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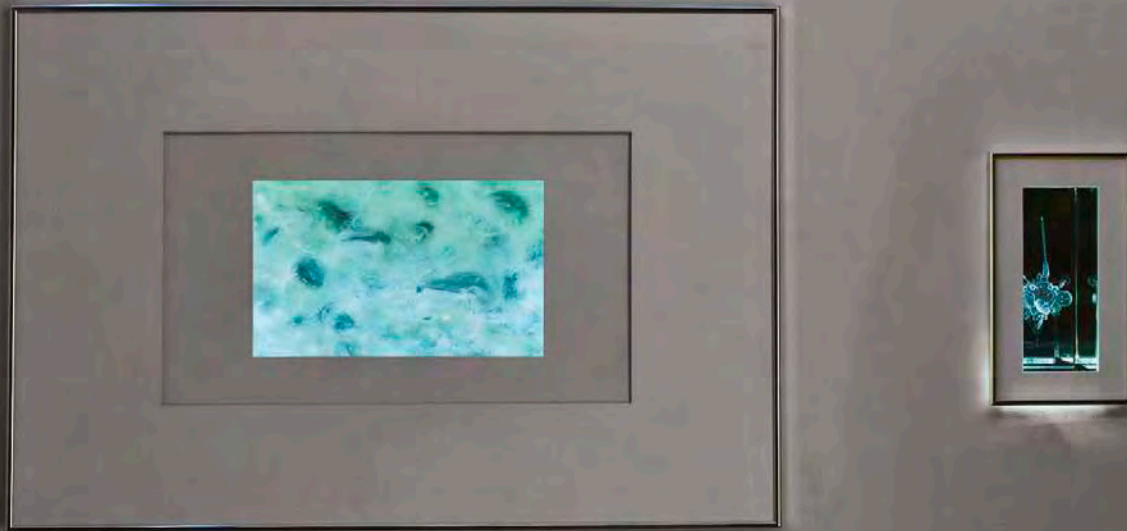
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THE SOVIET COSMOS AND NOA YAFE'S RED STAR

Joshua Simon

Yafe's Red Star creates a box of illusions based on photographic documentation. On the walls of the exhibition space hang works that seem to be framed images—two photographs and two holograms; but all four are made of substances that create a physical volume (glass and water) and are displayed in double walls with LED lighting that makes them appear to be photographs. In addition, an actual photograph that looks like a spaceship door is mounted on the wall like a light box, thus covering the hidden door leading to behind the double wall. The designs of these intricate aquariums and laser-engraved blocks of crystal are based on photographs of Mars; the first photographs of the planet taken by NASA's Viking 1 spaceship. One is of the Red Planet itself and the other is the surface of the planet in black-and-white. Out of the four supposed photographic works, two exhibit images of the devices that produced the photographs on which the installation is based—the unmanned Viking spacecraft that left Earth in 1975, and the space probe it ejected, which landed on the surface of Mars eleven months later. Both of these works are made of crystal blocks and are lit in a way that makes them look like holograms. At first glance, the whole installation looks like a display of photographs. But then one realizes that the light source in the room is the images themselves. While moving in the room in front of the works, the three-dimensionality of these supposed photographs becomes apparent as the objects float in their frames. This sense of floating gives a zero gravity atmosphere to the whole installation.

