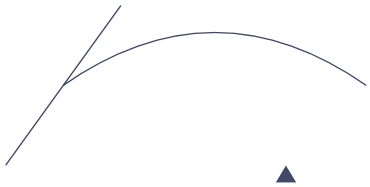
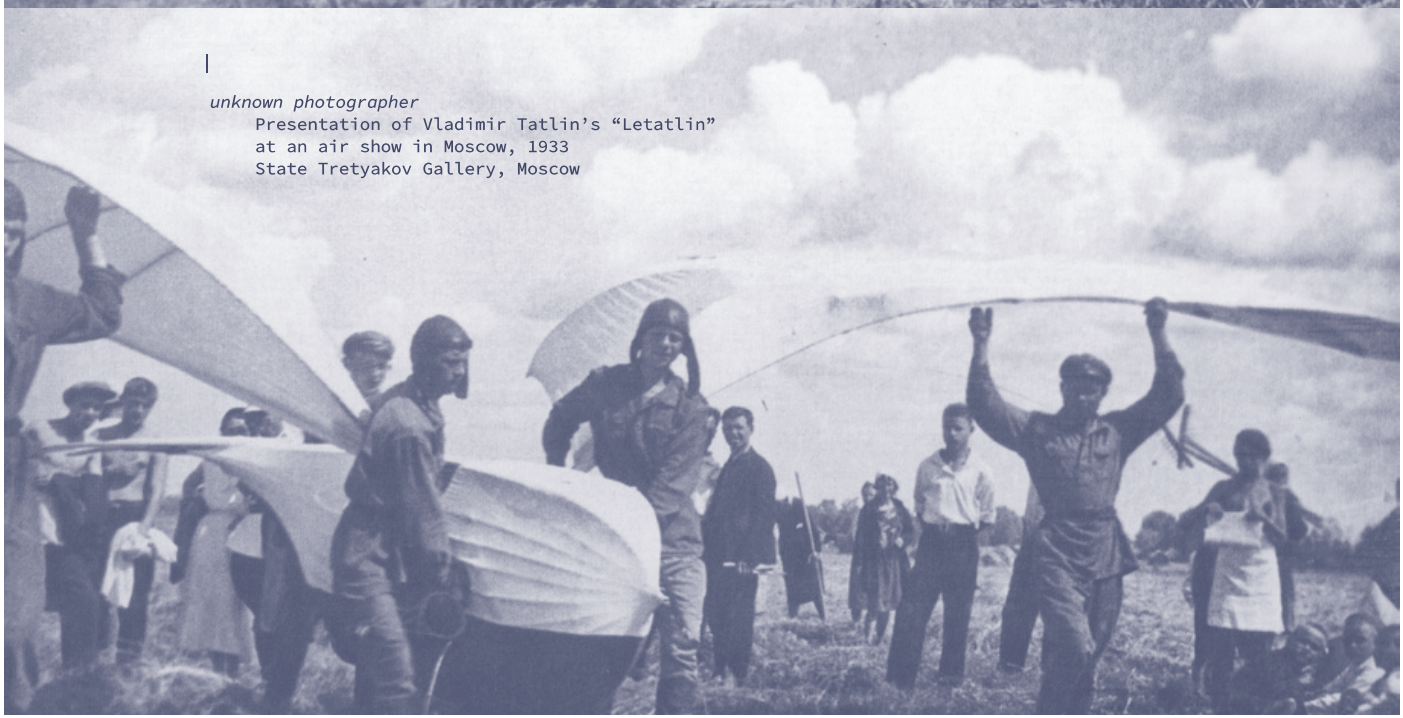


Scratching the Sky. Five footnotes to Marko Peljhan's *Here we go again... System 317*

ANDREAS BROECKMANN

unknown photographer
Presentation of Vladimir Tatlin's "Letatlin"
at an air show in Moscow, 1933
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



The ambitions and expectations associated with Marko Peljhan's *Here we go again . . . System 317* are anything but clear: is this proposal for a hypersonic propulsion vehicle a piece of tactical technical resistance, or research on behalf of the military industrial complex? Or is it an elaborately realised metaphor for the futility of any technoscientific hope of salvation – a hope that is futile even for the less than 0.01 per cent, who are the presumed customers of the product?

