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THE MAGIC OF THE HORIZON: THE ART OF LENINGRAD AND ST. PETERSBURG FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1980S¹

On 16 October 1930, Daniil Kharm's wrote a parody of a mathematical treatise titled "Cisfinitum. A Letter to Leonid Savelievich Lipavsky. The Falling of a Stem". Lipavsky was the author of "A Theory of Words", about those words which appear when the Russian letters Ъ and Ё are combined with consonants and vowels and letters are then removed. Kharm's's concept *cisfinitum* is related to the process of creating forms. He places the division between creative and non-creative sciences: creative science is art; non-creative science is logical reasoning. Kharm's writes: "If in creative science one has to contend with concepts of quantity... I modestly note that the new numerical system will be zero-based and its field of research will be *cisfinitum*".² In 1931, Kharm's included this treatise as the sixth item in his hand-written compendium of prose and poetry of the period 1927–1931, which was dedicated to the "zero of form," to quote Malevich. The concept of *cisfinitum*, as I hope to demonstrate, defines the space around zero in a more concrete way than Malevich's suprematist works. For now, we note the connection of the art of creating forms with the knowledge of zero and with alogical thinking.

Jean-Philippe Jaccard, author of the book *Daniil Kharm's and the End of the Russian Avant-Garde*, finds in "*cisfinite* emptiness" the original or "zero level of creation" and notes the "convergence" of Malevich and Kharm's. He suggests that "Kharm's's work should be considered not as a failed attempt to express the inexpressible, [...] but as a successful attempt to express the limitations and impossibility of this enterprise".³ If *cisfinitum* is the field of research of the "zero of form" then Kharm's and Malevich really do converge, and this begs the question of why Kharm's needed to invent his own word to designate passing through zero, why he multiplied the entities?

¹ The text is translated by Ruth Addison.

² Daniil Kharm's, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Complete Collected Works], vol. 2, compiled and edited by Valery Sazhin (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1997), 312.

³ Jean-Philippe Jaccard, *Daniil Kharm's i konets russkogo avangarda* [Daniil Kharm's and the End of the Russian Avant-Garde (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1995), 256.



Mark Petrov, *Torso in a Black Dress*, 1955
Oil on cardboard,
23 × 24. Family
of the artist

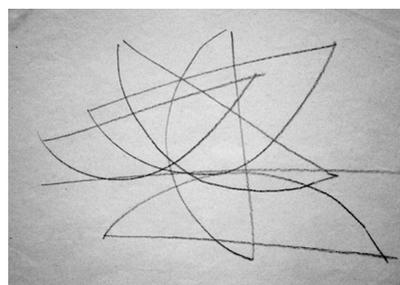
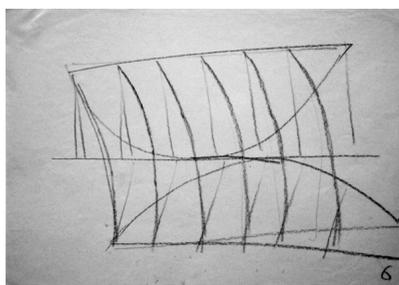
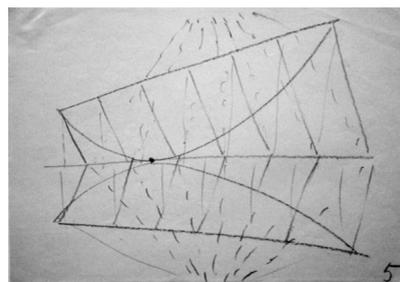
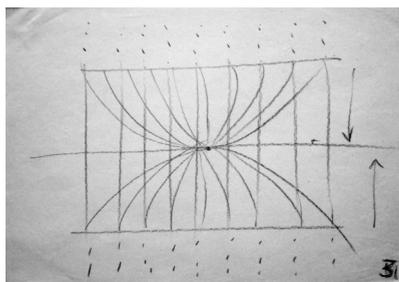
Also, in the 1930s, Kharms wrote the poems “Third *cisfinite* logic of infinite nonexistence” and “To ring to fly (third *cisfinite* logic)”. In the former he speaks of the steady passage of time (“The hour was always just there, and now / it’s only a half-hour... No, all parts of the hour were always just there, and now they’re not”). At the end of the poem there is an oscillating shift of two regimes: “The hour was always just there. / The hour is always just to be”. The first regime leads to an absolute end, the second – the alogical – allows for an exit from the steady passage of time to the regime of infinity – “is always just to be”. We note that Kharms uses the infinitive to designate the regime of infinity, but is the meaning of the word *cisfinite* exhausted by concepts of the original? It is obvious that the

