Constructed Geographies
in Contemporary Art

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

of Doctor of Philosophy by Public Works.

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ABSTRACT

Constructed Geographies in Contemporary Art, my PhD by Public Works, focuses on the Eurasian region and Soviet history. I have developed a body of work as an artist, filmmaker, and author from 2011 to 2022 and presented them publicly in form of exhibitions, screenings, lectures, and publications. My art works have examined the physical manifestations of the altered landscapes by using field observations, research, exhibitions, filmmaking, and publications, producing an outcome that combines both real and fictional experiences into a singular, synthesized one. The trilogy of works, titled *Terra Corpus*, explores post-Soviet geography within the context of twentieth-century mythologies and histories.

The first project, *At the Back of the North Wind*, investigates Hyperborea, a mythical land that serves as a source of inspiration for utopian civilizations. The second project, *Walking the Sea*, examines the Aral Sea region, which has shrunk due to Soviet irrigation projects in the 1960s. The third project, *Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives*, critiques the Soviet Constructivist project's utopian aspirations through the lens of post-war and Soviet experience.

As an artist and researcher, I have focused on the geography, archives, and cultural histories of Eurasia, particularly within the contexts of post-minimalist and post-conceptual art practice. I put myself at the center of the narrative, production, and documentation processes. This allowed me to investigate the experiential aspects of the research in which I was both a subject and an object of study. My work explores collage and montage as primary methods to synthesize research and studio methods as a strategy in knowledge construction, self-study, and interdisciplinary approaches. By combining factual and fictional elements through temporal layering, I created new narratives that expanded the understanding of these locations and histories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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As part of my Ph.D. by Public Works submission, I am including documentation of the public exhibitions (available in Appendix A) along with links to my three films as a component of my thesis.

Hyperborea, 2011,
45 minutes, HD video, surround sound

Walking the Sea, 2013,
30 minutes, HD video, surround sound

Turo, 2016
35 minutes HD video, surround sound

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In addition, I have submitted three physical books to Middlesex University

Anton Ginzburg: At the Back of the North Wind. (Hatje Cantz, 2012),
Anton Ginzburg: Walking the Sea. (Hatje Cantz, 2014),
Anton Ginzburg: Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives. (Hatje Cantz, 2020).

INTRODUCTION

This Ph.D. by Public Works thesis, titled *Constructed Geographies in Contemporary Art,* seeks to demonstrate how art practice research can produce knowledge and contribute visual, aural, spatial, and notional understanding about place. Additionally, it aims to shape innovative perspectives within cultural geography and new understandings of communities, ideas on contested territories, and historical contexts. I have developed a body of work as an artist, filmmaker, and author from 2011 to 2022 and presented them publicly in form of exhibitions, screenings, lectures, and publications. My art works have examined altered landscapes by using field observations, research, exhibitions, filmmaking, and publications. The resulting trilogy titled *Terra Corpus* encompasses multimedia installations, sculptures, films, and 2D works focusing on post-Soviet territories within the context of twentieth-century mythologies and histories. Each of the three projects: *At the Back of the North Wind, Walking the Sea,* and *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* featured an institutional solo exhibition, film, and book publication with Hatje Cantz Publishers. Furthermore, individual works from each project have been presented in different configurations in group exhibitions, publications, lectures, and film screenings internationally.

My thesis suggests the following contributions to the field of artistic research through practice, exhibition, and publications. Firstly, it is developing a new original concept of 'constructed geographies.' Second, it applies this concept to the unique material of the Eurasian region and USSR history. Thirdly, I combine a number of methods from different fields such as autoethnographic field research, various types of organizing narration from literature and archives, and montage techniques from film making and visual arts. And finally, I engage with the idea of 'post-Soviet' in a distinct way, interpreting it in a way which is meaningful for my particular artistic and intellectual biography.

I was born in Saint Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) and lived through my formative years during the final decade of the Soviet Union. I witnessed the final phase of its decline and immigrated shortly before its official dissolution in 1991. Despite not having Russian citizenship, I held a Soviet passport, making me a subject of the dissolved empire even after the USSR's collapse. Before gaining US citizenship, I carried a 'white passport' for displaced individuals for years. This

unique experience influenced my perspective on Soviet legacies, providing me with a distinctive understanding of belonging, geography, and national identity. Unlike artists of the previous generation, such as those from the SotsArt movement or Moscow Conceptualism,[1] who grappled with the enduring Soviet reality, my identity was positioned at the seam of historical shifts and the convergence of East and West after the Cold War. The Soviet past seemed like a fading image in the rearview mirror of a speeding car, while I was pursuing my studies in art in the United States, as Walter Benjamin described the *Angel of History*: 'His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.'[2] I center my artistic research and artworks around the impact of Soviet legacies in post-Soviet spaces. My interpretation of 'post-Soviet' is a historical or temporal point of view in relation to the Soviet Union's and twentieth-century timeline. Being a Soviet emigre to the USA, my diasporic identity is a constructed concept based on lived experience and cultural hybridity. I observed similar experiences among other international artists facing geographic and cultural displacement and forming unique artistic voices that I will explore in this thesis. My viewpoint and arguments below differ from the sociological concept of post-Soviet artists described by scholars like Madina Tlostanova.[3] She applied it to the generation of artists working within the Russian Federation and ex-Soviet republics, particularly in Central Asia. Her interpretation confined post-Soviet artists within a decolonial narrative, burdened by collective guilt and restricted to cultural boundaries of political discourse.[4] My *Terra Corpus* trilogy, by contrast, was a vehicle for exploring, understanding, and documenting the transformation of Soviet geography and landscapes and its complex and often

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[1] Rosenfeld, Alla. *Moscow Conceptualism in Context.* (Prestel, 2011).

[2] Benjamin, Walter. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' [1942]. *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (New York. Schocken Books, 2007).

[3] Tlostanova, Madina. *What it Means to be Post-Soviet?: Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

[4] 'For the post-Soviet human condition that I attempted to sketch briefly in the introduction, contemporary artivism grounded in decolonization of the affective sphere and in liberating aesthesis from the limitations of aesthetics, is particularly important and promising for the future.' — Tlostanova, Madina. *What it Means to be Post-Soviet?: Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).p.25.

catastrophic history through an artistic prism. In her essay *Landscape and History*,[5] academic Della Dora explored the concept of 'historical geography,' perceiving the landscape as a representation of history embedded in the land. This perspective was influenced by the ideas of Darby and Hoskins in England.

> Landscape provides one of the richest records of human activities and of human achievements that we possess. As such, its study has been inseparable from the development of historical geography, both as distinctive branch of human geography preoccupied with the geographies of the past, and as the study of the influence of the past in shaping cultural geographies of the present.[6]

I am interested in what remains of the Soviet legacy in the post-Soviet landscape and positioning my artistic research within the contexts of post-minimalism and post-conceptualism in contemporary art, a context that Peter Osborne's critical essay characterizes as the 'post-conceptual condition.' This condition encapsulates both an artistic situation and the dynamic interplay between communication technologies and new forms of spatial relationships.[7] The concept of 'construction' within Russian modernism historically encompassed a philosophical and artistic approach to art, society, and culture, that emerged as a response to the societal upheavals and quest for a new identity following the Russian Revolution of 1917. It aimed to construct a new vision that merged art, technology, and social reconstruction into a unified, forward-thinking ideology. The discussions surrounding the dichotomy of 'construction versus composition' starting in the spring of 1921 held significant importance for the Russian avant-garde circles,[8] engaging leading artists, and architects such as Stepanova, Rodchenko, Ladovsky, and Malevich among others. These debates culminated in forming the Constructivist faction, marked by the

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[5] Della Dora, Veronica 'Landscape and History.' Domosh, Mona, Michael Heffernan, and Charles W. J. Withers, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Geography* (SAGE, 2020).

[6] Veronica della Dora *Landscape and History*.
Domosh, Mona, Michael Heffernan, and Charles W. J. Withers, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Geography* (SAGE, 2020).

[7] '[…] the idea of a post-conceptual condition is double-coded. It is determined at once as an artistic situation and that which conditions it – primarily, that interplay of communications technologies and new forms of spatial relations that constitute the cultural and political medium of economic processes of globalization, the experience of which (when successful) it artistically condenses, reflects and expresses.'
—Osborne, Peter. *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London; New York: Verso, 2018). p.25.

[8] Khan-Magometov, Selim. *Constructivism.* (Stroiizdat, Moscow, 2003).

establishment of the Working Group of Constructivists.[9] The conclusions drawn from these debates were documented in the portfolio of drawings and notes within the Costakis[10] collection. The idea of 'construction' represented a modern articulation of formal strategies[11] linked to political perspectives and expressed in Rodchenko's thesis that 'organization' methodology stood as the operative principle for life and artistic struggle within the post-revolutionary USSR.[12] I use their method of 'construction' as my primary approach, employing a reductive formal strategy in line with Constructivist ideas. My work is rooted in post-conceptual art practice, but it focuses on 'constructed geographies' as a synthetic framework and material expression of culture. The notion of 'constructed geographies' forms an organizational principle that allows one to observe the development of place as it undergoes semantic, material, and historical transformations. Drawing on my training in experimental filmmaking at Bard College graduate program, I have developed a strong foundation in the use of montage as a cinematic strategy,[13] which I have then applied across various media. By combining diverse fields of research across different disciplines and artistic methodologies, I aim to create multi-layered readings of histories and cultural understanding, highlighting how form, meaning, and context are continuously evolving and generating knowledge.

The *Terra Corpus* trilogy weaves concepts of 'constructed geographies', art practice, and artistic research in a way that has not been done before. In three chapters, using examples of mythical and imaginary landscapes, actual historical sites, and 'representational' cultural spaces, I seek to address the dynamic interaction between human activities and the cultural environments within post-Soviet and Eurasian landscapes. Additionally, I examine the implications of an

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[9] Gough, Maria. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.* (University of California Press, 2005.) p. 41.

[10] Costakis was a collector of many things. The avant-garde was certainly the collection which made his name and set him apart from the other collectors of our time.
—Roberts, Peter. *George Costakis: A Russian Life.* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994). p.77

[11] 'Nothing accidental, nothing unaccounted for, nothing as the result of blind taste and aesthetic arbitrariness'
—Aleksei Gan *Constructivism* [1922]

[12] Rickey, George. *Constructivism. Origins and Evolution.* (New York: George Braziller, 1967).

[13] Only the Russian film, as a by-product of the early Soviet montage euphoria, has conceded a prominent place to the image of the editing suite alongside its numerous theoretical treatises on different types of montage.
—Pantenburg, Volker. *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory.* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015). p.154

autoethnographic approach, drawing on personal experiences, and position the *Terra Corpus* trilogy within other examples of contemporary art by conducting a comparative analysis of research-based art practices and integrating artistic research into the evolution of art practice. Each chapter of this thesis is dedicated to a specific body of work that I have outlined, with a focus on understanding the different relations that are established within these research projects through the lens of art practice. The artworks in the exhibitions serve as focal points and case studies in the examination of ideas and situations. In planning how to write about my projects, I drew inspiration from the concept of poetic structures,[14] which categorize poetry, into three primary forms: epic/narrative, lyric, and drama. These forms serve as frameworks for storytelling and creative exploration. I discuss how I position these structures in relation to my trilogy: *At the Back of the North Wind* (epic/narrative), *Walking the Sea* (lyrical), and *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* (dramatic), to organize the narrative and formal outcomes in relation to various geographic and landscape conditions.

The epic narrative is known for its ability to tell mythical stories that revive the past. It chronologically unfolds events, providing a sense of time and place. According to Michael Bujeia's insights in *Art and Craft of Poetry*,[15] an underlying meaning or subtext often runs through the narrative. In my projects, this narrative structure finds resonance through the presence of a surveyor character in search of Hyperborea, who acts as the storyteller, guiding the audience through the unfolding events. On the other hand, the lyric form encompasses a wide range of non-narrative and non-dramatic poetry. Its origins can be traced back to using a musical instrument, a lyre during recitation or singing. Lyric poets drew heavily from personal experiences and interpretations, making their thoughts and emotions the central focus of their work. In *Walking the Sea*, my project embraced a lyrical approach highlighting personal experiences and interpretations of being within surreal environment of the Aral Sea with the knowledge gained in walking through it. The audio field recordings from my multiple trips to the Aral Sea were later turned into an interactive installation and served as a central part of the exhibition. Lastly, the dramatic form emphasizes staging and interaction, I employed this approach in the

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[14] Bugeja, Michael. *The Art and Craft of Poetry.* (Writers Digest Books, 1994).

[15] Ibid.

Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives body of work in exploring Constructivist education and architecture. Incorporating poetic structures in my projects allowed for organized storytelling and creative exploration. The epic narrative, lyric form, and elements of drama provided frameworks for cinematic and exhibition approaches and reframing geographic and historical information.

In contrast to scientific methods, which often strive for objective distance from the data and situations, art-based research often places the narrator within the narrative, allowing for a more personal and immersive exploration. The closest description I could find is Simon O'Sullivan's description of the artistic research as 'fictioning'[16] because it offers a distinct approach to encountering and representing experience and transforming the potential interpretation of the landscape. Drawing on the concept of 'fictioning' in art practice, my thesis explores the interplay between fiction, fact, history, and geography across three distinct exhibition projects. This method embraces an autoethnographic lens, where personal, process-based experiences and interpretations become integral to the research process, blurring the conventional boundaries that separate fact from fiction. Graeme Sullivan on the other hand points to the interdisciplinary nature of the research and possibilities for educational discovery.

> Art-based research, with its emphasis on constructivism, interpretation, and contextualism, is adaptive and lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches where the emphasis is to offer new perspectives on educational issues.[17]

The thesis aims to review artworks via the deployment of innovative and established art practice research methods and contextualization as exemplified in my body of work, the *Terra Corpus* trilogy. The analysis of each work examines their individual and cultural settings and explores how it is conceptualized as a form of artistic research. By analyzing the artworks' formal properties, content, and art historical context and drawing on a range of critical, comparative, and theoretical perspectives, the thesis identifies ways of representing experiences and forms of expression to create new knowledge. Research-based art practice combines a conceptual scaffolding with the potential to link activities in different fields and media. It

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[16] Burrows, David; O'Sullivan, Simon. *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[17] Sullivan, Graeme. 'Research Acts in Art Practice.' *Studies in art education* 48, no. 1 (2006). pp.19-35.

combines fieldwork practices, such as collecting field notes, images, video footage, sounds, and objects, with studio practice.

THREE PROJECTS IN THREE CHAPTERS

At the Back of the North Wind premiered as a collateral project at the 54th Venice Biennial and later at the Blaffer Art Museum (2014) and Wyoming Art Museum (2022). It was structured as a part-fictional, part-documentary journey searching for Hyperborea, a mythical land that first appeared in the writings of ancient Greek writers Hesiod, Homer, and Herodotus as a place of pure bliss, perpetual sunlight, and eternal springtime, invoking the 'golden age of man'. The chapter examines mapping, ethnography, ritual, and mythical geography. My exploration began with a sensationalist article in a Russian online newspaper in the early 2000s, which claimed a discovery of the mythical territory of Hyperborea in the sub-Arctic region. This article inspired me to delve deeper into the topic, leading me to meet with authors of the article in Saint Petersburg, visit potential locations of Hyperborea, document field encounters, engage in studio work and conduct archival research. Chapter One undertakes an analysis of artworks that resulted from this exploration, alongside a film that serves as a metaphorical map of Hyperborea, featuring a surveyor as its central character.

Walking the Sea was initially presented at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Texas. The film was screened at the 59th Venice Biennale, Tufts University, and Anthology Film Archives in New York. My exhibition and film examined the Aral Sea region, a 26,000 square-mile area between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that was once one of the world's largest lakes in Central Asia. Despite the difficulties in accessing the territory, its poetic allure stemmed from the paradox of a sea without water. *Walking the Sea* introduced references to regional histories, post-Soviet conditions, and critical research on the landscape of environmental ruin. While exploring the aftermath of this ecological catastrophe, I observed the relationship between nature and the ruins that remained in the landscape. At the Blaffer Art Museum exhibition, my focus was on showcasing the relationship between the desert terrain of Central Asia and the architectural fragments found in the area. One of the exhibit's main artworks was an *Aeolian Harp,* an interactive

musical installation that used field audio recordings and forms I encountered during my travels.

The exhibition *Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives* premiered at Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, Canada, and proposed a view of the Soviet Constructivist project that questioned its utopian aspirations and futuristic pathos. The resulting exhibition synthesized different media and historical perspectives, with elements of VKhUTEMAS[18] pedagogy. The third chapter examines theories of Constructivist education through practice-based research, architectural environments, and initiated situations. VKhUTEMAS, was a pioneering pedagogical institution, aimed to institute transformation in society at large after 1917 revolution in Russia. It emphasized interdisciplinary approaches that combined synthetic methods and explored 'research through making' to construct new knowledge. My experiment sought to move beyond modernist art's aesthetic. Instead, I conducted an autoethnographic investigation to test historical theories, which led to the creation of several exhibitions and a film. In the process, I followed the writing, syllabi, and practical experiments of artistic epistemologies. I explored the spatial experiments of Alexander Rodchenko, the color theories of the ZorVed,[19] group, headed by Mikhail Matiushin and synthetic methodologies expressed through modularity. My focus was on the artistic outcomes of creative and critical practices and their impact. I will investigate the intersection between Constructivist ideas and 'experimental geography,'[20] exploring the connections between cultural production and spatial dynamics. This exploration is informed by Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'social spaces' from his book *The Production of Space*,[21] where he discusses how space is both

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[18] 'VKhUTEMAS is an acronym for Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie (Higher state artistic and technical studios). Established in 1920 in Moscow as the successor of SVOMAS (Free state art studios), it was conceived as a specialized institution that would prepare qualified master artists, professors, and directors to work in both industry and higher education. It aimed to fulfill the state's goals for efficiency and production by linking art with politics. The curriculum of VKhUTEMAS was similar to that of the Bauhaus. First-year students were required to complete the basic course, which covered subjects including color theory, construction, and art history, providing both an artistic and a political education.'
—Nouril, Ksenia. *VKhUTEMAS.* Available at: https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/schools/15.html

[19] ZorVed —a group of artists which was formed by students of M.V. Matiushin at the 'Workshop of Spatial Realism' in 1923 in Petrograd free art workshops and his staff at the Department of organic culture of GINKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture). The name came from the roots 'Zor'(vision) and 'Ved' (knowledge).
—(https://artinvestment.ru/en/auctions/?c=91501)

[20] Paglen, Trevor. *Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space.* [cited 2023]. Available from https://brooklynrail.org/2009/03/express/experimental-geography-from-cultural-production-to-the-production-of-space

[21] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space* [1974]. (Hoboken.Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

shaped and reproduced through the mechanisms of production. My film *Turo* (*Tower* in Esperanto) combined my documentary footage of the locations and various staged situations, where each of its four sections explored and deconstructed a different Constructivist building as a set of past strategies.

Throughout the three projects described in the main three chapters, I undertake a comparative analysis with other artists' research-based practices. I consider how different artists approach the process of conducting research and integrating it into their work, as well as help me to position my work within an art historical context. In all projects, I employed a pilgrimage as a strategy to activate various landscapes and environments. By doing so, I could transform the resulting knowledge from mere 'excavation sites' into active 'construction sites', in line with Hal Foster's definition of an archival art approach[22]. To achieve this, I conducted initial archival research and gathered various forms of data, which helped me to construct multi-layered representations of these places. As an artist, I put myself at the center of the narrative, production, and documentation processes. It allowed me to investigate the experiential aspects of the research in which I was both a subject and an object of study. In the chapter *Generational Filming as Ethnography*[23] of his thesis dissertation, Pekka Kantonen highlights a tacit knowledge ingrained in practical experience, emphasizing the distinctive perspectives acquired through filming and participatory research. By combining factual and fictional elements through temporal layering, I have sought new narratives that expand the understanding of these locations and histories, producing cross-disciplinary theoretical acts and situate their relevance within cultural and educational frameworks.

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[22] Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency.* (London; New York: Verso, 2015). p.60

[23] 'This knowledge, gained through filming, would have been hard to come by through methods based only on text. For this purpose it was crucial that I filmed moments that are in-between, when nothing seems to happen.' —Kantonen, Pekka. *Generational Filming. A Video Diary as Experimental and Participatory Research* (Ph.D. diss., University of the Arts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts, 2017).

CHAPTER 1: AT THE BACK OF THE NORTHERN WIND

CH1.1: 'PARADISE IS NEAR'. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND 'FICTIONING'

The idea and the impetus for this body of work was prompted in 2011, by an online article titled *Paradise is Near* (2009)[24] that claimed to have discovered the actual location of Hyperborea. The article described a group of scientists from the Russian Geographical Society (RGO), who claimed to have discovered an archaeological site with possible remnants of the Hyperborean civilization. They reported about their expedition to the sub-Arctic parts of Russia, the Kuzovsky archipelago on the White Sea, and their findings, specifically mentioning a large granite throne, pyramids and priest sanctuaries, and other artefacts that this mythical civilization could have produced. The article claimed that 'Hyberborea was not a myth' and described physical and spiritual transformations from experiencing the location: 'People who have been there are experiencing amazing changes. They have been charged with energy and are indulging in it!'[25] The article was characterized by a mixture of historical revisionism, sensationalism, and a nostalgic longing for the pure origins of the past. Nevertheless, as is often the case with research, the site uncovered some perplexing coincidences. The so-called 'utopian ruins' that were the focus of the article were located near the site of the first Soviet Gulag in town of Kem' (sometimes called the 'Gates of Gulag'), which became a prototype for the rest of the Soviet penitentiary system built by Stalin. This juxtaposition of the mythical Hyperborea with the ruins of a brutal prison system created an unexpected reading of the site, giving it a broader historical and cultural meaning.

This sensationalist article was simultaneously entertaining and symptomatic, as theories of a Northern-based paradise were already familiar to me. It sparked a curious constellation of topics ranging from classical writings of ancient Greek authors and concepts of 'mythological geographies', as described by William Warrant in his books,[26] to conspiracies of esoteric traditionalist theories claiming that the Russian

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[24] Pozdnyakova, Maria *'Paradise' is near. The mysterious Hyperborea flourished in the Russian North.* Available at: http://rt.com/politics/press/aif/paradise-is-near-the-mysterious-hyperboreaa-flourishes-in-the-russiaan-north/en (2009, Accessed: 2014).

