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The Organics of the St. Petersburg Avant-Garde: From Matyushin to Kotelnikov



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Органика петербургского авангарда: от Матюшина до Котельникова

Abstract. Modernization of the 20th century is usually associated with Constructivism and technical progress. However, the St. Petersburg Avant-Garde of 1912–1915 offered an alternative concept of art, revealing the world as a unique organic whole, but not a sum of standard replaceable parts. The organic Avant-Garde as an artistic tradition was first presented by Vladimir Sterligov in the symbolic drawing *A Bowl* (1962), emphasizing the analytical art of Pavel Filonov and the philosophy of the expanded vision of Mikhail Matyushin, that is, transrational practices aimed at creating a picture of the world that unites the objective and the non-objective. The organic tradition in the last quarter of the 20th century was revived in the art of Vadim Ovchinnikov, Timur Novikov, Ivan Sotnikov, and Oleg Kotelnikov, contributing to the culture of transavantgarde. The transrational and seemingly marginal ideas of the 1910s and 1920s were revealed in the 1980s and 1990s as true assembly points of the worldview. The organic tradition shows the historical dynamics of the 20th century from the Symbolist dream about a new vision of a new man to the idea of a post-industrial world after the ecological catastrophe of the Anthropocene.

Аннотация. Модернизация XX века обычно ассоциируется с конструктивизмом и техническим прогрессом. Однако петербургский авангард 1912–1915 годов предложил альтернативную концепцию искусства, раскрывающую мир как уникальное органическое целое, а не сумму стандартных заменяемых деталей. Органический авангард как художественную традицию впервые представил Владимир Стерлигов в символическом рисунке «Чаша» 1962 года, акцентируя аналитическое искусство Павла Филонова и расширенное зрение Михаила Матюшина, то есть заумные практики, нацеленные на создание картины мира, объединяющей предметное и беспредметное. Органическая традиция в последней четверти XX века возобновляется в искусстве Вадима Овчинникова, Тимура Новикова, Ивана Сотникова и Олега Котельникова, обогащая культуру трансавангарда. Заумные и, казалось бы, маргинальные идеи 1910–1920-х годов в 1980–1990-е раскрываются как истинные точки сборки картины мира. Органическая традиция показывает историческую динамику XX века от мечты символизма о новом видении нового человека до представления постиндустриального мира после экологической катастрофы антропоцена.

Introduction. The origins, structure, and features of the organic tradition

It is generally believed that the Modernism of the 20th century is best associated with Constructivism and the focus on technical progress. Meanwhile, in 1912–1915, the St. Petersburg Avant-Garde put forward an alternative concept of art that reveals the world as a unique organic whole, rather than a set of standard replaceable elements. This idea, previously considered marginal and utopian, in the 21st century has become the basis of the modern perception of life — the concept of ecology, including the ecology of culture and thinking as the forces that shape the environment of the Anthropocene.

The creators of the organic concept of the Russian Avant-Garde were poets and artists Elena Guro (1877–1913), Mikhail Matyushin (1861–1934), Pavel Filonov (1883–1941), Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922), and Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964). In the 1920s, their ideas were followed by the artists studying at the Petrograd State Institute of Art Culture: Matyushin's students Maria Ender (1897–1942), Ksenia Ender (1895–1955), and Boris Ender (1893–1960), Malevich's student Vladimir Sterligov (1904–1973), and Pavel Kondratiev (1902–1985) who studied under Malevich, Filonov, and Matyushin. It was thanks to Kondratiev and especially Sterligov that the organic tradition was revived in Leningrad in the second half of the 20th century; it continued in the art of Tatyana Glebova (1900–1985), Sterligov's wife and Filonov's student, and the participants of the Old Peterhof school. Its new chapter started in the 1980s, when the tradition was developed in the works of the New Artists group: Oleg Kotelnikov (born 1958), Timur Novikov (1958–2002), Vadim Ovchinnikov (1951–1996), and Ivan Sotnikov (1961–2015), who revived the Avant-Garde universalism of the 1910s and, above all, the multimedia nature of art.

The first to present the organic concept of Avant-Garde as an artistic tradition was Vladimir Sterligov, which is proved by the drawing entitled *A Bowl* (1962, private collection) depicting bowls and an inscription along the perimeter of a rectangle:

A bowl.

Malevich 9 II 62 Matyushin — expanded vision

Tatlin. Larionov Filonov — analytical art

Today in Moscow: Volkonsky's Mirror Suite.

This makes a list of organic artists with an indication of their greatest achievements: Matyushin's expanded vision, Filonov's analytical art, and the idea of mirror worlds — the key idea of the bowl-dome universe discovered by Sterligov himself and depicted in the drawing under consideration. Thus, Sterligov believed his system to be the central symbolic part of the Avant-Garde tradition of the first half of the 20th century and its result or *vyvod*, if we apply the term of Filonov and Malevich. The graphic structure of Sterligov's drawing is also along the lines of Rayonism.

