

Nikolay Smirnov

# Religious Libertarians Foundation

## 1. Progressive emancipation and religiosity - an impossible match?

*Religious libertarians*: these two words form a neologism, an impossible construct – at least at first glance – and an eclectic mash-up of notions from different discourses: ‘libertarian’ seems to contradict some semantics of the word ‘religious’ and vice versa. This, apparently, stems from the fusion of the notions of *liberal* and *secular* that developed during the Enlightenment, as well as the opposition of this *progressive* combination to the *religious*, which has since become associated with conservatism and reaction. However, today we are witnessing an amazing transformation of libertarianism, the radical wing of the liberal grouping. When *progressive* splits off from *secular*, such phenomena as neoreaction (NRx) become possible- a movement in which libertarianism proclaims radically progressive goals in alliance with traditionalism and religiosity, while secular modernist values, on the contrary, are denounced as conservative and non-progressive.

Over the past 250 years, art and science have simplified many controversial phenomena, seeking to find the *secular* in them and proclaim it as *progressive*, discarding everything else. In the context of reassembling the field of political ideologies, led by libertarianism, the task seems to be reversed: we look at the complex phenomena of the past and ‘discover’ in them the religious side in conjunction with emancipation and the concept of freedom. Thus we understand that the union of the *liberal* and the *secular* was of a situational, history-specific nature, and so we give the depth and ambiguity back to many historical phenomena. The Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet contexts are fertile ground for such activity: researchers have long noted paradoxical combinations of archaism and radical progressivism, right up to revolutionism. Today, such combinations lose the paradox they possessed in the world where *liberal*, *secular* and *progressive* were

indivisible, and become the genealogy of our time.

The context of reevaluation of the concepts of *reactionary* and *progressive* in their relation to *religious* and *secular* makes the emphasis on freedom within orthodox religions resonate in a very special way. It immediately becomes apparent that many traditional religions – for example, Christianity – have attached great importance to the concept of freedom, and at the point of religious modernism, the connection between freedom and religion became central. It is reflected in the philosophies of Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev of Eastern Orthodoxy, while for Roman Catholicism it is the theology of liberation. From this point of view the neologism *religious libertarians* is a case of tautology: after all, modernist theology is saturated with the values of freedom, while the religious way is often proclaimed the only one for gaining true freedom, in contrast to the repressive social experiments spawned by the secular mind. Therefore, for a truly religious consciousness, freedom and God are synonymous. In many respects we, nevertheless, still assume that *secular*, *liberal* and *progressive* belong to one cluster and therefore cases of religious dissent, underground activities, heresies and sects acquire special relevance. In these cases, social marginality is combined with a call for emancipation, while religious dissent leads to the search for political alternatives, which is a sign of progressiveness for the liberal secular consciousness as well.

Revolutionaries in Russia took note of the religious dissent in the second half of the nineteenth century after government expeditions ‘discovered’ that at least a third of the population consisted of those opposed to the official religion: Old Ritualists and Old Believers. The former appeared as a result of the *schism*, the conflict that occurred within the Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century when many believers did not accept church reforms. At first it was an open conflict, but then the dissenters were forced to register with the official church in order to survive. Yet this was only a superficial reconciliation, which was revealed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The most hostile to the state were the priestless sects of the Old Believers, who rejected any official hierarchy. This made them similar to various sects of spiritual Christianity, seeking righteousness in an extremely individualistic way, for example, as a mystical personal meeting with God. Later it was revealed that, besides various admixtures of non-canonical Eastern Orthodoxy, the ‘popular faith’ also contained the more archaic layer of paganism, a hybrid with Christianity that had been forced by the elites, giving way to the phenomenon of a dual faith. Therefore, it makes sense to separate the various currents of the Old Ritual from the Old Belief in which pantheism, modified by the Old Believers or spiritual Christianity, plays an important role.

