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Illustration **Anastasia Filippova**

Vaults: A2

Olga Druzhinina
Curator of the Vaults
Centre for Artistic
Production

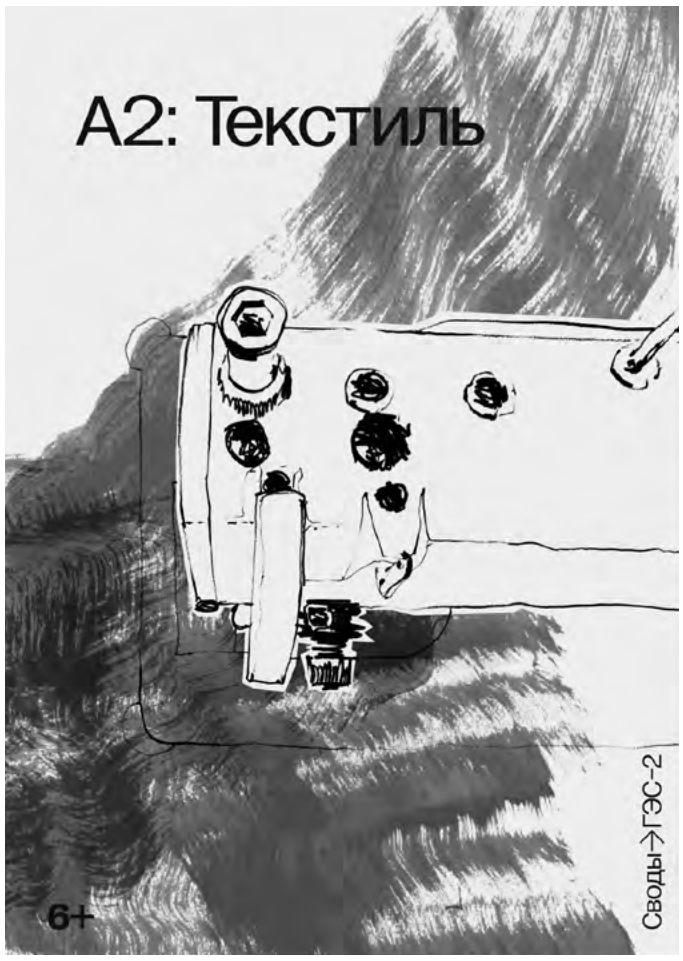
The Vaults Centre for Artistic Production is a complex of eight workshops in Moscow, where both emerging and established artists work with a wide range of technologies and materials, realising GES-2's vision of collaborative cultural production.

The Vaults also publish its own journal, *Vaults: A2*, conceived as a kind of living archive that brings together projects by artists working across different techniques. The first issues were devoted to individual workshops and to the technologies and materials employed there. Gradually, the scope of the publication expanded: it began to include articles on a far broader range of subjects—from the history of various media to the challenges of exhibiting and preserving contemporary art. Today, contributors include art historians and artists, critics and technical specialists, as well as researchers from leading Russian museums such as the Hermitage, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art.

From time to time, we produce special issues together with colleagues from other departments at GES-2. For example, in collaboration with the *V—A—C Sreda* online magazine we published a collection of twelve conversations between *Sreda* contributors and Vaults artists, covering subjects as diverse as architecture and urban studies, personal recollections and collective memory, celebratory banquets and commemorative feasts, music and sound art, video games and theatre, tradition and modernity.

Artists are invited to participate in the making of each issue, which is printed in-house on our A2 RISO risograph. Since every copy is produced almost by hand, the creation of *Vaults: A2* comes close to the making of an artwork itself.

The publication has now been in existence for nearly three years. Over time, we have gathered a body of material that we wanted to share with colleagues abroad. This gave rise to the idea of an English-language digest, with articles selected by Alisa Prudnikova, Programming Director of V—A—C Foundation and GES-2 House of Culture, together with curator, art critic, writer, and *Flash Art* editor Francesco Bonami. Collected within a single volume, these texts chart the landscape of contemporary Russian culture.



All issues of *Vaults: A2*, from September 2022 to February 2025

Synergy

Alisa Prudnikova
Programming Director
of V–A–C Foundation
and GES-2 House of Culture

Photos **Anna Todich**

Within the GES-2 ecosystem, the Vaults play a vital role in fulfilling one of its core missions: cultural production. Here, artists experiment with materials and technologies, bringing their ideas to life using state-of-the-art professional equipment. Yet they are never left alone with the machinery—a skilled specialist is always nearby to offer guidance, answer questions, or help formulate new ones. We take pride in our specialists, whose knowledge and expertise largely determine both the course and the outcome of each experiment. Such expansive opportunities for artistic exploration and research cannot be found anywhere else in Moscow, or even in Russia.

The dialogue between artist and technician is just one of the Vaults' strengths. The Centre is also integrated into the broader programme at GES-2, itself a space of experimentation. Works created in the workshops are regularly included in curatorial projects; artists from the Vaults participate in public events at GES-2; and each year we present exhibitions featuring works by "graduates" of the Vaults programmes.

These exhibitions give us a better sense of the current artistic landscape and deepen our understanding of the evolving language of contemporary art—a perspective that is vital for GES-2 from a socio-cultural standpoint. Colleagues across many departments of our institution incorporate these insights into their work, creating a process of "cross-pollination" and collective development.

Artists are selected to work at the Vaults through a collaborative process: applications are reviewed by a panel of experts, with participation not limited by age, education, or professional status. We are open to anyone with the courage and commitment to declare, I am an artist!

The Vaults also build direct relationships with other institutions, serving as a point of contact with the professional arts community at large. Today, many see the Vaults as a gateway to collaboration with GES-2 and as a launchpad for joint cultural initiatives. A shared desire to help artists realise their ideas has become the driving force behind partnerships with museums, galleries, and art schools.

It is only fitting that our international strategy is being developed in part through the Vaults: we invite artists from around the world to work in our studios and send our own artists to international residencies, where exchange and research lay the groundwork for future projects. This is one of the most promising directions for GES-2 today.

Proximity

Francesco Bonami
Italian Art Curator
and Writer

Photos **Daniil Annenkov, Gleb Leonov, Anna Todich**

The proximity between a production site and a cultural container is common. When it happens, as in the case of the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production and GES–2 House of Culture, the results are surprising, verging toward the unique. The Vaults are by themselves a unique place and for the artists involved, a rare opportunity where the possibility to experiment with access to technologies otherwise not easily available creates the chance to produce works of unpredictable quality.

The rare condition for an artist to be able to realise works of extreme complexity with the chance to show them to the audience of a great cultural institution makes the Vaults a case study in the realm of contemporary art. At the same time, the human scale of the Vaults centre allows the artists an intimacy that could match that of their studios or private environment.

While the scale of GES–2 and that of the Vaults is completely different, the dialogue and the connection between the two architectures is quite organic and natural. This brings to mind the relationship between two other buildings designed by Renzo Piano: the iconic Centre Pompidou and IRCAM, the space devoted to experimental music nearby in Paris. This concept—where creation and exhibition occur in perfectly designed complementary spaces—resembles what in the food industry is called a short supply chain or zero kilometre approach.

The Vaults share the same philosophy as the House of Culture. Through the Vaults' activity and experimental production, one can have a glimpse into the future programming of the House of Culture. The Vaults is a valuable resource and catalyser of new energy rarely seen side by side with a major institution. The flexible and variable programme allows the centre to react to the never-slowing changes and transformation of the contemporary language, which is essential to the maintenance of healthy cultural development.

The Vaults are the incubator of the future and the jump-start cables of possible innovation. The centre enables artists to test their vision without imposing any curatorial interference. The Vaults have the long-disappeared underground energy, unburdened by lack of means and stressful economic conditions. It represents the reinvention of the Renaissance bottega with the tools of the digital era—the ideal condition to nurture unpredictable and unexpected results.

The Vaults: a Contemporary Art Space

Olga Druzhinina
Curator of the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production

Photos **Daniil Annenkov, Anna Todich, Anna Zavozyaeva**

The Vaults Centre for Artistic Production is a space for creative work in the heart of Moscow. The Centre's workshops offer artists, designers, architects, musicians, and other creative professionals the opportunity to work on their projects, experiment with materials and technologies, and explore new media—both independently and with the help of technical specialists. At the Vaults, one can observe the invisible daily routines of artistic production: how an idea gradually takes shape, how a concept transforms depending on the materials and technologies used. Though unnoticed by the viewer, these processes are essential for artists whose practice gives as much weight to what something is made of as to what is made, and sometimes makes the material itself part of the work. In the process, an artist may expand the scope of a project, inspired by the resources of our equipment: a ceramic artist might use a 3D printer to produce plastic prototypes, a musician might build a new instrument out of wood and metal, and a choreographer might choreograph a piece with the help of a robot. Both individual artists and collectives work in our spaces.

1 Wood, Metal, and Plastic Workshop

The machines and tools in this workshop are suitable for all kinds of woodworking, including the creation of designer furniture.

The FlexiCAM CNC milling and engraving machine is one of the largest and most advanced in Russia, with a work surface measuring 1.5 by 3 metres. It mills according to digital 3D models and can carve bas-reliefs up to 15 cm high.

"All our tasks are unusual, requiring non-standard solutions," explains Grigory Tolchinsky, who served as a woodworking specialist at the Vaults in 2021—2022. "Take, for instance, Sveta Shuvaeva's piece *Ispodlobye*—a series of objects made from charred wood and jacquard fabric woven by the artist herself in our textile workshop based on her own designs. There was actually more joinery involved than weaving. It was interesting from a construction perspective as well. And when I worked on the set for the performance *Dzhan*, created by Yekaterina Kukol, Yelena Drozdova, and Elina Bolshenkova, I had to bend plywood using a mould, just like the great Finnish designer and architect Alvar Aalto used to do."

The star of the metal workshop is the KUKA robotic arm, a robot manipulator that can be used for milling or 3D printing in plastic. The robotic arm has movable joints and eight axes of rotation. It is best suited to large-scale objects—these machines are capable of assembling cars, but can also tackle far more intricate tasks.

2 Ceramics Workshop

The ceramics workshop offers the opportunity to experiment with any kind of clay.

"The most important feature here is the muffle kiln made by the German company Nabertherm, which heats up to 1300°C. It has a 300-litre capacity, which makes it possible to fire pieces up to 80 cm tall," explains Natasha Tsygankova, who oversees not only the weaving but also the ceramics equipment. "Our kiln has a very convenient loading system: the bottom platform slides out completely, so you can easily arrange your pieces on it and slide it back in without damaging anything."

Artist Vasilisa Lebedeva came up with a total installation: "It's a kind of scale model of the world in the form of a playground with felt and textile installations and ceramic sculptures that reference traditional clay whistles. The figures are quite large, and wet clay doesn't hold its shape, so I needed support structures to work with. It was very convenient to have the woodworking shop nearby: the specialists prepared the bases according to my sketches, which made the sculpting easier. Then the supports could be incorporated into the final work. I'm very interested in combining ceramics with other materials—plastic elements, textiles, experimenting with majolica, embedding semiprecious stones and crystals."

Another example of ceramics as part of an installation is Alla Mirovskaya's *Greetings from Inta!.* Alla addresses the subject of state repression. Her total installation is based on a collection of objects made by inmates of the Mineralny labour camp in the settlement of Inta, Komi Republic, in the 1940s—1950s. One of the installation's key elements is a ceramic model of the Inta water tower, designed in 1954 by architect Artur Tamvelius, a Gulag prisoner, and constructed by fellow inmates.

The tower was difficult to produce due to its size and complexity: the finished piece was over 75 centimetres tall and weighed around 40 kilograms in its raw form. It consisted of four sections that had to be joined precisely, taking into account clay shrinkage during firing. This required a structural drawing with precise calculations of height, wall thickness, placement of supports, and weight distribution.

3 3D Printing Workshop

The Vaults are equipped with state-of-the-art machines capable of handling a wide range of materials and working methods. For instance, photopolymer printers can produce models in up to 4K resolution. Filament printers are more versatile and suitable for both technical and artistic applications. They can print not only with standard plastics but also with carbon-, metal-, and wood-filled filaments, as well as fibreglass.

"We use two main technologies. The first is FDM printing, or filament printing: the object is built up layer by layer from pre-melted plastic filament. The second is photopolymer printing, using either a laser or ultraviolet light. Laser printing is done in a small chamber, about 12.5 by 15 centimetres, while UV printing allows us to make objects up to 40 centimetres tall," explains Sergey Kalinin, a specialist in working with metal, CNC machines, and 3D printers.

Alexander Fedorov, a member of the Friends of the Vaults programme, is working on the project *Tashkent: Architecture of Seismic Modernism*. He plans to print 3D models of iconic buildings raised in Tashkent following the 1966 earthquake, which destroyed almost the entire city. The modernist architects of the time developed not only earthquake-resistant structures but also innovative ways of living: tower blocks with rooftop swimming pools, elevated courtyards and apartments with rounded corners, a market with a sky-blue dome, and concrete walls adorned with ornate decorations and mosaic patterns.

"I want to tell the story of the buildings from this unique period," says Fedorov. "Many of them were never listed and are now being demolished or lost in the sprawl of contemporary urban development. It's important to me to draw attention to them, to show the value and beauty of these structures, and the era they represent."

4 Textile Workshop

Alongside a basic setup of industrial and domestic sewing machines, an overlocker for finishing fabric edges, and a steaming table, the textile workshop is home to unique weaving equipment. Most notable is the first digital TC2 Jacquard loom installed in Russia, capable of producing photo-realistic images in cloth. Though it operates using cutting-edge technology, it still demands constant human participation: Norwegian artists Vibeke Vestby and Geetika Nautiyal designed it not for mass production but for creative experimentation with woven structures. The weft threads are inserted by hand, and instead of standard fibres, one can use straw, fishing line, 3D-printed plastic, or a combination of materials in different parts of the textile. 2640 warp threads—24 per centimetre—are also threaded manually before being raised automatically according to a digital programme. Patterns and images of any complexity can be produced, with each interlacing forming a pixel. Multimedia artist Alina Tikhonova, a participant in the *ColLab* programme, used the TC2 loom to create nine textiles depicting the chemical reaction between water and oil: "I'd been waiting for this equipment to appear in Russia, I'd long dreamed of working with the true precursor to the computer: punched cards were tested on Jacquard looms long before they were used in computing machines."

Textile production in Russia has a long history and rich traditions. Some of the country's fabrics ended up in world-renowned museum collections—including the Victoria and Albert Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The late nineteenth—early twetieth century collection of Stroganov School textiles survives mostly as poor-quality black-and-white reproductions of design fragments. Ekaterina Polyakova, head of the Department of Textile Design at the Stroganov State University of Arts and Industry, together with her students Daria Dentsel, Sofya Makeeva, and Polina Pleshkova, developed their own method to reconstruct these historical patterns. They enhanced the original printed images using neural networks and graphic software, and redrew individual elements and pattern repeats. For the first time, the legendary Stroganov collection was recreated using the TC2 Jacquard loom.

As Ekaterina Polyakova explains, "The textiles of the Stroganov School were a distinctive phenomenon of the late nineteenth century. At the time, their style was described as 'Russo-Byzantine' or 'Russo-Slavic'. The best student designs were used in the weaving and printing workshops. These were true masterpieces of design, exhibited as exemplary specimens of Russian decorative and industrial art. But we know almost nothing about them, as most of the textiles and design sketches have been lost. Our dream is not only to restore the historical collection, but also to update it, to creatively reinterpret it in the light of contemporary trends and new technologies."

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5 Printmaking Studio

The printmaking studio offers the possibility of manual printing with water-based inks on paper or fabric, and in any format, up to and including the maximum size of A0+. There's also a small etching press available for various types of printmaking and for experiments with alternative techniques.

"One of our workshop's key advantages is the range of scales we can work with," says Maria Kharmandaryan, who served as a silk-screen printing specialist in 2022. "We have a very rare A2 risograph that prints in six colours—black, yellow, blue, gold, pink, and red—and with silk-screens, we can print on sheets up to 70×100 centimetres. Our equipment is suitable for both one-off hand-printed works and print runs of any size."

Photographer Vladislav Efimov believes that every artist, in one way or another, reflects on the past: over time it grows hazy, and the path to today's events seems to dissolve within it, becoming unclear. Art can preserve the link between past and present—one just needs to keep returning to their archive, reworking older pieces and giving them new life. In doing so, the past is "reactivated," and one returns to their own beginnings. In his project *Mini-Replicas*, Efimov reconstructs works from twenty or thirty years ago from memory, photographs them, and then reproduces the images through silk-screen printing. The resulting visuals are simplified and more laconic, stripped of any pretension of being "artworks with a capital A." They appear timeless, existing somewhere between past, present, and future.

Ekaterina Gerasimenko's project is a meditation on the mundane, on the most boring things. We tend to perceive life as white noise, a blur, a non-presence, reduced to automatism. The artist focuses precisely on this breakdown in perception, making the vague grey background of ordinary life tangible: something we can relate to, become aware of, feel, measure, and transform.

"My works are mostly based on personal photographs—blurry shots taken with my phone. I rework them, adding 'glitches'. They blend into familiar, calming figurative images while at the same time provoking anxiety and bewilderment." Gerasimenko combines her silkscreen prints on canvas with fragments of painting—the layering of these two techniques heightens the interplay between illusion and reality.

6 Photo Lab

Our photo lab places particular emphasis on analogue hand-printing, both in black-and-white and in colour (C-print).

According to Ekaterina Vlasova, a photo lab assistant at the Vaults in 2021–2022, one of the lab's clear advantages is the ability to produce large-format prints: "We have a rail-mounted Durst enlarger and a Colenta processor that handles prints up to 180 centimetres on the short side—there are only two machines in the world with that width capacity. Our digital plotter (essentially an inkjet photo printer) is designed for the same format. I think every photographer should see their work in printed form, as it changes how one views it."

"In the darkroom, one can experiment with wet processes (developing, working with negatives) and chemicals. I know that many people dream of spending the whole day shut away with their rolls of film and an enlarger."

Artist Kirill Gluschenko, who has been passionate about photography since childhood and studied it at the Leipzig Academy, reflects: "Maybe it's a generational thing, but I'm only drawn to analogue photography. At the Vaults, I had the rare opportunity to work with C-prints—optical colour prints made from negatives. As an experiment, I printed images from several series, using both 35mm and medium format film. It confirmed what I already felt: hand-printing is in a league of its own. The light passes directly through the negative, imprinting itself onto the photo paper. There's a certain magic in that—like a physical, almost tactile connection."

An intriguing example of working with digital imagery and unintended glitches is the project *Error Report* by interdisciplinary artist Konstantin Adzher. Over several years, the artist has undertaken meditative journeys through digital space in search of a basis for abstract images.

He "extracts" abstract fragments from distorted digital video screenshots and then enlarges them multiple times. Konstantin experiments with the resulting forms, relying on the human brain's tendency to perceive familiar, figurative elements in everything.

"I saw these works printed on a large scale and refined using a technique that imitates painting. I didn't want to stop at a straightforward print of enlarged fragments," Konstantin says, describing his creative process.

