





# Cosmic Care

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As many critics pointed out during the first few months of the still ongoing covid-19 crisis, the pandemic could indeed be seen as merely adding another layer to capitalism's perversely demonstrable inability to provide the basis for a liveable life.<sup>1</sup> As the indigenous movement *The Red Nation* stated in mid-March: 'the crisis has exposed the capitalist system for what it is: anti-life'.<sup>2</sup> As a reaction to the predictable recognition that 'corporate politicians and billionaires [...] only care about their own power and wealth', the early months of the pandemic, thus, stimulated various demands for a universal and global care system beyond capitalist exploitation and extraction.<sup>3</sup>

According to a group of academics and activists dubbing themselves *The Care Collective*, the pandemic crisis was not just the result of new pathogens propagating in human bodies around the globe. It also caused and exposed a manifold *crisis of care*. Years of neoliberal austerity, deregulation and privatisation debasing and devaluing 'hands-on' care work meant that many of the largest nation states were unable to properly cope with the spread, the Collective argued.<sup>4</sup> What was suddenly so urgently missing was not only more and better conditions for 'hands-on' care workers, but also care in the sense of an 'enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life'.<sup>5</sup> On this note, the Collective called for a new system of universal care and for a radical rethinking of the role of the state and the economy on the foundation of a proliferating circle of models of common care. Such utopian

yearnings were far from rare during those initial months. Crises, as we know, are not only recklessly violent; they also induce radical hopes.

In an attempt to respond to such visions of universal care systems, this article will turn its attention to a rather unusual object: Russian Cosmism. As ridiculous and frivolously ill-timed as it may sound at first, I will indeed argue that we seem to need Russian Cosmism more than ever before. I will do this by examining two contemporary (though pre-corona) artworks, Jonas Staal's installation *Interplanetary Species Society* from 2019 and the film trilogy on Russian Cosmism *Immortality for All* from 2014-17 by Anton Vidokle. On the basis of these works, I discuss how Staal and Vidokle actualise past utopian desires in order to draw some inspiring lessons for a contemporary politics of care.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Staal calls for a politicisation of the biosphere in new experimental infrastructural settings, Vidokle elaborates on a biopolitical demand for immortality for all that is mediated by the screen. On the basis of the fundamental impulses of Russian Cosmism, they both attempt to experiment with an enduring capacity for caring for the living; a practice that, embedded within material situations, seeks to provoke speculative and imaginary potentialities.<sup>7</sup>

Seen from a wider perspective, both Staal's installation and Vidokle's film engage in the reception of the intellectual, artistic and philosophical tradition of Russian Cosmism, which has unfolded around the media platform *e-flux* with several book publications, journals, exhibitions and even an extensive timeline on the

1 For a widely quoted and discussed account, which touched upon the ecological roots of covid-19, see Rob Wallace et al., 'COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital', *Monthly Review*, 1 May 2020, [monthlyreview.org/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/](https://monthlyreview.org/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/). I would like to thank the editors, especially Gry Hedin, Anne Kølbæk Iversen and Sarah Pihl Petersen, for valuable comments and help with this article. All cited online sources have been accessed July 2020.

2 The Red Nation, Editorial Council, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic: Capitalism in Crisis', 16 March 2020, [therednation.org/2020/03/16/the-covid-19-pandemic-capitalism-in-crisis/](https://therednation.org/2020/03/16/the-covid-19-pandemic-capitalism-in-crisis/).

3 The Red Nation, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic', emphasis added.

4 The Care Collective, 'COVID-19 Pandemic: A Crisis of Care', *Verso Blog* (blog), 26 March 2020, [versobooks.com/blogs/4617-covid-19-pandemic-a-crisis-of-care](https://versobooks.com/blogs/4617-covid-19-pandemic-a-crisis-of-care). For a more thorough and general discussion of this crisis pre-covid-19, see, e.g., Nancy Fraser, 'Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism', *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya, Pluto Press, 2017.

5 The Care Collective, 'COVID-19 Pandemic'.

6 In the midst of writing this article, Jonas Staal responded to the crisis with a text on *e-flux*. See Jonas Staal, 'Coronavirus Propagations', *e-flux conversations*, 17 March 2020, [conversations.e-flux.com/t/coronavirus-propagations-by-jonas-staal/9671](https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/coronavirus-propagations-by-jonas-staal/9671). Having almost finished writing this piece, Anton Vidokle published an interview

in the *e-flux journal* in which he briefly emphasises the contemporaneity of cosmism (an edited transcription of a conversation taking place on Zoom in May in the context of the Art and Science Aleph Festival hosted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico), see Anton Vidokle & Irmgard Emmelhainz, 'God-Building as a Work of Art: Cosmist Aesthetics', *e-flux journal*, #110, June, 2020, e-flux.com.

7 For a theoretical elaboration on the notion of care and its material and speculative dimensions, see María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

8 Anastasia Gacheva, Arseny Zhilyaev & Anton Vidokle, 'Timeline of Russian Cosmism', *e-flux journal*, #88, February, 2018, cosmism-timeline.e-flux.com.