Such ambiguity of aims and intentions has been an essential part of Peljhan's artistic work – from the locative media project *UCOG 144* (1995), through the long-term *Makrolab* endeavour (1997–2010), to the unmanned aerial vehicle of *System 77-CCR* (2004–2007) and the new *System 317*. All these projects appear to have technical and political traction well outside of the art world contexts in which they are publicly presented and perceived. The unease that accompanies this observation is calculated: what is it we are looking at – sculpture, installation, a form of circulationism (in Kolja Reichert's sense of diverse materials, objects and money being circulated into and out of the art world), or military-grade technology? An important dimension of Peljhan's work lies in provoking the shock of this last confrontation: importing potential weapon systems into an only superficially benign art context and thus opening it up – no, tearing open the curtain that keeps the one from seeing the other. The theatricality of this violent gesture is intended: it is part of Peljhan's play on the different registers of his techno-aesthetic instruments. (And a romantic art aficionado may hope that a similar irritation can also be carried into the research and development circles of the military industrial complex, where these issues are looked at as technical and political, rather than aesthetic and ethical, challenges.)

What follows is a series of historical references that probe how Marko Peljhan's project responds to certain conceptual questions from the modernist and the postmodernist avant-garde. Peljhan has consistently placed his practice within the tradition of overcoming the boundaries between art, politics and technology – what in the more benign parlance of art criticism is referred to as "art and life".

1. TECHNICITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE STARS

The Russian Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) has been an important inspiration for Marko Peljhan ever since the early 1990s – as Khlebnikov was for many revolutionary avant-gardists, including Mayakovsky and Tatlin, who mourned the early death of their visionary comrade as an incalculable loss. In his writings, Khlebnikov developed a poetic system he termed the "language of the stars", in which letters and syllables in the Russian language were ascribed certain meanings. In the words and sentences of his poems, such as *Ladomir* (1919) and *Scratch Across the Sky* (*Tsarapina po nebu*, 1920), these meanings combined into a meta-semantics that, for Khlebnikov, pointed to the true mechanics of the material world. Similarly, Khlebnikov was fascinated by numbers and sought to discover the laws of time, elaborately and exhaustively trying to ascertain number-based rules for the incidence of historical events.

What is it that makes Marko Peljhan's artistic practice – which at first glance seems so much closer to the pragmatic Productivism of someone like Varvara Stepanova or Vladimir Tatlin – resonate with this somewhat esoteric poetic combinatorics? When Peljhan presented the *Makrolab* at documenta X in 1997, he dedicated a significant part of his lecture to an analysis of the work's title as read through the lens of Khlebnikov's language of the stars. Peljhan's installation *LADOMIR AB 7th SURFACE* (2008) translated Khlebnikov's "tables of destiny" into a three-dimensional hyperobject that superimposed the aims of the *Makrolab* onto Khlebnikov's historical speculations. The number 317 – which we now encounter in the title *Here we go again . . . System 317* – was of crucial significance for Khlebnikov, who was convinced that the occurrence of important events could, with certainty, be related to this number or its multiples, thus allowing for predictions of the future course of history.

This elective affinity between Peljhan and Khlebnikov is rooted, we can presume, in the technicist conception of *poiesis*, which for Khlebnikov implied an automatism of meaning that resides in the materiality of language and signs. For Peljhan's aesthetics, this translates into a conviction about the poietic automatisms of visionary technologies. Where Khlebnikov combines words from everyday language with neologisms engendered by the language of the stars, Peljhan conceives techno-neo-logisms that are intended to construct - mechanically, inevitably, and reliably - a new, superior meaning from this techno-aesthetic practice. Hence, the proposal for the hypersonic propulsion vehicle of *System 317* can be taken as a conceptual gesture that seeks to make another "scratch across the sky".

