

The Sputnik Gazette

Editorial

Dear Reader – Many thanks for the new subscriptions and your effort in distributing The Sputnik Gazette. I've got very supportive reader response and hope you will enjoy the recent issue including the interview with Marko Peljhan, founder of Makrolab which was among other installed in the frame of Documenta X and the Venice Biennial 2003. The project website <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/> is currently down.

There have been many responses for the International Sputnik Day and people from Berlin, Belgrade, Frankfurt/M, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Ljubljana, Leipzig, Manchester, New York, Paris, Rotterdam, San Francisco, Vienna, Wiesbaden, Zagreb showed their interest to join the celebrations. Stay updated online at the website <http://sputnik.irmielin.org!>

Marko Peljhan Interview

First question I would like to ask you, is in how far you would describe satellite technology in general as an Eastern project and/or as a Western project.

Depends on how you approach this theme, because historically it's not divided. In Russia you have the hole cosmistic philosophy, first of all with Aleksandr Fedorov in the late 19th century and then of course Konstantin Tsiolkovsky who is the father of Russian cosmonautics he also already started to write then, but more than an engineer he was a philosopher, his technical expertise was not so high, he had more the power of imagination and poetics. And in the West you had Robert Goddard in the United States, who worked on liquid motor engine and you had all the Germans, specifically Herman Oberth and Wernherr von Braun and then in Slovenia Herman Potocnik Noordung who was officer at the Austrian-Hungarian army but published his thesis *The problem of travel in space - the rocket motor* in Germany, in Berlin in 1929.

So I wouldn't say that this division between East and West just happened after the Second World War with the advent of the Cold War. Sergei Korolev, who was sort of the "father-engineer" of the Russian space program was the one to finally put a satellite and a human into space. So it then became symbolically an Eastern project, a Soviet project, because they were first. But then the Americans caught up and this dynamic continues until now. Now we have the Chinese and the Indian space program and these are the players that will become big in the future.

Do you think, it will cause the same kind of dynamics in technological developments?

It already has. The Chinese have mastered this technology already very well and their culture

is built on learning from others and making things better and they are very successful in this. In science applications of space flight it's basically the Americans and Europeans who are very advanced but in human spaceflight it's definitely the Russians.

Asking the same question on a cultural level...

Well the cultural level is being romanticized also by people like myself and all the people I deal with in my life. You have the difference of the notion of the astronaut, the conqueror of the stars, and the cosmonaut, which goes into the cosmos, sort of closer to god maybe. So there is this difference, one goes to the stars and the other goes to the cosmos, into the complete absolute unknown, the absolute zero and so on. There is this dimension and the other one is at least in my experience that the Russian space program (and I developed many friends within even the cosmonaut core) is much more open to all kinds of artistic connections. They clearly



see that sort of spirit of discovery and curiosity with artists in a similar way, whereas the Americans are dealing with a rather engineering mindset, and in Europe also but in Russia it's much more humane in this sense.

Regarding your artistic work with satellite technology, how do you see the technological developments in relation to your own projects?

Well my first experience with satellite technology was when I was very young, because a friend of mine Matjaz Vidmar built a receiver for the European Meteosat imagery in the begin of 1980s. In that time we had a dish in my home town Nova Gorica and a satellite receiver and you could receive live pictures of the Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. And then with the advent of satellite navigation I saw, there is a lot of potential for all kind of situationist application of this technology, especially furthering the notion of the derive, Guy Debord's form of the exploration of urban space and to map this space much more efficiently than it was done before. So we did this project *Urban Colonization and Orientation Gear (U-COG-144)* in 1995 which used GPS technology. This was my first contact with the whole GPS/ NAVSTAR constellation and I really wanted to understand this technology and this brought me much, much closer to the notion of aerospace and my interest in aerospace was really furthered by that. The notion that something built for military

purposes was used for civilian applications was something, that was very fascinating for me, this conversion process... and that's when I really started engaging in this whole territory.

Do you see current and upcoming developments that could mean another paradigm shift in the use of satellites?

Well the thing is with satellites, the problem is that they are very expensive to launch and it is very dirty business. Space rocket technology is not the most ecologically friendly technology - it's one of the worst pollutants on the planet, so it has this kind of double edge how useful it is and how dangerous it is. I don't see any big revolution in terms of new technologies developing. I think definitely navigation and telecommunication is covered, so all the things that we can use satellites for have been invented, we can only make them better and more useful for the people.

On the other hand with all those aerospace companies you have the problem of access to these technologies and that's why I started thinking very early to maybe build an independent satellite. At the moment we are actually discussing with a group of Russian engineers to actually launch two satellites that would serve our polar stations and everything in-between.

How do you want to launch it?

We have actually signed a memorandum of understanding for a launch on an converted Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, called Dnepr-1, a converted SS-18 ICBM and with this group of engineers we have a project called *Prosracny Mir* (www.transparentworld.ru). The idea is to have sort of a open source format earth observation and communication satellite, where everybody can very easily access the imagery from this satellite and use it for educational purposes as well. The problem is of course financially, the technology is known.

You already mentioned the polar station project. Why do you go to such a remote area?

The poles of the earth are one of the most sensitive ecological points on the planet and also they are sensors for the state of the things on the planet. They are also interesting "time machines" where through drilling into the ice core you can read what happened in the past of this planet, it's like an archive. In my opinion they provide a window and a vision of what the future on this planet will be.

It's a thesis and the thesis is that by removing a small number of people in a very intense communication environment in very harsh conditions you can create more evolutionary results then by using the usual social systems of transfer and production of ideas. It's sort of the thesis that by removal you see better.

(Interview and photo on Feb 15, 2007 by Francis Hunger, sputnik@irmielin.org)

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