All the artists mentioned in this drawing with the exception of V. Tatlin and K. Malevich belong to the organic tradition of the Avant-Garde as presented by one of its first researchers, Evgeny Fedorovich Kovtun, who in the 1960s was close to Sterligov. In 1977, studying the art of Filonov, he described the organic trend in Russian non-objective painting. His theory of the three dimensions of the non-objective received its final form in 1993 in an article for *The Great Utopia* exhibition catalogue (which, let us say, started with organics). After all, it was in organics that Kovtun and his colleague Alla Povelikhina saw the peculiarity of the Russian Avant-Garde, its uniqueness, and significance for the future. According to Kovtun, there are three paths to non-objectivity: the path 'from the bottom up', when the artist (V. Kandinsky) intuitively abstracts the forms of reality; the path 'from the top down', when the artist (K. Malevich) by an effort of will veils the real world with that of geometry and erases reality; and the 'organic' path, when the artist acts synthetically, like nature itself, sustaining and reproducing its living, not mechanical, geometry of forms. The masters of the third path — Larionov, Filonov, and Matyushin — are not copyists-naturalists but inventors, like Malevich; developing 'in-feeling', they gain a unique skill to create and design like nature does it. Kovtun considers the 'organic' schools of Matyushin and Filonov, as well as the art of Pavel Mansurov, to be the development potential of bionics [Kovtun, 1993, pp. 64–71].

Among others in Sterligov's list we saw the names of Tatlin and Malevich. Tatlin's 'organicity' is confirmed, first of all, by the Letatlin personal flying apparatus (1929–1932, Central Air Force Museum, Monino); as for Malevich, his name in this list is responsible for the foundation of Sterligov's organics — faith and divine cosmos. In his mirror scheme, Sterligov presented organics as a world in which opposites (contradictions)

are balanced by faith (the bowl). He thought Malevich to be the master of such a balance, believing that alogism is a balance between the rational and the irrational.

Later, the list of organic artists was updated several times, but its core was always the above-mentioned artists. In 1996, John Bowlt put the organic Petrograd Avant-Garde artists into two groups: Guro and Matyushin who built on Symbolism and the idea of the eternal world and the totality of nature, on the one hand, and the conditional constructivist-formalists Filonov and Mansurov, on the other [Bowl, 1999, pp. 24–35]. Meanwhile, he wrote that in his idea of the unity of the organic and the inorganic Mansurov inherited from theosophy. Analysing the origins of Filonov's painting and worldview, Nicoletta Misler focused on the discoveries of the 1910s (the first X-ray photographs of crystals in 1913) as well as on the influence of Eastern religions, which brings Filonov closer to the Symbolist ideological sphere of Guro and Matyushin [Misl, 1999, pp. 38–46]. By the early 2000s, Bowlt had somewhat changed his concept: he included Moscow artists Petr Miturich and Tatlin in the circle of organic-scientific artists, united all Petersburg artists in the Symbolist circle, and the two circles and attitudes towards the organic world, as he saw it, came together in the work of Mansurov [Bowl, 2000, p. 67; see also: Sarabyanov, 2003, p. 9].

Indeed, the Petrograd organic artists combined Symbolist vision with an interest in science (e.g. physiology, crystallography). As a researcher Matyushin was interested in both the physiology of vision and theosophy, pursuing the aim of extending perception. In his diaries he mentioned the names of scientists who represented space unconventionally or transrationally from the point of view of everyday life: from B. Riemann and N. Lobachevsky to A. Einstein and M. Planck. The philosophical and scientific sources of the organic system of expanded vision, including the works of August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Michel Eugène Chevreul, Hermann von Helmholtz, Gustav Theodor Fechner, Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, Wilhelm Wundt, Ernst Mach, and Johannes von Kries are analysed in detail in the monograph by Isabel Wünsche, who, following Charlotte Douglas, calls this scientific-visionary type of worldview 'holism', emphasizing the priority of integrity in it [Wünsche, 2015, pp. 13–19, 89–91, 94–95, 104–106, 110, 115]. Wünsche argues that Nikolai Kulbin, Matyushin and Filonov were interested in psychophysiological parallelism: the absence of barriers

between the physical and mental worlds, the mainstay of the unity of matter and spirit. She also drew attention to the scientific research of the 1920s: in 1923, at the State Institute of Art Culture (GINKhUK) Matyushin took an interest in the experiments in biophysics conducted by Pyotr Lazarev who at that time was developing the theory of the movement of ions and the theory of excitation and was studying the interaction of optical and acoustic nerves [Wünsche, 2015, p. 115]. The scientific and philosophical foundations of Filonov's art, including the ideas of A. Schopenhauer, Ch. Darwin, H. Bergson, and A. Bogdanov, were structured in the book by Gleb Ershov [Ershov, 2015, pp. 119–120, 122, 125–151].

In rethinking the organic dimension of the Avant-Garde, the focus is on the work of Matyushin and Filonov whose ideas sprouted in the second half of the 20th century and then grew through decades of repression and silence, having shaped an artistic and philosophical tradition in which generations of masters inherit from each other both directly, for example, through Sterligov, and arrhythmologically, like the New Artists group. This focus represents the organic dimension of St. Petersburg — Petrograd — Leningrad art as a special culture of creative thought connected with the city landscapes and history, with the Baltic, the Neva, Lake Ladoga, and Karelia, that is, wide water spaces connected by a changeable river and wooded hills opening up vast horizons (the motifs of fluidity, specularity, vast round skies — all that the zaum poet Alexander Tufanov defined in relation to expanded vision and listening as 'the feeling of Sestroretsk'). Through this landscape, the organic dimension is connected with the romantic tradition of the North as a place of catastrophe and rebirth, Hyperborea and eternal return.

The important features of St. Petersburg organic art include its original multimedia nature — the unity of image, sound, and word (artists, musicians, and poets are all in one) and its connection with the phenomenon of zaum and alogism in the spirit of Khlebnikov, Guro, Malevich, and D. Kharms. The organic tradition is the upstream of zaum, since it is truly capable of representing what was previously considered unimaginable and, in fact, is aimed at the transrational and system task of creating the eternal, physical and metaphysical, simultaneously objective and non-objective picture of the world.

