

**Following The Black Square:
The Cosmic, The Nostalgic & The Transformative In Russian Avant-Garde Museology**

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Abstract

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Contemporary Russian art and museology is experiencing a revival of interest in the pioneering museology of the Russian artistic and political avant-garde of the early 20th century. This revival is exemplified in the work of contemporary Russian conceptual artist and self-styled ‘avant-garde museologist’ Arseniy Zhilyaev (b. 1984). Influential early 20th century Russian avant-garde artist and museologist Kazimir Malevich acts as the ‘tether’ binding the museologies of the past and present together, his famous “Black Square” a recurring visual and metaphoric indicator of the inspiration that contemporary Russian avant-garde museology and art is taking from its predecessors. This thesis analyzes Zhilyaev’s artistic and museological philosophy and work and determines how and where they are informed by Bolshevik-era avant-garde museology. This thesis also asks why such inspirations and influences are being felt and harnessed at this particular juncture in post-Soviet culture. The ‘avant-garde’ museological tenets shared by Zhilyaev and his earlier Russian predecessors (most significantly Nikolai Fyodorov, b. 1829, Kazimir Malevich, b. 1878, and Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov, b. 1900) incorporate the three facets that form the subtitle of this thesis - the cosmic (future focus), the nostalgic (for a lost past or an imagined, potential future), and the transformative (social and political through education). Differences include post-Soviet Russian museology’s less cohesive ideological underpinnings. The current generation of post-Soviet artists and museologists, typified by Zhilyaev, on the one hand, desires to move away from the more traumatic elements of the Soviet period. On the other hand, he misses the ‘superstructure’ of the Soviet era, in terms of its provision of a single, cohesive ideology to both take inspiration from and rebel against. Zhilyaev is a particularly insightful focal point from which to trace earlier Russian and Soviet avant-garde museological influences not only because his work directly references those museologies but also because all of Zhilyaev’s work is centered on one theme: the museum. Most of Zhilyaev’s exhibits presuppose the existence of an imaginary superstructure (which he often adapts directly from Fyodorov’s Cosmism, Malevich’s destructive impulse and contemporary focus, and Fedorov-Davydov’s class-based didactic agenda). Zhilyaev’s larger purpose is to unveil and heighten awareness of the superstructures (ideologies, agendas, and assumptions) that lay behind most of the ‘objects’ and actions in the world. Soviet nostalgia, escapism, political activism, the *art of dissent*, and institutionalism play key parts in both the timing and content of Zhilyaev’s work.

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u> - From The Black Square To The Red Star & Back Again:	6
<u>A Shared Museology</u>	10
<u>Chapter 1</u> - Toward The Museum(s) Of The Future	15
<u>Avant-Garde Defined</u>	27
<u>Leading The Way</u>	30
<u>From Chaos To The Cosmic</u>	39
<u>Chapter 2</u> - An Old Nostalgia?	51
<u>The Appeal Of Eschatology</u>	54
<u>Utopia & Escape</u>	59
<u>Chapter 3</u> - Shaping The New Man	67
<u>Changing The Medium & The Messenger</u>	72
<u>Zhilyaev's Direct Inspiration</u>	82
<u>Conclusion</u> - From The Black Square To The Red Square & Back Again	83
<u>A New Museological Activism Or An Old Institutionalism?</u>	87
The Museological Trajectory of Malevich's <i>Black Square</i>	93
Biographies	94
<u>Figures</u>	95
<u>Bibliography</u>	98

Following The Black Square



(Fig. 1)

I must say that I never imagined that you might have special museums for works of art . . . I thought that sculpture and picture galleries were peculiar to capitalism, with its ostentatious luxury and crass ambition to hoard treasures. I assumed that in a socialist order art would be disseminated throughout society so as to enrich life everywhere.

- Aleksandr Bogdanov's *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia*, 1908¹



(Fig. 2)

Cover of 1908 edition of Aleksandr Bogdanov's science fiction novel

Contemporary Russian society lacks this confidence in [an] utopian future of humanity, which requires [the] upbringing of free individuals; it does not believe in education as an important human right, instead considering it a way of personal capitalization that gives advantages in the labour market; it does not understand history as a continuing process, related to everyone. . . The value of history as a general subject and of a museum as a place of cultural entertainment is underestimated in today's Russia.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2012²

¹ Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia* (1908), Loren R. Graham, Richard Stites, and Charles Rougle, trans. Soviet History, Politics, Society, and Thought (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).

² Il'ia Budraĭtskis and Arsenii Zhili'a'ev, "Introduction" in *Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History*. (Italy: Marsilio, 2014), 5.

Introduction - From The Black Square To The Red Star & Back Again

Contemporary Russian art and museology is currently experiencing a revival of interest in and attention to the pioneering ‘avant-garde’ museology of the early Soviet-era. This renewed interest and influence can be seen in the production, curation, and exhibition of the work of contemporary Russian conceptual artist and self-styled ‘avant-garde museologist’ Arseniy Zhilyaev (b. 1984), who was described in 2012 by a leading Western architectural journal as “tipped [to be] one of the hot new names on the Russian art scene.”³ Museology, also known as museography or museum studies,⁴ is generally understood to be the discipline of museum design, organization, management, and function - in other words, the ‘science’ of museums. This thesis marks the first serious academic analysis of Zhilyaev and his work in Western scholarship, preceded only by Lena Jonson’s recent (2016) article “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today.”⁵

The common thread running through Zhilyaev’s work is his argument that “the avant-garde character of the art created by Soviet museologists must be reopened to the world”⁶ -

³ Rory Olcayto, “The Way of Enthusiasts,” *The Architects’ Journal* (London), August 28, 2012.

⁴ Defined by pioneering French museologist Georges-Henri Rivière as “an applied science, the science of the museum. Museology studies its [the museum’s] history, its role in society, the specific forms of research and physical conservation, activities and dissemination, organisation and functioning, new or musealised architecture, sites that have been received or chosen, its typology and its deontology.” G. H. Rivière, “Muséologie,” (1981), repris dans G. H. Rivière, et al., *La muséologie selon Georges Henri Rivière*, Paris: Dunod, 1989). For English translation see André Desvallées and François Mairesse, eds., “Key Concepts of Museology,” *ICOM (International Council of Museums) Report* (Armand Colin, 2010): 54.

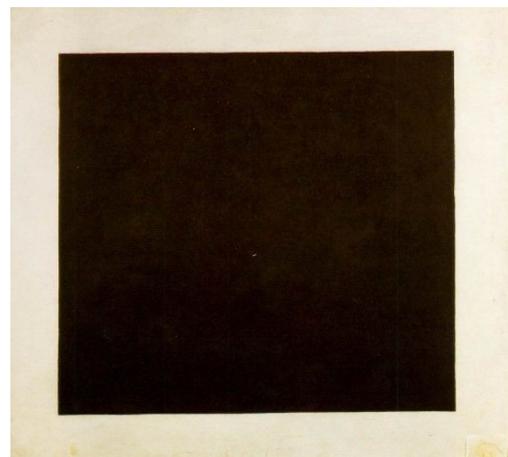
⁵ In which she references Zhilyaev as one of several examples of Russian artists utilizing subtle forms of political dissent and critique in their art. Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 657-72.

⁶ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

reopened not only as a historical subject but as artistic and curatorial direction and inspiration as well. This thesis aims to analyze Zhilyaev's artistic and museological philosophy and work and determine how and where they are informed by early Soviet avant-garde museology's aesthetic, ideological, and organizational principles and aims. It is the ultimate goal of this thesis to look at how, where, and why such inspirations and influence are being felt and harnessed at this particular stage in post-Soviet culture, a stage Jonson describes as Russia's "turn to an ultra-conservative, authoritarian official paradigm."⁷

In order to do so it is useful to find and follow that which bridges the temporal and experiential gap between the Bolshevik-era avant-garde and Zhilyaev. I use early twentieth century Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich as the 'tether' binding the avant-garde museology of the early Soviet era to Zhilyaev's contemporary avant-garde museology, with Malevich's famous *Black Square* the recurring visual and metaphoric indicator of said tether. In doing so I don't intend to argue that Malevich's pioneering of artistic non-objectivity was the direct inspiration for the ideologization of Soviet museology. The pioneering early Soviet museologists saw and seized that opportunity themselves. **(Fig. 3) Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915**

But such creative, avant-garde opportunities did not die with the end of the early Bolshevik period of experimentation and eclecticism, nor did awareness of the creative opportunities in ideology and revisionism die with the end of the Soviet system. Contemporary



⁷ Here Jonson is referring to the Russian post-2012 period. Lena Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 668.

post-Soviet and Russian artists and museologists like Arseniy Zhilyaev are realizing those opportunities today.

Just as the upcoming centennial of the Russian Revolution has prompted a closer look at the “historical legacies and new beginnings in Russian culture and politics a hundred years after Red October,”⁸ the recent centennial (2015)⁹ of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* painting has also prompted several new art-historical analyses, curatorial treatments, and art exhibit and installation projects that in some way touch on and interpret Malevich’s revolutionary abstract painting. Many of these ‘retrospectives’ are especially concerned with either celebrating and tracing its artistic influence¹⁰ or emphasizing the importance of the work’s context (artistic, philosophical, historical, and political), while at the same time ‘revising’ it for the purpose of illuminating the present. For example, Romanian conceptual artist Veda Popovici designed a

(Fig. 4) Popovici, “Revolutionary Gear” video still



conceptual performance installation entitled “Revolutionary Gear: The History of Art Retold Through The Black Square (2015)” which “instructs its viewers to reconsider moments in art history as contexts of political antagonisms.”¹¹ Popovici does this primarily through a video

⁸ “The REECAS NW 2017 Conference Theme,” last modified January 19, 2017, <https://jsis.washington.edu/ellisoncenter/news/reecas-nw-2017-conference-theme/>.

⁹ see page 44 and footnote 107 for more on the historical development of Malevich's painting.

¹⁰ See the websites for the exhibits “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915” at Whitechapel Gallery, London, April 2015, accessed March 9, 2017,

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/january-23rd-2015/the-abstract-revolution-inspired-by-orthodox-icons/> and

“Malevich: Revolutionary of Russian Art” at the Tate Modern, July - October 2014, accessed March 9, 2017.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/malevich>.

¹¹ “Revolutionary Gear, the History of Art Retold Through the Black Square” exhibit website, accessed March 9, 2017, <https://atelier35.eu/revolutionary-gear-the-history-of-art-retold-through-the-black-square/>.

performance of a series of *tableaux vivants* inspired by poses in Renaissance paintings, Orientalism and sculptures (for example, the Venus de Milo). The performance guides the viewer to reflect on moments throughout art history, never forgetting their political contexts - with ever present iterations of Malevich's *Black Square* symbolizing the dominant superstructure of our world history (which Popovici believes to be patriarchy and classism).¹² Popovici sees no issue in attaching this kind of 'new' meaning to Malevich's *Black Square*, seeing the act instead as a "kind of revolution"¹³, an argument for a kind of perpetual revisionism that Malevich himself might have enjoyed (it also doesn't take too many leaps of the imagination to get to Trotsky's much-quoted notion of a 'permanent revolution').

I say Malevich might have enjoyed such a revision because his chief creation, Suprematism (the conceptual foundation of his black square) was in fact, just such a revolutionary 'revision' of what had gone on before in the world of art (historically, philosophically, and aesthetically speaking). Change is constant and adapting is useful and often necessary. And as we have seen with Veda Popovici and will see in further analysis of Kazimir Malevich, the early Soviet museologists, and Arseniy Zhilyaev, artistic and museological recognition of this opens up windows of creative opportunity for the avant-garde and the revolutionary in both of these fields.

This creative opportunity is centered around the adaptation and instrumentalization (the agenda-driven use) of the past - what is fundamentally a revisionist, revolutionary impulse. This impulse is shared by Arseniy Zhilyaev, contemporary Russian conceptual artist and self-styled

¹² "Revolutionary Gear: The History of Art Retold Through The Black Square" exhibit listing on the Bucharest International Experimental Film Festival 2016 (BIEFF) website, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.bieff.ro/en/2016/films/revolutionary-gear-history-art-retold-through-black-square>.

¹³ Ibid.

‘avant-garde’ museologist. In an interview about his 2012 exhibit “The Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia” at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Zhilyaev said that he had been directly inspired and “moved by th[e] impulse [of early Soviet museologist Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov] to articulate an alternative [Marxist] history of art, not based on the celebration of individual creativity but on the relationship between art and the relations of production of its time.” Zhilyaev went on to ask, “Can we subject the history of art to revision today? What would it look like from the point of view of a factory worker of the 1970s or 80s? And what about the perspective of a producer of immaterial goods of the 2000s?”¹⁴

The overall ‘superstructure’ may be different, as it is no longer derived from Marxist-Leninist thought. However, this museological consideration and addition of new perspectives and narratives has pushed curatorial ‘neutrality’ and objective ahistoricism out the museum window. Zhilyaev currently has little trouble taking inspiration and direction from the production of the past: disregarding, challenging, combining, and co-opting from his pioneering predecessors all along the way. The next logical questions then are: how? And why now, at this particular juncture in the post-Soviet present?

A Shared Museology

The ‘avant-garde’ museology shared by Zhilyaev and his early twentieth century Russian predecessors (most notably Nikolai Fyodorov, b. 1829, Kazimir Malevich, b. 1878, and Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov, b. 1900) can be divided into three main tenets. The first is a focus on contemporary cultural and artistic production. This focus alternates between recognition of the

¹⁴ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

creative opportunity to be had in the adaptation and instrumentalization of the past (driven by the agenda(s) of the present in pursuit of the future) and the appeal of obliterating the past and disdain for the preservationist impulse of traditional museology. The second shared tenet is the goal of social and political transformation through criticism and education. The third is the “practice of combining artistic and curatorial positions,”¹⁵ and the treatment of the exhibit “as a special form and medium of contemporary art”¹⁶ in and of itself with the exhibit-as-medium taking over from the individual artwork, and the museum coming into its own as an institutional as well as artistic, creative, and political authority. These shared tenets incorporate the three museological impulses that form the subtitle and the three main chapters of this thesis: the *cosmic* (contemporary and future focus), the *nostalgic* (for a lost past or an imagined future), and the *transformative* (social and political through discourse and revelation). These combine to form the rationale behind the timing and the content of Zhilyaev’s consciously referential work.

Zhilyaev is a particularly insightful and effective focal point from which to trace earlier Russian and Soviet avant-garde museological influences not only because his work directly references those influences but also because all of his work is centered on one theme: museums. The majority of Zhilyaev’s exhibits and art installations ‘metatextually’ reference previous historical exhibits (their format and framework as well as content) and historical museological ‘trends’ alongside either commenting on the current Russian socio-political context or informing a fictional, imaginary future one. This work presupposes the existence of individual, all-encompassing imaginary superstructures, often borrowed and adapted directly from the

¹⁵ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

exhibits, art, and ideologies of Fyodorov, Malevich, and Fedorov-Davydov). Such work is designed not only to present to but also to educate the museum visitor regarding the details and contexts of these imaginary (often future-based) superstructures. In doing so, Zhilyaev's larger museological *and* political purpose is to unveil and heighten awareness of the superstructures (the hidden or assumed ideologies and agendas) that lay behind most of the 'objects' and actions in the world.

To Zhilyaev, just as the art of Soviet museology should be "reopened to the world"¹⁷, "The artist [should] be the one who reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politicians, for the most part, try to conceal."¹⁸ And if the artist must reveal and the politician must be 'revealed', so too must the exhibit and the museum alternately reveal and 'be revealed.' They must be revealed as institutions and sites with hidden ideologies, agendas, assumptions, and authority of their own. In his museum-focused work, Zhilyaev seeks to "emphasise the artificiality of museum representation . . . [and] use the institutional conventions of exhibition-making to expose the assumptions on which it is based and that we usually take for granted." This emphasis draws a direct line from the past to the present, with Zhilyaev arguing that "this is, in fact, what experimental museum curators did in the early years of the Soviet regime."¹⁹ And not just curators were involved in this 'experiment' in unveiling and exposing hidden authority, assumptions, and agendas while at the same time applying newly

¹⁷ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

¹⁸ From the "M. I. R.: Polite Guests from the Future" exhibit page on Zhilyaev's professional website, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/mir-new-paths-to-the-objects/>.

¹⁹ Silvia Franceschini, "Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview]," *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

made, more encompassing and explanatory ones - this was the very basis upon which the whole Soviet project was predicated.

And while the past is being reflected in the museological work of the present, Zhilyaev also argues that the present is reflecting itself. The timing of Zhilyaev's consciously referential work stems from what he describes as the existence of a general "parallel between the Russian political situation and the contemporary art field."²⁰ Unveiling hidden assumptions is an effective strategy for the purpose of political dissent and critique. And this effectiveness is made directly and especially relevant to the present Russian socio-political situation by this paralleling of the Russian political and artistic worlds - just as it was for the early Soviets (artists and ideologues alike) regarding their recent imperial and capitalist past. In other words, the lessons and influences Zhilyaev is drawing on from the avant-garde museology of the Soviet past have taught him much about how to 'museologically' deal with the post-Soviet present in terms of strategies for socio-political critique, dissent, debate, and raising awareness.

This paralleling also affects Zhilyaev's contemporary conception of museums. Just like society and the political arena, the museum provides a "space . . . where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom."²¹ Zhilyaev finds himself at odds, just as the young artists and museologists who came of age in the early years of the Soviet Union must have been, over whether creative and effective art and curation happens individually or collectively. Zhilyaev draws deeply from that which he learned from his

²⁰ From the "M. I. R.: Polite Guests from the Future" exhibit page on Zhilyaev's professional website, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/mir-new-paths-to-the-objects/>.

²¹ Ibid.

avant-garde twentieth century predecessors. In so doing he applies to post-Soviet art and museology lessons in the superior transformative power of the institution and the collective (in Zhilyaev's case the museum and the exhibit). These lessons were thought by many to have been disproven by the twenty-first century, with its collapse of the Soviet Union and its attendant system and ideology.

Chapter 1 - Toward The Museum(s) Of The Future

We must build a bridge as soon as possible from the world of the children of the sun to the world of the moles, and show the masses that the museum is essential to them.

- Anatoly Lunacharsky, 1919²²

A famous *anekdot* by perestroika-era satirist Mikhail Zadornov states that Russia is “a country with an unpredictable past.”²³ ²⁴ In a popular earlier Soviet-era *anekdot* of the same sentiment, a listener rings up a call-in radio station and asks, “Is it possible to foretell the future?” The answer: “Yes, no problem. We know exactly what the future will be. Our problem is with the past: it keeps changing.”²⁵ There is a decided relief and appeal in the ostensible discovery and declaration of a definitive future. As a case in point, just look at the pervasive and lasting power of Marxism. And with a future guaranteed it is left only to round up and put in order the twisted skeins of the past so that all the threads lead in the same direction. This is made both more and less difficult, however, by the surprising adaptability and malleability of the past - in terms of not only making sense of the present but serving its diverse, often ‘cross’-purposes as

²² Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first head of Narkompros also known by the title Commissar of Enlightenment, in an address to the All-Russian Museum Conference in Petrograd, February 1919. Natalia Semenova, “A Soviet Museum Experiment,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 43, 1-4 (2009): 81-102, doi: 10.1163/221023909X00066.

²³ Kate Sutton, “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art [exhibit review],” *Artforum* (May 2015), accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>.

²⁴ Another joke concerned with the difficulties of Soviet history, this time an American one, was told by Ronald Reagan, who loved a good Communist joke and who tormented Gorbachev with them during their meetings at the historic 1987 summit in Washington D.C. which eliminated medium-range nuclear missiles. They even “actually bickered about the correct way to tell one of them.” The joke went thusly: ‘What is a Soviet historian? Someone who can accurately predict the past.’ Reagan read such jokes in the traditional conservative American, anti-Red way, taking them as “evidence of - to use the clichés of the day - the indomitable spirit of the people of Eastern Europe and their irrepressible longing for freedom, not to mention proof that Communist economic theory was ridiculous.” Ben Lewis, *Hammer & Tickle: The History of Communism Told through Communist Jokes* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 258-262.

