

Floating in a Wish-fulfilment Theme Park Zero Gravity in Russia in the early 2000s

"RUSSIAN COSMONAUTS ONLY, it says on the door of the Russian WC. Correspondingly on the US toilet door, AMERICA, EUROPEAN AND JAPANESE ASTRONAUTS ONLY. *Because of ongoing political disputes please use your national toilet*". From 'Orbital' by Samantha Harvey (2024) a near-future fiction set on the International Space Station.¹ The International Space Station in reality today remains one of the few examples of co-operation that exists between Russia and the 'West' during an age of global instability and war.

While recently teaching curating students at Central St Martins, London, I showed a film I produced around 20 years ago 'Attention Weightlessness'² which shows a number of artists on a Russian military aircraft, floating in in a series of three parabolic flights, organised by The Arts Catalyst with Projekt Atol³ in the early 2000s. While my students are always excited and impressed by this description of a floating artists studio, accessible only to astronauts or cosmonauts, I find it myself increasingly uneasy about justifying this ambitious project in the light of the 2014 invasion by Russia of Ukraine and the full-scale invasion in 2023, notwithstanding doubts about burning up jet fuel for art in an age of visible climate catastrophe.

How had it started? At The Arts Catalyst, Nicola Triscott and I had made initial contact with the dancer and choreographer Kitsou Dubois,⁴ who, in the mid 90's had become the first artist in zero gravity, flying with CNES, the French Space agency in a Caravelle aircraft. Parabolic flight is the only way to train for continuous Zero Gravity in space. The plane climbs to a certain altitude and the passengers experience double gravity for around 30 seconds, then as the plane reaches the height of the parabola, 30 seconds of free-fall when they can float freely, then 30 seconds of double gravity. This is repeated between 10-20 times depending on the plane that is used, together with the experimental program that is performed. With Kitsou having reached a full stop with CNES, we decided to take on her project and get her and her dancers on to a European Space Agency airbus at Bordeaux, exclusively used by scientific projects Nicola's alma mater being Imperial College London, we assembled a team of biodynamics engineers there with a view to measuring the dancer's responses in zero gravity with a magnetic device that could interfere with

¹ Vintage 2004

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sc2BGizmgJI&t=25s>

³ <https://projekt-atol.si/en/>

⁴ <https://www.kitsoudubois.com/english>

their responses. Our experiment was accepted by ESA but there would be a waiting list of several years before we could get on a flight.

In 1998 we were touring The Arts Catalyst's 'Atomic'⁵ exhibition, featuring the world's first nuclear sculptor, James Acord and were offered an exhibition in Slovenia by Projekt Atol, directed by Marko Peljhan, whose 'Makrolab' project⁶ (an intensive art-science residency in a space-station-like structure) we had just visited at Documenta X in Kassel and started discussing the staging of it in the remote highlands of Scotland . While there, I was at the apartment of Slovenian theatre director Dragan Zivadinov⁷, who had already flown in zero gravity in Russia, when the call came from the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut training centre in Moscow telling him that his rehearsal for the first zero gravity theatre piece was on. We were immediately invited to participate by Marko and Dragan. Nicola Triscott, who was later to thrive in zero gravity and take up sky-diving as a result, was surprised at my reluctance. "I'm a curator not a cosmonaut" I protested, to no avail. Within days I was on a plane to Moscow and on an freezing airfield waiting to take off. This first flight paved the way to fast-tracking Kitsou back into zero gravity - we eventually flew her experiment with ESA several years later. But here's my account of arriving in Moscow followed by my description of the flight which strangely reflects my misgivings now. (taken from an as-yet unpublished commentary on John le Carré's *The Russia House*⁸ in which I compare the timeline of his plots with some of the projects I have been involved with), followed by an extract of my description of the actual flight.

