

Reports and Commentaries

MOSCOW AS A DIGITAL PATTERN:
ALEXEY BELIAYEV-GUINTOVT'S IMPERIAL LOOPS
Vlad Strukov

At the end of March 2012, Triumph gallery, Moscow, presented a new artistic project by Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt. The artist has a somewhat controversial reputation. Some regard him as a mainstream maker of commercial decorative works employing imagery that instantly satisfies the needs of consumers hungry for Russian / Soviet exoticism. For others, Beliayev-Guintovt is a radical thinker whose ideas and art disturb neo-liberals by dipping into their memory of the Soviet regime and pushing the boundaries of the permissible and the unsaid in contemporary Russia. In this review I am not concerned with the paradoxes of Beliayev-Guintovt's reputation or in fact with his role in the Moscow and world art and/or political scene. My interest lies in the ways in which digital video has been employed to convey the architectural qualities of Beliayev-Guintovt's futuristic vision for Moscow. Thus, my discussion of his new project focuses on the digital as a field of vision and an intersection of spatial forms of art. I employ the concept of imperial loops in a number of ways: first of all, to designate Beliayev-Guintovt's obsession with the imperial aesthetic and his constant return to the practice of imperial style; secondly, to denote the characteristics of digital art work that are often structured as a series of loops; and thirdly, to ascertain digital projection as a site of cultural production and also as an ideological space.

In my review of the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, I pointed out that projecting art seems to dominate contemporary artistic and curatorial practice (Strukov 2011). In fact, projecting art—video, still images, installations, and so forth—utilizes the loop as a symbolic form that re-enacts cultural memory and questions the assumed linearity of perception. Projection becomes a way to mix times with patterns of memory that achieve the status of the political field of vision. Beliayev-Guintovt has been preoccupied with creating imagery that interprets history as a collection of styles, each of which is a building block in his phantasmagorical vision for the future of Moscow. Whether following Egyptian or classical conventions of representation, Beliayev-Guintovt has been concerned with depicting the imperial space that controls time and thus makes a leap into the future possible. He politicises his view of the future by recreating imperial codes of supremacy and dominance in his art and social activism. Since c. 2000 Beliayev-Guintovt has been involved in the Russian neo-

eurasianism movement, whose main ideologist is Professor Aleksandr Dugin. Leaving the political aspect of their neo-imperialist ambitions aside,¹ I would like to focus on the loop as a symbolic form of suspended time, ideologised in Beliayev-Guintovt's art as a locus of historical asynchronicity and architectonic authority.