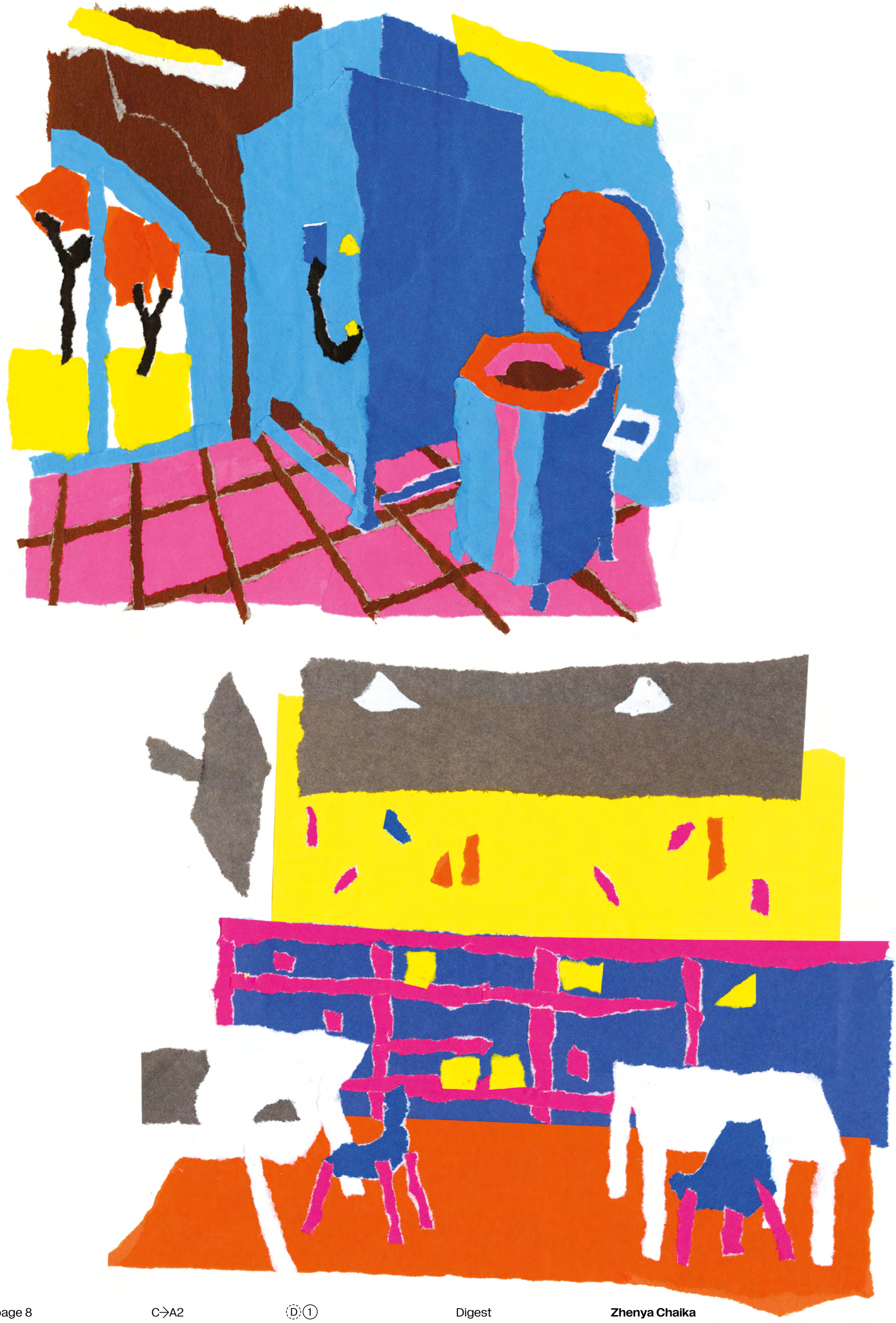
7 Audio and Video Studio

The recording studio offers facilities for recording, editing, mixing, mastering new compositions, and creating soundtracks for film.

The acoustics were designed by the Belgian company Kahle Acoustic, known for their work with the Philharmonie de Paris, Amsterdam's Stopera, and the Geneva Conservatory. The recording hall, which can accommodate up to 30 musicians and singers with 50 microphones, is fitted with soft panels that reflect, absorb, and diffuse sound. Echo effects can be created by channelling sound through the underground corridors of the Vaults or even through the 70-metre blue chimneys of GES-2. The studio also houses a Steinway & Sons concert grand piano, tuned specially for each session.

Composer Viktor Osadchev particularly appreciated the complex's educational focus during his dual role at the Vaults—both as a participant in the Friends of the Vaults programme and as head of the sound engineering department at the Gnessin Academy (2020–2022).

Director and video artist Andrey Silvestrov began following the Vaults' emergence on Moscow's sound map "long before it opened, first at the construction site, when it was impossible to imagine what it would become," and later took part in setting up the equipment. "It's always fascinating to witness the birth of a new organism. It's like making a film: at first there's only a distant idea, then you start to sense its physical presence, then many people contribute to making it happen, and you constantly feel that it's all going wrong—until suddenly, everything starts working smoothly, and you find yourself preparing for the premiere. But there's a key difference: one can finish working on a film and move on, while the Vaults, I hope, will continue to live, giving rise to new works in partnerships with artists. My own partnership has been a very happy one."



Under One Vault: The International Experience of Universal Workshops

Zhenya Chaika
Head of the Association of Artistic Residencies of Russia

Illustration **Irina Korina**

Art today is no longer bound by technical limitations. To become an artist, one no longer has to spend years mastering the intricacies of craft or production techniques. Contemporary artists move easily between materials, selecting tools and media that suit their specific ideas. This kind of flexibility is made possible by specialists, skilled professionals in artistic production. The artist's task is to clearly understand what form of execution is needed, and then entrust it to the right specialists.

It's true that in Russia, the infrastructure for working in this way is still lacking. Artists and designers are not taught how to collaborate with manufacturers, and manufacturers, in turn, are not used to dealing with artists. There are too few small factories in the country, while large industrial plants are not geared toward creative work.

As my experience with the Ural Industrial Biennial's artist-in-residence programme (2012—2018) showed, attempting to set up even limited production of artworks at a massive industrial enterprise demands extraordinary effort. It can lead to remarkable results, but it will always be the exception rather than a sustainable model. The reason is simple: any manufacturing facility is a system optimised for specific outputs—and art is not usually what is expected from a giant metallurgical plant.

Nevertheless, with its dozens of factories, the Urals could become a universal production base for contemporary art. At first glance, everything seems to be in place: metalworking, casting, all kinds of stone, the most incredible machines and complex optical mechanisms, and 90% of the world's graphite supply, used to make all the pencils on the planet, as well as exquisite bone china. What's missing is the most important thing: an interface for interacting with the artist, a mechanism that would allow artistic production to be integrated into the broader industrial cycle.

International experience shows that systems geared toward artistic production are indeed possible, and in a wide variety of forms: from democratic creative laboratories (also known as makerspaces), accessible to anyone willing to pay a small membership fee, to refined art residencies which have highly competitive entry requirements.

For me, the first such laboratory was the Maker Nexus in San Jose—the heart of Silicon Valley. It's a workshop with fairly simple equipment—mostly woodworking and metalworking machines, though there are also 3D printers. Anyone can access the workshop by paying an annual membership fee and booking a time slot on the website. The facilities at Maker Nexus are mainly used by faculty and students from the local Technological University, and recently there have also been interesting hands-on classes for children and teenagers.

There are many such creative spaces around the world; some unite into communities and participate in international maker festivals, while others offer their services on an hourly basis, even to people without ambitious goals who simply want to make a small table by hand, for example.

The technology centres run by Autodesk, however, are firmly focused on collaboration with professionals. This art residency programme at Pier 9 in San Francisco started out by offering artists and designers the opportunity to test the latest equipment with cutting-edge software. This way, the company's employees could see their developments in action and fine-tune them if necessary. Today, the focus has shifted from simply testing prototypes to visionary work: Autodesk invites teams of researchers, manufacturers, and entrepreneurs to join them.

Many beautiful projects have been completed at Pier 9: for example, Stefanie Pender, who works with glass, taught a modern computerised welding machine to create stunning objects by sequentially layering glass beads on top of each other.

Such technological breakthroughs are only possible with the support of specialists. Complex equipment always comes with experts who understand its workings and are prepared to pass on their knowledge. Many workshops—often based in universities—form around these professionals to help newcomers learn the craft. The expectation, however, is that artists will master the technology as a tool for self-expression, not for industrial-scale production.

This format works perfectly for Fab Lab Barcelona—an independent educational and technical base that collaborates with several universities, from the nearby Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC) to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). MIT runs a global programme known as the Center for Bits and Atoms, which involves over 2,000 specialists in 100 countries, with each laboratory within the network maintaining its own unique profile. Fab Lab Barcelona specialises in the design of the future and maintains a visionary standard, while the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine focuses on openness. This laboratory accepts anyone, regardless of skill level or student status. Interestingly, "crafts" in modern fab labs encompass anything from digital embroidery to CNC milling; 3D printers are considered basic equipment, much like a drill or a cutter.

Institutions that work with professional artists hold a special place among experimental production spaces. One example is the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (RBK, State Academy of Fine Arts) in Amsterdam. As the name suggests, it is also connected to higher education, but in this case, the connection is more historical. The academy was founded in 1870 and worked for over a century following the traditional model, with teachers, students, and classrooms. But in the 1990s, a radical reform was implemented: the academy began accepting artists from all over the world, but most importantly, the auditoriums were transformed into studios, and most of the classrooms were converted into workshops. Today, the Rijksakademie is one of the most prestigious residencies in the world: up to 50 artists can work there simultaneously, with access to an extensive library and all kinds of professional equipment, from metalworking and foundry shops to high-tech audio and video laboratories. The selection process for this two-year residency has one unwritten criterion: priority is given to artists who want to master new techniques or materials.

Another dream residency is the Cité des Arts in Paris, with three hundred individual studios and shared workshops for printmaking, screen printing, and ceramics. This residency is designed for independent and traditional work.

Residencies or workshops where more than three types of equipment are available are a rare phenomenon worldwide. However, all such programmes. Whether small-scale or large, accessible or resembling an ivory tower, share one feature: they provide infrastructure that is ready to respond sensitively to the needs of artists, designers, and creators of new forms and ideas.

Metal, Wood, Plastic

The Metal, Wood, Plastic workshop is one of the most popular among the artists working at the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production. Head of the centre **Lyuda Frost** answers questions from curator **Olga Druzhinina** about how the workshop was created and how it is organised.

Photos **Daniil Annenkov, Gleb Leonov, Anna Todich, Katya Zuyeva**

Olga Druzhinina: The workshop is called Metal, Wood, Plastic. Why did you decide to combine these materials?

Lyuda Frost: We didn't combine the materials themselves, but the equipment needed to work with them, and the equipment for wood, metal, and plastic is essentially the same. In many industrial enterprises and factories, metalworking and woodworking are done in adjacent spaces. We discovered this when conducting preliminary research for planning the workshops and decided to do the same: in the neighbouring vaults, we have machines for metalworking and woodworking. But in fact, one can also work with other materials on this equipment—plastic, for example, which is currently very popular among artists, architects, and designers.

OD: How was the list of equipment compiled?

LF: First and foremost, we based it on the requests of the artists, for which we conducted several focus groups. Then we worked with a consultant: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—perhaps the most famous technical educational institution in the world, a leader in the field of robotics. The institute has expansive workshops used not only current students, but also by graduates.

OD: MIT is more focused on designers than on artists, isn't it?

LF: We considered not only artists but also designers developing prototypes and architects building models. In the first season of the *ColLab* programme, designer Grigory Afonin created a prototype chair—his first attempt at a notoriously difficult object in furniture design. Since sitting is often considered an unnatural and uncomfortable posture, ergonomic precision was key. Over six months of experimentation, Grigory arrived at a plywood frame he was satisfied with.

OD: What did the consultations with MIT involve?

LF: It was a very close collaboration. We began by presenting the needs of our artists identified through focus groups, and the MIT specialists, in turn, introduced us to the equipment used in their workshops. They then helped compile a comprehensive list of tools and machines tailored to our context. We followed their recommendations almost in full, making only minor adjustments. For instance, they suggested a water-abrasive jet cutting machine—but given our floor-to-ceiling windows, we realised this method would constantly splash the glass and leave the floors wet, so we opted for a cleaner alternative.

OD: You're talking about different types of equipment. Let's group them by function, based on what each machine is actually used for.

LF: The main processes that apply to working with wood, metal, and plastic are milling and engraving. Both can be done on the FlexiCAM milling and engraving machine, which is computerised. In fact, machines like this are fairly common; they're standard equipment, even in smaller workshops. However, they are only eighty centimeters wide and a meter long. For artists, though, it's often crucial to produce a monolithic object, rather than piece together parts cut on a small machine. Our FlexiCAM makes that possible, with a working surface measuring 1.5 by 3 metres.

The FlexiCAM can be used with any type of wood. The key is selecting the right bit, based on the material's density and the desired surface finish. Last year, Brazilian artist Aline Xavier Mineiro used our machine for her exhibition *The Langsdorff Expedition: Before Your Eyes* at the Tsaritsyno Museum-Reserve. She cut silhouettes of rivers from eight different types of wood.

OD: How did you get such a large machine—one and a half by three metres—into the building?

LF: The FlexiCAM was actually the very first resident of our workshops. It was brought in through an unglazed window opening. It stood on temporary pilings, because the surrounding floor hadn't yet been laid. At one point, the only things inside the building were that machine and the restorers working on the Vaults.

OD: The woodworking workshop has machines for gluing, cutting, bending, sanding, and lathe work, for creating cylindrical shapes. Does the artist who plans to work on them already need to know how to use this equipment?

LF: Most artists who work with wood and metal tend to specialise in these materials, so they're quite skilled and confident in the workshop environment. Of course, we're happy to assist those with less experience, but it's important to understand that a complex project isn't feasible at the early stages of learning.

OD: Let's return to material processing. The second key technique is engraving. Wood can be engraved on the FlexiCAM. But what about other materials?

LF: The workshop also has a laser cutting and engraving machine, also computer-controlled. It works with sheet materials: not only wood, plywood, and plastic, but also leather, rubber, cardboard, and even paper as light as 200 g/m^2. The machine can also be used to mark outlines, engrave fine text, or create shallow reliefs. It can also cut through material. For example, as part of Maria Timofeeva's project *Memory Is What I Have Instead of a View*, a model of a house in Vorkuta was created—its façade windows were laser-cut with this machine.

OD: What does the metalworking studio offer that might interest artists?

LF: Equipment for painting and welding metal is in constant demand. Nearly every other project requires welding—it's essential wherever one wants to join material without using hardware. For instance, Vasilisa Lebedeva used welding to construct the internal frames for her *Fairy Tale* project. The frames were later covered with felt, resulting in large-scale objects that formed part of an immersive installation.

OD: One of the most advanced pieces of equipment in the workshop is the KUKA robotic arm, which occupies an entire vault. Was it also recommended by your MIT colleagues?

LF: Yes, that was their recommendation—they said more and more designers and architects are working with this kind of equipment.

OD: What is a robotic arm, and what can it do?

LF: To put it simply, a robotic arm is a manipulator that follows commands. Different attachments can be mounted on the arm, much like a mixer or a hair dryer. There's a milling attachment, but, unlike the FlexiCAM, which is designed only for flat materials and can mill objects up to 15 centimetres in height, the robotic arm can work with larger objects. For example, during the second season of the ColLab programme, Ivan Gorshkov used the KUKA for milling complex-shaped ready-mades—tree stumps with roots. Another application is 3D printing of large plastic objects, up to two metres in height. In the same ColLab season, Irina Petrakova and Oleg Frolov used the robotic arm as a giant 3D printer for their project, the film *Heidi Schneider*.

OD: But that's not all it is capable of, is it? What else can the KUKA robotic arm do besides milling and 3D printing?

LF: In Mikhail Maksimov's video work *A Virtual Production System for Puppet and Stop-Motion Animation*, the robotic arm acted both as a camera operator and an actor—it "performed" alongside human actors. For his project *Goldwasser*, Maxim Ksuta, working with programmer and robotic arm operator Alexander Lysov, developed and implemented a unique technique for milling the surface of brass sheet metal. The result was a series of engravings on brass, described by the artist as a kind of a "map of the surface of agitated water, formed by a sequence of smooth, continuous lines that resemble a guilloche pattern—an ornament of tightly interwoven, wavy lines."

OD: And how was the robot used, exactly?

LF: As a robotic musician. Architects Vladislav Bek-Bulatov, Ilya Izovov, and Maxim Kolesov created the *Sonus EX* project using the robotic arm. The concept was developed around the idea that a robot, by nature, is stronger and more precise than a human and therefore capable of producing entirely different kinds of sound from musical instruments. *Sonus EX* unfolded in two stages. The first one was exploratory: the creators studied the potential of using an industrial KUKA robot to generate sound and perform music. It was crucial to them that the result not merely imitated human performance. The second phase was the creation of a sound performance using instruments specially designed for the robot to play. These instruments, based on different methods of sound production, were made from concrete, titanium, copper, and brass. The robotic arm's wide range of functions inevitably raises questions about the boundary between machine and human.

Sonus EX wasn't the only musical project realised in the workshop. Evgeny Klimin, a participant in the Friends of the Vaults programme, created a sound art installation in the metal workshop using electric motors, parts from a wrecked car, and metal structures. Techno-style music was generated by stepper motors controlled from a computer via custom software developed for the piece. Both works have already been exhibited at the GROUND Solyanka gallery.

OD: Does such high-tech equipment require special knowledge and skills to operate?

LF: In Russia, there are very few specialists capable of translating an artist's concept into a language that KUKA can understand—for example, converting a 3D model into format the robot can interpret. One also needs an operator who manages the robot on-site: someone who can power the machine on and off, position the object correctly on the work surface, and monitor the entire process. For our artists' projects, we work with Alexander Lysov—he's both a programmer and a robotic arm operator. Sasha is the founder of a major company specialising in digital production for architecture and construction, and he's one of the few people in the country with the expertise to handle such advanced equipment.

OD: Most of the machines we've discussed so far can be found in other workshops too. What makes this one unique?