"Arriving at Sheremetyevo Airport I had heard that taxis to the centre were very difficult to get. You were either in a tour bus or had a driver. One either had to risk a 'private car' - a pirate cab (usually driven by drunks or worse) or use a communal minibus, with Cyrillic destinations that I couldn't understand. Fortunately for me, in the queue for customs I recognised someone from my flight, obviously Russian who spoke English. He agreed to help me get a minibus. On the other side his friends were all waiting for him to return from a rare visit, even then, to the West. We all piled in to the minibus and arrived at an apartment block close to the Aeroport metro station (mentioned in *'The Russia House - there is no Aeroport'*). There was no question of continuing to my hotel until I had experienced traditional Russian hospitality, in an old-fashioned bohemian intellectual atmosphere with artists, poets and writers. It was with great difficulty I extracted myself from copious helpings of vodka and was put into a 'private car' to the Proton Hotel, where visiting astronauts and cosmonauts stayed in Moscow . However, my hosts had been appalled by my

⁵ <https://artscatalyst.org/whats-on/atomic/>

⁶ <https://www.ladomir.net>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragan_%C5%BDivadinov

⁸ <https://johnlecarre.com/books/the-russia-house/>

mission to Moscow, which was to fly in a Zero Gravity plane at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre. All their lives, the heroic Soviet achievements of Gagarin had been stuffed down their throats and they had no idea why an art-minded Westerner wished to visit such a place".

I wrote in the Independent newspaper at the time: "I had been called to Star City, the former secret cosmonaut training base, near Moscow with three days notice (Get visa! Get medical!) by Marko Peljhan, a friend and long-time collaborator, who had put together the project in a last minute firefight for the explosive and charismatic Slovenian theatre director Dragan Zivadinov. Zivadinov, who was later to mount the first full-scale theatre performance later that year, complete with audience, on the Ilyushin, had earlier made a solo flight with other participants as part of a cigarette company-sponsored 'space training' competition the previous year in the new free-for all Russia, and Peljhan had had previous contact with the Russian space agency through the organisation of a live video conference with the Kristall mission on the MIR space station while it was overflying Slovenia in May 1998. Arriving after a whirlwind of last-minute preparations we found ourselves at the gate of Star City in an aged 'cosmonaut bus'. We were clearly in unknown territory, waiting for over 3 hours to find someone in charge".

"A variety of officers in greatcoats and the characteristic Russian military big hats came back and forth with contradictory messages, but the Slovenian team, all Russian space buffs, kept spotting space legends entering and leaving. There's Leonov!⁹ And Krikalev!¹⁰ I remember feeling a mixture of anxiety and disbelief that we would ever be allowed to actually take off, but in what seemed no time at all we were lined up like military recruits with parachutes, and after an apparently cursory medical exam were taking off in a rather creaky but enormous jet plane, smelling of oil and jet fuel and feeling as if I hadn't missed the Second World War and conscription in my lifetime after all. To my bemusement and even further disbelief my trainer for the flight was none other than Yuri Gidzenko,¹¹ another legendary long-duration MIR cosmonaut and later to command the mission to build the International Space Station. Sergei Krikalev (pictured in the film 'Out Of The Present' as the Last Soviet Citizen, stranded on MIR during the fall of communism¹²) also joined us for the ride".

The first moment of zero gravity is one of those 'wake-up' moments where you feel like you have been dreaming for the rest of your life. Nothing quite computes, you feel as if you are somehow a

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexei_Leonov

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei_Krikalev

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Gidzenko

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcmjp0Tehnk>

character in a strange movie. I felt a sharp tingling of the blood around my extremities, followed by a massive panic attack. Time to test my emotional stability. In one direction to the left of my field of vision flew one of the Slovenian actors, stage-diving, hair flying, laughing. Gidzenko hovered solicitously upside down near me: 'Are you OK?'. I nodded, stiff upper lip operational, as he flew off diagonally to play a game of 3-dimensional tag with Krikalev. "It's the most expensive drug in the world" Zivadinov said later, and seeing the cosmonauts get their fix, I could see why."

