

The Weight of History, contemporary art from Russia 100 years after the October Revolution, Mari Bastashevski, Chto Delat?, Rahul Jains, Ilya Kabakov & Emilia Kabakov, Artyom Loskutov, Anton Vidokle, Arseny Zhilyaev.
Curated by Heidi Brunnschweiler

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Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was marked by the vision of a socially just society and the radical ambition to make it real. In 1917, the door to the future seemed to open wide. These historical moments provided unprecedented optimism for implementing a multitude of utopian projects aimed at completely transforming people and their living environment. The October Revolution was a zero point for the political, social and economic order, from which a new society and heroic future could be imagined and created. Science, art and technology were freed from the shackles of conflicting vested interests and could thrive for the good of mankind.

The **communists** wanted to change material living conditions on earth and pushed for a classless society where the state would cease to be. The world and its people were malleable matter to be moulded by communist ideals. The Russian avant-garde artists considered it their duty to shape the modern era in the aftermath of the October Revolution. The constructivists called for activism at the start of the 1920s, to push progress forwards: art should intervene directly in public life. Reality was to shape comparable to a master according to the new visions.

The **biocosmists**, a group of anarchist poets, writers and scientists, believed in universal self-salvation and expansion into the cosmos. They wanted to free mankind from the slavery of space and time to transcend the laws of nature and death. The whole project of immortality was to remove social inequalities without state intervention. The belief in the omnipotence of united liberated human beings erased the boundaries between science and esotericism. Experiments were conducted, including making astronomical calculations in wind tunnels and trying to create fellow creatures through blood transfusions. A biocosmist faction even joined the Duma proposing a law on cosmic freedom of movement.

Kasimir Malevich had already declared in 1915 that his *Black Square* was the zero point of art and life. For him, the future was of cosmic nature, which he saw as being the non-objective, infinite and uncontrollable intrinsic movement of matter. Humans were to embrace this anarchic elemental force that permeated every societal order. He did not consider death as the archenemy of life to be fought by organised biopower, but rather as matter taking on a different shape. He rejected the Soviet project, because it hindered the plunge into cosmic life. According to him, mankind was actually already in this future thanks to the revolution and its radical break with the past.

It is well-known that the utopia of an ideal communist progressive society became state ideology under Stalin, and was brutally implemented leaving millions of deaths and prisoners in its wake. Socialist realism artworks were to show happy workers within a progressive society to the outside world, even though Soviet reality was actually a host of countless hardships.

Hannah Arendt criticised the Russian Revolution and the communist project because of this huge discrepancy between vision and failed implementation. She reproached its leaders for defining the social question as a historical necessity to justify the use of uncompromising violence in their lust for power. She herself saw the essence of revolution as a combination of freedom and a peaceful new beginning. Therefore, freedom was the principle behind political governance and a viable polity for her, not social justice. For Arendt, the political is dependent on speech and conversing with one another. Violence is mute and remains anti-political in the language of justification. Therefore, war and revolutions, by their sheer violence, are outside of the political sphere.

On the occasion of the **Revolution's 100th anniversary**, left-wing intellectuals such as Slavoj Žižek or Gerold Raunig have re-visited the Russian Revolution and the communist project. Žižek argues that instead of continuing to suppress or sweepingly demonise this past, we should remember it and work through it. If we succeed in turning this part of history from an obstacle into an object that we can analyse, we can reveal its unredeemed potential for emancipation. Žižek puts forward the theory that the Russian Revolution is worth repeating, as the "first revolution failed in form rather than content". Its success thwarted an authentic emancipatory vision. According to Raunig and Žižek, form failed because the revolutionaries merely filled the state apparatus with new people and content. They did not develop alternative forms of organisation that would suit the emancipatory project. In addition, a successful second revolution should combine opposition and constituted power and not think of them in a linear or hierarchical way. In other words, vision and implementation should be complementary.

The second revolution could also be cosmic. The perfecting of ideas, humans and the environment through science and technology is still a hot topic today in view of the current developments in bioengineering and artificial intelligence.

With all this in mind, how do contemporary artists from Russia deal with the weight of this history today, with its visions and failures, and its potentially unredeemed possibilities? What role do they assign to art that so vehemently lent itself to the new beginning in 1917? What can art contribute in terms of critique? The ***Weight of History*** exhibition focuses on the discrepancy between the vision of a socially just society and its problematic implementation as a legacy of the Russian Revolution. Against the backdrop of the tense relationship between ambition and reality, the exhibition presents seven artistic stances, and questions how they engage with the burden and the unredeemed potential of this history.