The revolutionary movement of the Narodniks (populists) in the 1860s counted on this deep, religious dissent as a huge part of Russian society: in 1862-1864, N.P. Ogarev and A.I. Herzen were publishing a supplement in the *Kolokol* newspaper with the aim of engaging the schismatics in the revolutionary struggle. Later, the Bolsheviks also

showed interest in religious dissent: within the political party, this trend was supervised by V.D. Bonch-Bruевич. It can be said that the revolutionary struggle against tsarism and anti-hierarchical values, starting in the 1860s, was closely associated in the public consciousness with issues of religious opposition, schism and sectarianism<sup>1</sup>. Suffice to recall the priestless sect of runners or wanderers, whose adherents considered all official power to come from the Antichrist, refused any registration by the state, destroying even passports, and were constantly on the move to get away from control. The government fought the runners, considering them an extremely harmful sect, because their high mobility ensured effectiveness of their anti-state propaganda, in particular among the factory.

It can be said that, technically, the stake of the revolutionaries in religious dissent did not pay off: schismatics and sectarians did not rise to the fore in the political struggle against tsarism. However, one can look at this from a different angle: the projects of the Bolsheviks were then built on an alternative, secular religiosity, such as the God-Building of A. Bogdanov, A. Lunacharsky and M. Gorky and the genetically related project of creating a *proletarian culture*. The pantheistic-heretical and gnostic ideas of Russian cosmism were reflected in the Soviet space project, one of the founders of which – K.E. Tsiolkovsky – professed panpsychism and even wrote his own gospel. The ideas of mystical anarchism suddenly received a second life in Soviet cybernetics and scientometrics of the 1970s, in particular through Vasily Nalimov. However, all this concerns the culture of the creators of the Soviet project, but what about the people? Here too, behind the anti-religious façade, deep connections marginal religious creativity are hidden. According to the historian Alexander Pyzhikov, *Old Belief* as an ethical and spiritual code formed the basis of Stalin's Bolshevism, when the section of the population professing this code first came to power<sup>2</sup>.

If we take all these and many other similar studies seriously, then it should be admitted that the Soviet state was built on marginal religious views, melted down into a secular form. Besides, the views of Karl Marx himself are today recognised as deeply connected to Hermeticism and Gnosticism, that is, unorthodox and heretical religiosity, in particular through Hegel and the tradition of German Protestant immanentism<sup>3</sup>. We should note that this was recognised as early as the end of the nineteenth century. Sergei Bulgakov, for example, pointed out the connection between Marxism and, more broadly, German Immanentism with Gnosticism and the religious heretical project of 'anthropotheism'.

The complexity and the 'second bottom' of secular phenomena is clearly visible in the example of Latvian poetess Mirdza Kempe (1907-1974). In the Republic of Latvia

---

<sup>1</sup> Smirnov, Nikolay. 'Shaman, Schismatic, Necromancer: Religious Libertarians in Russia', e-flux Journal #107

<sup>2</sup> Pyzhikov A.V., Корни сталинского большевизма, Аргументы недели, 2015, p. 382

<sup>3</sup> Bulgakov, Sergei, Карл Маркс как религиозный тип (Его отношение к религии человекобожия Л. Фейербаха), Moscow, 1906 / Bulgakov, S., Свет невечерний. Созерцания и умозрения Москва, Путь, 1917.

in the 1930s, Kempe belonged to the literary vanguard of the international political Left. Being pro-Soviet, during the Nazi occupation the poetess left for Moscow, and after the end of the war and her return back home she became the 'grande dame' of Latvian Soviet literature. People's Poet of the Latvian SSR and Laureate of the USSR State Prize, Mirdza Kempe recalls the romantic Bolshevism of her youth in the miniature *When I Say: Lenin*:

*Your labours entered my mind and heart. And I can no longer think and imagine differently than You, Lenin... Years go by... I am looking for people who think the same as You. And underground communists enter my house...*

However, all her life Kempe combined her 'red scarf' with an interest in Indian philosophy, esotericism and even spiritism. While in high school, she began reading Suniti Kumar Chatterji- an Indian philologist who claimed kinship with the Balts and the ancient Aryans. His works were translated into Latvian by the actor Ēvalds Valters, who had become acquainted with esoteric Indian literature in 1920 in Moscow through the theatre director Yevgeny Vakhtangov, himself a yoga devotee. Kempe also practiced the yoga system developed by Harijs Dikmanis, a lecturer at the Riga Parapsychology Society and head of the Latvian Yoga Society. Dikmanis kept in touch with Indian sages and translated a lot of Indian spiritual literature.