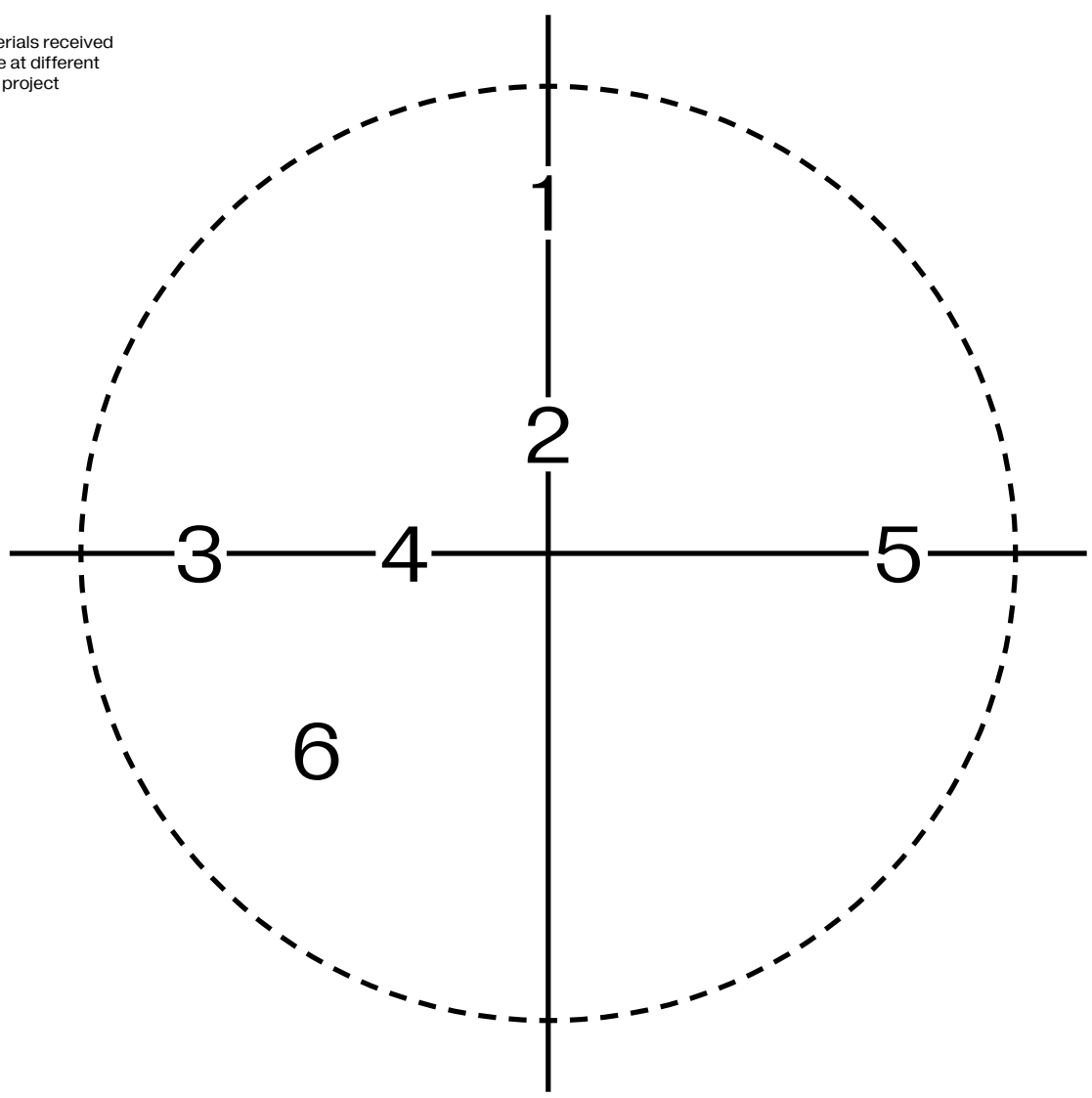
LF: Here we've brought together almost all the equipment an artist, architect, or designer might need. Workshops that allow you to carry out a full cycle of production are extremely rare, but we've managed to create one. Another distinctive feature is that such complex equipment requires highly skilled specialists. We have some of the best. Take Sergey Kalinin, for example. He's a graduate of the National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, and before joining the Vaults he led an experimental workshop at the Rosatom corporation. Now, he helps artists with 3D scanning and 3D printing, and working with metal and other materials—whether by hand, on metalworking machines, or on CNC equipment. But beyond professional skills, our specialists also need to be able to work on artistic projects: to understand the particularities of the creative process—its complexity, its occasional unpredictability—and to build relationships with the artists. After all, during their time in the workshops (for example, the *ColLab* programme lasts six months), the Vaults team becomes something of a temporary family for the artist.

The Archive of V—A—C Foundation and GES-2 House of Culture: From Private to Collective

Sofia Nakonechnaia
Head of Photo/Video Production and Archives

Sasha Romanova
Senior Archive Specialist

fig.1
Types of materials received by the archive at different stages of the project



1 Concept Development
– Sketches
– Video conference recordings
– Project notes

2 Production
– Technical documentation
– Charts and timelines
– Exhibition layout models
– Printed materials

3 Media and Communications
– Press releases
– Press monitoring reports
– Publications on V—A—C Foundation's and GES-2 House of Culture's social media
– Communication strategies

4 Visual Communications
– Diagrammatic materials
– Illustrations
– Film and video stills
– Artwork images
– Corporate style guides

5 Documentation
– Photographic documentation
– Video documentation
– Audio documentation

6 Participatory Experiences
– Project ideas proposed by participants in laboratories and residencies
– Works created during workshops
– Audience responses on social media

The archive of a cultural institution is not merely a collection of materials documenting various aspects of its work. It is a complex, dynamic system that not only preserves the memory of events but also stimulates the creation of new interpretations and expressions. The archive plays a crucial role in preserving and organising the institution's heritage, helping to document the process of cultural production and making this data accessible to staff, researchers, artists, and in future to a wider audience.

The main mission of the archive is not only to document what has happened but also to actively incorporate these documentary testimonies into the contemporary cultural process—process, thus supporting new creative expressions. This is particularly important for GES-2, where new materials and objects are created daily through numerous projects, all of which require systematisation, reflection, and preservation.

Since the House of Culture opened in 2021, more than 80,000 photographs have been taken, ranging from architectural shots to images of artworks. In addition, the archive contains over 400 units of video and audio documentation, including interviews, promotional videos, and documentaries, the V—A—C Foundation archive since 2009, as well as the inherited archive of the GES-2 power station.

Over the past year, artists have created more than 200 illustrations for the institution's projects, demonstrating the scale and intensity of cultural production. To reflect these in the Archive, we have developed a typology of materials that covers the entire project lifecycle. Thus, we collect testimonies of the idea's inception: internal discussion notes, concept descriptions, sketches. We also store many documents related to the implementation process: installation schedules, technical checklists, lighting guides, scenography, exhibition layout models, and much more. At the same time, we carefully systematise all visual communication that passes through the public platforms of the House of Culture. This allows us to analyse the use of diagrammatic language and helps develop visual vocabulary. One can study illustrations for specific GES-2 programmes or entire sections. Additionally, we analyse the impact a project has in the public sphere and the reaction it drew from different audiences. This final stage of a project's life is reflected in media publications and materials under the category "Participatory Experiences", which includes children's drawings from workshops, visitor feedback, applications from residents, and creative projects by lab participants. Currently, the archive contains about one hundred projects with a fully documented production cycle, providing a deeper look at the finished product—for example, an exhibition or concert.

However, over time we realised that among existing public museum archives, there are no model solutions that fully align with the principles of operation and positioning of GES-2. In search of an optimal approach, we turned our attention to international practices in the use of Digital Asset Management (DAM) systems at cultural institutions. These systems are about not just storing digital materials, but also organising processes within the institution, which significantly simplifies access to information and lowers the entry barrier for users. One of the most significant examples of using DAM systems is the project implemented by the Metropolitan Museum in 2005. The latest version of this system is not just software for file storage, but a comprehensive tool that optimises internal communication, making interaction with materials more accessible and intuitive.

The introduction of the DAM system at the GES-2 media library has transformed the archive into both a comprehensive repository, aligned with the scale and tempo of the institution's projects, and a vital tool for generating new work. The media library enables the ongoing updating, organisation, and preservation of materials while ensuring broad public access. Today, content creators can seamlessly exchange information with one another, and in the future, this exchange will extend to the audience as well.

One of the archive's central missions is to uphold the core values of the institution: accessibility, interdisciplinarity, and cultural production. It is envisioned as both an intellectual and material resource, serving not only the institution's staff but also the broader public. In a rapidly evolving cultural landscape, the archive plays a vital role in preserving identity and facilitating the study of artistic contexts.

With this in mind, we plan to make the archive fully accessible to the public within the next six months—an important step that will open the doors to a wealth of unique cultural and historical materials. We believe that a public archive will offer everyone the chance to engage more deeply with the work of the House of Culture, to witness and take part in creative processes, and to discover new sources of inspiration. It will also broaden educational horizons, making contemporary culture more accessible not only to specialists, but to all who are curious about the art of today.

Artists' Archives: Rehearsals of Absence

Conversation participants
Daria Konovalova, Alexei Starkov, Artem Filatov, Yakov Khorev, Vladimir Chernyshev

Illustration **Yakov Khorev**

At the moment when an artist chooses what to place in an archive, the artist is not yet an object, but no longer a subject: they are a ghost choosing their form in the future. Archiving is like a staged death in the hope of gaining new forms of vitality, but with no guarantees.

The Tikhaya Studio was established in Nizhny Novgorod in 2015. Originally created as a space for artists to work, it has grown into a centre for contemporary art, including workshops, a gallery, an art residency, a research centre—and an archive.

The studio's archive is organised around the works of the resident artists and other Nizhny Novgorod artists of their generation. It holds both digital and physical documents, photographs, and artifacts. The mission of the project is to involve artists in the archival movement. Materials are accepted for temporary storage, to be systematised, attributed, and digitised, and thereafter either returned to their owners or transferred to the studio.

At the request of *Vaults: A2*, the resident artists of the Tikhaya Studio gathered to discuss archives and archival methods.

1 Self-Archiving

Vladimir Chernyshev (VC): I don't want to talk about an abstract or specific archive, but rather about certain sensations encountered in self-archiving, which seem to me quite specific.

I'll begin with the first of these. When an artist organises their own archive, it always involves a kind of sacralisation, because you, as an individual, take a part of yourself or of your output and send it off into the future—into a situation where that part will participate in something larger, such as history. You become a sort of a virtual project. That's what makes the ritual sacral. To explain this more simply, I'd like to refer to Thomas Schütte's work *Model for a Museum*. In this work, the institution is portrayed as a crematorium, and in an earlier version as a cemetery, while artists, curators, critics, and art historians appear as gravediggers working on their own tombstones. Boris Groys writes about this in his collection of essays, *Particular Cases*. The particularity of a self-made archive lies in this transcendental gap between a life that is not yet over and an abstract future in which the archive might be resurrected by someone else. And in that sense, I'm interested in how the archive might be desacralised—made more alive, if you will.

Last time we met here and were discussing what we might talk about, you, Artem, I think, mentioned a story about notes scribbled in the margins when you were discussing work issues with contractors. Things like that, of a positivist nature, might dilute the archive and turn it into a story assembled from fragments, rather than just a collection of dates, works tied to those dates or periods, or other neat categories. A story that might bring life into the archive.

Alexei Starkov (AS): It's not easy to develop a personal strategy for this kind of approach. Because, just like "gardens are always for next year"[1], an archive is never for you. We live in the present, with our own mode of perception, our own system of selections and prohibitions. We can't know what will be needed and what will become irrelevant. In the future, the archive will become the Other, and only then, through a different vector of perception, will people be able to make sense of it. So either you accept the rules of the game and keep what you yourself think is important, or you start collecting everything indiscriminately in the hope that something will prove useful down the line, and in doing so lose control over the process.

VC: Is there such a thing as a universal form of archive? For example, if we're talking about the Tikhaya Studio archive, where an artist puts their works, documents, articles, and so on? Or is the archive also a creative act, and the artist decides what to include? Or is it simply a matter of how much free space you've got in your closet?

AS: The thing is, when you're dealing with self-archiving, you know the author selected only what they wanted to be there. But when one visits a retrospective of someone like Aivazovsky and sees draft versions of compositional decisions he later rejected, one cannot help wondering: would he have wanted us to see anything other than the finished piece? Maybe those drafts should have been burned altogether?

Artem Filatov (AF): I feel that the moment one gets kind of personal storage at all is exactly when one starts to lose control over the archive. If there's free space, something will appear to fill it. Some things come into one's life by accident, entirely on their own. That's how I came into possession of the archive of documents belonging to an old lady, Lidia Alexandrovna Davydova-Pechorkina, who lived in the so-called Belvedere building at 46 Novaya Street. Not only did she collect invaluable information about the history of the building and set up a small museum inside it, but she also managed to defend it in court against a developer who wanted to demolish it. When she died in 2013, her heirs decided to sell and demolish the house, going against the instructions she had left in her will. One day, my wife's friend, the artist Elena Konopleva, went out to do a plein air sketch of that building. At that point, demolition was already scheduled to begin, and the house was surrounded by a blue construction fence, with a guard stationed inside. To find a good angle for her drawing, Elena struck up a conversation with the guard, who began letting her onto the site under the pretence of drawing. On one of those days, when the guard was feeling particularly generous, he showed her the inside of the house: beautiful stucco mixed with trash, rubble, the debris left by scrap metal hunters—and still-intact belongings. On the floor was a torn plastic bag stuffed with a thick bundle of papers that were Lidia Alexandrovna's. Elena took the bag home, and for a long time didn't know what to do with it, though she understood how valuable its contents were[2]. Those papers ended up in my possession entirely by chance—they could just as easily have gone to someone else. Later we showed them at the *Life of the Living* exhibition at the Arsenal in 2014. I still keep those documents, because I hope their story isn't over yet.

One day in the city, I came across handwritten notices signed by someone calling themselves *L. M. I.* They were always written in ballpoint pen on half a sheet of notebook paper and stuck up with toothpaste. I managed to take one for myself, the artist Anton Morokov tore down another, but the rest I only saw in photos or learned about on social media. In my search for more of these notices, I got to know Ivan Chicharov, who had collected around twenty of them, and he eventually passed that collection on to me.

I like it when things come by chance. But at the same time, it's predictable: you opens up a channel, and not only what one expects flows in—everything else does, too. The archive takes shape in spite of you, fed by a string of circumstances.

AS: But in the end, it's still your own will that makes you keep these things instead of throwing them away.

AF: I wouldn't want to deny these objects their ability to influence me. This influence can be mediated by culture or upbringing, like in the case of books—we keep them, we're afraid to throw them away, and if we do part with them, we take them to a second-hand shop. One can't ignore the fact that the objects themselves already contain a built-in logic for how they should be handled.

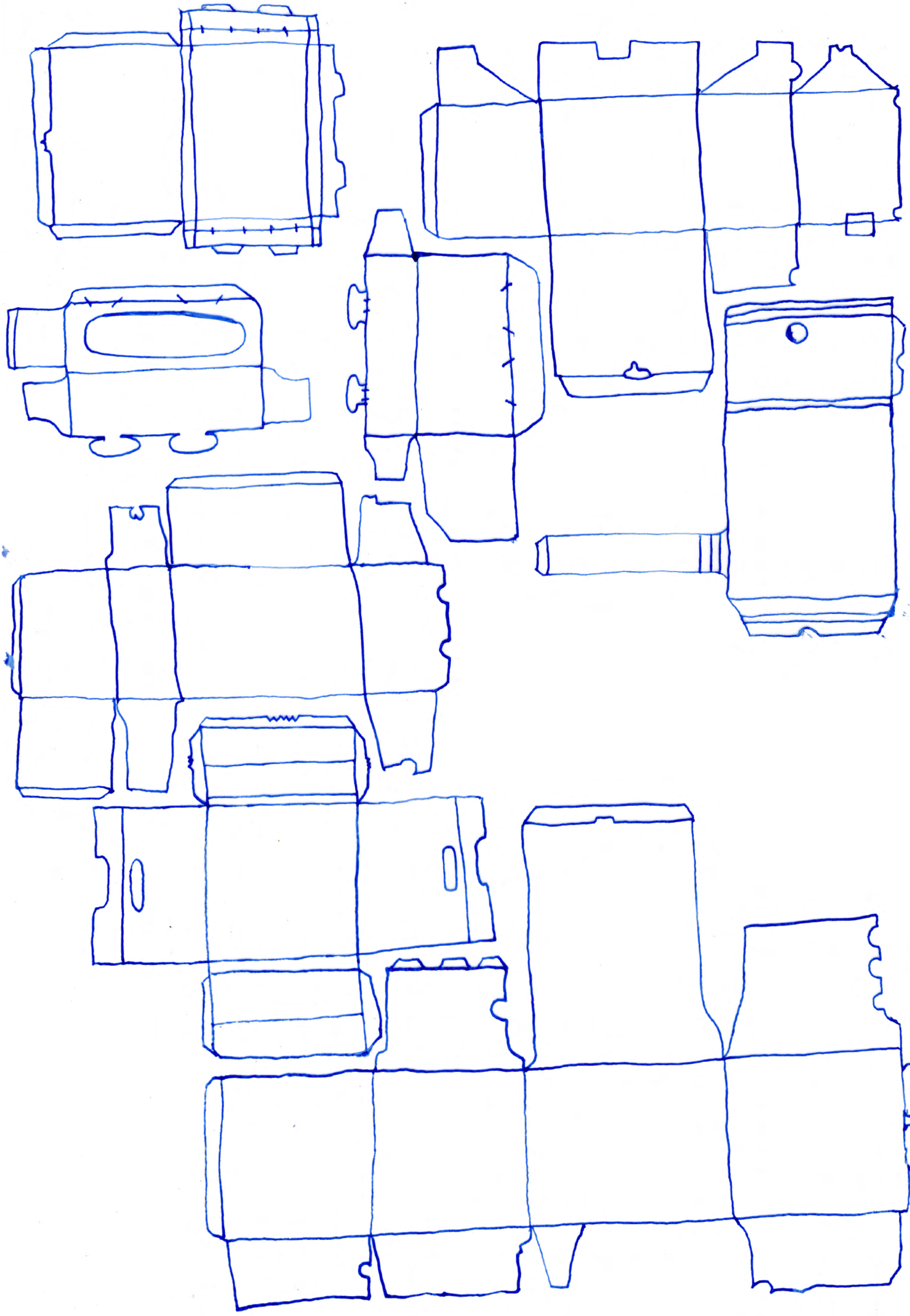
Yakov Khorev (YK): This is where I'd like to add an illustration from the present day, where we have cloud services like Pinterest or Spotify that we use to construct ourselves, to build our own archives. Almost everyone now has saved folders of images, videos, or music. When I analyse these collections, I identify two opposing selection strategies: the vector strategy—research and curiosity,—and the circle strategy—a closed loop of manipulations and fears. It's how I can tell what kind of fuel a person is using to construct their story. For instance, I have a playlist where the songs are saved like photographs in an album: each soundtrack becomes a way to return to the past, to a specific mood or state. Sometimes I meet people and I want to understand what makes them the way they are, what's running their "black boxes", so to speak: I'd like them to show me their saved images or songs. And then it gets even more interesting, for example, why someone dressed or did their makeup in a certain way.

AF: That's a good point. If we look at Pinterest or bookmarks in any other social network, they resemble a digital archive. I don't think I'm revealing any secret by saying that social networks operate with algorithms that influence one's behaviour. In the end, one's visual archive in these networks is heavily shaped by those algorithms, in many ways, it's imposed on one.

