

Star City

The Future Under Communism



Logo by S Mark Gubb

“Those who have already been in space yearn with all their heart and soul to return there again and again. With every single day passing, time leaves my flight in the past. Occasionally the wind will whisper something from the tops of the tall pine trees, and then everything becomes silent. In such minutes I remember the most bright and wonderful experience in my life: the flight into space,”

From the memoirs of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, lift off at 12.29 pm, 16 June 1963.

Into That Silent Sea: Trailblazers of the Space Era, 1961 – 1965
by Francis French and Colin Burgess (University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

Cover Image:
Valentina Tereshkova, a scene from *Sovety v Kosmose*.
Photo by RIA Novosti

What do we see when we look at the future?



What do we see when we look at the future? A world ravaged by climate change? Wars fought over water? A 'planet of slums' surrounding gated communities? The world's poorest nations deep in debt? With little to look forward to the future seems to have lost its allure.

The future looked different during the Cold War, both in the East and the West. Despite the fear of nuclear war, technology was still associated with progress. In particular, our solar system was there to explore. Sci-fi seeped into the popular consciousness and the race was on to put a man on the moon. While this faith in the future was evident in both capitalist and communist countries, that future meant something different the other side of the former Iron Curtain.

In the Soviet sphere of influence, the future was officially very much part of the present. Class war had been waged and the proletariat had triumphed. Technology was driving the steady march of progress. The heavens themselves were an epic arena for the struggle between communism and capitalism – and to begin with the Soviets were winning, with the first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, Yuri Gagarin's first orbit of the earth in 1961, and the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, in 1963.



Top:
Jane & Louise Wilson, *Star City*, 2000.
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Bottom:
Jülius Koller, *Question Mark Anti-Picture*, 1969.
Courtesy of Jülius Koller Society and gb agency



Down on earth the communist Eastern Bloc stretched out from Moscow to cover Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania and East Germany. In these countries many sacrifices were required for the sake of full-blown communism, always just around time's corner. To our eyes, the future imagined under communism – at its most persuasive in the 1960s – is as fascinating as a recently discovered archaeological site. What were the visions that shaped these strange artefacts? What light do they shed on the everyday lives of its inhabitants? And are there any parallels between the ruins of this past future and our own time?

The artists in Star City have differing experiences of this history. Some, like the greatest post-War Russian artist Ilya Kabakov, made art well away from the eyes of the authorities during communism. Many more, like Goshka Macuga, Pawel Althamer and David Maljkovic were children themselves under communism, and adults after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are joined by Western artists who have worked behind the former Iron Curtain. The younger artists in the exhibition are like archaeologists, returning again to sites of the future. Their investigations include Star City, the vast, secret cosmonaut training camp 20km from Moscow, seen here in Jane and Louise Wilson's video installation. The 16 mm films of Maljkovic show futuristic monuments from the former Yugoslavia. The installations of Micol Assael and Robert Kusmirowski look like sets from old sci-fi films – antiquated computer laboratories whose purpose is unclear.



Above left: Together with the Soviet Union forwards for Completing Building of Socialism and for Peace. Poster, artist anonymous. Photograph courtesy of the "Ne Boltai!" Collection.

Facing page top: Christian Tomaszewski and Joanna Malinowska *Mother, Earth, Sister, Moon*, 2009. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of Open Art Projects, Michael Wiesehoefler Galerie, Cologne and the Artists. Produced by Performa and Nottingham Contemporary.

Facing page bottom: Micol Assael, *Elsewhere*, 2008. PVC, copper, water, ice, sparks, audio system. Courtesy of Foksal Gallery Foundation.



Brief history of The Space Race

- 1957 Soviet Union launches Sputnik 1, then Sputnik 2 with Laika, the first dog in space
- 1958 US launches Explorer 1 satellite
- 1959 Soviet Union launches Luna 2, first probe to hit the moon
- 1961 Soviet Union's Yuri Gagarin on first manned space flight
- 1962 US's John Glenn completes first US manned orbital flight
- 1963 Soviet Union's Valentina Tereshkova first woman in space
- 1965 Soviet Union's Alexei Leonov makes first space walk
- 1968 US's Apollo 8 first manned space mission to orbit the moon
- 1969 US's Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins land on the moon.