After this experience I attended a space and the arts Leonardo/Olats workshop at what is now known as the Malina house in Paris . On March 23 2001 along with Roger Malina, Annick Bureaud, Marko Peljhan and others, we drank a toast to the MIR space station, the first Soviet long-term habitat in space, which was being 'de-orbited' ¹³ that night, burning up into the ocean. The Swiss-American artist, Arthur Woods, had sent the first kinetic sculpture into space on MIR, a work called 'Cosmic Dancer',¹⁴ which was destroyed along with the station. After drinking the toast we decided to form a European consortium to apply for cultural funding from the EU, Culture 2000, the precursor of the current Creative Europe fund, from which the UK is now sadly excluded for reasons stemming ironically from Russian corruption and political manoeuvres influencing the Brexit vote.

We were successful in getting this funding, the members of the consortium being V2 -Lab for the Unstable Media, Holland, Leonardo-OLATS, France, Projekt Atol Slovenia and the Multimedia Centre for Actual Arts, Russia as a third-country partner. After doing an initial experimental flight, enabling Kitsou Dubois and her dancers to fly, we went ahead with two open call for artists and in a considerable feat of organisation brought artists and equipment to Star City in Moscow. Notable among the 50 artists and scientific projects were the Zero Genies,¹⁵ Ansuman Biswas and Jem Finer on an actual flying carpet, The Otolith Group,¹⁶ Anjalika Sagar (attempting to sleep in Zero G) and Kodwo Eshun, space medic and consultant anaesthetist Kevin Fong, who now broadcasts a popular podcast, 16 Sunsets,¹⁷ about the Space shuttle, Ewen Chardronnet demonstrating on behalf of the Association of Autonomous Astronauts ¹⁸ and the fiendishly ambitious payload of Marcel-li Antunez-Roca ¹⁹ with a massive exoskeleton. Marko Peljhan, as flight director, did a lot of

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT2xmO23LtU&t=2s>

¹⁴ <https://www.cosmicdancer.com/>

¹⁵ <http://zerogenie.net/zerogenie.html>

¹⁶ <https://otolithgroup.org/>

¹⁷ <https://sixteensunsets.com/show/>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMj9PQZ3vAQ>

¹⁹ <https://www.marceliantunez.com/>

the direct negotiation with the complex layers of command and organisation at Star City, though looking back it is hard to see how he managed it. Not only did we have to build a considerable infrastructure, we had to negotiate with the Russian military with small presents (cognac, watches, Swiss army knives and bring in expensive filming and technical equipment through customs with accompanying 'negotiation acceleration techniques' (100\$ here, 100\$ there...) although the main costs for the flight were based on contracts with bona-fide companies with bank accounts in Latvia, Seychelles and Cyprus. On one occasion I had to pay cash for a sound system from a mafia-owned nightclub with potential threats of violence if we did not return the gear.

Moscow at that time had that chaotic post-Soviet atmosphere that was a heady mix of gangsterism, 24 hour nightclubs, drunks reeling through the streets, super-luxury and edgy criminality that Michael Idov, Latvian-American author of 'Dressed Up For A Riot - Misadventures in Putin's Moscow'²⁰, about his two-year editorship between 2012 and 2014 of Russia's GQ Magazine, would call a "nebulous vision of Russia as a wish-fulfilment theme park". Star City, in contrast, was, 10 years after the fall of the Wall, a time-capsule, a Soviet-era theme park caught in aspic, with remains of 60's era spacecraft, a shrine to Gagarin and statues of cosmonauts.²¹

The late artist and inventor Alexei Blinov²² was our interpreter and guide for these flights. It was with Alexei that I discovered that our trainer friends in the Russian military had a darker side. We had returned from a reception at the British Embassy with our friendly commander, who was a Major at the time and we will call Boris (he appears as a 'General' in this photo by Vincent Fourier that was exhibited in the Cosmonauts Exhibition at London's Science Museum, although looking at the photo, it is clear that it was taken about the same time when we were there, so the 'General' is definitely an invention by someone)²³. As usual our return to Star City was dogged by the ancient cosmonaut bus (Gagarin had reputedly travelled to his flight in a similar vehicle) and horrendous Moscow traffic, followed by a long wait at the gates of Star City for our passports and permissions to enter to be inspected. We were now over two hours late for an appointment and sound check with another rather more senior officer, the director of the Cosmonaut Club, where we planned to present a post-flight afro-futurist concert by the group Flow Motion.²⁴ It was now clear that in every authoritarian system there were the usual rivalries, but as a visiting Western curator I was not prepared for what followed. On arrival, the commander of the club, complete with full uniform and