²⁵ The most popular iteration of this joke labels the radio station as Armenian, with Georgia also serving as a possible host for the radio station. There was a long-standing feud between those two countries that was waged in *anekdoty*: another example, Soviet-era Armenia sends a request to Moscow for a navy. Moscow asks why, as Armenia is land-locked. Armenia’s response: But Georgia has a Ministry of Culture! Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

well. But if the past is malleable then museums are equally so, having proved themselves timelessly effective instruments of historical revisionism and propaganda - from the Soviet-era to the present day.²⁶ In less critical and politically charged terms, Gail Anderson, in the comprehensive *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (2012), argues that museums are continually evolving and reinventing themselves and “like most institutions, [they] are not immune to local or world events, issues, and trends.”²⁷ It is this reflective, adaptive institutional capability of museums that mirrors and makes natural bedfellows of the past (aside, of course, from museums’ traditional primary function of preserving that past).

This adaptability and malleability need not and has not always been seen as a bad thing. Indeed, the Russian artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century did not think it so, nor did the first Soviet museologists. Just as avant-garde artists like Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878-1935) were fighting against what Malevich called “the burden of the object”²⁸ (in other words the previously unchallenged duty of the artist to depict realistic, ‘objective’ representations of the world), at the same time a parallel avant-garde museology was being developed in the newly Soviet Russia. This museology was also fighting against objectivity - this

²⁶ Recent examples of extreme historical revisionism and propaganda-making being a series of blockbuster exhibits in Moscow galleries (circa 2015) centered around the message that Russia has long been under attack and is “a besieged fortress that needs a strong commander, and anyone trying to democratize Russia and shake the power of the commander is trying to undermine this country.” For more see Neil MacFarquhar and Sophia Kishkovsky, “Russian History Receives A Makeover That Starts With Ivan The Terrible,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/world/europe/russian-museum-seeks-a-warmer-adjective-for-ivan-the-terrible.html?_r=1.

²⁷ Gail Anderson, “A Framework: Reinventing the Museum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift, 2nd Edition*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2012), 1.

²⁸ Malevich wrote in his 1927 book *The Non-Objective World*: “In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square.” Susan Holtham and Moran Fiontan. “Five ways to look at Malevich’s Black Square,” *Tate Modern*, August 28, 2014, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/five-ways-look-Malevich-Black-Square>.

time the objectivity of traditional museology's ostensibly 'neutral' conception, organization, and presentation of the past. As Zhilyaev put it, "The 'neutral' display of museum material was replaced [by pioneering Soviet museologists] with an agenda-driven position, which implied not merely an emotional effect on the viewers, but a development of their awareness of the place they occupy within the class struggle."²⁹ In 1930 at the First All-Russian Museum Convention in Moscow, A.S. Bubnov said, "We do not need the museum to look like a camera of curiosities. We must break the reactionary routine approach to museum-building."³⁰ At that same 1930 convention, Ivan Luppel suggested a new classification of museum institutions based on the Marxist concept of base and superstructure. Museums were to be divided into two separate groups: the "base" museums of natural science, technology, economy and socio-history, and the "superstructure" museums, focused on art and combatting religion.³¹ This may seem like a fairly standard application of an overarching ideological agenda to a previously relatively autonomous, 'neutral' cultural institution but it was, in fact, only the second such museology to do so in history. Nikolai Fyodorov's 'cosmic' museology of 'The Common Cause' was the first (which we will explore later).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, museums had only relatively recently (post-Renaissance) come close to our present-day conception of the publicly-oriented institution.

²⁹ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

³⁰ Quoted from the greeting letter by A. S. Bubnov in *Works of the First All-Russian Museum Convention* (Moscow, 1930). See Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

³¹ Ivan Luppel, "Dialectical Materialism and the Construction of the Museum," in *Reports from the First All-Russian Museum Congress*, ed. I. K. Luppel, vol. 1 (Moscow: Uchgiz, 1931), 25-40. For English translation see Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 320-339.

Before then they had been private cabinets of curiosities.³² The consequence of this non-ideological, ‘superstructure-less’³³, personal collections-based ‘neutrality’ in museology was a conservative approach to museum work, including the selection for display of works only representative of certain delimited periods or styles, the chronological, non-creative grouping and display order of works, the exclusion of empathetic explanatory text or narrative and non-contemporaneous material, and the privileging of the original over copies.

But the museology of the early Soviet period forced a change in this neutrality. Zhilyaev describes this change: “From a system of objects, the museum was to turn into a system of ideas that would demonstrate not objects, but processes.”³⁴ In other words, museums were now housed within a larger, ideological ‘superstructure.’ Expansive and more emotional narrative- and context-providing text and statistics began to be used in the labelling of exhibits in the Soviet museums of the 1920s and early 30s.³⁵ Non-contemporaneous material and objects were used in the exhibits of this ‘new’ museology, as were copies as no distinctions were made between reproductions and originals by the Soviets, whose chief aim was increased accessibility and instruction through display and not the championing of historicity and authenticity.³⁶ These new

³² For more on the transition from the private, individual collection centered around natural history to the public institution of today see Paula Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 1, no. 1 (1989): 59-78.

³³ Ivan Luppel, “Dialectical Materialism and the Construction of the Museum,” in *Reports from the First All-Russian Museum Congress*, ed. I. K. Luppel, vol. 1 (Moscow: Uchgiz, 1931), 25-40. For English translation see Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 320-339.

³⁴ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

³⁵ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

³⁶ For more on the long-standing debate over authenticity in contemporary museology, as an introduction read Rene G. Cepeda’s blog *The Museologist* and her March 9th, 2015 post, “Authenticity in Museums,”

<https://ragc.wordpress.com/2015/03/09/authenticity-in-museums/>. For a glimpse at an earlier but no less influential stage of this debate see Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

exhibits often included panoramic, photographic ‘vistas’ and dioramas that incorporated all the previously mentioned museological innovations in one:

[This involved an innovative] [c]ombination of aesthetic effects of realistic art and analytic approach (dioramas were always followed by detailed historical description), [and this] bring[s] to us the idea that Soviet dioramas anticipate many contemporary art methods [including] panoramas and dioramas . . . [These] giant all-encompassing installations . . . referred to [the] historical imagination of the viewer and called for analysis and empathy with the event [being depicted].³⁷

Soviet museology was a pioneer on more than one front, however. The new Bolshevik era avant-garde museology did not simply rise up and develop parallel to the Russian artistic avant-garde movement. The two ‘movements’ came together to create what Maria Gough calls “Futurist museology.”³⁸ Just as Malevich had realized the aesthetic, philosophical opportunities in challenging artistic objectivity, Russian avant-garde artists and innovative art critics and museum administrators alike recognized the opportunity in developing a new museology - the opportunity for the creation of a new kind of museum: ‘the museum of living artists’, or in other words, the contemporary art museum. Discussions and debate on this had actually begun in Russia before the revolution, in 1912,³⁹ just as Malevich began grappling with non-objectivity and what would soon become the artistic avant-garde movement Suprematism.

The development of this new ‘Futurist museology’ of the early Soviet avant-garde hints at a long-standing (and still extant) problem within traditional museology - with its preservationist, archival concerns and display methods. There is an inherent problem, what might

³⁷ Il’iĭ aĭ Budraĭtskis and Arseniĭ Zhiliĭ aĭev, “Initial Statement” of the collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History” from Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/archive-of-the-future-museum-of-history/>.

³⁸ Maria Gough, “Futurist Museology,” *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 2 (2003): 327-348, accessed March 3, 2017, doi: 10.1353/mod.2003.0038.

³⁹ *Ibid.* For more see Josev Shkolnik, “Muzei sovremennoi russkoi zhivopisi,” *Soiuz Molodezhi* 1 (April 1912): 18-20; for English translation see Tatyana Schmidt, trans., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection*, ed. Anna Kafetsi (Athens: National Gallery & Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995): 455-6.

be called an ‘illogic,’⁴⁰ in traditional museology’s removal of objects from the creative process that bore them and their ‘living’ cultural and artistic context to the ‘safety’ and distance of a museum exhibit. This removal might be likened to an ‘entombment’ or a death and a museum of the ‘living’ was seen as a direct way to resolve this illogic. Echoes and direct parallels to Futurist museology’s revisionist, overhaul approach to the failings of the traditional museology of old can be found in the mid to late twentieth century movement (within Western museology) - the so-called ‘New Museology.’ This ‘New Museology’ of the 1990s “evolved from the perceived failings of the original museology . . . [which] was seen to privilege both its collections-based function and its social links to the cultural tastes of particular social groups. . . [This includes] a drive for wider access and representation of diverse groups, as well as a more active role for the public as both visitors and controllers of the curatorial function.”⁴¹ The striking nature of the commonalities and parallels between these two ‘new’ museologies, which cover the whole of the twentieth century and involve both the East and the West, deserves its own research paper.

It may seem strange now, but at the turn of the twentieth century there were no museums for the fostering, display, or preservation of contemporary art. While this makes the common negative associations of museums with ‘galleries of the dead’, ‘mausoleums’, and ‘tombs’ more understandable, it does even more to illuminate the notable fact that the ‘modern museum’ is only a very recent creation. According to Maria Gough in her 2003 article “Futurist museology”:

With a single exception, the Russian museums [of contemporary art] represent the very earliest instantiation of a phenomenon that has since rapidly proliferated in many parts of the world, particularly in the postwar period and especially since the 1980s. At the time of their foundation during the Civil War [1917-1922], however, their

⁴⁰ Thanks to Professor James West for this insight.

⁴¹ Vikki McCall and Clive Gray, “Museums and the ‘new museology’: theory, practise, and organisational change,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* vol. 29, no. 1 (2013): 2, accessed May 12, 2017, doi: 10.1080/09647775.2013. 869852.

single precedent was the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, which, in 1818, had been transformed by government decree into an institution devoted exclusively to the work of “living artists,” and thereby differentiated in function from the Musée du Louvre, the so-called galleries of the dead.⁴²

So if the combination of artistic non-objectivity, an ideological ‘superstructure’, the inclusion of contemporary cultural production, and the addition of a whole new ‘type’ of museum can be called revisionist and revolutionary, then what happened when the Russian artistic and political avant-garde met can rightfully be called a museological ‘revolution.’ And the opportunity in revisionism, for innovation in the museological treatment of history and the past as well as art, was not and is not being overlooked by Russian avant-garde museologists - of the early Soviet *and* current post-Soviet period.

While Malevich did not make the connection explicit in his writings, it is nonetheless striking that his declaration of freedom from the burden and ‘oppression’ of artistic realism and objectivity, the Bolsheviks’ declaration of war against and then proletarian victory over Russia’s feudal past, and the new Soviet Union’s declaration that it was the vanguard of the future universal Communist order all occurred simultaneously. As previously stated, with a future guaranteed all that is left is to round up and put in order the twisted skeins of the past so that all the threads lead in the same direction. However, while museums seem perfectly suited for the pursuit of the latter (making sense of the past so that it accords with the agenda(s) of the present), projections of the future have long been a knotty point of debate for museums. In 1989 Judith K.

⁴² Maria Gough, “Futurist Museology,” *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 2 (2003): 327-348, accessed March 3, 2017, doi: 10.1353/mod.2003.0038.

Spielbauer said, “Approaching the future of museology and its associated institutions through the framework of futurology has both advantages and disadvantages.”⁴³

Museological ‘futuresology’ has historically chiefly been devoted to anticipating trends in museum work⁴⁴, not to focus on the overall future society, culture, and world within which museums must situate themselves. This favoring of ‘trend-watching’⁴⁵ over ‘superstructure’ predictions has been the long-standing ‘state’ of museological futurology but Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903) again is the one historical exception (as he was in the discussion of which museology was the first to apply an overarching ideological agenda to its work).

Fyodorov was the grandfather of Russian space travel, founder of Russian Cosmism, and developer and chief advocate for the ‘Common Cause’ - mankind’s organized pursuit of immortality and resurrection, necessitating the development of space travel and colonization. His ‘Cause’ (popularized posthumously in Russia in 1906) required the development of a future- (and not past)-directed museology. With this museology informed by a larger agenda (Cosmism) and prediction (that mankind would resurrect all the dead), it was the first to apply an overarching ideology to its work, followed later by the new museology of the early Soviets.

The difficulty museums and museology have with making claims about the future does not lie in their reverence for and focus on the past or their traditional reliance on historical

⁴³ For more on the history of modern Western museology’s attitude toward futurology see the International Committee for Museology Museum’s (ICOFOM) publication “Symposium: Forecasting - A Museological Tool?,” *ISS (ICOFOM Study Series)* 16 (August 1989): 21, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://network.icom.museum/icofom/publications/our-publications/>.

⁴⁴ For more see AAM’s (American Alliance of Museums) Center for the Future of Museums, which monitors cultural, technological, political and economic trends of importance to museums, equips museums to help their communities address the challenges of coming decades, and builds connections between museums and other sectors, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/center-for-the-future-of-museums>.

⁴⁵ The British National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) makes yearly trend predictions that touch on but are not devoted exclusively to museums, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.nesta.org.uk/news/2015-predictions>.

neutrality or objectivity. Instead, this difficulty is perhaps best expressed in words that could have been written in Russia at any time in its ‘unpredictable past’:

Much of the disorienting nature of change in today’s society may well come from the public image of a past that has irrevocably disappeared and a temporary present which is swiftly and universally advancing into an inexorable and unknown future.⁴⁶

In actuality this was lifted directly from notes taken by Magda Cordell McHale at the 1989 International Committee for Museology’s (ICOFOM) Symposium titled “Forecasting - A Museological Tool?” Malevich himself had noted 70 years earlier in 1919 that “We must recognize “short duration” as being the sharp distinction between our epoch and the past - the moment of creative impetus, the speedy displacement in forms; there is no stagnation - only tempestuous movement.”⁴⁷ McHale would later go on to make a statement that early twentieth century Russian avant-garde artists and Soviet ideologues alike would have seen as an interesting challenge:

In our present Western mode, time is unilinear in that the past comes before the present and the future follows upon the present. So pervasive is this mode that it is difficult for us to imagine a practical way of relating events other than in such a sequence.

Early Soviet-era and post-Soviet avant-garde artists, Malevich and Zhilyaev included, would jump at such challenge.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ International Committee for Museology Museum’s (ICOFOM) publication “Symposium: Forecasting - A Museological Tool?,” *ISS (ICOFOM Study Series)* 16 (1989): 9, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://network.icom.museum/icofom/publications/our-publications/>.

⁴⁷ See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 268.

⁴⁸ As an interesting aside, in 1988 Ilya Kabakov designed an installation for the Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York called “The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment” in which an empty bedroom with a blown out roof is decorated with rocket schematics and optimistic Soviet posters promising the coming of the Soviet utopia. Evidently the man couldn’t wait that long and it is this impatience that leads me to believe that temporal revisionism would not be a completely foreign, sci-fi concept to the average Soviet citizen who is constantly bombarded with the promises of a better Soviet tomorrow. As Boris Groys put it in his analysis of the exhibit, “Utopia will be a long time coming, as well all know, for the construction of the ultimate utopia is a slow historical process that requires

I say that not because Malevich's Suprematism and Zhilyaev's conceptual art and museology actually seek to 'revise' temporality, although both do exhibit impatience regarding the speed with which the rest of the world is to catch up with their avant-garde 'breakthroughs.' One example is how and why Zhilyaev has drawn inspiration from the museology of the early Soviet era:

maybe there is a way to accelerate the whole project of contemporary art that can bring us to a breakthrough into the future avant-garde . . . To this end, we can get substantial help by analyzing the formal compositions of both the analytical and the "weird" Soviet museum exhibitions created by the representatives of avant-garde museology.⁴⁹

But the work of both Malevich and Zhilyaev does strive to achieve more kinds of 'revisionism' than that of temporality. In Malevich's Suprematist movement, this revisionism was a revision of feeling and sensation and what those could do and mean in art. Put simply, Suprematism is the notion of art as the rendering of pure feeling, a break from the dutiful artistic representation of objects towards the artistic depiction of the ultimate 'non-object' - sensations. In the second part of his book *The Non-Objective World* (first published in 1927 in Munich as *Bauhaus Book No. 11*), titled "Suprematism", Malevich described the changes and 'revisions' of this new art:

To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling . . . [Under Suprematism, art] wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without "things."

the collective effort of generation upon generation. But not everyone can live with that." Boris Grois, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, One Work Series (London: Afterall, 2006), 1.

⁴⁹ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

For his part, Arseniy Zhilyaev, as per his professional website biography, proudly declares himself a historical, museological, and artistic revisionist *and* futurologist:

Using artistic, political, scientific, and museological histories to uncover and propose potential futures, Zhilyaev explores a productive space between fiction and non-fiction. Within his projects, the artist casts a revisionist lens on the heritage of Soviet museology and [the] museum in Russian Cosmism.⁵⁰

In fact, it might be easier to call Zhilyaev a museological revisionist as his work (his art, his installations, exhibits, curation, and writings) is predominantly preoccupied with what the first Soviet museologists called the ‘Museum Problem’⁵¹ - the question of the museum’s ideal role in society (as well as its relationship with the artist) and the projection of that museum and that society into the future. Zhilyaev admitted as much in an interview following his exhibit “Moscow Etude” at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (MMOMA) in 2016:

[Zhilyaev]: This project continues the series of experimental exhibitions devoted to *the future of contemporary art* . . .

[Interviewer]: The museum is among the central themes in your work. Why are you interested in it?

[Zhilyaev]: This is the medium I discovered in the late 2000s. Since then, *all of my projects are presented as imaginary museums or exhibitions from the future*. For example, the Museum of the Revolution from the imaginary future is a very convenient form to discuss both the potential history of art and the social structure that will determine it. At a certain point, I became interested in the theory of the museum as well as in this practise. That is how I came to [be] working on an anthology of avant-garde museology⁵² and discovered Russian Cosmism and the early Soviet museum. *In my works, I try to show how productive it was.*⁵³

The projects Zhilyaev mentions which focused on presenting imaginary or future museums include: his exhibit “Moscow Etude (2016)” at MMOMA, his contribution, a

⁵⁰ From the “CV” page of Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/>.

⁵¹ “On the Question of Museums: Record of the Discussion of Problems and Objectives of Fine Art Museums at the Art and Industry Board (1919)” in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 381.

⁵² Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015).

⁵³ The “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>.

large-scale installation called “Cradle of Humankind (2015),” to a joint exhibition (titled “Future Histories”) in the Russian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, his installation, “RCC YHV: The Resurrection Museum (2014-15),” at the two-venue exhibition “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art” split between the CUNY Graduate Center’s James Gallery and E-flux in New York, his first solo exhibition in the U.S., “M.I.R. (*Myzeé Istorii Rossii* or Museum of Russian History): Polite Guests from the Future (2014),” at the Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco, his collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History (2012-13)” with the Presnya Historical Memorial Museum in Moscow, and his exhibit “The Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia (2012)” at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. But the project that first sparked his interest in “using artistic, political, scientific, and museological histories to uncover and propose potential futures”⁵⁴, also drew his attention to the theme of “proposing new approaches to the tradition of Soviet museology”⁵⁵ - this was his editing of *Avant-Garde Museology*⁵⁶ (published in 2015, research begun in 2010), an anthology of primary source materials translated into English (most for the first time) on early Soviet museology.

⁵⁴ From the “CV” page of Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/>.

⁵⁵ E-flux exhibit program for “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art,” last modified January 21, 2015, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>.

⁵⁶ Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015).

Avant-Garde Defined

As we have seen, avant-garde conceptual artists such as Malevich and Zhilyaev do not have a problem with futurology or charging ahead into the future. In fact, they are impatient - not only for the rest to catch up, but for the projected, promised future to arrive. To the avant-garde, rules are made to be broken and the forefront is their natural environment. A closer look at the etymology of the expression ‘avant-garde’ sheds some light on the artistic avant-garde’s comfort ‘in the lead’, as well as explaining the predominance of *Russian* artists in this vanguard position.