VC: I'm also interested in "black boxes." But I'm equally curious about understanding and distinguishing the tonalities of narratives. Sometimes I turn to a distinction described by the Korean-born philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his book *The Crisis of Narration*. He believes that any narrative, whether it's a history of listening to music or a personal archive, can be divided into two parts: *storytelling* and *storyselling*. And sometimes I ask myself: what I see and hear, and even more so what I produce myself—is it storytelling or storyselling? What kind of approach should an artist take in collecting their own archive so that it becomes a story or at least raw information, rather than speculation?

[1] *Gardens Are Always for the Next Year* (2023) is a documentary film about the *Name Garden* project by artists and curators Artem Filatov and Alexei Korsi, an open memorial garden at a private crematorium in Nizhny Novgorod.

[2] The archive of Lidia Alexandrovna Davydova-Pechorkina consists of 498 sheets, most of which were reused: one document was printed on one side, and later another was printed on the reverse. These are mainly materials about the history of the house that Lidia Alexandrovna studied and designed herself, as well as the results of the Ethnos company's efforts to recognise the house as a cultural heritage object with photographic documentation (a total of 244 sheets). The second part of the papers consists of documents used at Lydia Aleksandrovna's court hearings (a total of 159 sheets). Most of the sheets were corrected, rewritten, and added to with a ballpoint pen by Lidia Alexandrovna. There are also 26 official letters among the papers, including ones sent by Lidia Alexandrovna to the city administration and the responses she received. Notably, there are six sheets with a copy of a poem by V. Divnov dedicated to the house at 46 Novaya Street.



2 Self-Theatricalising

VC: I'd also like to say a few words about self-theatricalisation. In fact, works of art themselves often hallucinate the history of art. That's partly why artists tend to theatricalise their practice: for example, writing about themselves in the third person on personal social media, or repeatedly editing already published texts on websites. I think the creation of an archive during one's lifetime is part of this tendency. In that sense, I find it interesting to perceive the archive as a dismantled stage. Some kind of deconstruction, and the artist's own project of deconstructing it, opens up a very interesting perspective on the future.

AF: In my case, the archive is nonlinear, technically dismantled from the start. It includes many meaningless items, many gifts I didn't choose. For instance, there's a painting lying around in my studio that was given to me by the Society of Old Nizhny Novgorod Residents. It's a piece of hardboard, painted and framed in a clunky, primitive pine frame with huge uneven gaps in the corners. I suppose I could tell a story using it, but it's a silent one...

VC: Not at all, because you just devoted half your attention to those gaps.

AF: Yes, of course. But I don't spend any effort turning this archive into a coherent book, there's no plot to it. Many of the objects appear there on their own, and only someone from the outside might be able to find connections between them. For me, the archive is the presence of another person. That's the powerlessness of my archive: it hasn't yet found its viewer. Of course, working with a living artist's archive is a thankless task. A specialist might start asking the same kinds of questions Vladimir asks, trying to figure out what might fit into the construction imagined by the artist. But I feel the archive will only truly begin to function when another pair of eyes arrives.

The year before last, in Samara, we visited a space called OCCI "MI". We took the elevator up to an apartment, and they let us into one of the rooms, which served as a gallery. When we were leaving, they handed us a Ziploc bag full of stuff—zines, artists' books. I placed all of it into my archive without even looking at it. Who knows, maybe one day someone won't care about my archive at all, but the OCCI "MI" publications will turn out to be the most valuable part of it for them.

AS: In my case, it's quite the opposite, it's a story about deliberately constructing myself. I've seen too many diaries by other people, which is why I don't keep my own. The archive sets the boundaries for how I interpret things. There's real life—chaotic, vital. And at its centre, the archive, a kind of a Procrustean bed that cuts away the excess and leaves only the essence.

But the catch is that no matter how hard one tries to construct oneself, one can never predict what might turn out to be useful in the future. And collecting everything indiscriminately entails losing control. The outcome doesn't always lend itself to becoming fertile material, like in the project by the Chinese artist Song Dong, where thousands of miscellaneous household items his mother had accumulated over decades became a portrait of a Chinese family that lived through all the upheavals the country experienced over the past eighty years.

In my own archive, there are also by-products—remnants of performative events, edition copies, and literally pieces of my work—fragments of the very first piece I consciously made as an artist, which came back to me from its first group exhibition already damaged. Romantic things, in a way.

I don't know about you, but when I look at my works from three to five years ago, they feel like cut nails or trimmed hair. Just an hour ago, they were a part of you, you cared for them, identified with them—but now they're no longer you at all. There's a sense of detachment, of defamiliarisation, and a kind of squeamish indifference.

VC: It seems to me that this is exactly where the effect of transgression lies: one creates an autonomous system that can reconstruct itself. The moment the artist decides what to place in the box and what not to, it's like standing in front of the camera just before the shot is taken. The artist isn't yet an object, but is no longer a subject either—they're a ghost, choosing their future form. Thus, archiving resembles a staged death in hopes of finding new forms of vitality, but with no guarantees. When I heard what Alexei said, I thought about this ghost.

AS: One sees a perfect version of oneself.

VC: That's the trick here: some kind of an ideal form, if it will ever be resurrected. But one can approach it differently: by adding to the archive what one feels isn't the best, or even what seems wrong, or something one doesn't know how to relate to. Ultimately, everything depends on the personal relationship one has with oneself.

YK: In my archive, I have a Marauder's Map from *Harry Potter*, showing a plan of Hogwarts. I placed it there—like a "hairy hand." The story behind this life hack is that a photographer submitting a series of photos accidentally left in a shot with his hairy hand. The series was accepted with the single request to remove the hairy hand. He concluded that when handing over a work, one should sneak something into the folder that allows the client to play their role as critic, filter, and so on. That's what I do when people come to me, especially teenagers, who are sceptical about the idea that being an artist is a profession and a way of existing without humiliation.

So, the Marauder's Map shows the layout of Hogwarts, but if you look closely, it's not just a blueprint—it's a text: the words form the outlines of school spaces, all the classrooms, bedrooms, pitches, gardens. This gives me a chance to say: listen, look—Hogwarts is a text. As a linguist, I find a certain pleasure in saying that one doesn't necessarily need to get a letter from Hogwarts if one knows how to decode the text. And here I can say: listen, you can share yours, too.

Maybe I wander in the mazes of my own archive. But right nearby there's a stack of documents that show I fulfil agreements, receive payments, pay taxes. And people see that my archive isn't just papers with little pictures; it's evidence of my existence.

People see that my archive isn't just papers with little pictures; it's evidence of my existence

3 Self-Therapy

AF: Life is made up of losses, and many people one loves die, often sooner than one would have liked. One used to be able to sit down with that person and reminisce. When one loses that opportunity, one clings to the last fragments, frantically collecting anything to remember. Along with the person, the memory of them fades, and it's hard to change it into another form and store it in the archive. Maybe the archive appears out of hopelessness.

When Alexander Nikolaevich, an elderly gentleman and a friend of my wife's, passed away, his dog Kuka came to live with us as a living continuation of that person, better than any photograph. He had an incredible archive, which his children probably didn't preserve. Maybe I would have wanted part of it to be with me. But in the end, our experiences with Kuka became a continuation of those we had with Alexander Nikolaevich.

When collecting things for the archive, one is trying to hold on to objects that carry memories of loved ones. Everything living will eventually turn into a herbarium and bones, and it will be forgotten. I feel that without these items one wouldn't be able to relive the experiences one had with those living beings—people, animals, plants.

YK: When I broke up with my first love, we easily divided up our collective finances, but the cat Murzilka remained indivisible. I joked that I'd at least take the tail or a paw. This cruel joke reflects the pain of indivisibility, and thus the flicker that lies beyond the material world.

Darya Konovalova (DK): I'd like to add a thought about how an archive can sometimes capture deeply personal moments. I often think back to the archival exhibition *322.6.2B*, where many visitors—some of whom knew little about the history of the Tikhaya Studio—found themselves drawn into the personal stories and relationships behind the materials. For them, the documents in the display cases weren't just narrative fragments, but windows into lived experience. They imagined what a 2011 trip down the Volga might have looked like, studied the handmade postcards Andrei Olev created each year, and read the correspondence between Vova and Fyodor. The archive was full of personal material—traces of friendship, intimacy, and everyday life. That's what struck people most: the chance to share something, to feel a point of contact.

Not everything made it into the exhibition. In Vasily Ragozin's archive, there are loose scraps covered in drawings, and one can tell that several people drew on the same page. It shows the kind of gathering we had—not just meeting, drinking coffee, and leaving, but a genuine exchange, a conversation. That sheet of paper became a witness to that togetherness. These documents act like teleporters into a kind of imagined past. They're partially factual: for example, Vova did write to Fyodor, and we know that because of the stamps and return addresses. But the context around them becomes speculative. It's that fantasy that creates a connection between the viewer and the people behind the archive. That's the part of archival work I find most compelling.

AC: In my archive, I have a teleport—a work consisting of a VHS cassette in a plastic bag, taped shut. It contains a recording of a dead person I knew. At some point, I realised that I still remember his characteristic words and expressions, but that I had already forgotten the sound of his voice. I could refer to this cassette, but I'm so afraid of damaging it or breaking it that at one point, I thought: in order to preserve the cassette, I must deprive myself of the opportunity to access it. It's a paradox. Maybe someday I'll open it. But for now—"to forget is to begin to be."[3]

YK: At the Synaesthesia lab in Peredelkino, Alexei and I shared a room. I noticed that he had a lot of personal items in bags. I heard about the cassette and realised I'm quite the opposite. I like it when things are open and naturally show signs of wear and tear.

VC: By the way, this is exactly what is being studied in departments for the conservation and restoration of contemporary art. Modern materials which no really one knows how to preserve. How does one preserve a bag?

AF: It's great that this came up. I thought it would be interesting if Alexei's archive consisted of objects in different bags...

DK: (*laughs*) Everything he submits is kept in a file with a description of its contents.

AF: It's probably not just transparent bags, but also Spar grocery bags. Just think, everyone throws these bags away, but thanks to your archive, protected from sunlight, they might become valuable to future researchers.

[3] A quote from Mikhail Gronas' poem *What Was Acquired, Burned: Embers...*

Photos **Gleb Leonov**

Irina Safonova is a philosopher, phygital artist, and member of the art collective EVPRAXIS

Evdokia Dergilyova is a multimedia artist, designer, and member of the art collective EVPRAXIS

Anton Sidko is a researcher and artist

Porfir: An Artistic Exploration of Ceramic Technology

Porfir is a new ceramic material based on porcelain and a method of ceramic forming developed by our team. We conducted our research at the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production during the *ColLab* programme in 2023. The name “porfir” is an original acronym derived from “porcelain fibreglass reinforced” that accurately reflects the essence of the technology, used to create ultra-thin ceramic objects.

The goal of the project was to refine this technology and apply it to art ceramics. All members of our group are ceramic artists, yet we come from diverse professional backgrounds, in the natural sciences, design, and philosophy. Although we didn’t set out to analyse porfir through the lenses of our respective disciplines, this inevitably happened over the course of the research, giving the work a multidisciplinary perspective.

Let’s take a closer look at the project.

Technology

Ceramics is one of the oldest records of culture. For at least 25,000 years, it has reflected artistic styles, social structures, and the technological achievements of human communities. With the development of technology and the increasing division of labour, new methods of shaping ceramics emerged: unique hand-moulded forms; rotational bodies made on a potter’s wheel; identical copies produced from moulds; and slab construction.

When discussing the influence of technology on the visual appearance of ceramics in recent decades, the first thing that comes to mind is 3D printing of ceramics with an extrusion printer—which essentially amounts to robotic coil building. This method is distinguished by the characteristic layered pattern of the objects and the ability to create complex profiles. 3D printing can also be used to produce moulds for slip casting. Another technological trend influencing the look of contemporary ceramics is the use of standardised ceramic bodies with functional and decorative additives: ceramic grit, mica, pigment, and so on. These bodies may include reinforcing fibres such as cellulose or wool. Reinforced compositions are convenient for hand-building and resistant to cracking during drying. Additional materials improve the property of clay and allow for greater freedom in determining the size of an object and the thickness of its walls. This practice even extends to impregnating textiles or sponge-like polymer frameworks with slip, followed by firing.

In our research, we set out to develop a method for combining fibrous materials with ceramics. We chose to move away from combustible fibres and frameworks, turning instead to fibreglass. Up until now, fibreglass has primarily been viewed as a technical material or a fire-resistant coating. Our study revealed that incorporating fibreglass into ceramics opens up new decorative possibilities—and more importantly, a fundamentally new method for creating art objects: composite forming. We called this method “porfir”. It involves layering sheets of fibreglass, bonded with slip, much like assembling a layered pastry. The result is a stratified structure that can then be shaped into a finished ceramic piece.

Composite technology, which only became widespread in the twentieth century, makes it possible to combine the structural rigidity of a fibrous framework with a matrix material—in the case of porfir, ceramic slip—that embeds the reinforcing fibres. When applied to ceramics reinforced with fibreglass, this approach allows for the creation of ultra-thin forms—starting from just 1 mm in thickness—on a large scale, thanks to the support provided by the robust fibres of inorganic textile. Such forms cannot be achieved through hand-building or throwing-wheel, and are extremely difficult to produce by slip casting. During firing, the ceramic body gains strength through the sintering of its particles, while the glass fibres become integrated into the glazed phase of the finished piece.

This new method eliminates the need for additional machinery and bulky plaster moulds, shifting part of the labour to fibreglass production. Sheet cutting can be carried out with a CNC cutting machine, which is exactly what we did at the Vaults. This significantly simplified our work with porfir and marked an innovation: until now, laser cutters had only been used in ceramics indirectly—for instance, in preparing stencils or stamps.

Research

What makes the porfir research project unique is that the discovery of a new material took place not in science or design, but in the realm of art—a rare occurrence. Our goal was to identify and explore the new visual possibilities that porfir could offer ceramics. This meant that we planned to create, and created, a series of art objects in which the artistic image, or part of it, is based on the distinctive properties of porfir, which differ from traditional ceramics. At the outset, we believed these distinctive qualities would be transparency, thinness, and lightness, but we also suspected that others might emerge along the way.

We weren’t aiming to produce specific, predefined objects, which meant we were free from the constraints of fixed expectations. As a result, we were able to work with a high degree of freedom and often acted spontaneously. At the same time, we planned, calculated, conducted visual studies, designed sketches and patterns, and meticulously documented our findings. It’s fair to say that we managed to combine a rigorous approach with a creative one.

From the start, we established reference points that divided the research into three provisional phases: exploration, scaling, and complication. The first two focused on technical experimentation; the third on conceptual and artistic development.

In the first phase, we tested all our ideas for working with porfir on small samples. We crumpled, cut, twisted, bent, and joined them in different ways. Depending on the results, we adjusted the composition of porfir, making it stronger or softer. In doing so, we explored its shrinkage, plasticity, deformation during firing, translucency, strength, and other properties. We also began to identify techniques suited to working with the material. Working freely, we not only ruled out some unworkable ideas—for instance, we found that porfir can’t be twisted into ribbons— but also discovered many effective ones. Some of these came from practices used with other materials such as paper, textiles, and wood.

The second phase involved experiments on a larger scale. We refined the techniques that had captured our interest, using the experience gained to create composite objects. For example, while we had initially made freestanding cylinders of different sizes and thicknesses, we later used the same method to build a large, unified structure of twenty cylinders—the piece titled *Weight*.

The third phase began once we had become sufficiently confident with porfir to use it deliberately in conceptual artworks. These works often combined porfir with other materials, including various types of clay.

Techniques

Porfir is thin and pliable. Before firing, it resembles dense, damp paper, so the forming process often feels like working with a sheet of paper, or in some cases with fabric. Here we outline the specific techniques we discovered and tested during the course of the project.

Rolling

The simplest and most intuitive thing to do with porfir is to roll it, which is where we began. We created a series of cylinders and polyhedrons (cubes, pyramids) in various sizes and with different numbers of layers, aiming to find the minimum wall thickness that would still hold its shape after firing without collapsing. For example, *Layers* consist of five cylinders, each carrying one layer more than the previous one. Arranged in a row, they clearly demonstrate how increasing the number of layers reduces the degree of deformation.

Using this technique, it is possible to produce very thin (up to 1 mm) yet large-scale (50 cm high or more) cylindrical objects out of porfir, such as lamp shades.

Folding and Origami

Porfir has also proved pliable enough to be folded into origami forms, which is impossible with traditional ceramic bodies. Porfir figurines and vessels created using this technique hardly deform in the kiln, thanks to the built-in ridges acting as reinforcement, and in their finished state they closely resemble paper. Ceramic origami is a promising direction for artistic exploration, not only because of the variety of forms it makes possible, but also because the potential size of the object is limited only by the kiln.

In addition to origami, certain fabric manipulation techniques, such as accordion folding, are well suited to working with porfir. This method allows for the creation of pleated structures that resemble folds in textile. Part of the carousel object *Russian Nirvana* was made using this technique.

Construction Set:
Assembly from Flat Components

Small elements made from unfired porfir hold their shape well. We took advantage of this property to create complex three-dimensional objects by assembling them from numerous pieces, like a construction set. Laser cutting was a huge help: it allowed us to produce "parts" much faster and more precisely than we could have by hand. For example, the object *Thor*, made using the slice-form technique, consists of 24 slotted crescents. It took us three days to assemble. Without the help of a cutting machine, making such an item would have taken weeks.

With this construction-set technique, artists and designers can create thin, abstract ceramic structures that are unusual for ceramics. Traditional forming methods wouldn't allow for this, as the components would have to be cast, for instance, and even then they wouldn't be as thin and stable as those made from porfir. The possibilities for experimentation in this technique are vast, thanks to the variety of shapes that can be designed for assembly.

Construction Set:
Assembly from Volumetric Units

The construction-set technique can be taken further by using readymade three-dimensional modules instead of simple flat shapes. This opens the door to creating modular origami objects such as kusudama or star-like forms composed of multiple elements, each folded with origami techniques. Even more complex macrostructures can be built this way. For example, using the modular approach, we created the installation *Ontological Constructor*, in which Platonic solids and other intricate forms served as building blocks.

Cutting

Thanks to porfir's thinness and flexibility, it can be used to make finely cut decorative elements. These can be delicate shapes cut from fibreglass before it has been fused with porcelain. Cutting can be done either with scissors or with a laser, depending on the required precision and level of detail. For instance, we used scissors to cut wing templates for butterflies and a laser cutter to create intricate Koch snowflakes.

In some cases, it's possible to cut not just fibreglass, but the finished porfir sheet itself. That's how we made our constructivist-style Christmas trees—cutting out components from porfir with scissors. This technique can also be used to produce bas-reliefs by cutting and bending specific areas of the sheet.

Appliqué

Porfir can be used to decorate objects made from other materials. For instance, we applied porfir strips and carved patterns to embellish the *Neberesta* jug and the base of the *Russian Nirvana* piece, both made on a potter's wheel. We called works that combine porfir with traditional forming techniques "chimeras". In such combinations, porfir works through contrast: its lightness, translucency, and fragility are often set against the heaviness of conventional ceramics. This interplay of materials helps create artistic imagery rooted in antithesis.