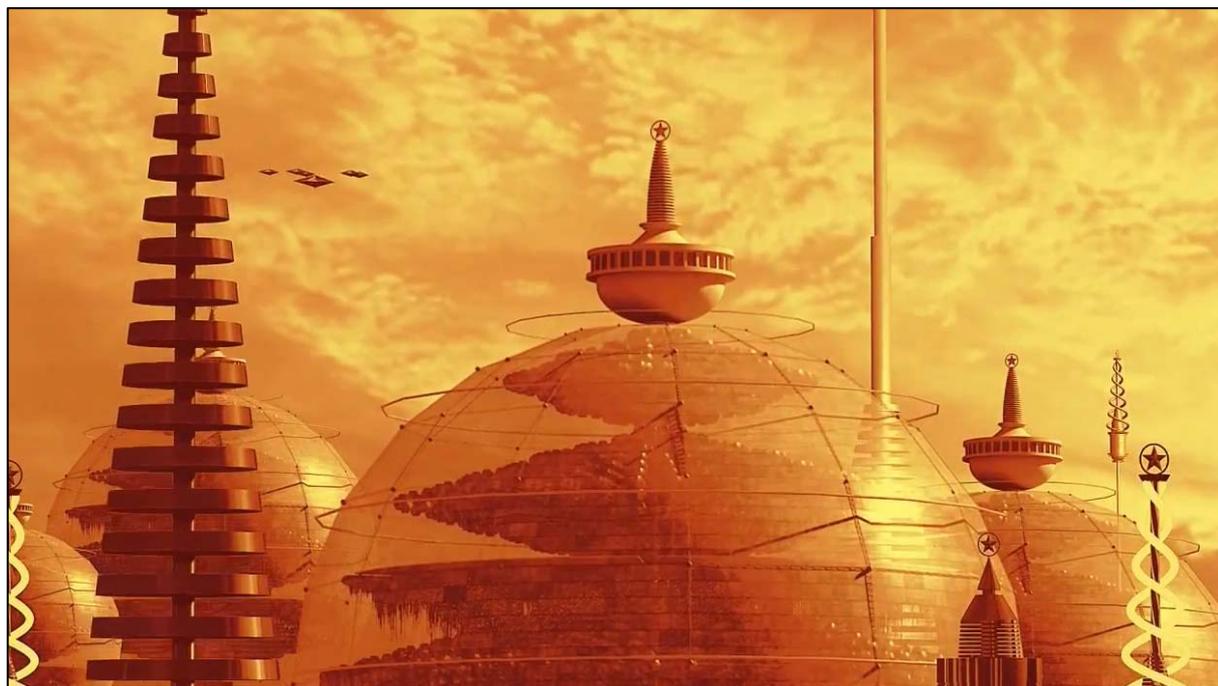
The title of the new exhibition is 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. These are the geographical coordinates of the centre of Moscow. They refer simultaneously to the location of the art gallery in Russia's capital as well as to the position of Moscow as a project on the global scale, whereby 'global' refers not so much to the world order established by the good old British empire, with its astronomic centre in the Greenwich observatory, but rather to the intergalactic order. Hence the title of the exhibition reads as a navigational code for a spaceship, or, in fact, as a new type of encoding information that might perhaps replace the binary code used nowadays in computers. The use of such encrypted information instead of a word-based title in the name of the exhibition—his previous show was called 'Parad pobedy 2937' [Victory parade 2937]²—signifies a higher level of abstraction in the artwork as well as a shift to new media and techniques. Rather than applying paint and using palm printing as his main method, in 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E Beliayev-Guintovt used felt, nano-printing, ultra-violet rays, layering, printing on gold plates and other mind-boggling procedures. These techniques are meant to represent the cultural legacy of the vanished empires—Chinese, Mongolian, Roman, and so forth—with the digital medium reserved for the new Eurasian empire. At the same time, the use of digital media equates the digital with non-digital methods, insofar as each of the medium is employed by the artist as a form of writing about / representing the new imperial order. Thus the works presented in this exhibition fall into two groups: digital video and analogue works. The latter include paintings, re-mastered photographs, multi-layered prints, and mixed-media pieces (for example, hangings that combine oil painting and embroidery). The focus of this essay, however, is on the former group, and on how the digital video is used to render the artist's vision for the future of Moscow.

In true imperial fashion, the focus of Beliayev-Guintovt's project is Moscow as the centre of the new order. This is because the new empire is so vast that its borders remain invisible and are, in fact, insignificant, as perhaps these are now borders between realms of representation, rather than between polities. As Alexandra Rudyk notes, for Beliayev-Guintovt 'the new Moscow is a gigantic cyber-space' (Rudyk 2012). It is a space of intergalactic connections, where we find star-shaped spaceships cruising at low altitude and then docking in; fast-speed trains carrying thousands of passengers along glass-roofed tunnels; lifts transcending vertical spaces punctuated by rooftop gardens and crystal-shaped utilitarian buildings. Thus the artist focuses the viewer's attention on the infrastructure of the new imperial capital; this infrastructure—city layout, its transport links and architectural elements—appear somewhat traditional, indexical in a cyber-linked environment of the imagined city.

¹ For a brief overview of the movement please see Shekhovtsov (2009). Also a video with Beliayev-Guintovt commenting on Vladimir Putin's concept of eurasianism is available at <<http://www.evrazia.tv/content/aleksey-belyaev-gintovt-sverhnovaya-moskva>> (accessed 11 April 2012).

² The exhibition was presented in Triumph gallery in 2010.

Image 1. Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video



Source: Vlad Strukov.

The digital functions as a medium and also as technological glue that holds the pieces of the new Moscow—and [in fact] the whole project—together. Among them are such recognisable landmarks as the Kremlin and Stalin's high-rise on the Kropotkinskaia embankment. They make the link to the Soviet empire explicit, and they also help the viewer assess the scale of the imagined buildings and networks. The new structures are innovative from the architectural point of view, as they imply dynamic rather than fixed forms of architecture; they replicate the domes of the St. Basil Cathedral, thus accentuating the primacy of the Russian imperial project. The arresting shades of red make the project cohesive as well as providing it with an apocalyptic aura.

