**THE OBSERVATORY**

**Descriptions of artworks**

**Eva Engelbert**

**Space emblem for G.B., 2016**

***Graphite, PUR, velcro, fabric.***

Dear Galina Balashova,

On a flight to Rome last summer, I came upon an article about you and your life. The magazine called you the “creative mastermind behind the Soviet space program.” In the midst of a militarized space race, you brought the principles of modern Soviet architecture to the final frontier. As the only female architect in a team of engineers and scientists, you designed the interiors of rockets, space ships, control rooms and living quarters. You created a semblance of reality in a fabricated environment. You built a world in outer space — from the walls all the way to the emblems on the astronauts' spacesuits.  I like to look at your beautiful watercolors, I return to them again and again. They are delicate and precise, coming to me from an era I never knew. You made color systems to suggest spatial orientation and a feeling of gravity in space, where there is no gravity. You said that you didn’t feel that gender was an issue, but you still earned less than your male colleagues. You said that even though you had been associated with space travel for almost three decades and continue to follow the development of this daring human discipline, you never wanted to fly to space. I dedicate my work here, at the Special Astrophysical Observatory of the Russian Academy of Sciences, to you.

**Irina Korina**

**Svetilishcha, 2016**

***Objects, mixed media***

The name of this project comes from two words: *svetilo*, a heavenly body that radiates light, and *svyatilishche*, a sacred place or alter.

I have built a number of objects that I placed on the streets of the astronomers' settlement. There are boxes with visual aids to demonstrate great events, such as the birth and death of stars and even entire galaxies. Mere mortals cannot comprehend such events in all their majesty. Emergence and death evoke a sense of awe just as they did hundreds of years ago. I would like to remind viewers of nature’s incomprehensibility and the mysteries that scientists still labor to unravel. My wall installations must become like lighthouses flashing in the darkness. But as the viewer approaches these strange sanctuaries, it will become impossible to plainly discern the source of the flashing light. That which is most interesting is hidden. These objects will resemble little street shrines, mailboxes (as top-secret scientific institutes were referred to during the Soviet period) or nativity scenes.

**Mikhail Mikhailov**

**M-Theory, 2016**

***Installation***

Inspired by the “M-theory,” which brings together incompatible theories of the birth of the universe, Mikhailov uses in his artwork fundamentally different media, the combination of which is unusual for his existing artistic practice.

The video, which was inspired by his first visit to Karachay-Cherkessia, is shown on a microcosm of dust collected in the artist's studio and transformed into a drawing that spins on its own axis.

Mikhail Mikhailov uses the situation with irony, explaining through artistic means his own M-theory. The focus should be on the human being and his existence. Despite all the complexity of art and the abundance of topics and interpretations, the subjective point of view and perception should nonetheless be primary.

The idea is to create a work that encourages the viewer to question even his own existence in his own universe. Starting with the investigation of a microcosm, the artist tries to find ways to explain the macrocosm while not forgetting its internal contradictions.

In his artwork Mikhailov turns to parasitic strategies, applying them in life so as to manipulate it. Similar to string theory, it is not clear whether falsifiable experimental hypotheses can be made.

The M-theory is so mysterious that nobody can even say what exactly the M stands for (see *The Fabric of the Cosmos* by Brian Greene, Chapter 13), and therefore Mikhail Mikhailov has declared that the M refers to himself.

**Yuri Palmin**

**The Lower Site, 2016**

***Series of photographs***

Residents of the Special Astrophysical Observatory’s small settlement, called the “lower scientific site,” work in their everyday lives with objects, events and phenomena billions of light years away. It seemed interesting to me to radically shift the focus of their attention to something located in their immediate vicinity. This series of photographs of the settlement’s architecture is an attempt to create something like a corrective lens for cosmic farsightedness. What is interesting here is not the works themselves, but the potential for an intellectual response from scientists who can for a short time alter their perception through this simple trick.

**Alexandra Paperno**

**Abolished Constellations, 2016**

***Water-based paint on wooden panels***

*“These constellations are all false, but deliciously false! They have grouped totally foreign stars in a single figure. Between real points, that is between stars that are isolated like one-of-a-kind diamonds, the dream of constellations has drawn imaginary lines.” – Gaston Bachelard, “Air and Dreams”*

The ancient Sumerians, and later the Greeks (as recorded by Ptolemy), established most of the northern constellations in use today. When explorers mapped the stars of the southern skies, European and American astronomers proposed new constellations for that region. In 1922, the International Astronomical Union adopted the modern list of 88 constellations, which depict 42 animals, 29 inanimate objects and 17 humans or mythological characters. It was agreed that the list would be final and no new constellations would be added. The number 88 has no specific scientific or cultural significance — it is random.

Some constellations were not recognized by the International Astronomical Union in 1922 and thus have been abolished. More than 50 constellations fall in this category. Some of them appear in old maps and etchings, among them Argo Navis, which was one of the 48 proposed by Ptolemy. This list of the “victims” of unification and standardization forms the basis of Alexandra Paperno’s project. This list of 51 former constellations is the result of a peculiar bureaucratic process: something that had never objectively existed was officially abolished. Paperno's artworks, which carefully recreate the maps of former constellations, have been placed in the tenth-century Middle Temple in Nizhny Arkhyz, creating a dialogue between the medieval and modern history of this location. They demonstrate the link between the scientific and artistic aspects of the evolution of human thought.