The **Kabakovs (1)** address the implausibility of the lofty ideals the Revolution put so much effort into attaining. **Arseny Zhilyaev (2)** and **Anton Vidokle (9)** explore the legacy of the Russian cosmists. Many of the pioneers of human collective self-salvation became victims of history themselves and are only brought to light again now. **Mari Bastashevskis (6)** and **Chto Delat? (4/7/8)** are interested in the history of communism and its broken promises. Whereas for Bastashevski there is no escaping from capitalist consumerism, Chto Delat? sees a glint of hope in the form of self-organised collective production. **Rahul Jain's (3)** film ***Machines*** documents the exploitative working conditions in a current-day Indian textile factory. Historical ambition for some sort of equal society and today's factual reality could not be further

apart. With his *Monstrations*, **Artyom Loskutov (5)** brings the political potential of dadaist art back to life.

Gallery I

Ilya Kabakov & Emilia Kabakov (respectively born in 1933 and 1945 in Dnepropetrovsk, the then Soviet Union, living and working in Long Island in the USA)

The Kabakovs experienced life in the Soviet Union and its collapse in 1989. They have addressed the discrepancy between ideal and reality in many of their works. Ilya Kabakov states that he tackled the “Soviet rubbish heap”. The preoccupation with white as the colour of idealism, of Malevich’s spiritual unity, led him to an artistic dead end.

With the ***The White Cube, 1993, (1)*** installation, they use the colour white to make a reference to the Russian avant-garde art of Kazimir Malevich as well as the ideal exhibition space of the Western world as a promise of art that transcends history and production conditions. A white cube stands in the centre of the room with a ladder placed on two of the sides to climb to the top. On top of the cube is a small boat, and no matter how hard you try, you cannot reach it. The visitor is invited to blow the boat around a circular track. The winner is the first to move the boat to the other side. This experimental installation is a metaphor for the discrepancy between vision and reality exposed in the 20th century: despite the greatest of efforts, the ideal could never be attained. Mankind was not in a position to climb into the boat and reach Thomas More’s island of *Utopia*.

Ilya Kabakov was part of the **Moscow conceptualists** that actively worked on criticising Soviet ideology from the 60s onwards. Artistic life was strongly censored in the Soviet Union. The Moscow conceptualists were tolerated by the authorities, but excluded from any official exhibitions. Like all artists of their generation, Ilya Kabakov were affected by Soviet visual culture. It portrayed a good and successful world as a product of ideological wishful thinking – a world that did not exist in reality. Anything undesirable was removed by censorship, leaving only happy workers, successful engineers and other proletarian heroes who praised the extraordinary efforts of the USSR. Kabakov despised this duplicity. For him, the USSR was hollow. In many of his works he combines this false propaganda-driven world with reminders of real life, marked by poverty, homelessness and other everyday problems.

Arseny Zhilyaev (born in 1984 in Voronezh, Russia, lives and works in Moscow and Voronezh)

The 1917 Revolution aimed at completely redefining all aspects of life. This included museums and their exhibits. Art needed to be utilitarian and museums had to fashion the future human as an art object. With the interactive installation ***Anton Vidokle De Cosmos Recreation Center, 2016, (2)*** **Arseny Zhilyaev** explores the new relationship between artists, art institutions and visitors, which has taken on a broader participatory form today. The Russian avant-garde wanted to be useful in everyday life and break away from the notion of “art for art’s sake” dear to the symbolists and academia. Today, the wind of protest blows the other way. Does art have to justify itself as being useful to society to be legitimate?

Anton Vidokle De Cosmos Recreation Center, 2016, (2) was created for the *De*

Appel art centre in Amsterdam. In an allusion to the *De Kosmos* centre for meditation that was located in the same building from the 60s to the 90s, Zhilyaev criticises ambitious contemporary art institutions that strive to use art as a means for human self-improvement.

The installation consists of a simple wellness spa with suprematist Malevich-style pictures and a user guide that plays on Russian cosmism. Visitors to planet earth are invited to take a colour-wave bath that rejuvenates them and awakens eternal godly love. The work seems to speak to futuristic creatures who are already immortal and are visiting the land of their ancestors. The title of the piece is also an allusion to Anton Vidokle's film *This is Cosmos*. Vidokle employed red LED screens as a form of anti-ageing wellness therapy for the viewer. NASA introduced the use of red light wavelengths for healing astronaut injuries in outer space.