cisfinite is a paired term with transfinite. The word “transfinite”, or infinite, goes back to Georg Cantor’s transfinite multiplicity. And Kharms no doubt remembered the Latin lessons of his schooldays, with Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul: everyone learned Latin through reading Julius Caesar’s *The Gallic Wars*. In this case, the meaning of the word *cisfinitum* is clarified topologically: it is not about the “primordial” but about that which is located on this (our) side of the limit-horizon, beyond which is the infinite-transfinite. Then too the convergence of the transfinite and the *cisfinite* acquires a particular meaning of transfiguration: the infinite or transfinite space of Malevich may turn into the *cisfinite* space of Kharms and this process is not only the reverse but also reversible. The second poem noted above is about this process. It contains open perspectives on the free movement of people, animals, objects, fractions of time and the sound connection between MBI [WE] and TAM [THERE] where we perform an action here and the sound is heard THERE. Extermination or resetting to *cisfinitum* can be a broadening of our space and time into the “netherworld”.

With the help of the concept of *cisfinitum*, Kharms creates an event horizon, a transformation of our finite space into the infinite of past and future. These transformations are possible thanks to the alogism of the *cisfinite*. It is comparable to meaning- and world-forming in human logic and in the gibberish of the text which precedes “Cisfinitum”, the in the compendium, which is titled “Whirled” and dated 30 May 1930: “I would say: – I am also a bit of a triple turn.

The bits would reply: – We are but tiny dots.

And suddenly I stopped seeing them, and the other bits as well. And I got scared that the world would collapse. But at this point I realised that I didn’t see separate bits, but I saw the whole caboodle. At first I thought that this was NOTHING. But then I realised that this was the world, and that what I used to see before was NOT the world. And I had always known what the world is, but what I had seen before I do not know even now. [...]



Vladimir Sterligov,
From the series
Explanatory Drawings,
1962. Elena Spitsyna
collection

and nil, where the symbol of nil is the circle. "I suggest and even dare to assert that learning about the infinite will be learning about nil. [...] I should say that even our imaginary solar sequence (i.e. the sequence of simple numbers – *E.A.*), if it wishes to answer reality, must cease being straight and should curve. The ideal curve will be even and constant and with the infinite continuation of the sun sequence it will become a circle".¹ In the last text of the series, titled "On the circle" (17 July 1931), Kharms apophatically defines the perfection of the circle as the ideal form. For him it is not the meaning of the ambiguity of perfection (as in Jaccard) that is important but its inexhaustibility: "Nature is such that the less noticeable the laws of creation, the more perfect the thing. And in nature it also the case that the less accessible the extent of a thing, the more perfect it is. [...] If there was such a thing that had been studied to the end, it would cease to be perfect, because only that which has no end, the infinite, is perfect".² In order to understand Kharms's words on the alogical movement towards truth, it is simplest to consider how he transforms the straight line into a curve and then a circle: "The straight line, broken at one point, forms an angle. But a straight line which breaks at each of its point simultaneously is called curved. An infinite number of changes in a straight line makes it perfect. A curved line does not have to be infinitely large. It can be such that we can easily capture it with our gaze, yet it remains incomprehensible and infinite".³

¹ Daniil Kharms, op. cit., vol. 2, 313.

² Ibid., 314.

³ Ibid., 315.



By analysing the meaning of Kharms's philosophical compendium and poems we can distil two pairs of oppositions: Kharms is for the qualitative numbers nil and one and against quantitative multiples, he is for the curve and circle and against the straight line. The latter makes a total convergence with Malevich very unlikely. Furthermore, his apologia for the circle and nil allow us to contrast Kharms with the Soviet avant-gardists and technocrats. Kharms's closeness to Matiushin's ideas of the permanent free movement of form and colour is obvious (in particular the idea that the square has a tendency in the viewer's perception to become a circle through a concave form and the circle is transformed into a rhombus with straight angles, as Maria Ender explained in her lecture "On Supplementary Form" on 15 December, 1927). It is obvious that Kharms's alogism is similar to the organic concept of the avant-garde and it is no accident that it is thanks to Kharms, probably in Yakov Druskin's retelling, that the metaphysics of the organic opened up in the 1960s in the work of Vladimir Sterligov, in his re-discovery of the alogical event horizon.