9 George M. Young, *The Russian Cosmist: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

10 Boris Groys, 'Introduction: Russian Cosmism and the Technology of Immortality', *Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys, The MIT Press, 2018.

11 Esther Zonsheim (in conversation with Bart De Baere & Arseny Zhilyaev), 'Wahlverwandtschaft', *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, ed. e-flux journal, Sternberg Press, 2017, 139; Arseny Zhilyaev (in conversation with Bart De Baere and Esther Zonsheim), 'Wahlverwandtschaft', *ibid.*, 143.

12 Hito Steyerl, et al. 'Editorial - Strange Universalism', *e-flux Journal*, #86, November, 2017.

e-flux webpage.<sup>8</sup> From this dispersed historiographical endeavour, Russian Cosmism – a conceptual term applied retrospectively in the 1970s – emerges as a highly multifarious historical tradition. As such a tradition, Russian Cosmism is said to encompass the work and practice of Russian scientists, philosophers, technicians and artists from the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. Some, in this group of scientists, reflected on the possibility that the sun might have caused the communist revolution, while others developed visions of space occupation; thus, building the cornerstones for what would later become Russian space science. Moreover, some of these ideas disseminated into the Russian avant-garde in the form of 'biocosmist poetics', and further into the post-revolutionary establishment of a transdisciplinary Institute for Blood Transfusion with the ambition of collectivising blood and rejuvenating life. Most often, the Russian cosmists took their point of departure from the posthumously published *Philosophy of the Common Task* written by the Russian philosopher and librarian Nikolai Fedorov in the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In this book, as media theorist Boris Groys has noted, Fedorov drew the contours of a radical biopolitical project seeking to overcome death.<sup>10</sup> Death was a biological mistake, Fedorov argued, and for this reason a truly common and socially just state should strive towards the immortality of all who ever lived and would live – an aspiration that, naturally, would quickly lead to space constraints and the need to explore other planets.

Our daunting cosmic times and discouragingly sick Earth need truly cosmic answers

for sharing and taking care of the living. This seems to be the *raison d'être* of Staal's and Vidokle's actualisation of Russian Cosmism. What they share is an attempt to resurrect the central Fedorovian aspiration to 'live with and for everyone' and, thereby, engage in the radical *shared task* of resurrecting and taking care of all humans, animals, bacteria and 'all other molecular compounds, too'.<sup>11</sup> I propose to term this strange universal ambition a *cosmic care* for the living.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, Fedorov's hyperbole and dramatic ideas of cosmic care are much weaker today than in the late nineteenth century or post-revolutionary years in Russia, but Staal and Vidokle show us that cosmism need not be a 'mythological place-holder for an absent, or failed, politics'.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, they keep alive the desire for a cosmic care; they attempt to organise past utopian desires and speculative imaginaries, and, thus, they simultaneously reflect and epitomise the contradictory function of art as a *careful practice*.

Through and in their works, we are confronted with several questions crucial for any contemporary politics of care within and beyond the field of art: as the notion of (feminised) care historically speaking has most often been considered the exact opposite of (masculinised) political emancipation and empowerment, what would it then mean to put care and concern into the service of emancipation?<sup>14</sup> Are we, really, as the French anthropologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour seductively would have us believe, forced to choose between an iconoclastic 'critical barbarity' gesturing towards the fetishes and abstract structures of capital, and a more concerned form of critique that

aspires to compose and glance at things ‘in great need of care and caution’?<sup>15</sup> Instead of digging myself into a theoretical hole encompassing the usual suspects of influential and congenial contemporary thinkers, such as Latour, Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, my attention will instead turn to Staal and Vidokle. From Staal’s and Vidokle’s engagement with the historical archive of the *futures past* of Russian Cosmism, I attempt to examine the contours of a form of *weak cosmism* from which we might be better able to grasp, or at least grasp *otherwise*, what it means today to mobilise contemporary social desires involving the nurturing and care of all. If not this, what else should comprise the horizon for contemporary politics?

### Countering the billionaire boys club

A little more than one hundred years after socialist thinker Rosa Luxemburg’s famous thesis that capitalism would not survive without a non-capitalist outside, it is tempting to confirm her assessment – though for different reasons than those her sophisticated analysis pointed to.<sup>16</sup> With billionaire projects, such as Space-X by Elon Musk (co-founder of PayPal and Tesla Motors) and *Blue Origin* by Jeff Bezos (CEO and founder of Amazon), we are witnessing a new kind of ‘neocolonial, extractivist, corporatist state’, as Jonas Staal has phrased it.<sup>17</sup> The ‘alternative’ to the ‘inevitable extinction’, as Elon Musk has himself put it, is to become a ‘spacefaring civilisation, and a multi-planetary species’.<sup>18</sup> Cunning as it is, capital is finding ways to assert its powers beyond planet Earth. If the most likely outcome from this situation is the acceleration of the collapse of capitalism, as economic geographer Peter

Dickens has stressed, we might also get used to another layer within this mess: a kind of extra-terrestrial billionaire boys club seeking to survive from the planet it has burned up (and through).<sup>19</sup> That Musk, Bezos or some other upcoming trillionaire will succeed in this endeavour within the near future does not escape the real social and ecological effects it will cause.