The term ‘avant-garde’ can and has been used in multiple ways and so has multiple definitions. While John Bowlt argues that the terms ‘avant-garde’ and ‘arrière-garde’ were brought into more common usage by the heightened awareness of military jargon brought about by the First World War,⁵⁷ Susan Buck-Morss contends that ‘avant-garde’ had already entered the common vernacular, within France at least, in the mid nineteenth century, to describe cultural or political radicalism.⁵⁸ Within Russia, the term was being used as early as 1863 in a non-militaristic way to describe the encroachment of certain cultural values.⁵⁹ Both terms originated in the West as military descriptors of the front edge, the small leading force, of an army sent to surprise the enemy.

When abstracted and removed from its military origins and used alone, ‘avant-garde’ can be taken to mean: those or that which pushes the boundaries of the status quo and takes the first

⁵⁷ John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds. *Laboratory of Dreams : The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁵⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ Aleksandr Herzen used it to describe the expansion of *meshchanstvo* (bourgeois values) into Russian life. See John Bowlt, “Introduction” in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, eds. John Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3, footnote #4.

step needed to start a paradigm shift,⁶⁰ be it scientific, social, or aesthetic. When used in a phrase, like ‘artistic avant-garde movement,’ the movement itself (typically its founding members) will usually be at great pains to define itself (its tenets, goals, and foundational principles).⁶¹ As Bowlt observes, there is no single cultural avant-garde - it is a “multifarious phenomenon”⁶² bounded by discipline (traditionally aesthetic: art, theater, literature, music), region (not necessarily national but often geographically determined), and period (this is often done retroactively by outsiders⁶³). And the concept of the ‘political vanguard’ so closely associated with Marxist thought on ideal Communist organization was in fact developed by Lenin in his seminal *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), in which he co-opted the French term *avant-garde* to describe his new Bolshevik Party.

To borrow Buck Morss’ useful etymological parallel, the terms ‘avant-garde’ and ‘vanguard’ can be defined “against each other,”⁶⁴ most productively with regards to the Russian or rather ‘Bolshevik’ variants of the terms. While both terms possess foreign, military origins, the early Soviet (i.e. Bolshevik) period’s twofold cooption of this term (military *and* aesthetic) is perhaps best defined visually by Russian avant-garde artist (and Malevich protégé) Lazar Markovich Lissitzky’s famous lithograph *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge!* (1919), in which

⁶⁰ For more on paradigm shifts in a non-artistic field see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶¹ See all the ‘manifestoes’ of the various avant-garde movements - for example: Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁶² John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁶³ What Buck-Morss calls “the periodization of the ‘Russian’ avant-garde. . . It was only in the 1960s that Western art historians constructed retroactively an international narrative of the artistic “avant-garde,” in which the Russian modernists figured as a critically important moment.” See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 60, footnote #78.

⁶⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

the Red army is portrayed, Constructivist-style, as a large red triangle or ‘wedge’ whose apex or ‘point’ is penetrating the ‘circle’ of White resistance. The use of an avant-garde artistic style in a political propaganda poster depicting the military defeat of the White army is a clear illustration of the multiple uses early



Bolsheviks and Russian artists got out (Fig. 5) Lissitzky’s *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge!*, 1919 of the term ‘Russian avant-garde’ - a term Bowlt describes as a “useful umbrella.”⁶⁵

As edited by Arseniy Zhilyaev, the primary source anthology *Avant-Garde Museology* (2015) compiles the speeches, articles, and conference proceedings first given, printed, and debated during the 1920s and 30s by the Russian avant-garde artists, art critics, and administrators who became the first Soviet museologists.⁶⁶ What caught Zhilyaev’s eye in researching this anthology were not the recent well-received retrospectives on Malevich, his *Black Square*, or Suprematism⁶⁷, nor was it the individual historical development of each of

⁶⁵ John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ This primary source compendium was preceded by Eleanora Shulepova’s 2010 broader anthological sweep of the 18th to 20th centuries’ development of Russian museology. E. A. Shulepova. *Muzevedcheskai ‘a ‘mysl ‘v Rossii XVIIIIX vekov: sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Moskva: Èterna, 2010). As well as Katerina Clark’s 2007 compilation of a 20th century ‘document history’ of Soviet power and culture, whose selection was defined by a conception of the 1920s in the Soviet Union as unique and distinct from prior and later eras. Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, and Marian Schwartz, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*, Artizov Andrei and Naumov Oleg, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). For earlier but no less useful primary source compilations on early Bolshevik avant-garde and contemporary art focused museology see Elena V. Basner and Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei, *Muzei v Muzei: Russkii Avangard Iz Kolleksii Muzeia Khudozhestvennoĭ Kultury v Sobranii Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeia* (Saint Petersburg: Gos. Russkii Muzei: Palace Eds., 1998) and Khristina Tur’inskai ‘a and K. P. Kalinovskai ‘a, *Muzeinoe Delo v Rossii v 1907-1936 Gody* (Institut ètnologii i Antropologii: RAN, 2001).

⁶⁷ See the exhibits “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915” at Whitechapel Gallery, London, April 2015, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/january-23rd-2015/>

these. Instead, it was his discovery of the radical ‘new’ museology of Malevich, that was informed by the totality of his pioneering artistic and philosophical works and experience.

Leading The Way

Even if people will examine the [ash] powder from Rubens and all his art - a mass of ideas arise in people, and are often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).

- Kazimir Malevich, 1919⁶⁸

Why would an artwork of the past need a physical body, if it can be condensed to an idea, a gesture that can be used by contemporary artists? This is similar to what the Internet does to art today.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2016⁶⁹

Although not the only quality that Zhilyaev found so appealing in the radical new ‘avant-garde’ museology of Malevich, its basis in a more ‘conceptual’ kind of art is exactly what Zhilyaev (a conceptual artist himself) would have found attractive. Zhilyaev belongs to what might be called a neo-‘Moscow Conceptualist’ school of art. The original ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ was “a small group of advanced artists working in relative obscurity in the Soviet Union of the 1970s”⁷⁰ whose chief aim was the dematerialization of art and a shift towards idea- rather than object-driven artistic production. Ironically (given the Moscow

[the-abstract-revolution-inspired-by-orthodox-icons/](#) and “Malevich: Revolutionary of Russian Art” at the Tate Modern July - October 2014, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/malevich>.

⁶⁸ See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 268.

⁶⁹ The “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>.

⁷⁰ Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, “Introduction” to Boris Groys, ed., “Moscow Conceptualism,” *e-flux journal* 29 (November, 2011), accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34898/issue-29-guest-edited-by-boris-groys-on-moscow-conceptualism/>

Conceptualism group's underground, dissident status), their Soviet upbringing served them well in making the avant-garde artistic leap toward a more conceptual art. In the Soviet world:

communist ideology had already converted objects to ideas (collective property) and citizen-subjects to (non-professional) artists, so the found object, the privileging of idea over material, and the disappearance of the artist's hand were already indistinguishable from an ideological landscape taken for granted by the artists.⁷¹

Zhilyaev (born in Voronezh in 1984), who calls himself a 'Post-Post-Media Artist' among other things, can be considered a 'neo-' or 'post-Soviet' Moscow Conceptualist in that he

(Fig. 6) Arseniy Zhilyaev



also greatly privileges idea over material, and as others have noted, his work also emphasizes 'the disappearance of the artist's hand':

[Interviewer]: You have entirely rejected the idea of the "artist's hand", not only shifting to a post-studio practice, but doing away with the production of objects.

[Zhilyaev]: I have to admit your observation is really quite accurate. If you were to try to describe my approach in the context of American art history . . . then I would apply the neologism "Post-Post-Media Art."⁷²

If this evokes Malevich's de-objectifying Suprematism, there are reasons for this. Not only does modern conceptual art (of the Moscow school as well as most others) owe a great deal to the Russian avant-garde art movements of the early twentieth century - there is also a direct line connecting Malevich's work on non-objectivity to the 'dematerializing' art of the post-war period. As Malevich put it, ". . . a blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into a

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Arseniy Zhilyaev in conversation with [Kommersant correspondent] Valentin Diaconov: In this pulsing we can hear an echo of the Big Bang," *Academia.edu*, accessed on March 12, 2017, http://www.academia.edu/30273897/Arseny_Zhilyaev_in_conversation_with_Valentin_Diaconov_In_this_pulsing_we_can_hear_an_echo_of_the_Big_Bang.

“desert”, where nothing is real except feeling . . .”⁷³ - and that same sense drew the Moscow Conceptualists and now the current Russian generation of conceptual artists (Zhilyaev included) to similar deserts of non-object, idea-based inspiration.

Zhilyaev also owes a great deal to more contemporary influential Russian artists such as Ilya Kabakov (born 1933), who in the 1980 and 90s helped develop a “more encompassing and multi-dimensional mode of art”⁷⁴: ‘installation art’ and its precepts of dissolving the borders between objects and experience and art and atmosphere. He did this through his own multimedia installation pieces and his 1995 book *On the “Total” Installation*. As his wife and long-time artistic collaborator Emilia, explains, “With a total installation, there is no divide between the artist and the audience. In a way, you create a painting and you allow the viewer inside the painting, which has become three-dimensional instead of one-dimensional.”⁷⁵

But aside from the conceptual basis of Zhilyaev’s attraction to Malevich’s de-objectifying work, what Zhilyaev found even more appealing, in Malevich’s museology in addition to his art, was its ruthless and destructive attitude towards the past and its disregard of the past’s ostensible ‘usefulness’ in the development of the new museum and the museology ‘of the future.’ This ruthlessness is indicated in the fact that the following statement is one of Malevich’s more benign arguments regarding whether or not to preserve museums at all:

In the Art College, which takes care of the affairs of art and industry, the question of the creation of a museum of contemporary art has been discussed, followed by the creation of a museum of pictorial culture which ended with the decision to create a museum giving priority to pictorial culture. This is an enormous concession, a great

⁷³ Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, trans. Howard Dearstyne (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1959). First published in 1927 in Munich as *Bauhaus Book No. 11*).

⁷⁴ Arifa Akbar, “From totalitarianism, to total installation,” *Independent*, March 27, 2013, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/from-totalitarianism-to-total-installation-8550568.html>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

step backwards, an enormous agreement with what existed yesterday. A concession to those who still dream of loading all possible phantoms onto the shoulders of the modern world [1919].⁷⁶

In his infamous text “On the Museum (1919)” (which is worth reading in its entirety if for nothing else but its almost gleeful derision⁷⁷), Malevich put it even plainer, arguing against those he elsewhere called “the “scientific-artistic” museologists who are now making their nests in the revolutionary institutions by stubbornly exhibiting the old as if it were a magnificent altar of truth before which the young should bow down and in which they must believe.”⁷⁸ In a passage that would lead almost a hundred years later to Arseniy Zhilyaev describing Malevich as a “prophet- arson,”⁷⁹ Malevich called for the destruction of museums of the old era using the technological progress of the new one:

Contemporary life has invented crematoria for the dead, but each dead man is more alive than a weakly painted portrait. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly, thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on one chemist’s shelf. We can make a concession to the conservatives by offering that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up one pharmacy.⁸⁰

This pharmacy would ‘take up less room’ and leave the rest for the accomplishment of Malevich’s true museological aim - the creation through artistic production of a ‘living museum’

⁷⁶ Kazimir Malevich, “The Axis of Colour and Volume Plastic Arts,” *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* 1 (Petrograd, 1919) in “Documents on the Founding and organization of the Museum of Artistic (or Painterly) Culture, compiled by Patricia Railing,” accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.incorm.eu/documents.html#f-1919>.

⁷⁷ Malevich even cracks a joke!: “In our contemporary life there are people who are alive and there are conservatives.” See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 271.

⁷⁸ Kazimir Malevich, “The Axis of Colour and Volume Plastic Arts,” *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* 1 (Petrograd, 1919) in “Documents on the Founding and organization of the Museum of Artistic (or Painterly) Culture, compiled by Patricia Railing,” accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.incorm.eu/documents.html#f-1919>.

⁷⁹ “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

⁸⁰ See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 270.

and art, physically as well as metaphorically unencumbered by the ‘burden’ of the objects that make up a museum and its collections (as opposed to the compromise of a museum of ‘living artists’):

In the street and in the house, in oneself and on oneself - this is where the living comes from, and where our living museum lies. I see no point in setting up sarcophagi of treasure or Meccas for worship. We must not allow our backs to be platforms for the old days. Our job is to always move toward what is new, not live in museums. . . And if we do not have collections it will be easier to fly away with the whirlwind of life.⁸¹

At first, this radical, anti-museum museology seems at odds with Zhilyaev’s own long-term focus on museums and his projection of their survival and thriving in the distant future (one might call the ‘superstructure’ of Zhilyaev’s work ‘imagining museums’) but Zhilyaev’s interest makes more sense in light of his post-conceptual, post-post-media belief in the idea over the object, the superstructure over the artist, change over stagnation. The inspiration that Zhilyaev takes from Malevich’s radical museology is not destructive - in keeping with his conceptual art-background, it is creative and quasi-philosophical - inspiring the development of an adaptable kind of ‘immortality of the idea’ as well as an appreciation for an adaptable kind of museum:

[Malevich] calls for museums to be burnt down, leaving the right to judge whether this or that artwork from the past should be saved to life itself. The only possibility for the work of a dead artist, then, is to find some relevance within the current context - that is, to be compressed into a didactic pill of powdered ash, which can then be given out on request to active cultural workers. In his own work, Malevich himself took on the role of a kind of prophet-arsonist, creating not only an image of the absence of an image, but also . . . an image of the permanent destruction of the image [his *Black Square*]. That is to say, an image that is able to survive any negation. While the artist’s less radical colleagues may not have been calling for the total

⁸¹ Ibid.

destruction of the art of the past, they were advocating for the creation of a museum that was maximally open to change [Zhilyaev, 2016].⁸²

Zhilyaev believes that in the ‘age’ of the internet, the contemporary museum has realized much of what Malevich called for (especially concerning the dematerialization and proliferation of ideas):

It would seem that, with the advent of the internet and its assumption of the role of an international archive, or even, in some sense, of the dematerializing crematorium, the museum actually has increasingly positioned itself as a place for organizing educational or discursive activities, all the more enshrining the status of the work of the past to how Malevich described it.⁸³

The majority of Zhilyaev’s work has focused on the articulation and presentation of imaginary museums of various imagined futures, whose projected historical trajectories are implied by their museums’ contents and ‘superstructures’ - these contents and superstructures typically being the subject of Zhilyaev’s exhibits and installations. To borrow a term used in describing science fiction, this can be called a ‘world-building’-based creative museology. Here again Zhilyaev reveals his debt to the work of Ilya Kabakov, who as one contemporary curator describes him, serves as “the reference point for large immersive installations that construct entire worlds.”⁸⁴ Zhilyaev revisits Malevich and his theme of ‘destruction’ in his exhibit “Moscow Etude (2016)” at MMOMA. This exhibit imagines a museum set in a future in which Nikolai Fyodorov’s Common Cause has been achieved - all the dead can and have been resurrected. This, of course, includes Malevich. “Moscow Etude” showcases an exhibit of

⁸² “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Arifa Akbar, “From totalitarianism, to total installation,” *Independent*, March 27, 2013, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/from-totalitarianism-to-total-installation-8550568.html>

paintings that the ‘resurrected’ Malevich has done since his ‘return’ to life, with the larger future ‘world’ surrounding this exhibit hinted at in references to an imaginary financial system (a system that indicates not only has conceptual art survived and adapted in this particular future - capitalism has too). In this imaginary ‘future’ exhibit Zhilyaev even more explicitly addresses the influence Malevich has had on him - specifically his arsonist-impulse towards museums:

[Zhilyaev]: This project continues the series of experimental exhibitions devoted to the future of contemporary art. This time, I have decided to look into art that has to do with destruction and vandalism. In the imaginary MMOMA display in the future, the viewer will find an urn with Malevich’s burnt legacy along with works by an artist who [vandalizes] every work by the resurrected Malevich. Only instead of the dollar sign, which has lost any significance,



(Fig. 7) Self-portrait ‘vandalized’

(Fig. 8) *Black Square* ‘vandalized’ he draws signs of the key crypto currencies of the future.



[Interviewer]: It is not the first time you turn to the legacy of Malevich.

[Zhilyaev]: It’s true that a lot of my work has to do with Malevich. In this particular case, my starting point was his call to destroy the museum and art history. . . Besides, *I admire his destructive drive.*

The ash metaphor is a good image for it. Why would

an artwork of the past need a physical body, if it can be condensed to an idea, a gesture that can be used by contemporary artists? This is similar to what the Internet does to art today. In a sense, the legacy of Malevich with his conceptual approach to history can be interpreted as a draft for a digital archive of the imaginary museum.”⁸⁵

(Fig. 9) Malevich’s urn



⁸⁵ The “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php/projects/moscow-etude/>.

Zhilyaev has found several ways to pay homage to Malevich in his work since his discovery of Malevich’s radical ‘non-museum’-based museology. This is somewhat ironic as he places the references in work that imagines museums surviving and thriving far into the future). In addition to “Moscow Etude (2016)”, references to Malevich, his attitude towards museums, his artistic philosophy, and specific works have been made in two other prominent



exhibits and installations put on by Zhilyaev:

(Fig. 10) Waiting area of AVK Recreation Centre

1) the installation “Anton Vidokle de Kosmos Recreation Center (2016)” in de Appel, Amsterdam and 2) his contribution to a joint exhibition (titled “Future Histories”) in the Russian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, a large-scale installation called “Cradle of Humankind (2015).” Both installations are augmented by the reproduction and precise placement of multiple



(Fig. 11) The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10, 1915

copies of Malevich’s *Black Square* in key exhibit positions (one placement, in fact, duplicating Malevich’s original key placement of the painting at its debut showing at “The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10” in 1915 in St. Petersburg, in which the painting took the traditional place of the

Russian Orthodox religious icon - the corner).

While these two exhibits don’t pay homage to the destructive aims of Malevich’s museology, they do incorporate ‘resurrected’ Maleviches (a detail they share with “Moscow Etude”) and the artistic ramifications of this ‘resurrection’ (which includes Zhilyaev imagining

Malevich breaking through into a ‘futuristic’, new avant-garde art - harking back to his impatience in waiting and wishing for a new avant-garde today - “a way to accelerate the whole project of contemporary art that can bring us to a breakthrough into the future avant-garde”⁸⁶).

And these two Malevichean elements fit in nicely **(Fig. 12) Fourth room of “Cradle of Humankind”**

with both the historic and the contemporary

Russian avant-garde’s recognition of the fact that adaptability in the face of change or an unknown future (whether it be in contemporary art or in the agenda-driven use (the ‘instrumentalization’) of the past) can create opportunities for further breakthroughs.



⁸⁶ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

From Chaos To The Cosmic

Malevich's Black Square is not chaos or empty space, but a new, super-ordered space.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2015⁸⁷

So, we can establish the first tenet of the 'avant-garde' museology that Zhilyaev shares with his avant-garde early twentieth century predecessors: its focus on contemporary cultural production. This artistic production alternates between: 1) recognition of the creative opportunity to be had in the adaptability and instrumentalization of the past, driven by the agenda(s) of the present in the pursuit of the future, through context and narrative⁸⁸ and 2) the appeal of obliterating the past and disdain for the preservationist impulse of traditional museology. Establishing a second tenet of this century-bridging avant-garde museology will take us back, not just to the first appearance of Malevich's *Black Square* and Suprematism but to before the turn of the century and the Russian Revolution when Nikolai Fyodorov's Cosmism and Common Cause first took hold in Russia. Put another way, the second strain in Arseniy Zhilyaev's museological work (in addition to its early Soviet-inspiration) is that of 'Cosmism.' Zhilyaev himself describes

⁸⁷ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Second Advents: On the Issue of Planning in Contemporary Art," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August 2015).

