

Vadim Fishkin: Of Angels and Dreamers, Machines and Metaphysics

Vadim Fishkin, Slovene citizen, born in Penza in the Soviet Union in 1965, has been living and working in Ljubljana since 1992. Since that time he has been collaborating on and off with NSK's theatre department Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung as a stage designer. Fishkin is not merely an artist working with all kinds of different media (installation, photography, botanics, etc.), but also an architect who studied at the Moscow Institute of Architecture, an angel researcher, a spiritualist, a photographer, a pyrotechnician, an engineer, an inventor, and a geologist. In 1996 during the *Transnacionala* trip¹ through the United States Alexander Brener who was one of the participating artists characterized Vadim Fishkin as "showing an awareness of the metaphysical tradition of objectness"² while Eda ufer characterized his artistic work as a "metaphysical embodiment expressing his ability to create an unusual and even esoteric feeling or condition"³.

This 'esoteric feeling' is mainly created by the fact that Vadim Fishkin's works link the physical to the metaphysical, or supernatural. He tries to make visible what remains invisible, or at least point to the invisible, or to the invisible connections between two points. In addition to that, all of Fishkin's works are ephemeral (time based) and immaterial, non-material works. As the metaphysical generally remains invisible, ephemeral and immaterial, so do Fishkin's works: he constructs machines (media) which produce the metaphysical, which at least make it visible for a short period in time, disappearing very quickly. Fishkin quotes one of his favourite writers, the French René Daumal: "The door to the invisible must remain visible."

The aspect of "im/materiality" was a predominant focus of the exhibition ... *incommensurabilis* ... which was initiated by Vadim Fishkin and curated by Gregor Podnar. ... *incommensurabilis* ... was exhibited in kuc Galerija in Ljubljana from 16 December 1999 until 30 January 2000. The conceptual framework for this project was to present art projects based on "immaterial nature" – light, shadow, fire, fog, water, electronic media and alike. The concept draws on Ludwig Boltzmann's idea that invisible properties of the atom (e.g. mass, charge and structure) define visual properties of substances (e.g. viscosity, thermal conductance and diffusion). All the works of the participating artists (Eliasson, Fishkin,

¹ In the summer of 1996 an international group of artists (Alexander Brener, Vadim Fikin, Yuri Leiderman, Michael Benson, Eda ufer and the five-member IRWIN group) set out on a one-month *Transnacionala* journey across the United States.

² Alexander Brener, 'Conversation at the Grand Canyon, Arizona, July 16, 1996', in: Eda ufer (ed.), *Transnacionala. Highway Collisions Between East and West at the Crossroads of Art*, Ljubljana 1999, p. 116

³ Eda ufer, 'Detonation of a Gaze', in: *Вадим Фишкин / Vadim Fishkin*, Soros Center of Contemporary Arts, Moscow & Kulturkontakt [without year, without page numbers].

Peljhan, Valldosera) were ephemeral and dealt with the divide between the material and the immaterial⁴.

All of these aspects - ephemerality, immateriality, and a linkage between the physical to the metaphysical - could be found in Fishkin's installation *Darkness Orbit* (1993) which consisted of projects installed in the Guelman Gallery, the Dar Gallery, the Shkola Gallery, the 1.0 Gallery and the Contemporary Arts Center in Moscow. The show was open at night from 12 p.m. until 6 a.m. in the morning. During the day all the exhibition spaces had their regular exhibitions. Only at night it was possible to notice the project *Darkness Orbit* installed in these five venues. The project was based on light and sound material entirely unnoticeable during the day, thus underlining the possibility of the discovery of another parallel layer within the same space. By using slide projections, sound, ultraviolet light, photo flashes and a radio receiver the premises were suddenly transformed into completely different spaces where you could discover the silhouettes of Flying Saucers and Angels. They were there all the time, but they were invisible during the day.