[25] Ibid

[26] Warren, William Fairfield. *Paradise found: The Cradle of the Human Race at the North Pole: A Study of the Prehistoric World.* 5th ed.(Boston. Houghton, Mifflin, 1885) and Warren, William Fairfield. *The True Key to Ancient Cosmology and Mythical Geography.* (Ginn, Heath and Co, 1882).

civilization originated from mythical Hyperborea and its historical confrontation with the Atlantean West. The Apollo-inspired classical utopia was also a popular topic in Saint Petersburg poetry associated with the Acmeist school (1911-1912).[27] During my research, I purchased a few vintage issues of *The Hyperborean* (1912) from a rare book dealer in Tbilisi, Georgia. The journal was the first Saint Petersburg-based monthly cultural publication of early modernist poetry and criticism, with black and white illustrations of impressionist and cubist paintings. The fascination with terrestrial paradise emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in culture and politics, with a growing interest in social transformations reimagining perfect societies. This interest was expressed through various cultural forms such as poetry and literature, mystical Theosophical texts and organizations, and political theories as a tool for mobilizing the masses and inspiring revolutionary action. Hyperborea was a popular topic, and many nations claimed to be the descendants of the mysterious civilization, suggesting a divine lineage to the newly formed political identities of nation-states.

One of the main shared concepts in the texts of Blavatsky[28] and Nietzsche[29] about Hyperborea was the idea of locating the paradise in the past, somewhere far north; it was always a recollection of something out of reach. Hyperborea has traditionally been described as a fictional, utopian society at the end of the known world, beyond the Northern Wind (Boreas), and associated with Apollonian ideals. In the Western tradition, the concept of 'utopia', which signifies a perfect society, is often connected to the Golden Age, and represents an attempt to transcend the present society by

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[27] 'Acmeism, a school in modern Russian poetry, formed after breaking away from Russian Symbolism—then the dominant school of the country's literary scene. … The Acmeists revolted against Symbolism's vagueness and attempts to privilege emotional suggestion over clarity and vivid sensory images.'
—*A Brief Guide to Acmeism.* (2004) Available at: https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-acmeism
(Accessed: April 7, 2023).

[28] 'The land of the Hyperboreans, the country that extended beyond Boreas, the frozen-hearted god of snows and hurricanes, who loved to slumber heavily on the chain of Mount Riphaeus, was neither an ideal country, as surmised by the mythologists, nor yet a land in the neighborhood of Scythia and the Danube.* It was a real Continent, a *bona-fide* land which knew no winter in those early days, nor have its sorry remains more than one night and day during the year, even now. The nocturnal shadows never fall upon it, said the Greeks; for it is the *land of the Gods,* the favourite abode of Apollo, the god of light, and its inhabitants are his beloved priests and servants. This may be regarded as poetised *fiction* now; but it was poetised *truth* then.'
—Blavatsky, Helen. *The Secret Doctrine. Vol. 2.7* [1888].

[29] 'Beyond the North, beyond the ice, beyond death—our life, our happiness.... We have discovered that happiness; we know the way; we got our knowledge of it from thousands of years in the labyrinth'
—Nietzche, Friedrich. *The Antichrist.* [1895]. (SoHo Books, 2010).

imagining a better one in the past. Ancient Greeks like Herodotus[30] or Pindar[31] described Hyperborea as an actual location, while other authors wrote about it as a romantic concept of humanity's ideals. The return to the Northern paradise was viewed as an Apollonian pursuit, an attempt to reverse-engineer the original divine plan through logic, clarity, and mathematics. It was a neoclassical triumph of reason reaching into the past, where the culture emphasized the rationalization of nature and the pursuit of harmony and balance. The longing for certainty and control is rooted in the fantasy of an eternal return to paradise and the desire to conquer the upcoming terror of time. The recognition of decay as a destructive force marked a significant metaphysical shift at the turn of the twentieth century. This idea of paradise being placed behind the horizon of memory was something that I could relate to in my own pursuit. This article prompted me to go on a journey and reconstruct the potential physical location of Hyperborea based on literary, mythological, and historical sources.

After immigrating to the United States in 1990, I spent over twenty years away from Russia. I visited Russia in 2011 to start this project and to revisit my birthplace and re-examine my formative years there. It allowed me to reconnect with memories of growing up in the Soviet Union, making sense of experiences and helping me identify my own cultural blind spots about the past. My search for Hyperborea was metaphorically tied to a return to post-Soviet Russia—a modernist imaginary that never evolved to its full promise, leaving behind the remnants of socialist dreams in ruins. I decided to explore the situation by utilizing creative research methodologies, and positioned myself into the narrative of the project, as the character of a surveyor tasked with mapping Hyperborea. Simon O'Sullivan defines this approach as 'fictioning' in his essay *Art Practice as Fictioning (or, Myth-Science).*

> Fictioning inserts itself into the real in this sense – into the world as-it-is (indeed, it collapses the so-called real and the fictional), but in so doing, it

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[30] Herodotus *Histories (Book IV, Chapters 32–36).*

[31] 'Neither by taking ship.
   Neither by any travel on foot,
   To the Hyperborean Field
   Shalt thou find the wondrous way.'
—Pindar *Pythian 10*

necessarily changes our reality. This is 'fictioning' as mythopoeisis: the imaginative transformation of the world through fiction.[32]

Research-based art practice combines a conceptual scaffolding with the potential to link activities in different spheres and media. In his text *Research Acts in Art Practice,*[33] Graeme Sullivan argues that the transformative nature of artistic research practice is that it exists as 'research through making'. Sullivan's central thesis posits that research is an inherently transformative act, affecting both the researcher and the subject of study. Furthermore, when research aims to generate new knowledge, its purpose extends beyond rational explanations. Research-based arts practices strive to foster a comprehensive understanding that empowers one to engage with the construction of knowledge in active ways.

   My work merged fieldwork practices, such as collecting field notes, images, video footage, sounds, and objects, with studio practice. The experiences of fieldwork and studio practice are quite different in their process, and outcomes. For me, studio practice established an interruption in the types of field research advocated by the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, or geography, because it engaged with a function of memory and re-interpretation of lived experiences, that combined factual information with artistic interpretation. This hybrid practice included crossing over between exploring and practicing, reflecting and making, expanding the phenomenology of the artistic practice and its role in the cultural associations of a recovered – often fictional – approach towards the landscape.

CH 1.2: MAPPING AND COLLAGE APPROACH.
EXHIBITION IN VENICE, AND DISPLAY STRATEGIES

In considering other artists' practices involved in research-based art, I would like to highlight the work of another artist Joachim Koester, whose work shares some similarities with mine. Koester's approach involves reconstructing past artworks as a means of establishing a critical distance from the historical fiction of the past, which emphasizes the contextual quality of his work through formal appropriation. His work

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[32] O'Sullivan, Simon. *Art Practice as Fictioning (Or, Myth-Science)* Unit of Play, Goldsmiths, United Kingdom ed. https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/15430/, (4 March 2015).

[33] Sullivan, Graeme. 'Research Acts in Art Practice.' *Studies in art education* 48, no.1 (2006): pp.19-35.

creates a temporal displacement and evokes a sentimental yearning for the past, while highlighting the paradox of historical recontextualization. The past becomes the main source and ultimately subject of the investigation. This nostalgia manifests itself in Koester's photographs of historical sites to reanimate moments from the past, Koester challenges the linear perception of time while also examining the nature of historical narratives.

The art historian Paolo Magagnoli in his essay, 'Critical Nostalgia in the Art of Joachim Koester'[34] framed Koester's method as one of critical nostalgia. Magagnoli identified combination of 'imitation of the past', and 'reenactment' as staging devices in his photo investigation of Aleister Crowley's utopian community in Cefalù, Sicily. The juxtaposition of the abbey ruins, surrounded by newly built suburban housing, emphasized the failures of past utopian projects through photography. In contrast to Koester's approach, my artistic practice involved juxtaposing diverse perspectives, literary sources, observations, and conflicting narratives. This combination created a hybrid, collage experience that evoked unexpected relationships and tensions of meaning. Rather than attempting to reenact the past, I see my own approach as embracing a fluid, non-linear approach where meaning evolved through the interplay of various elements. In doing so, I could simultaneously establish my field of research as a synthesis between a work of pure fiction, archival research, and documentation. This method allowed me to blend different temporal layers, merging the past, present, and future into a single composition. I believe this approach is shared among artists from my generation who have experienced immigration or displacement. Among artists tackling post-Soviet conditions and modernist ideals, Monika Sosnowska utilizes construction materials like steel beams and concrete in her sculptures. These materials and fragments are manipulated to imply defunct functionality, echoing various Modernist influences. From Polish Constructivism of the 1930s to the 1960s and 1970s international art trends, her work captures the essence of Eastern European modernist architecture while distorting its original purpose. Another example of an artist who does this is Vietnamese American artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen who, in a recent exhibition *Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance* (2023) at the New Museum in New York blended constructed fictional cinematic and

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[34] Magagnoli, Paolo. 'Critical Nostalgia in the Art of Joachim Koester.' *Oxford Art Journal* volume 34, no.1 (2011). pp. 97-121.

sculptural installations, delving into post-war Vietnam's history and its post-colonial context. In a recent interview the artist acknowledged that his works are made 'in collaboration, with all its antagonisms and asymmetries, across time and geography.'[35] This fictionalized approach challenges the traditional notions of pure documentary or illusionistic 'real' fiction reinventing autobiographic framework and evolving cultural identities.

By adopting Hyperborea as a conceptual framework and a geographic site, I ventured into actual landscapes that I documented, recorded, and filmed, where the physical presence of ruins and traces of history became integral elements of the work. I viewed these landscapes as more than mere backdrops; they actively participated in the semiotic structure of the narrative. As W.J.T. Mitchell suggested, 'As a fetishized commodity, landscape is what Marx called a "social hieroglyph," an emblem of the social relations it conceals.'[36] Ultimately, constructing environments and situations served as a tool for investigating, interpreting, and reshaping landscapes, allowing new understandings and perceptions to emerge.

As an official collateral project of the 54th Venice Biennale, *Anton Ginzburg: At the Back of the North Wind* was presented at the Palazzo Bollani, a 13th-century palace near San Marco, overlooking the Rio della Pietà. The exhibition's display approach drew inspiration from the Enlightenment ideas of the classical Natural History Museum, particularly the Russian Academy of Science's Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Saint Petersburg. Founded in the 18th century by Peter the Great, the Kunstkamera[37] started as an imperial cabinet of curiosities, which aimed to preserve natural and human artifacts and rarities and included ethnographic and mineralogical collections. The museum embodied a form of scientific inquiry that predated modern archives, with vast collections of organized and displayed artifacts representing the Enlightenment ideals of discovery, education, and knowledge. The display strategy employed in the *Anton Ginzburg: At the Back of the North Wind* installation at Palazzo Bollani involved a reinterpretation of the

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[35] *Tuan Andrew Nguyen: Radiant Remembrance.* (New Museum, 2023).

[36] Mitchell, W. J. T. *Landscape and Power.* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.15.

[37] 'Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera) celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2014. One of the most comprehensive ethnographical museums in the world, it is also an academic center of international fame.' –Available from https://kunstkamera.ru/en/.

idealized form of the Museum of Natural Sciences. In my conversation with Boris Groys, featured in the catalogue for the exhibition *Anton Ginzburg: At the Back of the North Wind*, we talked about this exhibition strategy. Groys observed: '[…] you use this state of frozenness as a natural metaphor for the museum and cultural memory in general. You take these elements of cultural memory that are already frozen and put them into the exhibition space, which is like bringing them from one freezer into another.'[38] Groys' comment was very perceptive to describe how I utilized traditional exhibition modules reminiscent of those found within museum settings. They included geological display cases, relief maps integrated into the neo-classical interiors, paleontological exhibits, and ethnographic expositions. By pointing towards and using these areas of visual representation, I aimed to establish a totality of visual and contextual connections to the framework of the museum as a cultural archive with established topologies. The overarching installation can also be seen to embrace two fundamental principles highlighted by Claire Bishop[39] in her book, *Installation Art* – namely, 'activation' and 'decentering'. These concepts refer to the viewer's immediate sensory engagement and active physical involvement facilitated by the artwork's scale and immersive nature, alongside the deliberate construction of a spatial narrative.

To achieve a cohesive and site-specific presentation, I approached the installation of the works in the exhibition by employing formal and spatial reduction, stripping away unnecessary elements, and focusing on essential components that embodied my research, creating an almost diagrammatic formal structure. Through this reduction, the artworks and their strategic placement became integral in generating a sense of suggestive continuity within the space (fig 1). Each element in the space contributed to building the experience of the exhibition as a meta-frame, guiding the visitor through the exhibition and facilitating a 'total installation' experience. By transforming and defamiliarizing the traditional museum form, I intended to provoke a sense of uncanny narrative unfolding within the exhibition. The formal decisions and spatial arrangements aimed to establish a dynamic interaction between the viewer

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[38] Lippke, Andrea Condrington ed. *Anton Ginzburg: At the Back of the North Wind.* (Hatje Cantz, 2012). p.84.

[39] Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art.* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

and the artwork while simultaneously framing the voids of the space. The term 'void' in this context refers to the gaps, and spaces within the installation itself, allowing for the conceptual connection of disparate artworks to form a unified and modular installation. Additionally, it refers to the imaginative space within the viewer's mind, where they can conceptualize the mythical Hyperborea. This 'void' served as a bridge between the physical components of the installation and the imaginative interpretations I aimed to generate within the viewer's experience. In his seminal text *Art and Objecthood*,[40] Michael Fried discusses the theatrical nature of the minimalist (or literalist) approach. He posits a conflict between objecthood and situation, highlighting the passive vs. active roles of the artwork in relation to the viewer and suggesting anthropomorphic possibilities caused by the 'hollowness' of minimalism.

> Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work …
> The object, not the beholder, must remain the center or focus of the situation, but the situation itself belongs to the beholder—it is his situation.[41]

In my installation, I have expanded Fried's minimalist situation concept by highlighting its voids or absences. These gaps intentionally represent the 'hollowness' he describes, emphasizing the importance of pauses and rhythms within the formal narratives. My approach has been guided by Dan Graham's writings, as articulated in his seminal essay *Subject Matter* (1969), which focused on the works of Bruce Nauman from 1965-66. Graham noted that Nauman's work marked a departure from abstract geometric relationships by emphasizing materiality, topology, and the artist's presence.

> In place of the rigid notion of Euclidian geometry (as in "minimal" sculpture) […] (the medium) acts as a medium conveying its material in-formation. It acts as a record of its material changes of interaction and of its own material nature in yielding to natural forces (its own, the environment's and the artist's physical presence and procedures in placing it).[42]

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[40] Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews.* [1961-1977], (The University of Chicago Press. 1998).

[41] Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews.* [1961-1977], (The University of Chicago Press. 1998). p.154

[42] Graham, Dan. *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990.* (The MIT press, 1993). p.40.

I have expanded the post-minimalist reductivism by contextualizing research findings and production processes. For example, the CNC-milled *Middle World (Black)* (2011) (fig 2) geometric relief sculpture above the entrance in the second room references an archival photograph from the Ethnographic Museum in Saint Petersburg that depicts shamanic practices in northern Russia. To construct the Hyperborea narrative, I incorporated diverse empirical materials, including historical maps, photo materials, NASA satellite photography, and literary descriptions. As I examined these findings, I began to see patterns and connections that allowed me to develop a more extensive project outline inspired by the archive materials. The exhibition spanned four connecting spaces on two levels, with the main exhibition space on the second floor featuring a curious architectural detail: empty plaster frames above the doors and around the large room's perimeter, which contained artworks in the past. I saw an opportunity to integrate these site-specific frames into my exhibition and placed topographic reliefs inside them, creating a sense of continuity with the building's history and a reference to display approach of classical museums of natural sciences, which were often featured neo-classical interiors. The first installation (fig 3) was placed at the entrance to the exhibition and was a collection of research materials, including clippings of literature research, field notes, sketches, photographic documentation, maps, props from film production, and my findings from fieldwork, such as granite stones and findings from the Kuzovsky Archipelago. The collection served as a repository for diverse elements, including archival materials, field research, and data gathered during film production and a guide for the viewer as to what to expect. The recordings, images, and textual data were sorted, and organized into distinct themes and categories. This meticulous structuring and categorization, aligned with a display strategy, not only formed the foundational reference for the artworks but also served as a strategic framework for the exhibition presentation. 'Mapping' became central to the exhibition, defining outlines of boundaries and borders, and the resulting artworks included a series of reliefs titled *The Topology Shift*, (fig 4) identifying the geographical destinations of my travels and potential locations of Hyperborea. These reliefs employed a fusion of cartographic elements, satellite imagery, and artistic interpretation to convey both factual data and poetic narratives. In addition to the reliefs, I created a large tondo painting (fig 5) that was inspired by ancient Greek depictions and medieval engravings of Hyperborea.

Based on mythological descriptions and geographical data, if this northern utopia ever existed, mammoths would have been witnesses to its history. The very first mammoth ever discovered, known as Adams' mammoth, is held in the Saint Petersburg Zoological Museum collection. My response to this was the sculpture *Ashnest* (fig 6) exhibited in the main space of the exhibition. It floated above a circle of ashes on metal stilts, some as tall as four meters (13 feet) and was designed to evoke the shape of structures found in museums of natural history for displaying paleontological artifacts. I used a micro-CT scan of a human bone to create a distinct surface texture for my sculpture. I then developed a 3D rendering of the gestural serpent-like shape, which was milled out of polyurethane and joined with 40,000 years old mammoth tusks fragments. My search for authentic tusks led me to explore various sources, eventually partnering with a specialized dealer in fossils. My goal was to juxtapose the actual paleontological artifacts with contemporary fabrication technologies. The artistic approach paralleled the work of archeologists or paleontologists who expertly employ scientific knowledge to reconstruct the past. An expert paleontologist can recreate a prehistoric animal's entire skeleton or appearance based on a single bone fragment, my artistic method harnessed historical artifacts from diverse fragments and challenged the viewer's awareness, inviting them to participate in the fictional proposition of Hyperborea discovery. I used fragments of mammoth tusks to create an assembled construction to prompt ideas about what lies beyond a fragment from an original artifact. The viewer plays an active role in completing the story by bridging the gaps between the original historical artifact and the fictional extension that I have added.

I set up the adjacent room as an ethnographic exhibit with two of my marble sculptures titled *Bone Totem Owl* and *Bone Totem Owl Shadow* (fig 7 and 8). The sculptures were created using the CT scanning technique similar to that of the *Ashnest* sculpture. However, instead of using polyurethane and metal, they were crafted from marble which resulted in a distinct visual and material impact. The sculptures depicted an owl totem and its materialized shadow, symbolizing the interplay between light and darkness, which is characteristic to northern mythologies. The owl totem's eyes were depicted as gold-plated bronze 'ilgaak', traditional slitted sunglasses worn by Inuit people to shield their eyes from the sun's reflection off snow (fig 9). This same element was also featured in the film *Hyperborea*, worn by protagonist in the final scene at the White Sea, as a link to the sculptural installation.

In addition, two black-and-white patterned reliefs (fig 10 and 11) were installed above the doorways, representing the intricate relationship between the lower, middle, and higher spheres as viewed through Siberian shamanic cosmogony. These reliefs drew inspiration from the rich collection of the Eurasian ethnographic department at Kunstkamera and the Ethnographic Museum in Saint Petersburg, which profoundly influenced me during my art studies in my teenage years. This museum collection showcased an array of objects, costumes, and religious carvings, spanning from Scythian to Siberian to Central Asian cultures. The third golden relief *Sunburst. Lower World* (fig 12) representing the sun and the 'lower sphere' of the world was installed at the entrance in the main exhibition space.

The exhibition maintained an ongoing dialogue between the cinematic narrative and the sculptural installations. Several selected scenes and objects from the footage were reinterpreted and transformed into sculptural forms. For example, *Ashnest* sculpture referenced the scene with a mammoth in the Saint Petersburg Zoological Museum, and the *Bone Totem Owl* sculptures pointed to the scene with a live owl in the *Hyperborea* film. The sculptural artworks established their own narrative connections in the exhibition space. Their physical presence expanded the passive nature of the cinematic experience, encouraging viewers to re-engage with the narrative content within exhibition context. The formal decisions, and spatial connections in the exhibition, aimed to create a decentralized experience, by unfolding formal narrative and defamiliarizing the viewer's experience. Through the use of 'fictioning', collage, and montage as formal methods, the exhibition challenged the boundaries between fact, fiction, and geographic knowledge.

CH1.3: FILM *HYPERBOREA* AND LANDSCAPE

The film *Hyperborea* (fig 13) brought together different angles of my artistic research. It combined landscape documentation from potential Hyperborea's locations in the American Northwest and north of Russia. The narrative followed the surveyor character (myself), accompanied by red signal smoke as a temporary intervention with the landscape. The gradual pacing and atmospheric cinematography linked the surveyor, the fading red cloud, and the northern geographies, establishing a hypnotic, dream-like state. I merged situations and locations to display cultural significance through the lens of speculative history and direct engagement with different sites.

During my initial research for this body of work I came across Irving Washington's book, *Astoria, or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains.*[43] This book was commissioned by the American real estate mogul John Jacob Astor and served as a record of the creation of his business empire. In the book, Washington recounts Astor's travels and experiences in the fur trade, particularly his encounters with the Russian government, which played a significant role in the fur trade and had established trading houses in the Pacific Northwest by the end of the 19th century. He eventually established the town of Astoria in the Oregon Territory, naming it after himself. The mythological references to a 'delightful country' ruled by a great spirit in the Pacific Northwest region aligned with the characteristics commonly attributed to Hyperborea. This territory has become the source of Astor's wealth and the foundation for the American and specifically New York boom in real estate development in the beginning of the twentieth century. This is why my film unfolded on the docks of the Columbia River in Astoria, Oregon, and the coastal Northwest, where fog and rainforests created a surreal backdrop. While elements of civilization are present, such as container ships suggesting global trade and the local economy's ties to the sea, the landscape is mostly desolate. Within this forest setting, two animals, a wolf, and an owl, emerge as unexpected figures (fig 14). They inhabit the rainforest and through their interactions with the red smoke I edited the film's narrative to add this mythical and uncanny dimension. Their presence alludes to the historical context of the region, particularly the 19th-century fur-trading outposts established by the Astor family. These outposts played a crucial role in the region's trade and transportation networks, shaping its economic and cultural landscape. *Hyperborea* employed the historical dimensions embedded within the landscape, connecting it to W.J.T. Mitchell's writings, who defined landscape as a fluid cultural and economic commodity.

> Landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is a material "means" (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values. As a medium of expressing value, it has a semiotic structure rather

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[43] Washington, Irving. *Astoria, Or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains.* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 1836).

like that of money, functioning as a special sort of commodity that plays a unique symbolic role in the system of exchange-value.[44]

By manipulating and intervening in the symbolism that some landscapes acquire, including those which are mythic or fictional, alternative interpretations and subjective experiences can arise, fostering transformative engagement with history and meaning. The different elements from North America, were consciously positioned within the film, and acted as conduits, facilitating a deeper understanding of the history surrounding the nineteenth-century 'dreamwork' of American capitalism, as part of a larger constructed narrative. The quest for Hyperborea, a utopian ideal, became a thematic thread that underscored the film's scenes and the constructed nature of the depicted landscapes.

In making this film, I wanted the viewer to have an awareness of the camera's presence as a point of view, a reminder of its central role in shaping the narrative construction of these landscapes. This self-reflexive approach emphasized the subjective nature of representation, acknowledging the inherent influence of subjectivity in the visual storytelling process. The landscape's focus continuously shifted from playing central role to becoming background and back again. By consciously maintaining a critical distance from traditional modes of expression or political dialectical reading of the landscape, *Hyperborea* embraced the multiplicity of narratives that emerged from engaging with a landscape. I wanted to encourage scenarios that revealed the nature of local geographies and their histories. In a long tracking shot, across the Astoria-Megler Bridge, a continuous truss bridge, the perspective viewpoint undergoes a transformation, becoming abstract and detached from its physical location. As the camera glides along, a dreamlike motion unfolds, accompanied by the haunting sound of the wind howling through the bridge's metallic bones.

The film's soundtrack incorporated field recordings of the wind and diegetic audio captured on location during filming. With this abstract scene of the bridge, I aimed to alter the perception of space and place, blurring the distinction between the real and ephemeral. Throughout the film, the truss bridges served as connecting devices, metaphorical 'seams' that link different geographic locations together. The film continued in Saint Petersburg, with the camera crossing the Bolsheokhtinsky Bridge,

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[44] Mitchell, W. J. T. *Landscape and Power.* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994). p.14.

a unique 19th-century truss bridge spanning the Neva River. Saint Petersburg's cityscape that is rich with historical, literary, and architectural elements, and I aimed to construct an original and personal perspective on it. The central scene is set on the frozen Neva River, in front of the Hermitage Museum. The scene captured a red cloud moving across the river, partly shot from the Kunstkamera and Zoological Museum interiors, the silhouette of myself as the surveyor character who becomes engulfed by the massive red cloud, which gradually dissipates against a backdrop of neoclassical buildings. This interaction with the landscape created a temporal engagement, transforming the cinematic narrative into a surreal state. The red smoke played a dual role as a meta-character and a structural device in the film. It appeared at significant moments, imbuing the story with an unsettling presence. In Saint Petersburg, it guided the narrative from the frozen Neva River to the decaying imperial palaces and the desolate Natural History Museum interiors (fig 15). This presence of the red smoke served as a representation of historical memory, and it linked various locations in the cinematic narrative as an abstract presence. The red smoke was a constant reminder of the past and its impact on the present, creating a haunting atmosphere throughout the film. Incorporated into the film are scenes of the mammoth, housed in the Zoological Museum of Saint Petersburg, a potential witness of the ancient golden age (fig 16). I linked cinematic narrative and sculptural installations in the exhibition by introducing the *Ashnest* sculpture, featuring mammoth's presence and its ivory tusks. This doubling effect underscored the connection between the film and the sculptural manifestations in the exhibition.

The search for the Apollonian empire in the film, concluded at the White Sea, a sub-Arctic region of Russia based on the initial online article. The landscape resembled an abandoned archaeological site, with remnants of Soviet Gulag prisons and guard barracks from the Stalinist era (fig 17). A damaged truss bridge lay amidst the frozen landscape. The red cloud against the white snow and endless horizon took on a renewed resonance and meaning in reference to the prison sites. By superimposing different locations, such as pre-revolutionary Saint Petersburg imperial interiors and neo-classical architectural perspectives alongside the Neva embankment, with the dark Soviet histories of Gulag and the Stalinist purge, I created narratives that intertwined various periods, offering a wider historical angle onto this geographic region. This aligned with my approach to landscape as a dynamic and symbolic entity for artistic exploration through which cultural values and ideologies

are communicated. Through the construction method, I was able to emphasize the connections of historical events and cultural phenomena that shaped the views of modern geographies.

CHAPTER 2: WALKING THE SEA

CH 2.1: ARAL SEA AND ALTERED LANDSCAPE

The second body of work *Walking the Sea* in the trilogy, was dedicated to the area in Central Asia, specifically the Aral Sea. This work drew inspiration from altered landscapes and Western traditions of land art of 1960s, site-specific, and research-based practices. The demise of the Aral Sea was the result of the *Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature*[45]*,* which attempted to adapt geography to human needs. Control over waterways in Central Asia, specifically the Aral Sea Project that started in 1960, became a top priority in Soviet modernization as a source of cheap and renewable resources for the sake of the planned economy. The Aral Sea is a testament to the ambitious yet ill-fated interventions of the twentieth century, carried out on a geographic scale. Other projects of Stalin's plan included hydroelectric power installations in Northern Crimea and southern Ukraine, as well as near-Caspian and Central Asian desert transformations.[46] The vast and depopulated expanse of the Aral Project is an evocative open-air record of Soviet modernity, resembling an anonymous *'*ready-made earthwork',[47] which inspired me to go to this region and to explore it further. I was drawn to it as evidence of the USSR's geographic policy and utopian will to master nature through science. While exploring the aftermath of this environmental catastrophe, I observed the tumultuous relationship between nature and the remains of the Soviet infrastructure still populating the landscape. This transformed landscape bears witness to the historical ambitions and miscalculations that unfolded in pursuing human progress aligned with universalist heroic aspirations. 'That such plans have often had to be adjusted or abandoned is an indication of just how heroic are the assumptions behind them.'[48] Once ranked as the fourth largest lake in the world, the Aral Sea has

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[45] Brain, Stephen. 'The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature.' *Environmental history* 15, no. 4 (2010). pp. 670-700.

[46] Denis J. B. 'Mastering Nature through Science: Soviet Geographers and the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, 1948-53' *The Slavonic and East European Review,* 93, no. 1 (2015). pp.120-146.

[47] 'Art is design that has become dysfunctional because the society that provided the basis for it suffered a historical collapse, like the Inca Empire or Soviet Russia.' — Groys, Boris. 'Politics of Installation' *e-flux.* no.01(2009).

[48] Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State.* (Yale University Press, 1998).

witnessed a drastic decline, losing more than ninety percent of its water over the past sixty years. This depletion occurred due to the diversion of its two main feeder rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, to irrigate cotton fields. Most parts of the Aral Sea are a deserted area of 26,000 square miles between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The Soviet intervention in the Aral Sea has had far-reaching and devastating effects, leading to severe environmental and humanitarian crises. The major consequences were the disruption of the local ecosystem and a dramatic regional climate change. In their research published in *Scientific American*, Philip Micklin and Nikolay Aladin highlighted how the climate has shifted up to 100 kilometers beyond the original shoreline, leading to significant and widespread temperature fluctuations, including extreme weather events and droughts.[49] The ecological consequences of the Aral Sea's decline extended well beyond its immediate surroundings, impacting a broader range of interconnected ecosystems and communities.[50] As a result, the once-thriving fishing communities and the local economy have been decimated, leaving behind a deserted landscape.

Growing up during the era of Perestroika in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the Aral Sea held a particular aura of significance for my generation. It served as a poignant metaphor for the communist utopia that had gone awry, echoing the decline and eventual dissolution of the Soviet project itself, a haunting specter of a sea without water. In 1988, the influential Soviet literary journals *Novyi Mir* and *Pamir* organized *Aral-88*,[51] an expedition of well-known Soviet writers, journalists, academics, scientists, and philosophers to understand the situation of the Aral Sea. Their objectives were to witness the disaster's impact firsthand on behalf of the public, counter official distortions with trustworthy scientific data, and address the broader range of environmental challenges. It was an important step towards the policy of Glasnost, a new transparency of governmental institutions. Perestroika[52] which coincided with my teenage years in Leningrad, was a turning point in late Soviet

[49] Micklin, Philip, and Nikolay V. Aladin. 'Reclaiming the Aral Sea.' *Scientific American* (April 1, 2008). Available from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reclaiming-the-aral-sea/.

[50] Rama Sampath Kumar. 'Aral Sea: Environmental Tragedy in Central Asia.' *Economic and political weekly*, no. 37 (2002).

[51] Wheeler, William. 'Aral-88: Catastrophe, Critique and Hope.' *The Slavonic and East European review (1928)* 94, no. 2 (2016). pp. 295-324.

[52] Perestroika (Russian for "restructuring") was a program instituted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s to restructure Soviet economic and political policy. Available: https://coldwar.unc.edu/theme/perestroika

history. Open public debates and the release of historical archives paved the way for discussions within Soviet society, becoming a catalyst for heightened environmental awareness. The dire condition of the Aral area became an important topic, questioning governmental policies. The Aral Sea also found its way into the realm of counterculture during that time, leaving a lasting impact on the artistic youth of my generation. One important example is the film *The Needle*,[53] directed by Rashid Nugmanov, which featured two influential underground rock musicians, Viktor Tsoy and Pyotr Mamonov. These musicians were iconic figures for the youth of the 1980s. *The Needle* captured the essence of the emerging countercultural movement and incorporated the Aral Sea into its narrative. The film showcased segments filmed at the Aral Sea, romanticizing elements of Soviet orientalism[54] associated with the remote and exotic landscapes. This representation further heightened the iconic status of the Aral Sea within the Soviet cultural framework, resonating with the artistic sensibilities of the time and evoking a feeling of both environmental degradation and disillusionment.

The Perestroika period brought significant historical changes, shaking the foundations of the country, and leading to a rapid cultural shift from the Soviet system to 1980s liberalization and, later, post-Soviet rampant capitalism. In my personal experience, the Aral Sea held importance, because of my mother's work trips to Uzbekistan in the 1980s when she worked as an engineer. Her experiences as well as public environmental debates, combined with the widely discussed articles in *Noviy Mir* articles about *Aral-88*, left a strong impression on me. Even after moving to the United States in 1990, thoughts of the Aral Sea stayed with me as a metaphorical construct connecting to Soviet past. I felt it was important to research it deeper and I decided to visit the Aral Sea in 2012 prior to filming *Walking the Sea.* The field trip grounded my initial research in the physical context of the site's historical and situational aspects. It enabled me to establish conceptual connections between past and recent experiences, which Sullivan[55] aptly describes as 'visual knowing'. This practice-based approach involves thinking visually through medium, making*,*

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[53] Rashid, Nugmanov. *The Needle.*(1988). Duration: 1h 21min.
Main roles: Viktor Tsoy, Marina Smirnova, Pyotr Mamonov.

[54] Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen. 'The Eastern Connection.' In *Art Beyond Borders.* (Central European University Press, 2016). p.464.

[55] Sullivan, Graeme. *Art Practice as Research. Inquiry in Visual Arts.* (SAGE Publications, 2010).

and context. I continued developing my field notes and visual observations by integrating studio work, exhibitions, lectures, and literature review findings. The method provided fresh insights through visual connections and image-based interpretations. In the film, I emphasized the relationship between the Aral Sea's desert landscape and the architectural remnants, capturing the geographic transformations caused by human activity. It documented the shift from the Soviet era to the present day, where I created a deliberately slow-paced cinematic narrative by merging factual and fictional elements and their imprint on the landscape.

CH 2.2: 'SUBNOTES' AS RESEARCH ARCHIVE AND EXHIBITION STRATEGY

The *Anton Ginzburg: Walking the Sea* exhibition was organized through interconnected sections, that included a film screening space and a sculptural installation, forming part of a larger overarching master plan. Boris Groys'[56] interpretation of the 'total installation' portrays it as an artist's monologue infused with metaphorical layers; however, this symbolic construct might limit other creative possibilities, restricting both formal and conceptual exploration. In contrast, Claire Bishop[57] delineates four essential modalities of experience that installation art facilitates for the viewer. One of these modalities she highlights is 'activation', wherein viewers interact with the art in a state of what she terms 'activated spectatorship'. For the purposes of this thesis, this notion of viewership and sensory participation describes my strategies about conveying information about a specific geographical and historical location. This activation occurs through the interplay of visual and immersive experiences of the exhibition, deepening engagement between the viewer and the artistic narrative. This idea of activation is also linked to my first-hand observations of the Aral Sea area and how I saw this in contrast to the historical research and documentation on this Soviet mega-construction. In the installation, I constructed an experience that not only educated but also emotionally resonated and drew the audience into an exploration of the historical transformation of the Aral Sea and its impact on the environment and communities involved.

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[56] 'The installation operates by means of a symbolic privatization of the public space of an exhibition. It may appear to be a standard, curated exhibition, but its space is designed according to the sovereign will of an individual artist who is not supposed to publicly justify the selection of the included objects, or the organization of the installation space as a whole.' — Groys, Boris. 'Politics of Installation' *e-flux* no. 02 (2009).

[57] Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art.* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005). p.11.

Mike Nelson, a British artist, creates 'total installations' that resemble deserted film sets. These installations are meticulously crafted with an authentic attention to detail, transforming spaces into immersive environments that evoke alternate realities.[58] The deliberate rearrangement of familiar objects within these installations leads to surreal outcomes. This intentional manipulation induces psychological tension in viewers, prompting them to assume undefined roles within the settings. Nelson intertwines cultural associations in these fictional settings that evoke disorientation, drawing heavily from literature and art history. His approach echoes Baroque attributes, emphasizing emotional intensity, theatricality, and meticulous attention to detail, resulting in spatial confusion and illusionism. In his recent exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, Mike Nelson showcased the installation *Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)* (2004), drawing inspiration from Robert Smithson's iconic Land Art piece, *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970). Nelson meticulously reconstructed the wooden structure with mounts of sand, empty oil barrels, and torn tires, extracting the structure and its surroundings from the original context and landscape. Every detail was attentively replicated, creating a fully immersive 'trompe l'oeil' alternative reality within the gallery. In contrast, my *Seaharp* installation employed a visual language that condensed observations, materiality, and color into visual elements or concise symbols, such as a plaster cast anchor or concrete wedges inspired by the *laukh*, a marble stand for the Koran from Samarkand. Employing a modular technique reminiscent of cinematic montage and modernist sensibility, I introduced pauses and voids that spatially separated the artworks, challenging viewers' perceptions within the exhibition space and creating fragmented encounters with the artworks. My aim was not to replicate reality through sculptural installation but to rephrase and transform it, engaging the viewers' experience.

My artistic research process was showcased in the exhibition as a body of works titled *Subnotes* (fig 18). I collected field notes, sketches, screen captures, geolocations, maps, photos, and other references to organize my research and build a critical perspective. Later I developed these materials into black-and-white contact print collages, utilizing photosensitive paper exposed to the material assemblages in

[58] Cullinan, Nicholas. 'Mike Nelson's the Coral Reef (2000).' *Sculpture* 150, no. 1268 (2008). pp. 763-765.

a camera-less darkroom process. Arranged together on a black wall, the prints formed a visual archive offering insight into process and theoretical references.

Aral Sea Tapestry: Sea-Cotton-Image (fig 19) is a conceptual artwork that served as a visual record and documentation of the Aral Sea. It featured four satellite images of the Aral Sea, captured at 3-4 years intervals (1989, 2002, 2008, and 2012), woven into a tapestry using cotton sourced from Uzbekistan. The tapestry illustrated a geological time progression, showcasing the evolving state of the Aral Sea over more than 20 years. Each frame captured the gradual landscape and water level changes by joining these images into a sequence. The artwork was made from Uzbek cotton sourced from fields that once diverted water from the Aral Sea, symbolically weaving the resource back into its own image. It represented the recycling of means and transformation of historical evidence into a tangible form, using scientific data, where artwork's materiality also reflected the means of its production.

The exhibition's centerpiece at the Blaffer Art Museum was the interactive audio sculpture *Seaharp* (fig 20). This installation featured a plaster geometric relief wall, placed diagonally in one corner of the gallery, two triangular concrete wedges positioned at right angles, a life-size plaster cast of an anchor, and a petrified seashell. Metal piano wires connected these diverse elements, turning the sculpture into a monumental musical instrument installation. I developed my visual language by transforming and incorporating elements discovered during my field research at the Aral Sea. These vernacular geometric forms, materials and architectural fragments echoed the formal vocabulary of minimalist art. *Seaharp* was a reimagined version of the Aeolian harp, deconstructed and reassembled. It engaged with the acoustic environment and responded to visitors' movements within the exhibition gallery. Unlike a traditional Aeolian harp, which relies on natural wind to produce musical notes, *Seaharp* was a site-specific installation. It generated sound by playing pre-recorded and processed audio of wind from the Aral Sea, triggered by viewers' motion in the gallery space.

I would like to draw a parallel with the sculptural installation practice of French artist Raphaël Zarka. He is a research-based artist of my generation working in the post-minimalist context. In his previous exhibitions and interviews, Zarka considered the idea of 'migrating forms,' the way certain geometric forms recur in different geographic and historical contexts. He is interested in pure mathematical forms, usually based on his archival and field research, linking them to Smithson's 'displaced

abstraction' practice described in *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*[59] essay. As discussed in an interview with Christoph Gallois,[60] Zarka employs reshaping, remixing, and reimagining of pure geometric forms. This approach is likened to skateboarding, where skaters transform the city's architectural elements and public sculptures into functional ramps. Similarly, I extended and repurposed visual vocabulary from the vast Eurasian landscape, juxtaposing it with 'pure minimalist forms' in my installation to create synthesis and dynamic interplay of spatial possibilities and geographical encounters. The juxtaposition of works within the exhibition itself unfolded as a temporal collage, assembling works, references, and fragments in exhibitions and publications, allowing the new narratives to form.

The exhibition's installation was also influenced by how photography[61] frames its subject/objects, emphasizing fragmentation and framing techniques. Just as some elements are left outside the field of vision in the camera, I built a wall to block the entrance to the gallery for the exhibition. This wall featured a window cut at eye level as a viewfinder. On either side of the window frame, two panels were inserted at a forty-five-degree angle: one panel of a standard mirror, while the other was a one-way mirror. These panels created a narrow opening in the center, allowing a layered view of the space beyond the window. The construction of the *Window* (fig 21) was designed so that any visitor looking at and through it would see their own reflection within the museum space. It served a similar purpose to the mirror structure that I wore and was featured in the *Walking the Sea* film. My historical precedent for this was Marcel Duchamp's final work, *Étant donnés* (1946-1966), at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which requires viewers to look through a peephole into another concealed space, effectively guiding the viewer's gaze and framing their perception. It employed an artistic strategy that obstructed the viewer's immediate access to the artwork, compelling them to adopt an external position. Adjacent to the *Window*, I positioned a sculpture titled the *Well* (fig 22) in a shape of a triangular concrete basin. The *Well* contained a small amount of water, metaphorically representing the proportionate amount remaining in the Aral Sea. The triptych of relief panels titled

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[59] Smithson, Robert. *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.* (University of California Press, 1967).

[60] 'Raphaël Zarka.' *Interview with Christoph Gallois.* (B42, Michel Rein. 2012).

[61] Robert Smithson also described the photographic nature of his landscape research: "When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel." —Smithson, Robert. *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, ed., (University of California Press Robert, 1996).

Tiled Sails (fig 23), featured grid arrangements of geometric tiles made of white plaster, cast yellow pigment, and mirrored plated plaster. These elements were inspired by architectural features found in Central Asian architecture, particularly the ornamental arches or 'sails' that usually connect walls and ceilings in traditional interiors. The individual tile design was a scaled-down interpretation of the prism mirror construction featured in the film. This minimalistic pattern extended to the treatment of the adjacent *Wall* sculpture (fig 24), transforming it into an architectural element within the installation, emphasizing the continuity of the exhibition. Similar to the *At the Back of the North Wind* installation, I utilized the exhibition's voids and spatial rhythms to establish connections and tensions among the artifacts. This approach allowed me to claim the museum's public space, emphasizing the importance of 'silences' and showcasing the standalone modules and highlighting their relationships. This arrangement echoed the non-linear structure of a concrete poem, where art objects functioned as words within a sentence, marked by patterns, pauses, and gaps.

CH 2.3: *FILM WALKING THE SEA* AND 'VISUAL KNOWING'

In the film *Walking the Sea* (fig 24), I played the role of wanderer where I walked through the landscape as a character with mirrored construction on my back. The narrative of the film was my documentation of the landscape as the wandering observer. The main character in the film was constructed through collaging various elements and references, like a structured visual poem to become a symbolic presence in the landscape. I was inspired by Gustave Courbet's self-portrait *Le rencontre* (1854), a well-known realist painting, where the artist's figure emerged as a modified version of Courbet himself stepping out of the studio into nature with his 'en plein air' tools. I included items in the character's attire, such as a traditional dervish water flask, fragments of ikat fabric, and a wooden staff alongside the mirrored prism. These choices were influenced by Gurdjieff's personal accounts[62] of his travels in Turkestan during the early 1900s, reflecting on interactions with local culture. Additionally, I studied Central Asian photographic and ethnographic materials,

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[62] Gurdjieff, George.I. *Meetings with Remarkable Men.* (Penguin, 1963)

including the *Turkestan Album*[63] commissioned between 1871-82 by the region's governor-general, K.P. Von Kaufman, and compiled by Russian orientalist A.L. Kuhn. This album provided a detailed visual record of the Central Asian region, covering countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

> For both Russian and European scientist in the mid-nineteenth century, Central Asia was so vast in its extent, so complex and awe-inspiring in its physical characteristics, and so mysterious in its inner workings, that its ability to play a formative role in the emerging discipline of geography is of little surprise.[64]

The *Walking the Sea* film opens in a white desert landscape with a mirror structure partly covered by black fabric at the center of the frame (fig 26). The prism stands as a solitary monolith in the vast, empty landscape. The scale of the surroundings is difficult to determine due to its emptiness. The only sign of life is the gentle swaying of the black fabric by the wind, revealing the mirror underneath, as a sole indication of passage of time. With its blinding reflections of the sun on the salt crystals, the desert seems devoid of life. The salt crust covering the ground, the glaring brightness, and the scattered remains of camel bones contribute to an atmosphere frozen in time, where deafening silence absorbs any trace of life. The mirror device was created as a construction to be carried on the back of the protagonist, reflecting the desert landscape of the Aral Sea. In line with the lyrical canon, the character always faces away from the viewer, directing attention to how the viewer can only observe the mirror and making it the primary focus for them. The mirrored prism remains exposed for most of the film, but there are moments when it is covered by black fabric, echoing the mechanism of a 19th-century photographic camera. This metaphorical representation captures the essence of a photographic process that, rather than recording, reflects the imagery back onto the viewer. But it is a 'camera with amnesia,' with selective perception that cannot document but can only react to the environment. Mirrors are often employed by artists in films, performances and installations, for example, Dan Graham, who used mirrors in his sculptural installation *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1976) to unveil social dynamics, positioning observers as subjects within his works and merging with the artwork itself. In the exhibition

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[63] *Turkestan Album*, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, USA. (1871-72).

[64] Oldfield, Jonathan D. 'Russia and Eurasa.' Domosh, Mona, Michael Heffernan, and Charles W. J. Withers, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Geography* (SAGE, 2020).p.107.

catalogue,[65] I recorded and transcribed a conversation with Dan Graham about *Walking the Sea*, where he highlighted the potential of the project to 'resurrect the recent past'[66] as portrayed in my film.

The sight of the mirror covered in black fabric evoked a childhood memory of my grandmother's passing. In Russian Orthodox tradition, mirrors in her home were draped in black cloth during mourning. This ritual deeply impacted me, leading me to connect this memory with the fate and atmosphere at what remains of the Aral Sea. The juxtaposition of the covered mirror in the film, symbolizing both introspection and loss, resonated with my personal experiences and further influenced the overall narrative. In addition to the main footage, *Walking the Sea* incorporated close-up shots of the prism, which reflected the surrounding landscape. I referenced the technique of mirroring and dissecting the image, as seen in the scene featuring the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow from Dziga Vertov's[67] iconic montage film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). These abstracted scenes deconstructed the landscape image and created structural connections within the film, linking the story's changing geographical locations and intersecting linear structure. The combination of audio and visual elements established a dynamic interplay between the Aral Sea environment, human presence, and the constructed reality of the film. The film followed the arc of one day, commencing at daybreak and concluding with the setting sun, framing the narrative with a structuralist interplay of natural light.

Western art and the land art movement of the 1960s, represented by artists such as Richard Long, Nancy Holt, Hamish Fulton, Walter de Maria, and Robert Smithson, often focused on placing sculptures or objects in the landscape thus manipulating terrain through artistic gesture. Both Smithson and Fulton were exploring sites and geological locations of historical significance in the development of America's and

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[65] Ginzburg, Anton, Flint, Lucy, Schmuckli, Claudia eds. *Anton Ginzburg: Walking the Sea.* (Hatje Cantz, 2014). p.90

[66] Ibid

[67] 'And this is why Vertov's film has particular relevance to new media. It proves that it is possible to turn "effects" into a meaningful artistic language. Why is it chat in Witney's computer films and music videos effects are just effects, whereas in the hands of Vertov they acquire meaning? Because in Vertov's film they are motivated by a particular argument, which is that the new techniques of obtaining images and manipulating them, summed up by Vertov in his term "kino-eye," can be used to decode the world. As the film progresses, straight footage gives way to manipulated footage; newer techniques appear one after another, reaching a roller-coaster intensity by the film's end-a true orgy of cinematography.'—Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media. Prologue: Vertov's Dataset.* (MIT Press. 2001) p.12.

British identity. Richard Long's[68] work would always leave a trace in the landscape that exposed his artistic intention, employing processes such as walking in straight lines or following a circle's radius drawn on a map, a formal intervention into the landscape. I sought to create a sense of historical distance by utilizing a time-based medium that doesn't alter the site and is aligned with the Russian tradition of 'Peredvizhniki,'[69] or wanderers, a realist art movement in the 19th century, focusing more on observation, recording and critical commentary and Eurasian geography. This trope also appeared in several conceptual artists' works – for example, Collective Actions.[70] In my approach, human intervention within the landscape was fleeting and captured through video documentation. It emphasized the ephemeral nature of the artistic gesture and its relationship to historical projects of the 1960s. Through the shots of a moving figure carrying the mirror construction, I sought to engage with and temporally transform the perception of various locations. This dynamic approach created an effect wherein the reflected landscape became an image of landscape placed within the actual landscape, capturing the interplay between the reflected imagery and the surrounding environment. The prismatic mirror structure became an essential tool in my project. Its reflective surfaces fragmented the landscape representation, mirroring the rhythm of the figure's movements in the desert. Another similar strategy appeared in Joan Jonas' *Mirror Piece* (1969), where performers carried oblong mirrors reflecting their bodies and surroundings, offering the audience a 'flattened' image of themselves within the performance space.

I identified several locations in the desert around the Aral Sea that held historical significance and embodied the region's unique characteristics. The film highlighted the 'Cemetery of the Ships' (fig 27) depicting rusted fishing boats and a mirage-like herd of camels passing by, juxtaposed against the abandoned ships in the desert. Through local connections, I was also able to access the abandoned secret Soviet military bases on the unmapped islands (fig 28). These bases, now reachable by walking across the land, due to the disappearance of water in the Aral Sea, had groups of abandoned panel buildings weathered by the sun and nature. Missing

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[68] Hogue, Martin. 'The Site as Project: Lessons from Land Art and Conceptual Art' *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-),* volume 57, no. 3 (2004): pp. 57-58.

[69] Valkenier, Elizabeth Kridl. 'The Peredvizhniki and the Spirit of 1860s.' *Russian Review.* volume 34, no. 3 (1975). pp.247-265.

[70] Groys, Boris. *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrski and 'Collective Actions'* (Black Dog Publishing, 2011).

sections of the walls exposed sand-colored grids of interiors and now served as habitats for local fauna, with hawks nesting in them. Some of these buildings had also been used as targets for artillery exercises when the Soviet army left the sites in the 1990s (fig 29). The military ruins merged seamlessly into the desert landscape, forming an impromptu 'counter-monument' representing the past Soviet empire. I filmed local residents actively dismantling these buildings to repurpose the stone and concrete for new construction projects.[71] This process of deconstruction-reconstruction seemed like a metaphor for the undoing of the twentieth century's Soviet utopian collective dream.

Tacita Dean's film *Sound Mirrors* (1999) investigated concrete acoustic receivers along the coast of Dungeness, built during World War II. Dean employed the metaphor of an eclipse, structurally similar to how *Walking the Sea* condensed a day's sun movement into a thirty-minute film. Dean contrasted celluloid and digital mediums, using 16mm film to capture pre-radar acoustic technology, giving it an archaeological feel.[72] In contrast, my focus was on digital media's fluid and constructed aspects. Unlike celluloid, digital media's materiality is subtle, emphasizing the artwork's constructed storyline rather than the medium itself.

The firsthand experience of traveling, engaging with local perspectives, and producing the film, including obtaining filming permits from local authorities, proved a difficult part of the process. I encountered challenges when dealing with the mayor of Muynak, a city in northern Karakalpakstan on the Aral Sea, and the police chief, who initially resisted granting filming rights. They even resorted to temporarily arresting and intimidating me and my crew, consisting of German, Russian, and American citizens, while restricting access to certain areas of the Aral Sea. However, I managed to navigate these permit issues by negotiating and hiring a local production crew,[73] while learning the intricacies of local bureaucracy. Elspeth Probyn observed that: 'The local is only a fragmented set of possibilities that can be articulated into a momentary politics of time and space.'[74] This experience significantly influenced my

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[71] Homage to Gustave Courbet's painting *Stonebreakers* (1849).

[72] Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days. Art, Criticism, Emergency.* (London; New York: Verso, 2015).

[73] Havai Production, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

[74] Probyn, Elspeth (ed. Nicholson, Linda) 'Feminism/Postmodernism.' *Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local.* (New York: Routledge. 1989). pp177-187.

approach and artistic process, ultimately transforming my initial ideas and adapting them to local realities. I wanted to capture the site's essence in its current form as first-hand experiences, incorporating personal accounts, ongoing alteration of the landscape, and a portrayal of the production process in actual locations.

The film's soundtrack,[75] composed by Daniel Perlin, featured audio sourced from my field recordings of the wind and environments in the Aral Sea region. The wind recordings' hypnotic quality matched the film's pacing. As the film progressed, the central figure navigated diverse terrains, encountering various structures, animals, and geographical features within the desert landscape. Walking was more than just a means of traversing the landscape; it was a direct physical engagement with the environment that provided an expanded way of observing and experiencing the social and historical dimensions of Eurasian geographical identities. This engagement transformed the landscape into what felt like a 'readymade installation,' which allowed me to understand the culture of this region better. My resonance with Taus Makhacheva, an artist exploring the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural landscape of the Caucasus, is rooted in shared backgrounds and interests; both of us were born in the Soviet Union and pursued our art studies in the West. We maintained contact during our graduate studies while Makhacheva was in London. Our commonalities include using video and installation art with the Western perspective on Eurasian geography and local histories, interpreted through our artistic practice. Makhacheva often adopts the perspective of a cultural anthropologist, focusing on region of Dagestan, her family's place of origin. This personal connection adds a unique depth to her artworks, infusing them with intimacy, humor, and a genuine affection for the people and the region. In her interview with Sara Raza,[76] Makhacheva emphasized the pivotal role of social conditions, value systems, and histories in shaping her artistic practice. Although we may have different ways of approaching things, I have noticed certain generational themes present in our practices. What stands out to me is the combination of fiction, documentation, and analysis used to explore autobiographical events, which serves as a meaningful mode of understanding the cultural changes that have taken place in broader recent Soviet history.

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[75] Daniel Perlin was inspired by the Aeolian harp phenomenon and reinterpreted it in his digital approach to audio.

[76] Raza, Sara. *Punk Orientalism: The Art of Rebellion.* (London: Black Dog Press, 2022). p.25.

CHAPTER 3: BLUE FLAME.

CONSTRUCTIONS AND INITIATIVES

CH 3.1: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND VKhUTEMAS / GINKhUK EDUCATION

My third project, titled *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives*, explored the Soviet art school VKhUTEMAS/GINKhUK[77] (1920-1930) and structures of historical Constructivist architecture. I investigated how Constructivist methodology transformed the physical environments politically, spatially, and aesthetically. During my graduate studies at Bard College, I became interested in Constructivist pedagogy and artistic research. I discovered recurring themes from my art education as a teen at Leningrad Central Art School (1984–1988) as I studied historical materials and archives about Constructivism, its colour theory, and expanded viewing ideas, and spatial exercises. I learned about the significance of VKhUTEMAS in Moscow and the GINKhUK[78] institution in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) during my research on the topic through the writings of Maria Gough, Selim Khan Magomedov, and Margareta Tillberg. This institution profoundly influenced the artistic and cultural landscape following the 1917 October Revolution and continued to be relevant for the post-war generation of artists.[79] However, it is essential to note that the Constructivist legacy faced disfavor under the Soviet official cultural policy when it endorsed Socialist Realism in the 1930s. In his influential work *The Total Art of Stalinism,*[80] Boris Groys elaborated on the cultural significance of Socialist Realism in a historical context. Emerging post-avant-garde, Socialist Realist art during Stalin's era sharply contrasted with the destiny of the Russian avant-garde and was often characterized as a censoring tool that stifled genuine artistic experimentation. Unlike the avant-garde, the doctrine of Socialist Realism persisted as a mandatory aspect of Soviet art, and its purpose was shaped to conform to immediate political needs. As a result, only a few abstract works from the historical avant-garde were displayed in public museums

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[77] Maria Gough. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.* (University of California Press, 2005).

[78] Tillberg, Margareta. 'Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-Garde
Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia, 1932.' Ph.D. diss., (Stockholm University, 2003).

[79] Bartelik, Marek. *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov at the Roundhouse.* (Artforum, vol 36-no 10. Summer 1998). pp 143-144.

[80] Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism.* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

or published in magazines until the late 1980s. Nevertheless, despite the limited official recognition, there was a strong undercurrent of interest and admiration for Constructivist art within the Postwar Soviet 'unofficial art' culture.[81] John E. Bowlt, in his 1989 article *The Condition of Soviet Art History*,[82] highlighted a noticeable revisionist shift in the USSR cultural policy during the 1980s, exemplified by exhibitions such as *Art of the 1920s-1930s* at the State Russian Museum (1988-89). Bowlt correlated this transformation within Russia because of the growing fascination with Russian avant-garde in Western Europe, evidenced by exhibitions like *Paris-Moscou* at the Centre Pompidou in 1979, as well as the burgeoning interest from North America, reflected in exhibitions held in Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1988) and the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington DC (1989). George Costakis, a Greek-Russian collector, was a significant figure in the postwar art world that brought attention to Suprematism and Constructivism.[83] His collection was the earliest and most extensive collection of materials from when the Constructivist movement emerged and became crucial for historical art research. While living in Moscow, he cultivated friendships with many avant-garde artists and started collecting their works in 1946. Costakis donated a substantial part of his collection to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow before emigrating to Greece in 1977. His collection and patronage greatly contributed to recognizing the Russian avant-garde legacy.

In 2016, I was invited to the Gushul Art residency in Southern Alberta, Canada. My project was an experiment in autoethnography and aimed to research Constructivist education by following the curriculum of VKhUTEMAS[84] using historical materials and practical exercises. Historically, Constructivism was seen as a synthetic movement, encouraging artists to experiment with various media and take on roles as

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[81] Bowlt, John E., Donald B. Kuspit, Alla Rosenfeld, and Vitaly Patsukov. *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde.* (Distributed Art Publishers / D.A.P., 1998).

[82] Bowlt, John E. 'Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History.'
The Art bulletin (New York, N.Y.) volume 71, no. 4 (1989).

[83] Roberts, Peter. *George Costakis: A Russian Life.* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

[84] The following sources collectively provided valuable insights into the subject matter of the VKhUTEMAS curriculum, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Gough, Maria.*The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.* (University of California Press 2005); Khan-Magometov, Selim. *VKhUTEMAS,* vol.1. (Ladia, Moscow. 1995) and *Constructivism*, (URSS. 2003); Tillberg, Margaret. *Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-garde Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia, 1932.* (Stockholm University. 2003); Bokov, Anna. *VKhUTEMAS Training* booklet. Pavilion of the Russian Federation at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia (2014).

explorers, inventors, and constructors. During the residency, I created artworks using different media and historical viewpoints, incorporating elements of VKhUTEMAS pedagogy through critical examination. This experience expanded my understanding of Constructivist methodology by blending literary and formal research. The resulting artworks were exhibited at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery at Lethbridge University in 2017 and several private galleries in North America, accompanied by a publication with Hatje Cantz Publishers. I proposed that revisiting formal assignments from the VKhUTEMAS practice and curriculum (fig 30) would be a tool to deconstruct the Soviet 'grand narrative' surrounding that historical period. The VKhUTEMAS institute was envisioned as a 'social space' in line with Henri Lefebvre's[85] definition and meant to be a collective and profoundly transformative experience on a scale of entire country. I saw an opportunity to become a part of this proposed 'social space' from a contemporary perspective, allowing me to experience and participate in that cultural experiment.

During my time at the Gushul residency, I undertook a project inspired by Aleksander Rodchenko's *Spatial Constructions* exercises (fig 31), which he called 'initiatives'. I recreated the abstract spatial models, based on his archival photographs using local wood, a material readily available in Southern Alberta. There was a performative aspect in repeating these abstract forms amid the vast Canadian landscape, allowing me to expand upon this formal experimentation. To complete the process, I decided to burn my wooden artwork *Spatial Constructions. Gushul Initiative* (fig 35 and 36), metaphorically liberating artworks from their temporal and material constraints. In subsequent exhibitions, I displayed the burnt carcasses of the artworks as a documentation of the creative process. In a similar vein, John Latham's works *Burial of Count Orgaz* (1958) and *God is Great (#4),* (2005) served as precedents for the deliberate destruction of artworks by fire as an artistic gesture.

For another part of my research, I studied Mikhail Matiushin's theories, particularly his work with students at the Department of Organic Culture at GINKhUK[86] in the

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[85] 'Social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products; rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their order and/or disorder.' —Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

[86] Tillberg, Margareta. 'Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-Garde
Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia, 1932.' Ph.D. diss., (Stockholm University, 2003). p.74.

1920s. His Laboratory of Colour[87] experiments were the scientific research of chromatic properties and aspiration to expand the visual angle of the human experience to encompass a complete 360° perspective. One of the outcomes of these exercises, Matiushin and his students devised a collection of charts[88] comprising three bands of colours with a narrower band in the middle, serving as an activation colour for the others. It resulted in an afterimage or shimmering effect intended for functional architectural application for Leningrad, where the institution was situated.

> In his research Matiushin was especially interested in afterimages as a way to grasp the nature of higher dimensions – and to find a way to experience them. He was interested in not only the first complementary colour that occurs but also changes in the afterimage that come about after a longer time.[89]

Matiushin's colour experiments and Bauhaus' Johannes Itten's methods showcased distinct yet resonating approaches to colour and artistic training. Matiushin's expanded viewing exercises resulted in a pragmatic understanding of chromatic dynamics. Inspired by Matiushin's theories and their spatial potential, I developed modular paintings, porcelain sculptural columns, and site-specific murals, adjusting colour theory to the architectural scale (figs 37- 41). Matiushin's theories can be compared to Itten's Bauhaus 'Preliminary Course,' which shared a similar goal of unleashing students' creative potential, blending tactile practices, colour analysis, and rhythm exploration to enable them to communicate artistically through materials However, Itten's method adopted a more holistic and playful approach.[90] Itten and Matiushin had distinct approaches in their understanding and application of colour, despite both drawing inspiration from Goethe's writings on colour.[91] The influence of Goethe colour theory resonates with the work of Heinz Mack, a prominent German contemporary artist. Active since the 1950s, Mack is recognized for his explorations in light, colour, and form, establishing himself as a key figure in the evolution of the

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[87] Ibid

[88] 'Mikhail Matiushin's *A Guide to Color'*. Available from https://ls.vanabbemuseum.nl/M/matiushin/pages/1932spravochnik%201.htm.

[89] Werner, Jeff. 'Margareta Tillberg. Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-Garde. Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia 1932.' *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*: pp. 244-247.

[90] Itten, Johannes.*The Art of Colour: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Colour* (Reinhold Publishing Corporation. 1961).

[91] von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Theory of Colours.* [1840].

ZERO movement. In his recent exhibition and catalog *Acts of Light—Mack and Goethe* (2018)[92] Mack experimented with the relationship between colour and sensory perception in dialogue with the work of the famous poet and colour theorist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Through a series of paintings, and chromatic studies, Mack investigated the ways in which colour can be used as an active and passive tool for representing light and explored the phenomenology of Goethe's colour theory in practice and its significance within contemporary context.

As both an artist and researcher, my focus was to study Soviet modernist culture and to analyze what remained of the Constructivist architecture after the Soviet Union's collapse. These architectural structures embedded cultural and historical context and provided rich material for analysis. I immersed myself in exploring surviving Constructivist buildings, vestiges, and architectural plans as dynamic spaces of historical programming and cultural production. Analyzing the spatial shifts stemming from past experimental aspirations and subsequent historical changes, I aimed to articulate connections between social spaces and the transformations of the environments. Henri Lefebvre characterized 'representational spaces'[93] as the intersection of art and architecture, showing hidden meanings and connections to obscure parts of society. Drawing from Trevor Paglen's writings, which were influenced by Lefebvre's *Production of Space,*[94] I encountered the concept of 'experimental geography.'[95] This approach involves generating space through cultural productions and emphasizes the inseparability between them. 'Experimental geography' recognizes that cultural and intellectual production are inherently spatial practices. Furthermore, 'experimental geography' entails not only recognizing space production as an ontological condition but actively engaging in space experimentation

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[92] Steingießer, Barbara. *Taten Des Lichts – Mack & Goethe* (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2018).

[93] 'When the history of a particular space is treated as such, the relationship of that space to the time which gave rise to it takes on an aspect that differs sharply from the picture generally accepted by historians.'
—Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). p.110.

[94] Ibid

[95] 'Geography, then, is not just a method of inquiry, but necessarily entails the production of a space of inquiry. Geographers might study the production of space, but through that study, they're also producing space. Put simply, geographers don't just study geography, they create geographies.'
— Paglen, Trevor. *Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space.* (2009). Available at: https://brooklynrail.org/2009/03/express/experimental-geography-from-cultural-production-to-the-production-of-space (Accessed: 2023).

as an integral aspect of one's artistic practice. I thought it closely connected to Constructivist legacy. As I proceeded to work on my film *Turo*, I applied these concepts of cultural space production. I was building on the idea that culture and space are inextricably linked and can influence how environments are perceived and utilized. In *Turo*, I sought to document as many original Constructivist buildings as I could in the cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg aiming to activate the unique spatial qualities of each location. It was an interesting task to construct a cinematic narrative through the poetics of space and voids. In doing so, I aimed to bridge the gap between historical ideas and contemporary perspectives as a visually poetic narrative.

CH 3.2: EXHIBITIONS: SEAM, FRAGMENTATION AND MODULARITY

In the realm of modernism and Constructivism, the concept of a grid holds important significance, resurfacing in the twentieth century as a rational, organizational, and meditative structure within cultural space. Rosalind Krauss described the grid's unique quality in modern art, where it can simultaneously conceal and reveal, acting as both a mythological and structural device. Instead of a narrative, it's a visual representation of a confined space, embracing paradoxes and contradictions. The grid serves as a captivating visual language, reflecting modernity's complexities.

> Logically speaking, the grid extends, in all directions, to infinity. Any boundaries imposed upon it by a given painting or sculpture can only be seen—according to this logic—as arbitrary. By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric.[96]

In *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* sculptural installation, I combined various grid systems and scales, inspired by Krauss's notion that individual fragments can unveil the larger grid system they belong to. Through my use of a modular method,[97] diverse research fragments converged, forming connections and

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[96] 'The peculiar power of the grid, its extraordinarily long life in the specialized space of modern art, arises from its potential to preside over this shame: to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time. In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction. [...] The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or something science or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)' — Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.* (MIT Press.1986). p.18.

[97] '…modules are units in a larger system that are structurally independent of one another, but work together. The system as a whole must provide a framework—an architecture—that allows for both independence of

modules, and shaping a complex multi-grid network structure. In the twentieth century, the notion of a 'seam' as a modular joint gained prominence across art, architecture, and cinema. In cinematic montage, the transformative role of the cut introduced a new language, as seen in works by filmmakers like Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, who used it to create dynamic narratives challenging traditional storytelling. Lev Manovich, a new media theorist, highlighted in his book *Language of New Media*,[98] that Vertov's avant-garde masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera*, created in 1929, marked the inception of a new media language through its modularity.[99] Manovich defines modularity in his essay *Modularity as Aesthetic Category*[100] as follows: 'In its usual meaning, "modularity" refers to modules, i.e., standardized parts of units employed in design and architecture.' And a century later, cinematic ways of perceiving, structuring time, narrating, and linking experiences through have become essential for computer users to interact with cultural data, fulfilling cinema's vision as a visual Esperanto, an idea discussed by film critics in the 1920s. Similarly, in architecture, the seam became a pivotal detail where different materials, functions, and spatial attributes converged, revealing the awareness of fragmentation and modularity that composed the innovative approaches. This understanding of how individual elements contribute to a unified structure influenced my approach in the *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* exhibition and the four sections of my film. I designed the exhibition's framework to emphasize the seam's significance by synthesizing the variations of elements and their contribution to the overarching narrative relationship between reference and form. The nature of the 'construction' according to Rodchenko is based on the organization of details and factors: 'There is only one kind of construction—laid-bare construction as the organization of a work's elements and materials according to a purpose or goal.'[101]

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structure and integration of function.'
— Baldwin Carliss, Y. and Clark Kim, B. *Design Rules: The Power of Modularity* (MIT Press. 2000).

[98] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media.* (MIT Press. 2001).

[99] Manovich wrote an essay about my work at the Altana Gallery at Technical University of Dresden in 2022 '… Ginzburg's works demonstrate to us how different types of modularity and the contrast between modality and continuity can act as powerful systems for new meanings, aesthetics, and artistic experiences. These systems emerge when different types of modularity are juxtaposed with each other, along with their media, historical, social, and technological contexts, leading to surprising tensions and new aesthetic experiences.'
—Manovich, Lev. *Modularity as Aesthetic Category.* (2003).

[100] Manovich, Lev. *Modularity as Aesthetic Category.* (2003).
[101] Gough, Maria. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.* (University of California Press. 2005). p.39

Overall, the concept of modularity offered a valuable framework for analyzing the relationships of cultural components and their contributions to shaping a coherent cultural reflection. A critical examination of how forms are constructed allows for an expression that goes beyond aesthetics, enhancing the research argument and deeper understanding of the relationship between historical and local practices in modernist cultural spaces. At Documenta12, artists such as Fareed Armaly, Stan Douglas, Mathias Poledna, Florian Pumhösl and Fred Wilson showcased their approach by using techniques of quotation and appropriation to interact with historical modernist themes, addressing the influence of contextual art.

Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl,[102] explores modern art's historical systems as updated visual language structures. In his analytical studies for the group exhibition *Space Force Construction* (2017) at Palazzo delle Zattere in Venice, Pumhösl reconstructed El Lissitzky's *Room for Constructive Art* (1926) to explore how exhibitions served as models for modernism's lasting influence and the role of spatial design in shaping this process. Pumhösl shared his fascination and formal approach towards the Constructivist replica in an interview with *Cereal* (2017), an online publication.

> I developed this series in response to El Lissitzky's incredible space. It eliminated so many possibilities because everything I could put there would be nostalgic, just referencing Modernism. The question became, can I find a place that's not covered by that totality? It excluded colour, it excluded composition, so it made sense for the series to be more architectural, something that might depart from pictorial space; an object with a modular form.[103]

Sabeth Buchmann praised Pumhösl's work for its ability to intricately blend form and media discourses in a historically conscious manner, and identified his method as 'second order abstraction,' where 'first-order' refers to self-referential formalism of an art object and 'second-order' abstraction as a 'historically' referential form.[104] My work

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[102] 'On the other hand, media-reflexive approaches have been developed by neo-Conceptual artists who engage in critical reconstructions of modernism's legacy, choosing not to declare obsolete its formal language and ambitions but rather to address its internal contradictions while attending in particular to its geographically and socio-politically marginalized manifestations.'
— Rottmann, André. (2009) *Openings: Florian Pumhösl*, Artforum, Number 1, Volume 48. (2009).

[103] Ainsworth, Ruth. *A Conversation on Artistic Experimentation.* (2017). Available at https://www.readcereal.com/articles/florian-pumhosl

[104] Buchmann, Sabeth. *Abstract Characters? Reference and Formalism in the Work of Florian Pumhösl.* Texte zur Kunst, Number 69 (2008), pp.92-11, and pp.182-190

in *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* aligns with a 'second order' perspective, which permitted me to position myself within the broader context of art history with other international artists of my generation to explore modernist visual language in a post-modern condition. My aim was to both challenge and give new meaning to the universalist ideals that were once promised by modern imaginaries and offer a fresh perspective on the role of art in contemporary society. Andreas Fogarasi is another Austrian artist whose artwork offers an abstract portrayal of specific urban situations, reduced to their tactile qualities, colours, and materiality, which address architectural narratives. His ongoing artwork *Nine Buildings, Stripped* (2019–) consists of wall-mounted 'material packages' made up of fragments of demolished buildings such as façade elements, floor tiles, windows, bricks, and more. 'Andreas Fogarasi always addresses the functionality and logic of exhibiting in his own artistic practice or makes them the main object of investigation […].'[105]

The *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* exhibition was structured into sections, each colour-coded according to Matiushin's Colour Lab experiments and inspired by VKhUTEMAS ideas. These sections focused on various departments curriculum projects, highlighting sculpture, painting, graphics, textile, architecture and film. The display approach employed at Southern Alberta Art Gallery followed a modular methodology emulating historical avant-garde and formalist organizational principles. The *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* exhibition was a practical application of modularity, showcasing its adaptability across various contexts, and testing its coherence through interconnected fragments and functions[106]. The museum exhibition's visual language and modular system were later expanded to several other related gallery exhibitions,[107] all of which retained a connection to the original display system. The museum exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery featured an abstract mural *COEV: Collective of Expanded Viewing Colour-Space Initiative1* (fig 42), multi-panel composition *Simurgh Birding Initiative* (fig 43), and two

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[105] Thalmair, Franz. *Critics' Picks Vienna: Andreas Fogarasi.* Artforum, (Winter 2017).

[106] 'The fact remains, however, that a narrative is made up solely of functions: everything, in one way or another, is significant. It is not so much a matter of art (on the part of the narrator) as it is a matter of structure.' —Barthes, R. and Duisit, L. 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,' *New literary history,* 6(2), (1975) pp. 237-272

[107] I continued my experimentation by organizing additional following exhibitions: *Construction Proxy* at Barbara Davis Gallery (2018) in Houston and *VIEWs* at Helwaser Gallery (2019) in New York. These exhibitions showcased original and new works, particularly paintings and murals, advancing my ZorVed color theory and exhibition display research.

gradient blue porcelain columns *Sky Columns II (Blue) (2016)* (fig 44) in the center. Adjacent to this, a series of graphic posters *Meta-Constructivism* (fig 45) illustrating the VKhUTEMAS' concepts and ideas. The display also included charred *Burnt Constructions. Gushul Initiative* (fig 46), from Rodchenko's experiments, and a scale model of *Stargaze: Orion*, a public sculpture commissioned in 2014 by Art in Embassies (fig 47). This sculpture was later installed at the US Embassy in Moscow in 2018. *Stargaze: Orion* (fig 48) is a mirror polished steel modular construction which functioned as an instrument or a 'situation', extending the viewer's gaze and framing the constellation of Orion. Acting as a bridge between cosmic and human scales, this sculpture projected and framed the surrounding environment, its presence directly linked to the viewer's presence. The linear nature of the sculpture created a shift and superimposition within the city's grid.

Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* navigated between the avant-garde as a space for creative experiment and the organic process of materials, context, and ideologies undergoing natural decay and transformation. It represented a restorative process, incorporating partial erasures to address the pathos and trauma of the twentieth century within the modernist framework.

CH 3.3: FILM 'TURO' AND DECONSTRUCTING CONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

The period of Soviet modernity, although brief in historical duration, has made a lasting impact due to the enduring structures and buildings that remain from the Constructivist movement. *Turo* is a film exploring post-Soviet geography and Constructivist architecture (fig 49). It consists of an introduction and four sections, each focusing on a different iconic Constructivist building. I selected Melnikov House (architect Konstantin Melnikov), Narkomfin Building (architect Moisei Ginzburg), ZIL (Automobile factory designed by Vesnin brothers), and a recording of Pripyat' (Soviet town affected by Chernobyl catastrophe), using a video game engine, featuring the unrealized *Tatin's Tower* (1919-20).[108] Each section of the film demonstrated a

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[108] *Tatlin's Tower* or the project for the *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20), was a design for a grand monumental building by the Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin, that was never built. It was planned to be erected in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as the headquarters and

modernist expression of a tower that is deconstructed, and the sequence was aligned with Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'from Ivory Tower to Control Tower'.[109] I introduced these architectural structures as spatial archives, reflecting historical records of political ideologies and modernist visions. These structures have made historically notable contributions to the advancement of art and architecture by functioning as formal prototypes for envisioning future societies. Within this context, a fresh portrayal of space has emerged, encompassing production relations and social relationships, all within dynamic and evolving forms.

The film *Turo* was originally commissioned for the Soluna Festival live premiere in Dallas, Texas (fig 50). Sections one and four were screened at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra stage and featured live performances of Wagner's *Waldweben* and Sibelius's *Pohjoola's Daughter*, conducted by Karina Canellakis. I later developed additional sections, parts two and three, to bridge the initial materials and to extend it for institutional and cinema screenings. An essential part of the film *Turo* was adapting the soundtrack from its original live performance to the screening version. Adapting the visual strategy used in *Walking the Sea*, my aim was to create a temporal delay effect with the sound, reinterpreting the film's narrative through a conceptual framework. To achieve this, I collaborated closely with composer Daniel Neumann. We collected various recordings of Wagner's *Waldweben* and Sibelius' *Pohjoola's Daughter*, ranging from vinyl to digital and even iPhone renditions. These recordings were then remixed and performed in a large industrial space reminiscent of the ZIL auto factory,[110] subsequently re-recorded to create a distinct and immersive audio experience that complemented the film's visual narrative. The process applied Viktor Shkolvsky's defamiliarization[111] through audio, adding a reinterpreted experience of the music in the film. The film's first part, *Ivory Tower (Ebura Turo)*, (fig 51) portrayed the Melnikov House, a structure built in 1929 in Moscow by Soviet

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monument of the Comintern (the third international).
— 'Tatlin's Tower.' Available from https://architectuul.com/architecture/tatlins-tower.

[109] 'To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory tower to the control tower of society.' — McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* (1964).

[110] The empty industrial space influenced the sound by creating echoes that made the audio feel larger and more distinct.

[111] 'The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.'
— Shklovsky, Viktor. *Art as Technique, 1917.* (London: Longmans, 1988). Pp. 16-30.

architect Konstantin Melnikov for his residence and studio. As an iconic example of Soviet avant-garde architecture, this building stands out for its unique floorplan design, construction techniques, and distinct six-sided polygonal windows. As the film progressed, the focus transitioned from the location's footage to images of the Melnikov House projected onto geometric surfaces, transforming the building into a set with video projections. As the section culminated, the visuals filled the screen and dissolved into abstract colour compositions, deconstructing footage into a hive of pixels. The soundtrack for this part was created by layering Wagner's *Waldweben* sequence with the vocal performance of African American Yiddish singer Anthony Russell. Russell performed *City of the Future* (1931), a song from the Soviet Yiddish Children's Songbook *Far Yungt*, which depicted a utopian society based on ideals of equality and brotherhood.

The second part, *Wormwood Star. Ghost-mode (Absinta Stelo. Fantoma Modo)*, (fig 52) centered around digital video game renderings of Pripyat, a city built around the Chernobyl nuclear power facility. Using 'ghost mode,' all video game[112] participants were muted, allowing the viewer to experience the haunting emptiness of the abandoned city environment. A 3D model of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, a never-built architectural landmark from the Soviet historical avant-garde, appeared above the cityscape at the end of the chapter. Many Constructivist ideas existed only as prospective designs or models, so I placed *Tatlin's Tower* 3D rendering into the video game's virtual settings, integrating a utopian proposition into a dystopian military game simulation. The tower loomed over the video game rendering of Pripyat before disintegrating into fragments. The chapter's musical score was based on John Cage's musical composition, *In a Landscape*, performed by musician Katya Mihailova and layered with my audio field recordings from Moscow during filming in 2015. This combination of visuals and music was designed to create a haunting slowed-down atmosphere of abandoned cityscape and the collapsing utopian ideals of historical avant-garde.

Babylon Detour (Babilona Ĉirkaŭ-iro) took place in the Narkomfin Building (fig 53), designed by Moisei Ginzburg, that was a pioneering example of communal living in the Soviet Union, promoting collective life and creativity. Moisei Ginzburg proposed a 'transitional type of dwelling', which suggested integrating multiple apartment types

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[112] Videogame *Counterstrike V5*

within the same building. This innovative approach promoted a sense of collective living and interaction among residents. The section was filmed in the apartment type 2F, that belonged to Aleksandr Deineka a renowned Soviet painter. Here, I set up a Theremin[113] and let forest birds flutter about its antennae, recording the sonification of their flight. The resulting audio performance reflected the effect of the accidental nature of the bird's flight and electromagnetic fields of the Theremin technology. I wanted to insert a dreamlike instance into the context of the historical monument, to reinvigorate it with new meaning, and relevance.

The final fourth part, titled *Control Tower (Kontrolturo),* focuses on the ZIL facility (fig 54) designed by the Vesnin brothers, leaders of the Constructivist movement. This immense industrial site housed an iconic auto factory in the heart of Moscow as a productivist architectural marvel. This twentieth-century temple to industrial innovation exemplified the formal principles of architectural Constructivism. Unfortunately, this architectural complex no longer exists, making the film a unique documentation of its once-prominent presence. The soundtrack featured Jean Sibelius' tone poem *Pohjoola's Daughter,* which was inspired by the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*[114]—a mythological trip to the magical realm of Pohjola in the Far North. The chapter followed a character as he investigated the industrial ruins of an abandoned ZIL industrial complex. (fig 55). The long tracking shots revealed the industrial landscape in a meditative manner.[115] Incidentally, the film captured footage of a major fire that broke out on the site during filming. The sequence illustrated a transition from symbolic deconstruction to a real physical act of destruction. (fig 56) Throughout *Turo,* all the titles are translated in Esperanto[116]—an artificial language of

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[113] The Theremin was invented around 1920 by Russian physicist Lev Sergeyevich Termen – commonly known later as Léon Theremin. Theremins involve the manipulation of electromagnetic fields around two antennae that make the instrument look rather like a weird lectern. Players control sounds by moving hands and fingers around a vertical antenna to raise or lower the tone, and up or down over a looped antenna to control volume.
—Miller, Norman. *The Theremin: The Strangest Instrument Ever Invented?* Available from
https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201111-the-theremin-the-strangest-instrument-ever-invented.

[114] Friberg, Eino (Translator), and Lonnrot, Elias (Compiler Editor).
Kalevala: The Epic of the Finnish People. (Penguin Classics, 2021).

[115] 'The aim of slow cinema, for Jaffe, in reference to one instance, is to access 'the purer time of contemporary slow movies, time undisturbed by advertising.'
— King, Geoff. *Positioning Art Cinema Film and Cultural Value.* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2019).

[116] 'The ideas of universal language were widely discussed and explored in the Constructivist circles that included exchange with Roman Jakobson and Osip Brik, who visited Matiushin's Institute of Organic Culture, GINkHUK'

'This universal language had its roots in the experimental 'zaum' poetry (za-beyond, um- mind, intellect, senses) which was a central issue for the pre-revolutionary futurists Matiushin belonged to. This 'zaum' poetry in these

the twentieth century that, in itself, was a utopian universalist project. I aimed to reinterpret the narratives of utopian modernism by reactivating these locations and conceptually deconstructing their structures. By renegotiating memories, I aimed to detach the architectural forms and geography from their dramatic and arduous history, where social and creative ideals faced compromise over time due to authoritarian pressures and neglect. My goal was to restore a sense of poetic agency to these sites, transcending the constraints of traditional interpretations. My interest lay in balancing structure and spontaneity, and visualizing[117] uncanny situations in cinematic framework, like a bird scene in Narkomfin Building (figs 57 and 58). This approach fostered participatory engagement and aligned with the 'fictioning' method that merged a documentary approach with constructed narrative. Simon O'Sullivan proposed that the production of a 'new' landscape, as a 'platform for dreaming' – is another definition of 'fictioning', especially when it is no longer clear where the fiction itself ends and so-called reality begins or where reality ends and the fiction begins[118].

The notion of personal fiction as an evolution of Russian modernist visual language permeated the ethos of artists within the Moscow Conceptualism, among whom Viktor Pivovarov stands out. While maintaining a close friendship and professional bond with Kabakov, Pivovarov's recognition in the Western sphere remained relatively limited. His conceptual practice reinterpreted the language of heroic modernism inherent in the Russian avant-garde, weaving a poetic narrative that encapsulated Soviet identity and metaphysics of individual experiences. In his series, *Beautiful Actions* (1989), he drew inspiration from Kazimir Malevich's note 'gone to the store.' This body of work, with its diagrammatic sensibility, navigated 'minute-

hey-days of Esperanto was to make communication across all borders possible, including those between animals and humans, as for example in the bird-sound neologisms of Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922).'
—Tillberg, Margareta. *Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-garde: Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia, 1932.* (Stockholm University. 2003) p57.

[117] In my third publication, *Anton Ginzburg: Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives* (Hatje Cantz, 2020), the universalist model and visualization theme emerged during a conversation with artist R.H. Quaytman. This dialogue highlighted the crucial role of visualizing innovative ideas cohesively in artistic research. Quaytman emphasized the importance of visualization as the fundamental means to explain and convey complex ideas effectively: 'This is what early modernists understood and why they still offer such extremely valuable ideas and models... There will be the next thing. It's important to visualize. The only way to explain an idea, basically, is to visualize it.'

[118] O'Sullivan, Simon. *Art Practice as Fictioning (Or, Myth-Science).* Unit of Play, Goldsmiths, United Kingdom ed. https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/15430/. (4 March 2015).

actions', insignificant moments that would be otherwise overlooked[119]. This notion of quotidian fiction also resonates with Pierre Huyghe's approach, where he initiates surreal situations, as he shared in a dialogue with George Baker for October Magazine,[120] Pierre Huyghe addressed how he wrote the scenario for his film *Streamside Day Follies* stating: 'From the moment of my early work, I never script something in a totalizing way. I provide a framework, and then I let the framework go and things happen within the framework that are subject to chance, to interaction. These things are beyond my control.' Huyghe's approach to his film involved creating a flexible conceptual structure that allowed for spontaneity and the emergence of unscripted moments, enabling a dynamic and authentic experience that interacted with the reality of the environment. I had a meaningful encounter with Pierre Huyghe during a small dinner hosted by our mutual friends, Christian Wassmann and Luisa Gui. At that time, I was working on the *Hyperborea* film, immersed in research materials, while conceptualizing my approach for the project. As it was my first major video production, there were still many unknowns, especially since I had yet to visit the locations in person. During our conversation, Pierre Huyghe told me about his fascination with idea of a floating rock that seemingly defied gravity. Although the scenario was clearly impossible, I was impressed by his willingness to embrace this uncanny situation. His acceptance of the surreal in his creative process was inspiring and gave me the confidence to adopt a more flexible approach to making my films, emphasizing the significance of the media used. I am interested in critically reconstructing and expanding modernist formal language while addressing its cultural contradictions. *Turo* pays tribute to post-Soviet landscapes and unfolds Constructivist architecture like a dramatic poem.[121] The film is divided into four parts, with each section transforming architectural structures into spatial archives that capture ideologies, histories, and concepts. It captures the essence of a dramatic, poetic form where each part resonates as distinct episodes contributing to larger narrative. It captures the essence of a dramatic, poetic form where each part resonates as distinct episodes contributing to larger narrative. The sections unfold dreamscape of Melnikov

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[119] Pepperstein, Pavel, and Vaclav Glotser. *Viktor Pivovarov (Books 1 and 2).* (Moscow: Artguide Editions. MAGMA Museum, 2014).

[120] Baker, George. 'An Interview with Pierre Huyghe', *October,* 110, (2004). p.85.

[121] Bugeja, Michael. *The Art and Craft of Poetry.* (Writers Digest Books, 1994). p. 249.

House, haunting emptiness in Pripyat, dreamlike sequences in Narkomfin, and the industrial drama of ZIL factory. By blending universalist aspirations, modern imaginaries and reanimating historical sites, *Turo* reclaims poetic agency of lost utopias and stark dystopias of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The *Terra Corpus* trilogy explored the concept of *Constructed Geographies in Contemporary Art* and how artistic research has expanded and transformed perceptions of landscapes. This thesis examined the different art research methodologies, including field research and documentation, historical and experimental geographies, 'fictioning', representational spaces, and studio practice. I see my work as a development of artistic research because of its attention to the societal, critical, and geographical factors shaping cultural and historical interpretations of Soviet legacies in the post-Soviet imagination.

Chapter One explored the concept of mythological construction within geographical spaces, focusing on the notion of utopian Hyperborea. This exploration spanned fictional narratives as well as actual sites, including the American Northwest, and several locations in Russia, including Saint Petersburg and the coast of the White Sea. This chapter examined my project *At the Back of the North Wind*, drawing on various literary and mythical sources as well as extensive fieldwork. This chapter investigated the dynamics between fiction, geography, and autoethnographic documentation, which was the core of the project. Moreover, the chapter introduced the theoretical framework of 'fictioning', as proposed by Simon O'Sullivan, and conducted a comparative analysis of the research-based practices of Joachim Koester, Monika Sosnowska and Tuan Andrew Nguyen. The overarching aim of this chapter was to articulate how the combination of geographical knowledge and interdisciplinary field work, framed by mythological and literary elements, could serve as a tool of artistic inquiry, reshaping comprehension of geography, culture, and history. The study further extended into formal strategies within the post-conceptual and post-minimalist traditions and the relationship between cinematic and sculptural narratives, encouraging active viewership, as demonstrated in my exhibition.

Chapter Two shifted to the ruins in the landscape caused by the destruction of the Aral Sea in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's *Great Plan of Transformation of Nature*. The ramifications of this Soviet endeavor have been catastrophic, manifesting as severe environmental and humanitarian crises. My research drew inspiration from this Central Asian terrain, leading to the development of installations and exhibitions that premiered at the Blaffer Art Museum and subsequently showcased in other venues. I introduced parallels with the tradition of land art in the Western culture

during the 1960s and I explored the historical legacy of Western artists who engaged with geography, including figures like Hamish Fulton, Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt. Additionally, I conducted a comparative analysis, examining the research-based contemporary artistic practices of Tacita Dean, Taus Makhacheva, Raphaël Zarka, and Mike Nelson's installations. This exploration also examined the concept of a 'total installation', as defined in the writings of Boris Groys and Claire Bishop. This chapter highlighted the methodologies that reanimated and translated historical narratives of altered landscapes. It addressed the ability of artistic research to provide innovative perspectives on historical events and their broader significance through the integration of creative and critical practices.

Chapter Three examined Constructivist education through an autoethnographic reanimation and update of the formal artistic language. I combined historical references with practical exercises to create artworks that followed the VKhUTEMAS curriculum. This process expanded my grasp of Constructivist methodology, contextual art, and the 'migration of forms' in modernist discourse, shaping new narratives. By reenacting the Constructivist pedagogy through creative practice and critical analysis, I aimed to personalize my role as a practitioner and reference overlooked cultural trajectories. I analyzed architectural spaces of the Constructivist settings as a form of historical staging. Detaching material constructions from their ideological function emerged as a critical outcome in producing artworks and forms of exhibition display. Interested by Trevor Paglen's concept of experimental geography, I contextualized Constructivist methodology and architectural environments as a manifestation of the 'representational spaces' within cultural production. This perspective helped me to document the gradual transformation of post-Soviet modernist environments, captured through the gradual deterioration of these architectural forms. I examined Pierre Huyghe's cinematic approach through comparative analysis. My modular method emphasized the interplay between unscripted situations, objects, and spaces to activate meanings, drawing inspiration from cinematic montage and dynamic shifts of grid systems, which evaluated it through Rosalind Krauss' essays on how grids function as a modernist concept. The integration of modularity and montage within modes of representation emphasized the multidisciplinary nature of my practice, aligning it with the fragmented nature of contemporary culture and facilitating critical distance. I identified this body of work with the principles of 'second-order abstraction', resonating it with Florian Pumhösl's

and Andreas Fogarasi explorations of modern art's historical aspects and its structural grammar in relation to formal and media discourses. In essence, Chapter Three not only investigated Constructivist methodology but also navigated the evolution of the built environments, historical references and translations of the cultural memory informing 'production of space'[122] in the post-Soviet settings.

In these three chapters, I have argued how the *Terra Corpus* trilogy investigated relationships of fact and fiction, geography and art, historical references, and critical studio practice. Informed by my experience as a Soviet immigrant and framed by my art education in the United States, I crafted narratives exploring the aftermath of Soviet geography from both a Western standpoint and a post-Soviet 'temporal' perspective. I also reviewed practices from other diasporic and Eastern European artists like Pivovarov and Kabakov on how they approached post-Cold War cultural and historical shifts. The trilogy served as a case study of practice-based research to reevaluate geographical narratives by deconstructing the creative process and engaging in a comparative analysis of research-based methodologies used by other artists. This thesis has examined art's role in modifying the critical reading of geographical knowledge, landscapes, histories, and cultural contexts, emphasizing formal modes of representation and critical reflection methods intellectually, aesthetically, and historically. This approach contextualized the subject of constructed Eurasian geographies within a broader framework of contemporary art.

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ARTWORKS REFERENCE

Anton Ginzburg
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Constructed Geographies
in Contemporary Art

Supervisors:
Dr. Ergin Çavuşoğlu (Director of Studies)
and Dr. Katy Deepwell

—

Arts and Creative Industries
Middlesex University London

2023

Middlesex University

CHAPTER 1

FIG. 1 — FIG. 17

AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND

The exhibition's main feature is the 45-minute film *Hyperborea*, which documents field research and a constructed narrative about the search for the mythical territory. Alongside the film, the exhibition includes two large sculptures: *Ashnest*, constructed using mammoth tusks and micro scans of human bone and installed with steel rods over a circle of ash. The second sculpture, *Owl Totem and its Shadow*, is a composition carved from white and black marble, echoing the formal language of *Ashnest*. The exhibition showcases eight relief sculptures inspired by NASA geo-locations visited during the research phase and two paintings based on historical maps of Hyperborea. Furthermore, the exhibition encompasses research materials, photographs, film props, and sketches collected throughout the project.

The publication with Hatje Cantz represents an extension of the project in the form of a book. It serves a dual purpose as both a comprehensive documentation of the artworks and research involved in the project and a platform for intellectual discourse. It includes a conversation with philosopher Boris Groys and the inclusion of essays authored by critics and art historians reacting to the artworks and theme of Hyperborea.

Institutional Exhibitions:
54th Venice Biennale
At the Back of the North Wind
June 15, 2011 - November 27, 2011

Blaffer Art Museum,
University of Houston
Terra Corpus
January 18, 2014 - March 15, 2014

Wyoming Art Museum
Ashnest
October 1, 2002 -June 3, 2023

Screenings of the film *Hyperborea*:
-Swiss Institute, New York (2013),
- video_dumbo at Eyebeam, NY (2013)
- Les Rencontres Internationales
at Haus der Kulturen, Berlin (2013),
- XVI Media Forum: 37 Moscow
  International Film Festival (2015)
- Babylon Cinema, Berlin (2015),
- New Holland, Saint Petersburg (2017)
- Anthology Film Archives, NY (2017)

Publication: *Anton Ginzburg:
At the Back of the North Wind*
Published by Hatje Cantz (2012)
Size: 21.50 x 30.00 cm. ca 200 pp.,
ISBN 978-3-7757-3429-5

FIG. 1
Installation view of
At the Back of the North Wind, 2011
at Palazzo Bollani
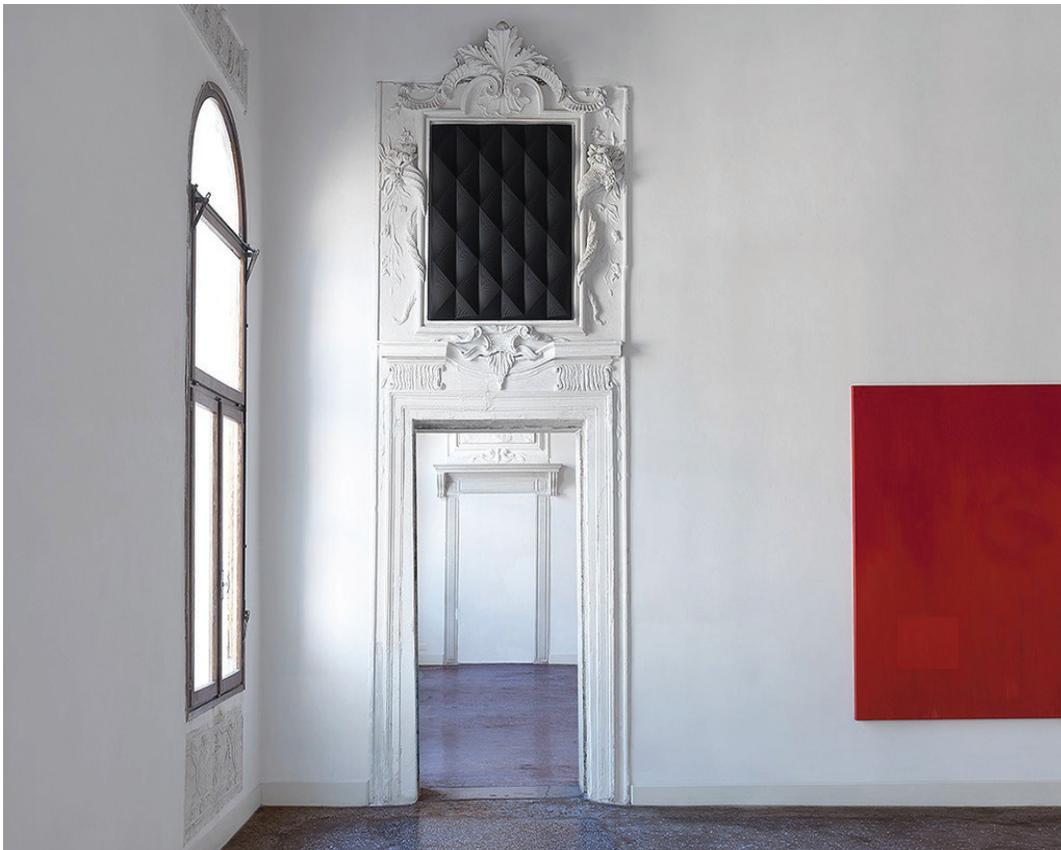
FIG. 2
Installation view of
At the Back of the North Wind, 2011
at Palazzo Bollani

FIG. 3
Installation view at Palazzo Bollani, 2011
Photos and theodolite used in the film,
for landscpe surveying and granite
from Kuzovsky archipelago.

FIG. 4
Topology Shift: Astoria, 2011
Painted polyurethane,
site-specific plaster frame.
Size: 44 x 51 inches (112 x 130 cm)

FIG. 5
Composition 2 (Herodotus Map Study), 2011
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
Size: 96 inches in diameter

FIG. 6
Ashnest, 2011
Mammoth tusks, painted polyurethane,
iron rods, resin, ash, bronze slag, sand
Size: 170 × 158 inches (432 × 400 cm)

FIG. 7
Bone Totem Owl and
Bone Totem Owl Shadow, 2011
White Carrara marble,
gold plated bronze details and
Size: 92 x 21 in. (234 x 53 cm)
Black Belgian marble
Size: 80 x 14 inches
(203 x 36 cm)

FIG. 8
Bone Totem Owl and
Bone Totem Owl Shadow, 2011
White Carrara marble,
gold plated bronze details and
Size: 92 x 21 in. (234 x 53 cm)
Black Belgian marble
Size: 80 x 14 inches
(203 x 36 cm)

FIG. 9
Ilgaak glasses prop. 2011
gold plated bronze, metal, plastic

FIG. 10
Middle World (Black), 2011
Painted polyurethane, site-specific frame
Size: 48x38 inches (122 x 98 cm)

FIG. 11
Middle World (White), 2011
Painted polyurethane, site-specific frame
Size: 48x38 inches (122 x 98 cm)

FIG. 12
Sunburst (Lower-World), 2011
Painted polyurethane, gold-leaf
convex mirror, site-specific frame
Size: 44x51 inches (112 x 130 cm)

Film *Hyperborea*
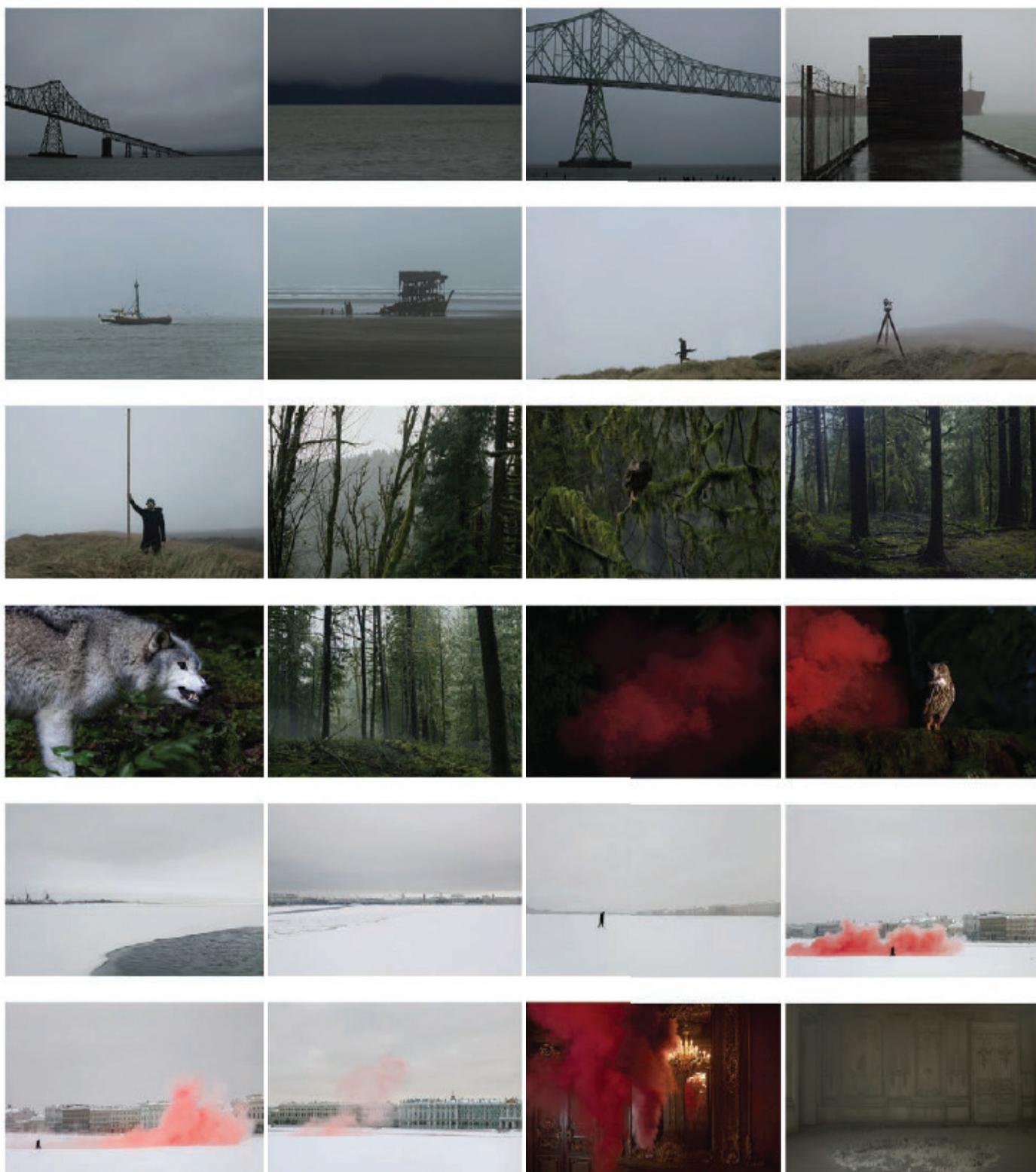
FIG. 13
Hyperborea, 2011
45 minutes
HD video, surround sound

Hyperborea is a 45-minute film documenting the artist's search for the mythical region of Hyperborea. The expedition starts in Astoria, Oregon, continues through the forests of the American Pacific Northwest, the faded palaces of Saint Petersburg and Neva embankment, and finishes at the remnants of Russia's White Sea Gulag prisons. The film combines mythical and actual landscapes. The protagonist, a surveyor performed by the artist, is accompanied by the dissipating cloud of red smoke.

FIG. 14 *Hyperborea #14, Astoria, Oregon.* 2011
Archival inkjet print.
Size: 20 x 26.75 inches (50.8 x 68 cm)

FIG. 15 *Hyperborea #20, Saint Petersburg.* 2011
Archival inkjet print.
Size: 20 x 26.75 inches (50.8 x 68 cm)

FIG. 16 *Hyperborea #29, Saint Petersburg,* 2011
Archival inkjet print.
Size: 20 x 26.75 inches (50.8 x 68 cm)

FIG. 17 *Hyperborea #38, the White Sea,* 2011
Archival inkjet print.
Size: 20 x 26.75 inches (50.8 x 68 cm)

WALKING THE SEA

FIG. 18 — FIG. 29

Institutional exhibitions:
Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston
Terra Corpus
January 18, 2014 - March 15, 2014

Screenings of the film *Walking the Sea*:
- 59th Venice Biennial,
Uzbekistan National Pavillion (2022)
- Tufts University Film and Media Studies
Department (2022)
- Anthology Film Archives, NY (2017)
- Babylon Cinema, Berlin (2015)

Publication: *Anton Ginzburg:*
Walking the Sea
Published by Hatje Cantz (2014)
Hardcover, clothbound.
Size: 21.00 x 29.20 cm
ca 200pp., ca 100 ills.
ISBN 978-3-7757-3831-6

The exhibition and film examined the Aral Sea region, a 26,000 square-mile area between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that was once one of the world's largest lakes in Central Asia. However, due to Soviet irrigation projects in the 1960s, the rivers that fed the Aral Sea were diverted, causing it to shrink dramatically over the decades.

The exhibition comprised a 30-minute film, a tapestry woven using cotton from Uzbekistan and featuring NASA images depicting the Aral Sea's transformation over the years, a large interactive sound installation, *Seaharp* as well as plaster sculptures, and architectural interventions inspired by Central Asian environments. Additionally, the exhibition showcased a collection of photographs and research materials generated during the artistic research process.

Walking the Sea book, published by Hatje Cantz, is the second volume in this trilogy and serves as an extension of the project. It documents the exhibition and the artworks featured at the Blaffer Art Museum. The publication includes several commissioned essays and a conversation with American artist Dan Graham about the project as it relates to the art history, land art and engagement with landsape.

FIG. 18 *Subnotes,* 2013
Contact prints.
Size: 8 x 10 inches each
(20.3 x 25.4 cm)

Philip Micklin
*Changing Profile of
the Aral Sea, 1960-2011*

FIG. 19
*Aral Sea tapestry:
sea-cotton-image,* 2013
Tapestry: cotton, silk,
golden thread.
Size: 26.5 x 162 inches
(67 x 412 cm)

FIG. 20
Seaharp, 2014
Plaster, cement, wood,
paint, piano wire and
piano pins, computer,
camera, speakers

FIG. 21 *Window*, 2014 and *Staff, dipped*, 2013
Wall, wood, mirror, one-way mirror.
Size: 21.5 x 35 x 7 inches

FIG. 22 *Well*, 2014
Cast concrete, iron
and water.
Size: 48 x 36 x 24 inches

FIG. 23 *Tiled sail #1, 2, 3,* 2014
Plaster on wooden structure.
Size: 120 x 60 x 2 inches
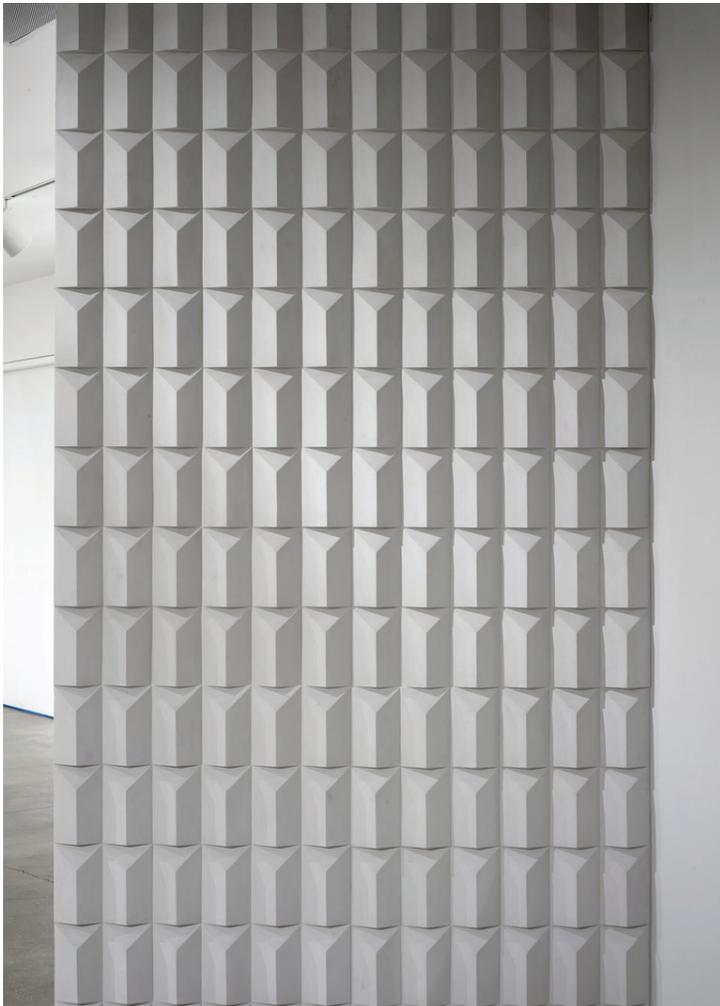
FIG. 24 *Wall,* 2014
Plaster, resin, pigment, nickel plaing on
wooden panel and plaster tiles on the wall
Size: 56 x 35 x 3.5 inches

Film *Walking the Sea*
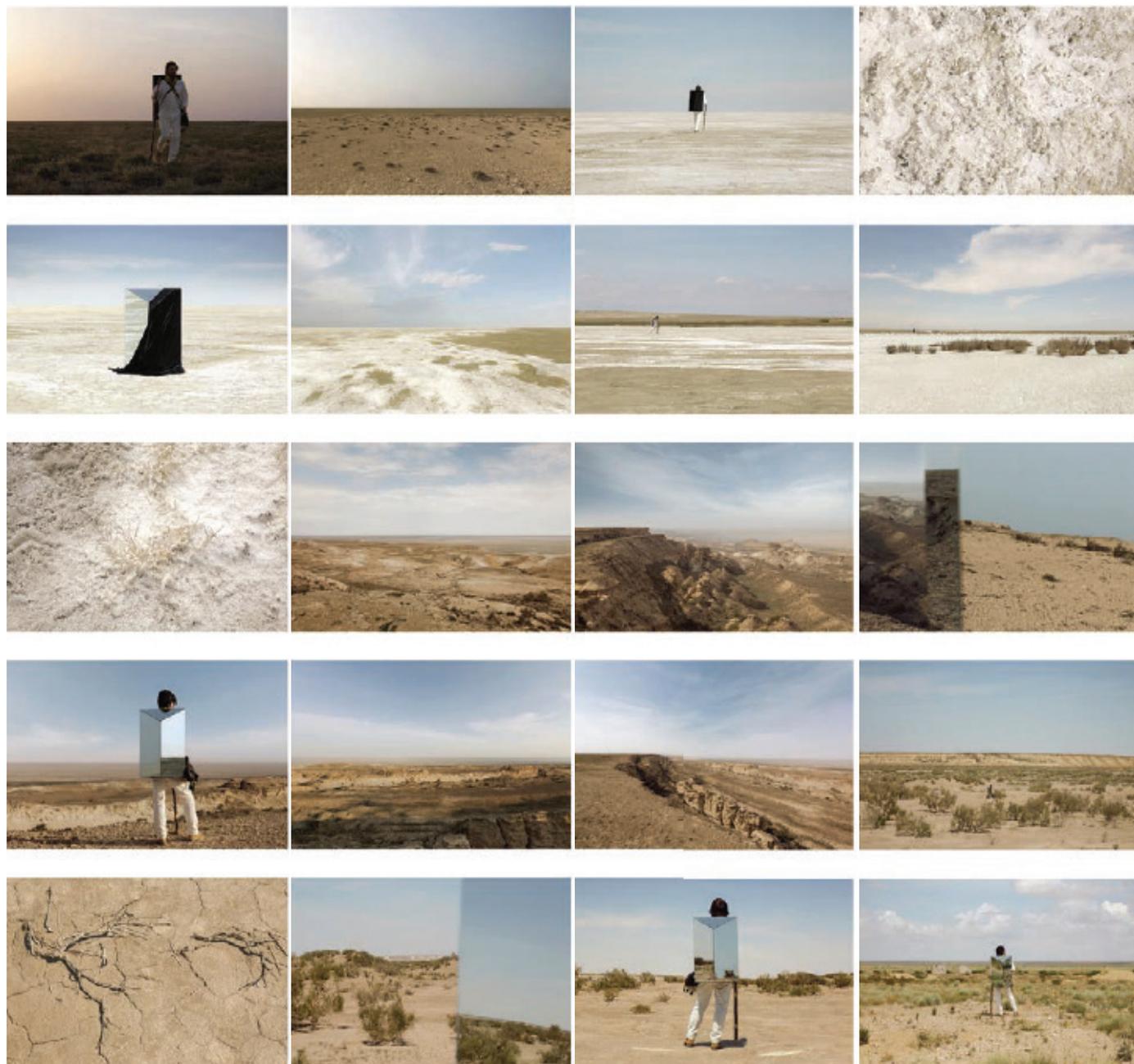
FIG. 25
Walking the Sea, 2013
30 minutes
HD video, surround sound

Walking the Sea, is a 30-minute cinematic documentation and constructed narrative of walking across the Aral Sea—an inland salt-water lake between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The film documents the altered landscapes resulting from the Soviet irrigation project, which diverted feeder rivers to irrigate cotton fields in the surrounding desert and the protagonist that carries a mirrored construction on his back. Film showcases the desert terrain, ruins of Soviet military structures, and the consequences of the ecological catastrophe that has taken place in this Central Asian region.
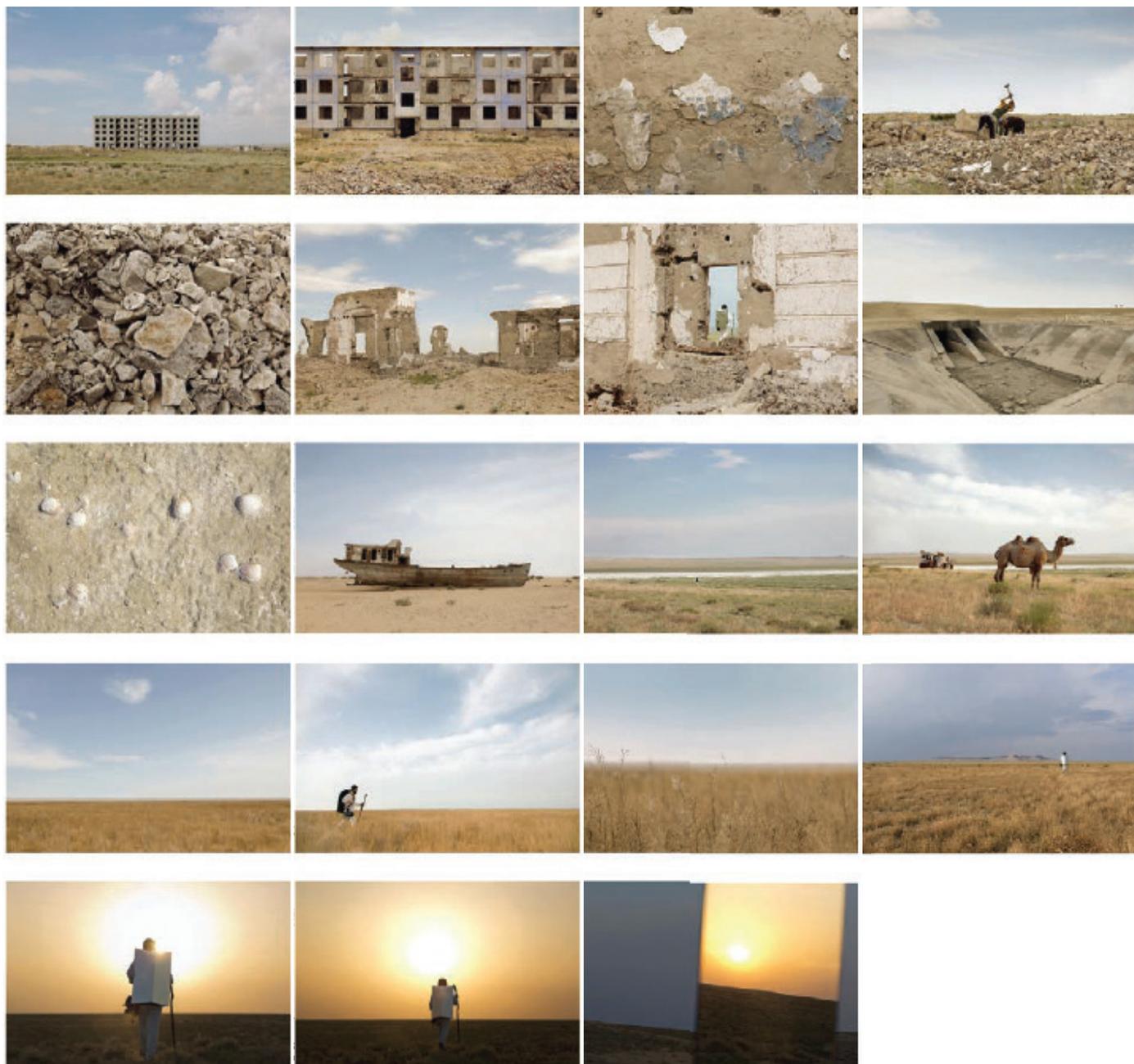
Blaffer Museum Visiting Artist and Scholar Series: Boris Groys + Anton Ginzburg artist talk was moderated by curator Claudia Schmuckli at the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center (Dudley Recital Hall) in conjunction with the exhibition at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, Texas (2014).

Boris Groys is a Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. His lecture, *New Archeology of the Soviet Empire*, was followed by a conversation between Boris Groys and Anton Ginzburg about *Terra Corpus* exhibition.

photo by Natalya Nikitina

FIG. 26 *Walking the Sea #5,* 2013
Archival inkjet print
Size: 12.05 x 18 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)

FIG. 27 *Walking the Sea #32,* 2013
Archival inkjet print
Size: 12.05 x 18 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)

FIG. 28 *Walking the Sea #22,* 2013
Archival inkjet print
Size: 12.05 x 18 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)

FIG. 29 *Walking the Sea #26,* 2013
Archival inkjet print
Size: 12.05 x 18 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)

CHAPTER 3

FIG. 30 — FIG. 61

BLUE FLAME.
CONSTRUCTIONS AND INITIATIVES

The exhibition *Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives* synthesized various media and historical perspectives with elements of VKhUTEMAS pedagogy. It combined documentation and formal research and served as a critique of the universalist project through the lens of contemporary and post-Soviet experience. The exhibition included sculptural works, a series of paintings, murals and a 35-minute film. The film *Turo* (Tower in Esperanto) consists of four parts, each deconstructing a different Constructivist building with various formal strategies.

The third volume book in the Hatje Cantz trilogy, titled *Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives*, is the final publication, completing the project. It documents the exhibitions and artworks displayed across various venues and includes several essays and conversations. Among the contributors are architect Charles Renfro, art historian Meghan Forbes, and artist R.H. Quaytman.

Institutional exhibitions:
Southern Alberta Art Gallery
at the University of Lethbridge,
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada
Anton Ginzburg:
Blue Flame. Constructions and Initiatives
December 3, 2016 - February 05, 2017

Additional exhibitions:
Tufts University Art Galleries
The Sun Rises in the West & Sets in the East
curated by Sara Raza (2022)

VIEWs
at Helwaser Gallery, New York (2019)

Construction Proxy
at Barbara Davis Gallery (2018)

Screenings of the film *Turo*:
-FilmFest Dresden, Dresden (2021)
-Anthology Film Archives, NY(2017)
-Whitechapel Gallery, London (2017)
-2nd Moscow International Experimental
Film Festival (MIEFF) (2017)
New Holland, Saint Petersburg (2017)
-Les Rencontres Internationales at
Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2017)
-Dallas Symphony Orchestra (Soluna)
live orchestra and screening, Texas (2016)

Publication: *Anton Ginzburg:*
Blue Flame Constructions and Initiatives
Published by Hatje Cantz (2020)
Hardcover. English. 140 pp., 320 ills.
Size: 21.80 x 29.70 cm
ISBN 978-3-7757-4676-2
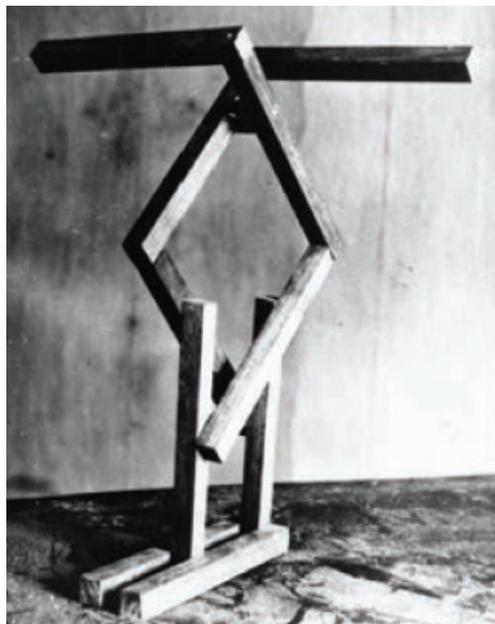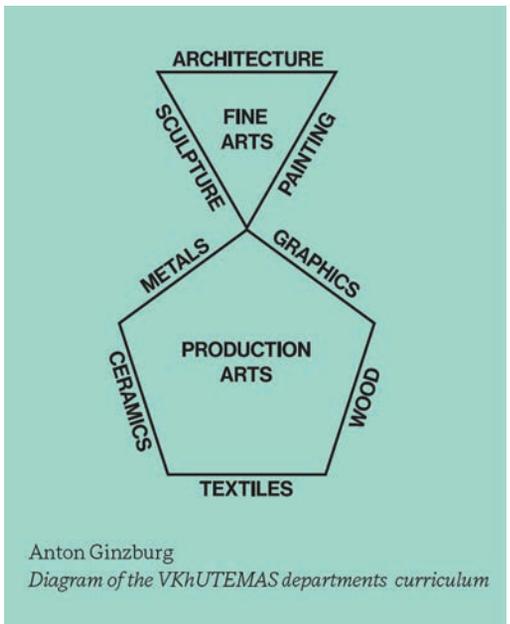
Anton Ginzburg
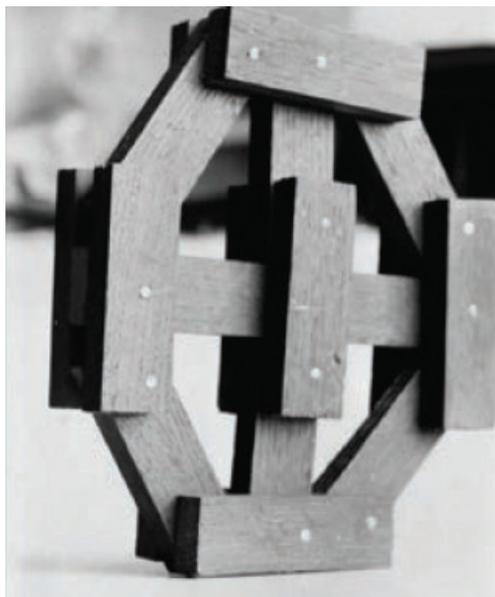*Diagram of the VKhUTEMAS departments curriculum*

FIG. 35 *Houston Color-Space Initiative #3 and COEV Compositions #12 and #15,* 2018
Interior flat wall enamel, acrylics and mirrored glass
(2 panels 18 x 24 in each)
Size: 121 x 71 inches

FIG. 36 *Burnt Constructions. Gushul Initiative,* 2016
(Based on Alexander Rodchenko's *Spatial Studies*)
Burnt Wood
Installation size: 60 x 96 x 80 inches

FIG. 37
ORRA series
Pigment and acrylic on wood
Size: 24 x 24 inches

FIG. 38
VIEW_series
paint on wood
Sizes: 37.5 × 60 inches
and 25.5 × 36 inches

FIG. 39
VIEW_series
paint on wood
Sizes: 37.5 × 60 inches
and 25.5 × 36 inches.
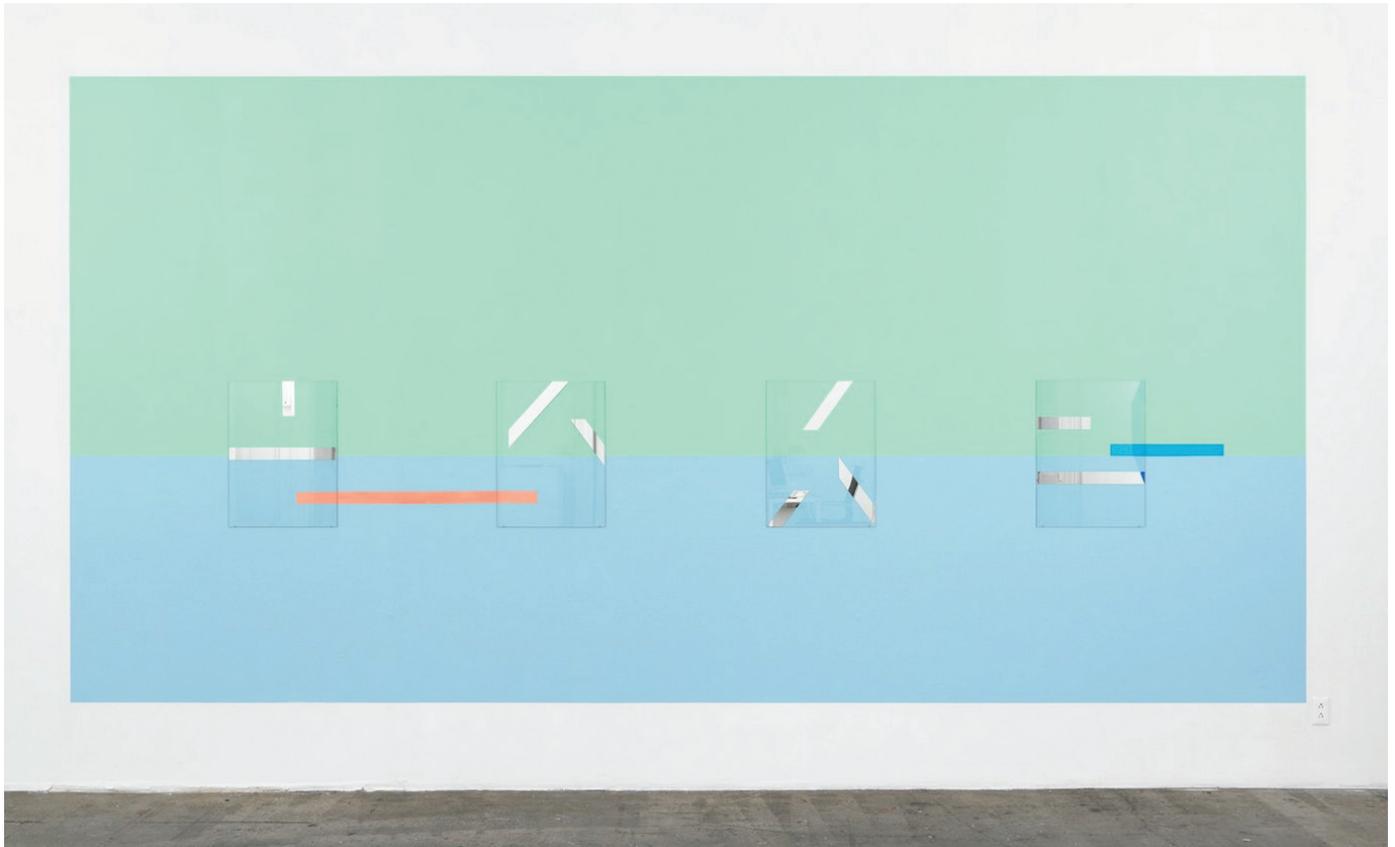
FIG. 40 *New York Color-Space Initiative #2, 2017* and *COEV Compositions #4, #3, #5, #1,* 2016
at Fridman Gallery, New York
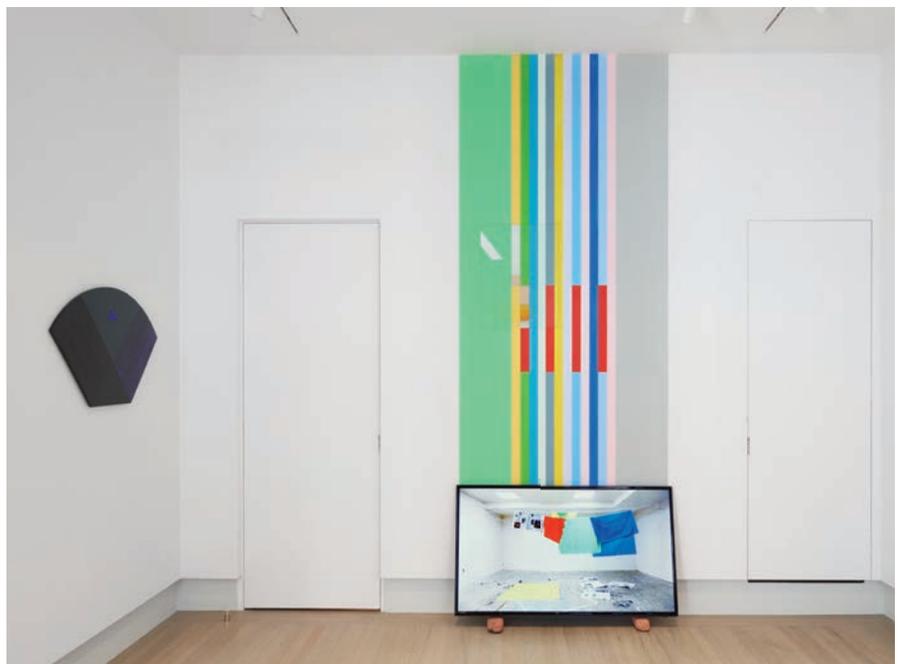
FIG. 41
Polychrome Columns, 2019
Glazed Porcelain and steel structure
Size: 120 x 7 inches, each column
and mural at Helwaser gallery, NY.
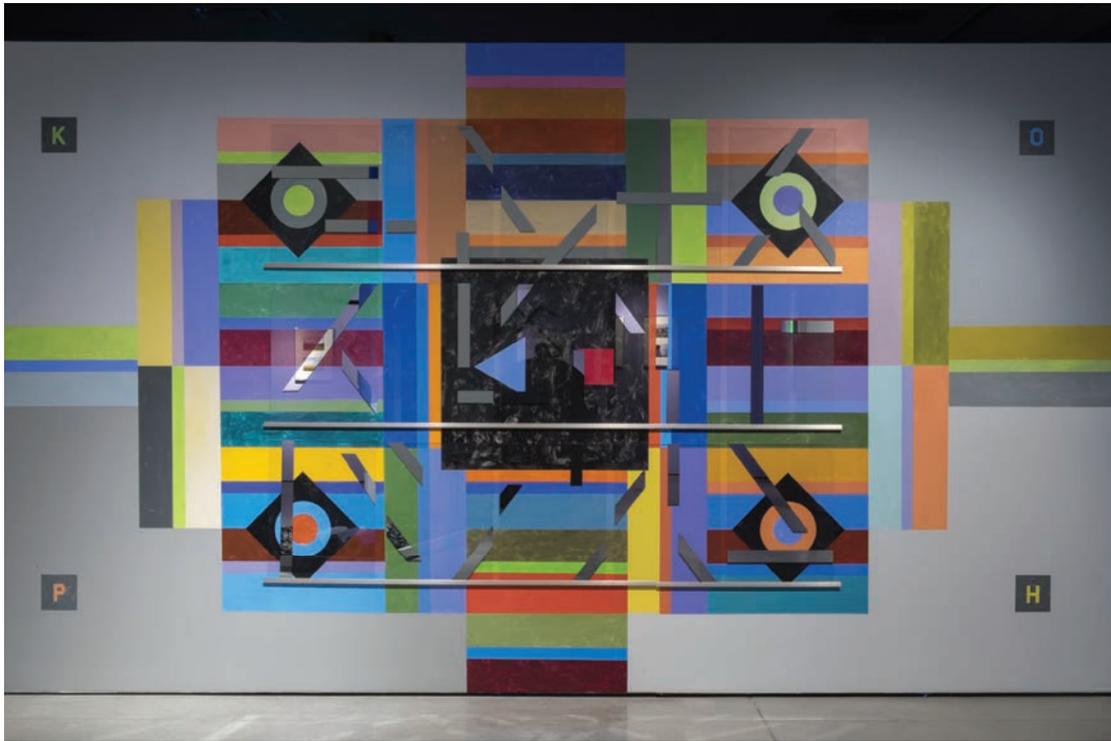
FIG. 42 Mural *'COEV*
(Collective of Expanded Viewing)
Color-Space Initiative 1', 2016
Interior flat wall enamel, acrylics
and mirrored glass
(12 panels 18 x 24 in. each).
Size: 120 x 240 inches
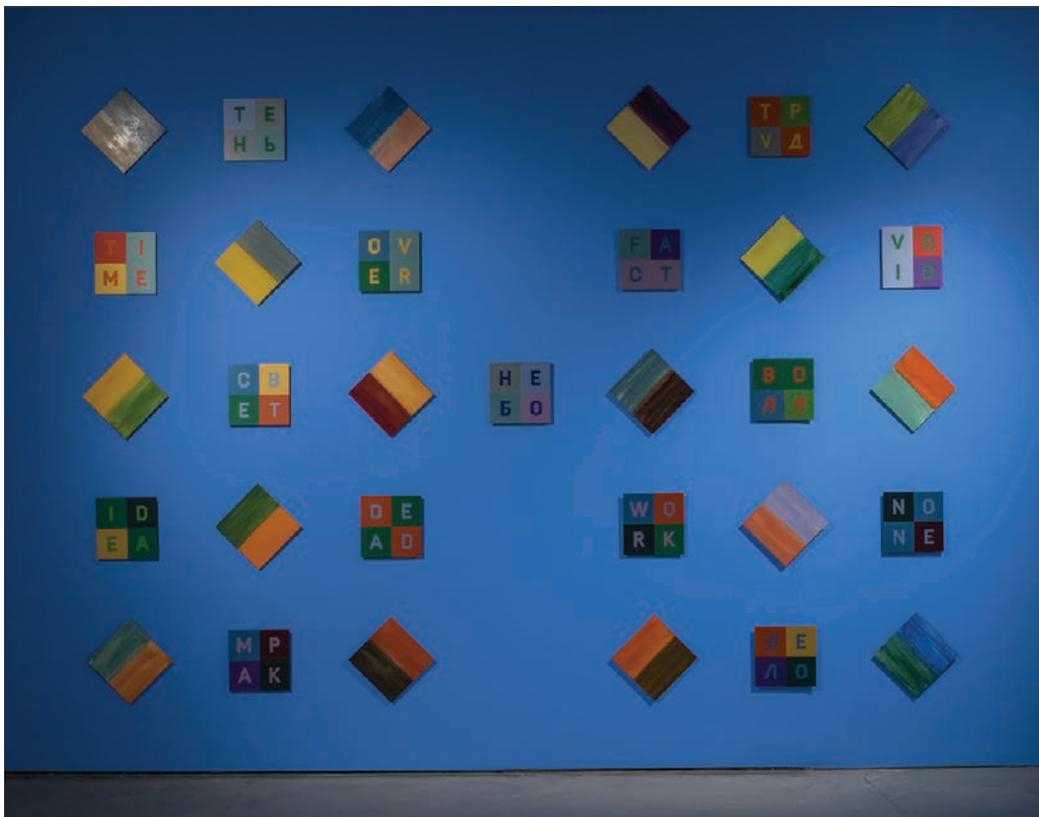
FIG. 43 *Simurgh Birding Initiative*, 2016
31 panels: 12 x12 inches each
digiital printing on metal and oil paint
on blue colored wall.
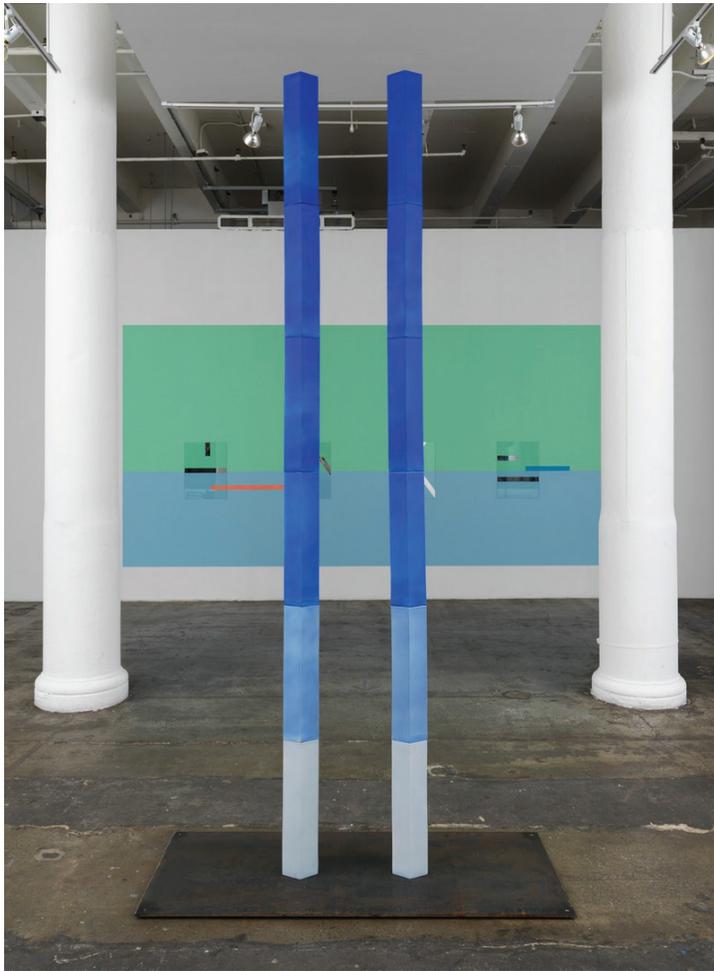
FIG. 44 *Sky Columns II (Blue)*, 2016
Glazed Porcelain and steel structure
Size: 120 x 7 inches, each column.
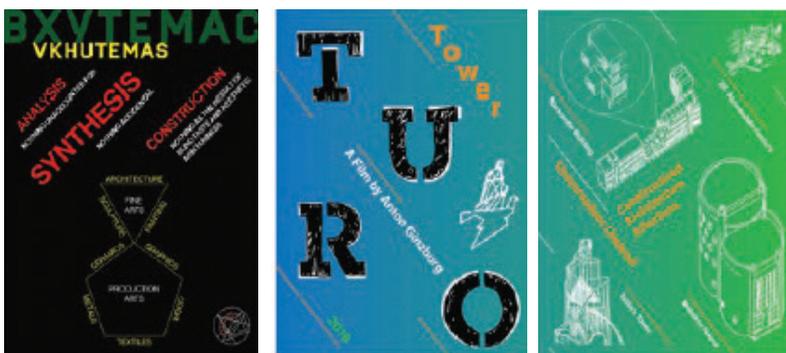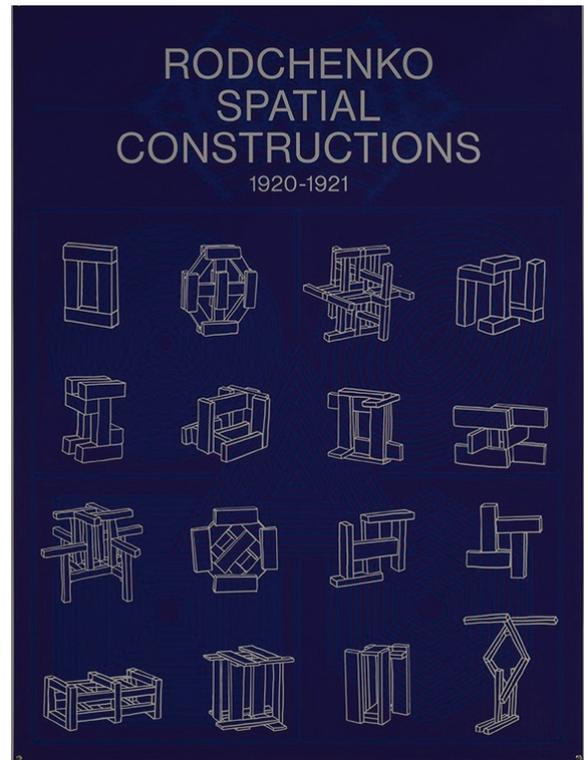
FIG. 31 Anton Ginzburg
Meta-Constructivism Posters, 2016-17
Digital prints
Size: 36 x 48 inches each

FIG. 46 *Burnt Constructions. Gushul Initiative,* 2016
(Based on Alexander Rodchenko's *Spatial Studies*)
Burnt Wood
Installation size: 60 x 96 x 80 inches

FIG. 47 Installation view at
Southern Alberta Art Gallery,
with photos, poster and model
of *Stargaze: Orion,* 2016
Aluminum, paint

FIG. 48 *Stargaze: Orion,* 2016
Stainless steel,
patinated bronze, paint.
Size: 267x9x132 in.
(678 x 244 x 335 cm)
Public Sculpture for U.S. Embassy
in Moscow. Commissioned by Art in
Embassies, U.S. Department of State
in 2014. Sculpture completed in 2016,
and installed in 2018.

Orion constellation

Anton Ginzburg *Constructed Geographies in Contemporary Art*

Film *Turo*

FIG. 49
Turo, 2013
35 minutes
HD video,
surround sound

Turo is a 35-minute film exploring Constructivist architecture and cultural space production. It is made up of four sections and an introduction. Each part explores a different Constructivist building as a stage for modernist utopias.

The buildings are landmarks of Soviet modernism: Melnikov House (architect Konstantin Melnikov), Narkomfin Building (architect Moisei Ginzburg), ZIL (Automobile factory designed by Vesnin brothers), and also a recording of a "ghost mode" of a video game exploring ruins of Pripyat' (Soviet town affected by Chernobyl catastrophe) featuring unrealized Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*.

Exploring various methods of representation, the film's structure combines a cinematic approach with layering, projection, and digital abstraction. Each part of the film is a physical and symbolic tower that gets deconstructed throughout the chapter.
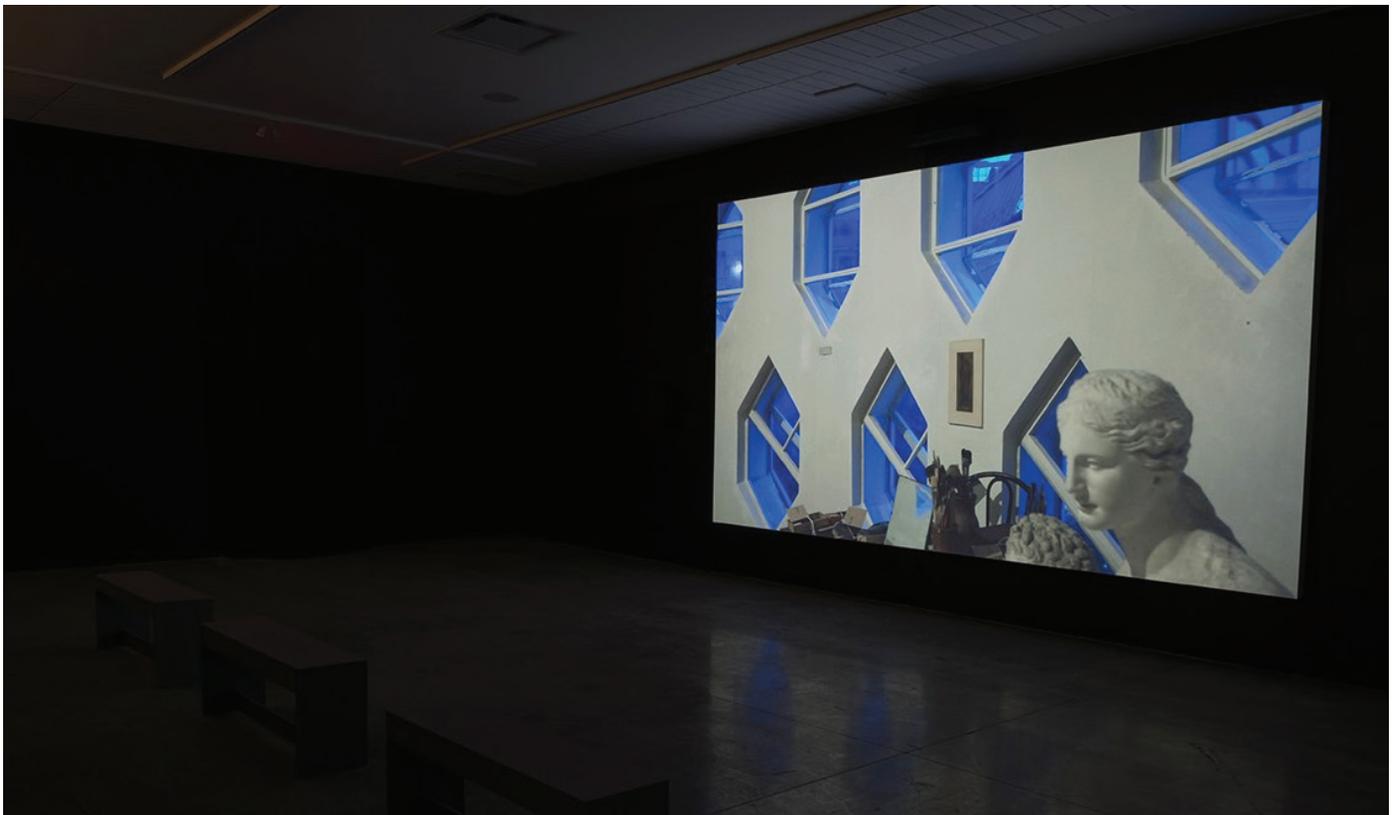
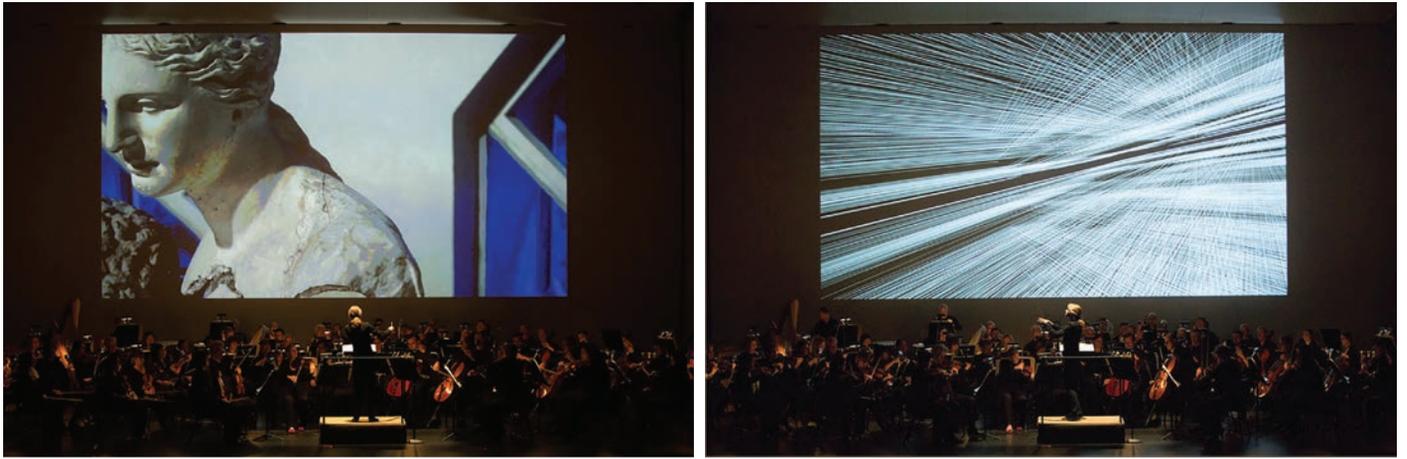Screening room at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery,
Lethebridge, Canada

FIG. 50 *Turo* at Dallas Symphony Orchestra
Soluna Festival. Live orchestra screening of *Turo*
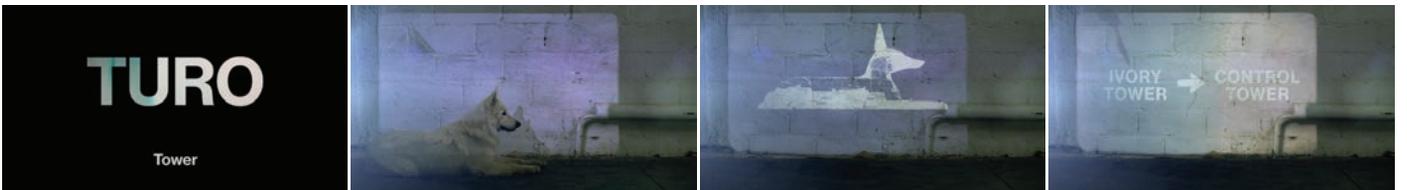(May 20 and 21, 2016)

Introduction

FIG. 51
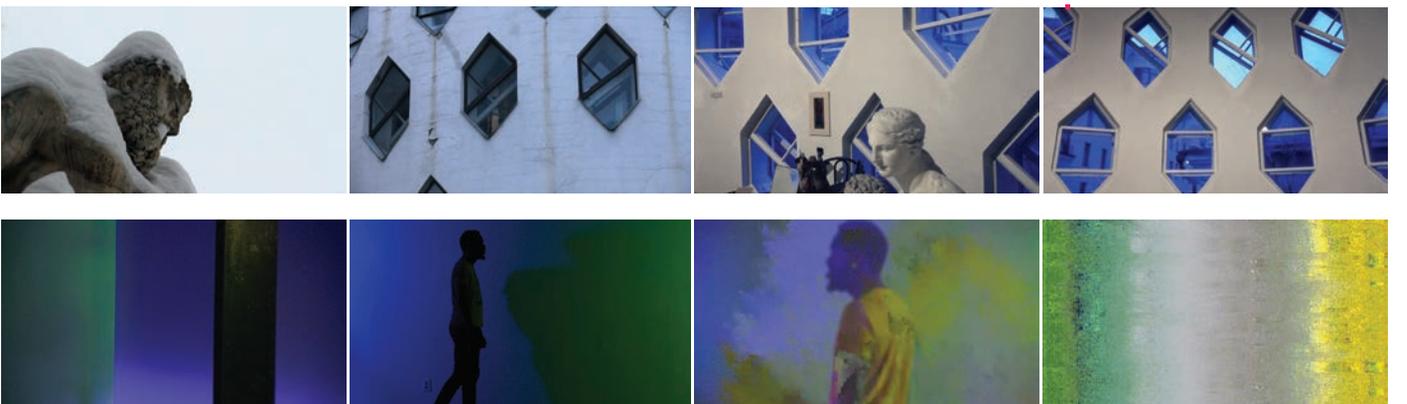**Part 1: Ivory Tower (Ebura Turo)**
Melnikov House

FIG. 52
Part 2: Wormwood Star. Ghost-moode (Absinta Stelo. Fantoma Modo)
Monument to the Third International

FIG. 53
Part 3: Babylon Detour (Babilona Ĉirkaŭ-iro)
Narkomfin Building

FIG. 54
Part 4: Control Tower (Kontrolturo)
ZIL automobile factory

FIG. 55 *Turo* film still, 2016
ZIL scene 1

FIG. 56 *Turo* film still, 2016
ZIL scene 2

FIG. 57 *Turo* film still, 2016
Narkomfin scene 1

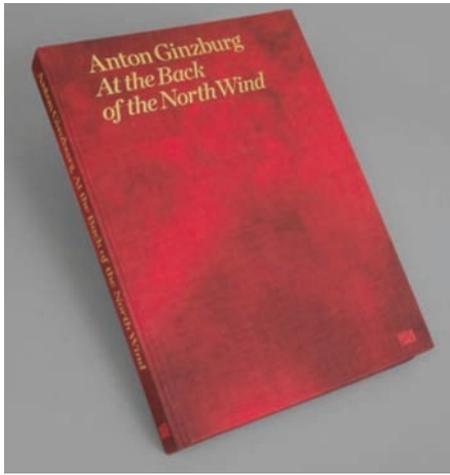**FIG. 58** *Turo* film still, 2016
Narkomfin scene 2

FIG. 59
Anton Ginzburg:
At the Back of the North Wind

Texts by Matthew Drutt,
Anton Ginzburg, Jeffrey Kastner,
interview with the artist by Boris
Groys.
Published by Hatje Cantz (2012)
Hardcover, English. 2014. 200pp.

Size: 21.00 x 29.20 cm
ISBN 978-3-7757-3429-5

FIG. 60
Anton Ginzburg:
Walking the Sea

Texts by Claudia Schmuckli,
Melanie Marino, Olesya Turkina,
interview with the artist by
Dan Graham.
Published by Hatje Cantz (2014)
Hardcover, English. 2014. 200pp.

Size: 21.00 x 29.20 cm
ISBN 978-3-7757-3831-6

FIG. 61
Anton Ginzburg: Blue Flame.
Constructions and Initiatives

Texts by Anton Ginzburg,
Anastasia Osipova, Ksenia Nouril,
contributions by R.H. Quaytman,
Charles Renfro, Meghan Forbes.
Published by Hatje Cantz (2020)
Hardcover. English. 140 pp.

Size: 21.80 x 29.70 cm
ISBN 978-3-7757-4676-2