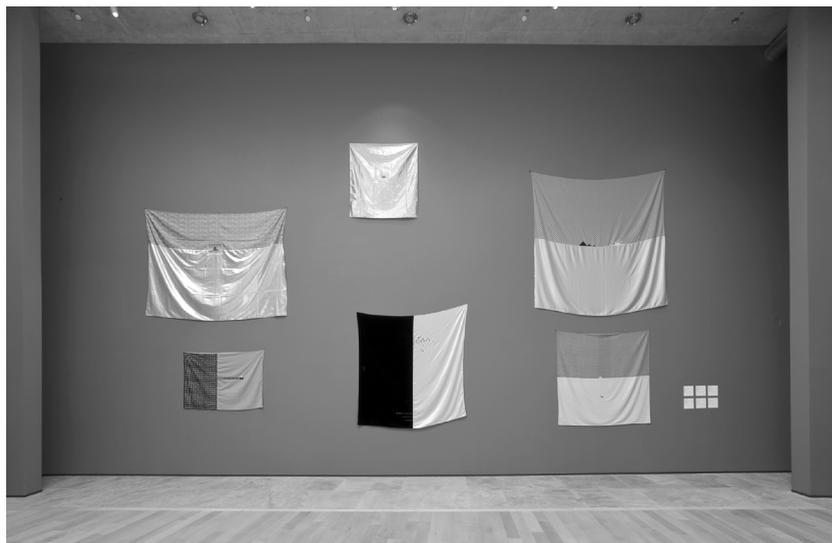
In his writings of 1964 and 1965, Sterligov describes the process of creation of his chalice-like, dome-like space: "When I drew a straight line which coincided with the horizon, the following occurred within me: the need to choose one of two possibilities. [...] As the line of the horizon in the chalice world is not the line of the horizon, but the Divine Straight-Curve, like the Divine Separation. It presents the possibility to compare the most distant contrasts. I decided to do that, to place on top something from another world. And then I continued with the bushes and they turned out to be from another world. It was if the old world returned 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. [...] Daniil Kharms labelled this merry-go-round 'Watermelon, melon, watermelon,

Vadim Ovchinnikov,
Symbols, 1991
Oil on hardboard,
50.5 × 77.5. Gennady
Pliskin collection

melon, watermelon...’ and so on”.¹ Sterligov not only indicates receiving impetus from Kharms’s crazy mantra “watermelon, melon” but also once more convinces us of the correctness of the understanding of Kharms’s *cisfinite* in dynamic connection with the transfinite, in the launch of the interaction of both worlds through the horizon.

In Leningrad, unofficial art of the post-war period, this symbolic tradition produces a chain of significant images, although the artists who made them did not form a sequence of teachers and students. Here we see an objective occurrence of *genius loci*. Graphic designer Mark Petrov, one of the founders of the Leningrad style of the 1960s, minimally leaves the horizon empty like a reserve of free space, which is particularly tangible for the producer of ideological design. His 1965 record sleeve for the record “Musical Art of Leningrad” brings back Malevich’s geometry to the Leningrad seascape. At the end of the 1960s, Petrov became a follower of the Buddhist teacher Bidia Dandaron. In 1968, he painted the political picture *Memories of the Future*, an image of vertical division. On the right side of the composition a red Soviet sunset fades and an icy glow appears, the male and female faces of a crowd of victim, among whom is the face of Petrov’s wife, the artist Ioanna Kuney. The same people can be found in Petrov’s painting *Zoo* (1968), where alongside the artist’s wife and friends there are a rhinoceros, a giraffe and an elephant, exotic creatures for the North. These animals (with the rhinoceros replaced by a unicorn) which appear on the left part of Bosch’s triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in the scene of the divine union of Adam and Eve. In Petrov’s work there is no formal boundary between abstraction and figuration, as with Sterligov. But Petrov, in contrast to the perpetually heavenly Sterligov, places an accent on the presence of the human – male and female – within the divine. Love and death are embodied in the world of his horizons, becoming known through each other. The artist tries to adhere to the abstract austerity of the line, to ascetic detachment, in order to maintain the phenomenon: the flying body of the event. One of his strongest works is on this theme, his 1955 portrait of Ioanna Kuney entitled *Torso in a Black Dress*. The viewer feels themselves in the presence of eternal transitivity. We witness the unremitting transformation of the torso into a landscape of Lethean waters and an eternal sky, changing with the rebirth of the body from inanimate black and white paint on a piece of cardboard 23 by 24 centimetres. The great Leningrad abstractionist Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko also imagined “the Boundary where the Sky touches the Earth” as both speculative and bodily, i.e. sacrificially. The self-generation of the world originates from an initial horizontal and humans dissolve in the glow of creation: *Untitled* (1972), *Hands*