Angels also appear as faint forms on Fishkin's photographs *Breathing* (1991) and *Orbit 2* (1993). These works actually look like spiritualist photographs from the end of the 19th century. Spiritualism was a belief in the continued existence of the dead and in the ability of the living to communicate with them through a sensitive, or medium⁵. *We are there all the time, but you cannot see us*. Primarily in Western religions (i.e., Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), an angel⁶ is a benevolent spiritual being, power, or principle that mediates between the realm of the sacred (i.e., the transcendent realm) and the profane realm of time, space, and cause and effect. Angels are volatile intermediaries between the physical and the metaphysical realm. Or, as Michel Serres has it, “‘volatil’ se dit d’un être qui porte des ailes; puis d’une substance qui change, vite, vers l’état subtil; enfin d’une apparition qui, aussitôt, disparaît. Voilà, que je sache, trois attributs angéliques. [...] l’angélique, pour finir, [...] s’occupe à connecter les lieux vers le global.”⁷ And this is exactly what makes them interesting for Vadim Fishkin's work.

‘Vertical connections’ can be found in many of Fishkin's works. In the *Lighthouse* installation (1997) his heartbeat was transmitted to the cupola of the Viennese Secession from where it was re-transmitted as a pulsating light installed inside the the gold-leaf filigree of the

⁴ C.f. Igor panjol. Ritmine podobe. [Quelle?] 2000.

⁵ Manifestations of spirit presence include rapping, table turning, automatic writing, spirit voices, and ectoplasmic materialization. C.f. Maria Carlson, “*No Religion Higher Than Truth*” - *A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia 1875 - 1922*, Princeton 1993, especially “Spiritualism” pp. 22-28.

⁶ The term angel derives from “angelus”, the Greek word for “messenger”. Comparable beings in Eastern religions include the Hindu *avatars* and the Buddhist *bodhisattvas*.

⁷ Michel Serres, *La Légende des Anges*, Paris: Flammarion 1999 [original 1993], pp. 42f.

cupola placed on the rooftop of the Secession. The work continued to exist only as long as Fishkin was connected to the transmitter and as long as the radio connection between the transmitter and the receiver in the Secession's cupola existed, or, more dramatically, as long as Fishkin was alive. Fishkin thus compares the *Lighthouse* project with On Kawara's "I am alive" project. Since 1970 On Kawara sent daily telegrams to friends and to people from the art world. These telegrams only contained the sentence "I am alive". The telegrams documented On Kawara's existence not in a personal, expressive way but through a standard sentence on a standard form.

In 1995 Vadim Fishkin exhibited *One-Man-Show* in Mala Galerija in Ljubljana. When Fishkin was invited to do this solo exhibition he asked himself how he could reflect on the meaning of a one man show nowadays. This process resulted in an installation consisting of a futuristic wooden construction placed in the middle of Mala Galerija, lots of slide projectors installed in the wooden construction, projecting slides of Fishkin's work (as a kind of retrospective) on the walls of the gallery space at an unbearable speed, speakers and a recording device inside the construction and 22 (prerecorded) questions posed by curator Viktor Misiano. Some of them read: "1) Do you remember the name of the artist whose exhibition you are visiting?", "2) Are you sure that you pronounce it in the right way?", "4) Do you know that this exhibition has a curator?", "5) Do you know who he is?", "9) But why have you come to this exhibition? 10) Due to some obligations? 11) By inertia?", "13) Has this exhibition enriched you somehow?", "19) Do you believe that the artist believes in the wholeness of being? 20) Why then he hasn't presented anything substantial?". While the first questions were still answered by the audience, at least starting with question 11 the whole situation – with the projected images rushing by, and the questions getting more and more heavy and esoteric – becomes simply absurd. The majority of the audience stopped answering and remained silent. Some felt reminded about a trial, some felt guilty. Vadim Fishkin recorded the visitor's answers given at the exhibition. There was nothing to be seen (in a double sense) – in fact the artist did not present anything 'substantial' –, and still the voice posed these paradoxical questions. In a way, this *One-Man-Show* could not have been staged better to (re-)present the immateriality and ephemere nature of Vadim Fishkin's work.