The systems of the organic worldview. Organics as a unity of the objective and the non-objective

Both in his own creation and in the works of his comrades in the Avant-Garde movement, Mikhail Matyushin saw above all a new view of the world and ways of visualizing and expressing it in words. A new view of the world is possible in the consciousness of a renewed person, and it is precisely Filonov whom Matyushin presented as a prophet of novelty in his article of April 1916 inspired by Filonov's poetry and painting, in particular his poem *Propeven' o prorosli mirovoi* (Sermon-Chant on Universal Sprouting) and painting *Flowers of the World Bloom* (1915, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). In 1912, it was Matyushin who wrote down Filonov's manifesto *Canon and Law* directed against Cubism and its mechanistic geometry (canon), whereas form is characterised by the 'law of organic development'. Filonov's manifesto anticipated Nikolai Berdyaev's thought of the same direction which he expressed in his 1914 works on P. Picasso and the crisis of art (1917). This alone speaks of the rootedness of the organic artistic tradition in the philosophical and aesthetic soil of Symbolism. In his article about Filonov, Matyushin, on the one hand, gives a detailed explanation of the new painting and drawing technique invented by the 'eyewitness of the invisible' [Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov, 1988, p. 92], as Alexei Kruchenykh called Filonov: Matyushin describes that very organic development of form in 'made paintings and drawings' and 'analytical art' which brings the work closer to a living and growing biological phenomenon; whereas on the other hand, he emphasizes the main thing that emerges in organic painting — the representation of continuous, changeable, and living movement. This is not the mechanical movement of Futurism and later Constructivism based on the Cubist shifting dynamics of planes, but movement in all its imaginable fullness, when changes affect all elements of the artist's life, consciousness and, accordingly, the picture of the world, when the physical impulse of growth resonates in the spiritual aspiration for freedom and is transformed in a metaphysical universal flow of creative existence, when in change we see the power of a breakthrough which closes the distance between the past and the future. Here is a fragment of Matyushin's article about Filonov:

The entire sum of the motion of matter of the new decree, the course of its couplings form a new visible world. <...> If the telescope showed an object of the universe, and the microscope showed its atomic complexity, then the artist... taught us... to understand the complexity of its states: the idea of a heavy volume, the unity of movement, the bending force of the energy flow, the elasticity of the wind, the smell, the density of water in its mass, all the living lumps of earth, the ardour of the rising flame, and the living heat moving itself. The expanded boundaries of the new sound, a new understanding of the word as an independent sound and, finally, the slow beats of inorganic life, the life of a crystal. <...> The world became populated not by a scattered humanity but by the great common body of God. <...> One for all, Filonov encapsulated and twisted all the threads of new paths, as if in a whirlpool, in his new common body. <...> He proposes a new principle of applying paints. The body of the painting is first born, its flesh — paint and drawing — must shape its ground in a raw monolithic form, almost fluidly alive. Moreover, the canvas is not primed and takes on the first liquid load of paint and the nervation of the drawing for the future growth of the organism of the living painting. <...> The world and objectivity for him are firstborn in continuous shifts and fluctuations. ... He understands movement not as contained in the visible periphery of things, but coming from the centre outward and back... Apart from mechanical movement, Filonov shows movement emerging in the free will of things in themselves, considering evolution as freedom of choice, the expression of which is the most complex creature — man. <...> His large paintings absorbed the power of a new space, in which ups and downs and the entire moving essence are captured by the spreading gaze of a new dimension. <...> Filonov, while continuously and persistently performing creative work as an artist, sought and created a valuable texture of word and speech. As if touching the deep antiquity of the world, which had gone into the underground fire, his words emerged as a precious alloy and joyful, sparkling pieces of life. They conceived the book of the world bloom *Propeven' o prorosli mirovoi* [Matyushin, 1979, pp. 232–235].

As Filonov states in his autobiographical notes, in his works of 1906–1907 “naturalistic and abstract provisions were introduced to the point that physiological processes in trees and the smell emanating from them were depicted” [Filonov, 2020, p. 58].

The incredible crystal texture of Filonov's painting in *Flowers of the World Bloom* represents a free transition from the non-objective geometric form of the existence of matter (its micro- and macroscopic vision) to the phenomenon of natural forms — flowers on 'abstract' crystal stems — energy flows rising from the bottom up and embodied in changeable magmatic colour streams and overflows. At the top of the painting, natural forms dissolve in the cosmos of shining colour-light again. The dynamics

of the living/non-living/living is a key theme of the Romantic era which continued in Symbolism and Art Nouveau. Wünsche draws attention to research in the field of crystallography — Otto Lehmann's book *Liquid Crystals and the Theory of Life* published in 1908 in Odessa, which, quite possibly, inspired Matyushin to produce a series of self-portraits *The Crystal* in 1914 — just before the creation of *Flowers of the World Bloom* [Wünsche, 2015, pp. 95–96].

In his classic watercolours of the early 1920s and theoretical texts, Matyushin presents this intertransition of the objective and the non-objective, the living and the 'non-living' in a different way. Unlike Filonov, he does not create symbolic mega-compositions presenting the world 'in all its predicates', that is, the planet of plants, humans, and animals in the syncretic unity of their interactions. Matyushin is not interested in the battle for time, for human history. He is fully immersed in landscape — the changing natural environment of light and colour. In Matyushin's framework, time is even more epic — it ranges from short vegetation periods to grandiose geological epochs that a St. Petersburg summer resident sees while taking a walk along the shore of the Gulf of Finland and observing boulders left behind after glacier movement. Matyushin's non-objectivity is natural, not speculative. He shows the transformation of the body of nature into the energy of space. Thus, Matyushin's watercolour drawing *Stack. Lakhta* (1921, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) clearly expresses the feeling that the stack is the breast of the earth, its dense material body made up of coloured lines which disperses in the sky as clouds of colour and daytime northern lights — the waves of the earth's magnetic field.