¹ See E.S. Spitsyna’s essay reproducing Sterligov’s notes of 1964–1965, “Shestnadsat’ pyatnits. Vtoraya volna russkogo avangarda [Sixteen Fridays: The Second Wave of the Russian Avant-Garde]”, *Experiment*, 16 (2), 2010, 87–88. For more detail on Kharms’s understanding of Malevich see Ekaterina Andreeva, *Vse i Nichto: Simvolicheskie figury v isskustve vtoroi poloviny XX veka* [All and Nothing: Symbolic Figures in the Art of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century] (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2011), 3–70.



(1974), *Horizontals* (1970s). As we can see, for Mikhnov the horizontal is the same type of sacred, personal symbol of death and eternal life.

Vadim Ovchinnikov (b. 1951) is an artist of the trans-avant-garde generation, who arrived in Leningrad from the steppe of Kazakhstan. He also made an easy transition from abstraction to figuration. In the painting *Symbols* (1991) he creates a score, an acoustic map of the depths and heights of creation, where the silhouettes of sharks and plants, symbols of nomadic dwellings, churches and tombs, and sun signs are located as if on the horizon lines of the stave. This compositional scheme goes back to the images on shamans' tambourines, which symbolically represented a journey through three worlds. Timur Novikov, Ovchinnikov's friend and the leader of art of the 1980s and 1990s, rethought the basic concept of postmodernist aesthetics, appropriation, turning material of mass production into the matter of the transfinite image. In the composition *Don Quixote Meets the Red Sun* from the series *Horizons*, the landscape of La Mancha is a striped kitchen oilcloth. The main active element in *Horizons*, like Matiushin's linked colours, is a "symbolic perspective" which brings together the stencilled icons with the ornament and texture of the fabric in a picture of the world along the horizon of the stitch. Novikov transforms the symbol of the horizon into a universal image of the newest universe, combining the dynamics of variability and the completeness of existence. Like Ovchinnikov, Novikov begins with the alphabet of symbols. But if for Ovchinnikov symbols and pictograms are introduced in the layers of half-abstract painting and appear to us like signs of an ancient palimpsest – "signs of concealment", as Matiushin would have it – Novikov, with his clear compositional geometry removes the dramatism of the temporal and spatial confrontation. Novikov's *Horizons* represent modernity (*Red Crossing*) and antiquity (*Odyssey*), the basic areas of human activity (the exhibition *Manifesta: Aral Sea, Swans*, the wall on technology, the wall on the

Timur Novikov's exhibition *Horizons* at Manifesta 10, General Staff Building, State Hermitage Museum, 2014
Curated by Ekaterina Andreeva

points of the compass). Novikov anticipates the universal language of the latest computer graphics, taking as the basis of his visual symbol-horizons road signs and those from railway stations and airports. But to the neutral style of international animated transliteration he returns the nature of archaic and children's languages. Sensing the inevitable technogenic revolution, in which language will automatically be simplified to the sign and the main role of re-translators and communicators will be taken by various types of screen, Novikov made the language of painting formulaic and its flatness almost weightless, portable, in order to send the "organic" picture of the world with its fundamental meanings and harmonious dimensions into the otherworldly technogenic reality.

Artistic practice on horizons from the 1950s to the 1980s allowed artists to live outside the limiting rules of Soviet society, alogically being in universal contact with world culture and the avant-garde. Works by artists of different generations, which appear to answer each other, bear witness to the existence of the objective life of artistic tradition and artistic form itself. And this life emerges in the unremitting move from the *cisfinite* to the *transfinite* and back again, in line with Daniil Kharms.