²⁰ Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2018

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Gagarin_Cosmonaut_Training_Center

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexei_Blinov

²³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXMhlylr69b/>

²⁴ <https://iniva.org/library/digital-archive/people/f/flow-motion/>

big hat, strode up to me and despite being able to speak English, stood nose to nose opposite me screaming abuse in Russian for at least five minutes in full military style. I have never served in any military service so this came as a profound shock to my rather sensitive, artistic nature. Finally I asked Alexei what he had been shouting. Alexei, who possessed a rather dry, dark Russian humour said "He is debating whether to have you or Boris shot first".

Alexei Blinov, a character with extraordinary features, who looked as if he had stepped straight out of the Russian gulag, had escaped conscription to Afghanistan in the 70's to Amsterdam and was now running a hacker collective in East London. He died in 2019 and at his memorial service I met the film director Ilya Khrzhanovsky,²⁵ instigator of the notorious Dau project,²⁶ which was also known as the Russian Truman show. Funded by the oligarch Sergui Adoniev, it transmuted from a film set to an entire recreation of Soviet life in an abandoned swimming pool outside Kharkiv in Ukraine. it was the largest shooting location in Europe spanning 12,000 square meters, named the Institute, built on the site of the former Dynamo Aquatic Stadium and involving 392,000 participants, over a period between 2009 and 2011, mainly non-actors. Everyone entering the set had to dress Soviet-style, undergo compulsory haircuts, under the gaze of guards who were actually recruited from former KGB members. Allegations of violence and various types of abuse on set abounded, but it now turns out that these had come from a rival oligarch. Alexei Blinov was key to this process and appeared in the many hours of film as a distinct character. More specifically he headed up the 'experimental department', where, according to Wikipedia, media and performance contemporary artists were conducting their experiments such as Marina Abramović, Carsten Höller, Boris Mikhailov, Peter Sellars, Peruvian shaman Guillermo Arévalo and others. I missed the opportunity to participate in this myself. In the summer of 2010, no doubt prompted by Alexei, I had a number of phone calls from a Ukrainian assistant of Khrzhanovsky, offering me flights to Kiev to participate, but I had had enough of Soviet theme parks by then (having nearly been arrested with the American musician and artist Laurie Anderson on a research visit to Moscow that Spring) and declined. Khrzhanovsky has since fallen out with the oligarchs and Russia in general, having been declared a 'foreign agent' over his opposition to the invasion of the country in which he filmed 'Dau'. The massive film with hours of footage is still being released as I write and the first section 'Degradation' can now be seen on Youtube.²⁷ In a sense the Dau project could be seen as dovetailing with our experiences in the Soviet theme park of Star City.

We produced an expensive glossy catalogue 'Zero Gravity' which looks pretty impressive even after 20 years. Reading the catalogue it is clear to see our motivation for doing this massive,

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilya_Khrzhanovsky

²⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DAU_\(project\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DAU_(project))

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14u64rkaxm4&t=7642s>

ambitious, project. Nicola Triscott, in the introduction, talks about our motivation to work in Star City "heart of the Russian space programme, where the philosophical and artistic idealism of Russian cosmicism, dreamed up 100 years ago, still permeates its space efforts". Mihail Ryklin, a Russian philosopher who flew with us and who was old enough to remember Soviet times recalls "legends circulated about Star City , exceptional people lived there, there were special supplies of food and goods...it is now evident how modest the requirement of Soviet people were and what a revolution in consumption they have been through in the last ten to fifteen years. Star City by contrast has remained as it was in the 60s and 70s".

I decided to take another look at that catalogue and also try to contact some of the people who were on that flight, including Russia-based artists. I found Ukrainian artist Yuri Leiderman,²⁸ who had produced a work for our 2003 flight 'Kefir Grains Are Going Onto the Flight'. He had organised an artist boycott of the 2014 Manifesta 10²⁹ in St Petersburg and I expected him to be forthright, especially during the current barbaric bombardment by Russia of Ukraine's civilians and its electricity infrastructure during a severe winter.