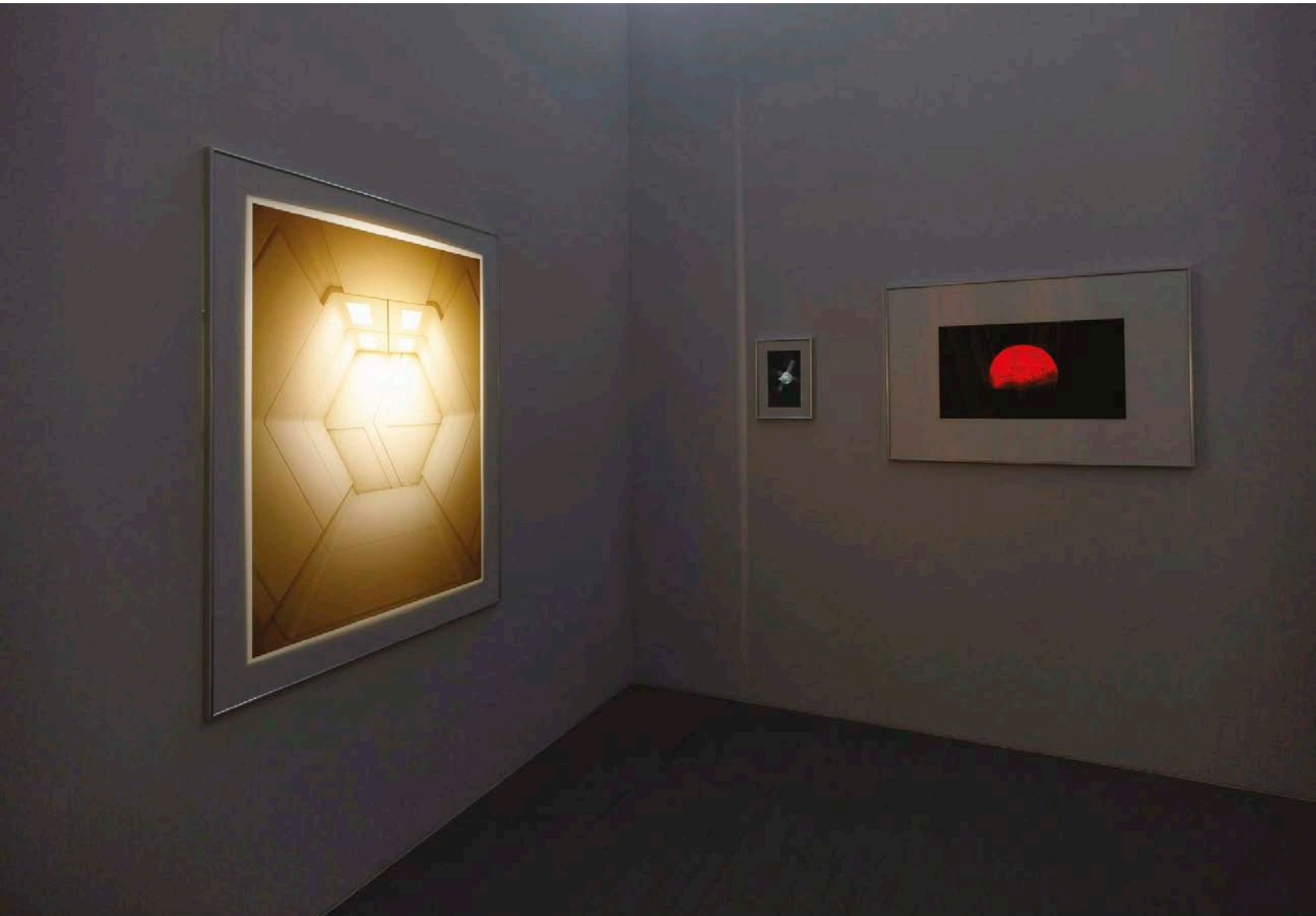




Red Star, Noa Yafe's diorama installation, brings forth a notion of Mars as a portal for both a physical and political outside. This outside is accessible via space travel as much as it is possible through communism.

At a time when spectres are haunting the Earth—the spectres of anti-communism, the astrophysical and political converge. “Of all the words that once drove forward great dreams and tremendous promise, communism has suffered the greatest damage because of the way it was captured by bureaucratic realpolitik and made subservient to a totalitarian enterprise. The question remains, however, as to whether among all these damaged words there are those worth repairing and setting back in motion,” wrote French communist Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) in his last essay, published posthumously.

“Communism” might sound like an irrelevant term to many people today, but more than any other word in our political vocabulary, communism is the radical negation of the current regime that dominates our planet and which celebrates exploitation and inequality. Beyond it being a political system with its circumstantial successes and failures, communism is a cosmos that was devoured by the black hole that is 1989–91. This cosmos includes many communisms; an epic reestablishment of property-free communities, communal indigenous societies, real-existing socialism with its achievements and crimes, the long history of anti-Fascist resistance, egalitarian mysticism, the dialectic abolition of capitalism through its internal dynamics, the uncharted, un-exploitable pockets of resistance that cannot be appropriated by capitalism, the already present humane solidarity and camaraderie shared by people everywhere and the political proposal of the emotion called “love.”



