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Aljoscha



Germinating New Art

BY PETER LODERMEYER
TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH VOLK

Dateline: Tuesday, March 17, 2009. At Cologne's Museum Ludwig, a young man moves toward *Portable War Memorial* (1968), a large installation or, more precisely, an environment created by Edward Kienholz in obvious reference to the Vietnam War. The man makes sure that no one is looking, pulls a small, longish object from his pocket, smears the bottom with glue, and quick as lightning, attaches it to the wall, about a meter away from Kienholz's work. After photographing the situation, he moseys on through the galleries as if nothing had happened. Later, on the same day, in the same way, he leaves two more objects on the museum walls—one between two works by Roy Lichtenstein, and the other near paintings by Lucio Fontana.

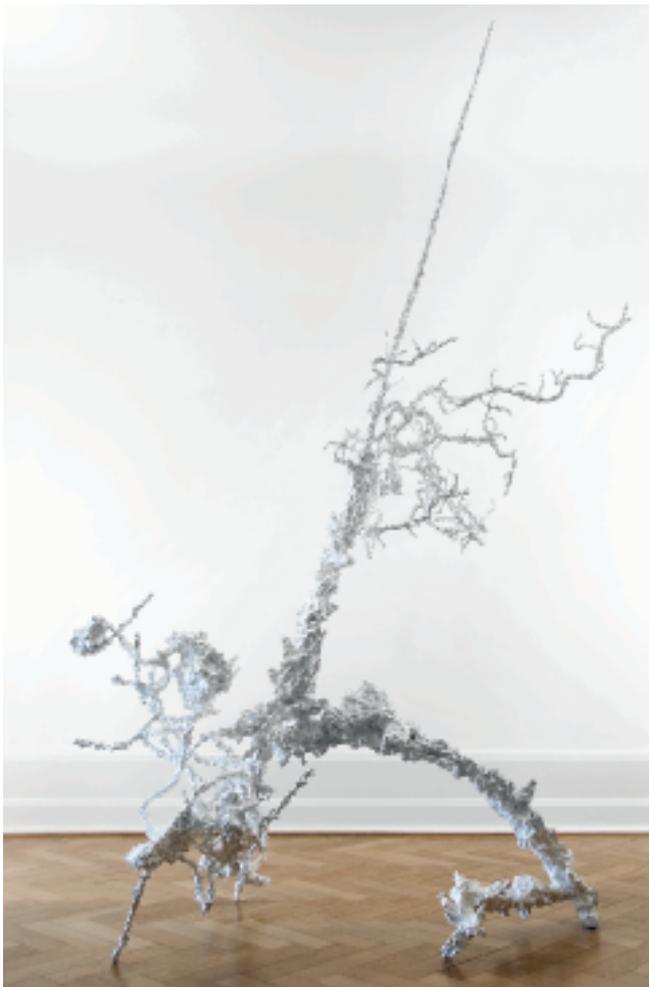
The name of this unusual museum visitor is Alexej Potupin, and he was born in Glukhov, a small city in the northern Ukraine, in 1974, though he has lived in Düsseldorf since 2001. He is an artist who refers to himself as Aljoscha. The objects that he placed on the walls of the museum were test tubes containing thorny, white formations made of acrylic paint. Aljoscha calls these creations "g-signs" (the g standing for "growing") and designates them as "new life forms" that mature in their glass "uteri." The action at the Museum Ludwig was not his only one that year. During the first week of spring, a time of growth and new beginnings, Aljoscha "infected"

Opposite: *b-meetings #05*, 2010.
Acrylics and oil, 108 x 58 x 58 cm. View
of installation at ALDI discounter, Düs-
seldorf. Above: *g-signs Tate Britain*,
2011. Acrylics, 16 x 8 x 12 cm.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



Above: *Bioism*, 2014. Acrylic glass, acrylics, and sand, approx. 360 x 600 x 400 cm. Left: *object 136*, 2010. Acrylics on aluminum, 190 x 320 x 130 cm.



19 German museums with his g-signs. In a manifesto-like text, he explained his vision of a new type of museum, one where new forms of art can proliferate epidemically: “The main vision of the art action *the growing signs of life* is that the museums of the future will be living systems, which are continually spreading. I wish to see outgrowths appear on the walls of the buildings simultaneously and mysteriously at multiple places. Burgeoning growth of the young creatures. Germination of new life.”