⁸⁸ Example - The 1931 exhibit "Absolute monarchy consolidates the authority of the lord over the peasant" by Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov which mixed different media, original and reproduced contemporaneous objects, and narrative text to paint an ideologically Soviet (i.e. critical/negative) picture of life under Romanov rule. Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

See also Zhilyaev's exhibit "Resurrection Museum" in which he ironically and satirically reframes Putin, equating him with a conceptual artist: "press images of President Vladimir Putin, in which his antics (namely, his media appearances showing him kissing a tiger, flying with cranes, fishing, or painting) are displayed as the work of a conceptual artist." Olga Kopenkina, "The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art," *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 12, 2017,

<http://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

his work as having a two-pronged focus - casting “a revisionist lens on [both] the heritage of Soviet museology and [the] museum in Russian Cosmism.”⁸⁹

The majority of Zhilyaev’s museum-themed works have made reference to resurrection (coupled with imaginary futures). The inspiration for this museum-centered futurology actually predates the Soviet era, relying instead on the influential precursory work of Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903), the founder of the Russian Cosmism movement and developer and chief advocate for the ‘Common Cause.’ The Common Cause is mankind’s organized, scientific pursuit of immortality and resurrection. The achievement of both will then necessitate the development of space travel and the colonization of other planets as Earth will no longer have enough room for all the living and the ‘resurrected’ (a fear Malevich echoed in his reminder that ideas “take up less room” than artworks⁹⁰). This prediction of mankind’s technological advance into space, along with his mentoring of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935), an early rocket scientist and astronaut theorist who is called the ‘father’ of the Russian space program, has led to Fyodorov being given the moniker of ‘grandfather’ of the Russian space program.⁹¹

Intriguingly, a central part of the pursuit of this ‘Cause’ involves the development of museums geared towards preserving the bodies of the dead and all connected materials (belonging to and produced by the dead) - not for posterity but in the expectation of the future development of ‘resurrective’ technology. Zhilyaev paints the picture of the traditional museum

⁸⁹ From the “CV” page of Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/>.

⁹⁰ “Even if people will examine the [ash] powder from Rubens and all his art - a mass of ideas arise in people, and are often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).”

See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 271.

⁹¹ a genealogy Fyodorov would have enjoyed as part of his Cosmism involved the pioneering belief in mankind’s ability to one day resurrect the dead using only material from their living ancestors - a precursor to DNA!

as ill-equipped to deal with Fyodorov's 'Common Cause': "The first museums of technology and daily life were founded at the end of the nineteenth century. However, as museums of art, they only provide a fragmentary picture of the past."⁹² This 'incomplete picture' necessitates the creation of a new, 'cosmic' museum - one that would run in the opposite revisionist direction to Malevich and his desire to destroy the museum as preserver-for-preservation's sake. Instead, this 'cosmic' museum would have an all-encompassing 'hyper'-preservationist function focused on the 'resurrection' and re-creation of *all* the forms of cultural production that make up the context and content of all epochs and societies. This cosmic museum would not just house but resurrect through exhibition⁹³ and thereafter unify all artistic production, culminating in "[a]n all-encompassing collection of contemporary art, i.e., the art of the simultaneous coexistence of all the generations that have ever lived on Earth. . . [This] will form the constant exposition of the cosmic museum."⁹⁴

Zhilyaev is excited for the creative consequences and opportunities of such simultaneity (its perpetual revisionism, again calling to mind Trotsky's 'permanent revolution'), as well as for the core component of Fyodorov's Cosmism - its unifying power:

Quite obviously, this constancy will exist in a state of permanent change, as people of different generations will be moving, interacting, living their creative lives, and playing artistic and curatorial roles at the same time. In the end, this will help eliminate differences between constant, historically organized exposition and temporary artistic expression over time [Zhilyaev, 2015].⁹⁵

⁹² Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Second Advents: On the Issue of Planning in Contemporary Art," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August 2015).

⁹³ "If you compare storage with a grave, then reading - or rather researching - would be like a way out of the grave, and an exhibition would be like a resurrection" - Nikolai Fyodorov in the Voronezh newspaper "Don" circa 1880s. From the "RCC: The Resurrection Museum" exhibit page of Zhilyaev's professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/rcc-yhv-memorial-exhibition/>.

⁹⁴ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Second Advents: On the Issue of Planning in Contemporary Art," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August 2015).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Fyodorov considers the function of museums as preserving and uniting ‘tombs’ to be quite innovative and vital: “this grave, this museum becomes the reconstruction of all of progress’s victims at the time when struggle will be supplanted by accord, and unity in the purpose of reconstruction.”⁹⁶ This reconstructive core of Fyodorov’s Cosmism runs contrary to the more conservative derision of Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), who declared museums to be “the cemeteries of the arts”⁹⁷, calling to mind Malevich’s ‘joke’ in defense of the creativity of the living against the pull of the dead and the past: “In our contemporary life there are people who are alive and there are conservatives.”⁹⁸

While this universal and unifying reconstructive aim might seem to have some initial appeal for the transformation-minded Bolsheviks, the appeal of the ‘Malevichean’ call for the obliteration of the past⁹⁹ and the Marxist call for a revolution of the proletariat was much stronger. The literature of the early Bolshevik period, novels especially, provides insight into not only the ‘popular’ opinion and conception of museums at the time but also the psychology behind the revolutionaries’ unease regarding the past and its potential uses. There is a consensus among the novels (of the first decade or so of Soviet rule) that directly reference museums, their state, and role in the new Soviet society (Andrey Platonov’s 1922 *Chevengur*¹⁰⁰, Ilf and Petrov’s

⁹⁶ Written in the 1880s, first published posthumously in 1906. See Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 60-163.

⁹⁷ Anna Leshchenko, “The Principle of the Indivisibility of Museum Collections as Part of Museological Theory and Russian Reality,” *ICOFOM Study Series* 39 (2010), 63.

⁹⁸ See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 271.

⁹⁹ “*Blow up, Smash to pieces, The Old World! In the heat of the Universal Struggle, By the glow of flames, Show No mercy - Strangle the body of destiny!*” - a decidedly revolution-minded poem by V.D. Aleksandrovsky in 1918. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁰ Andreï Platonovich Platonov, *Chevengur* (1922), trans. Mikhail Geller (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1972).

1928 *Twelve Chairs*¹⁰¹, and Panteleimon Romanov's 1931 *Three Pairs of Silk Stockings*¹⁰²). This consensus shares the critical view of museums as 'cemeteries' for the 'dead' past and its now defunct and ultimately useless objects and inhabitants. The only literary outlier with an experimental and useful conception of museums and their potential role in helping to remake Russian society actually predates the Russian Revolution entirely (Aleksandr Bogdanov's 1908 *Red Star*¹⁰³). The main commonality in all of this literature, however, is the surreal nature and effect the combination of traditional museums' preservationist goals can have on a visitor, especially one whose recent experiences involve cultural, social, and political upheaval. Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984, literary critic and avant-garde theorist of Futurism and Formalism) provides a more journalistic contemporary description of the surreal nature of the first Soviet decade and he notes the necessity of invention, experimentation, and innovation in that period of chaos and privation, juxtaposing those two poles of experience in his *Knight's Move* (1919-21): "We are a country of electrification and Robinson Crusoes."¹⁰⁴

Jumping from one set of poles to another takes us from death and immortality, invention and deprivation to chaos and order. That the Russian artistic avant-garde recognized the opportunity for experimentation and invention during an especially chaotic period is well-established. That this recognition sprung from the very conditions (of chaos and deprivation) that should have stifled it is less so. That same causal, connecting link can be seen between the poles of chaos and order. It was Nietzsche who first described our world as the site

¹⁰¹ Il'īa Il'f and Evgeniĭ Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs* (1928). (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

¹⁰² Panteleĭmon Romanov, *Three Pairs of Silk Stockings: A Novel of the Life of the Educated Class under the Soviets*, trans. Leonĭd Sergiĕvĭch Zarĭn, ed. Stephen Graham (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931).

¹⁰³ Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia* (1908), eds. Loren R. Graham, Richard Stites, trans. Charles Rougle (Soviet History, Politics, Society, and Thought. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, *Knight's Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).

of the ongoing battle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian - between rationality and irrationality, order and chaos. Fyodorov (and then Boris Groys and Arseniy Zhilyaev, much later taking up the ‘Cosmic’ banner) would describe these two forces as the ‘chaotic’ and the ‘cosmic.’ Boris Groys (a German art critic and theorist of the Soviet era¹⁰⁵ and frequent collaborator of Zhilyaev’s¹⁰⁶, born in 1947) argues that the Russian artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century saw the creative opportunities on both sides of this battle and took advantage of both:

[O]nly different ways of reacting to the battle between cosmos and chaos are possible: the ecstatic embracing of chaos or an attempt to control the cosmos and secure its victory over chaos. Both projects were formulated by Russian thinkers, poets, and artists at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of [the] twentieth centuries as Russia stood on the threshold of the revolution that plunged the whole country into total chaos. Many writers and artists invoked the coming of chaos.¹⁰⁷

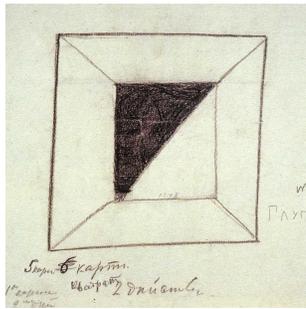
Groys goes on to cite the influential production of the first ‘Futurist’ opera “Victory Over the Sun” (first performed in St. Petersburg in 1913 and marking the first appearance of Malevich’s *Black Square*¹⁰⁸) as a case of the artistic avant-garde choosing to rally behind chaos:

¹⁰⁵ Groys is perhaps most well-known for what Stephen Kotkin describes thusly: “the picture so dear to intellectuals inside and outside Russia of an intelligentsia martyred by Philistine functionaries. . . in the late 1980s this framework was exploded by Boris Groys” in Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992). Kotkin says elsewhere, “We are, thankfully, beyond the avant-garde martyrology whereby uncomprehending apparatchiks and policemen are said to have killed off an inculpable avant-garde and its “pure” modernist culture, opening the way for a supposedly unrelated flotsam of petty bourgeois and national “kitsch.” See Stephen Kotkin, “1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks,” *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 2 (1998) and Stephen Kotkin, “Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjunction,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 1 (2001).

¹⁰⁶ For an example the 2015 New York exhibition “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art” which Groys curated and to which Zhilyaev contributed the installation “RCC: YHV - The Resurrection Museum.” <http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>

¹⁰⁷ Boris Groys, “Cosmic Anxiety: The Russian Case,” *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August, 2015).

¹⁰⁸ It began its life as a stage curtain for the set of the 1913 opera. Malevich would later paint the image on canvas 4 times - the first in 1915 (which he dated as 1913 to pay homage to the original stage curtain version) and the last in 1930. Susan Holtham and Moran Fiontan. “Five ways to look at Malevich’s Black Square,” *Tate Modern*, August

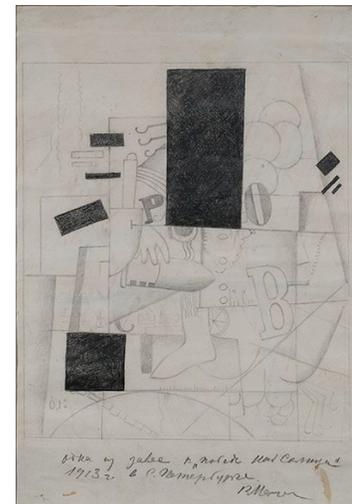


(Fig. 13) Malevich's set design, 1913

The most prominent members of the Russian avant-garde movement of the time participated in its production: Kazimir Malevich, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, and Mikhail Matyushin. The opera celebrated the extinction of the sun and the descent of cosmos into chaos, symbolized by the black square that Malevich painted for the first time as part of the scenography for the opera. [Groys, 2015]¹⁰⁹

(Fig. 14) Malevich's stage curtain, 1913

Zhilyaev disagrees¹¹⁰ with Groys over this ostensible decision of the avant-garde, instead interpreting it as a choice in favor of order and controlling the cosmos. As Zhilyaev interprets it, although Malevich's *Black Square* gives:



the impression of image decomposition: the dark, unknown end, the pure materiality of an object . . . The artist understood his invention not as a chaotic or destructive act, but on the contrary, as a search for a new superorder [what dialectical materialists and Soviet museologists would call a 'superstructure']...The artist shared this interpretation of [the] cosmos as order with Russian cosmists, and Nikolai Fyodorov influenced avant-garde artists deeply.¹¹¹

28, 2014, accessed March 5, 2017,

<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/five-ways-look-Malevich-Black-Square>.

¹⁰⁹ Boris Groys, "Cosmic Anxiety: The Russian Case," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Of course it is important to remember that "Malevich wrote much and said more about suprematism [and by implication, the meaning of the black square], his utterances veering between vigorous idealism, apocalyptic nihilism and a hazy eloquence so open to interpretation it has been construed without consensus many ways." Laura Cumming, "Malevich review - an intensely moving retrospective," *The Guardian: Art*, July 19, 2014, accessed March 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/20/malevich-tate-modern-review-intensely-moving-retrospective>. And as noted in the introduction, Romanian conceptual artist Veda Popovic had no concern attaching a new meaning to the Black Square - she considered it a "kind of revolution." "Revolutionary Gear: The History of Art Retold Through The Black Square" exhibit listing on the Bucharest International Experimental Film Festival 2016 (BIEFF) website, accessed March 9, 2017,

<http://www.bieff.ro/en/2016/films/revolutionary-gear-history-art-retold-through-black-square>.

¹¹¹ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Second Adverts: On the Issue of Planning in Contemporary Art," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August 2015).

Zhilyaev has taken this ‘Cosmic’ influence very much to heart, as testified by his multiple direct references to Fyodorov in his works as well the recurrence in his work of the imagined future realization of the ‘Common Cause’ - the resurrection of all the dead and the subsequent expansion of the ‘cosmic’ museum throughout the universe as mankind advances and expands into an interplanetary, immortal future.

Zhilyaev first encountered Fyodorov and his Cosmic museology, not during the research and editing of the primary source anthology *Avant-Garde Museology* (as he discovered Malevich’s museology), but instead in his hometown of Voronezh, where Nikolai Fyodorov founded the Voronezh Museum of Local History: “In the end of the nineteenth century, during

(Fig. 15) 1898 Fyodorov newspaper interview



his visits to the capital of the Black Soil Region [Fyodorov] organized several exhibition projects that set the foundation for the tradition of memorial and thematic museum events [like the panoramic, dioramic, event-focused and empathy-building exhibit design that the early

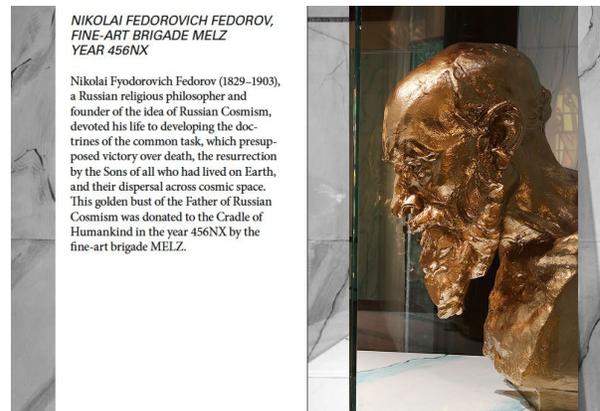
Soviet museologists later borrowed].”¹¹² Fyodorov was reported in the Voronezh newspaper *Don* contrasting the traditional perception of museums (as tombs/archives) with his more innovative approach to that same preserving function: “If you compare storage with a grave, then reading - or rather researching - would be like a way out of the grave, and an exhibition would be like a resurrection.”¹¹³

¹¹²From the “RCC: The Resurrection Museum” exhibit page of Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/rcc-yhv-memorial-exhibition/>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Zhilyaev takes Fyodorov's notion of an exhibit or museum as both a literal and a metaphorical kind of 'resurrection' and runs with it. In his installation "Cradle of Humankind (2015)", Zhilyaev's contribution to a joint exhibition (titled "Future Histories") in the Russian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, and the subsequent expansion of that installation into the exhibit "Tsiolkovsky - The Second Advent (2016)" are key examples of Zhilyaev's Fyodorovian and 'Cosmic' ideas. The project depicts a far off future in which humanity has abandoned Earth, leaving it to become the site of a museum-reservation network called *The Cradle of Humankind*, dedicated to preserving, displaying, and re-animating or resurrecting all of life, history, and civilization. Key historic figures and moments are commemorated in displays "merging the utopian aesthetics of the Soviet space programme with the ultimate idealism of Russian Cosmism."¹¹⁴

The museum not only provides the housing, preservation, and display services expected of a museum but the additional, truly Fyodorovian service of the resurrection of a client's ancestors as well. At the entrance of the first of four rooms



(Fig. 16) Gold bust of Nikolai Fyodorov

of this installation is an imagined future exhibit (with 'donated' gold bust) dedicated to the father of Cosmism and the grandfather of space travel himself, Fyodorov, in honor of his actually having achieved (in this imagined future) the realization of his 'Common Cause' (and having been successfully resurrected himself):

¹¹⁴ E-flux exhibit announcement: "Future Histories In Venice [Mark Dion and Arseniy Zhilyaev]," last modified March 29, 2015, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/29773/future-histories-in-venice/>.

by which he [Fyodorov] meant the common effort of all humankind where science and art would be unified in one ‘Resurrecting Museum’. I [Zhilyaev] used this utopian model of the museum as the primary concept for “Cradle of Humankind.” The only significant deviation from Fyodorov’s speculation is that according to the Russian philosopher, capitalism should have been defeated, whereas in my dystopian installation it survived. [Zhilyaev, 2015]¹¹⁵

(Fig. 17) Entrance to the future ‘Resurrecting Museum’



The ‘cosmic’ theme of resurrection by and in an imaginary future museum can be found in the following projects of Zhilyaev: “Cradle of Humankind (2016)”, “Tsiolkovsky - The Second Advent (2016)”, “Moscow Etude (2016)”,

“Anton Vidokle de Kosmos Recreation Center (2016)”, “RCC YHV (*Raketno-Kosmicheskaja Korporatsiia: I’a Hachu Verit’* or Rocket and Space Corporation: I Want to Believe): The Resurrection Museum (2014-15)”, “M.I.R. (*Myzeé Istorii Rossii* or Museum of Russian History and *mir* - ‘peace’): Polite Guests from the Future (2014)”, and “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History (2012-13).” In fact, all of the projects that involve a projected future museum have some element of resurrection, be it the display of the ‘new’ artistic production of resurrected artists (like Malevich in “Moscow Etude”), the provision of services by the resurrected (again Malevich, as resurrected and then cloned ‘museum-spa’¹¹⁶ assistants in

¹¹⁵ From the “Cradle of Humankind” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/cradle-of-humankind/>.

¹¹⁶ Here Zhilyaev is repeating his critique of contemporary museums as ‘spas’ from his exhibit “Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia (2012)” where he said the first conception of museums was utopian, imagined as “a public space where the creation of knowledge was founded on the cooperation and communication between free citizens. The emancipatory purpose of the museum was to establish a better future for everyone, here and now, in a particular moment of history. According to the facts, though, the only element of the museum’s utopian function that still remains is the fervor of knowledge reproduction. The achievements of art have been preserved there, where the past is exhibited and the future is not spoken of anymore, whilst public spirit has been slowly replaced by recreation, relaxation and leisure. The museum has turned into a sanatorium for well-educated citizens.” From the “Museum Proletarian Culture: Industrialization of Bohemia” exhibit on

“Anton Vidokle Kosmos Recreation Center”), or tribute paid to the founders of the Cosmic movement that made resurrection possible (Fyodorov and Tsiolkovsky in “RCC YHV

(Raketno-Kosmicheskaiia

Korporatsiia: I'a Hachu Verit' or

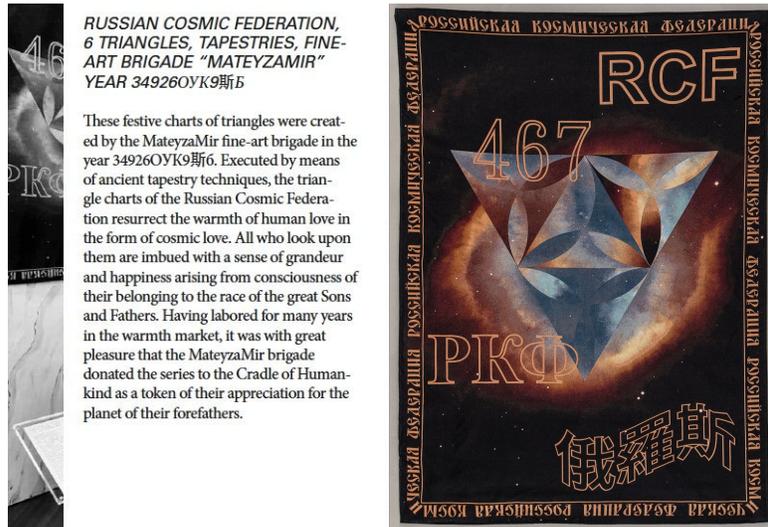
Rocket and Space Corporation: I

Want to Believe): The

Resurrection Museum” and

“Tsiolkovsky - The Second

Advent”).