2. THE TRIUMPH OF FAILURE

Vladimir Tatlin made two attempts at such "scratches across the sky": first the proposal for the *Monument to the Third International*, and then *Letatlin.* The *Monument*, designed in 1920 and planned as a gigantic 400-metre-high tower of steel and glass to commemorate the triumph of the Russian Revolution, became – even in its unrealised form, as drawings and scale models – a signature piece that represented the historic transgression of the old order and a monument to the vertiginous ambitions of the new one. Soon afterwards, in the early 1920s, Tatlin was working on a project for a flying apparatus whose wings would be operated by a person lying inside. The *Letatlin,* whose name is derived from the Russian verb *letat'*, "to fly", but of course combines it with *Tatlin*, was meant to be a flying machine that was as affordable and easy to use as a bicycle.

In the literature about pioneers such as Daedalus, Leonardo da Vinci, or Otto Lilienthal, the "dream of flight" is often presumed to be a fundamental anthropological constant. Its motivation, however, should not be treated as an unchanging anthropological fact. Instead, its historically specific, pragmatic, and utopian potential should be investigated – not least in the case of Peljhan's project *Here we go again . . . System 317.*

In Tatlin's case, in light of the emerging military aircraft industry of the 1920s, we can assume that the rear-guard humanism of the *Letatlin,* its artisanal individualism, was part of the message the artist wanted to send. At the same time, the development of the *Letatlin* was supported during its crucial construction phase, from 1929 to 1932, by the pioneering Union of Societies of Assistance to Defence, Aviation and Chemical Construction of the USSR (OSOAVIAKhIM). The organisation's campaign sought to awaken enthusiasm for flying as well as popular support for the Soviet aviation industry. A 1934 poster advertising a plenum of the Communist Party featured a portrait of

Tatlin – alongside four other Soviet inventors with their militarily interesting technological projects – and a photo of the *Letatlin* with OSOAVIAKhIM activists, under the title “The Inventor – the Foremost Combatant for the Most Modern Technology in National Defence”.

The photo in the poster had been taken on a sunny day during an air show near Moscow in 1933. We see the biomorphic aerial device, spanning ten metres and weighing around thirty-five kilograms, with its wings and fuselage covered in white fabric, being carried by several young men in pilot uniforms across a flat, freshly harvested field. There does not seem to be the remotest chance that this bird will fly that day, nor is there any indication of such an ambition, even if another photo taken the same day shows Tatlin demonstrating to a young activist how the wings should be moved to gain aerodynamic traction. In fact, there is no need for the device to fly to make its point: it is an imaginative model for a potential that is yet to be realised – utopian in the best sense of the word, namely, with a potential that will certainly not be fulfilled in the here-and-now of that field outside of Moscow but that is not impossible either.

That may well be the message that was heard. Tatlin was soon being politically attacked – for his artistic “formalism” and lack of commitment to the doctrine of Socialist Realism, and also for not being a proper artist but merely an engineer. After being forced into “self-criticism”, he abandoned his Constructivist projects and went back to the painting practice he had put aside during the revolution. Thus, in the end, the *Letatlin* becomes a metaphor for the degree to which a social system is ready to recognise and cherish, or sanction and punish, the transgression of its ideological boundaries.

3. VACATING THE IMMOBILE BODY

The fragility of the human body is a major challenge for the fulfilment of *System 317*'s mission. For the time being it must be assumed that a human passenger's body will simply and swiftly die under the conditions of hypersonic propulsion.

A somewhat ironic proposal for a way to compensate for the human body's inability to adapt to certain technical environments was put forward by the Austrian artist-philosopher Oswald Wiener in the mid-1960s. Wiener developed the idea of the "Bio-Adapter", a device whose purpose is to fully contain a human body and gradually, over time, take over the body and mind of its inhabitant.