As 2009 progressed, more and more g-signs showed up in various countries. Liberated from their glass containers, they underwent diverse mutations, taking on increasingly complex forms. G-signs from the second through the fifth generation, which Aljoscha set free in numerous museums in the Netherlands, Belgium, and England (at times in cooperation with his Brazilian artist colleague Eliane Paulino), revealed hairs, colorful tentacles, and bloom-like growths. Ultimately, they detached themselves from the wall, initiating physical contact with the art of the past. At Tate Britain, a black form sat in the middle of a scroll spread out by Sir Alfred Gilbert’s *Mother Teaching Child*, a marble sculpture from 1881. And at Tate Modern, a blazing-red life form extending defensive tentacles found a place on John Armleder’s *Table and Chair* (1963–64).

Though these unauthorized “epizotic installations” in important international museums might appear as self-confident stunts by a young artist desiring to attract attention in an original way, they also serve as a highly individualized kind of institutional critique. How long would the g-signs be able to “survive,” to “live like parasites” in a museum? How would the museum as an institution react to them? In some cases, Aljoscha was able to find his



smuggled-in beings weeks later, still attached to the walls. Had they gone unnoticed by museum personnel? Had the intruders been mistaken for official exhibition pieces, or were they simply accepted in silence? Art-works as new, unknown forms of life, the museum as a breeding ground and biotope, exhibitions as infections and epidemics — with its biological terminology, *the growing signs of life* leads directly to the heart of Aljoscha's idea of "bioism" or "biofuturism," an artistic concept in which profound seriousness ("art, for me, is a kind of religion that does not perform a function") is inextricably linked to a sense of subversive humor.

Aljoscha first arrived at the Düsseldorf Academy of Arts in 2001 as a guest student in the class of Konrad Klapheck, who paints surreal portraits of subliminally anthropomorphic machines. Aljoscha is fascinated by unusual technical equipment — particularly the technology of space travel — and the specialized, practicality-driven design of scientific instruments. He collects original press photographs of rockets, satellites, measuring instruments, space probes, and other paraphernalia of space exploration, using them at times as counter-inspiration for his work.

The idea for his biofuturistic objects first arose as a by-product of the painting process.

While working on his extremely detailed *Landscape Beings*, executed with the finest of brushstrokes, he noticed that the paint he was wiping off onto his palette formed complex and bizarre structures.

Above: *b-meetings #07*, 2010. Acrylics, 47 x 186 x 47 cm. View of installation at University Hospital, Düsseldorf. Below: *b-meetings #20*, 2011. Acrylic glass, acrylic, polystyrene, silicone, approx. 210 x 68 x 160 cm. View of installation in Venice.



COURTESY THE ARTIST



Above: *b-meetings #13*, 2010. Acrylics on aluminum, 190 x 440 x 170 cm. View of installation at Am Pappelwäldchen, Düsseldorf. Below: *object 106*, 2009. Acrylics on aluminum, 420 x 210 x 160 cm.

More importantly, these structures seemed to grow faster than the painted surfaces on the canvas. Fascinated, he began to apply and build up quick-drying acrylic paint brushstroke by brushstroke, allowing the paint to grow out into space. The idea of

using paint sculpturally is not new, but unlike works by Robert Sagerman, for example, who makes his dots of oil paint protrude into space in layers, Aljoscha's paint forms detach themselves completely from any pictorial support and develop into autonomous sculptural objects. As fragile as these objects consisting of countless individual elements may appear, they turn out to be extremely robust and flexible. The paint can be shaped into complex structures, which grow even larger when supported by a wire skeleton.

Over the years, Aljoscha has experimented with various technical processes and diverse formal possibilities. Because his "bioisms" evolve in a multitude of finely wrought branchings, they trigger a wide range of associations depending on their color, size, form, and degree of complexity. With paradoxical charm, they can recall the fractal patterning of twigs, branches, coral formations, neural pathways, and nerve tissue. When they form simple symmetries or approach spherical forms, we think of enlarged microorganisms, radiolarians, mastigophorans, or bacteria. With increased color and complexity, they become less familiar and increasingly strange — beings from outer space or unknown strains of bacteria bred in the laboratory by a mad scientist from a 1950s sci-fi matinee. Still other bioisms, silver-plated in an elaborate galvanizing process called "white bronze electroplating," take on the sheen of precious metals.