(Fig. 18) ‘Re-created’ tapestries in honor of the imaginary future ‘Russian Cosmic Federation

The second tenet then, bridging the gap and forming the link between the Russian avant-garde museology of the early twentieth century and Zhilyaev’s museology, progresses quite naturally from the first tenet’s focus on contemporary artistic production and the oscillation of that production between the creative utilization of the past and the desire to obliterate it. This second shared tenet progresses from these present- and past-heavy considerations toward an almost blinkered focus on the future and the utilization of all that contemporary production in pursuit of that future. This future-directed museology combines creative predictive futurology with the ‘Cosmic’ conceptions of ‘preservation-for-the-purpose-of-resurrection’ and not posterity and ‘resurrection-through-exhibition’ (literally and figuratively), the universal and unifying

Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 13, 2017,
<http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/museum-of-proletarian-culture/>.

reconstructive aims of Fyodorov mingling with Malevich's favoring of the contemporary and the 'living' over the past, his conceptual, idea- and not object-driven art, and the pioneering Soviets' provision of an overarching 'ideology' or 'superstructure' within which to pursue the museum and museology of the future.

Chapter 2 - An Old Nostalgia?

Why are you still a Communist, after all your country suffered at the hands of Stalin? I asked. What else is there to be nowadays, she replied.

- Ben Lewis, early 2000s¹¹⁷

Zhilyaev's 'resurrecting' of the past a la Fyodorov's Cosmism is a modern, decidedly Russian, variant of a very old desire. To return to an imagined 'happier' past is just as powerful a desire as that of a brighter, 'greener' future. Zhilyaev, Fyodorov, and for that matter the Soviets' preoccupation with not only imagining such a future but actively organizing and pursuing it while using the past as a platform, could be considered an inverted nostalgia, one flipped on its end. Whereas once resurrection meant the return, however brief, of a much longed for (often impatiently¹¹⁸) and dearly missed event, period, or person, within the post-Soviet Russian context (and following Zhilyaev's example of the 'resurrected' brought to the future in order to produce and enact further breakthroughs, resurrection has come to have new meaning and significance.



(Fig. 19) Kabakov's impatient Soviet

¹¹⁷ In conversation with his East German contemporary artist girlfriend, early 2000s. Ben Lewis, *Hammer & Tickle: The History of Communism Told through Communist Jokes* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 258-262.

¹¹⁸ As Boris Groys put it in his analysis of Ilya Kabakov's exhibit "The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment (1988)," in which an empty bedroom with a blown out roof is decorated with rocket schematics and optimistic Soviet posters promising the coming of the Soviet utopia: "Utopia will be a long time coming, as we all know, for the construction of the ultimate utopia is a slow historical process that requires the collective effort of generation upon generation. But not everyone can live with that." Boris Grois, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment, One Work Series* (London: Afterall, 2006), 1.

Given the current revival of interest in and direction taken from the work of early twentieth century Russian avant-garde museologists (as seen in the work of Arseniy Zhilyaev and his collaborators), it is well worth it to begin establishing some kind of explanation for the timing of this revival. Why now? Why are such inspirations and influences being felt and harnessed at this particular stage in post-Soviet culture? One possible answer has already become clear to us through the analysis of Malevich's radical anti-museum museology and the appeal for the post-Soviet generation of destroying the past and wiping the slate clean. Another possible explanation - the potency of cultural pride and heritage - became clearer in the my earlier analysis of the predominance of Russians in the pioneering use of both the 'avant-garde' term and impulse, whether it be for political, cultural, or aesthetic ends (r.e. all the Russian artistic and political avant-garde movements, the '-isms', of the early twentieth century). All of which make future associations with the phrase predominantly Russian ones. A third possible reason comes to us through analysis of the contemporary and future focus and aims of the museological work of Fyodorov, Malevich, and Zhilyaev, this reason being Russian culture's long-standing (some might say overly 'mythologized') belief in the difficult but worthwhile pursuit of an utopian future.

I say overly mythologized because it is a common critique of contemporary Russian culture that an overly reverential attitude towards an 'idealized' past is "self-mythologizing escapism."¹¹⁹ As one art critic said regarding Zhilyaev's work, specifically his installation, "RCC

¹¹⁹ Olga Kopenkina, "The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art," *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 12, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

YHV: The Resurrection Museum (2014-15)", at the collaborative exhibition "Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art":

One can get weary of the curator's and Russian artists' disproportionate dwelling on the past. . . efforts to reanimate old myths as well as the proclivity to present Russia as, still, a pioneer of social-political utopias.¹²⁰

Dwelling in the past has immense appeal - to those whose present is not what they have wished, anticipated, or been promised and to those whose memories helpfully 'revise' what came before, in aid of legitimizing a contested present. On the flip side of this nostalgia coin (tails indicating a remembered past, heads a 'remembered' or 'imagined' future), the promise of a fresh start, a new future proves equally compelling, although some variants (for example Malevich's museology) require extreme degrees of destructiveness r.e. 'wiping the slate clean.'

This two-sided nostalgia has a special kind of appeal for the current generation of post-Soviets (like Zhilyaev, born in 1984) who, on the one hand, desire to move away from the more traumatic elements of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods (the stagnation of the 80s and the "shock therapy"¹²¹ of the 90s) and who, on the other hand, I argue (following analysis of Zhilyaev) miss the 'superstructure' of the Soviet era and system, in terms of its provision of an ideology to both take inspiration from and rebel against. Back in 1924, in words that were meant to be applied to the defeated past following the Russian Revolution, Nikolai Bukharin said, "The old world . . . has no great unifying idea that would rally people together,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ "Europe: Arseniy Zhilyaev, *Time is Working on Kommunism, 2010*," Kadist Foundation, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://kadist.org/work/time-is-working-on-kommunism-2010/>.

that would cement their relationships.”¹²² To Zhilyaev and others of his generation these words could very well be applied to the post-Soviet present.

The Appeal Of Eschatology

The breaking up, the smashing of something or other
in general is the first step toward culture.

- Vasily Rozanov, 1911¹²³

Blow up
Smash to pieces
The Old World!
In the heat of the Universal Struggle
By the glow of flames
Show
No mercy -
Strangle the body of destiny!

- V.D. Aleksandrovsky, 1918¹²⁴

I admire [Malevich's] destructive drive.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2016¹²⁵

Leszek Kolakowski characterized Marxism as an eschatology, ‘a modern variant of apocalyptic expectations’ perpetually present in the history of Europe.¹²⁶ As Tony Judt put it, Marxism delivered the original and decidedly attractive combination of “Promethean Romantic

¹²² Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds. *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹²³ Rozanov actually fervently opposed the Revolution of 1917. He died of poverty and malnutrition in 1919. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds. *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ From the “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>.

¹²⁶ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution; Book 1. The Founders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

illusion and uncompromising historical determinism.”¹²⁷ The feeling of a door slamming shut on the unpleasant past and the opening of a new one to a guaranteed brighter future and a world freshly and fully understood was common among newly converted Marxists.¹²⁸ This feeling is missed by the post-Soviet generation, who find themselves divested of their monoculture and ‘superstructure’ and floundering in the chaotic modern world of incohesive battling ideologies, cultures, and influences. Malevich’s disdain for the past and his ‘anti-museum’ stance created a kind of ‘eschatological’ museology, destructive rather than preserving.

But for all his homages, references, and uses of Malevich and his work, it’s also true that Zhilyaev parts company and disagrees with Malevich in several key ways - most significantly regarding Malevich’s destructive aims. While Zhilyaev says that he admires Malevich’s “destructive drive”¹²⁹, he elsewhere contradicts this (not the admiration so much as the implication of agreement). In a 2016 conversation with Boris Groys, in which Malevich was brought up several times, Zhilyaev posed a “question about the relationship of artists of the historical avant-garde to the museum - specifically the [destructive] relationship laid out in

¹²⁷ Tony Judt, “Goodbye To All That?,” *The New York Review of Books* Vol. 53, no. 14 (2006).

¹²⁸ Karl Popper, the famous philosopher of science and champion advocate of falsification as a method of distinguishing science from non-science lobbed vicious criticism at Marxism regarding its ‘scientific’ claims: “The pseudo-scientific character of the unfortunately influential Marxist interpretation of history . . . is another of those impressive and all-explanatory theories which act upon weak minds like revelations. . . I [Popper] found that those of my friends who were admirers of Marx . . . were impressed . . . especially by [his theory’s] apparent explanatory power. [Marxism] appeared to be able to explain practically everything that happened within the fields to which it was referred. [Its study] seemed to have the effect of an intellectual conversion or revelation, opening your eyes to a new truth hidden from those not yet initiated. Once your eyes were this opened you saw confirming instances everywhere . . . A Marxist could not open a newspaper without finding on every page confirming evidence for his interpretation of history. Whatever happened always confirmed it.” Martin Curd and J.A. Cover, *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998).

¹²⁹ From the “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php/projects/moscow-etude/>.

Kazimir Malevich's famous text from 1919, 'About the Museum.'¹³⁰ Zhilyaev agrees with Groys, neither feeling the same ruthless need that Malevich did to destroy museums of the old, historical-preservationist 'type', instead acknowledging that avant-garde art can only hold the distinguished, vanguard role it does when placed within the context of that which it has broken away from. As Groys puts it:

first and foremost, the project of the avant-garde - or, let's say, more specifically, of Futurism and Suprematism - would have been impossible without the tradition of historicism, which was given form in museum displays as they had evolved by the end of the nineteenth century. These museum displays were constructed on a simple principle: each historic epoch had its own persona, its own artistic style - antiquity, medieval art, the Renaissance, Baroque, and so on . . . Malevich himself repeatedly described the genealogy of the contemporary (to him) art and Suprematism as the result of a gradual transition from Cézanne through Cubism and Futurism. If all the art in museums had actually been cremated, then the historical originality of the avant-garde would have lost its visibility. The history of art, as it is shown in European museums, is precisely the history of breaks with the past. Without this history, the avant-garde is simply no longer able to be perceived as such.¹³¹



(Fig. 20) Boris Groys

This conundrum of the avant-garde over whether to destroy what came before or concede its limited usefulness calls to mind the oscillation of Lenin between violence and pragmatism in his decisions regarding the enlistment of the past in the pursuit of the future. He went from denying the need for help from the pre-revolutionary 'intelligentsia' during a dark period of the

¹³⁰ "Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum," *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

¹³¹ "Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum," *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

Civil War (1917-1922) - when he angrily described them as “lackeys of capital who fancy themselves the nation's brain. In fact they are not the brain but the shit”¹³² - to defending his decision to in some way preserve and utilize tsarist-era content, institutions, and professionals:

We cannot limit ourselves to Communist conclusions and learn only Communist slogans. You will not build up Socialism like that. You will be Communists only when you have enriched your minds with the knowledge of all the wealth which humanity has created . . . If I know that I know a little, I will endeavor to know more. But when anyone says he is a Communist and so does not need a solid foundation of knowledge, he is not, and never will be anything approaching a Communist.¹³³

Despite criticism from the hard-line Marxist ideologues (those who sought not just equality but the elimination of all special advantages and the positions of owners, bosses, and specialists who might corrupt the revolutionary process), Lenin decided that the past could not be changed and therefore no other tools but those of the past were immediately available:

We have bourgeois specialists, and no others. We have no other bricks to build with. Socialism must be victorious and we socialists and communists must prove that we are capable of building socialism from these bricks . . . one must take the culture left by capitalism and from that culture build socialism . . . Such is the problem in all domains . . . the extremely difficult but still solvable problem . . . We have to build not 20 years later, but now in two months, in order to withstand the bourgeoisie.¹³⁴

Ultimately, to Lenin, what was essential was to “grasp all the culture which capitalism has left and build socialism from it.”¹³⁵

Whatever his qualms, Lenin paid more than just lip service to the understanding that the past is an malleable and potentially useful platform - something that Malevich, it seems, was loathe to admit: “Contemporary life needs nothing other than what belongs to it; and only that

¹³² From the “Moscow Etude” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>.

¹³³ Beatrice King, *Changing Man: The Education System of U.S.S.R* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds. *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

which grows on its shoulders belongs to it.”¹³⁶ But even here Malevich betrays the inherent contradiction of this thinking. If as he says, “Our contemporary life should have as its slogan: ‘all that we have made is made for the crematorium.’ ” and “We must not allow our backs to be platforms for the old days”¹³⁷, how is anything to be built? Without some kind of foundation, without some kind of structure or form, what would there be to break free from, to revolt against? Malevich carried this paradox even further with his demand that “We, as witnesses to and creators of the New Art movement must also document it, so that its history need not be dug out of the ruins of posterity.”¹³⁸ It becomes clear very quickly that, to Malevich, ‘their’ ruins (those belonging to the old world) are to be treated much differently than ‘ours’ (those belonging to the avant-garde).

Zhilyaev, on the other hand, fully understands that he would have nothing to work with if Malevich’s wishes had been carried out. He agrees with Groys’ contention that “The history of art is . . . the history of breaks with the past. Without this history, the avant-garde is simply no longer able to be perceived as such.”¹³⁹ Without the ‘tradition’, Zhilyaev could not “propose new approaches to the tradition of Soviet museology” as he claims is one of his central themes.¹⁴⁰ So, one of the possible answers to the question of why all this historical influence and interest is being felt *now* is not the attraction of post-Soviets like Zhilyaev to the Malevichean call for the

¹³⁶ See Kazimir Malevich, “On The Museum,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, *Art of The Commune* no. 12 (February 23, 1919) in Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 269.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Paul Bond, “New Art for a New Era: Malevich’s Vision of the Russian Avant-Garde at the Barbican Centre, London,” *WSW.org*, June 16, 1999, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/1999/06/avan-j16.html>.

¹³⁹ “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

¹⁴⁰ From the “CV” page of Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/>.

destruction of the past but rather their attraction to the instrumentalization and transformation of that past, for the admittedly diverse and sometimes contradictory purposes of the present.

Contemporary Russian artists and museologists can take aesthetic and curatorial lessons from the past, creatively and unrestrictedly ‘building’ on it, as opposed to having to start from scratch and move forward without any points of reference.

Utopia & Escape

Boris Groys is particularly aware of the contradictory and less ideologically cohesive post-Soviet impulses of Russian contemporary art (what he calls “Russian Post-Conceptual Realism”¹⁴¹). There is a contradiction and push-pull quality within Russian contemporary art’s approach to and treatment of the Soviet past. While curating the collaborative exhibit “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art (2015)” (to which Zhilyaev contributed his “RCC YHV: The Resurrection Museum (2014-15)”), Groys discussed the existence of “a certain ambivalence in contemporary Russian art in reaction to communism. One remembers utopia. One also remembers violence, the tragic aspect of the communist revolution in Russia. One has mixed memories.”¹⁴² As the program of the exhibit put it:

Contemporary Russian artists are still haunted by the specters of communism. On the one hand, they do not want to close the utopian perspective that was opened by the October revolution and art of the Russian avant-garde. But, on the other hand, they

¹⁴¹ Geneva Hutcheson, “Post-Soviet Union aftermath on display in ‘Specters of Communism,’” *Columbia Spectator*, February 12, 2015, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://spc.columbiaspectator.com/arts-and-entertainment/2015/02/12/post-soviet-union-aftermath-display-%E2%80%98%98specters-communism>.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

cannot forget the long history of post-revolutionary violence, where artists are haunted by these specters in the middle of reality that does not welcome them.¹⁴³

This admitted contradiction within Russian artistic treatment of the Soviet past is usually joined by a critique of Russian culture's storied attachment to Russia's 'utopian prerogative', by which I mean the inclination of Russian movements (aesthetic and political) to take on utopian, future-oriented pursuits - what curator and art critic Olga Kopenkina calls "the proclivity to present Russia as, still, a pioneer of social-political utopias."¹⁴⁴ Contemporary Russian artists and museologists like Zhilyaev might also feel the draw of a smaller-scale form of rebellion - an oppositional reaction to post-Soviet Russia's "current hyper-conservative climate's rejection of a communist utopia"¹⁴⁵ This reaction Lena Jonson would classify as the *art of dissent* - indirect often ironic disagreement with the official consensus. This art falls in the middle of Jonson's 'political' art spectrum - between the less direct *art of another gaze* ("a subtle form of dissensus in which the questioning of established concepts is sometimes hardly visible" and political motifs and motivations can be denied) and the more openly political, activist *art of engagement* (Pussy Riot would fall under this category).¹⁴⁶ Zhilyaev's simultaneously ironic and unironic embrace of his avant-garde museology's Soviet influences is part of this 'dissent', his rejection of contemporary Russia's rejection of Utopia.

¹⁴³ E-flux exhibit program for "Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art," last modified January 21, 2015, accessed March 11, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>.

¹⁴⁴ Olga Kopenkina, "The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art," *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 13, 2017,

<https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

¹⁴⁵ Geneva Hutcheson, "Post-Soviet Union aftermath on display in 'Specters of Communism,'" *Columbia Spectator*, February 12, 2015, accessed March 9, 2017,

<http://spc.columbiaspectator.com/arts-and-entertainment/2015/02/12/post-soviet-union-aftermath-display-%E2%80%98%98specters-communism>.

¹⁴⁶ Lena Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 658.

The critique of the utopian approach is two-pronged. On the one side, there are the contradictions regarding the push-pull appeal of the Soviet experience. As Boris Groys ‘neatly’ puts it in his curatorial statement for the exhibit “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art (2015)”, he places the exhibit’s constituent works into the categories and paradigms of the leftist tradition, which “has two components that do not always correlate perfectly with each other: a critical one, and a utopian, ‘life-building’ one.”¹⁴⁷ And on the other side, there is the often impractical, impossible nature of utopian projects. The word ‘utopian’, so closely associated with Socialism, was actually often used by the Soviets as a derogatory term indicating impracticality and infeasibility during debates and attacks on early Soviet cultural policy.¹⁴⁸ Zhilyaev himself admits to the infeasibility of much of his work, speaking here in reference to proposals made by his collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History (2012-2013)”, which focused on reawakening Russians to the value and relevance of history: “We are aware that, most probably, these proposals would never be implemented due to the objective limitations of the activity of contemporary museums. However, we can discuss them through the concepts of contemporary art and will continue to do so.”¹⁴⁹

But it is also its very impossibility that forms a large part of the appeal of Utopia. This brings us back to the still attractive Soviet-utopian idea that a single ideology could unite the

¹⁴⁷ Olga Kopenkina, “The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art,” *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 13, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

¹⁴⁸ Ronald H. Hayashida, “Lenin and the Third Front,” *Slavic Review* Vol. 28, no. 2 (1969), accessed March 7, 2017, doi: 10.2307/2493231. As James McClelland put it - “All of the participants in this debate were living in a world of unreality [here referring to the 1920s Narkompros debate over vocational versus polytechnical education and administration, when resources were extremely limited but opinions and ideas were in no short supply].” Abbott Gleason, Abbott, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds. *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹⁴⁹ Il’iā Budraĩtskis and Arseniĩ Zhiliāev, “Introduction” in *Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History*. (Italy: Marsilio, 2014), 7.