In the summer of 2019, in Reaktorhallen in Stockholm, Jonas Staal exhibited his *Interplanetary Species Society*. In an explicit attempt to counter the cosmic billionaire boys club and other ‘terrifying alt-right biosphere[s]’, Staal’s installation aimed to function as an ‘experimental’ and ‘emancipatory biosphere’.<sup>20</sup> Materially speaking, the species society took the form of a huge installation consisting of an assembly of chairs with domes at each side: the first dome exhibited neo-constructivist ammonites – fossil ammonites on top of columns bearing slogans such as ‘COMRADES IN DEEP FUTURE’, ‘HYPEREMPATHY NOW’ and ‘FOSSILS ARE COMRADES NOT FUEL’. The other dome comprised two rectangular posters of plants, arranged beside a red flag – so-called ‘proletarian plantae’. The installation was gathered around a deep hole in which one could glimpse cosmic meteorites. As Staal himself stresses in an e-flux essay entitled ‘Comrades in Deep Future’, the experimental biosphere was much inspired by Alexander Bogdanov’s cosmic novel *Red Star*, a sci-fi vision of a cosmist-communist utopia on Mars published in 1908. Without neglecting the programmatic and ambiguous nature of this fictive communist utopia (in fact, the novel ends with problems of overpopulation

13 Benjamin Noys, ‘The Poverty of Vitalism (and the Vitalism of Poverty)’, *To Have Done With Life: Vitalism and Anti-vitalism in Contemporary Philosophy*, MaMa, 2011, 3, available at academia.edu.

14 For a brief discussion on this matter, see Dmitry Vilensky, ‘Who Is a Healthy Subject? Dmitry Vilensky interviewed by Meriujn Oudenamposen’, *Caring Culture: Art, Architecture and the Politics of Public Health*, ed. Andrea Phillips & Markus Miessen, Sternberg Press & SKOR, 2011.

15 Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, no. 30, winter 2004, 240, 246. In his ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’, Latour indeed set it up as a matter of an either/or: ‘The difference is not moot, because what performs a critique cannot also compose’. Bruno Latour, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’, *New Literary History* 41, 2010.

16 Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals*, Verlag Neue Kritik, 1970.

17 Jonas Staal, ‘Comrades in Deep Future’, *e-flux Journal*, #102, September, 2019, e-flux.com.

18 Nicky Woolf, ‘SpaceX Founder Elon Musk Plans to Get Humans to Mars in Six Years’, *The Guardian*, 28 September 2016, theguardian.com.

19 Peter Dickens, ‘The Cosmos as Capitalism’s Outside’, *The Sociological Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2009, 80.

20 Staal, ‘Comrades in Deep Future’.



LIVING WORLDS





DEMAND THE PRESENT

HYPER

Jonas Staal, *Interplanetary Species Society*, 2019. Installation shot from Reaktorhallen in Stockholm. Produced by Public Art Agency Sweden. Courtesy of the artist

22 Staal, 'Comrades in Deep Future'. More precisely Staal is drawing on the work of Russian constructivists here, such as Varvara Stepanova, Lyubov Popova and Alexander Rodchenko, and their idea of the 'object as comrade'. This idea comes from the scholarly work of Christian Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism*, The MIT Press, 2005.

22 Jonas Staal, 'Assemblism', *e-flux journal*, #80, March 2017, e-flux.com; In this text – and in the installation in Stockholm – Staal is inspired by Judith Butler's idea of the assembly as a performative practice. However, whereas Butler is, first and foremost, focused on the bodily presence of the performative assembly, Staal is much more concerned with the infrastructural conditions rendering a more careful assembly possible. See Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2014.

23 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill, Bloomsbury, 2004.

and excessive resource extractions, which lead to debate about whether to colonise capitalist Earth), Bogdanov's *Red Star* is presented as a critical and historical corrective to the violent colonial vocabulary of Musk and Bezos.

Rather than a nostalgic longing or a simple historicist gesture, Bogdanov's novel, in Staal's work, functions as a kind of historical resource from which to mobilise the urgent need to engage with the thinking and building of an alternative biosphere in our contemporary moment. 'WE DEMAND THE PRESENT', as a slogan on one of the columns states. Along the lines of this communist trajectory, Staal, inspired by Donna Haraway (the contemporary dialectical counterpart to Bogdanov?), calls for a 'propaganda art of hyperempathy': what is proposed is nothing less than another kind of biosphere replacing the *pioneer* with the *guest*. Moreover, Staal is inspired by the works of certain Russian constructivists in his consideration of what it might imply to view non-human objects, such as meteorites, plantae and ammonites, not as dead, exploitable matter, but as 'comrades'.<sup>21</sup> Characteristic of Staal's practice, this experimental replacing or substitution has to be viewed as both a *performative* and *organisational* task. Resembling a strange mixture of scientific societies, such as the glorious *The Royal Societies*, a communist party meeting and a cosmic fiction, Staal founded his assembly on 24 August 2019 in Reaktorhallen, with an event involving non-human objects and human academics, scientists, curators and artists. It does, however, not seem unfair to argue that Staal's concern was less the actual

event than the *performative assembly* itself in the form of the installation.<sup>22</sup> Installed underground in a former Cold War era techno-utopia topos, a nuclear reactor, the installation could indeed be said to expose the social, material and infrastructural conditions without which any alternative biosphere and material actors would be unthinkable.