Analysing Matyushin's drawings, one discovers the organic cosmos of interactions. In the graphic composition *Untitled. (Space)* (1920, Manuscript Department of the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House), f. 656, c. 36) Matyushin depicts either living cells with nuclei or cosmic bodies in different orbits: for him these are interdependent phenomena, as well as for Khlebnikov who compared the surface of the globe with the size of an erythrocyte. Matyushin considers the Moon and the Sun to be the seeds of the Universe. This spherical drawing *Untitled* and the watercolour *Entry of the Spheres* (1921, Museum of St. Petersburg Avant-Garde (The Matyushin House), St. Petersburg) carry the seeds of the future bowl-dome space of Sterligov. Matyushin found entertaining the motif of a large body

entering a small one — sun rays embracing the earth, the sun seeming to set in the centre of the globe, etc. Thus, in *Entry of the Spheres* we see how in the middle of the colour interference of two light volumes there opens a dark blue black-pupiled cosmic eye. Similar fathomless eyes can be seen in the upper layers of Filonov's large-scale painting *Formula of Spring* (1928–1929, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). Maria Ender, Matyushin's closest student and collaborator, during her years of study in his studio at the Petrograd State Free Art and Educational Workshops wrote in her diary: "I am the eye of life" [Ender M., 2024, p. 137]. In 1923, after one of his trips to Vaskelovo, where the hilly forest landscape with its eyes-lakes reveals the horizons of expanded vision, Matyushin put a note in his diary that Maria "wants to see not with a ray, but with the whole sphere" [Matyushin, 2017, p. 335]. What Matyushin, the Enders, Larionov, and Filonov have in common is the undulating dynamic sphericity, the all-encompassing nature of the world movement and the energy flow, which in Matyushin's framework goes in a circle, forming spheres. Matyushin's view is an inclusive movement, not a spotlight. Matyushin shows a flow of non-objective matter which gets condensed in the landscape, in the living environment, and then is carried away by the cosmic wind again.

The development of Modernist art, especially in the USSR of the 1920s, is normally presented in opposition of the abstract (progressive) and the figurative (backward). The creative work of organic tradition masters does not demonstrate such a straightforward opposition, since it is filled with the desire to express a modern view of the world, in which there is no opposition between the figurative and the abstract, but there takes place an endless exchange of energies and forms, the transition of the non-objective into the objective and back.

Mikhail Matyushin's expanded vision: a transrational worldview

Landscape in expanded vision was the subject of Matyushin's academic program at the Petrograd State Free Art and Educational Workshops, the reformed Academy of Arts in 1919–1922. Experiments under this program, which developed the ability to see with closed eyes, the back of the head and the whole body, were continued by Matyushin at the Department of Organic Culture of the State Institute of Art Culture. Maria Ender was transferred to the institute to work under his leadership on a voluntary

basis. Anna Petrovna Ostroumova-Lebedeva recalled that in those years she met Albert Benois and heard from him about Matyushin's 'eccentricity and madness': how he made his students paint with their backs to the river. However, Albert Nikolaevich did not know Matyushin. "I immediately realized," said Alb. Nik., "that I accidentally found myself in a group of mental hospital patients... There was a warden with them. But the worst thing was that this warden took me for a patient and started to persuade me to sit with my back to the river and continue working" [Ostroumova-Lebedeva, 1974, p. 39]. Let us imagine this scene: a famous watercolourist is drawing the colourful diversity of an evening sunset, whereas the students of the zaum artist Matyushin are expressing something they do not see but experience through their entire bodies, when the landscape turns into something audible, the visual experience is combined with the sound, the senses open up the space behind them in its immense acoustic extension, and the bank of the Nevka becomes the edge of the sounding land. In 1921, Maria Ender created watercolour drawings called *Transcription of Sound* (Museum of Modern Art (MOMus), Thessaloniki) — the compositions about the freely emerging and dying colour spheres, about the cosmos of the harmonic movement of light and sound waves. The multimedia nature of art based on the wave nature of light and sound matter is the invisible law of the organic world and the world of art that Matyushin and Maria Ender managed to make visible. Maria Ender wrote in her diary: "I want to do the impossible — like screaming of a starfish (non-objectivity)" [Ender M., 2024, p. 172]. The task of expanded vision is to give voice to the silence of the world and to convey the audible through the visible.

Another illogical technique of expanded vision taught by Matyushin was reported by Valida Delacroux [Delacroux, 2007, pp. 50–51]. The artist shifts the projective gaze from the centre to the sides. The scope of view ceases to be fixed and expands, the eyes catch an enormous volume of coloured air, and the person connects with this colour form of the surrounding boundless world. Looking at the scheme of Matyushin's expanded vision representing the elliptic motion of the viewpoint that traces the 'circle of the earth', we realize that the centre of the world is everywhere. The ontological meaning of expanded vision is that the world structure is not hierarchical. Matyushin's system of views is democratic in essence. Although later Sterligov reproached Matyushin for placing the Self, not God, at the centre of the world, those reproaches were unfounded,

since the ego of the artist — the actor of expanded vision — dissolves in the world. Let us recall Matyushin's watercolour drawing *Space* (1921–1922, collection of Valery Dudakov, Moscow): a rainbow braid freely outlines a nacreous sphere of a flash in the centre and, unbraiding in coloured swirls, goes beyond the edges of the sheet. This is a picture about enlightened consciousness: the motif of a lightened sphere outlined by a non-objective colour wave is found in all graphic recordings of experiments in expanded vision and clearly represents the engagement of the observer themselves in the environment, their transparency for the world. Man and the world cease to be impenetrable obstacles for each other.