Noa Yafe, *Red Star*, 2016–2017. Mixed media.
Courtesy of Kunstraum Kreuzberg
Bethanien, Berlin. Photos: Eric Tschernow.

This maximalist understanding of communism aims to place it as the ultimate outside. And indeed, communism was never constrained to one place (there is no Russia in the name USSR). In its more imaginative manifestations communism offered a cosmology that promised to liberate not only humans on Earth, but the whole Milky Way and beyond! Setting it in motion promises to reorient the whole cosmos. Communism is therefore a horizon that gives us a perspective to see the world. It is a hypothesis of universal emancipation, an actuality to be revived.

Yafe's *Red Star* presents an installation that brings both the observatory and planetarium into the exhibition space, tying together NASA and SpaceX's contemporary attempts to conquer and colonize Mars. With its historical connotative meaning as a potentially habitable planet, Mars could host a totally different social order than the one we are subjected to under capitalism here on Earth. Throughout the

twentieth century, Mars, the Red Planet suggested a site for imagining a social reality that went beyond existing capitalism. Therefore, in this installation, Mars operates as both a site of actual exploration and as a space of the imagination. It combines science, fiction and science fiction.

But the meaning of Mars today exemplifies the saying that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than to imagine the end of capitalism.’ In the wake of disaster films in the 1990s, such as *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), this saying was attributed to key Marxist thinkers writing on culture, such as Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson. The re-emergence of Mars in recent films such as *Mission to Mars* (Brian De Palma, 2000), *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015) and *The Space Between Us* (Peter Chelsom, 2017) suggests we should paraphrase this saying as: ‘it is easier to imagine people living under capitalism on Mars, than to imagine the end of capitalism on Earth.’

In the last few years, Mars has become physically closer; Curiously, the NASA rover has been transmitting documentation of the surface of planet Mars, developer Elon Musk has given a timetable for his SpaceX Mars Mission, NASA’s Mauna Loa camp on a volcano in Hawaii imitates life on Mars, hosting yearlong experiments for scientists to experience Mars-like conditions, and at the beginning of the year, the Grayson winter storm hit the east coast of North America, and in Saskatoon, Montreal and Calgary temperatures were reported to be colder than the Gale Crater on planet Mars. And so, we see a shift in the way we imagine Mars. From a mirroring effect that allows one to reflect on the conditions on Earth, Mars becomes just another territory where the logics of capitalism seem inevitable. As we exhaust the resources of planet Earth, we no longer perceive of Mars as a mirror planet to Earth, one that can host another social and political order, different from the one we have here. Now Mars is simply a copy planet, one we plan to travel to in order to create a biosphere that will be based on capitalist accumulation, and therefore, destroyed in the same manner as we will have destroyed the biosphere of Earth.

Space Travel

In films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972), and *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011), the celestial bodies and humans, who encounter them, echo each other. In these films, the planet approaching Earth, the planet that humans are investigating, and the computerized operating system that facilitates human space travel are all conscious entities. Their consciousness reflects and is fed by the limitations of the individuals and societies that set out to investigate or use them.

In recent years, Noa Yafe, who trained as a photographer, has developed ways of entangling the relations between image and object. After experimenting with analogue photography in an attempt to create a trompe l’oeil effect, which made the image look as though it had been reworked in Photoshop, Yafe began to construct pictures and encase them between double-walls to make them look like photographs. These sculptures appear to be photographs, two dimensional prints framed and presented behind glass. Between the illusion that reconstructs an

image and the appearance of a photograph and its material analysis, Yafe’s Red Star installation recreates her imagination of an outside. By using images of “there,” with materials from “here,” Yafe’s Red Star suggests that not only will “here” be transferred to “there,” but also that “there” can be present “here.”

Yafe took the title of her work from “Red Star,” written in 1908 by Bolshevik scientist, revolutionary, and influential thinker Aleksandr Bogdanov. This is a science-fiction novel concerned not only with the utopian notion of a communist civilization on Mars, but with an actual political plan for a human society outside capitalist exploitation. One of the scenes in the book describes the art museum on Mars, which displays earthly works of art that glorify the human body, alongside scientific and engineering achievements.

