The Play's the Thing

by Ben Eastham

"All the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born."
Clarice Lispector, *Hour of the Star* [1]

"I don't make any separations. A poem is a poem. A building's a building. Architecture's architecture. Music is music. I mean, it's all structure. It's structure."
John Hejduk [2]

The process, in the drawings of **Viktor Timofeev**, is the end in itself. Over the past decade he has – across a variety of disciplines but most conspicuously in his works on paper – created an overlapping series of elaborate worlds governed by internally coherent and endlessly ramifying systems. The only set of rules to which these works must be faithful is their own, and ideas are followed through to their conclusions rather than amended or adjusted to fit any pre-existing compositional schematic. They strike me as expressions of something like guided play, in which creative agency is catalysed, and then organised, by a handful of basic principles.

That they are faithful only to their own interior logic is one reason that Timofeev's drawings are difficult to categorise; another is the bewildering range of his sources. Among the visual languages identifiable in his work are those of architecture, algorithmic design, mathematical illustration (one work included here brings to mind Leonardo's contributions to Pacioli's *De Divina Proportione*), anatomical pedagogy, graphemics, concept art, fantastic landscapes from Piranesi to Cedric Price, dance notation, 3D modelling, and, I am sure, innumerable others that I have failed to pick out. The worlds of Timofeev's making can, like our own, only be understood through the application of numerous interwoven disciplines. The artist puts them all to use.

If these alternate realities have a single unifying principle, it is that complex structures arise through the combination of simple ones. The rules are constant and predictable, but the patterns by which these basic elements interact are not. They appear as hermetic systems defined by this property of emergence. Information is fed back and incorporated into constantly evolving structures, meaning that these drawings document shifting behaviours and landscapes. Process rather than substance is the essential constituent in a universe characterised less by resolutions, by end points, than tendencies.

After Edward Snowden and the financial crisis, we are increasingly conscious of the fact that certain protocols track, guide, and to varying degrees shape our experience of the world, whether online or off. A schematic guide produced by Timofeev to accompany *Proxyah* (2014) – a 'closed world' computer game developed by the artist during an artist's residency at Jupiter Woods, London and Rupert, Vilnius – plays on our relationship to these structures and the possibility of exercising individual agency in a highly codified environment. These guides employ an arcane language and cryptic symbology that is simultaneously compelling and alienating: the reader feels on the verge of comprehension, but access is always, ultimately, denied. They promise to offer insight into the structures underlying appearance and behaviour, but the oracular manner of their expression only exaggerates the reader's sense of being subject to forces that elude comprehension. I am reminded of those flow charts that model high-frequency trading, or the global distribution of carbon emissions, or the landscapes of output that are the consequence of data farming. Flashes of comprehension are commingled with confusion and resignation.

This preoccupation with patterns and interactions is characteristic of the artist's practice. In Timofeev's earlier work on paper and canvas, fundamental geometric shapes and symbols – the legacies of modernism's grids and serial structures – conspire to form repeating honeycomb patterns on a flat plane. Similar aggregations and permutations are perceptible in the drawings that string together the glyph-like symbols X, Y and K that recur in the artist's practice,

and which serve as the elementary units for a new and esoteric poetics of space expressed in the series *LOCAL_AREA_NETWORK[s]* (2010).

Timofeev allowed those basic constituents to flourish into an architectural utopia, an urban landscape teeming with tessellated foliage, exploded interiors, and late-modernist superstructures. These abandoned structures, glyphs and patterns sometimes seem possessed of a curious kind of personality. The interaction of these characters – such as truncated and morphed letters, or modified logos – creates a loose, spooling narrative that can be traced through the series, much as the radical architect John Hejduk's anthropomorphised buildings (such as the *House of the Suicide* and the *House of the Mother of the Suicide*) imbued his architectural drawings with an irresistible theatre. It's interesting to note, in this respect, that most of Timofeev's drawings begin as 'doodles' in a sketchbook accompanied by a brief narrative idea.