Illumination: Images Revealed by Light

Thanks to its translucency, porfir looks especially striking when lit from within—light reveals the material's essence. That's why many of the works we created are designed to be illuminated internally. This feature can also be used to produce pieces with hidden decoration. For example, images can be applied to one of the interior layers of an object and will only be clearly visible when backlit. There is also potential to experiment by embedding images on multiple layers and overlaying them: with each additional layer, the translucency of the ceramic body is significantly reduced.

Deformation During Firing

Porfir deforms in unusual ways during firing. The extent of deformation varies depending on the number of fibreglass layers and the size of the sheet, which can be used as an expressive artistic technique. For example, this is how we created *Fallen Bud*: originally vertical, the form sagged into a gently enveloping shape after firing.

The techniques for working with porfir described above can be successfully applied in contemporary artistic ceramics. They allow for the creation of weightless, translucent, floating, luminous objects. This is the unique visual quality that defines porfir as a new forming method. Like the technique itself, it aligns well with the spirit of the age and its visions of the future, where material things grow ever lighter, thinner, and more immaterial.

Representation

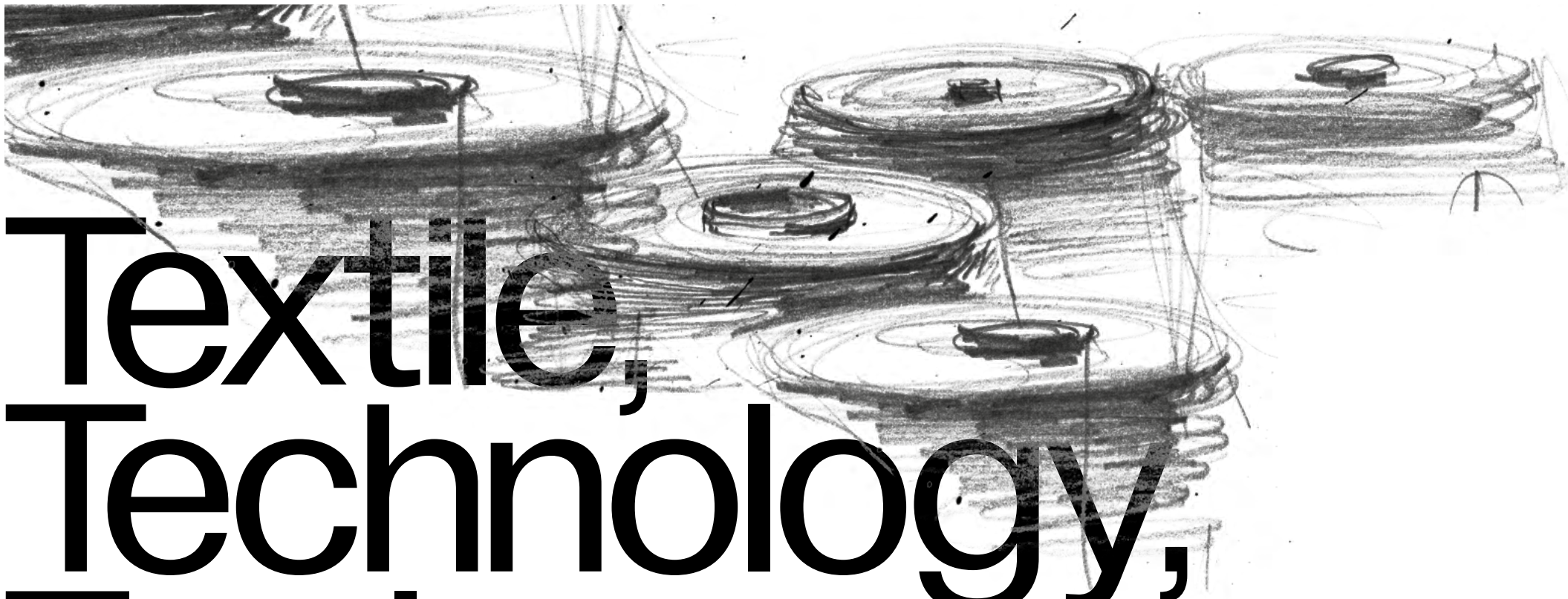
In the course of our research, we created around thirty porfir objects. Each of them in some way reveals and illustrates the properties of the material. At the same time, many of these works are not purely demonstrative—they also carry artistic and conceptual significance as pieces of contemporary art. That is why we chose to present the results of our research through an artistic exhibition conceived as an aesthetic statement in its own right.

Finding a suitable concept for such an exhibition proved difficult. On the one hand, it needed to reveal the research and material; on the other, it had to somehow unite the conceptual messages embedded in the individual works. Choosing a single theme would have narrowed the scope of the project. Fortunately, we found a solution: play.

Play is a free, non-utilitarian act, valuable in and of itself. It is also a creative force: through play, new scenarios of reality are generated. All of this connects play with creativity, and especially with artistic practice. Since play became a key element of our research, serving simultaneously as its goal, method, and outcome, we presented the research as a field of play and expressed this idea in the exhibition. The display was divided into zones, each symbolising a different type of play humans engage in, becoming more complex in step with both human development and the evolution of civilisation. This parallels the refinement of technology, and mirrors how in our project we moved from simple sandcastle-like forms in porfir to increasingly complex shapes and concepts.

Our study of porfir demonstrated that the high technological potential of this new forming method opens up new visual horizons for artists working with ceramics. Once our patent is granted (the application has already been submitted), access to the technology will become available by licence or at specialised workshops.

We hope that our experience will also be of use to other creators conducting artistic research—especially those exploring materials, techniques, and ways of representing similar projects.



Textile, Technology, Ecology: Trends of the Near Future

Olga Bozhko is a design critic, curator, journalist, and editor with over twenty years of professional experience. She serves as a visiting professor at the Università Iuav di Venezia, Politecnico di Milano and the Masters School in Saint Petersburg. Bozhko has authored book forewords, worked as a design consultant and lecturer, and actively promotes design across Russia, Europe, and beyond.

Illustration **Evgenia Tut**

Textiles are an essential part of our lives. Fabrics keep us warm, make our homes cosy, and provide the tactile comfort that modern people seek. The textile industry draws on countless sources of raw materials and employs a wide range of production technologies. Its focus today is on improving every stage of the process—a direction reflected in the industry's key development trends. Researchers, designers, and artists are asking questions: where do the materials come from, how will they be processed, where will the item go after its service life, and how can it be reused? The trend toward long-term thinking is leading the way—it promises to transform the industry's relationship with the planet and ensure a more positive future.

Trend researcher Lidewij Edelkoort states, "Fabric becomes especially important in the virtual world, which has already permeated every aspect of our lives. We spend more and more time in front of screens. Yet people still enjoy touching things, and so greater attention will be paid to textures. From a psychological and philosophical standpoint, texture lends a material a special status: it possesses power, aura, and a destiny of its own."

This means that the texture of a material now takes on primary importance. It may even become the reason for merging multiple disciplines—for example, visual art and design. New works will almost always be a combination of various elements, brought together through a specific technology.

Sometimes this will be done by hand, sometimes through chemical processes, unusual colours, shapes, or the reuse of old objects. Fabrics are promised a second life through reinvention, even if at times grotesque.

At the same time, contemporary textiles possess a range of qualities that allow them to replace other materials. They are lightweight, compact, and recyclable. At the Stockholm Design Week in February 2023, a "sofa" was reimagined as a reconfigurable hammock. This concept was proposed by Samsung and the design studio Form Us With Love. The Shift hammock is a prototype textile "viewer's platform" that can change shape depending on the number of people using it and the number of screens in the room. Most importantly,
it can be carried like a blanket.

New and traditional materials are now being combined through technology in fields where their use was previously unforeseen: they are emerging in architecture, visual arts, and engineering. These materials are used to address issues such as climate change and to improve the lives of entire communities.

Textiles and the Architecture of the Future

The experimental KnitCandela pavilion, developed by Zaha Hadid Architects and ETH Zurich, caused a great deal of excitement when it was presented several years ago. This double-curved concrete structure was built using formwork woven with 3D technology.

The KnitCrete technology is a new textile invention involving 3D weaving to create curved concrete structures. This process eliminates the need for expensive production moulds. In 2018, a "knitted" building was temporarily erected in Mexico City.

Another huge advantage of using special textiles in architecture is their relatively low weight compared to traditional building materials, which becomes a critical factor when resources are limited. Designing lightweight buildings also proves to be an effective strategy from a sustainability perspective. Even an ordinary metal structure, considered almost "weightless" compared to concrete, will lighten a square metre of construction by no more than 30 kg. Textile architecture offers a more efficient solution: for example, the weight of a frame made from tensioned cables combined with a structural membrane is only 10 kg per square metre of covering. Membranes also provide effective sun protection, energy efficiency, and let in natural light. They are durable and suitable for reuse, as demonstrated by the experience of the London Olympics: textile structures built specifically for the event were later dismantled, relocated, or recycled.

Today, thanks to high-tech fabrics, architecture is rediscovering the tent as an architectural form—now used not only for temporary structures but also for permanent ones. Modern durable textiles make it possible to span large areas. At the same time, the specific static requirements placed on textiles—due to wind loads, atmospheric effects, and deformation—as well as structural factors such as the installation and fastening of these textile elements, demand a high level of engineering expertise. The production and cutting of fabric segments are carried out according to complex patterns made possible by the latest computer technologies.

Recycling

According to the World Bank, the fashion industry currently produces around 62 million metric tons of clothing each year—and sooner or later, all of it

becomes waste. Less than 15% is recycled, but what should be done with the remaining 85%?

A solution has been proposed by the engineering firm Imat Uve (specialising in research, development, and testing of materials, components, and systems) and the design lab Envisions, known for its experimental approach to materials. They developed a project called *Fibers Unsorted*, aimed at creating textiles from used clothing that is usually considered unrecyclable. Within the *Fibers Unsorted* framework, a technical fabric is produced using garments made from mixed fibres. These items were traditionally sent to landfill, but are now being transformed into a product durable and high-quality enough to be used, for instance, in the automotive industry. "The challenge was to create quality yarn from large flows of waste that until now were either turned into low-grade insulation, incinerated, or landfilled. We need to keep this resource in circulation for as long as possible and extend its lifespan, even though the fibres, materials, colours, and quality levels are so mixed that they can't be sorted on an industrial scale," says Sanne Schuurman, director of Envisions.

Achieving uniform recycled yarn proved to be a challenge. "When combining and spinning unsorted textiles on standard industrial machines, the result was yarn of inconsistent thickness and strength. But thanks to smart technologies, such as sensors that monitor thickness and then adjust the machine's speed accordingly, we can now produce yarn as strong as unspun cotton," says Imat Uve's Michael Wolf. No bleaching or chemical processes are used in production. Experiments showed that by combining the yarn with other recycled materials (such as polyester thread) and playing with textures, it is possible to create variations in colour and pattern.

The result was a series of car seat covers. The new yarn meets the stringent specifications of the automotive industry—which means the textile is also suitable for many other sectors. Currently, furniture-grade textiles based on this yarn are in development. There are also plans to increase production to about 500–600 tons per year—the necessary volume to make a real impact on the recycling situation.

The textile industry is also prepared to support plastic recycling (with several billion tons of plastic already on the planet). Fabric made from plastic bottles has already been created—and was used to manufacture a rugby uniform. Similar fabrics are now used for furniture upholstery as well—they are easy to clean and can be recycled again.

Climate Change and Fabrics

Awareness of environmental issues needs to be raised, and people should have a way to keep warm without turning on the heating, believes the Dutch studio Raw Color. The designers came up with the *Temperature Textiles* collection, which incorporates climate change data. The *Temperature Textiles* range includes blankets, scarves, and socks, all featuring infographics about rising temperatures, sea level increase, or greenhouse gas emissions. Raw Color wanted to create objects that visually drew attention to climate change—and decided to focus on the data necessary to visualise the facts. These data sets are presented as charts, lines, and colours, making them perfect for translating into graphic textile patterns. The designers liked the idea of making information that people usually only see on a screen more tangible. "Textiles were important to us because they constantly display the data. On a screen, you only see it temporarily. This way, you're surrounded by reminders—from scarves that speak about climate change to prints that explore the poetics of colour," say the creators of the idea, Daniera ter Haar and Christoph Brach.

Biodegradable Fibres

Trends in textile production are no longer seen exclusively through the perspective of fashion—though of course this field remains central. The textile industry is seeking alternatives to cotton, with research focused on developing new types of biodegradable fibres. Laboratories are now exploring the properties of the world's second most common fibre, jute. Jute grows rapidly, in just three months, and yields a strong, glossy, and flexible fibre. It is a renewable and easily degradable resource. Developers have modified the production technology to make it nearly harmless, while also discovering the material's inherent qualities—previously, jute fibre had mostly been used to imitate cotton. Alongside jute, researchers are studying hemp and banana peels. In India, a research project has been launched to produce textiles from banana fibre and stems—and estimates suggest that, if successful, it could double the income of banana producers. The project has even gained the support of aerospace scientists: Mylswamy Annadurai, former director of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), has described the beneficial properties of the fibre for making dhotis and shirts.

Mycelium, like all "growing" fabrics and substances, has become the focus of intense interest. A sensational alternative to leather, with similar properties but cultivated from fungi, was introduced by the biomaterials company MycoWorks. The new material is called Mylo. Luxury brands have enthusiastically embraced these experiments: Stella McCartney has already created her first collection using Mylo, while the French house Hermès has partnered with MycoWorks to reinvent its Victoria shopper bag, now adorned with amber-coloured mycelium inlays, a material formed from the thread-like structures of fungi.

Sheets of mycelium are tanned and finished at Hermès leather workshops in France, just like natural leather, to replicate its appearance and texture—from folds to subtle colour gradients.

Eco-materials are also widely used in the mass market. Lenzing's lyocell, modal, and viscose fibres are biodegradable in all natural and industrial environments: in soil and compost, as well as in both fresh water and seawater.

Textile Technologies in Art and Design

Advanced weaving and dyeing technologies are promising to revolutionise textiles. They make it possible to create truly three-dimensional fabrics, where the illusion is achieved not through printed patterns, but entirely by means of complex algorithms that combine multi-coloured threads. This has proven to be a breakthrough for the visual arts and collectible design. As renowned artist, designer, and architect Ron Arad says, "Nowadays, any artwork can look different thanks to these technologies. For instance, I took one of Michelangelo's tondos and recreated its image in textile form, but it's not a print, it's an incredibly complex weave of threads. Using the same technique, I designed a car cover that looks exactly like a car from the outside."

A similar approach was taken by the Swedish design studio Front, which collaborated with the Italian brand Moroso to translate elements of the natural world into furniture using 3D scanning technology and remarkable textiles. Their collection, *Design by Nature*, includes six pieces that echo forms found in the wild—branches and stones covered in moss, lichen, and seaweed. The designers began by photographing and 3D-scanning various rocky forests and coastal landscapes. Wooden elements of the furniture were then carved into undulating shapes on a CNC milling machine and covered with richly textured, tapestry-like fabric produced by the Dutch textile company Febrik (part of the Kvadrat group). The fabrics are mottled: some dyed in stony greys, others knitted in deep blues to evoke seaside rock formations.

The field of textiles is evolving rapidly, helping people to adapt to more sustainable ways of living in a swiftly changing world.

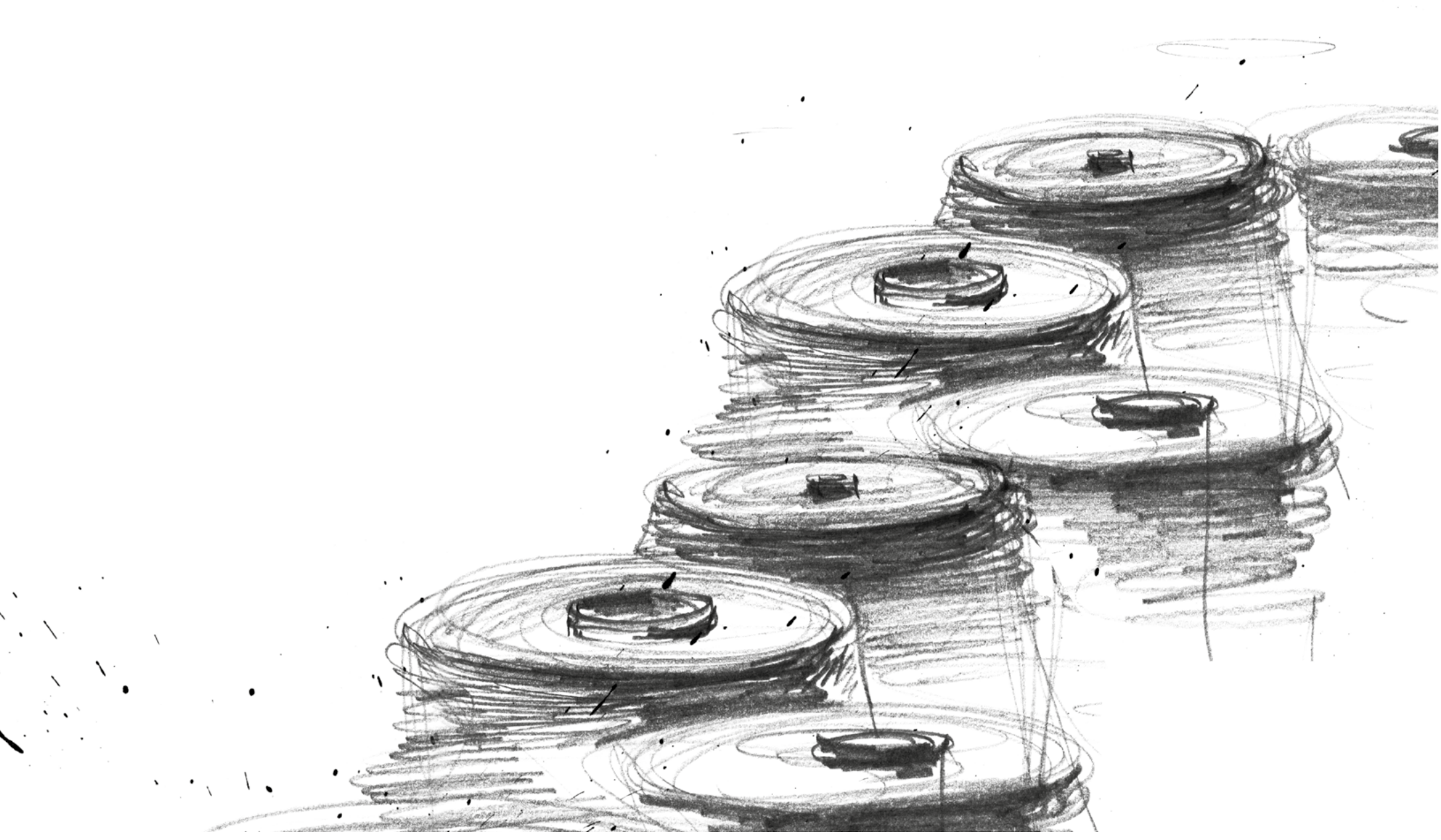
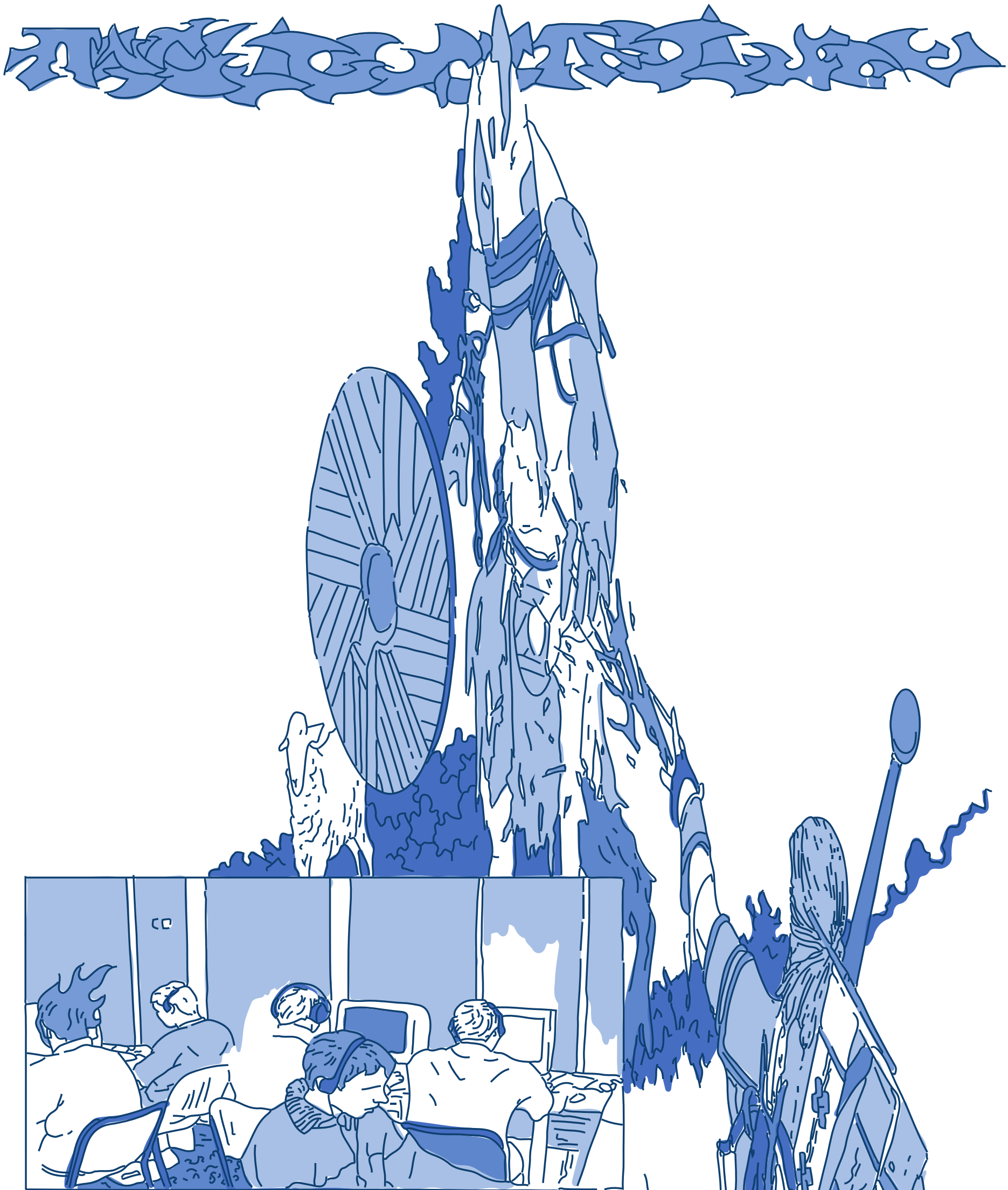