Kempe also established contacts with India: she kept correspondence with Suniti Kumar Chatterji and the ashram (commune) Sri Ramanashramam that grew up around the sage, saint and teacher Advaita-Vedanta Sri Ramana Maharshi; she was friends with the Indian Ambassador to the USSR TN Kaul and she met with Indira Gandhi. Her interest in esotericism reached the point of enthusiasm for spiritism. In 1945, while in the Hermitage in front of a portrait of General Yermolov, the hero of the war of 1812 with Napoleon, the poetess entered into an astral marriage with his spirit. She began to communicate with him through seances witnessed by her Moscow friend Maya Lugovskaya: the spirit of Yermolov asked Kempe to go to the Russian city of Oryol and "collect my body The women followed the instructions and indeed found the general's lost hand under an old elm tree. In subsequent years, Kempe succeeded in ensuring that the Soviet authorities recognised Yermolov's merits (which was rather difficult, since Yermolov had been a tsarist general) and immediately after Stalin's death installed a memorial sign with an inscription on her behalf at Yermolov's burial site in Oryol.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Vilnis Vējš, the author of the stage play (DZEJNIECE. Mirdzas Ķempes mīlestība) who helped me in my research on the poetess.




Maxim Dmitriev. Pilgrim. End of XIX-beginning of XX century. [Image](#)





Mirdza Kempe. 1935. [Image](#)

is a great honor  
that you have written  
my humble drawing - a most  
interesting - perhaps not so  
appropriate to receive your kind  
personalty. But I do not care  
is very low for India - this  
known in the East.  
L.


 To Sister Mirra Adamson  
 Indrani 12th JP. dr. T.  
 Riga a. LATVIA.

Dear sister,  
 We received your letter of 22nd. May  
 by Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi.

You ask why, if the Soul of our  
 peace, there is ~~an~~ any need to lose itself in  
 What is the need for any action? Why the  
 give nothing to him who is already perfect?  
 Why is the world and the humanity is created

"The only way to answer these  
 instance, Who it is that puts these questions  
 which put these questions, will go on  
 set is answered. If the Soul or Magna,  
 without falling into illusion or stagnation  
 without remain as it were in stagnation  
 perfection is an end in  
 problems and

Ģenerāļa Jermolova portrets – tušas zīmējums.

## 2. National and Ethnic Revival and Religious Restoration: The Eternal Return

In the late USSR, after the internationalist Bolshevik rhetoric – and the criticism of nationalism stemming from it – had softened, various national and ethnic *revivals* or *restorations* began. The decolonialist pathos of these phenomena shifted, in comparison with the early Soviet period, from dismantling the tsarist ‘prison of peoples’ to liberation from the repressive Soviet universalism. Religion here was tied closely to the interest in folk culture and the rhetoric of political emancipation.

The history of Latvia is characterised by the example of the famous Stalte family. Dainis Stalts and Helmi Stalte founded the *Skandinieki* folklore ensemble in 1976. As active members of the Livonian community, a small Finno-Ugric people more ancient than the Balts, they fought for the preservation of their culture and traditions. They participated in folklore expeditions and worked in the national underground, for which Dainis was expelled from the university. They successfully insisted on having their ethnicity acknowledged in Soviet passports, but folklore and song culture remained their main instrument of nonviolent geocultural resistance to the Soviet regime.<sup>5</sup>

Folklore and songs (in Latvia- *dainas*) played a key role in ‘The Third Awakening’ or ‘The Singing Revolution’, the process of gaining independence in the Baltic states in the late 1980s. It is not surprising that the Latvian flag was raised publicly after a long break at the Baltika-88 song festival, and Dainis Stalts did it together with the *Skandinieki* during a solemn procession through the streets of Riga. In 1993-1995, after Latvia had gained independence, Stalts was a member of the national parliament (the Seim) representing the Latvian National Independence Movement which later became the basis of the pro-market national-conservative political party LNNK (For Motherland and Freedom). Dāvis Stalts continued his father’s political legacy, becoming a Deputy of the National Parliament and one of the founders of the New Conservative Party (JKP). His sister Julgī Stalte is the Artistic Director of the *Skandinieki* ensemble, as well as the soloist of *Tulji Lum*, another group dedicated to traditional Livonian culture. In their songs, the *Skandinieki*, drawing on the neo-paganism of the Livs, reconstruct traditional rituals such as the fire ritual, dressing the bride (*Līgavas ģērbšana*) or playing the plucked string instrument *kokle*. The masks used in the rituals are very expressive, each of them being a window to another world, allowing them to come into contact with the spirits and cosmic forces of their ancestors.