Rahul Jain (born in 1991 in New Delhi, lives and works in Los Angeles)

In his film work *Machines, 2016, (3)*, **Rahul Jain** documents the human cost of mass production in our globalised world of commodities and consumerism. The exploitation of slave workers has been relocated to the farthest corner of the world, where labour rights simply do not exist. Here, people are hired on poverty wages or deployed as mobile migrant workers throughout the world, at all levels of production and via all types of channel. The misery of their bare survival makes them easy victims for exploitation.

Machines takes the viewer on a journey through the gruelling workings of a textile factory in Gujarat, India. The machines run day and night: men operate them to print complicated patterns on material in a dark room; children sift through the scraps, working with no breaks. With stirring interviews and vivid shots, Jain's film brings the history of the worker into the spotlight. 100 years after the Russian Revolution, non-organised workers are still the ones that lose out when it comes to history and progress.

Gallery II

Artem Loskutov (born in 1986 in Novosibirsk, lives and works in Novosibirsk)

Monstration (5) is an annual artistic happening created by the artist Artem Loskutov, and takes place in public spaces in Russia. It makes a reference to May Day demonstrations and the political impact of dadaist nonsense art. Creative people carry placards with absurd messages through the city to comment on how they see the world around them.

Each monstration has a leading slogan which is only revealed on the day of the event. The authorities keep a close watch on the event despite the apolitical nature of the messages. They have tried to ban the event several times and the organisers have repeatedly been arrested and convicted.

The first monstration was instigated by Artem Loskutov and the artist group "CAT" (Contemporary Art Terrorists) in 2004 in Novosibirsk. Over the last twelve years, monstration has become a mass movement. The steadily growing number of participants and the fact it has spread to other Russian cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Perm, Petrozavodsk, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Khabarovsk, Yaroslavl, Volgograd, is proof that it strikes a chord in current times.

For the first time, a **monstration** is coming to Freiburg. It is not taking place on May Day, but during the *Weight of History* exhibition running from 12 October to 19 November 2017. In an allusion to the Revolution and the call for a return to a greater Russia, the slogan is: “We can do it again”.

Chto Delat? (artist collective founded in 2003, living and working in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod)

Chto Delat? (What is to be done?) combines political theory, art and activism. Founded in St. Petersburg in 2003 by artists, critics, philosophers, and writers, the collective asks *What is to be done?* faced with the current difficult political situation. The name is derived from a same-titled novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky about the first socialist workers in Russia, and from Vladimir Lenin’s own political pamphlet also called *What is to be done?* (1902). Inspired by the self-organized socialist labour force Chto Delat? works as a collective. Through their activities – the newspaper they publish, their education project, and so on – they want to create a space for debating on politics in Russia. Chto Delat? take a similar stance to Slavoj Žižek. For them, one of the historical failures of the Russian Revolution is the elimination of the “soviets” (worker’s councils) by the communist party. The **self-organised collective** as a decision-making structure is hence an unredeemed potentia. Consequently, they believe that producing a film as a self-organised collective is what makes a film political, and not just taking a political theme and illustrating it. They use film production as an example of how collective creative power can be deployed in a purposeful way.

Perestroika Songspiel, 2008, (4) employs Berthold Brecht’s distancing effect and brings together five stereotypes of new post-1989 Russian society. The choir critically comments on the antagonistic dialogue between the democrat, businessman, nationalist and revolutionary. It declares that communism has finally collapsed and predicts that the word “democracy” as a new solution will soon become a curse, because any good intents are quickly worn out by bureaucrats, new oligarchs, the stock markets, intelligence services and the military. Despite the fact that they all see democracy as a new hope for society, they quickly start to quarrel over who should be most privileged. Each one argues why they should have the most influence, power and rights in Russia.

The **democrat** is a parody of the new ideology. He promises to improve people’s lives through power sharing and a free market. As he wants to please everyone, he ingratiates himself with the new powers within society. He promises the **businessman** to improve the negative image the population has of capitalism. Without competition and privatisation, society cannot develop. He supports businesspeople to take over the management of formerly state-owned companies, even if the people view this as stealing. The choir extols both as an ideal couple that will torture the land and its people, gaining ever more power.

The democrat then encourages the **nationalist** to clean up society and sweep away communism. The communist party should be outlawed and the Lenin mausoleum destroyed. For the nationalists, reviving the national state and giving the church its property back is a priority. For him, the Russian people need a strong hand, not freedom. The choir calls for a strong leader: Putin, Putin, Putin.