Wiener's 1966 text – presented as a fragment, or work in progress, in its first publication in 1969 – describes different functional and theoretical aspects of the Bio-Adapter, how it constructs certain experiences and how, for instance, it deals with unavoidable temporary failures. The description singles out certain experiences as conducive to adaptation, namely ecstasy – sexual ecstasy in particular, to the induction of which Wiener devotes an especially long and detailed section. The Bio-Adapter is described as a "happiness suit" (*Glücks-Anzug*) and likened to an artificial "uterus". It is there to counteract deficiencies both in the rapport between the human individual and its environment and in the psychic make-up of the human subject itself:

> It is its [the Bio-Adapter's] purpose to supersede the world. That means it will take over the heretofore inadequate function of the "existing environment" as transmitter and receiver of vital messages (nourishment and entertainment, metabolism and intellectual exchange), and will be more appropriate for its individualised task than was the so-called natural environment, which was common to "everybody" and which is now obsolete.

The following description of the deficient human being can stand in for an analysis of the physiological problems that the body would encounter when placed in the *System 317* passenger capsule. Wiener writes:

> Outside of its adapter, the human being is an abandoned, nervously activated and miserably equipped lump of slime (in terms of language, logic, thinking power, sensory organs, tools), shaken by the fear of life and petrified by the fear of death. After putting on its bio-complement, the human becomes a sovereign entity which no longer needs to cope with the cosmos and its conquest because it now ranks distinctly higher than the cosmos in the hierarchy of possible valences.

The gradual adaptation of the human “bio-body” to the Bio-Adapter takes place in several phases. In the first phase, the Bio-Adapter simulates the living environment that the inhabitant is acquainted with, through a variety of visual, auditory and tactile interfaces. Gradually, in the second phase, the old body functions are taken over by the adapter and replaced by modules that can generate experiences much better suited to the wishes and desires of the inhabitant. “Mechanical aggregates become unnecessary and are dismantled by the adapter and converted, or transferred to storage (where the cell tissues of the bio-body are also kept),” Wiener writes, describing these processes as a “gradual absorbing of the cell organisation by the adapter’s electronic circuit complexes”. In this second phase of the adaptation, the goal is not simplification, but the improvement, complexity, and expansion of the consciousness of the inhabitant - who is alternatively referred to as the “patient”, “inmate” or “bio-module”.

Wiener’s text is a fantasy about a fully cybernated human body - pushing to the limits ideas for a complete replacement of the natural living environment by a highly individualised and simulated virtual world. “Consciousness,” the text says, “becomes the self of the environment.” In the fiction of the Bio-Adapter, the data-processing machine enables an explosion of human consciousness - which itself is the limiting capsule - to the point where the cybernated, expanded consciousness becomes *self-contained.*

So far, the exit strategy of *System 317* assumes the integrity of the human body that inhabits it, but in view of the scenario of the Bio-Adapter we should consider whether technically more satisfying solutions for the vehicle could be found if human bodies were adapted, vacated, or left behind altogether.

4. IM-HABITABLE

When it comes to speculation about *System 317* as a living environment, we have a more benign and comfortably banal model in the form of the "sleeping cells" of the Japanese capsule hotels, which were first introduced in the late 1970s. These are bed-sized boxes one metre high, equipped with some technical amenities and air conditioning, and intended only for well-insulated transit between a late night out and morning coffee at the office.

One such cell was presented in the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in Paris in 1985 as an example of how the combination of technical development and capitalist economics led to new spatial solutions with a deep impact on subjectivities. In the exhibition, it was presented under the title "Habitacle," a term that joins the function of housing with the passenger's cabin and pilot's cockpit – a functional unit for accommodation, travel, and control.