The project includes 21 pieces, and 12 of them are combined with video projections. The latter are part of a longer segment of digital video that is shown at the exhibition in a separate room on a large-scale screen. The static and moving images create a dichotomy of representation; their binary logic is similar to that of the digital code. The artist seems to suggest that this exhibition is a transition from conventional to digital art. Another possible reading of the artist's intention is that perhaps the boundaries between the static and the moving image, between the analogue and the digital, have been blurred. In this regard Moscow occupies a space of transience—a notion highlighted by the arrangement of pieces at the exhibition that occupies two floors, with pictorial pieces reflected in the video projections. This transience is akin to cosmic transcendence, expressed in Beliayev-Guintovt's earlier 'Parad pobedy 2937' and rooted in the Russian tradition of cosmism (e.g. Nikolai Fedorov).

Image 2. Alexey Belayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video.



Source: Vlad Strukov.

Image 3. Alexey Belayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video.



Source: Vlad Strukov.

To be sure, transience here is perceived as a permanent condition (life on earth as preparation for life in space, in Fedorov's terms) because the growth of the empire can never be halted, i.e. it is a permanent process. The artist achieves this impression by utilising the loop as a means of displaying the artworks but also as a way to structure the images. The videos are shown on continuous loops; each of them makes references to others, and all of them are part of a larger assemblage of images. The imperial grandeur of futuristic Moscow can never be seen in full; it is accessible to the viewer only in fragments.

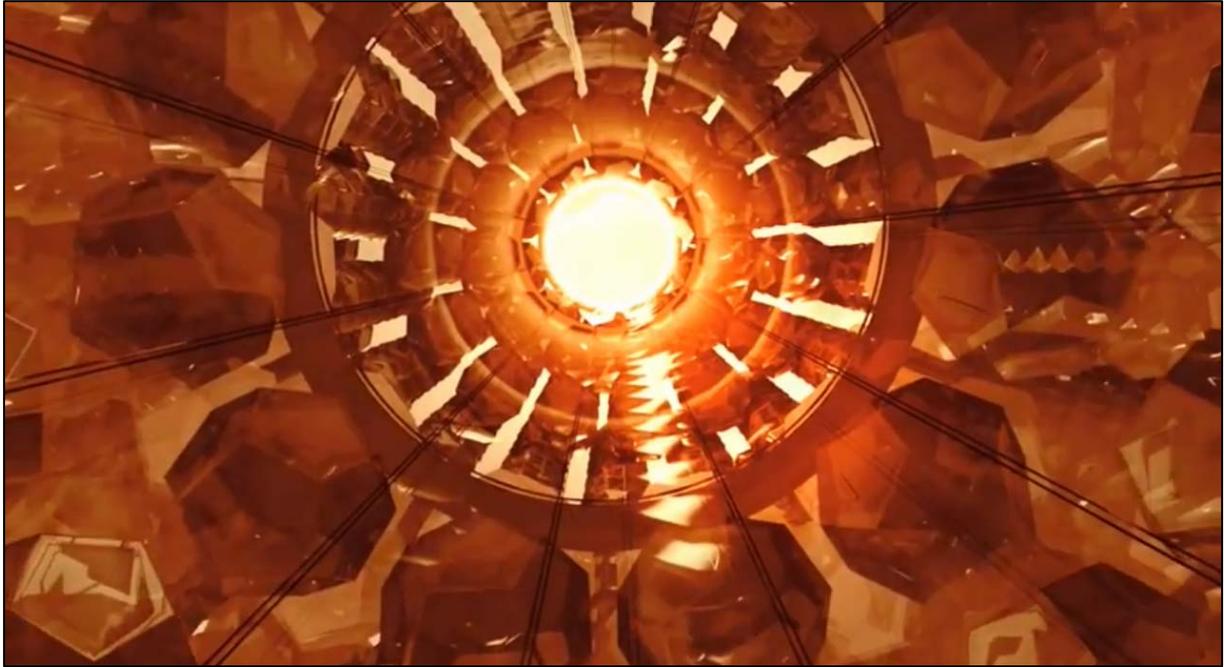
With few exceptions, the space of Moscow is not occupied by living creatures: these appear sporadically and schematically in a few scenes, and each time their status as living beings is dubious. Rather, they appear to merge with the decorative patterns of the buildings and their role is strictly utilitarian: they help the artist explain the purpose of various constructions and transport networks. Arguably, the whole structure may be perceived as a living organism owing to the moving parts of the architecture and especially the 'organic' structure of the patterns themselves. As in much digital art, patterns derived from the world of plants and fungi are used in Beliayev-Guintovt's artwork. In fact, the crystals decorating the surface of the buildings might be taken for blood cells and transport shafts for coronary passages. The whole project is then a graph that allows for loops and multiple edges; the circular shape of many attests to the eternal nature of the imperial project and are emblematic of the loop as an imperial structure. The artwork also utilises cyclic pentagons (one of them clearly visible in the bottom left corner of image 4³): these advance the notion of perfection and the natural cycle that the pentagon symbolises. The whole body of new Moscow is represented as a digital pattern [uzor]: its fluid symmetry propagates the law of the cosmic empire stretched across the Eurasian continent and further, in other galaxies.