The only one the democrat cannot butter up is the **revolutionary** as he believes in the revolution and the readiness of the people to stand up and fight. His banner states: *All power to the soviets*. He invites the workers to take over the state and factories and calls for a joint demonstration. The choir reprimand him as a troublemaker. The logic of history is privatisation. Workers have to work, it is the way of the world. He should placate the workers with alcohol. Lastly, the **feminist** enters and, as if she were the true personification of democracy, she leads the other four to the public square, where she declares this day as a victorious day for democracy. The haggling and jostling for supremacy begins.

In Freiburg **Chto Delat?** continues their *More Light!* series with ***On striking power of electric light, 2017 (7)***. A constructivist-style structure juts out from the steps of the former turbine hall, making a reference to the power of electric light. As a kind of lighthouse, it reminds us of the age of reason in the dark times of tyrannical rule.

In the tower, there is a two-channel video installation, ***It did not happen with us, yet. Safe Haven, 2016 (8)***, which talks about the persecution of artists in Russia and other countries. The film was produced with the help of *Artist at Risk*, an organisation that enable artists in danger to find residencies in Europe. Chto Delat? shot the film on the Norwegian island of Sula, which offers this kind of programme. The film tells the fictional stories of five persecuted artists in the epic theatre style. They can escape war and repression on this remote island. Their stories are punctuated by documentary takes. The islanders talk about their solidarity with the persecuted. They comment on their local rules and the need for integration. They also sing their island anthem. The anthem hints at nationalism, which can narrowly define the norms within a society and, as an ideological stronghold, is often used to justify persecution and censorship.

In the middle part of the film, the five protagonists tell the stories of **real persecuted artists**, writers and activists. These real people have been imprisoned, tortured, or even killed, because of freely expressed thoughts, activist actions, or merely because they are homosexual, or have a specific political opinion. One of them is Oleg Sentosov, a Ukrainian artist and activist. He was sentenced to a 20-year jail term for criticising the crimes of the Russian authorities. The protagonists in the film equally risk being persecuted by the state for being members of Chto Delat?. It hasn't happened yet.

The five narrators settle temporarily on the island. Each of them finds their favourite place. However, they cannot forget their origins. At night, they climb to the light at the top of the lighthouse and share their own stories of persecution. Little by little, peaceful exile becomes false hope in terms of escaping from internal and external conflicts. Some of them eventually return to their land of origin.

This island that offers a safe-haven in an open and friendly community, is a reference to Thomas More's novel *Utopia* (1516). In the book, an island community is presented as the ideal society, living industriously and learnedly thanks to rational principles of equality and democracy. The dual projection produces dialectic images, combining text and visuals that comment on each other. Black empty zones on the screen give the viewer space to think away from the image and text. Chto Delat? works with simple and striking images. The lighthouse appears again and again with multi-layered leitmotifs. As a source of light, it guides us and acts as a warning. As a

tower, it provides protection and a view over the horizon, but it can also be a prison. The lighthouse is also a monument to the persecuted.

Mari Bastashevski (born in 1980 in St. Petersburg, lives and works in Lausanne, Switzerland)

The 1917 Revolution was mainly a call for a new organisation of work under classless conditions. The precarious living conditions imposed on the capitalist-exploited proletariat through wage labour had to disappear. By raising awareness about exploitative production conditions, the working classes were to build a new, non-alienating production system.

In her three-part installation **10.000 Things out of China, 2016–2017 (5.1–3)** Mari Bastashevski portrays the production of goods under globalised capitalist conditions. The artist uses more than 300 photos (5.1) to show the global goods production and supply chain through: workers, factories, ports, logistics hubs, oceans, container ships, the fight against piracy, streets, and trains.

The oceans are the forgotten places of global trade. 80% of all goods are transported via ocean-faring container ships. This advanced worldwide logistics system is a must for producing goods in low-wage countries and enabling exorbitant over-valuation. Millions of exploited migrant workers sustain the capitalist system and are routinely relocated to even cheaper production countries. It becomes apparent that still so-called **communist China** practices the toughest form of exploitation in the competition for neo-liberal expansion. At the heart of worldwide maritime transport logistics, it is establishing itself as the new imperial economic power. The **vessel** was once a **tool of the revolution** but is now the key weapon of capitalism. Bastashevski therefore believes that the weight of the Revolution's history lies on the shoulders of the workers in this global supply chain: the Filipino workers employed by global maritime transport company Asia Marine to scrub the rust from the leased container ships; or the Putin-friendly Russian mechanics who once epitomised the heroic proletariat.