In this sense, the installation could be viewed as the cheap and more artistic equivalent to the vast experimental research facility *Biosphere 2* in Arizona (which Staal also mentions in the *e-flux* essay), once under the directorship of the alt-right propagandist and former Trump chief strategist, Steve Bannon. Obviously mimicking not only some of the architectural forms of *Biosphere 2*, but also its inaccessibility and exclusiveness, literally being underground in a former state-owned research reactor now frequently used for cultural and artistic purposes, Staal's installation performed – that is, constructed – a counter-hegemonic biosphere. In Staal's rather compact and airy, almost transparent, infrastructure, what is at the fore is, thus, how any experimental *social* organisation – however scientific – already prescribes and is conditioned by the ever-present *formal* aspects, whose political form par excellence is the assembly: in the chairs on which we sit, and the walls surrounding us, we are already taking part in what philosopher Jacques Rancière terms a 'distribution of the sensible'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, within the installation, we are already partitioned into a social division of labour; configured by certain limits and possibilities, enemies and comrades inscribed in the very





Biosphere 2. Library & Living Quarters, Arizona

infrastructure of *our* – or *their* – assemblies and experimental laboratories. Staal, thus, reflects on and engages with the question of how to contest and collaborate in a more *careful infrastructure*. One that replaces the competitive and violent extraction of capital and its personifications with mutual aid and ‘space cooperation’.<sup>24</sup>

### **The politics of non-human assemblies**

Staal’s installation is unquestionably symptomatic of a much broader trend in the contemporary art world. His work could arguably be viewed along rather similar lines to another political-aesthetic engagement with non-human/human assemblies, such as that of the speculative research group *Parliament of*

*Things*. In 2018, this group launched the long-term *The Embassy of the North Sea* project at Stroom in The Hague, much inspired by the thinking of Latour.<sup>25</sup> In March 2019, they arranged a symposium entitled ‘Listening to the Sea’ in which they attempted, with the help of hydrophones and underwater noise data, to give things of the oceanic ecosystem a political voice. The ambition was to include non-human actors and extend human rights to phytoplankton, bacteria and hermit crabs as ‘fully-fledged members of society’.<sup>26</sup> As in Staal’s installation, the *Embassy* took the form of a careful gathering of participants (humans as well as non-humans), as Latour would put it, which together came to constitute an *assembly*.<sup>27</sup> Both the *Embassy*

24 Staal, ‘Comrades in Deep Future’. With the use of chairs in the installation, Staal, in fact, betrays his own lesson which he stated in 2017: ‘we have learned that using chairs maintains the liberal order that emphasises the sovereign individual above the collective, whereas benches maintain the principle of negotiating and sharing collective space’. Staal, ‘Assemblism’.

25 A notion from Bruno Latour, *We have never been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

26 Parliament of Things, ‘Embassy of the North Sea 2019’, 27 March 2019, [theparliamentofthings.org/event/embassy-of-the-north-sea-2019/](http://theparliamentofthings.org/event/embassy-of-the-north-sea-2019/).

27 Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?’, 246.



28 *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel, The MIT Press, 2005.

29 Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, The MIT Press, 2019.

30 Anne van Leeuwen, 'About the Embassy of the North Sea. Speech during the Human Rights Weekend @DeBalie, Amsterdam', February 2019, [theparliamentofthings.org/article/embassyofthenorthsea/](http://theparliamentofthings.org/article/embassyofthenorthsea/); Jonas Staal, 'Comrades in Deep Future'.

31 Jonas Staal, 'Comrades in Deep Future'. A month after the exhibition in Stockholm, between 20 and 22 September on the occasion of Ruhrtriennale Festival der Künste, Jonas Staal conducted a performative training camp curated by Florian Malzacher, [trainingforthefuture.org](http://trainingforthefuture.org).

and Staal's installation strived towards expanding the network of actors, probing the task of 'making things public'.<sup>28</sup>

However, whereas Staal's installation is propagandistic in nature, *The Embassy of the North* plans to build a fully inclusive democracy by 2030, with the possible goal of including the *Embassy* in the EU infrastructure in the form of an office in Brussels.<sup>29</sup> As the *Embassy* emphasises the inclusion of non-human actors in an already given formal democratic and bureaucratic infrastructure (which could perhaps be supplied with an experimental office?), Staal's experimental biosphere stems from the premise that it takes form within the 'terrifying alt-right biosphere in which we find ourselves today' – to such a terrifying extent that he thought it necessary to, at least temporarily, go underground.<sup>30</sup>

What is foremost in this admittedly rather brief, polemical comparison between the *Embassy* and Staal's installation, is the highly conflictual and hostile *social* context, which none of the formal strategies can evade. The assembly of the *Embassy* may be viewed as processual, fragile, constructivist and radical in scope and scale. But, from the point of view of Staal's assembly, the strong emphasis on inclusion, and the diplomatic and juridical form of the *Embassy* (strictly speaking the embassy as an architectural-bureaucratic form sustains and extends the interests of the nation states) tends to naturalise or, at least, devote great trust to the existing social forms. Ignoring the hostile and increasingly militarised biosphere in which we are *all* living, arguably also makes it

an easy target for the compensatory and recuperated powers of capital. Powers which, after all, show no intention of altering our direction towards catastrophe.