³ An ironic viewer will perhaps interpret this pentagon as the Soviet trademark of quality [znak kachestva], which was used on premium products in the USSR.



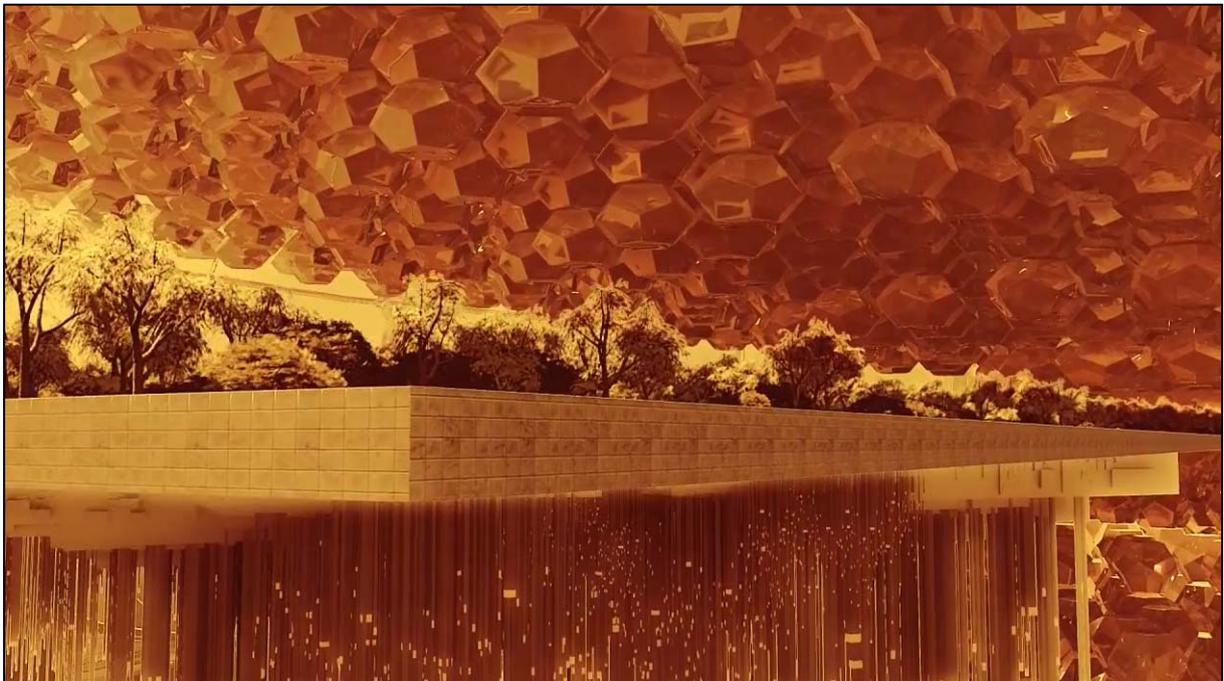
Source: <<http://www.pcdesign.ru/tovar/850005.html>> (accessed 11 April 2012).

Image 4. Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video.



Source: Vlad Strukov.

Image 5. Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video.



Source: Vlad Strukov.

Image 6. Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt. 55° 45' 20.83" N, 37° 37' 03.48" E. Photograph of digital video.



Source: Vlad Strukov.

Moscow-London, April 2012

Sources Cited

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