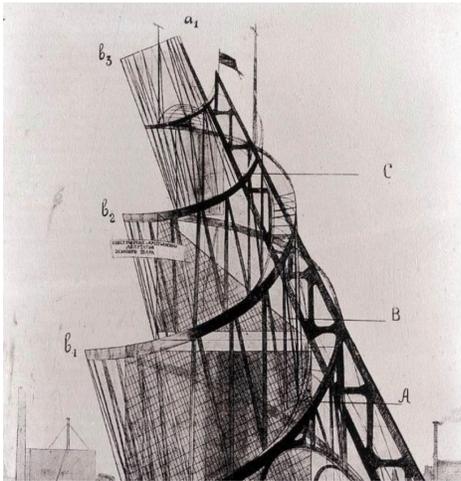
world. Writer and historian Ben Lewis describes just such a rationale behind the decision of his East German girlfriend (of the same post-Soviet generation as Zhilyaev and a multimedia artist as well) not only to remain a Communist but to focus on Soviet ‘utopias’ in her art:

Her work contained the tension of ambivalence and contradiction. The faithful way she presented the imagery of Soviet propaganda in her work was both ironic and sincere. The irony flowed from the transparent banality and dishonesty of the pictures; the state lied as badly as a child. On the other hand, a pool of sincerity coagulated in *the regime’s defiant conviction that it could organize Utopia. Today we are too cynical to try to solve so many problems with just one big idea . . .* Ariane was surfing the contemporary art boom of the early twenty-first century, with her own - highly marketable, rather expensive - brand of Communist nostalgia. She made large collages based on old propaganda images, which she overpainted with abstract modernist stylings. She watched Communism fading into the distance through a haze of paint, a set of awkward poses, and impossible dreams.¹⁵⁰

Although a superficial take on what some would call simply ‘Soviet kitsch’, this does open up some questions concerning the reaction to more overtly nostalgic post-Soviet Soviet-themed art. Ariane is described as mournfully watching Communism sink into the oblivion of the past but others could approach the same work with an entirely different, less mournful mindset - that of escapism.

Distraction is a tool long used by authoritarian governments like the Soviet Union to quell any unrest regarding the outcome (or lack thereof) of promises made. And this method of governing (by distraction) hasn’t gone out of style in the post-Soviet era. The “hyperbuilding of the spectacular age of state socialism,” with its distracting elements of “the technological sublime” (“a world where the skyline carries the citizen’s imagination above and ultimately away from the known life of the sidewalk”), and “paper architecture” created what Bruce Grant calls “the circulation of images and a kind of collective wishful thinking . . . [with] real social

¹⁵⁰ Ben Lewis, *Hammer & Tickle: The History of Communism Told through Communist Jokes* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 7-8, 32.



consequences” that has continued from the Soviet to the post-Soviet age. Empty or unfinished buildings “belonged to the realm of the future and therefore remained potentially accessible to everyone [while leaving] the unevenness of ‘progress’ unseen”¹⁵¹ - the hope and distraction of a kind of utopian futurism.

(Fig. 21) Tatlin’s unrealized Monument to the 3rd International

This is the arena in which Zhilyaev has laid himself open to and received the most criticism. In focusing almost blinkered on the future, in ‘imagining’ distant futures for museums *and* mankind with a sci-fi world-building level of detail (and believability), he seems to expose what one critic calls “the major problem of contemporary art in Russia: its self-mythologizing escapism”, elsewhere calling it “impotent escapism.” Spending so much time focused on imaginary and for all intents and purposes unrealizable futures, leaves the present without engagement and discourse.

This same critic directs what may be the sharpest critique to be made against Zhilyaev’s revisionist approach to early twentieth century Soviet and avant-garde museologies - that his treatment of the philosophies behind the inspirations and direction he has taken from Fyodorov, Malevich, and Soviet-era museologists like Fedorov-Davydov and Luppol is trivial, superficial, and possibly even politically symptomatic:

The inability to connect with history as a whole is clearly a symptom of repression - something that is exemplified by the installation “Resurrection Museum” by

¹⁵¹ This puts me in mind of the quote by sci-fi writer William Gibson, “The future is already here - it's just not very evenly distributed.” Grant was speaking here of post-Soviet Baku, Azerbaijan. Bruce Grant, “The Edifice Complex: Architecture and the Political Life of Surplus in the New Baku,” *Public Culture* 26, no. 3 (2014): 501-528, accessed March 17, 2017, doi: 10.1215/08992363-2683648.

Moscow-based Arseny Zhilyaev, dedicated to Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903) and his idea that someday the dead will be resurrected and fill up all of cosmic space. The piece consists of a plaster bust of Fyodorov next to a series of images showing smiling families that advertise the “eternal life” - a kind of sarcastic, postmodernist interpretation of the philosopher’s idea as an attractive new product that promotes humankind’s future. . . The installation did not convince me, however, that the artist attempted to dig into the complexity of the idea of resurrection itself. . . Instead, Zhilyaev’s work trivializes the philosophical idea into a pop-up installation. . . *The inability to deal with philosophy is reflected in an inability to deal with political realities.*¹⁵²

This is quite a criticism to throw at Zhilyaev as he considers one of his chief priorities to be “despite the current use of art as entertainment, . . . to rethink the museum as an educational institution *connecting art and history.*”¹⁵³

The ‘re-historicization’ of the contemporary, post-Soviet Russian museum visitor is one of Zhilyaev’s main stated goals. He laments the current state of Russian museology regarding the presentation of history, what he calls “the dehistorizational approach [that] contradicts the idea of history as continuing human experience and sensory perception.”¹⁵⁴ In his introductory statement (co-written with historian and political activist Ilya Budraitskis, born in 1981) for the collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History (2012-13)” based out of the Presnya Historical Memorial Museum in Moscow, Zhilyaev couched his ‘historizing’ goal in criticism of the current Russian ‘underappreciation’ for both history and museums:

¹⁵² Olga Kopenkina, “The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art,” *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

¹⁵³ “Europe: Arseniy Zhilyaev, *Time is Working on Kommunism, 2010*,” Kadist Foundation, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://kadist.org/work/time-is-working-on-kommunism-2010/>.

¹⁵⁴ Il’iā Budraĭtskis and Arseniĭ Zhiliāev, “Introduction” in *Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History*. (Italy: Marsilio, 2014), 5.

Contemporary Russian society lacks this confidence in [an] utopian future of humanity, which requires [the] upbringing of free individuals; it does not believe in education as an important human right, instead considering it a way of personal capitalization that gives advantages in the labour market; *it does not understand history as a continuing process, related to everyone. . . The value of history as a general subject and of a museum as a place of cultural entertainment is underestimated in today's Russia. Apprehension of history is limited to the idea of a dusty catalogue of the past, alien and minor to the present.* Rare historical references only occur within political speculation or pulp fiction, and what's even worse, in "learn a lesson" didactic allusions. [Zhilyaev, 2012]¹⁵⁵

In the collaborative exhibit "Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art (2015)", Zhilyaev is grouped together with other critically-minded artists of the post-Soviet generation, whose work exhibits the tension of the potential contradiction inherent in what Boris Groys describes as the two chief aims of the leftist artistic tradition "that do not always correlate perfectly with each other: a critical one, and a utopian, 'life-building' one."¹⁵⁶ The program for the "Specters of Communism" exhibit contextualizes and describes Zhilyaev and his collaborators' work not just as utopian, critical and unifying (in the 'cosmic' sense) but as ultimately transformative as well:

[This] new generation of Russian artists continue the tradition of the Russian artistic and political Left: *the desire to change reality* by means of art, ideals of equality and social justice, radical Utopianism, secularism and internationalism.¹⁵⁷

This harkens back to the Soviet impulse to shape the new 'Soviet' man in all spheres and through all means at their disposal. Of course, Zhilyaev is missing the single, cohesive superstructure that the Soviet system's Socialist ideology provided - a lack that could prompt a kind of nostalgia,

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Olga Kopenkina, "The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art," *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

¹⁵⁷ E-flux exhibit program for "Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art," last modified January 21, 2015, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>.

not for the ideological content of the Soviet superstructure but for the existence of any kind of superstructure at all. And while it is perhaps unfair to compare their transformative aims and ends considering the superior ideological means and authority at the Soviets' disposal, it is important to note that Zhilyaev's transformative aims are centered around the power of *art* and not political authority or ideology - the strength and viability of which is always under debate.

Chapter 3 - Shaping The New Man

The Russian Avant-Garde had a tremendous reflexive faith in the possibilities, even necessity of the transformation of humanity as a whole.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2016¹⁵⁸

Now we can establish the third tenet that Zhilyaev's avant-garde museology shares with its predecessors. It follows quite naturally from the unifying, future-gear'd aims of the second tenet that, in order to achieve such a 'future' the work of transforming society toward those 'cosmic' ends must begin immediately. This work would involve the transformation of society through the individual museum visitor - what the Soviets called 'making the *novy sovetsky chelovek*' (or New Soviet man) and what Zhilyaev lays claim to as his work's chief goal - the 're-historicization' of the contemporary Russian. So the avant-garde museologies of Zhilyaev, Fyodorov, and early Soviet museologists share a fundamental transformative impulse - one that seeks to blur the lines between history, ideology, politics, life, and art.

What is particularly striking about the trajectory of Zhilyaev's work is not just its focus on the 'medium' of the museum exhibit, its inspiration drawn from the avant-garde museologies of the past, or its projection into the future. Although the direct cause and inspiration of all of his subsequent museum-focused work was his researching and editing of the anthology *Avant-Garde Museology* (first begun circa 2010), it was only in 2012, with the Occupy Moscow movement and protests surrounding the then recent Russian presidential election, that Zhilyaev sought a

¹⁵⁸ "Arseniy Zhilyaev in conversation with [Kommersant correspondent] Valentin Diaconov: In this pulsing we can hear an echo of the Big Bang," *Academia.edu*, accessed on March 12, 2017, http://www.academia.edu/30273897/Arseny_Zhilyaev_in_conversation_with_Valentin_Diaconov_In_this_pulsing_we_can_hear_an_echo_of_the_Big_Bang.

(Fig. 22) Zhilyaev with the English edition of *Avant-Garde Museology* more active way to realize these



avant-garde museological inspirations and ‘act’ “in line with avant-garde gestures aiming to erase the border between art and life, perhaps extending them to the dissolution of the borders between art and

activism.”¹⁵⁹

In his 2012 exhibit “The Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia” at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Zhilyaev incorporated and prominently displayed the Occupy Abay Manifesto, “named after the statue of the Kazakh poet Abay around which the protesters first gathered in Moscow in May 2012 . . . The Occupy Abay Manifesto was written by the people who took part in the General Assembly in the Moscow Occupy Camp and included anti-Putin claims, various social demands and defended self-organisation and direct democracy.”¹⁶⁰ Zhilyaev’s inclusion of this political as opposed to artistic manifesto marked the beginning of a new kind of transformative aim in his museology - one more overtly political (i.e. addressing issues of authority and effecting direct social change). Although some of his earlier work did center on labor rights (his exhibits “Employment Record Book (2009)” and “Rare Species (2010)”), this focus was still on “the rights of *creative* workers”¹⁶¹ and not all citizens.

¹⁵⁹ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

In the longest running of his works, the collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Museum of the Future (2012-2013),” Zhilyaev turned his museological attention to the everyman Russian who has become ‘de-historicized’ and lacks appreciation for both history and museums - due in part to the lack of appreciation in Russia for education as a form of individual sovereignty:

Contemporary Russian society lacks this confidence in an utopian future of humanity, which *requires the upbringing of free individuals; it does not believe in education as an important human right*, instead considering it a way of personal capitalization that gives advantages in the labour market; *it does not understand history as a continuing process, related to everyone*. Due to all these circumstances we accept [the] challenge of our epoch and take a risk of creating a new “Pedagogical Poem”.¹⁶² [Here Zhilyaev is referencing the work of Anton Makarenko¹⁶³ during the first decades of the Soviet Union. Through his work with the numerous homeless and orphaned children of the Russian Civil War period (1917-1922) Makarenko sought to develop a new Soviet philosophy of education (pedagogy) that advocated shared concern and the ‘collective’ over individualism.]

Lena Jonson marks 2014 and the exhibit “M.I.R. (*Myzeé Istorii Rossii* or Museum of Russian History): Polite Guests from the Future” as the moment in his artistic/museological career when Zhilyaev began “inscrib[ing] the protest movement into the museum context.”¹⁶⁴ In both of these projects (“Pedagogical Poem” and “M.I.R.”) Zhilyaev can be seen coming fully into his belief in “the museum as a tool in which the goal of the display is to educate and to create a provocative discourse open to debate”¹⁶⁵ and possibly critique. In his later installation in the

¹⁶² Il’iā Budraĩtskis and Arseniĩ Zhiliāev, “Introduction” in *Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History*. (Italy: Marsilio, 2014), 5.

¹⁶³ Anton Semenovich Makarenko, through his work with orphans during the early years of the Soviet Union, strove to substitute the “decrepit Adam” with a new “man” of the Communist future - the new ‘Soviet Man.’ He wrote the first book entitled *Pedagogical Poem* (1925-1935) - the title of which Zhilyaev consciously borrowed for his collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Museum of the Future (2012-2013). Bruce F. Baker, “Makarenko, Anton (1888-1939),” in *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Joseph James Chambliss (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 378.

¹⁶⁴ Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 666.

¹⁶⁵ From the “M. I. R.: Polite Guests from the Future” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/mir-new-paths-to-the-objects/>.

collaborative exhibit “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art (2015)”, in the exhibit program Zhilyaev and the other artist-contributors are placed in a larger critical, political (and not just artistic) context:

In contemporary Russia in which the official political and cultural attitudes have become increasingly conservative, a new generation of Russian artists continue the tradition of the Russian artistic and political Left: *the desire to change reality* by means of art, ideals of equality and social justice, radical Utopianism, secularism and internationalism. This exhibition includes the works of artists from Moscow and St. Petersburg who share *a critical attitude towards the realities of contemporary Russian life*.¹⁶⁶

Now transformation through critique might seem just as utopian (i.e. impossible) a desire as that of resurrecting the past. But Zhilyaev’s larger goal is transformation by awareness. Much of Zhilyaev’s work presupposes the existence of an imaginary superstructure (Fyodorov’s future-driven Cosmism and Common Cause, Malevich’s destructive impulse and contemporary focus, Soviet museologist Fedorov-Davydov’s class-based didactic agenda) and such work is designed not only to present to but to educate the museum visitor regarding the details and background of that imaginary superstructure. There is no point in attempting to revise something when the original version is unknown and the end result has no context. But moving away from the specifics of individual exhibits and inspirations - Zhilyaev’s larger purpose is to unveil and heighten awareness of the superstructures (the ideologies, agendas, and assumptions) that lay behind most of the ‘objects’ and actions in the world. To Zhilyaev, “The artist would [and

¹⁶⁶ E-flux exhibit program for “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art,” last modified January 21, 2015, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/program/64850/specters-of-communism-contemporary-russian-art/>.

should] be the one who reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politicians, for the most part, try to conceal.”¹⁶⁷

In a 2012 interview following his exhibit “The Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia”, Zhilyaev addressed these more political, critical, and revelatory ‘aims’ of his museology, which he explained were borrowed and adapted from the earlier Soviet avant-garde museology:

[Interviewer]: How do you see the relationship between your artistic practice and your political activity?

[Zhilyaev]: Metaphorically speaking, I think that art must be prepared to accept its own death in order to develop into a political event. . . Art should exist in the regime of the liar’s paradox: it should be open to recognising its artificial nature. . . I tried to *emphasise the artificiality of museum representation*. . . I often act as a curator of sorts in my art projects, using the contemporary art exhibition as a medium. I apply a similar method to that of a mockumentary: I use the institutional conventions of exhibition-making to *expose the assumptions on which it is based and that we usually take for granted*. This is, in fact, what experimental museum curators did in the early years of the Soviet regime. For instance, they created sculptural installations bringing together historical objects from museum archives and props to illustrate the principles of historic materialism. . . For them, the distinction between the copy and the original was unimportant, insomuch as creativity was subordinated to an understanding of history as a scientific and overarching narrative. During the same period, in the 1920s, Soviet curators also began including texts and statistics in exhibition displays; in other words, they were already using media that are nowadays an integral part of the palette of *critical art*.¹⁶⁸

This ‘transformation through education and awareness’ prompts not only a shift toward more overt political commentary and critique. It also prompts a shift toward the contemporary art exhibit ‘as medium.’ This is another element of Zhilyaev’s museological thinking that was drawn directly from the early Soviet period’s avant-garde museology. In 1919, influential art critic and

¹⁶⁷ From the “M. I. R.: Polite Guests from the Future” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/mir-new-paths-to-the-objects/>.

¹⁶⁸ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

new Soviet museologist Osip Brik said that “It is the exhibit that educates and not the museum [nor, it can be inferred, the individual artwork].”¹⁶⁹ In 2014 Zhilyaev noted the ‘return’ of this trend:

It is an increasingly frequent occasion nowadays that art historians have started to describe art history as the history of exhibitions, and not that of individual artistic statements. . . . The recent shift of artists’ attention from separate works on to exhibition-as-medium can be described as a critique of the bureaucratized version of the contemporary critical art display. This kind of display [the individually treated single artwork] cannot achieve. . . . any real aesthetic changes and [has] unwarranted hopes of creating social transformation.¹⁷⁰

The individual (artwork *or* artist) is no longer enough.

Changing The Medium & The Messenger

The practice of combining artistic and curatorial positions is . . . highly productive, in terms of problematizing the exhibition as a special form and medium of contemporary art - a medium which is based on hidden and deep rules of social organization. . . . Thus, it is an increasingly frequent occasion nowadays that art historians have started to describe art history as the history of exhibitions, and not that of individual artistic statements. And often, these artistic statements themselves appropriate the expository practices of the curators, not to mention the rather widespread practice of an artist acting as a curator of an essentially curatorial exhibition.

- Arseniy Zhilyaev, 2014¹⁷¹

Intertwined with Zhilyaev’s transformative goals is the final element that he shares with his early twentieth century avant-garde museological predecessors: that the exhibit-as-medium necessitates the combining of the artist and the curator, creating a kind of artist-director.

¹⁶⁹ Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 291.

¹⁷⁰ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017,

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Zhilyaev has long-standing interest in such a transformation of the artist's role. In 2012 he said, "This is the kind of curatorial work that interests me: the creation of narratives through the display of objects, images and texts in the gallery space; for me the curator should be like a movie director."¹⁷² Zhilyaev notes that this 'artist/curator trend' is not unique to him and his collaborators nor to the Russian contemporary art and museology scene. Indeed, it is not unique to the present historical period. For all its global rise in popularity, like the advent of the museum of 'living artists' (i.e. the contemporary art museum), which was jumpstarted by Russia in the early twentieth century, the "practice of combining artistic and curatorial positions,"¹⁷³ and "playing artistic and curatorial roles at the same time"¹⁷⁴ also began amidst the artistic and political avant-garde movements of Russia in the early twentieth century.

In 1919 Osip Brik reiterated his point that it was the exhibit - as opposed to the museum or the individual artist - that educates, going on to argue for the placement of the transformational cultural (museological) duties of the political and artistic avant-garde of the period into the hands of artists and not professional museum workers:

All educational responsibilities should be transferred to the creators of contemporary art . . . control over all education and aesthetic impact must be transferred to the artists. . . the work of cultural enlightenment and artistic instruction should be removed from museum jurisdiction and entirely handed over to the creators of contemporary art.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Silvia Franceschini, "Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview]," *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

¹⁷³ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

¹⁷⁴ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Second Adverts: On the Issue of Planning in Contemporary Art," *e-flux journal: Supercommunity* 65 (May-August 2015).

¹⁷⁵ Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 291.