Matyushin also appeals to the astronomical concept of the vertical: he combines the orientation towards the sky and the 'line back', that is, he turns the line of sight in the opposite direction, behind the back, in order to feel the reverse extension of the world, including in time. He shows that man — the cross-shaped knot of the universe — is not limited by the planes of his vision from above, from the sides, from the front, and from behind. Not only consciousness, but also all these planes-boards of the world are permeable and reversible when you imagine yourself, your body as a communication centre of the universe, or, as Kharms later formulated it, you place yourself in the Node of the Universe [Kharms, 2000, pp. 395–398].

Maria Ender in her untitled watercolours of the 1920s depicts trees at the ground. They are amazing naturalistic and at the same time Symbolist paintings, in which height is cleverly shown through breadth — its opposite and at the same time complementation. Commenting on the 'hieroglyph' or the image-concept 'the Star of Nonsense' of Alexander Vvedensky, Yakov Druskin states that the path towards this star leads beyond the limits of consciousness, to where there can exist the unifications of the incompatible that are not perceived by reason [Druskin, 1998, p. 648], for example, round square, which is logically impossible (let us add that the corpuscular-wave theory of light is a scientific example of such transrational logic). The possibility of such transrational forms is confirmed by expanded vision, which Maria Ender showed in her report *On Supplementary Form* [Ender M., 2024, pp. 79–94] given in December 1927 at the State Institute of Art History, where she and Matyushin worked after the closure of the State Institute of Art Culture in 1926. Her report presented an oscillation of opposites that takes place in our perception when a geometric form

(a straight line or a square) spontaneously begins to be replaced by its opposite: the ends of a straight line start to curve, it becomes a wavy line, and square sides and corners are drawn inward, forming a polygon that tends to a circle. Maria Ender believed that 'visual perceptions' form normative 'visual representations' that from time to time, due to the changing conditions of vision and under the influence of renewed visual perceptions get replaced by new ones. In this process, the possibility of harmony is ensured by the dynamics of complementarity and constant variability.

In 1920, Matyushin painted a Symbolist watercolour landscape *The Open Window* (The Tsarskoye Selo Collection Museum, Pushkin). The window frame, depicted in fragments, forms the shape of a star. The viewer can see the sky and forest expanses far ahead and at the bottom. The frame illuminated by the red reflections of the sun rises over the green-blue world like a huge star, revealing the distances of the blue planet, whose view from space Matyushin had anticipated. The harmonious natural colouring of the work forms the palette of primary, complementary, and coupling colours which Matyushin and his students described in expanded vision experiments and systematized together with Maria Ender in *The Reference Book of Colours* (1932) [Matyushin, 1932]. If I. V. Goethe derived the principle of harmony of complementary colours, Matyushin discovered the third, coupling colour, having developed the principle of colour perception and described the mechanism of natural colour harmonization, very close to the then unknown DNA code, which allows for the production of numerous combinations from a basic set of elements. A. V. Povelikhina emphasizes that the coupling colour was discovered precisely in contemplation of nature, and only then the results of observations were confirmed in the laboratory [Povelikhina, 1993, p. 61]. Each copy of *The Reference Book of Colours* was accompanied by four colour tables hand-coloured by Matyushin's students. The primary, complementary, and coupling colours in each of the four tables were seen differently: the first table gave the primary colours on a neutral grey; in the second table, the complementary colours took the place of the primary ones; in the third table there appeared an afterimage of the complementary colour in closed eyes; in the fourth table, Matyushin showed the transition from a more saturated colour to a less saturated one. He took into account the dependences on the size of coloured areas,

on the duration of contemplation, and on how the very shape of objects changes in perception under the influence of warm and cold colours, striving for complementation of contrasts. Pavel Kondratyev mentioned that Matyushin recognized the possibility of the coupling colour to change depending on the observer's individual colour perception [Pavel Kondratyev, 2014, p. 39; see also: Tilberg, 2008, pp. 116, 130]. His words get confirmation: in one of the tables of *The Reference Book of Colours* kept in the Russian Museum, several different strips with coupling colours are pasted in. Matyushin and his students systematized the combination options in the tables, revealing the individuality of colour relationships, and not subjecting colours to a rigid unification.

The results of the research conducted by the Department of Organic Culture of the State Institute of Art Culture significantly affected the common ideas about colour, based on Wilhelm Ostwald's book on colour science published in Russian in 1926. According to Margareta Tilberg, researcher of Matyushin, students of the Higher Art and Technical Studios (VKHUTEMAS) were taught in line with Ostwald's concepts, the unchanging, once and for all established colour scheme [Tilberg, 2008, pp. 302–343]. Ostwald's circle, which formed the basis of the RGB scale, has 24 colours. It is dominated by cold tones (15 cold and 9 warm hues) obtained from colours mathematically: eight primary colours and an even shift of each colour to the left and right to its neighbours. Matyushin's scheme is initially based on eight colours too, but natural warmth dominates over the cold spectrum in it. The main difference between the schemes of Ostwald and Matyushin is the principle of colour combinations harmonization, which is what *The Reference Book of Colours* is actually devoted to. Ostwald solves this problem mechanically: harmonious combinations are two opposite sectors in the colour circle (dyad), two neighbouring and one opposite sectors (triad) or two neighbouring and two opposite sectors (quadriga). The work written by Matyushin and his students, based on dynamic variability and organic natural parameters, was in the full sense of the word a 'lawless comet' in the world of machine Constructivism. Not only did Maria Ender in *The Reference Book of Colours* venture to criticize Ostwald's mechanistic 'isolated vision', but she also resumed a discussion of the origins of colour science in the Impressionist painting, contrasting their intuition with the schematism of the Cubists, Suprematists and, most importantly, the supporters of industrial art [Ender M., 1932, pp. 6–9].