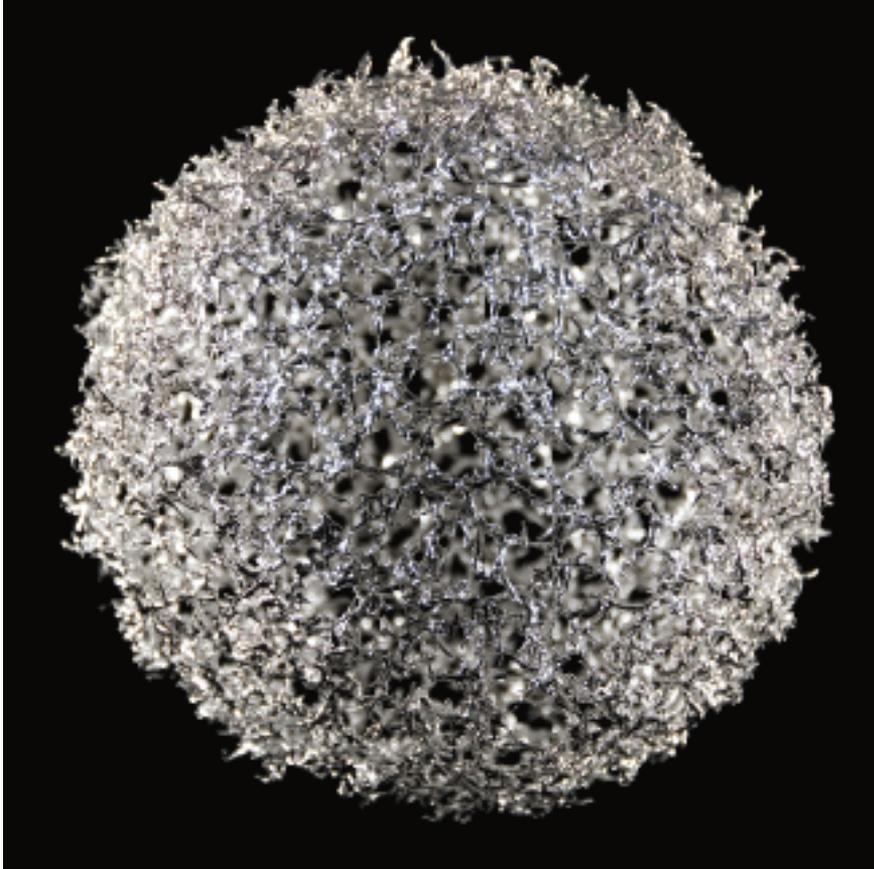


Above: *b-meetings #25*, 2012. Silicone on aluminum, 123 x 308 x 146 cm. View of installation in India.
 Right: *object 193*, 2014. Acrylics, 61 x 31 x 38 cm.

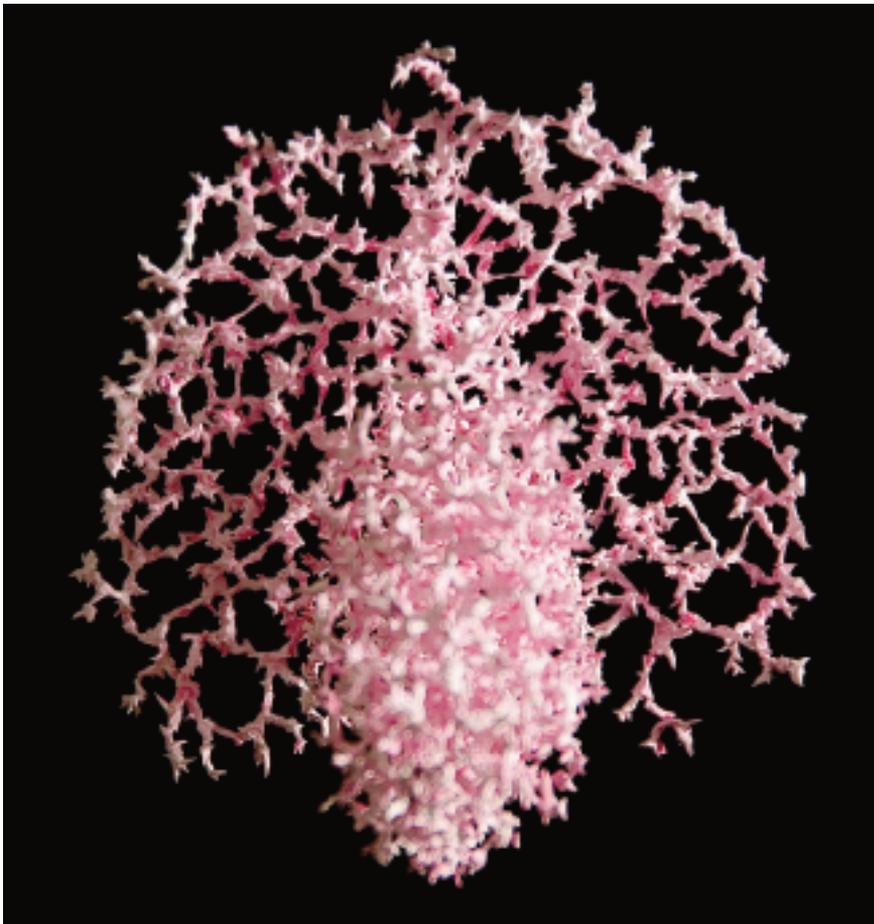
The “t-forms,” made of colorless polymethyl methacrylate, better known as acrylic glass, form an incidental genre among Aljoscha’s objects. These transparent bodies, characterized by irregularly frayed edges and a complex morphology of intermeshed convex and concave surfaces, offer unexpected views from every angle. Like specimens of a previously unknown species of jellyfish, they appear gelatinously amorphous and nearly weightless, almost as if they were deformed by external pressure; their smooth, reflective surfaces produce fascinating effects of light and shadow.