I asked him this: In the MIR Zero Gravity campaigns we were interested in countering the NASA narrative and were stimulated by the Cosmism of Tsiolkovsky and Fedorov. However, coming from the West, we may have been fooled by the post-Soviet 'openness' following 1989, travelling as we did to the heart of a symbol of Russian imperialism, the Space programme in a formerly secret city, still then controlled by the military. In 2003, when you made your flight, the current incumbent (Putin) was already on his way up and our flight were now accompanied by a security officer. How do you look back on this, as a Ukrainian artist now living in Berlin? Now we see artists and curators arrested and exiled en masse in Russia, or under house arrest, like Oleg Kulik.³⁰ Were we so naive back then?" Yuri Leiderman replied:

I think that on my part, on our part, it wasn't naivety, but rather foolish vanity: the desire to do high-profile, scandalous art projects, the desire to see our names in the mass media and so on. We thought we are simply exploiting the new Russian imperialism and clever and cunning enough to avoid being affiliated with it. But that's not how it works: if you use something, it also uses you. For myself, I can say that I am now terribly sad that I thoughtlessly wasted my best creative years in this vulgar Moscow, wasted the most valuable thing I had – my Ukrainian identity. Of course, I am now trying with all my might to atone for my guilt towards Ukraine, and I am succeeding in some ways, but what has been lived and squandered cannot be brought back, alas.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Leiderman

²⁹ <https://artukraine.com.ua/eng/a/stop-the-war--pismo-yuriya-leydermana/>

³⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/olegkulikoleg/?hl=en>

I also asked Nicola Triscott to look back at the flights in the light of recent history:

Reading Rob's account brings back the intensity of those projects - the logistical challenges, the bureaucratic tangles, the extraordinary people we met. But I find myself wanting to add some nuance to the retrospective questioning. Yes, the geopolitical landscape has changed catastrophically, and yes, we can look back through that lens. But in 2000-2003, we were engaged in something that felt genuinely important: cultural exchange at a moment of openness, exploring Russian cosmism and space philosophy, creating opportunities for many artists, as well as a handful of scientists, over three expeditions to experience something extraordinary in the spirit of enquiry and experiment, and building real relationships across borders. I studied Russian so I could communicate directly with our collaborators. We brought Krikalev and our Russian artist partners to London. These weren't naive gestures - they were attempts at meaningful cultural dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration at a particular moment in time. Could we have foreseen where Russia would be in 2026 under Putin? Perhaps warning signs were there. But I'm not sure that retrospective self-flagellation serves us well. What I take from those projects is the value of the artistic and scientific exchanges we facilitated, the work that emerged, and the genuine connections made. The context has shifted profoundly, but the spirit of exploration and cross-cultural engagement that drove us then still matters to me now.

I posed the same question of looking back into this history to Marko Peljhan, who continued trying to work with Star City and the Russian space program until 2008:

Interesting historical detail, I stayed in Yuri Leiderman's apartment in the north of Moscow during my first visit to Moscow to organise the Kristall MIR mission event in 1998. He was away that Spring. It is very commendable that you are trying to shed some light on our operations and activities of the time and I completely understand how Yuri feels. After all, we, from the West or by then near West (Slovenia) were visitors there, engaged with the system while there and did not need to deal with it when we were not there, but for them, it was their homeland, that has slowly transformed from a potential vision of a positive future, that we were led to believe was full of spirituality and historical nuances connecting everything that was going on with the historical avant-gardes, conceptualism, cosmism and other esoteric philosophies, to a militarised imperial nationalistic historical dystopia that is the Russia of today. In Slovenia we say "the devil took the joke away"... These processes of course started earlier, but as Nicola said, it was not so easy to read them. We understood the engagement with these rather giant but inefficient systems of power as agents of potential change. And we were perceived, it turns out, as agents that needed attention.