Matyushin's colour theory merged with life several decades after his death and the death of Maria Ender in Leningrad during the siege: in 1934, under the guidance of Maria Ender, Matyushin's student Elena Khmelevskaya, joined the Leningrad colour group (an architectural department responsible for facade design) and led it after the war up until 1964. In 1967, Khmelevskaya published *The Colour Guide for Architects and Builders* [Elena Stanislavovna Khmelevskaya, 2012], according to which the city centre was painted, taking into account the capacity of coupling colours used in architectural details of buildings to emphasize the luminosity and clarity of primary and complementary colours and thereby create a city that generates light and organically unites the earthly and heavenly spheres.

Vladimir Sterligov's cup-dome space

In the same 1960s, at the first opportunity for liberalization, the Avant-Garde practices that had been banned in the 1930s revived: a small group of artists united around Vladimir Sterligov and Tatyana Glebova and in home-based seminars studied the program of State Institute of Art Culture created in the 1920s by Malevich. In the early 1970s, Sterligov held an exhibition of Matyushin's works and the tables from *The Reference Book of Colours* in his studio. Of all Matyushin's students, he recognized only Boris Ender, but the main thing that he 'took' from Matyushin, in his own words, was first formulated and announced by Maria Ender and then included in Matyushin's article in *The Reference Book of Colours* — this is the theory of the complementary form and specifically the transformation of a straight line into a curve. In December 1927 Maria Ender narrated:

In visual perception we always have to deal with the interaction of a straight line and a curve in a continuous process of their struggle for dominance. <...> A straight line has been studied on a model of a dark neutral colour against a light neutral screen ... directly at the eye level, with a mandatory condition of simultaneous covering of the entire field of vision... In such a way, the model is observed in the environment. Under such conditions, a straight line immediately begins to waver. At the first moment of a certain equilibrium, the straight line gives two nodes at the top and bottom <...> Parallel lines are drawn towards the middle <...> Only in these sharp fluctuations there comes a point of a more stable equilibrium, which can be schematically represented as a wave oscillation... The straight

line has overcome the influence of the curve having maintained its direction disrupted in the second period. But the curve has manifested itself in disrupting the continuity of the straight line with bundles of successive bends [Ender M., 2024, p. 83].

Four decades later in his text *The Straight Line and the Curve*, Sterligov replaced Maria Ender's oscillatory mutually reversible dynamics with his 'static dynamism' when a straight line by necessity becomes a curve and takes on a symbolic form: "If we imagine that the endpoints of a straight line distanced from the conventional centre vibrate, they will strive to make a bowl, reversely reflecting in each other" [Sterligov, *The Straight Line and the Curve*, 2010, p. 88]. This is the semantic transformation that Sterligov carried out in the geometry of the organic world, which he and Maria Ender adopted from Malevich and Matyushin.

The image of the bowl, unlike the astronomical vertical and the natural horizon of Matyushin's expanded vision, carries a thousand-year-old Christian symbolism and introduces the organic tradition to Orthodox culture, replacing Matyushin and Guro's theosophical pantheism of the 1910s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sterligov and Glebova travelled to ancient Russian cities around Moscow, visited Vladimir and Suzdal, and saw the Church of the Intercession on the Nerl. Sterligov's art acquired a trinity of organics, Orthodox painting, and an Avant-Garde universal view of the world. His drawings and watercolours express the possibility of combining the ancient Russian and Avant-Garde traditions, which Tatlin, Malevich and Nikolai Punin thought about back in the 1910s and 1920s.

In 1962, at about the same time as the Symbolist work *A Bowl* was created, Sterligov produced the series *The Straight Line and the Curve*, or eight *Explanatory Drawings* (private collection) which continue and change the scheme of Matyushin's expanded vision. Sterligov described the spatial structure of his compositions as follows: "Three-part structure: bottom, middle, top. The bottom is seemingly the world where we are from, where man is from. This world is beautiful and there is no sin. It is an angel world. It precedes temporary earthly existence. The middle is reality... The top is where we are heading. The future world is present independently of us. ... The worlds communicate, which emphasizes the trinity" [Sterligov, *On the Spherical*, 2010, p. 90]. We see sheaves of rays that, moving from below, form an open bowl and, descending from above, shape a dome; they are mutually reflected along the horizon line — the iconic boarder of earthly existence embraced by two additional curves below and above.