In 1998 Vadim Fishkin exhibited *Dedicated...* at Knoll Gallery in Vienna and at Kapelica Galerija in Ljubljana. In the center of an almost completely empty and dark gallery space there's a red button on a dramatically lit board. The text says: "Press the button" and "tell your name" and then "wait". After some seconds the prerecorded announcement correctly repeats "This exhibition is dedicated to..." and then plays the voice of the visitor

“...Inke Arns”. It remains unclear which exhibition the voice is talking about, and also why it should be dedicated to the visitor. A feeling of uneasiness emerges within the visitor. Suddenly, there’s a noise coming from the wall - a firework. Like a real Chinese firework the fire performs revolving geometrical movements, with the flames and the smoke darkening the wall – and all this leaves the spectator overwhelmed. When the visitor finally realizes that Fishkin dedicates his exhibition to *him* or *her*, joy replaces uneasiness. This experience that is seemingly shared only by the artist and the visitor establishes a very personal relation between the two.

One of Fishkin’s most recent works using immaterial fire signs is *Ognegraf* (2000), a machine which translates data from various sources into the language of fire. It produces drops of fire which fall from the ceiling (where the machine is fixed) to the floor in various rhythms and can have different intensities and colors. The drops of fire remind people of stars falling from the sky. It is an old tradition to make a wish when one sees a shooting star. *Ognegraf* was installed in the private apartment of Vlasta Delimar and Vlado Martek, two Zagreb-based artists. Fishkin says about *Ognegraf*: “Children often daydream about catching a falling star. Dolina [Delimar and Martek’s daughter] will be able to watch falling stars from her bed... In a way, this will be a dream come true... For me, this is a sort of vertical link between children’s imagination and dreams on the one hand and the sky on the other. A very physical link, for each drop produces light, from top to bottom, yet this link only exists for very personal reasons.”⁸ Here it is again, the vertical link, the shared experience, the machine as a temporal medium which connects physical space to the realm of the sacred, the transcendent, the metaphysical.

Fishkin’s fascination with “dreamers” fits with his interest in metaphysical physics which was very typical for Russian cosmism. Cosmists maintain that Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (the ‘inventor of the Russian rocket’), Vladimir Vernadsky⁹ and Aleksandr Chizhevsky¹⁰ – many of whom Fishkin refers to – are the major representatives of their national tradition of ‘cosmic thinking’¹¹ in this century. Nikolai Fedorov, author of *Filosofija obshchego dela* (Philosophy of the common task, 1906/1913) is considered to be the founder of this tradition.

⁸ ‘Fire-Dropper for One Use Only’, interview with Vadim Fishkin by Nada Bero, 4 Feb. 2000, in: *Vadim Fishkin: Vatrograf / Fire-Dropper. Vadim Fishkin u Stanu Umjetnika Vlaste Delimar i Vlade Marteka*, Zagreb, 23.2.-25.2.2000, Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti 2000

⁹ With Edouard Le Roy’s and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s work in mind, Vernadsky (1863-1945) developed his own conception of the noosphere, defining it as a new phase of evolution brought about by the conscious human activity (c.f. Michael Hagemester, ‘Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and today’, in: Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (ed.), *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, New York 1997, pp. 185-202, here p. 200)

¹⁰ The biophysicist, historian, and cosmist painter and poet Aleksandr Chizhevsky (1897-1964) further developed the theory of the influence of cosmic factors (cosmic radiation and periodic sunspot activity) on the behaviour of organized human masses as well as on the universal historical process (c.f. Hagemester 1997, p.196)

Dependance (1997), a collaboration between Mateja Buar (choreography, dance), Vadim Fishkin (stage), Marko Konik (music) and Matja Levstek (technology) was dedicated to Chizhevsky.

Inke Arns, Berlin, August 2000

¹¹ Tsiolkovsky, the 'eccentric from Kaluga', has often been called a disciple of Fedorov. However Hagemeister shows that Tsiolkovsky's "rather primitive philosophical views obviously have very little in common with Fedorov's." (Hagemeister 1997, p.196f.; c.f. Michael Hagemeister, *Nikolaj Fedorov. Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, München 1989)