Hence, contrary to the *Embassy's* strategy of *radical inclusion*, Staal's experimental biosphere is comradely and hyperempathic – though surrounded by capitalist alt-right enemies. Rather than a formalistic bourgeoisie-like we (as in the brilliantly illustrated case of the EU, which the embassy aspires to be included in), it, thus, produces a propagandistic *us vs. them*. On the shoulders of past emancipatory movements, Staal attempts to construct new collective, cultural and artistic *forms* that engage and propagate – hence propaganda – in a much broader social struggle against (fossil) capitalism and its increasingly fascist derivatives. Of course, such a position is open to critique: just as the performative gap between humans and non-human agents can arguable be viewed as a generic and rather empty gesture, the propagandistic exertion can perhaps, for some, appear too performative, as a kind of desperate and left-mimicking act of the Bannon-like alt-right repertoire. However, not only do we need to be aware here not to fall into a dubious liberal critique presupposing a Habermasian ideal of a *herrschaftsfreie Dialog*, we also need to acknowledge that this *us* is far from homogenous. Rather, it is built around multiple and precarious socialist visions of new forms of living inscribed within the 'morphological vocabulary' of experimental biospheres, assemblies and even so-called training camps.<sup>31</sup> Staal's installation could, thus, be said to highlight that we do not need to choose, as Latour compels us to, between *performing*

a (Marxist) critique of capital and other forms of oppression, and a careful *composition* or assembly of objects.<sup>32</sup> What dispels such a false choice is the attention to the infrastructural and formal conditions always already (re)configuring any form of social organisation.

### The heritage of Cosmism

During the period of Staal's installation in Reaktorhallen in Stockholm, multiple screenings of Anton Vidokle's *Citizens of the Cosmos* took place in the exhibition. On the surface, however, this alignment seems rather odd. As another manifestation of the interest in cosmic ideas in the contemporary art world, Vidokle's film is pervaded by similar obscure and speculative demands, as present in Staal's installation. However, compared to Staal's highly politicised propaganda art of hyperempathy, Vidokle's work strikes as somewhat more hesitant and perhaps even reticent in terms of stance to contemporary politics.

This is not least the case with his film trilogy *Immortality for All* from 2014 to 2017. In these 'scientific-popular-films', as he himself terms them, exhibited several places, such as Tranen in Copenhagen, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and YVZ Artists' Outlet in Toronto, Vidokle tells the story of Russian Cosmism.<sup>33</sup> The films present montages of quotations recited in Russian by Vidokle (and others), and images of actors and people living in the various areas of the former Soviet Union, such as Kazakhstan, Siberia and Crimea. In the two first films, panorama-like images are shown of the post-Soviet

landscape of industrial architecture: pylons surrounded by mountains, Lenin statues and Muslim cemeteries. Occasionally, from a bird's-eye perspective, the historical distance between the Russian cosmists and our time is supplemented with a certain form of visually produced *spatial wideness*, which bears some striking similarities with the Soviet director Alexander Dovzhenko's famous film *Earth* from 1930. However, whereas the characters of Dovzhenko's *Earth* are almost annoyingly glancing towards the future throughout the film, the anonymous people of Vidokle's 'scientific-popular-films' seems haunted by the words of the cosmists, which they recite in a severe, convincing mime.

Compared to Staal's installation, Vidokle's films appear almost surprisingly *historical*, and some critics have indeed identified the trilogy as an 'intellectual history project'.<sup>34</sup> This, however, does not result in an aestheticisation of a forgotten and obscure intellectual tradition in a kind of compensatory utopian act, which would, at best, reflect the historical distance to our contemporary 'capitalist realism'.<sup>35</sup> Reluctant to convey any direct actualisation, Vidokle retains a historical *distance*, and is, therefore, questioning and perhaps even illuminating cracks and fissures in our disastrous present *from afar*. This historical gap is further reflected in the absence of any direct translations of the relation between his or others' recitations of obscure quotes taken from Fedorov or Russian scientist Alexander Chizhevsky, and the images portraying the contemporary post-Soviet landscape with people bathing in a river and riding horses.

32 Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', 475.

33 Anton Vidokle (in conversation with Arseny Zhilyaev), 'Factories of Resurrection', *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, Sternberg Press, 2017, 69.

34 Alma Mikulinsky, 'Resurrection After All: Russian Cosmism as an Intellectual History Project', *Tohu\**, 18 June 2019, [tohumagazine.com/article/resurrection-after-all-russian-cosmism-intellectual-history-project](http://tohumagazine.com/article/resurrection-after-all-russian-cosmism-intellectual-history-project).

35 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009.



36 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 486.

37 Vidokle, 'Factories of Resurrection', 58.

38 *Ibid.*, 64-5.