The State Commissar on Museums and Preservation of Artistic Monuments and Antiquity repeated this argument before the Art and Industry Board in January of that same year, saying “The restructured art museums must be taken out of the hands of professional museum workers and handed over to artists.”¹⁷⁶ Aleksandr Grishchenko argued that the museums of the new ‘type’ (of contemporary art) should “be established by an artist, not by an archaeologist.”¹⁷⁷ And last but certainly not least, Malevich himself made the case for the handover of cultural, aesthetic, and educational museum responsibilities to the truly innovative in the art community, painting a vivid picture of what the return to the ‘innovation-less’, anti-‘living art’, and professionally-led museums of the past would look like:

The czarist body of curators, as well as knowledgeable artistic museologists appointed to be directors . . . shouted down all that was creative and innovative. Due to conditions generated by refined connoisseurs, the creations of the innovators were shoved back into cold garrets and miserable studios where they awaited their fate, being abandoned to destiny. And if, at the cost of the greatest effort, one succeeded in bringing revolutionary works out onto the street, you were welcomed with insults, curses, jeers and scoffing. “Only old art is beautiful”, they shouted from all sides of the camp, “only the czar is handsome.”¹⁷⁸

There are interesting points of comparison to make between Malevich’s views on museologists and Zhilyaev’s conception of contemporary museum workers. Zhilyaev maintains

¹⁷⁶ From “On The Question of Museums: Record of the Discussion of Problems and Objectives of Fine Art Museums at the Art and Industry Board” - minutes/notes by the Moscow Department of Museum Affairs in 1919, translation by Bela Shayevech, an account of January 16th meeting of the collegium on artistic affairs and art production, where the question of the objectives and organization of art museums was discussed. See Arseniy Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York, NY: E-Flux Classics and V-A-C Foundation, 2015), 281-288.

¹⁷⁷ Aleksandr Grishchenko, “Thesis: The Museum of Painterly Culture Adopted by the Fine Arts” (1919) from “Documents on the Founding and organization of the Museum of Artistic (or Painterly) Culture, compiled by Patricia Railing,” accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.incorm.eu/documents.html#d-1919>.

¹⁷⁸ Kazimir Malevich, “The Axis of Colour and Volume Plastic Arts,” *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* 1 (Petrograd, 1919) in “Documents on the Founding and organization of the Museum of Artistic (or Painterly) Culture, compiled by Patricia Railing,” accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.incorm.eu/documents.html#f-1919>.

Malevich's 'bifurcation' of the museum worker 'breed' into the 'innovative' and the 'conservative', the avant-garde and the traditional:

As a rule, [museum workers] fall into two categories: those who have been working in the museum since Soviet times, and those who arrived on the wave of the reforms of the 2000s. The first are . . . are professional museum workers with the corresponding education and a good knowledge of their subject. Their conservatism, on the one hand, is an obstacle to creative experimentation, but simultaneously protects the museum from rushing off into commercial consumer goods or completely inappropriate kitsch. The second group . . . do not, as a rule, have any relevant education. They are managers, and not necessarily drawn from the world of culture. This group, in its turn, is an agent for change, but simultaneously the bearer of a potentially destructive impulse for the museum in the form of their lack of education or sensitivity towards museum work.¹⁷⁹

Boris Groys and Arseniy Zhilyaev have taken up the debate concerning the 'promotion' of the artist to creative curator and exhibit 'director' and the combination of artistic and curatorial duties, adding more political (i.e. regarding authority and social transformation) considerations to the mix. According to Groys, "the artist and the curator embody, in a very conspicuous manner . . . two different kinds of freedom: the sovereign, unconditional, politically non-partisan freedom of artistic self-expression, and the institutionalized, politically responsible freedom of curatorship."¹⁸⁰ Zhilyaev takes into consideration that political differentiation between the two main figures in museology and art and then throws in the museum as a third political 'figure' as well. To Zhilyaev the artist is "to be the one who reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politicians for the most part, try to conceal [while the museum, and the exhibit subsequently created therein, is to be] the installation space . . . where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the

¹⁷⁹ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Who's afraid of the Russian Cosmic Federation?", *Academia.edu*, accessed May, 13, 2017, http://www.academia.edu/18191073/Who_s_afraid_of_the_Russian_Cosmic_Federation.

¹⁸⁰ Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal* 2 (January 2009), accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/>.

contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom.”¹⁸¹ So the tense co-existence of those two ‘freedoms’ within the contemporary art museum creates a chance for the exploration of what Zhilyaev calls “the parallel between the Russian political situation and the contemporary art field”¹⁸² (in terms of relative individual versus institutional freedoms) and the opportunity and imperative to “test the borders between these sovereign and the institutionalized freedoms”¹⁸³ - all the more so through the combination of the artist and the curator and the artist and the museum, or in Zhilyaev’s words, “the merging of artist and curator into one person - even if, in reality, this “person” is an anonymous museum team.”¹⁸⁴

Zhilyaev’s shift away from the individual’s potential role in activism and his tipping of the scale in favor of the institution as ‘the superior transformative power’ dates back to his museological political awakening in 2012:

After the mass protests denouncing alleged fraud in the Russian presidential elections held in March 2012, it became clear to me that *isolated actions* such as those by the activist collectives Voina or Pussy Riot¹⁸⁵ could no longer achieve their main political goal. . . It is important to us that “Pedagogical Poem” takes place in the former Museum of Revolution because our purpose is to rethink the museum as an educational institution connecting history and art and addressed to the wider public. *This differs significantly from both the anti-institutional impulse* of the Occupy movement and bureaucratized contemporary art academia.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ From the “M. I. R.: Polite Guests from the Future” exhibit page on Zhilyaev’s professional website, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/mir-new-paths-to-the-objects/>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Arseniy Zhilyaev, “Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work,” *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

¹⁸⁵ For more on placing Zhilyaev within the context of contemporary Russian political protest movements and their intersection with the art world see Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 657-72.

¹⁸⁶ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

Here Zhilyaev again betrays a kind of nostalgia for the superstructure and the collectivism/institutionalism of the Soviet past (though not the ideological or political content), admitting the comparative ease of mass mobilization and education under such a system (however prescribed, limited, and dependent that system's institutions).

In this shift, Zhilyaev can be seen undergoing another kind of transformation. Once (circa 2012 and the height of his interest in incorporating elements of political critique and activism into his work), he sought to “dissolve the borders between art and activism”¹⁸⁷, “bridge intellectual discourse and political activism”¹⁸⁸, and unveil and thereby criticize the ‘artificiality’ and hidden ideological agenda and authority of museum representation. But now (as of 2016) he finds more hope for transformation (social and political) in the exhibit and the museum institution rather than in the individual artwork and artist, in other words viewing that artificiality and authority as more curatorially and politically (i.e. transformatively) effective.

But there is a flipside to this ostensible ‘superiority’ of the institution’s transformative power - one that Zhilyaev notes, even as he maintains his belief in the potential power of the institution, the collective, the group over the individual. This flipside was discussed at length in a 2016 conversation between Zhilyaev and Groys in which Zhilyaev made the case that “The debate around the delineation between the artist’s position and the curator’s is one of the most pressing questions in contemporary art.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

This conversation reveals Zhilyaev and Groys to be on opposing sides of the issue of artistic/curatorial ‘hybridization.’ Zhilyaev is fascinated by what he sees as the innovation inherent in the utilization of ideology and the combination of institutional authority with individual artistic creativity and sovereignty (“Quite recently, I came across a phenomenon that was new for me - the unprecedented institutional activity of a museum pretending to be free expression in the guise of an artwork”¹⁹⁰). Groys, on the other hand, cautions Zhilyaev, recalling early Soviet museology’s history of organizing ostensibly ‘democratic’ exhibitions such as “Russian Art of the Imperialist Era” and “Art of the Industrial Bourgeoisie” (in which Malevich’s *Black Square* was criticized and displayed¹⁹¹), which were designed to reveal the true agenda and “class-determined ideologies” of the artists and artistic style and period on display. To Groys, “the issue with these exhibitions is not that the position of the



(Fig. 23) “Art of the Industrial Bourgeoisie”, 1931

curators did not coincide with the position of the artist but that the artist was denied the right to have a position altogether: his art was shown only as an indirect manifestation of his class- or

¹⁹⁰ “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

¹⁹¹ A bit like the Nazis’ “Degenerate Art” exhibition. For more on Malevich following the close of the eclectic 1920s see Maria Kokkori, “Exhibiting Malevich Under Stalin” in *Russian History and Culture: Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori, and Maria Mileeva (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013), 133-151.

race-determined nature - like the burrows of a mole, or the tail of a peacock”¹⁹² - a problem that could all too well be replicated within the present trend of creative, ‘hybrid’ art/curation.

Zhilyaev acknowledges this concern, while at the same time indicating a continued belief in the positive potential of harnessing the museum institution’s sovereign freedom for activism and critique. Just as museology itself has to grapple with the inherent ‘illogic’ of a traditional museum display’s transformation of an artwork from a ‘living’ creative force to a ‘dead’ museum object, Zhilyaev too has to grapple with himself over his commitment to the belief in the transformative ability of the institution and collective over that of the individual. To Zhilyaev the ‘norm’ is the utilization of an exhibit and its artist/curator for the purposes of unveiling the museum institution’s (and the museum visitor’s) hidden superstructure, assumptions, and agenda. The ‘deviation’ is the taking advantage of said institution and superstructure’s authority for the purposes of legitimizing and affirming the superstructure. Zhilyaev considers this kind of ‘authoritarian’ utilization of the transformation of the artist to curator and the museum to artist a ‘corruption,’ ‘mutation,’ and “deviation.”¹⁹³ Zhilyaev gives examples of such mutations and deviations in two exhibits in Kyiv and Russia circa 2014-2015:

[The] increasingly present trend of unifying the curatorial and artistic positions. . . involves taking a critical stance on the ideological system providing the framework for representing art history. In the contemporary context, however, we see the opposite tendency. Let me give you an example. Quite recently, I came across a phenomenon that was new for me - the unprecedented institutional activity of a museum pretending to be free expression in the guise of an artwork. Not too long ago in the center of Kyiv, there was an exhibition called “Presence,” which presented its audience with military equipment of Russian origin, which had been captured in Donbass and Lugansk. . . In some sense, this was a symmetrical response to a similar Russian exhibition, “Material Evidence: Donbass, 365 Days,” which opened about a

¹⁹² “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

year ago in the Ukrainian pavilion at the V.D.N.Kh. It's true, unlike the Kyiv exhibition, which took the form of a street intervention, built from a solemn series of ready-mades, the Moscow display - in a nod to the Soviet museology of the 1920-30s - made use of the theatrical effects of the dioramic "staged scenes" seen in Museums of Revolution. *Both examples can be understood as deviations, simultaneously drawing on both the sovereign freedom of the art work and the legitimizing power of the curatorial installation, not to undermine the dominant ideological system, but, on the contrary, to reinforce it.*¹⁹⁴

Groys, on the other hand, cautions that, "Artistic space should not be used for the distribution of official propaganda, which has other options for reaching its audience. The political significance of art lies primarily in the fact that it provides the opportunity to formulate and present positions that have no chance of reaching mass media outlets. Affirmational art, just repeating what can already be seen and heard without any artistic intervention, does not make any sense"¹⁹⁵ and is an uncreative use of art's power.

But this contemporary 'mutation' of what the early Soviet museologists developed does not diminish for Zhilyaev its appeal, in spite of critique regarding its 'deviation' and misuse:

Long before the emergence of total installation practice [here again Zhilyaev is obliquely referencing and drawing a connection to the work of Ilya Kabakov],¹⁹⁶ long before the formation of defetishized conceptual art, and long before the appearance of a postcolonial theory that legitimized the art of the oppressed peoples of the Third World within the USSR, the people who didn't even call themselves artists or curators created a work of art, the value of which was merely cancelled because of the mistakes in their interpretation of the Marxist theory of the base and superstructure. *The avant-garde character of the art created by Soviet museologists must be reopened to the world.*¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Kabakov wrote in his 1995 book *On the "Total" Installation*: "[One] is simultaneously both a 'victim' and a viewer, who on the one hand surveys and evaluates the installation, and on the other, follows those associations, recollections which arise in him[;] he is overcome by the intense atmosphere of the total illusion." Il'ia Iosifovich Kabakov, *On the "Total" Installation*. Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995.

¹⁹⁷ Arseniy Zhilyaev, "Conceptual Realism: The Vulgar Freedom of Avant-Garde Museum Work," *e-flux journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61056/conceptual-realism-the-vulgar-freedom-of-avant-garde-museum-work/>.

(Fig. 24) “The Serf order was based on the forced labor exploitation of the peasant by the aristocrat and landowner”, 1931



A simpler reading of this, of course, could just be that what Zhilyaev is so enamored of regarding the more ideological, narrative-providing, and ‘unveiling of the true nature of reality’

approach of early Soviet museologists like Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov, is not its “avant-garde character” or innovative utilization of contemporaneous material, copies, text, and statistics.

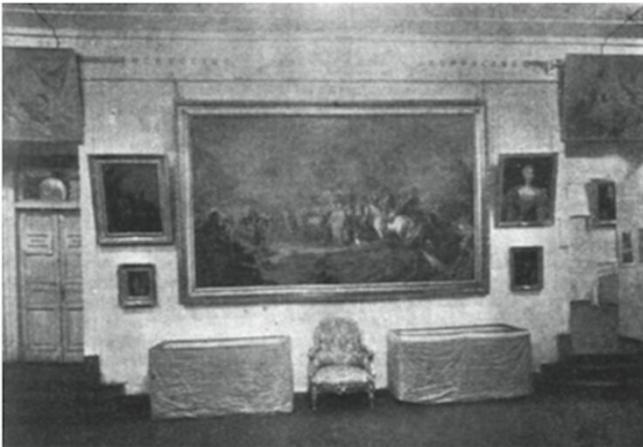
Rather, it is instead the simple strength, power, and drama of its encompassing, emotive multi-dimensional presentation (what Kabakov might describe as its ‘immersive atmosphere’).

Zhilyaev has admitted to viewing exhibit design as a kind of film direction¹⁹⁸ and the combination of the contemporaneous with copies, originals, heavy-handed exposition, agenda-driven ‘facts’, and hidden assumptions has never stopped a film’s narrative thrust before.

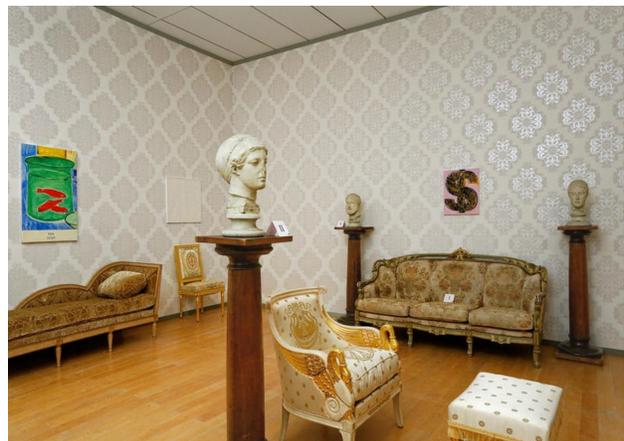
¹⁹⁸ “This is the kind of curatorial work that interests me: the creation of narratives through the display of objects, images and texts in the gallery space; for me the curator should be like a movie director. . . I apply a similar method to that of a mockumentary.” Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

Zhilyaev's Direct Inspiration:
The 'True' Class- & Money-Based Nature of Past and Present Periods Revealed
Through Their Artistic Consumption

(Figs. 25, 26) "The Art of the Most Prominent Serf Owners"
exhibit at the Tretyakov State Gallery, 1931



(Figs. 27, 28) Zhilyaev's "The Aesthetic Complex of
the Post-Soviet Oligarchy Period", 2015



Conclusion - From The Black Square To The Red Square & Back Again

The ‘avant-garde’ museology shared by Zhilyaev and his early twentieth century Russian predecessors can be divided into three main tenets. The first is a contemporary focus with conflicting, oscillating views on the usefulness of the past in pursuit of the future. The second is a goal of social and political transformation through criticism and education. And the third is the means of that transformation - the hybridization of artists and artworks with curators and exhibits. That hybridization includes the “practice of combining artistic and curatorial positions” and the treatment of the exhibit “as a special form and medium of contemporary art” in and of itself with the exhibit-as-medium taking over from the individual artwork, and the museum coming into its own as an artistic, creative, and political as well as institutional authority.

I have established, in my analysis of Zhilyaev’s museological philosophy and work, the ‘hows’ and ‘wheres’ regarding the current revival of interest in and creative direction taken from the avant-garde Russian museology of the early twentieth century - but it is in my attempts to answer the question of ‘why now?’ that obstacles appear. Soviet nostalgia can only explain so much. Over the course of most of my research for this thesis I had expected to argue in my conclusion that Zhilyaev’s two-pronged focus - his casting of “a revisionist lens on the heritage of Soviet museology and the museum in Russian Cosmism” and its attachment (along with his constant references to Malevich) to more political and critical creative work - was in fact a new kind of museological activism.

This argument developed from the idea that, while Zhilyaev ostensibly shared many aspects of his contemporary avant-garde museology with Malevich (his revisionist impulse and his focus on contemporary cultural production), in fact, Zhilyaev took more after Malevich's protégé El Lissitzky - who moved away from Malevich's self-referentialism and art-for-art's sake philosophy to a more constructive, transformative, and political kind of museology wherein the ideological content was just as important as the conceptual 'container.'

There exists the possibility of numerous differing interpretations of Malevich's work. In the words of curators at the Tate Modern art gallery in London, "Malevich wrote much and said more about Suprematism [and by implication, the meaning of the *Black Square*], his utterances veering between vigorous idealism, apocalyptic nihilism and a hazy eloquence so open to interpretation it has been construed without consensus many ways."¹⁹⁹ This ambiguousness has made possible various contemporary retrospectives and 'reworkings' (see Veda Popovici and Zhilyaev for examples). Even during his lifetime others were using and interpreting for themselves the work of Malevich - in various ways with various goals in mind. Lissitzky did just this, taking Malevich's Suprematism and infusing it with not only an artistic revolutionary spirit but a political, ideological, constructive one as well.

El Lissitzky (creator of the famous Constructivist lithograph *Beat The Whites With the Red Wedge*, 1919) called Malevich's *Black Square* (the Suprematist concept behind the image as well as the image itself) "the square pennant of creativity."²⁰⁰ Lissitzky went on to 'revise'

¹⁹⁹ Laura Cumming, "Malevich review - an intensely moving retrospective," *The Guardian: Art*, July 19, 2014, accessed March 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/20/malevich-tate-modern-review-intensely-moving-retrospective>.

²⁰⁰ El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," trans. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (Da Capo Press: New York, NY, 1990).

Malevich's black square - making it red and thereby infusing it with non-artistic ideological



meaning (i.e. Soviet Communism). In 1920 Lissitzky argued that “the black square inaugurates a revolution in form, but this in turn must give way to the revolutionary substance supplied by the red square.”²⁰¹ To Lissitzky “the black square is Suprematism”²⁰², but the red square is action - going beyond form to content. For Lissitzky this meant that “revolutionary form heralds the arrival of content, and the former must act as a vehicle for the latter.”²⁰³

(Fig. 29) “Upon the Black the Red establishes Itself”

Ross Wolf and Boris Groys argue that Malevich's aims were not, in fact, revolutionary or political in the transformative sense. In other words, Malevich was all about art for art's sake with no aim toward affecting or influencing other parts of life. In a handout Malevich wrote to accompany his work at “The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10” in 1915 where he first presented the *Black Square* painting that culminated his Suprematist project first begun in 1913²⁰⁴, he said,

²⁰¹ Ross Wolf, “Introduction to *About Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale About Two Squares*,” *Cambridge Literary Review* Vol. V, No. 8/9 (Lent, 2015): 59-67.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Malevich wrote in his 1927 book *The Non-Objective World*: “In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square.” Also see Susan Holtham and Moran Fiontan. “Five ways to look at Malevich's Black Square,” *Tate Modern*, August 28, 2014, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/five-ways-look-Malevich-Black-Square>.