The **photos** are presented in a **continuous loop** that recalls a conveyor belt or a film reel. Both are symbols and the material expression of an endless production of goods and desires that drives the capitalist system (Deleuze, Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1972). As material products, the photos allude to the industrial revolution and alienated work that were to be reorganised through the Russian Revolution. The photos are formally composed and aesthetically taken. In themselves, they stand out as attractive consumer products from the global supply chain. The artist hereby alludes to the communist interpretation of bourgeois aesthetics: art as beauty and fetish is based on emotion, seduction and intoxication and undermines real production conditions. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that Marxist art had to depict the conditions of production and dissemination of an artwork. They insisted that artwork should be more contextual. Boris Groys argued that installation as a new art form fulfilled this demand. Consequently, Marxist art could only be installation art.

In the second and third part of **10.000 Things out of China, 2016–2017 (5.2-5.3)**, the viewer is immersed in a space full of sounds and images. Radio signals and messages in several languages alter by songs from Filipino television. The deep quiet pulse of a diesel engine throbs in the background like the mechanical heart of the continuous movement of goods. A table opposite a nautical chart recalls a

customs office in a container port. Here, the viewer can delve into the artist's theoretical texts as a reflexive part of the work.

In the next room **(5.3)**, **shots of container ships** are displayed on three monitors in a disjointed montage. They show how restrictive a ship is as a working and living space. Through her choice of pictures, the artist focuses on the various aspects of the maritime movement of goods. On the first screen, the ship is represented as proof of the engineering prowess of the industrial era. The continuously turning propeller shaft is a metaphor for the unstoppable drive of capitalism. Rows of tools make us think of machinists, like a reminder that the system is sustained by the work of humans. The machinists are still mostly of Russian origin. Shots of navigation devices and control systems – on the second screen – allude to the officers of the privileged classes. Only their cabins have a TV.

On the third screen, the shots of the navigator bridge, sailors cleaning the ship, and views of water as a force of nature, all point to the ship as an allegory for the new workers' state. The **myth of heroic proletarians** who unite and cooperatively steer the new future, appears to be broken.

Abstract shots of the deep blue sea and marine landscapes punctuate the constant flow of pictures as moments of emptiness, giving the viewer room to reflect.

Anton Vidokle (born in 1965 in Moscow, lives and works in New York and Berlin)

In his film trilogy *De Cosmos*, Anton Vidokle addresses **Russian cosmism** and its desire for the universal self-salvation of mankind. In his article entitled *Philosophy of the Common Task* (1906/13), father of cosmism Theodor Fedorov calls on humanity to unite with the common goal of gaining total control over the universe and transforming it. He felt that an existence subjected to hunger, disease and death was restrictive, degrading and absurd. If mankind was aware of its own frailty, its only aim could be to seek immortality. Should the project of overcoming death succeed, through collective effort, humans would create a society of equals. The dead should be resurrected so that they could also contribute to progress and not remain victims of history. Federov wanted to settle the resurrected on planets in space. This vision persisted after the October Revolution uprising. The biocosmists worked on implementing it through their scientific experiments. It is regarded as having eventually led to successful Russian space travel.

The Communist Revolution Was Caused By The Sun, 2015 (9) is **Anton Vidokle's** second film about Russian cosmism. His film explores the cosmist theories of Russian biophysicist Alexander Chizhevsky (1897–1964). This biophysicist studied the influence of the sun on human behaviour. According to his observations, the sun's activity was responsible for causing maximum excitability on earth, leading to revolutions, epidemics, or other cataclysms. Vidokle's film was shot in **Kazakhstan**. The craggy, dry, sun-beaten landscape acts as proof for Chizhevsky's theories. The Soviet space programme had an important base in the Karaganda steppe. Chizhevsky was imprisoned in Kazakhstan in 1942, and was later banished there because he refused to withdraw his writings on sun theory. These writings contradicted Stalin's view that the revolution was driven by human will. Despite punishment and exile, Chizhevsky continued with his research in his prison cell and later, in the coal mines.

The film focuses on Chizhevsky's **air-ionisation invention** that emitted negative ion particles with life-prolonging effects. In the 1970s, small ionisation lamps were popular in Soviet households.

In the film, workers build the device in the shape of a huge lampshade in front of a cemetery with Islamic mausoleums. Svetlana, a young researcher, comments on it, speaking directly to the viewer. Later, the effects of the ionisation lamp are tested on humans, animals and plants. A young woman begins to dance under the lamp, as if re-energised by it.

The structure of the film employs elements of clinical hypnosis. The viewers are supposed to fall into a trance and expose themselves to the life-prolonging energy field. The film draws a parallel between the modern-day life of the post-soviet rural population and the earlier Soviet advances in conquering the universe. It is not really about ever-faster technology, but more about transcending earthly life in the interest of mankind as a whole.

Heidi Brunnschweiler, October 2017