According to Aljoscha, “Bioism or biofuturism represents my attempt to create new living forms and a new aesthetics of future organic life. Bioism is a way to develop art objects that express visual possibilities of synthetic biology. Bioism is an effort to produce art based on vitality, multiplicity, and complexity. I regard each of my works as a living being.” This bold statement is not as utopian as it sounds,





Above: *object 64*, 2008. White bronze, 15 x 15 x 15 cm. Below: *object 01*, 2005. Acrylics and oil, 9.5 x 8 x 10.5 cm.



considering recent breakthroughs in gene technology, bioengineering, and related disciplines. But for all of Aljoscha's futuristic rhetoric, he is simply finding a new way to express a very ancient dream—the sculptor's obsession with making the work come alive. The myth of Pygmalion is the best known, but not the only example of this ambition. Even in modern times, when the story becomes a figurative trope not to be taken literally, the appearance of life remained an important attribute of the best art. Vasari, for instance, praised Michelangelo's sculptures for their heightened degree of liveliness: they did not just reproduce nature perfectly, they surpassed it.

For Aljoscha, who lives in an age of gene sequencing, cloning, and synthetic biology, the desire to “improve” on nature is no longer restricted to the representation of the human body, or even to the human body itself. Instead, it reveals itself in the ability of manipulate the microstructures of organic matter. In terms of its underlying idea, Aljoscha's biofuturism shares a conceptual basis with Bio Art, whose representatives work with living organisms and use scientific techniques such as gene manipulation. (Eduardo Kac, perhaps the best-known practitioner of Bio Art, has created living fluorescent green rabbits [2000] and the transgenic flower variety *Eugenia*, a petunia injected with his own genes [2009].) There is a fundamental difference, however: Aljoscha, by declaring his objects to be *models* of future life forms, appeals to the viewer's imagination and aesthetic feelings, while Bio Art creates hard and troubling facts, using art to raise difficult ethical issues beyond the boundaries of aesthetics.

Aljoscha's strategy also relies on humor, which repeatedly shines through in his work. When he states the reasoning behind his new life forms in a quiet, gentle voice, his motivation becomes unclear. One is never sure if he means for everything he says to be taken literally or if there is a fine irony underlying his bioism. The inextricable connection between deep earnestness and Kafka-esque humor is expressed most clearly in his “b-meetings.” These works are mostly photo documentations (a few are photomontages) of actions and instal-



b-meetings #28, 2014. Silicone, oil, and galoshes, 18 x 14 x 7 cm. 2 views of installation in Kiev.

during which Aljoscha sends his objects out into the real world to test them in various contexts. Whether on the banks of the Rhine in Düsseldorf, at a fountain in Venice, a cemetery in El Salvador, an Indian train station, or on the beach at Thessaloniki—the bioisims attract attention, prompting wonder, perplexity, curiosity, and amusement. On occasion, they also provoke overt aggression. When Aljoscha offered some fiery red bioisims to chickens on a farm in Kazakhstan, they viewed them as a threat and attacked accordingly. For all their indulgence in the bizarre, the *b-meetings* are first and foremost investigations of social context. How, for example, does a monument to Sigmund Freud, or to Ronald Reagan, change when it has been infected with a biofuturistic object? And is it not a comment on the economics of the art industry when Aljoscha places a large-format bioism among the special offers of a supermarket, labeling it “Bioism Object 44 Fruity,” with a price tag of 99 cents?

b-meetings #28 caused a furor at the Majdan, the main square in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. The action took place on February 18–20, 2014, just as tensions were escalating and the first people had died in anti-government protests; on February 21, President Yanukovich fled the country. At the Majdan, Aljoscha placed two small red organisms in an old pair of black rubber galoshes and threw them over the barricades so that, as neutral observers, they could “provide an overview of everything that was going on.” In Germany, at least a dozen newspapers and magazines reported on the galoshes, their contents, and their flight. It is Aljoscha’s express desire not to be regarded as a political artist—art for him is, in principle, situated on a higher intellectual level than politics; the new life forms in Kiev nevertheless confronted the inevitable question of the political and social conditions under which man and creatures will want to live together in the future.

Peter Lodermeyer is an art historian and author living in Bonn, Germany.