**Timofey Radya**

**Brighter than Us, 2016**

***Installation***

**Eva Seiler**

**Artifact No. 2, 2016**

**Artifact No. 3, 2016**

***Wood, coal, bitumen, latex, acetal, metal, glass, wax***

We do not have a clear understanding of what *Artifact No. 2* and *Artifact No. 3* were used for.

The bodies of both exhibits are made from wooden sticks. The junctures between parts resemble joints. In addition, the artifacts have a series of functions to which we can give no precise definition.

*Artifact No. 2* appears to be custom-fitted shoulder guards, which suggests a personal use: It may be a support structure for someone who had to keep something in focus. A piece of the artifact located in the chest area could have served as an instrument holder.

On the purpose of *Artifact No. 3* we can say even less. From the design we can tell that it was adjusted for head size. A colleague studied the mechanism which connects the jaw with the ear piece and suggested that it may have been used as a transmitter. Yet there is insufficient evidence that transmission ever took place, as a receiving device was never found.

**Svetlana Shuvaeva**

**A Thousand Trifles, 2016**

***Installation, mixed media***

You find yourself in a place about which you know nothing. You know nothing about it not because you did not study its history, but because it does not know itself. It is and has always been empty. It remains unnamed. Its walls remember nothing. It watches itself until someone enters, and then it watches that person too. This place does not care what you think about it. It looks at you dispassionately, but you are unable to follow suit. You seek a dialogue with it. In reality, though, you are not so interested in learning about this place. It is much more exciting for you to find within it your own reflection and presence. You look around, staring into the emptiness of the room, and find nothing interesting. Everything is much too stingy and ordinary to be a revelation. In short, there is no discovery to be made, and you leave. Perhaps you will return here and again seek an encounter, like an astronomer observing an abyss through his telescope. Your search will continue until you grow weary of the apprehension of a chance encounter with the incredible and can no longer see usual things in a new light. Such things have become inconspicuous trifles.

Remember how many times you have lost your hat while it was on your very head, and how long you spent searching for it everywhere.

**Svetlana Spirina**

**Falling, 2016**

***Performance and documentary***

Contemplating the life of celestial bodies, I unwittingly sought analogies with what we call human life. The image of a meteorite falling to Earth from the darkness of space appeared to me as a direct analogy for the human path from birth to death.

Description of the performance: a human ritual replicating a meteorite’s fall to Earth. The performer rolls down a high hill clutching a meteorite, as if duplicating the path of the cosmic object through space.

**Anna Titova**

**Why Work?, 2016**

***Neon, powder coated aluminum, pigment***

The worlds in Anna Titova's works straddle the boundary between reality and fiction: that has been constructed is easily mistaken for the found, and vice versa. Through this collision of reality and illusion, Titova creates the most accurate metaphors for a modernity suffused with the effects of mediated reality. Seemingly familiar objects and images point to something beyond the realm of the exhibition, as the space begins to function according to unfamiliar laws. This occurred, for example, at her show *A Time Capsule* at the Lentos Art Museum in Linz. There the viewers found themselves within a space seen from all sides, a place reminiscent of the surveillance system of the modern era, while at *Exchange Point* at Artwin Gallery, collages changed depending on the perspective from which they were viewed. From a distance they looked like whole photographs, but upon closer examination the seams connecting the found images became visible.

*Why Work?* is dedicated to two figures in the local history of the town of Nizhny Arkhyz: the chief constructor of the Special Astrophysical Observatory, Bagrat Ioannisiani, and archaeologist Sergei Varchenko, whose discoveries led to the founding of the town’s historical and archaeological museum. Both were self-taught, and there is almost no reliable documentation remaining about either of them. It has been replaced by oral history. The artist references them to create an image of the modern hero, an agent of intellectual labor. One of the installation's components, a neon image of the ancient wind god Aeolus, introduces a mythological dimension. In Homer’s epics, Aeolus was a sort of personification of the elements; initially he helped Odysseus and his companions, but as soon as they disobeyed the divine will, Aeolus cast them away in disgrace.

By combining various layers of the imaginary and the documented, Titova recreates the tension between rational scientific knowledge and mythologized elements. Such a relationship of opposing forces appears in Nizhny Arkhyz, where the opportunity to observe the galaxy depends on weather conditions and scientific laboratories that resemble the dwellings of futuristic superhumans neighbor one of the greatest sites of Orthodox Christian pilgrimage. Anna Titova’s works send the viewer on a cognitive journey in search of links between the knowledge of modernity and the experience of art. *Why Work?* evokes a feeling that one is observing collisions between systems based on knowledge and on faith. Rational systems undergo changes as a result of these collisions. In a similar way, the work itself changes as a result of its encounter with the viewer: across all open space flies an iron powder resembling stardust.

*Alexandra Shestakova*