39 *Ibid.*, 62.

40 Alexander Chizhevsky, 'Mass Movements and Short Periods of Solar Activity', *The Earth in the Sun's Embrace, Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys, e-flux & The MIT Press, 2018, 41-53.

Frayed as it may sound, Vidokle's visual historiography is, in this sense, close to Walter Benjamin's historiographical reflections. Instead of a direct historical translation, Vidokle keeps open, much more than Staal, the dialectical *thresholds* between past utopian futures and our contemporary moment with the hope that it may result in new forms of the Benjaminian 'now of recognisability'.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps even more than Benjamin, Vidokle explores this threshold in a very practical and material sense. According to Vidokle, he first stumbled upon the Russian cosmists when Boris Groys told him about cosmic ideas about the resurrection of the dead on spaceships, and Bolshevik experiments of prolonging life through collective blood transfusions.<sup>37</sup> The blood experiment, in particular, epitomises a central feature in Vidokle's trilogy. The post-revolutionary establishment of the Institute for Blood Transfusion was led by doctor, philosopher and co-founder of the Bolsheviks Alexander Bogdanov. The institute was built around the cosmist idea of slowing the ageing process, or perhaps even obtaining immortality by transfusing blood from the young to the elderly – a practice that in a modernised version is, in fact, now offered by certain blood clinics and allegedly taken up by another PayPal co-founder, Peter Thiel, who dreams of living to the age of 150.

Bogdanov is almost absent in Vidokle's films, but his biopolitical and somewhat mundanely utopian and material ambition of collectivisation and rejuvenation is materially expressed in the trilogy. All of the films begin with Vidokle addressing the viewer in Russian as a patient. In the

first film, *This is Cosmos*, a kind of introduction to Fedorov's ideas, the viewer is successively exposed to a red-light 'irradiation session', a form of treatment accidentally developed by NASA with the result of speeding up the healing of skin wounds in the zero gravity in outer space. The second film, *The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun*, begins and ends with clinical hypnosis used for the treatment of different addictions. In the film, the hypnotised voice executed by Vidokle himself ultimately induces the viewer to follow the road to eternal life. In the third film, *Immortality and the Resurrection for All!*, Vidokle uses a discovery made by MIT: that flashing light in the range of 40 hertz has a medical effect on brain cells; for instance, reducing the loss of memory in the treatment of Alzheimer patients.<sup>38</sup> In this way, Vidokle's films materially and physiologically reflect and manifest the impulse of the cosmists in a kind of materialist determinist gesture.<sup>39</sup> One particularly radical view of this materialist determinism, which is the pivotal point of Vidokle's second film, was elaborated by Chizhevsky, who, for several years, examined the correspondence between solar activities and social revolutions, such as the October Revolution in 1917.<sup>40</sup>

### **Cosmic screens**

Borrowing a well-known trope popularised in the twentieth century from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida, we might, thus, speak of what could be termed a *weak cosmism*, pointing to two interdependent things: cosmism as a spectre encapsulating our contemporary longing for a universal (or cosmic) care system,

# ВНИМАНИЕ: ЭТО ВИДЕО МОЖЕТ УЛУЧШИТЬ СОСТОЯНИЕ ВАШЕГО ЗДОРОВЬЯ

Warning: this video may improve your health

Anton Vidokle, still from *This is Cosmos in Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism* (2014-17). HD video, colour, sound: Duration 28:10 mins. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist



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41 Vidokle, 'Factories of Resurrection', 65.

42 Arseny Zhilyaev (in conversation with Marina Simakova and Anton Vidokle), 'Cosmic Doubts', *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, Sternberg Press, 2017, 119.

43 Victory News, *Standing Strong Against Coronavirus COVID-19 with Kenneth Copeland*, 2020, 1.29:28, [youtube.com/watch?v=LJ9BO\\_G0aGs&t=847s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJ9BO_G0aGs&t=847s).

44 Kim Stanley Robinson (in conversation with Jim Bell), 'The Luxury Problem: Space Exploration in the "Emergency Century"', *Visions, Ventures, Escape Velocities: A Collection of Space Futures*, ed. Ed Finn, Joey Eschrich & Juliet Ulman, Arizona State University, 2017; Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (in conversation with Anton Vidokle), 'Chaos and Cosmos', *Art Without Death: Conversations On Russian Cosmism*, ed. e-flux journal, Sternberg Press, 2017; see also Pasi Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens. Image, Power and the Neoliberal Brain*, The MIT Press, 2014.

45 In São Paulo, for example, one of the biggest cities, the average life expectancy within a distance of less than 15 kilometres is 79 in the richest quarters and 55 in the poorest, see Nick Van Mead & Niko Kommeda, 'Living on the Edge: São Paulo's Inequality Mapped', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2017. On the notion of 'algorithmic governmentality', see Antoinette Rouvroy, 'Algorithmic Governmentality: Radicalisation and Immune Strategy of Capitalism and Neoliberalism?', no. 3, 2016; Antoinette Rouvroy & Thomas Berns, 'Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation', *La Découverte*, 177, no. 1, 2013.

and cosmism in a very practical and material sense, as in Staal's meteorites, ammonites and proletarian plantae. In this context, rather than actually healing the viewer, what we might term Vidokle's *vulgar-materialist* impulse, at least as much, expresses the *idea* and desire of immortality.