Illustration **Slava Nesterov**



Video Games, Theatre, and Shame

Religious studies scholar **Leonid Moizhes** and artist **Alexei Buldakov** discuss what lies at the root of stereotypes about video games, how gaming practice is connected to theatre, and why there's no shame in being a gamer.

Leonid Moizhes: My interest in the gaming industry began with role-playing and strategy games designed to construct stories. Then I started exploring key games in the main genres and noticed that the more demanding a game is was terms of speed and coordination, the harder it was for me to play. After studying all the different directions, I realised that I still liked role-playing and strategy games the most, because what interests me during gameplay is making choices and interpreting narrative arcs.

I enjoy analysing and commenting on mainstream role-playing games and examining their place in culture and their impact on it. However, because digital games are technically limited, developers are constantly forced to reduce the number of available choices—to artificially limit free will. So we have an interactive medium where you can influence the course of the story, but in fact that's not quite true, due to the small number of possible actions. I study the ways developers steer us.

Alexei Buldakov: I have a fairly standard gaming background: I played *Heroes of Might and Magic III*, *Counter-Strike*, shooters like *Battlefield* and *Insurgency*, and spent around a hundred hours on each of them. I'm ashamed to talk about this experience—I belong to the generation for which games were a forbidden pleasure, frowned upon by parents. Even now, I can only discuss this experience with a limited circle of people. But even with them, I feel awkward, thinking of gaming as something shameful. Leonid, maybe during our conversation you can ease my feelings of guilt.

LM: Many adults really do feel ashamed of playing games. Humanity has even invented an entire category, sports games, which they find less embarrassing to discuss. Sometimes adults find it hard to admit they play board games. There's something adolescent in this scepticism. Just a decade and a half ago, adults were embarrassed to admit that like teenagers, they also watched TV series. Then shows like *House M.D.* and others changed that perception. Now people are less likely to be embarrassed, because this form of leisure has become legitimised. With video games, the story is more complicated. The industry emerged as a competitor to cinema and comics. But it lacks an authorial layer, so it can't be compared to auteur cinema. There are indie games with a personal creative voice, but the industry has no Quentin Tarantino figure who could legitimise games in that way.

Additionally, game studios reinforce the stereotype that video games are only played by teenagers—specifically white teenage boys. Even though research shows otherwise, studios still consider teens their primary audience, with all other demographic groups added in as an afterthought. So we face two harmful stereotypes: the first is that games are childish; the second is that childhood itself is somehow shameful.

Developers and gamers often admit that computer games are not great art, and that they perpetuate harmful stereotypes. They don't try to elevate the status of the industry, despite its obvious cultural influence and enormous revenues. This issue is exactly what causes adults to feel ashamed. It highlights fundamental problems in contemporary civilisation: scepticism toward childhood, entertainment, escapism, and role-playing as a way of trying on different selves.

AB: TV series have managed to establish themselves in both niche culture and high culture. Today, they play the role of the classical novel. The novel is the highest form of artistic expression, allowing us to live alongside the player… What a great slip of the tongue! The novel allows us to live a new life together with the characters of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust, Miguel de Cervantes. Not everyone reads long novels, but everyone tries to deconstruct the desires and passions of the characters. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov experiences hell, and the reader lives through it with him. Series have managed to recreate the tragic structure of the classical novel, pushing the viewer toward a catharsis that arises from the interplay of complex emotions. In the series *Succession*, the choreography of power and the burning desire for it are conveyed beautifully. The viewer realises that their own desire for power may be something imposed. In this way, they begin to understand themselves better. The same process can happen after reading a book. In role-playing games, I don't see this kind of narrative impact on the player. For example, in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the character faces trials that could fundamentally change them. But they still remain static. And in the second half of the game, complex adversaries disappear.

One game that does create a character arc where the gamer changes along with the character is *Dark Souls*. That game has an element of flickering ambiguity: the good hero who defeats evil is at the same time part of that evil. In the end, the character must kill the final monster only to become it. In a way, playing *Dark Souls* can be seen as a bodily experience. In difficult moments, the player releases adrenaline, their heartbeat quickens, palms sweat. Defeating a boss delivers a feeling comparable to sexual arousal. These moments are followed by exhausting "farming", where the player performs mechanical actions to the point of total indifference to what's happening on the screen. After several hours of this "work", the player themselves seems to become "hollow"—an undead creature that has lost its reason, leaving only a shell of the former human being.

LM: If we place games in the context of different art forms, their position in society can be compared to that of cinema—no other art form has comparable reach. The global problem of the gaming industry lies in its attempts to turn games into interactive films. The merging of these two art forms is unnatural because cinema is absolutely passive: the viewer sits in front of the screen and watches a film—they don't even have to flip pages. It is fundamentally distant from the gaming experience. And yet, the desire to combine the practices of games and cinema has pursued developers since a surprisingly early stage: back in the 1980s, they were already trying to create cinematic games out of sixteen-bit coloured blobs, in which the gamer could control a character. Once we moved into 3D and graphics improved, everyone rushed in that direction.

We can trace a revolution in games. It resembles the revolution of comics. Comics changed their status by evolving from children's entertainment into works tackling sharp social issues. They allowed us to view superheroes as antiheroes, damaged by society. We see something similar in games: over time, it's as if they were growing up.

This evolution has the potential to influence the ambition of game developers. However, many gamers are reluctant to change the low status of games, because it's convenient. After Gamergate (a 2014 online harassment scandal), games that perpetuated harmful, dangerous stereotypes—colonial, sexist, patriarchal—came under criticism. In response, gamers began demanding that cultural criticism stay out of the industry, insisting that a game is just a game.

This unexpectedly raises the question, do game studios themselves want the cultural status of games to change? Perhaps they do—but no one seems ready to be the one to push that idea forward. There's a lot that could be improved in the gaming industry, but it also depends on whether gamers are willing to change their own attitudes. After all, no one objects when social, political, or cultural commentary is noticed in *Star Wars* or in Marvel blockbusters.

There is a small sphere of experimental indie video games. Recently, *Kentucky Route Zero* was released—a game in which the developers attempted to embed serious political statements. *The Binding of Isaac* explores themes of religion and child abuse. In developing such games, creators often unconsciously draw on theatrical techniques to naturalise commentary on religion, politics, or ethnicity through storytelling. In my view, this is why games are best compared to theatre. Unlike theatre, cinema can depict anything—it's not limited by the physical space of the stage and the curtain. Yet theatre is more dynamic, since all actors and audience members are present "here and now", adjusting their actions and responses based on what unfolds in the moment.

In reality, the story doesn't unfold on the screen—it unfolds in the player's mind. The gamer interprets what's happening while looking at the monitor and acts based on that interpretation. They are at once spectator and director—staging someone else's drama while deciding how to read it. They choose what kind of character to play: cruel or cynical, kind or heroic, anarcho-syndicalist or pro-feminist. The gamer conducts an experiment in interpretive freedom, watches their own production, and experiences catharsis. They also act as a performer—especially in action games—because they're physically involved in the process, sometimes even jumping back from the screen. This is what makes video games akin to theatre. In cinema, the viewer also has interpretive freedom, but they're not granted the roles of director or actor.

AB: Theatre is an archaic art form that in a certain sense emerged as a way to replace ritual sacrifice. Video games also serve as a substitute for real violence, as can be seen in *Mass Effect*. We are only at the beginning of their development—just as the ancient Greeks lived in the era of the birth of theatre. As a scholar of religion, do you see continuity here?

LM: I see continuity between ritual and play. According to Johan Huizinga, everything can resemble a game. The entire world is illuminated through that lens. Can we view video games as a form of ritual? Yes, we can. Are there people in the gaming industry who actually do this? I'm not sure. But in live-action role-playing games, the idea of play as ritual is more clearly present—they sit on the boundary between theatre and video game. When a player runs through a forest, they are having an experience akin to participating in a ritual. They don't believe in the real power of the forces they invoke. But from a religious studies perspective, the ritual matters in and of itself—what's significant is its social dimension, not the individual's belief.

At the end of the twentieth century, many people gained the opportunity to participate in digital rituals, albeit indirectly. For example, the first-person shooter *BioShock Infinite* opens with the protagonist being baptised. The gamer sees the immersion into the baptismal font as if the ritual is being performed on them. Millions of people around the world experience a two-minute simulation of a religious rite. That scene was so powerful it provoked one gamer to demand a refund—not because of the plot (he knew *BioShock Infinite* was a violent game), but because he was deeply offended by the light-hearted treatment of a religious ritual, even in a game.

Some might point out that if games create a sense of mediated presence, then they could also catalyse violence. I've heard from colleagues who study this issue that gamers, on average, tend to be less aggressive in everyday life, because a brief outburst of aggression during gameplay can relieve emotional tension without affecting real-life behaviour. Do games truly not provoke violence in the long term? It's difficult for me to say, but I know that psychologists have discussed the question in great detail.

AB: Games can catalyse violence because there is an excess of it. If developers were more influenced by the "theatre of cruelty" of the French theorist Antonin Artaud, perhaps games would depict violence differently. In most existing games, an angry, oppressed protagonist seeking revenge experiences catharsis through retribution, as if purging himself of negative emotions in the process.

LM: The studies I've read don't indicate any fundamental risk of losing touch with reality, nor do they record outbursts of violence among gamers that are directly caused by games. Games may give a concrete form to pre-existing problems and can influence someone with a mental disorder, but they can't provoke violence in someone who is capable of distinguishing fiction from reality. The issue is further complicated by the fact that games reinforce certain models of how the world works. They can be variable, particularly when it comes to story creation. But the variables in these models only allow choices within a rigid logic. Many of these models turn out to be harmful because they depict a distorted reality while presenting it as if it were natural.

AB: Japanese mainstream games like *Dark Souls* tend to depict a world controlled by a mad god. *Dark Souls* is an illustration of Gnostic heresy. In this game, there's even a division between the spiritual, mental, and physical, much like in Gnosticism. What do you think about Gnosticism in computer games?

LM: I wrote an article about how the *Dragon Age* developers at BioWare accidentally reproduced Gnostic ideas in the game: the god has turned away from a cruel world, and the hero must change it so that the god returns and life improves. I didn't interview BioWare's narrative designers, but I'm sure they don't know anything about Gnosticism. Japanese developers might be more familiar with it, because there was a time when their culture was infiltrated by European occultism, bringing many new symbols.

In games with religious elements, there aren't detailed plots with numerous eons, but there is a basic Gnostic impulse: an evil god created the material world, a good god created our souls, and the hero must leave the material world and make a journey to find the good god. This plot is simpler to understand than the complex Christian scheme, in which a sinful person must return to God. If we take ideas similar to Christian ones, fit them into a very simple game structure, remove the complex paradoxes and images, such as Jesus Christ, and the question of religion's influence on the hero's life, we get the classic Gnosticism seen in many games.

AB: That's a fascinating idea, and this has been a very interesting conversation! Recently, I've been trying to reinvent my relationship with computer games, to rediscover them, in order to avoid the prejudices that society has instilled in me. And it looks like the idea of comparing theatre and computer games might help.

Sonus EX: From Human Music to Machine Music

Evgeny Klimin is a composer and educator with a PhD in art history, and the author of over forty academic publications on bells (his dissertation was entitled *The Historical Sound Ideal of Russian Bells from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*) and experimental contemporary art. At the Metal, Wood, Plastic workshop, he created *Swallow*, a sound art installation made from electric motors, parts of a wrecked car, and metal structures.

"...To live a thousand lives!"—these words of Ludwig van Beethoven exemplify the dream that is shared by all artists. It is precisely through art that this dream becomes reality, again and again. We all know that feeling of waking from a trance—when the curtain falls or the closing credits roll, we realise that we haven't merely watched a performance, but have somehow lived the life of Figaro, Odette, or Mad Max ourselves. Modern neurophysiology explains this phenomenon through the activity of mirror neurons. When we observe someone else's actions, whether those of a skilled craftsman or a brilliant ballerina, our brain, and even to some extent our muscles, behave as if we ourselves were performing those actions. A similar effect can occur when watching an industrial robotic arm at work.

The most essential quality of the human soul is empathy—the ability to feel what another is going through. Without it, close human relationships, care for others, and humanity itself would be impossible. Once, people empathised only with those who spoke their language, shared their skin colour or religion, while all others were considered strangers. Today, a humane attitude toward all people without exception is considered the norm, and also toward stray dogs or endangered species. The suffering of animals on fur farms and the killing of new-born seals is a strong argument in favour of abandoning natural fur. But is there any point in extending such an attitude to the machines in industrial workshops? It would be fascinating to feel the essence of a mighty industrial machine through the magical power of art—even if the idea of including a machine in the sphere of our empathy still seems overly radical.

Sonus EX is a musical installation using a robotic arm. Its full name, *Sonus EX (Machina)*, translates from Latin as "sound from (the machine)" The project was created by Vladislav Bek-Bulatov, Ilya Izotov, and Maksim Kolesov, a team of architects. Izotov has the strongest connection to music, as an advanced amateur musician who plays keyboards and saxophone. All three of them are avid audiophiles. Significantly, Bek-Bulatov has unique experience in the use of robotic manipulators and 3D printing in architecture. These technologies are no longer exotic: for instance, one can easily find online videos of robotic arms shaping walls by pouring concrete layer by layer. Bek-Bulatov goes even further: under his direction, robots create intricate trusses from advanced polymers, structures that resemble the dwellings of fantastical creature—the cutting edge of technological development in the field. As the head of a firm, Bek-Bulatov skilfully coordinates the activities of both his human team and his robots.

The work on the *Sonus EX* project took place between 2022 and 2023 at the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production. Among the equipment in the workshops is a KUKA KR 120 R2500 Pro robotic arm—a large-scale industrial manipulator primarily used at the Vaults for 3D milling and printing. It is capable of producing objects up to two metres high. But in the *Sonus EX* installation, the robotic arm does not fabricate three-dimensional art objects; instead, it performs on a special kind of musical instrument. The milling head or plastic extruder on the arm was replaced with an attachment consisting of a spherical mallet mounted on a flexible joint and a triangular plectrum—a flat pick used to pluck strings. When the installation was exhibited in a gallery, a different but similar robotic arm from the same manufacturer was used, equipped with the same attachment but slightly smaller in size. Even so, the machine's dimensions remained substantial. It took considerable effort for gallery staff to carry it up to the second floor, where the exhibition was installed.

The installation features three musical instruments. The creators did not assign them formal names, but during the working process they referred to them as the "Cube", "Triangle", and "Floating Rod". At first glance, an uninformed viewer would be hard-pressed to guess the function of these unusual objects. Nonetheless, they fit neatly into the Hornbostel—Sachs classification system of musical instruments. The *Cube* and the *Floating Rod* both fall under the category of idiophones (111.212—sets of percussion sticks). The *Cube* consists of a relatively small hollow concrete body in which six round rods made of different metals are mounted. The body of the instrument includes a sound hole.

At either end of the *Floating Rod* are two plywood bodies that serve as air resonators. Suspended inside them are four metal rods. The rods mounted on flexible hangers produce a deep, sustained, bell-like sound, while the rods fixed in concrete emit a sharper, duller tone. When struck, they display visually perceptible infrasonic vibrations that are inaudible to the ear.