Such a three-part space had already been conceived of in two treatises by Kharms in the mid-1930s. In one of them, entitled *On Existence, Time, and Space*, Kharms formulated the following ideas: “9. ...the basis of existence comprises three elements: this, the impediment and that. <...> 11. Thus: dividing a unitary void into two parts, we get the trinity of existence <...> 36. The ‘present’ of time is space. <...> the here of space is time. 52. ... ‘something’ which is to be found at the point of intersection of space and time generates a certain ‘impediment’... 53. This ‘something’ <...> creates a certain existence which we call matter or energy <...> 58. Time, space and matter, intersecting one with another at definite points and being basic elements in the existence of the universe, generate a certain node. <...> 60. When I say of myself: ‘I am’, I am placing myself within the Node of the Universe [Kharms, 2000, pp. 396–398]. The Trinity of existence, paradoxically obtained not by addition but in a traditional Christian way — by division of one, in the simultaneous text *On Existence, Hypostasis, and the Cross* forms a cross, “a symbolic sign of the law of existence and life”, which is read as follows: heaven (this) — world (that) — heaven(this), but in the second version it turns into another sequence: this — impediment — that, “where heaven comprises this and that, and the world becomes an impediment in itself” [Kharms, 2000, pp. 400–401]. In his plans for the creation of the universe, Sterligov directly reproduces the three-part scheme of Kharms of the mid-1930s: heaven — world — heaven.

Kharms called his dynamic principle of world-building ‘cisfinite’ — complementary to transfinite and denoting a return from the sphere on the other side of the finite (return from the infinite or transcendental) to the sphere on this (our) side of the finite. Sterligov mentioned that the mode of perpetual motion of renewal of life and world forms resembles transition from the cisfinite to the transfinite and back:

When I drew a straight line which coincided with the horizon, the following occurred within me: the need to choose one of two possibilities. The reasoning went like this: what is below the horizon line is objective: houses, hills. What is above it is again houses, hills and clouds. Let us assume that what extends beyond the horizon line is not a house but the person’s face. Two incompatible, and even different-sized things — a face and a house. It is absurd. It is not allowed by the logic of the objective world. A similar problem arose as soon as I drew bowl-shaped bushes below. It is not bushes that should appear above, beyond the line of the horizon, since in the bowl world it is not the line of the horizon but

the Divine Straight-Curve, like the Divine Separation. It gives the possibility to compare the most distant contrasts. I decided to do that, to place on top something from another world. I continued with the bushes and they turned out to be from another world. It was that the old world seemed to return but had become something completely different. <...> Conclusion: A, B, A or the return of A through some kind of contrast, where the second A is no longer the first but via B it is still A. <...> Kharms labelled this merry-go-round ‘Watermelon, melon, watermelon, melon, watermelon...’ and so on [Sterligov, *The Straight Line and the Curve*, 2010, pp. 87–88].

In his painting Sterligov attributed both human or figurative (head, face) and abstract universal (originally geometric, non-objective) existence to these spheres. His spatial construction was further developed in the work of his students led by Gennady Zubkov.

Vadim Ovchinnikov’s ecological *The Green Square*

The organic tradition demonstrated the ability to revive arrhythmically, after a long while. This happened in the late 1980s, when the artist, musician, and poet Vadim Ovchinnikov, who had no relation to the ‘invisible institute’ of Sterligov and Glebova, created a plastic pictorial language that combines non-objective and figurative elements and is definitely close to the painting of the Matyushin circle. Ovchinnikov was interested in Avant-Garde art: his compositions of the early 1980s *Solar Energy* (private collections) are painted in a rethought manner of Filonov. But if Filonov’s paintings were occasionally on display at the Russian Museum, the paintings of Matyushin and the Enders were first presented in Leningrad only in 1988: at the exhibition Soviet Art of the 1920s and 1930s, among others there was Maria Ender’s painting *Experience of the New Spatial Dimension* (1920, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) which directly resembles Ovchinnikov’s composition *The Lights of Urengoy* (Galeyev Gallery, Moscow) of the same year. However, at that time Ovchinnikov could not have known about Boris Ender’s ideas of the 1920s, about his desire to continue the sequence of Malevich’s squares — to depict a green square on a white background as a symbol of human life [Ender B., 2018, p. 52]. In the same 1988, which can be considered the year of the rebirth of Matyushin’s organic art, Ovchinnikov created his main conceptual work — *The Green Square. Symbol of the World Revolution in Ecology* (collection of G.A. Pliskin, St. Petersburg). It was a 100×99 cm plywood sheet repainted green. In Ovchinnikov’s

painting cycles of the mid-1980s and 1990s (*Life of Plants, Atmospheric Phenomena, City by the Sea*), the language of the Avant-Garde is reborn and would be most accurately called transavantgarde, because the artist presents a universal picture of the world in which different historical eras, pagan antiquity and technological modernity, exist simultaneously. They are united by a rhythmic musical non-objective cosmos of living colour, spiritual and pantheistic. Ovchinnikov presents the Avant-Garde motifs of Filonov (syncretic spiritual world of nature — man and animals) and Matyushin (colour-light energy fields and images of germination, a hymn to vegetation) from a new angle. In his picture of the universe, the planet initially belongs to plants and animals, it is in them that the life-giving force lies, while human cities are alien geometric implants, giant growths-nets on the living spherical curves of the world. Unlike in poetry, in Ovchinnikov's painting there is no sociality, it seems to show the planet after a major crisis that terminated the Anthropocene.

In 1988, Ovchinnikov created a painting of the *Atmospheric Phenomena* cycle (private collection, St. Petersburg) which could illustrate Maria Ender's report *On Additional Form*. It is an abstract painting that with surprising accuracy calls in our imagination a seascape with a horizon outlined by the orange colour of sunlight. In its upper part — in the 'sky' — there is an oval shape changing before our eyes, and under the horizon line — on the 'beach' — there sparkles an object close to a rectangle, resembling a clot of glass. Ovchinnikov paints an endless interchange of forms by means of light — in this Matyushin saw the meaning and purpose of life.