Yafe’s Red Star echoes and develops a tradition that depicts Mars as a site for a totally different political order. The possibility of an outside—of other forms of life outside the current order—is what inspired communist science-fiction literature and film (from *Red Star* (1908), to Aleksey Tolstoy’s novel *Aelita* (1923) and its film adaptation *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924) and outside the Soviet Union, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars Trilogy* (1992–1996), and *The Martians* (1999)), which portrayed Mars as a potential habitat for the existence of a radically different social order. Red Star was the name used for many sports clubs in the Soviet bloc because it signified the possibility of making another world on this planet. The USSR was supposed to constitute communism here, to bring the Red Planet to Earth. Nowadays, having destroyed planet Earth, the sole motivation for venturing into space is to colonize other planets. Even this makes calls to protect planet Earth deceiving because they seem to serve a higher purpose—that of saving capitalism. Within this mapping, outer space is not external, but part of an exploitation system in which the forces have exhausted planet Earth. Mars is part of the financial speculations on emissions, resource materials and commodities markets.

With its illusionary and physical qualities, Yafe’s Red Star corresponds to this dual mirror and copy meanings we attribute to planet Mars; it is a site and a space, a place for colonizing and a realm for imagining. Our relation to Mars therefore exceeds the mere technological abilities that make it a potential site for human dwelling in the aftermath of catastrophic events on Earth. Mars has been a space for political projections, where we were able to imagine new social relations outside capitalism, where equality, freedom and love reign.

Today, our perception of communism relies mostly on the manifestations of real-existing socialisms in the twentieth century. The reference of Yafe’s installation to this history identifies potentialities, opportunities, associations, and relations that might still hold true for us today. As an installation that gives the impression of a photographic display, Red Star acts as a sort of space station, venturing into uncharted territories that are inaccessible to us on Earth today. It explores perspectives, constellations and connections that seem unacceptable under our current political reality, whose rule claims to be as consistent and absolute as the laws of physics governing our world.

Time Travel

The literary science-fiction genre was created during the nineteenth century, at a time of immense instability generated by capitalist industrialization. This genre includes space travel alongside time travel. The ability to leap into a future moment was made artistically manifest through cinema—while watching a movie, we are teleported into a different time and space—and found political expression in the conception of the revolution. The time machine that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin devised was the revolutionary party. Nevertheless, as history shows, this machine sometimes leapt into the wrong moment in time—i.e. the emergence of totalitarian regimes, or the destruction of traditions that eventually led to capitalism's accelerated advance into new territories. But in the twentieth century, it was the Soviet Union, from Sputnik to Chernobyl, which created its incredible reality in the form of science-fiction imagery. All this was made manifest quite literally in the Space Race during the Cold War.

The journey that Yafe's Red Star invites us to embark on goes beyond space travel to a different planet. Yafe's Red Star is presented as a time machine of the communist revolution—going back to the past, when we could still imagine a future. By looking to Mars not as a resource to be exploited, but as a site for a totally different social order, Red Star does the work of excavating imaginary political resources.

In 1923 the Perm Regional Museum in the Soviet Union (the earthly Red Star), transformed one of its galleries into an astronomical observatory. In 1935, I. V. Karmilov, dean of the physics and mathematics department at Perm State University wrote a manual for turning museum galleries into observatories. For Karmilov this would promote the museum's role in "shaping the scientific world view of the new man," but at the same time it would also expand the museum's capacity to access visual evidence through direct observation. In her Red Star exhibition, Noa Yafe brings the observatory and the planetarium into an art display. Through her construction of the images of Mars, Yafe's Red Star installation projects and resurrects the possibility of an outside that once existed on our planet.

Joshua Simon is the former director and chief curator at MoBY-Museums of Bat Yam (2012-2018), and is co-founding editor of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa based Maayan publishing. He is the author of *Neomaterialism* (Sternberg Press, 2013), and editor of *United States of Palestine-Israel* (Sternberg Press, 2011) and *Ruti Sela: For The Record* (Archive Books, 2015), and *Communists Anonymous* (with Ingo Niermann, Sternberg Press, 2017). His recent curatorial projects include: *Factory Fetish* (Westspace, Melbourne, co-curated with Liang Luscombe), *Roe Rosen: Group Exhibition* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, co-curated with Gilad Melzer), *The Kids Want Communism* (MoBY and Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien, Berlin, 2016-2017) and *Second Nature* (International Photography Festival, Tel Aviv, 2017).