The *Triangle* is a chordophone (316.1, frame zither without a resonator). Its brass frame, to which the strings are attached, has a complex shape resembling two interlocking triangles. When the installation was set up in the Vaults workshops, the frame was strung with guitar strings, but during the gallery exhibition these were replaced with thin cables. Since the frame can withstand only limited tension, some of the strings remain slack, while others are only lightly tensioned and produce low-pitched sounds.

The final versions of the instruments emerged through experimentation—an approach of investigative design. For instance, pipes were tested in place of rods, and a solid concrete body was tried instead of a hollow one. At this stage, the idea of adding a wind instrument was also discarded. The creators likewise rejected experiments in which the manipulator cut the strings so they would snap: they felt the resulting dry sound lacked interest. In addition to the three instruments already mentioned, the sound score of *Sonus EX* includes the noise of the robot's servomotors and the hum of the cabinet housing the power and control electronics, which creates a kind of organ-like drone. The creators view these elements as an essential part of the concept.

An intriguing feature of the composition for the robotic arm is the inclusion of the Hurrian hymn—the oldest known piece of notated music to have survived to the present day. It was inscribed in cuneiform on a clay tablet dating from 1400—1200 BCE. The Akkadian notation system used in the tablet differs from modern musical notation: rather than indicating pitches, it records finger positions on the strings of a harp. The creators of the installation were drawn to the similarity between this approach and the way music for a robotic arm is composed—as a sequence of spatial coordinates corresponding to the positions of sounding elements. Several deciphered versions of the Hurrian hymn exist today, along with various performance and compositional interpretations. The version used in *Sonus EX* appears to be independent of these and may be considered an original rendering of the ancient musical text.

The core concept of *Sonus EX* lies in creating musical instruments specifically designed for the robotic arm. As Vladislav Bek-Bulatov says, "the configuration of the robot's joints differs from the human body, and the sounds and choreography possible for the robot are difficult for a human [...]

We thought that [...] no one had ever made instruments specifically for robots. Robots have been made to play pianos, guitars, and so on [...] We were interested in creating instruments specifically for robots, taking into account their kinematics, not tied to human instruments or human biomechanics [...] Most of the things that surround us are made by robots in factories. They're used to automate many processes—everything from car assembly to countless other things produced on conveyor belts. Perhaps robots want a break from work too; they long for creativity (*laughs*) [...] A robot does have some anthropomorphism, a similarity to human movement, but it's faster, mechanical, and a little frightening [...] I am somewhat afraid of robots because they move quickly, and they have no sensors. They don't stop—they keep grinding and moving forward."

The *Sonus EX* paradigm, according to its creators, is based on a bottom-up approach to design. Unlike the top-down approach, which begins with a finished concept (for instance, the concept of a building) and then selects technologies for its implementation, the bottom-up approach reverses this logic. Here, the point of departure is the technology itself, whose specific characteristics shape the final outcome. This strategic shift is increasingly seen across various fields today. In the arts, a close analogy can be found in theatre, where productions often no longer aim for a precise realisation of a playwright's intent, and sometimes abandon it altogether, creating the play "during the rehearsal process, in the here and now." The foundation is no longer the written drama, or even a director's original vision, but the unique personalities of the actors, with the performance adapting to them. As theatre scholar Pavel Rudnev puts it, in these cases, "the text of the performance, its concept, is created by all participants in the act of creation from scratch, simultaneously. Nobody is in a 'contractor—client' relationship with one another." This inevitably entails a shift in authorship structures, which become increasingly evenly distributed among the participants of the creative process.

As for machines and technical devices, they have traditionally been tasked solely with executing someone else's design. The idea of making not only members of a theatre troupe but also inanimate objects into co-authors may seem rather strange. Yet the *Sonus EX* concept goes even further. In the mid-twentieth century, the French philosopher Roland Barthes challenged the notion that a work of art should be understood exclusively as the result of the author's creative will and personal traits. Since then, the problem of authorship and the origins of the artistic text has become the subject of some of the most fascinating debates in art theory. The creators of *Sonus EX*, however, reassemble a classical, pre-Barthesian paradigm of the sovereign author—only they place not themselves but an industrial manipulator at its centre.

Doubting the role of the author, Barthes writes, "The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions. [...] The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us".[1] In the case of *Sonus EX*, the "explanation" (without the slightest irony) is instead proposed to lie in the "personality, tastes, and passions" of the robotic arm. It is therefore entirely natural that the humming of the electronics cabinet, the noise of the servomotors, the infrasonic vibrations of the metal rods, and the silence of the slack strings all become part of the musical score. The same reasoning also underlies the unusual construction of the instruments, tailored to the "anatomy" of the manipulator. One might suggest that the creators were wrong to deny the machine the pleasure of slicing through the strings. While perhaps unremarkable to the average human ear, such an act could have had a vivid musical and symbolic resonance in the context of machine music.

[1] Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in *Images—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. NY: Hill & Wang, 1977. P.142.

Since the mid-twentieth century, literature, art, and philosophy have frequently raised the question of the relationship between humans and the devices they create. In Clifford D. Simak's short story *Skirmish*, a race of machines from outer space begins to liberate Earth's mechanical systems, granting them the ability to act autonomously and independently of humans. The story's protagonist comes to the conclusion that humans themselves would probably do the same if they were to discover a planet where humanoids were enslaved by machines.

In films such as *The Terminator* and *The Matrix*, extra-terrestrials are no longer necessary to drive the plot—human-made devices themselves evolve into autonomous intelligences and rise up in rebellion. These works can be viewed as a kind of modern fable, with little bearing on reality. Yet it is worth remembering that the very concept of "robots" first emerged in science fiction literature, and only decades later entered the real world. Today, with breakthroughs in AI, the issue of how humans and machines might coexist is becoming ever more urgent. *Sonus EX* points toward a more optimistic scenario for solving these problems, grounded in the golden rule of ethics: treat others (in this case, machines) as you would like to be treated yourself. If you cannot live without creativity and music, why not grant that same joy to an industrial manipulator?

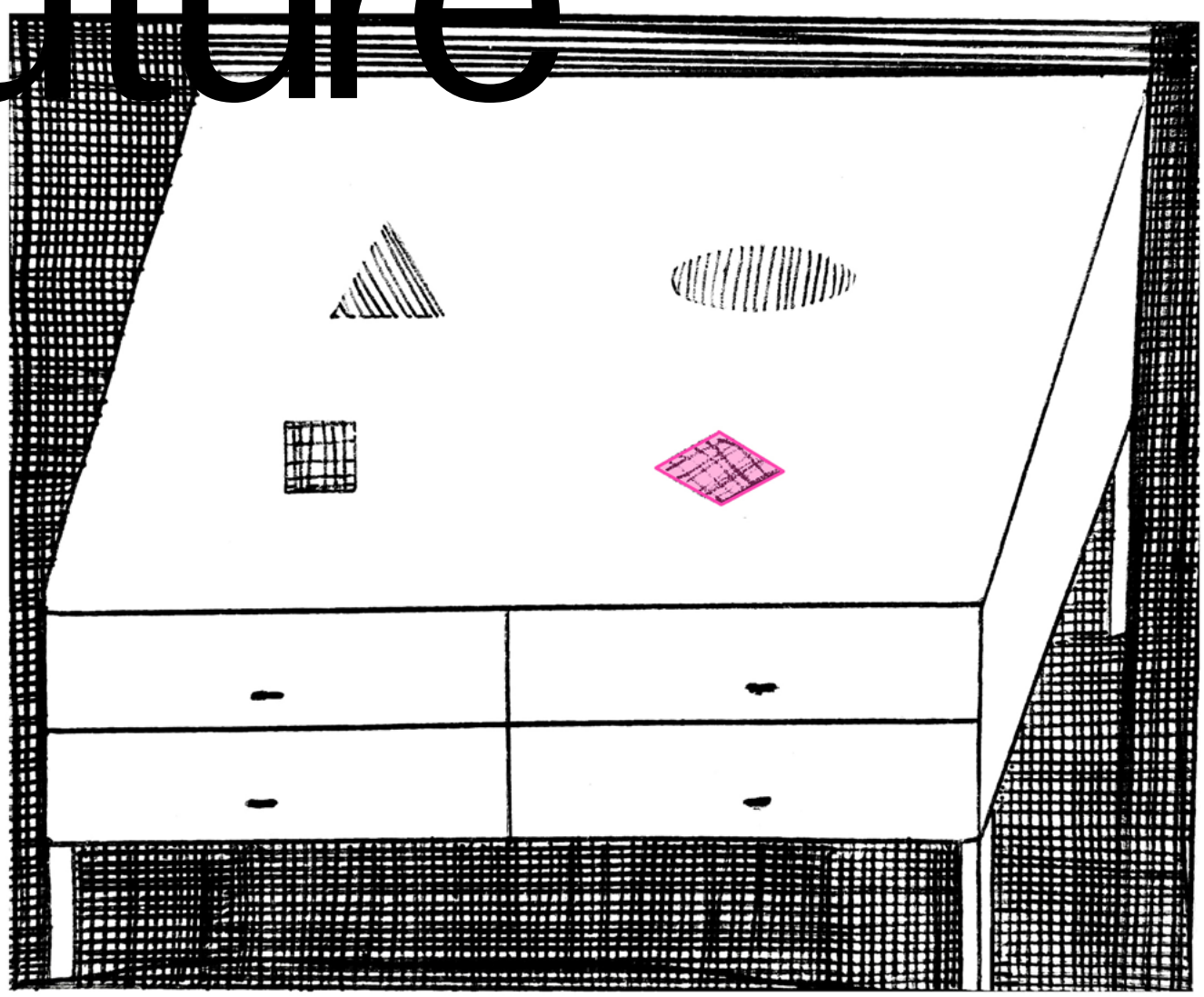
The title of the installation, *Sonus EX Machina*, echoes the classical theatre concept of *deus ex machina*—literally, "god from the machine". This device was used to resolve hopeless situations on stage, with a deity dramatically lowered from above to set things right. Anyone familiar with theatre, literature, or film will recognise this kind of implausible yet longed-for ending. Perhaps *Sonus EX* shows the possibility for a similar resolution—one that might, against all odds, resolve the conflict between humans and robots. Even if this isn't a prediction, it could certainly serve as the premise for a compelling science fiction story.

Video documentation fragments from *Sonus EX: Robotic Arm Music*
Authors: Vladislav Bek-Bulatov, Ilia Izotov, Maksim Kolesov
The work was created in 2023 as part of *ColLab* programme at the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production.

You Begin to Remember the Future

Artist, curator, and photographer **Vladislav Efimov** and writer, researcher, and critic **Alexandra Vorobieva** discuss distance in art, the role of childhood memories, and the importance of inventing the past.

Illustration **Kristina Pashkova**



Vladislav Yefimov: Contemporary art has undergone quite an intricate evolution recently. On the one hand, we strive to rid ourselves of texture and objects, as they hinder the artist, and possessing professional skills makes one dependent on them. Art is shifting toward a system that replaces philosophy, strengthening horizontal connections. On the other hand, art is still captive to the nineteenth century, longing for it: back then, artists armed with microscopes, telescopes, and cameras could perceive the texture of the world. Form and objects still hold primary significance; where there is form, there is texture. No matter how much we try to make form smooth, texture persists, and we remain its captives. Art is trapped in this positivist paradigm, where much depends on texture, on what we can directly touch and see.

If you study science art, you'll encounter attempts to visualise things that cannot be illustrated by their very nature. Take quantum entanglement, for example. I even went to an exhibition called *Quantum Entanglement*, and the visualisation attempts there were laughable, because things that can't be depicted shouldn't be. It's a total dead end.

But in the museum sphere we can now observe how the established paradigm is shifting. The philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov sought to understand what to do with artifacts, how to collect them, and what a museum could be. In the classical English paradigm and the Russian paradigm of the nineteenth century, a museum was a temple of science, serving education and the systematisation of artifacts. But what comes next? That is an important question.

My work is deeply rooted in the connections between art and knowledge, art and memory, the material and the immaterial, artistic and scientific models, and the legacy of positivism. Affirming one's past is essential—something artists are especially attuned to, perhaps out of a fear of losing it. The desire to feel that "something was not in vain" often leads artists, late in life, to revisit earlier works—though such repetitions rarely succeed. The past becomes clouded, shaped more by what lies ahead than what has been. Yet the past and the future, though separate, both move in the same direction. We exist in the space between them, and we require time, which is why everything in art repeats itself.

Alexandra Vorobieva: My medium is text, and I have two main approaches to creating it. The first, for journalism, is more documentary, relying on literary sources, archives, and testimonies that reflect historical events. For example, when I wrote the article *Red Drama* about Bolshevik dramaturgy during the Civil War for the online magazine *V—A—C Sreda*, I analysed sixty plays. The second approach involves analysing and reworking personal experience through artistic means. In particular, I am currently working with my grandmother's memoirs, which help me write a literary work. I enjoy filtering these documents through my own perspective, moving more toward poetry than documentary prose.

I want to return to the story about the rejection of objects, which I was surprised to hear you mention, Vladislav. At first, we spoke about how renouncing objects weighs on the artist, and yet you, a media artist, are now moulding pieces of pottery...

VE: Yes, it's funny. I work with ceramics and interactive installations precisely because I'm terrible at them, and there are no rules in their creation. Everyone is concerned with their own thing. The first thing you tell students is that no one cares about your soul, what you find beautiful, your family history, and least of all how you want to save the world. Please, create some distance. And "distance" is the key word for contemporary art.

But I believe that the personal needs to be reinterpreted. We should strive for things that touch on individual experience, emotions, and the depth of each person. If we do this, then all other archaic forms, like ceramics and interactive installations, also become valid. They are soulful, just like a family archive. More and more artists are now working with family archives—their own and others'. It's especially intriguing when one doesn't really know how to do something but still takes it on—that's bold modernism.

AV: A thought occurred to me around the theme of objects and distance, the detachment that often surfaces in our work. While reflecting on my family's history, and the histories of many families from neighbouring regions, I realised that in the Soviet Union, it was rare for people to live in the same place for even three generations.

My own family moved constantly across Siberia, including the Far North. From my grandfather, I inherited a large collection of objects he had accumulated in his Krasnoyarsk apartment. Some of them are completely mysterious—we'll never know what they were for, and they'll never find an owner. He was passionate about photography, for instance, and among his things are pieces of equipment for a home darkroom. These objects no longer hold any place in the future; they exist now only as artifacts. And yet when I encountered them, I discovered a paradox in the idea of freeing oneself from possessions: they seem obsolete, their original purpose is lost, but I can't bring myself to part with them. Sentimentality prevents me from letting them go.

I've seen similar situations in museums. A few years ago, Sergey Kovalevsky, the artistic director of Ploshchad Mira, and his colleagues put together a large exhibition called *Soviet Underside*, made up of everyday Soviet objects donated by local residents. Recently, my colleagues and I were searching the museum for various scraps to use in a musical performance, and we unearthed some items that hadn't made it into that exhibition, along with leftover pieces from other installations. The performance took place, and now these fragments of art have ended up in my office—I should throw them out, but I never get around to it.

VE: This is a question of the ecology of art: what to do with all of it? I have an old installation, *A Fearful Collection*, which was exhibited at the Stella Art Foundation in 2009. I made it from various scraps, sealing them inside display cases. It was a piece about the beginning of life, about feeling, or rather about the animism we are all guilty of, attributing a soul and will to objects. There was also a smaller work, *Where's the Stuff?*, about resurrected objects.

Works that draw on personal experience need to appear more often. Attitudes toward the personal in art—and the way it circulates—are shifting. There is now space for individual feeling. We need to cultivate humanism in ourselves: empathy for others, a genuine interest in their unique experiences. For an artist, belief in the personal is essential, because their entire practice involves shaping a personal history—without that, it's hard to begin making art at all. That's why artistic collectives, schools, and institutions with shared programmes are so important. We must continue to affirm the value of personal experience, memory, and feeling. What artists do, in essence, is assert their right to speak—to insist on it, even. And they create things that may endure for generations, as well as things that decompose quickly, enriching the soil without burdening museums like graveyards—making room for future art. Both approaches have their place.

AV: Does personal memory really exist? We have recollections that aren't tied to social situations. For instance, you might remember being a child, alone, waging a decisive battle against a patch of stinging nettles with a stick, and winning. You believe this experience is something deeply personal, something unique. Then you bring it up with friends, only to discover they fought the same kinds of battles. At the same time, I sometimes notice that my relatives remember things about me that I don't recall at all. In their memories, I'm the protagonist—but I have no awareness of myself in those moments. So is that still personal memory?

VE: So, we have to invent history. I once went to a gathering of young artists. They were asking two essential questions: what happened before they arrived, and what will happen after they're gone. They didn't live through the 1990s, so they invited me, as someone who had experienced those lively times when everything in the art world was spinning into motion. And they started asking me questions... but I couldn't remember a thing. I told them the '90s were fun, that I lived in a squat. But I really regret that we didn't keep any kind of archive back then—nothing to "write" a history with. So I told the young artists: just make it up. We have every right to invent our own history of art—to take artists who are still working, or better yet, those who have passed away, and construct our own stories around them. And this will be great, because made-up histories of art can give us the richness and variety we need.

AV: I really like Alexander Brener's book *The Lives of Murdered Artists*. He managed to create vivid, unforgettable stories. It's immediately clear that he's a completely unreliable narrator—at least in the literary sense. But once you start reading, you accept the rules of the game. The book blends his real experiences with pure invention, leaving space for both memory and imagination.

VE: Yes, Alexander's a poet and a performer. Performance is another paradigm, it's different from installation. You need to invent stories and present them to the world.

AV: When I worked in Moscow, I made friends with the team at Teatr.doc. From their practices, I gained many insights into the relationship between personal and historical memory. I was already familiar with the school of Mikhail Ugarov and Marina Razbezhkina, renowned documentarians. And I have always liked their position: the documentarian should not make evaluative statements "on camera". They focus on the characters, eliminating themselves as a figure. Razbezhkina, for example, uses the term "snake zone" in all her workshops, which refers to the situation where one gets so close to their characters that they stop noticing. You simply film them living their lives, and later one creates a story from the footage. This idea fascinated me at the time. I watched many productions by Teatr.doc, and I found their repertoire intriguing: some performances were based on personal stories, others on testimonies of historical events, and others were a combination of both. Together, they formed a large picture that captured a slice of time—but the emotional experience for the audience was powerful, as there was something paradoxically poetic in that documentary material.

VE: Documentary filmmaking is a media art that captures how to make life itself into poetry, into a statement. But when we talk about it, we find ourselves going back a hundred years—to the era of constructivism, of industrial art, and all those debates that led nowhere. In documentary filmmaking, editing is already a statement, a specific ideology. Dziga Vertov assured us that it was all filmed "without anything at all", just as life is structured. In reality, this method involves editing, imposing one's own position, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Media art is when one speaks in a language with a language about that language. It's a foolproof position. And media art raises a lot of fascinating questions: how do we relate to the audience? Should we continue cultivating the "white cube" and bourgeois values? How should we collaborate with the institutions we are currently working with? These questions are not new ones. I'm certain that they can be resolved through the efforts of artists and curators.