Viewed thus, the threshold between futures past and present not yet fully recognised could be perceived as taking form inbetween images obscurely chanting Fedorov's utopian demands for immortality and the almost banal medical and material strategies of red light, hypnosis and flashing light at a certain frequency. Here, Vidokle is questioning the lines between the (techno-)utopian and the mundane – a perhaps not that insurmountable divide between demanding immortality and viewing a film. The cosmic utopian ethos to 'rejuvenate, cure, heal, improve health, and delay death for as long as possible and by any means possible' is, thereby, transferred to the screen as a cosmic, therapeutic and, perhaps even, medical medium.<sup>41</sup> As novelist Kim Stanley Robinson has noted, space travel does indeed propose itself as a sheer 'luxury problem' today, and, for Fedorov himself, as Vidokle observed, was just a practical solution to the problems of overpopulation caused by the resurrection of the dead.<sup>42</sup> Seen as such, forcing the viewer to turn their eyes away from an already overheated biosphere and *onto the screen*, should not necessarily be viewed as a call for ignorance, as we are usually told. As the screen has increasingly become the inevitable condition for any social struggle, Vidokle reflects on and manifests how

the digital fluxes and interfaces could be seen as the means and practical solution to a hyperempathetic stance; a medium through which a caring attitude in a vulgar-material sense is practised. After all, such practices and desires become less and less rare.

During the first weeks of the corona outbreak in the US, it achieved its most patriarchal and passive-aggressive version in American televangelist Kenneth Copeland's attempt to heal television viewers from covid-19 by asking them to place their hands on the screen.<sup>43</sup> Vidokle's films manifest this reverse *terraforming* of cosmic strategies and processes on screens, taking care of blood and molecules entangled as they are in an expansive biopolitical visual economy already 'reformatting the human mind' in digital fluxes.<sup>44</sup> 'This is cosmos', Vidokle tells us in Russian with images of the Muslim cemeteries in Karaganda in Kazakhstan, former landscapes that under the Soviet Union were populated by political prisoners, such as Chizhevsky.

Taking at face value the ambiguous line between the utopian dream of immortality and its more material, mundane execution present in Vidokle's films, the demand for immortality might, then, not be as obscure as it first sounds. We all know the daunting numbers displaying unequal mortality rates. For billions of people living in the chaos of today's algorithmic and biopolitical form of governmentality mediated by the laws of capital, the dream of immortality would perhaps amount to just 70 liveable years<sup>45</sup> – and this is not to mention the other forms of increasingly

impoverished and obliterated lives occupying much of Vidokle's attention in the trilogy. As a result of the corona outbreak, we experienced the increasingly crucial function the screen plays in this algorithmically controlled biosphere pervaded by contagious pathogens. Long before the virus had even peaked in the US, it became possible to glance at the contours of what writer and activist Naomi Klein dubbed the 'New Screen Deal': the high-tech, Silicon Valley giants who did all they could to profit from the virus 'in the name of fighting the virus'.<sup>46</sup> From the point of view of Vidokle's films, we can easily see how such initiatives are indistinguishable from the experience that the precondition for *screen capitalism* is that some lives are more highly valued than others.<sup>47</sup> However, in the midst of these multiple disasters, the utopianism of the dreams and demands of the cosmists, which Vidokle's films obsessively circle around, not only manifest how horrible the situation is, but also how much there is to be done. The parodic mimicry of the techno-utopian desires displayed in the attempt to endow a certain frequency of light with a demand for immortality might here carry a certain un-spectacular truth: that it is in the material and mundane, day-to-day hyperempathetic practices that immortality (that is, a liveable life) is hidden.

Contrary to the way public health care institutions tend to appropriate art – as a kind of 'too careful' cultural Band-Aid detaching the sickness and the cure from its social context characterised by hyper-individualisation, privatisation and economic cuts in public health care funding<sup>48</sup> – Vidokle's historical and reflective approach complicates any form of instrumentalisation. The films

not only expose their viewers quite materially but also question and open, not least by virtue of the absurdity and obscurity of the cosmist ideas, the historical terrain to different forms of engagement in rejuvenating life and delaying death. Similar to the work of Staal, cosmism functions hence not so much as 'an imaginary solution to real problems, as a real problematising of how to navigate the differences between the imaginal that corresponds to each particular labour point of view'.<sup>49</sup> Rather than a mere historical analogy or a mythological place-holder, cosmism comes to function as a kind of historical reservoir from which to engage with some of the fundamental contradictions of our time. That is, as a weak historical tradition only surviving as long as practices pursuing other forms of caring and collective life forms persist and endure. In this light, we may reflect on Vidokle's question towards the end of the first film: 'and if all energy is truly indestructible, where is that energy now?'. This question is posed after having dubbed the Russian Revolution 'applied Cosmism', a social experiment allegedly canalising the energy of the cosmos. Thus, where did cosmism go? And what does it mean to be a cosmist today?