Symbolic perspective of Timur Novikov and Solar Objects by Ivan Sotnikov

In the first half of the 1980s, Ovchinnikov joined the New Artists group which had been founded in Leningrad in October 1982 by the artist and art theorist Timur Novikov. Just as Matyushin's plastic vision was acquiring a new life in Ovchinnikov's work, Novikov turned to a wide range of Russian Avant-Garde traditions: Matyushin's expanded vision, Malevich's Suprematism and their reinterpretation in Sterligov, as well as the *vsechestvo* ('everythingism') of Larionov, Ilya Zdanevich and Mikhail Le Dentu. His friend and fellow performer in the New Artists group, Ivan Sotnikov, had

become fascinated by Larionov's art even earlier, in the early 1980s, and in 1983 he created several paintings entitled *Solar Objects* — compositions that combined Rayonism and images of Lithuanian forged suns. In 1987, Novikov began a series of textile panels *Horizons*. This universal work of art offered a holistic organic view of the world and concluded the Russian Avant-Garde of the 20th century. Novikov called his 'additional element' a symbolic or semantic perspective. His graphic scheme of the universe, as compared with the schemes of Matyushin and Sterligov, is extremely simplified and close to Suprematist graphics. What Novikov and Sterligov have in common is the understanding of the internal hidden dynamics, coming from Matyushin and Malevich. In *Horizons* movement is not depicted but embodied in the spatial relations of the landscape: a micro-sign (a house, an airplane, a fir tree or a ship) that defines a type of space (the earth, the sky or the sea) sets the conceivable dynamics of the world-building, in which elements, almost imperceptible in size, steadily grow and move. Looking at *Horizons*, we realize how the enormous space of the planet, seemingly constant, changes invisibly but maintains harmony and avoids chaos.

Oleg Kotelnikov's Grave Wax and First Look

Oleg Kotelnikov, the artist, poet and musician, another founder of the New Artists group, together with the film director and artist Evgeny Yufit in 1984 started the necrorealist movement. Thanks to the plots of Yufit's imagination, Kotelnikov diversified the images of death in painting and wrote the anthem of necrorealism *Grave Wax* ('Zhirovosk'), the ending of which has become a meme: "After death comes a nice life, folks". Happiness and energy across a broad spectrum ranging from Ovchinnikov's ironic-gloomy cheerfulness to Novikov's joyful colour spiritual uplift characteristic of folk art are revived in the work of the New Artists group, bringing their worldview closer to the positive Avant-Garde sense of life of *budetyane* (people of the future). Necrorealism gives a direct reference to Matyushin. In the oscillatory circuit of the world movement, he included the point of death as rebirth. In the first edition of *An Artist's Experience of the New Space* in 1915, entitled *On the Fourth Dimension*, two years after Guro's death and in the midst of the war, Matyushin wrote: "Corruption of the body is not frightening if you see beauty and a spark of life even in

a worm. ... Creative fire spreading everywhere: in a louse and in a person — all comes from the One... “Our beauty is food for worms” is only a line beyond which is the merry life of worms, corruption, and transformation of a new spirit! Previously, thought terminated at the point of a person’s death... and did not go further. No one thought that worms are also life and that after worms, microbes are also life, and the dust of bones is also full of life, and that there is not even a momentary stop in life that endlessly spirals through our condensed little consciousness” [Matyushin, 2011, p. 212]. These words can be seen as a distant anticipation of life-affirming necrorealism. An homage to Matyushin’s expanded vision is a series of watercolour paintings by Kotelnikov *First Look* (2024) which turned the focus from the moment of death back to birth. It is in this turn that A.V. Povelikhina sees the very idea of the organic tradition: “Growth, decay, death, and transformation — continuous formation takes place in creative nature. ... These are the grounds of the Organic worldview, the essential quality of which is integrity. Organicity and all-unity with the single order that saturates Nature and the Cosmos” [Povelikhina, 1999, p. 16].

The beginning of the 2020s in Kotelnikov’s work is almost exclusively marked by the dance of death in the series *Death in Pink Light* (*La mort en rose*). Kotelnikov imagines the end of the Anthropocene: all sorts of skeletons presented in the styles of various cultures, from antiquity to Christianity, Maya and Incas, perform their unstoppable dance, their endless rave in empty cities, on abandoned beaches, etc. Sometimes on the horizon of peaceful landscapes there are traces of alien presence that allow us to assume the exodus of humanity and the revival of nature after an ecological catastrophe. Kotelnikov depicts the victorious kingdom of organic matter: a planet of insects, birds, elephants, penguins, and enormous plants, creating an epic similar to the dreaming Australian aboriginal art.

In 1983, on a small piece of paper Kotelnikov painted an artist creating a picture (Ivan Sotnikov family collection, St. Petersburg). It is a still life: there are plants hanging from a vase in all directions and a wet, fresh artist’s brush over them. This entire reality is created through a chaotic confusion of black lines, but the reality of art — the painting on the easel — shines with bright natural colours, sun and greens, generating joy and warm energy in the chaos of intersections of life.

Conclusion

The organic tradition reveals the historical dynamics of the 20th century from the dream of Symbolism regarding a new vision of a transformed man to the post-industrial representation of the world after the ecological catastrophe of the Anthropocene. An important feature of the organic tradition of the St. Petersburg Avant-Garde is its ability to preserve and update a unified picture of the world, to present the universal basis of the world, which are largely revealed in the 20th century. Now, when all images disintegrate and get reassembled in pixels, the transrational framework of organics, the fusion of the objective and the non-objective no longer seems impossible, which enhances the transrational potential of the organic culture in its views on the future and the ability to represent it.

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