Those artists brought up to embrace the future did not necessarily oppose communism – from the beginning it stimulated utopian thinking. The problem was the gulf between the demands of a life lived always in expectation, and the bleak and constrained experience of the present. Science fiction often disguised a critique of the state-dictated version of the future, from a philosophical and political perspective, as well as satisfying a human yearning for escape. Prevalent in all forms – literature, art, film, design – in the 1920s, it was banned by Stalin and tolerated, even welcomed again, under Khrushchev. Tobias Putrih has created a special cinema to screen an alternative ending to Tarkovsky's 1972 film version of *Solaris* by Deimantas Narkevicius. Elsewhere Pawel Althamer leads a group of golden-suited extraterrestrials on an expedition to the Modernist capital Brasília. His aliens are ultimate outsiders, painstakingly examining a different culture. Perhaps parallels are being drawn between their experience and the plight of the former Eastern Bloc as it is painfully assimilated into Western capitalism.

Common Task, the name of Althamer's quest, alludes to a far older utopian vision, one that influenced science fiction and, ironically, the Soviet space race. Russian Cosmism was a mixture of philosophical, scientific and mystical speculation. Its Common Task, as dreamt up by the influential and eccentric visionary Nikolai Fedorov (1828 – 1903), was the resurrection of the dead, reassembling the scattered atoms and sending them out into space to resettle. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857 – 1935), known in Russia as the father of cosmonautics, calculated much of the mathematics concerning space flight. He also wrote long tracts on the metaphysics of the cosmos. Something of this mysticism was tapped by Soviet space race propaganda, shown here in a collection of original posters and postcards - despite the cosmonaut Titov flatly stating that space contained neither God nor angels. This strand is also reflected in Aleksandra Mir's collages, where religious and space imagery are conflated. Jülius Koller UFO sightings in communist Czechoslovakia also incorporate strange transcendental desires.

*What were the visions
that shaped these
strange artefacts?*



Facing page left:
Replica Sputnik, image courtesy of the Science Museum/SSPL.

Left:
Pawel Althamer, *Common Task*, 2009. Foksal Gallery Foundation,
photograph courtesy of Open Art Projects.



Space travel itself is the dominant image of the future in Star City. The writer Boris Groys has described the former Soviet Union as a gigantic art installation, in which reality was shaped by ideology. In these circumstances the artist turns cosmonaut – there is the same sense of tentative but resolute exploration, of heroic possibility tempered by the mundane necessities of life, of the intrepid individual who is representing others, perhaps the human race itself.

The space men and women of Star City expose the discrepancies of the period. On one hand the patient, clearly overheard in Ilya Kabakov's installation of a doctor's surgery, achieves space flight through sheer willpower, as if he has internalised Communist Party propaganda. On the other he has escaped from the cramped and quarrelsome reality of life in a Soviet apartment block. There is the same contradiction in *Mother, Earth, Sister, Moon*, the huge homage to Valentina Tereshkova downstairs in *The Space*. The space goddess has fallen awkwardly to earth, where she remains grounded. Her fate is as full of pathos as Tereshkova's, doomed to remain a state symbol while she yearned to return to the skies.

Lastly Star City asks if any of the remains of the collectivist future under communism are still relevant now that the global ethos of profit-before-people is being challenged. With our economy rocked by the "credit crunch" - and alliances of activists formed to fight exploitative labour practices, third world debt and climate change - will the vision of universal capitalism one day resemble an irrelevant ruin too?

Above right:
Goshka Macuga, *Kabinett der Abstrakten*.
Courtesy of the Artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Star City is part of POLSKA! YEAR, The year of Polish Culture. POLSKA! YEAR comprises more than 200 events promoting Polish culture in the UK. The project takes place under the patronage of HM The Queen and HE The President of the Republic of Poland. POLSKA! YEAR is co-ordinated by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and supported by the Polish Embassy and the Polish Cultural Institute in London. To find out more visit www.PolskaYear.pl

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Coming Soon -

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Steve McQueen, *Oil Rich Niger Delta Series-Niger Boy*, 2006.
Image courtesy of Ziggi Golding.





Nottingham
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Exhibition guide
and FREE POSTER

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