

Art Without Death

HKW / Berlin

It has been a while since Russian cosmism — a hodgepodge of theories, scientific insights and artistic practices — has entered the compatible market of “isms.” This presentation at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt seems to be the most ambitious rebranding of the movement to date. Revising the national label of “Russian avant-garde” through the lens of cosmological imagination, curator Boris Groys imbues cosmism with historical validity. Alongside well-known works such as Olga Rozanova’s “non-objective” semitransparent clippings or El Lissitzky’s free-floating *Prouns* (1919–27), Groys presented three black squares made by neglected visionary artist Solomon Nikritin. Taken together, they comprise a narrative in which the infinite darkness of outer space gives birth to a celestial body. Figuration returns with a vengeance to what had been considered by mainstream art history to be the epitome of self-referential abstraction.

Anton Vidokle’s widely traveled trilogy “Immortality for All!” (2014–17) here settles down for the first time as an immersive video installation. Meandering through the work, one realized that ideas central to cosmist thinking, such as immortality, bodily transformation, resurrection and colonization of the universe, are not esoteric nonsense but synonymous with the communist project. In the HKW’s lobby another participant, Arseny Zhilyaev, installed a reading table in a form of a giant star; camouflaged as a rock, it portrays five “dead white males,” i.e. the founding fathers of the movement. This pop-up library is in fact more decorative than functional, since most of the books are still only in Russian and thus impenetrable for most of the audience.

The daring imaginary of cosmism might be well employed as a productive artistic strategy: it is a question of whether one could redeem the chauvinism and patriarchy that lies at the heart of this philosophy. However, even if the concomitant conference organized by Groys exposed its inside story, “Russian cosmism” may still require a full blood transfusion (which would necessarily pass through the translations of its original texts) rather than an aesthetic face-lift.

by Andrey Shental

Sergej Jensen

Neu / Berlin

In a year of “extreme weather” in which hurricanes queue up like dancers at a Vienna ball, titling an exhibition “The Weather” draws attention to how much is elided in that most commonplace of nouns. What is the weather, and how does one ever begin to talk about it, let alone represent it? For Jensen, the answers are both direct and indirect: weather is both an object and a process. Wear and tear on fabric from literal “weathering” has, historically in Jensen’s practice, lent a complexity to works that, divorced from the circumstances of their creation, can teeter delicately at the precipice of the decorative. The works that compose “The Weather” occasionally veer in this direction. Jensen’s digital prints of clouds augmented with a few painterly interventions to mimic a bit of sun bleaching certainly offer beauty, but beauty accompanied by a few painterly tics settles too neatly into the lineage of nature painting to truly subvert or reinvigorate.

It is when the works, and the associations they evoke, are more indirect that “The Weather” truly changes the climate. I’ll admit to finding Jensen’s use of gold leaf a bit excessive, but in other works, reminiscent in some ways of the rude deformations Alberto Burri visited upon canvases, Jensen’s paintings seem less concerned with pleasing or behaving. A periwinkle canvas skirted with an asymmetrical scrim of white fabric seemed more in touch with the whimsy and indifference of nature, and, therefore, much truer to the show’s title, than more literally minded works. Perhaps it was the timing, but the piece made me think of lines from the late John Ashbery’s poem “Crazy Weather”: “It’s this crazy weather we’ve been having . . . Among the loose grasses and soft, white, nameless flowers. People have been making a garment out of it, stitching the lilacs together with lightning.” What is nature if not the stitching of lilacs with lightning and all the flora and fauna in between? Jensen’s stitchwork in “The Weather” is truest when it allows for this kind of interpretive expansiveness to blossom.

by William Kherbek

John Russell

Kunsthalle / Zurich

The term “blockbuster” was coined during WWII, in reference to the mass urban destruction of new aerial bombs. It quickly became applied to commercial success, reaching saturation when used to describe big-budget, mass-audience entertainment with the release of Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* in the summer of 1975. John Russell’s exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich, “DOGGO,” suggests a similar binary.

Six gigantic, digitally printed paintings dominate the space. Backlit with neon tubes, causing a CGI-esque glow, they depict a broad lexicon of the entertaining slash violent. Severed limbs float weightlessly in blood, crucifixes dissolve alongside characters from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, blood pours skyward from the neck of a headless horse, butterflies flutter peacefully, a kangaroo confronts a rabbit. Collaged and collected subjects ooze into total compositions. They defy their static existence and are epic, forceful and confusing.

Images pasted to the walls of the gigantic cinematic space act as lobby cards for the larger works, and soaring dark sculptures of beastly forms induce a feeling of personal shrinking. The titular feature-length film (2017), shown on a domestic screen with a comfy couch, charts actors, in wacky, presumably commercially available, masks (dogs, a fly, an evil corn husk), who often laugh randomly and maniacally in their search for a missing character.

Russell’s works are reminiscent of not just the blockbusters of Hollywood, but those of art history: Jacques-Louis David, cycloramas, Roman fountains. Name checking Bruegel and Bosch here is obvious. *Leech* (2016), a floor-to-ceiling tondo, is a post-religious rose window with all the pleasures and pains of contemporary earthly and imagined worlds.

Moral and aesthetic judgments of the visual collapse on every side. War, Zen, drama, fun, cereal boxes. It’s a psychedelic, psychohistorical feast in which everything is everything and all is in play. Repeat viewing is recommended.

by Mitchell Anderson



From top:
Anton Vidokle
Film still from Immortality and Resurrection for All (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist

Sergej Jensen
Rosa Cirrus (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Galerie Neu, Berlin

John Russell
“DOGGO”
Installation view at
Kunsthalle Zurich (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Kunsthalle Zurich
Photography by
Annik Wetter