In his short text for the catalogue, the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who curated *Les Immatériaux*, expressed his concern about the reductive approach to the human inhabitant that is associated with the sleeping cell: "Decline of the habitat as place of identification and enjoyment, [and instead] appearance of environments designed for useful organic functions? A prosthetic habitat of a body deprived of any dimension other than functional? . . . Restorative sleep as the only issue taken into consideration."

A wordplay that Lyotard himself did not use but that is in line with his analysis of the neologism of the "immaterials" would be to say that the *habitacle* – and thus also the presumed passenger cabin of *System 317* – is "im-habitable". In Lyotard's understanding, the "immaterial" is not something non-material, or without any materiality, but rather indicates a polyvalent status between different forms and modes of existence – like the code of DNA or software-based texts and images: porous and translatable

signs. By analogy, the “im-habitable” passenger cabin would be a space that is, at the same time or different times, a living environment, a prison cell, a body prosthesis, and a body replacement unit. (And it is positioned at the horizon of human existence on Earth.)

For Lyotard, such a collapse of the modernist subject in an im-habitable capsular environment is the result of a technoscientific development in the course of which the ambitions for increased technological perfection lead to a destabilisation of the subject of this very modernity. The confrontation with the results of this modernist perfectionism, this “face-to-face” with the subjects’ technoscientific other, leads to sorrow, *chagrin*, which Lyotard identifies as a constitutive sentiment of the postmodern condition. As the technoscientific project of modernity reaches its completion, this sorrow replaces the two-centuries-old modernist hope.

The proposition here is that we must conceive of *System 317* as a monument to this sorrow, similarly to the way Lyotard, in 1984, envisaged the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* as “a sort of work of mourning for modernity”: “We must mourn for modernity, or at least certain aspects of modernity that today seem illusory or dangerous.” To ensure the survival of its passengers, or rather, imhabitants, *System 317* will require a saturation of bodies, sensors, and data, an intimate fusion between mind, body and apparatus, that necessitates the surrender of control. Lyotard continues: “In this face-to-face relation to a universe that is his to dominate - a heroic relation, I would say - in order to make himself the master of it, man must become something else entirely: the human subject becomes no longer a subject but, I would say, one case among others, . . . just one case among the many multiple interactions that constitute the universe.”

5. IN THE MUSEUM OF ACCIDENTS

The French architect and technology critic Paul Virilio once proposed the establishment of a "Museum of Accidents", which, for every period of technological development, would exhibit the respective concomitant accidents, such as the derailment of a locomotive, the crash of an automobile, or the meltdown of a nuclear power station. He wrote: "Each period of technological development, with its instruments and machines, brings its share of specialized accidents, thus revealing *en negatif* the scope of scientific thought." Virilio saw this idea not only as a contribution to the general awareness of the risks inherent in technological innovation, but also as a way to develop a more sober, detached attitude towards technical malfunction, which, according to Virilio, is not an aberration, but an aspect, an *accidens*, an accessory, to the more narrowly intended functionality of a technical system.

With this proposal in mind, we can ask what the accidents, the unintended accessories, of *System 317* could be. One could be the death of passengers due to physiological strain; another, the self-incineration of the device from frictional heat due to its high speed.

Yet another aspect of the system could be that it has nowhere to land, and thus nowhere to go . . . But such aimlessness, this utopian absence of any conceivable destination, is consistent with the awkward position the device holds in the theory of accidents: Virilio distinguishes between the “local” accident, which happens in a particular place, and the “global” or “integral” accident, which happens simultaneously at a global scale. This integral accident can be of a more technological type – like the infestation of a prolific virus in globally networked computers – or of an ecological type, where the deterioration of the natural environment in general, or, say, the progressive extermination of bees in particular, results from a mixture of sustained technical, chemical, climatic and behavioural factors. “The post-industrial accident . . . goes beyond a certain place; you may say that it does no longer ‘take place’, but becomes an environment.” The fatal paradox of *System 317* is that it assumes an isolated, “local” solution for an escape from an integral and global crisis situation.