### **The contradictions of care**

As historian and social reproduction theorist Tithi Bhattacharya noted at the beginning of April, the global propagation of the pandemic clarified that 'care work and life-making work are the essential work of society' – not capitalist 'thing-making' work.<sup>50</sup> A few days later, Bhattacharya, together with the rest of the Marxist Feminist Collective, called for a decommodification and public availability of all care work.<sup>51</sup> Rather than speculate on how

46 Naomi Klein, 'Screen New Deal', *The Intercept*, 8 May 2020, [theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/](https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/).

47 For a short discussion on how covid-19 displayed how some lives are more highly valued than others, see, e.g., Kehinde Andrews, 'The Other Pandemic', in *The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation*, curated by Brad Evans: Los Angeles Review of Books, 2020, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/).

48 Andrea Phillips, 'Too Careful: Contemporary Art's Public Making', *Caring Culture: Art, Architecture and the Politics of Public Health*, ed. Andrea Phillips & Markus Miessen, Sternberg Press and SKOR, 2011, 56. For more on the relationship between art and care see some of the other essays in this anthology.

49 McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red. Theory for the Anthropocene*, Verso, 2016, 225.

50 Tithi Bhattacharya, 'Social Reproduction and the Pandemic, with Tithi Bhattacharya', *Dissent Magazine*, 2 April 2020, [www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya](https://dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya).

51 The Marxist Feminist Collective, 'On Social Reproduction and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Seven Theses', *Spectre Journal*, 3 April 2020, <https://spectrejournal.com/seven-theses-on-social-reproduction-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.





Anton Vidokle, still from *Citizens of the Cosmos* in *Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism*, 2014-17. HD video, colour, sound: Duration 30:20 mins. Japanese with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist / Asakusa and Vitamin Creative Space





52 For some aspects on the ideological mediations of 'art as care' see the already noted, Phillips, 'Too Careful'. For some valuable reflections on the mediations of love and care in immaterial capital in the operations and functioning of post-Fordist forms of labour, see Brian Kuan Wood, 'Is It Love?', *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?*, e-flux journal & Sternberg Press, 2017.

53 Phillips, 'Too Careful', 53.

54 Maria Lind, 'An Ominous Buzz', *Art Review*, 10 June 2015, [artreview.com/april-2015-opinion-maria-lind/](http://artreview.com/april-2015-opinion-maria-lind/).

55 This is a paraphrase taken from Adorno's 'In psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations', Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflection on a Damaged Life*, Verso, 2005, 49.

care workers might be seen as the truly contemporary cosmonauts, I will end with a rather short note on how the demands of life-making work expose and challenge some contradictions and critical potentials within the art world. In doing this, one soon has to acknowledge a rather simple fact: we certainly do not seem to lack art practices complying with the (privately funded) expectations of top-down organised inclusions of works of art in hospitals or Latourian instantiations desiring to *make things public*, often in a far too careful *parliament of things*. Critical attentiveness and carefulness are exactly what ideologically and materially speaking is expected from the aesthetic sensibilities of art. To acknowledge that art is entangled within a post-Fordist economy of affect, continuously producing the wounds and despair to be cared for, must, therefore, be one of the starting points of any reflection on care in the art world.<sup>52</sup> The expectation is art practices that 'repair and heal broken social situations'; art that does not hurt too much.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, one could easily talk about a certain *jargon of care* in the art world. Care is obviously just as much the problem as it is the solution. To put it bluntly: art is, ideologically and materially speaking, expected to be careful and attentive, perhaps even healing, but no radical political-aesthetic struggle would ever survive without care, intimacy and mutual aid. Experimenting and identifying ways to tackle and deal with this contradiction, without obliging ourselves to a false Latourian choice between critical destruction and careful composition, might be one of the most urgent tasks of an emancipatory (and cosmic) engagement with care.

With this in mind, what makes the works of Staal and Vidokle interesting, and what justifies a certain comparative view, is the way they historicise the *politics of care* within a broader tradition of social struggle. Within this context, they elaborate, very concretely, even *vulgarly*, we might say, on what art critic and curator Maria Lind in a review of Vidokle's first film terms 'soft mobilisation'.<sup>54</sup> In fact, one could arguably see this notion appropriated in a very literal manner in Vidokle's most recent film *Citizens of Cosmos* in which cosmists go out on the streets singing. Rather than flirting with a nostalgic vision of an avant-garde gesture igniting or curing the masses, the strength of such images lies in their ambiguous combination of softness and mobilisation, carefulness and antagonism, without resolving their contradictory relationship. Perhaps the exposition of these images, as well as the urge to use watchwords and slogans, such as 'Immortality for All', and in the case of Staal's installation, 'HYPEREMPATHY NOW', should not just be viewed solely as expressions of the cosmic desires layered in the longstanding tradition of emancipatory struggle. Rather, these art works show us, too, that cosmism today is mostly true in its anachronistic exaggerations and obscurities.<sup>55</sup> Which simply means that we still have so much to fight for. Still a cosmos to win!





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Anton Vidokle, still from *The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun in Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism*, 2014-17. HD video, colour, sound: Duration 33:36 mins. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist