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Farewell Prometheus Readings: Light-Music in the Former Soviet Union

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tual reality and interface design. Intuitively, we know there is a lot more than just a linear reading of words to get information. We don't understand it and don't have languages for it yet. It's surprising how little research has focused on the language of the body, which can convey so much more than any words.

BB: One of our UCLA graduate students took a camera and started off across the street from a bus stop. When

one student came to wait for the bus, he stood right there in the center; another student came and they almost divided the space equally. The more people came—every time someone came to this bus stop, they were equally spacing themselves. And from a bird's-eye view, the people who came would always automatically space themselves. He did a visual essay on different places where people put themselves like that,

where he could document it . . . and it was like how Fred Astaire has this little tap . . . It was a graphic pattern.

RA: And then you find that in different cultures people space themselves differently . . .

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Farewell Prometheus Readings: Light-Music in the Former Soviet Union

Bulat M. Galeyev

For 25 years, seminars, conferences and festivals centering around "light-music"—an art form that integrates musical composition and the creative use of light—were held in Kazan, drawing participants from the entire former Soviet Union. In the 1980s, these conferences were named "Prometheus Readings" after Scriabin's *Prometheus*, an influential score that united light and music.

The jubilee tenth anniversary of the Prometheus Readings convened in April 1992, with "Light-Music in the Theater" as its theme. As usual, representatives from the entire Soviet Union planned to attend, so when the Union disintegrated the convention became an international one. Several early syntheses of light and music in onstage performance—Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada*, Kandinsky's *Yellow Light* and Schoenberg's *Lucky Hand*—were discussed. Reports were given on Barranov-Rossine's experiments with optophony (a term he coined to refer to light-music), which he performed in the 1920s in the Bolshoi Theater and in V. Meyerhold's theater. The use of music scenography in the chamber theater of A. Tairov was discussed. Among the reports on modern experiments were discussions of "laseriums"—modern light-musical performances held under the "sky" of planetariums—and of a new theater company called "Lanterna Magica."

A concert program featured light-musicians from Kharkov, laser experiments conducted by Kazaners and audiovisual compositions based on investigations that originated in the former electronic music studio at the Scriabin Museum in Moscow. There was

also a video presentation featuring the work of foreign colleagues active in the arts, sciences and technology.

The Prometheus studio in Kazan, organizer of the Readings, announced that it would no longer be possible to hold the conventions on a free-of-charge basis; thus, the 1992 convention was both a jubilee and a farewell.

During the final years of the Prometheus Readings, the scope of the conferences had expanded beyond light music to include other forms of experimental art. Artists, producers, cinematographers and engineers from many towns in the former USSR took part in conferences. Academic specialists in aesthetics and the psychology of art presented papers, while artists presented light-musical works including films, electronic music, kinetic art, computer animation, light architecture, laser art, holography and spatial music—in short, any modern genre involving art, science and technology fell within the range of the Readings.

Perhaps the end of the Prometheus Readings also marks the end of a fierce and desperate 30-year process of establishing a postwar Soviet school of modern art. Beginning with the "thaw" after Stalin's death, this process was initiated in hopes of continuing and developing the creativity of the pre- and early post-revolutionary years, reviving the work of artists such as Scriabin, Ciurlionis, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Theremin and Eisenstein. In the 1960s, a number of creative groups with "synthetic" agenda swept in on the wave of social reform, such as the Color-Music group at the Scientific Research Institute of Auto-

matics and Telemechanics of the USSR Academy of Science, the Prometheus studio in Kazan, the Moscow *Dvizheniye* (Movement) group, the SRBs (student research bureaus) at Moscow Aircraft Institute and at Ural University, the Kharkhov studio of dynamic painting, the electronic music studio at the Scriabin Museum in Moscow, the *Poisk* (Search) SRB at Valdimir Polytechnical Institute, the group associated with the light-music hall at Moscow University, the Ciurlionis Club in Odessa, the group involved with a laser theater in Uzhgorod and light-music studios in Chkalovsk, Alma-Ata and Minsk. Of course not all of these groups could endure Brezhnev's epoch of stagnation. Nevertheless, Scriabin's ideas have slowly filtered through the artistic life of this country.

Having survived intact, the Prometheus studio can state that the seminars, conferences and festivals it sponsored in Kazan—as well as the studio's involvement in the development of space art—have played a role in modern art, science and culture as a whole. During a period of notorious hostility to abstract art in the Soviet Union, our studio was probably the only place in the country where one could discuss the work of the various above-mentioned artists, as well as figures such as Xenakis and Schoeffer. Responding to the many who lived in constant anticipation of future festivi-

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ties was also a business in itself. A total of 25,000 questionnaires were sent to members of every creative union in the country, and the thousands of letters sent in response were answered by members of the Prometheus studio. This kind of activity promoted the creation of an invisible college united by common interests and aims.

Collections of materials from these meetings in Kazan have been compiled to document this incomprehensible but excellent time—a time when intelligent approaches to an art of the future were realized in conditions of pervasive apathy. Even now, the Prometheus studio continues to encourage experimentation in the midst of unfavorable new thinking conditions. It appears that the

advent of long-awaited freedoms in our country has resulted in the celebration of a kind of pornography of the spirit, a capitalism for which world harmony is no more than an annoying obstacle blocking the way to the warm shelter of a cave whose only light is the flicker of a videocassette recorder. This obliviousness has become a symbol of cultural well-being for the average person. It seems that we have overcome any sense of shame at our own ignorance and are now proud of our lack of interest in conquering the sky. It is hard to imagine the fate of new art in this country. One thing is clear: its objective inevitability. No matter what the conditions, new art will demonstrate its worth through whatever forms and means it can find.

Light-music is burdened by heavy and expensive technology, and will probably not survive as a viable genre in a free-market economy. A unique light-music hall in the Kazan Youth Center has already been voted out of existence by young businessmen from the former Comsomol (Young Communist League). The musical light-painting studio in Kharkov is dying. Members of the Uzhgorod laser theater have yielded to pressure and their hall has been converted into a video archive. But life has not stopped on the planet and the art of lighting sounds will continue to develop. We are now looking to what those who succeed us will do as they proceed along a different path—that of capitalism.