My zone of no return to Star City was the constant presence of an FSB agent in my car (I started renting in the 2000s) during that last 2008 trip. Boris introduced him to me as his 'cousin'. Already

by the looks I knew who I was dealing with and it went downhill from there, after he flashed his FSB ID in my face. Long story short, the Microgravity Interdisciplinary Research was over, only confirmed later by the invasion of Georgia a few months later. All the signs were there. We were not welcome any longer. As you will remember, a similar situation happened during our visit to Star City with Laurie Anderson a few years earlier, car chases, police stops, bribes, she got almost arrested. It became clear that the window is closing and it has closed. I was approached in 2014/2015 by Nahum Mantra and the Mexican space artists to help them organise their alternating gravity campaign, but I told them that due to the invasion of Ukraine, I am no longer dealing with these structures. My last visit to the Russian Federation territory was 2015/16. I participated in another trip, this time to the Russian Arctic as part of the Arctic Perspective Initiative activities and on that trip, well, I ended up in jail in town of Polyarny together with my colleagues and a Russian opposition journalist that we worked with that was brutally attacked while with us. RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous People of the North) was destroyed already a few years earlier and us digging these topics and discussing them was not welcome. Escorted to the border the next day by FSB operatives that posed as "patriots" waving Russian flags, we suspected the worst is yet to come and it did. On February 23, 2022 in the morning I wrote to Yuri Gidzenko on a secure messenger app asking him where is he and what the hell are they thinking? His response was very brief and my last exchange with him: "Marko, this is a tragedy". Since I studied the Soviet and now also Russian space programs quite closely and immersed myself also into the understanding of cosmism, it became clear that there are many nuances that we were unable to perceive while we were trying to engage with these systems, concepts and philosophies in those years. Sergei Krikalev is now a clear and open Putin supporter. I would never have thought this was even remotely possible.

The strange mutual brushing of imperial nationalism and space, which is of course counterintuitive due to the prevalent internationalist, planetary consciousness nominal ideology, together with whole erasures of Ukrainian and other nationalities and cultural identities in the Soviet/Russian dominated melting pot, is something we can now understand much better. I recently read Zero Sum: The Arc of International Business in Russia by Charles Hecker, which is the first book about the period from 1991 to 2022 that is extremely enlightening for anybody that had to deal with this system. The world is now much more unstable than it was then and if you combine nationalistic imperial designs with everything we know today how they came about (if you study Ukraine that is absolutely transparent), it is clear that we must continue with engaged forms of resistance by all means at our disposal. And when I say all means, I mean all. As for how you started your blog, during one of our second visit to the Star City hydrolab, the commander (name withheld), showed us a renewed toilet space that was light years ahead of what we have been able to experience on our first visit. The toilets were horrific the first time. A "post-Soviet nightmare". Now they were renewed and clean. And he quipped 'Marko, thank you and your team for our new toilets.'

Beyond the geo-political aspect of Russian aggression in Ukraine, there is also the issue of the climate catastrophe now unfolding before our eyes. I recently asked Kitsou Dubois In an interview in the Lithuanian publication 'Cosmos As A Journal'³¹ can we justify the burning of fossil fuels for artistic purposes in parabolic flights? She defended her continuing zero gravity work:

In the past, what mattered was that we helped the researchers, the scientists, working together to make discoveries. Now you can just buy a flight and the utility for the scientists in the artistic work is lost, it's absolutely useless. The idea is to keep on making discoveries for both the artists and the scientists. I'm not doing the work in weightlessness for fun. I've been doing it for a long time and it really matters to me. I find it sad that these billionaires went into space recently and were shown doing silly things in space. It's not the same thing, obviously. It does matter to me, a lot". So the research outputs justify making those flights? "I think yes, it's important in advancing our society in making these researches. It's very difficult, but I would fight for it! Because changing our point of view as earthlings leads us to discover ourselves differently and to revisit our relationship to time and space.

Kitsou Dubois, 25 year after we took her team to Star City, continues to make work in zero gravity. I salute her persistence. Since 2019 I have not got on a plane, let alone a diving aircraft, except in emergency. I have used up my quota of jet fuel.

Rob La Frenais

January 2026

³¹ <https://asajournal.lt/wp-content/uploads/Cosmos-as-a-Journal-No.-2-2022-Autumn-Winter.pdf>