POSTSCRIPT

In a text from 2003, Marko Peljhan tells the story of the scene which generated the first concrete ideas for the *Makrolab*. On a late-winter day in 1994, Peljhan and some friends were on the Croatian island of Krk, observing the barren landscape, listening to the sound of shelling coming from the Bosnian city of Bihać, a hundred kilometres away, and seeing airplanes in the sky above, on reconnaissance or humanitarian relief missions. As Peljhan writes: "The visible and the invisible merge into an extensive landscape, the past and the future converge, the machines of construction and destruction working in unison." The discussion among the group of artist friends was about how to respond to the Yugoslav calamity and what a performance art of the future might be. Peljhan, twenty-five years old at the time, thought of Velimir Khlebnikov, who himself was in his early thirties when another world went down in ruins during the First World War. Khlebnikov's utopian poem *Ladomir* – whose "principal preoccupation [. . .] is the destruction of the old order and synthesis of the new" – merged in Peljhan's mind with the scene on Krk to create the vision of a technoid vehicle that in 1997 would become *Makrolab*.

More than twenty years later, the payload of *System 317* appears more burdensome, its launch pads and interfaces furrowed by sorrow. Maybe the new avant-garde of futurist birds will have to be flightless and earthbound.

For Alex Adriaansens, pilot of instability.

REFERENCES

Asendorf, Christoph. *Super-Constellation: Flugzeug und Raumrevolution: Die Wirkung der Luftfahrt auf Kunst und Kultur der Moderne.* Vienna and New York: Springer, 1997.

Broeckmann, Andreas. *Machine Art in the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016.

Cooke, Raymond. *Velimir Khlebnikov: A Critical Study.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Gough, Maria. “Model Spectacle.” In *Tatlin: New Art for a New World: International Symposium*, edited by Roland Wetzel and Anna Szech. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013, 253–257.

Les Immatériaux: Album et Inventaire. Exh. cat. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985.

Lyotard, Jean-François. “After six months of work . . . / Après six mois de travail . . .” (1984). In *30 Years after* Les Immatériaux – *Art, Science and Theory*, edited by Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann. Lüneburg: meson press, 2015, 29–66.

Peljhan, Marko. "Krk." In *Makrolab*, edited by Rob Le Frenais et al. London: The Arts Catalyst and Zavod Projekt Atol, in association with Tramway, 2003, 46–48.

Siukonen, Jyrki. *Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines: Studies on Artists and the Dream of Flight, 1900–1935.* Helsinki: Suomalisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2001.

Strigalev, Anatolij, and Jürgen Harten (eds.). *Vladimir Tatlin Retrospektive.* Cologne: DuMont, 1993.

Virilio, Paul. "Surfing the Accident: Interview with Andreas Ruby." In *The Art of the Accident*, edited by V2_Organisation. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 1998, 30–44.

Virilio, Paul. "Museum of Accidents" (1986), *Public* (Toronto), no. 2, 1989, 80–85.

Wetzel, Roland, et al. (ed.). *Tatlin – neue Kunst für eine neue Welt.* Exh. cat. Basel: Museum Tinguely, 2012.

Wetzel, Roland, and Anna Szech (eds.). *Tatlin – New Art for a New World: International Symposium.* Basel: Museum Tinguely, 2013.

Wiener, Oswald. "appendix A: der bio-adapter" (1969). In *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa.* Salzburg: Jung und Jung Verlag, 2014, clxxv–clxxxiii. (Excerpts in the present text are translated by A.B.)

Wunderlich, Antonia. *Der Philosoph im Museum: Die Ausstellung* Les Immatériaux *von Jean-François Lyotard.* Bielefeld: transcript, 2008.

Zhadova [Shadowa], Larissa A. (ed.). *Tatlin.* Weingarten: Kunstverlag Weingarten, 1987.