“Up until now there were no attempts at painting as such, without any attribute of real life . . . Painting was the aesthetic side of a thing, but never was original and an end in itself.”²⁰⁵

Boris Groys argues that in “relieving artists of the burden of [realistic] representation Malevich shows us what it means to be a [non-transformative, non-political] revolutionary artist. It means joining the universal material flow that destroys all temporary political and aesthetic orders. Here, the goal is not change - understood as change from an existing, ‘bad’ order to a new, ‘good’ order. Rather, revolutionary art abandons all goals - and enters the non-teleological, potentially infinite process which the artist cannot and does not want to bring to an end.”²⁰⁶

Lissitzky on the other hand, was the one who had truly transformative goals in mind for this new art and new world: “I [Lissitzky] should like to stress that Marinetti [the founder of Futurism - an art movement that influenced Malevich’s Suprematism] does not call for playing with form as form, but asks rather that the action of a new content should be intensified by the form.”²⁰⁷

According to Ross Wolf, “Unlike Malevich, whose art was ultimately self-referential - having no goal beyond itself, as the aesthetic theorist Boris Groys correctly maintains - the art Lissitzky produced was made with the express intent of serving life. It was not enough that the black square had wiped out all reference to the past. *One must be the red square* as well, asserted Lissitzky, and actively build the future.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Boris Groys, “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich,” *e-flux journal* 47 (September 2013), accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>.

²⁰⁷ El Lissitzky, *The Future of the Book* (Gutenberg-Jahrbuch: Mainz 1926-1927), 41, accessed March 12, 2017, https://monoskop.org/images/6/6a/Lissitzky_El_1926_1967_The_Future_of_the_Book.pdf.

²⁰⁸ Ross Wolf, “Introduction to *About Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale About Two Squares*,” *Cambridge Literary Review* Vol. V, No. 8/9 (Lent, 2015), 59-67.

A New Museological Activism Or An Old Institutionalism?

Here is where my initial understanding of Zhilyaev as a new kind of museological activist, Lissitzky-esque in his intent to transform life and actively build the future, falls apart. Zhilyaev did participate in a museological kind of activism involving the display of political manifestos and the satirical depiction of Putin but even in these museological critiques of the current Russian socio-political context he betrayed a more detached form of political engagement than would have been expected given his rhetoric. As Lena Jonson put it, in her characterization of Zhilyaev's 2014 "M.I.R." exhibit, Zhilyaev "use[s] razor-sharp irony but kept [his] distance from any direct political message."²⁰⁹ Zhilyaev's transformative (i.e. political) museological aims have evolved to reflect the times (what Kopenkina describes as Russia's "current hyper-conservative . . . rejection of a communist utopia"²¹⁰) and his work reflects, in the categorization of Jonson, not *the art of engagement* but instead the more ironic and less 'political' (i.e. effecting less direct social change) *art of dissent*.²¹¹

Jonson and I disagree, however, in our conception and prediction of the future 'path' these politically, transformatively-minded kinds of art will take in Russia. Jonson sees Zhilyaev's *art of dissent* as serving a burgeoning 'underground' movement - "a subtle but critical discourse in art [that will] continue in the background, keeping a low profile and exhibiting in venues away from official watchdogs, biding its time until it can once again play a crucial role in society's

²⁰⁹ Lena Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 667.

²¹⁰ Geneva Hutcheson, "Post-Soviet Union aftermath on display in 'Specters of Communism,'" *Columbia Spectator*, February 12, 2015, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://spc.columbiaspectator.com/arts-and-entertainment/2015/02/12/post-soviet-union-aftermath-display-%E2%80%98%98specters-communism>.

²¹¹ Ibid: 669.

discussions on the country's future."²¹² I, on the other hand, attribute a conscious political 'disengagement' from the present political reality to Zhilyaev's work, with no intention of any 'underground resistance'-type action.

I am not alone in this interpretation. In addition to the critiques of Zhilyaev regarding his detached (potentially escapist) Cosmic/future-focus, independent curator and art critic Olga Kopenkina has also accused him of lacking "political imagination"²¹³ and the motivation to engage with the political reality of contemporary Russia. In a review of one of Zhilyaev's more overtly political works (i.e. that which directly referenced, commented on, explored, or criticized the current Russian socio-political context), Kopenkina notes that:

Today, [Russian] contemporary artists are working in a different political setting, and seem to be making a deliberate choice to disengage with the public debate and struggle, even while a war continues to escalate with the Ukraine. They, unlike artists before them, have resources and funding, but don't use them as an opportunity to voice out criticism.²¹⁴

Zhilyaev himself admits to such a 'distancing' (if not total disengagement) in the piece reviewed above - "So I [Zhilyaev] started from a more or less political project but later in time concentrated on these imaginary future stories."²¹⁵ This could be understood as simply a natural, personal evolution in Zhilyaev's museological/artistic interests or, on the other hand, as a kind of self-censorship on Zhilyaev's part, in reaction to what Jonson describes as Russia's "turn to an ultra-conservative, authoritarian official paradigm after 2012" which made true *art of*

²¹² Lena Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 669.

²¹³ Olga Kopenkina, "The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art," *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Geneva Hutcheson, "Post-Soviet Union aftermath on display in 'Specters of Communism,'" *Columbia Spectator*, February 12, 2015, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://spc.columbiaspectator.com/arts-and-entertainment/2015/02/12/post-soviet-union-aftermath-display-%E2%80%98%98specters-communism>.

engagement and direct, open protest and political critique “rare” and even the less direct *art of dissent* as existing “in a mine field.”²¹⁶ Kopenkina takes this to a deeper level, interpreting this lack of engagement not just as intentional but as ‘meta’ as well - Zhilyaev’s ‘real’ theme. She reads into the “Specters of Communism” exhibit two key components - “a critical one, and a utopian, ‘life-building’ one.” She says:

I tried to retrace the works in the show to understand which component each represents, but all I discovered was the widening gap between the two, which I re-interpret as a gap between criticism and disengagement. *It appears that this distance is the actual “object” of the exhibition.*²¹⁷

Here Zhilyaev is exhibiting characteristics of not just *art of dissent* but also Jonson’s category of the less direct *art of another gaze* - the “subtle form of dissensus in which the questioning of established concepts is sometimes hardly visible” and political motivations can be denied. Even at its most direct and explicitly political, Zhilyaev’s brand of activism never seemed to amount to more than an abstract, disengaged form of criticism, what Jonson describes as his “subtle and highly intellectual form of dissensus in art”²¹⁸, and what, in the “Specters of Communism” exhibit program, was described as “a critical attitude towards the realities of contemporary Russian life” - ‘attitude’ and not ‘action’ being the operative word.

In this sense, it can be argued that Zhilyaev’s level of political engagement and transformative aims *have* evolved in more recent years, from his earlier more overtly and politically critical works (his collaborative multimedia project “Pedagogical Poem: The Archive of the Future Museum of History (2012-13)” with the Presnya Historical Memorial Museum in

²¹⁶ Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 669.

²¹⁷ Olga Kopenkina, “The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art,” *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

²¹⁸ Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 667.

Moscow and his exhibit “The Museum of Proletarian Culture: The Industrialization of Bohemia (2012)” at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow). Now he is evolving his original transformative museology that sought to combine revisionism and narrative power in the hope of making Russians again appreciate the power of both history and museums. Where before (2012) he asserted that, “I [Zhilyaev] am convinced that only projects that incorporate an educational or discursive aspect can really change the political situation in Russia,”²¹⁹ his more recent cosmic-themed, far-off and imaginary future-oriented work indicates a shift away from active engagement with the social and political realities of the present. At the very most, he “aims to draw attention to the political numbness of the general public in Russia”²²⁰ and “capture many of the characteristics of Russian contemporaneity in an ironic mirror”²²¹ but goes no further in terms of political commentary, criticism, or action - which is quite a turnaround from 2012, when Zhilyaev ostensibly wanted to use “avant-garde gestures. . . to erase the border between art and life, perhaps extending them to the dissolution of the borders between art and activism.”²²² Admittedly, Zhilyaev’s preferred form of museology has always been the ‘unveiling’, revelatory, awareness-raising and educational type and not the more active protest and ‘direct change’ type.

But perhaps the biggest shift Zhilyaev’s focus and aims have undergone has not been this disengagement (for whatever reason) with the present and focus on unreal future(s). Instead, it has been his renewed interest in and focus on what the early Soviet museologists pioneered, and

²¹⁹ Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

²²⁰ Olga Kopenkina, “The Political Poseurs of Contemporary Russian Art,” *Galleries: Hyperallergic.com*, February 25, 2015, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/185275/the-political-poseurs-of-contemporary-russian-art/>.

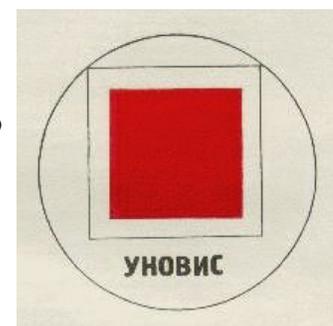
²²¹ Lena Jonson, “Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia Today,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 667.

²²² Silvia Franceschini, “Artists At Work: Arseniy Zhilyaev [interview],” *Afterall Online Journal* (November 21, 2012), accessed March 9, 2017, <https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-arseny-zhilyaev#.WKpO-YWcEcR>.

what is undergoing a kind of evolved, or ‘mutated’ revival in the post-Soviet arena: the transformation of the museum institution into the superior transformative power (over the individual, artist and artwork). More specifically, this refers to the transformation of the museum into an ‘artist/curator’ hybrid, with a combined sovereign *individual* kind of freedom in addition to the freedom and authority of the institution. This museum institution’s job, then (in Zhilyaev’s view), is to unveil (authoritatively) the true nature of reality and previously hidden agendas, assumptions, and superstructures. Curation is melding with art and the combination is becoming increasingly ideological, only this time around the ideology (or ‘superstructure’) is not a given. It could be one of any number - from Russian nationalism²²³, to pro-independent Ukraine²²⁴ - but again the most important thing is that there are no individuals - institutions are and should (according to Zhilyaev) act collectively in order to be effective curatorially and transformatively (i.e. ideologically, politically, educationally).

So instead of ending on the visual of Malevich’s *Black Square* turned red by El Lissitzky, indicating a new kind of museological activism, it might better to end with the logo and de facto signature of UNOVIS. Founded by Malevich and Lissitzky in 1919 in Vitebsk, UNOVIS (*Utverditili novogo iskusstva* - the Protagonists or

(Fig. 30) Lissitzky’s red square



²²³ See a series of blockbuster exhibits in Moscow galleries (circa 2015) centered around the message that Russia has long been under attack and is “a besieged fortress that needs a strong commander, and anyone trying to democratize Russia and shake the power of the commander is trying to undermine this country.” For more see Neil MacFarquhar and Sophia Kishkovsky, “Russian History Receives A Makeover That Starts With Ivan The Terrible,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/world/europe/russian-museum-seeks-a-warmer-adjective-for-ivan-the-terrible.html?_r=1.

²²⁴ “in the center of Kyiv, there was an exhibition called “Presence,” which presented its audience with military equipment of Russian origin, which had been captured in Donbass and Lugansk.” See “Zhilyaev in Conversation with Boris Groys: Contemporary Art is the Theology of the Museum,” *e-flux conversations* (June 2016), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>.

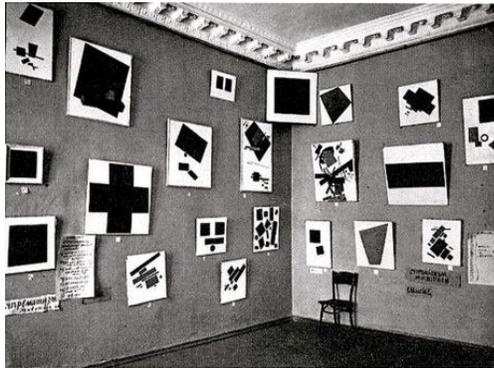
Champions of the New Art) sought to embrace both Malevich's Suprematism and the new Soviet Communist ideology. Its members celebrated the new ideals of Communism by sharing credit for all works produced within the group, signing them with Malevich's *Black Square*.²²⁵ This practice continued even after the group was disbanded in 1922, its members continuing to act 'institutionally', as it were, and not individually - a choice Zhilyaev would consider the more effective - and all within a single cohesive superstructure, whose Soviet iteration in some respects Zhilyaev seems to miss and whose current existence in imaginary futures alone Zhilyaev seems to regret.



(Fig. 31) UNOVIS seal, 1922

²²⁵ In using Malevich as the 'tether' binding and bridging the temporal and experiential gap between Zhilyaev's avant-garde museology and the avant-garde museologies of the early twentieth century (with his *Black Square* the recurring visual and metaphoric indicator of said tether), I don't mean to argue that Malevich's idea- rather than object-based art (non-objectivity) was the direct inspiration for the 'ideologization' of Soviet museology. The pioneering early Soviet museologists saw and seized that opportunity themselves. And it is true that the disagreements and dissimilarities between the museologies of the two artists only grow on closer look. But inspiration does not come from likeness alone and revolution and revision cannot happen in a vacuum. The very existence of the avant-garde requires something to precede, lead, perhaps even rebel against. And Malevich's destructive attitude toward the past is contradicted by Zhilyaev's decidedly more constructive one.

The Museological Trajectory of Malevich’s *Black Square*



(Fig. 11)
From The Vanguard Of The Future
 “The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10”
 December 19, 1915,
 Petrograd (St. Petersburg).
 The painting “Black Square,”
 by Kazimir Malevich can be
 seen at the top center corner of room,
 in the traditional place of the religious icon.



(Fig. 32)
To Builders Of The New Present
 Vitebsk, June 1920.
 Teachers and students of Malevich’s UNOVIS before their departure for
 Moscow to participate in the All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers
 and Students. *Black Square* can be seen hung on the side of the train car.



(Fig.23) **To Unwanted Vestiges of The Past**
 “Art Of The Industrial Bourgeoisie,”
 State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1931.
 The exhibition was curated by Aleksey Fedorov-Davydov. The caption on the wall reads, “Bourgeois art in the blind alley of formalism and self-negation.”²²⁶



(Fig. 10)
To Contemporary Inspiration

Exhibit by Arseniy Zhilyaev at the “Anton Vidokle de Kosmos Recreation Centre” de Appel, Amsterdam, 2016.
 Photo by Antonia Picascia

“Cradle of Humankind” exhibit by Arseniy Zhilyaev in the Russian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, 2015.



²²⁶ For more on Malevich following the close of the eclectic 1920s see Maria Kokkori, “Exhibiting Malevich Under Stalin” in *Russian History and Culture: Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori, and Maria Mileeva (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013), 133-151.

Biographies:

Arseniy Zhilyaev (born 26.06.1984 in Voronezh, former Soviet Union) is an artist who lives and works in Moscow and Voronezh. Using artistic, political, scientific, and museological histories to uncover and propose potential futures, Zhilyaev explores a productive space between fiction and non-fiction. Within his projects, the artist casts a revisionist lens on the heritage of Soviet museology and the museum in Russian Cosmism. Recent exhibitions include the 11th Gwangju Biennale, the Triennial of Contemporary Art - U3, Ljubljana, the 9th Liverpool Biennial, the 13th Lyon Biennale, and the 56th Venice Biennale at venues such as Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, de Appel, Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Thyssen-Bornemisza, Vienna. Zhilyaev is the editor of *Avant-Garde Museology*, e-flux, V-a-c Press and Minnesota Press, 2015. He is a contributor to *e-flux journal* and others. e-mail: zhilyaevstudio@gmail.com

Education: 2008-2010 MA International Program, Valand School of Fine Arts, Goteborg, Sweden, 2006 -2007 The Institute of Contemporary Art in Moscow, 2002-2006 Voronezh State University, Philosophical Faculty

Awards and Grants: Winner of the "Innovation VI" Russian State Award in the sphere of contemporary art, the Stella Art Foundation Special Prize in 2010, the Russian award "Soratnik 2010" and "Soratnik 2012" ("Companion-in-Arms"). The artist was nominated for the international Visible Award 2013 and the Absolute Award 2015. In 2013-2014 Zhilyaev was awarded a scholarship from the contemporary art museum "Garage" in Moscow to support young Russian artists. (info taken from the 'CV' page of his website - <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/>)

Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (born February 23 [February 11, Old Style], 1878, Kyiv - died May 15, 1935, Leningrad, USSR), was an influential Russian avant-garde painter, who founded the Suprematist school of abstract painting.

Education: He was trained at the Kiev School of Art, the Stroganov School in Moscow, and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.

Positions, Organizations: As a member of the Jack of Diamonds group, he led the Russian Cubist movement. In 1913 Malevich began developing what would become the art movement Suprematism. After the October Revolution (1917), Malevich became a member of the Collegium on the Arts of Narkompros, the Commission for the Protection of Monuments and the Museums Commission (all from 1918 to 1919). In Vitebsk in 1919 with El Lissitzky he founded UNOVIS - *Utverditeli novogo iskusstva*, the Protagonists or Champions of the New Art (Suprematism) - an organization working to put the new art in the service of the development of the new (Soviet) society. This group took on as their defacto seal and signature Malevich's *Black Square*. The organization was disbanded in 1922. He taught at the Vitebsk Practical Art School in Belarus (1919-1922), the Leningrad Academy of Arts (1922-1927), the Kyiv State Art Institute (1927-1929), and the House of the Arts in Leningrad (1930). In 1923, Malevich was appointed director of Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture. In 1925 he joined the teaching faculty of VKhutesmas (*Vyshchie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*, Higher Art and Technical Studios) - a network of schools directed to "prepare master artists of the highest qualifications for industry, and builders and managers for professional-technical education." In 1927 he published a book explaining Suprematism, *The Non-Objective World*. Malevich died in 1935 and was buried with the *Black Square* marking his grave.

Figures

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- ❑ Figure 1: Cascade of black squares, vinyl wall sticker decals.
<https://www.pinterest.com/singellum/vinilos-geom%C3%A9tricos/>. Accessed March 3, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 2: Cover of 1908 edition of Aleksandr Bogdanov’s science fiction novel *Red Star*.
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- ❑ Figure 3: Malevich’s *Black Square* painting, 1915.
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- ❑ Figure 4: Video still from Veda Popovici’s “Revolutionary Gear” installation. Photo credits: Sorin Popescu. <http://revistaarta.ro/en/revolutionary-gear/>. Accessed March 6, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 5: El Lissitzky’s 1919 Constructivist lithograph *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge!*
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- ❑ Figure 6: Photographic portrait of Arseniy Zhilyaev. Photo credits: Arseniy Zhilyaev’s Google Plus account. <https://plus.google.com/114619626244164771363>. Accessed March 8, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 7: Self-portrait of Malevich ‘vandalized’ in Zhilyaev’s 2016 “Moscow Etude” exhibit at MMOMA. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>. Accessed March 5, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 8: Malevich’s *Black Square* painting ‘vandalized’ in Zhilyaev’s 2016 “Moscow Etude” exhibit at MMOMA. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>. Accessed March 5, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 9: Malevich’s urn in Zhilyaev’s 2016 “Moscow Etude” exhibit at MMOMA. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/moscow-etude/>. Accessed March 5, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 10: Waiting area of Anton Vidokle de Kosmos Recreation Centre in de Appel, Amsterdam . Photo credit: Antonio Picascia.
<http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/arseny-zhilyaev-in-conversation-with-boris-groys-contemporary-art-is-the-theology-of-the-museum/3839>. Accessed March 5, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 11: The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10, 1915, in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg).
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- ❑ Figure 12: The fourth room of Zhilyaev’s “Cradle of Humankind” installation at the 56th Venice Biennale. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/cradle-of-humankind/>. Accessed March 6, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 13: Malevich’s set design for the Futurist opera “Victory Over the Sun”, 1913.
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- ❑ Figure 17: Entrance to the future ‘Resurrecting Museum’ in Zhilyaev’s “Cradle of Humankind” exhibit, 2016. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/cradle-of-humankind/>. Accessed March 8, 2017.
- ❑ Figure 18: ‘Re-created’ tapestries in honor of the imaginary future “Russian Cosmic Federation” in Zhilyaev’s “Cradle of Humankind” exhibit, 2016. <http://zhilyaev.vcsi.ru/index.php?/projects/cradle-of-humankind/>. Accessed March 8, 2017.
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- ❑ Figure 20: Photographic portrait of Boris Groys. Photo credits: Alexandre Kojève. <http://tikgrupa.blogspot.com/2013/04/boris-groys.html>. Accessed March 9, 2017.
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- ❑ Figure 31: UNOVIS seal, 1922. Photo credit: Willem Jan Renders.
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