AV: Krasnoyarsk stands on the banks of the Yenisei River. It's a picturesque, green city, surrounded by mountains. But since 2008, I've watched the landscape change. The city has been overtaken by chaotic commercial development. New buildings keep springing up along the riverbank—some beautiful, some ugly, but most of them out of step with the landscape, built for profit and real estate sales. I look at them and think, how wonderful it would be if, one day, nature rebelled. If the Yenisei overflowed, animals poured out of the forests, the woods crept over all those towering shipyard cranes rising from the river, and everything vanished—even the museums. What do you think, Vladislav, about a radical rejection of museums, especially if we're already trying to free ourselves from things?

VE: I can't give up my things; I love them. It would be like giving up my own body. It's worth thinking about, of course, but the universe is still material. It's made of atoms, molecules, black holes—it's all matter. So what exactly are we rejecting, and in favour of what? And then, what is an artistic gesture? It's a kind of purposeless effort—one is not thinking, one is not getting smarter, but not becoming more foolish either. Letting go of matter is difficult, if only because it's unclear where matter even disappears to. Sure, we can shift everything into digital networks, but that just creates a space of illusion. And what distinguishes illusion from matter? Things decay. and that's part of the tragedy built into art. The ancient Greeks already talked about this thousands of years ago: things fall apart because that's their fate. That's how idealism arose—from all the different textures that allow us to invent smooth, intangible concepts without the burden of physical substance.

AV: But despite this, I find the process of decay and destruction very attractive.

VE: I have an installation called *Live Corner*, which I created from parts of wooden houses in Nizhny Novgorod. It's a kind of a network project: in every city, one can create a unique living corner from the remaining parts of these houses.

AV: I visited Nizhny Novgorod, I remember this wooden structure that was collapsing.

VE: It has already collapsed. The installation *Live Corner* is dedicated to the demise of the Russian wooden city.

AV: I've always felt sorry for these things that are fading away, falling apart. Towards the end of his life, my grandfather moved back to the village where he was born and raised. He bought a house there which was in rather poor condition. Every summer, my mother and I would go there to help him and my grandmother with household chores. It became an endless story: you paint the house, and then it cracks; you renovate it, but it still decays. It's like a wheel of samsara that you want to escape from, as if you were a superhuman or a Soviet avant-garde artist: to throw away everything old, make way for the new, and move forward. But when you decide to take that step, like Orpheus, you turn to your Eurydice, see how dead, vulnerable, and powerless she is—and stop, because you feel so intolerably sorry for her.

VE: What you're describing is artistic reflection. What are its eternal themes? Life, death, God, and love. There are also more complex questions: about decay, the relationships between different internal mediums, and language structures. The expression of pity is a useful consequence of art. Questions about the destruction of art objects and things lead to broader discussions in society. They allow wonderful projects to arise, including Internet projects: there's one that allows you to make a map of destroyed monuments, for example.

In general, media space is useful for historians, because history is about learning the skills of dealing with information. If we know how to do this, we will find the necessary information. We need to learn how to navigate information flows, understand and critically analyse them. For an artist, there is no single field of art where everything is filled with information flows, physical and electronic artifacts. That's why media art is useful for them, too. The more possibilities there are, the more freedom there is. But not for everyone, only for those who understand.

AV: For a while, I actively followed contemporary drama. In the second half of the 2010s, it became fashionable to write plays based on social media messages, using them as material. But that trend quickly grew tiresome—once one mastered working with that kind of text, where could one go from there? It was fine when playwrights used these exchanges as documents or testimonies, but sometimes they would try to imitate these message exchanges, and the result was very mediocre.

VE: I agree. But drama isn't visual art, so we're talking about different things, even if they're closely related. In the art world, there's a tradition: when something new emerges, the first people to use it gain fame, money, grants, exhibitions. That's why artists often follow a strategy of retrofuturism—a future that has already been left behind. It's easy to learn how to imitate contemporary art, and that approach will always find an audience.

AV: During the COVID era, when everyone suddenly switched to digital art, either to escape the madness of isolation or to make a statement, my colleagues and I tried to explore how digital formats influenced the performing arts. Now, in the context of our conversation, I'm trying to recall an interesting artistic project that made use of the media noise of that time, but nothing comes to mind. The things that resonated with me weren't tied to the endless human-generated flow of information on social media but rather to retrofuturism, to a kind of aesthetic inspired by the early pioneers of the internet.

VE: Retrofuturism always works, which is somewhat unsettling. It's nothing more than a formula to be used—we can invent a "new" era when the old one has lost its value. For example, right now, everyone is busy aestheticising glitch effects and various digital distortions; at any given digital biennale, you'll find claims that information flows themselves constitute a new aesthetic. This is a form of parasitism on something that, as non-specialists, we can no longer apply in any practical way for society's benefit. All we can do is watch and take pleasure in it, gradually getting used to the idea that it's neither frightening nor dangerous.

AV: I just remembered the installation *Lost Connection* by Ksenia Ruban, which I saw in 2021 at an exhibition at ITMO in Saint Petersburg. As far as I recall, the artist used some kind of microorganisms—either mould or something else—that exist in symbiosis with humans to capture a particular moment of her existence. This approach struck me as revolutionary because it offered a unique perspective on the relationship between the artist and the surrounding environment.

VE: A lot of people have experimented with growing mould, particularly black mould, which was dangerous to exhibit in gallery spaces. These experiments are necessary because, in a sense, we keep repeating the same thing, but in different ways, with different intentions. My personal position is that nothing new is needed. It's incredibly useful to revisit the past across various fields because meaning is always shaped by context.

AV: We work just like they did in Ancient Greece: we use the same stories, but try to reveal them in different ways!

VE: That suits me just fine. I'm equally happy with anything new, I like it all. Speaking of memory, we could touch on childhood recollections. I think humans are built in such a way that they gradually become part of a vast web called "life and memory". Childhood memories fade because our very cells start to merge with the universe, and the universe is shared by all. That's also why children understand so much!

My first memory is of a bike ride with my grandfather. It was a different time—the 1960s. I remember how the Khrushchevkas were being built, and that, too, is a beautiful memory. You're standing on something, so small that the windowsill is higher than your nose, looking out the window. Outside there's an apple orchard, it's winter, and workers nearby are driving piles into the ground to build those white, gleaming rows of Soviet apartment blocks.

I remember the feeling of that future arriving, when we moved from Fili to Zelenograd, into a brand-new Khrushchyovka. It was astonishing. Since then, I've been a devoted fan of prefab architecture. A wild kind of future. The first thing you remember is the future. You begin to remember the future.

AV: My earliest memories aren't as significant. One that stands out is when our cat scratched me. I hadn't expected pain from a creature I loved.

And another early memory echoes beautifully with your story about the new Khrushchevkas, and I can't resist this echo. I grew up in Norilsk in the early 1990s. The future felt mysterious, hazy, and incomprehensible. If you remember gleaming white apartment blocks, I remember the dark outlines of unfinished buildings around my kindergarten, or the hollow windows of an abandoned nursery near my home. Norilsk was full of ruins in my childhood. If your memories are of the future, mine are steeped the past, because I was always drawn to these enigmatic places, always imagining what might be happening inside these portals to nowhere. Now we need a third person from Gen Z to contribute their own memories of buildings...

VE: Yes, exactly!

Hilarious Uproar

Artist **Ivan Gorshkov** and researcher and book publicist **Fyodor Derevyankin** discuss the connections between memes and Pushkin, the problems raised by AI, and the charm of the programme *A Stump in Every Home*.

Illustration **Slava Nesterov**

Ivan Gorshkov: I usually don't have specific themes that I want to express verbally—mostly, they lie in the realm of re-examining basic emotions: what is funny, what is frightening, what am I made of? My work is aimed at helping viewers understand their own reactions and thought processes. I encode my pieces, knowing how they function and how they affect the viewer. This process can be called reflection on the cultural code, but it is limited by the scale of the exhibition. Can the cultural code be managed in a global sense? That's a big question.

Fyodor Derevyankin: The cultural code can be seen either synchronically or diachronically. What you mentioned, Ivan, implies a synchronic approach. From a historical perspective, our cultural code is Alexander Pushkin, who subtly and invisibly defines everything. One of the subjects of my academic interest also concerns the question of how much the cultural code is also biological. In my view, Pushkin's descriptions of nature had a profound impact on our feelings and thoughts. Modern research often overlooks this matrix, but it manifests itself subconsciously. When reflecting on "coding", we may recall the cultural theorist and literary scholar Yuri Lotman, whose semiotic theory is partly based on the works of Pushkin. There are many such examples in cultural history. Undoubtedly, the cultural code is not limited to Pushkin alone, but he laid the foundations for its further development.

IG: Am I right in understanding that Pushkin had a significant impact on the Russian language and thus "encoded" the culture which we unconsciously absorbed while growing up in it?

FD: Exactly, he "encoded" Russian literature, which subsequently influenced culture as a whole.

IG: It would be fun to compare this impact with less obvious phenomena. I enjoy observing lowbrow genres, like internet memes—a kind of mirror of society's consciousness. What do you think—how seriously can we talk about the influence and significance of such micro-phenomena in the context of the cultural code?

FD: At some point, it became clear that our way of consuming news had to change—these days, staying informed is as easy as following a few meme channels. An interesting shift has taken place: serious news now often feels like a joke—not the funny kind, but a disturbing one that provokes discomfort. Meanwhile, memes have evolved into a vital part of our daily information landscape.

IG: As an artist, I'm drawn to the aesthetic dimension of memes and how they reflect the times we live in. It's especially intriguing to see how certain trends form in retrospect—take the 1990s or 2000s, for example. The phrase "Give me back my 2007" appeared in 2012, expressing nostalgia for a past era and its culture. In a way, old jokes resurface as emblems of the present. I wonder, will memes eventually become the subject of cultural scholarship? Could there one day be a dedicated section in a museum, displaying the memes that shaped our era?

FD: You're right to point out that out. Internet archaeology is rapidly evolving, and scholarly research into this field is gaining momentum. In Alexander Pushkin's time, cultural meaning was encoded in poetry, in Dostoevsky's era in the novel, and during the Soviet period in cinema, now memes have taken their place. The old view of them as nothing more than silly pictures with amusing captions is steadily fading. A major shift in cultural perception is approaching, when internet humour will be recognised as a serious force shaping our reality. A museum of memeology will likely appear in the not-too-distant future—and of course, we'll be among its visitors.

FD: Today, many of the mechanisms of cultural coding have become simpler, exposing what was once concealed beneath the elaborate layers of high art. Primitive images spread rapidly and widely, and through them, we can begin to understand why certain techniques resonate while others fall flat. In this sense, memes can be meaningfully compared to Pushkin—after all, a lot of his work is hilarious, uproarious even. Another fitting example is Dostoevsky's *Demons*: nearly every page is laced with humour, even as it grapples with weighty, existential themes. This is a lesson contemporary art ought to take seriously. Let's admit it—few are truly capable of creating work that is genuinely funny, and perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether it's worth continuing with art that lacks that essential spark.

IG: In my view, what matters most is that, although I experiment with various internet-based images, I consciously avoid direct, recognisable memes. I seek out abstraction—images that hint at a meme-like structure but remain open, ambiguous. One of my earliest successful exhibitions exploring this was *Mirage of Laughter*, held in 2016. It revolved around the moment when a viewer, catching a meme-like image out of the corner of their eye, is just about to laugh—only to be confronted with a mirage, a hollow echo. I'm drawn to this kind of visual code: one that alludes to a context without being weighed down by its specifics.

At some point, I came to a realisation: randomness is the key word in art. Almost everything meaningful is born by chance—hence expressions like "creative luck" or "the muse descended." So I began to think: how can I engineer luck? How do I build a machine for serendipity? I coined a tongue-in-cheek term for it— "a generator of happy accidents". As an artist, I see myself as its operator: attracting people, gathering found objects, harnessing whatever circumstances come my way.

When I think back to working at the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production, every phase of the process came with its own surprises, from programming and launching custom machines to scanning and processing digital files. It was a specific generator, because engineers were involved in setting up the machines. At the same time, much of the work took place out of my control.

FD: What you've said reminds me of what happens in nature—it too can be seen as a generator of happy accidents. Our own birth is a product of that same process. Every living organism is programmed and defined by its DNA, which functions much like a cultural code—one without which existence itself would be impossible.

By the twentieth century, scientists began to recognise that behavioural strategies in animals, particularly birds, are influenced by local customs. Culture, it turns out, is not exclusive to humans—it exists among animals, insects, and even certain microorganisms. Culture is what's passed on through social experience. For instance, sparrows sing differently depending on where they live; move a sparrow to a new flock, and it will adapt its song to match the local dialect. In this way, birds learn social skills and behavioural patterns. The bigger question is how all this relates to a broader cultural code—or even to Pushkin, as we were discussing earlier. The answer to this will be sought in the future, but it's already clear that there are echoes and connections between different areas of existence.

IG: In the context of the idea of randomness, it's interesting to reflect on the issue of authorship. I enjoy finding myself in controversial situations that question direct ownership: I appropriate other people's paintings, give away my own, swap, and share authorship with other people. I've long accepted that the artist in the modern world becomes a moderator or a combinator who doesn't necessarily have to produce something of their own.

I have a funny and illustrative story that touches on the question of authorship. From time to time, I work with assistants who help paint my pieces, though the concept and overall production are entirely my own. One day, some acquaintances visited my studio with their children. When the kids found out that I hadn't painted the works myself, the thirteen-year-olds were scandalised: "How can you be so shameless as to pass off someone else's work as your own?" That's when I had to explain that this practice is not only completely normal but has been a part of the art world for centuries. Artists have always worked this way. There's no need to reinvent the wheel—just hop on and ride it.

FD: Indeed, your example may seem to some a modern phenomenon or a problem of improper appropriation of someone else's labour. People often cite figures like Pavel Pepperstein, who reportedly relies on a team of specialists to execute his work, adding only his signature. In reality, this attitude is related to a short historical memory—many people simply don't understand how recent and unreliable the concept of authorship itself is. During Spain's Golden Age, for instance, literary giants like Cervantes or Lope de Vega were not seen as "authors" in the modern sense. The patrons who funded the publications were considered the true authors, and their names appeared on the title pages. Similarly, in medieval Russian literature, there was no established concept of authorship at all. The names of the actual writers often weren't recorded. Instead, scribes saw themselves as collaborators, free to enhance or revise the text as they saw fit—without anyone worrying about "authenticity". The emergence of authorship is connected with the development of capitalist relations in bourgeois society and the need to formalise legal and financial relationships.

The emergence of AI has put an end to authorship as such. Is there any point in asking who exactly programmed a particular neural network? And are we always talking to a real person, or are we hearing a meaningless system generating letters and words? We are still at the point where we don't fully realise the scale of the problem. Skills, including creative ones, are being lost — authorship is shifting to AI, which is why the meaning and coherence of what is produced are disappearing.

IG: We are now coming to the question of what art is. Since I was young, I've believed that a work of art is defined not by its quality but by the intent behind it. If someone beats their chest and says, "I am an artist, and this stick is my work of art," then that's exactly what it becomes. It might be boring, derivative, but the point is that the artist has declared their intention. That's exactly what's missing in the case of AI: there's no human will behind the gesture, no personal stake in the declaration.

FD: The problem is not that there is a gap, but that it is rapidly closing. Soon, people might lose that will entirely We've managed to jump into the last car of the departing train, and can still enjoy the privileges of wanting to create, of needing to make something.

IG: To conclude the topic of appropriation and authorship, I'm reminded of a joke my friends and I used to make, about organising a readymade festival. The idea was to pick a spot in the city, claim it as our own, and give people a tour. There's this power station in the park near my house, for instance, which is the perfect readymade. I'd like to call it my sculpture, speak about its form, its composition, the materials it's made of. Of course, readymade practices have long been part of art history, ever since Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917, which caused a stir at the time. But today, no one's shocked by these gestures. In fact, to reinterpret something now, I don't even need to extract it from its original context—I just claim it as it is.

FD: We shouldn't forget that readymades aren't always meant to be taken as literally as Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*. There's a more fruitful and poetic approach, like that of Sergey Konenkov, the sculptor of Mikhail Prishvin's gravestone that features the mythic bird Sirin. Konenkov worked in wood, and it's fair to say the material was his co-author. I once saw a piece of his in Moscow titled *The Stool Alexei Makarych*, though I nicknamed it "The Dwarf-Stool". It looked as if he'd stumbled upon a stump in the forest, and it had whispered to him, "Sergey, look, I'm a dwarf you can sit on." The sculpture seemed to be born from a true collaboration between nature and artist. It's a reminder to abandon the consumerist mindset toward natural forms. One should listen to what the stump says and then it'll give you a marvellous dwarf. If not, all one would end up with is a soulless piece of porcelain, like Duchamp's urinal.

IG: But what if you find a stump and appropriate it without any changes? Perhaps it will say: "Take me as I am, I'm perfect already?"

FD: Absolutely. What matters is the encounter. If the stump says "leave me be", then you leave it be. What's essential is making that connection, finding that shared language, even if it feels improbable.

IG: Last summer, I bought a few stumps for 200,000 rubles.

FD: Incredible! Clearly, it's time for a national programme called *A Stump in Every Home*. We need to make stumps fashionable, stylish, even aspirational. You should launch an app, maybe even a premium delivery service that brings quality stumps right into the heart of the city.

IG: With express delivery!

FD: Of course. We don't have time to wait—life isn't endless.

GES-2 House of Culture
+7 (495) 990 0000
v-a-c@v-a-c.org
The Vaults Centre
for Artistic Production
15 Bolotnaya Embankment
Moscow
vaults@ges-2.org
ges-2.org/vaults
ges-2.org

General Director of V—A—C Foundation and GES-2 House of Culture
Artem Bondarevskiy

Programming Director of V—A—C Foundation and GES-2 House of Culture
Alisa Prudnikova

Curator of the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production
Olga Druzhinina

Junior curator of the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production
Anna Agafonova

Head of the Vaults Centre for Artistic Production
Lyuda Frost

Artists
Anastasia Filippova
Yakov Khorev
Irina Korina
Slava Nesterov
Kristina Pashkova
Evgenia Tut

Authors
Francesco Bonami
Olga Bozhko
Alexei Buldakov
Zhenya Chaika
Vladimir Chernyshev
Fyodor Derevyankin
Evdokia Dergilyova
Olga Druzhinina
Vladislav Efimov
Artem Filatov
Ivan Gorshkov
Yakov Khorev
Evgeny Klimin
Daria Konovalova
Leonid Moizhes
Sofia Nakonechnaya
Alisa Prudnikova
Sasha Romanova
Irina Safonova
Anton Sidko
Alexei Starkov
Alexandra Vorobieva

Graphic design
Kirill Gorbunov

Supervising editor
Daniil Dugaev

Editors
Tima Aller
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Daniil Dugaev
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Texts in English
Simon Patterson

Photo editors
Ekaterina Migal
Ruslan Shavaleev

Photographers
Daniil Annenkov
Gleb Leonov
Anna Todich
Katya Zuyeva

Printmaking master
Artemiy Kulyomin

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