These utopian vistas recall Constant's New Babylon, the post-capitalist cityscape realised in innumerable drawings, paintings and models over a fifteen-year period from the late 1950s. In Constant's vision of the future, land is owned collectively, work has been given over entirely to robots, and humanity is free to devote itself to play in a vast, and constantly changing, citywide megastructure. Extending a postmodern aesthetics of utopianism[3] into a post-internet era in which the boundaries of the virtual and the real have blurred to the point of indistinction, Timofeev's street scenes in the *MONSTROcity* series (2011) are littered with touching intimations of domestic life: abandoned mattresses, chairs, tagged dumpsters. Constant's city of the future was populated by 'homo ludens', man defined by play. Timofeev's more recent work considers the effects of a radically different future upon the bodies that inhabit it. Where Constant sought to shape the landscape to fit his ideal of a free individual, these new drawings speculate upon how new environmental conditions might shape the body.

If *LOCAL_AREA_NETWORK[s]* was an act of world creation, and *MONSTROcity* an attempt to people it with pieces of code that seemed either to construct or corrupt the systems through which they glide, then Timofeev's drawings from the past two years that are on view here devote their attention to the more conventional, apparently

carbon-based life forms that might inhabit them. The shift from physics to chemistry and biology is manifested in the markedly different style of these drawings and, particularly, a renewed interest in the corporeal. Hands, teeth, veins, eyes and fingers recur, in each case 'mutated or "augmented" or rendered impotent or multiplied', as the artist puts it. These drawings are – like the bodies they represent – both more flexible and more complex than those focusing on the built environment. While the shift can be seen to mark a return to themes first explored as a (self-confessedly angst-ridden) teenager, Timofeev points out that we might also see them as an evolution in terms of tech: 'from hardware to wetware'. That evolution correlates with recent shifts in our experience of contemporary life and our expectations of the future: rather than anticipating the separation of virtual and material realms, it now seems more likely that they will become ever more inextricably intertwined.

That the drawings featuring hands and fingers are executed at something close to life-size exaggerates the viewer's association with these Frankenstein anatomies. Like organs prepared for harvest, or laboratory experiments in accelerated genetic mutation, they make the viewer queasily aware of his or her own body: its contingency, frailty, and reliance upon a whole host of interconnecting systems – cardiovascular, nervous, digestive, respiratory – which may, at any time, malfunction. The effect is to zoom in on the life forms that populate this network of related behaviours and governing principles, to question how and what can survive in a universe constantly in flux, endlessly expanding, moving relentlessly away from simple organisational principles towards a vast complexity that is ultimately chaos. What might once have seemed like an empty utopia is transformed into a universe as conflicted and contingent as our own.

[1] 1977, trans. Benjamin Moser

[2] as quoted in Shumon Basar's 'Nothing Is More Fantastic Ultimately than Precision: John Hejduk's Berlin Tower', *e-flux Journal*, 2014

[3] Constant's *Entrée du Labyrinthe (Entrance of the Labyrinth)*, 1972, particularly recalls Timofeev's 'blood' sprayed architectural sketches (2007)

Viktor Timofeev was born in Latvia in 1984, studied at Hunter College, New York and is currently completing his MFA at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Timofeev's solo exhibitions include SAZARUS I, Jupiter Woods, Vienna (2016); Proxyah v2, Jupiter Woods, London (2014); Proxyah v1, KIM? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga (2014); Palace Of Peace And Reconciliation, Arcadia Missa, London (2014); Selekthor, minerpie.net (2013); Neutral Paradise Sound Salon, Hannah Barry Gallery, London (2012); and Plasticity, Schmidt & Handrup, Cologne (2012). His recent group exhibitions include Piknik Na Obochine, Exo Exo, Paris (2016); Plural Melts, Yvonne Lambert Gallery, Berlin (2016); Lament Of Ur, Karst Projects, Plymouth (with Joey Holder) (2015); Nimm's Mal Easy, Austellungsraum Klingental, Basel (2014); A Guide To Making A Genie, 427 Gallery, Riga (2014); Palazzo Peckham, with Simon Werner and Cindie Cheung, 55th Venice Biennale, Venice (2013); Sphynx Cats Nuzzle, with Simon Werner, Plaza-Plaza, London (2013).

DRAWING ROOM