Masks are divided into many groups depending on the season and local characteristics. The main groups included *ķekatas*, *budēļi*, *Čigāni*, *ķekatas*, *tatari*. This plurality is inherent in the very paganism of the peoples of Latvia: according to Julga

---

<sup>5</sup> Johansone, Eva, ‘Latvijas ievērojamās dzimtas. Kolkas līvu stiprā ģimene - Stalti’, *jauns.lv*, 2018, gada 28. martā



Stalte, there are about a hundred Mother Goddesses (*māte*) among Latvians and even more among Livs. They are patrons of specific places and personalised maternal forces of nature. For example, in the old days, fishermen turned to the Mother of the Sea (*Jūras māte*) for help, Mother Hope (*Meža māte*) is close to the Mother of the Forest (*Meža māte*), but is solely responsible for foliage, while the Mother of Prosperity (*Gausa māte*) ensures the welfare of the house and a reasonable attitude to the world, when a person takes no more than she needs. The absence of *Gause* is expressed by another Mother, 'the devourer' *Negause*.

The (re)construction of pagan religions played a very important role in the search for the identity of the Baltic peoples in the process of gaining independence, not only in the late 1980s, but also at earlier stages. One of the two branches of Estonian neopaganism, Taarausk ('Taara's faith' in Estonian) puts the god Taara at the head of the pantheon, a god genetically related to the gods of other Finno-Ugric peoples, for example, the Finnish Tuuri, the Khanty Torum and the Germanic Thor. However, the popularisation of Taara in the mid-nineteenth century and the emergence of Taarausk in the 1930s were associated with anti-German and anti-Lutheran rhetoric as part of the search for Estonian identity by the national patriotic movement. The representatives of the national intelligentsia, who in 1928 decided to construct Taarausk, were convinced that spiritual and religious independence was inseparable from political independence, and that national culture and spirituality cannot be based on a foreign religion, such as Christianity<sup>6</sup> for Estonians. In the USSR, the followers of Taarausk were subjected to repression; over time, the religion acquired features of New Age movements, and Taara began to be understood in a less monotheistic sense, as a kind of supreme pantheistic unity.

The second branch of the Estonian 'folk faith' is the pantheistic movement Maauk ('faith of the Earth'), which arose in the 1980s. It is critical of monotheism in general and is rather an arsenal of folk wisdom and customs in relation to the outside world. Maauk considers all nature to be divine, and reveres as shrines natural objects such as old trees, boulders of the Ice Age or bodies of water. People visit them to find harmony with nature, experience peace and gain strength. The central element of the nature worship ethic is *mõnu*- 'pleasure', 'living in harmony' or 'balance'. The neo-paganism of the Baltic countries is generally extremely sensitive to the search for harmonious ways of coexistence between man and the world around him. Perhaps today it is one of the most environmentally friendly, pacifist and feminist versions of paganism. Folklore – in particular, song traditions – are central to Lithuanian and Latvian paganism, while Estonian paganism, on the other hand, focuses on worshiping nature and its elements, local gods and the Earth. Moreover, the Estonian word 'Maa' denotes the Earth as a planet, earth as an element, and native land in the sense of a native locus: from the local to the national level, all in one word. The Maavalla Koda organisation unites Taarausk and Maauk, the two

---

<sup>6</sup> For details see Ahto Kaasik, *Old Estonian Religion*

branches of Estonian neo-paganism. Among other activities, Maavalla Koda organises a photography competition among all Finno-Ugric peoples, dedicated to sacred places and nature worship rituals.

It is no coincidence that this competition unites the entire Finno-Ugric world: in 2001, Maavalla Koda was one of the founders of the Uralic communion, an initiative designed to facilitate interaction between adherents of Finno-Ugric (Uralic) neo-pagan religions. This and other organisations, in particular, the Fenno-Ugria Institution, create a common cultural and religious space between Estonia, Finland and the Finno-Ugric republics of Russia: Mari El, Komi, Udmurtia, Mordovia. The revival of neo-paganism here is inseparable from the revival of national-ethnic culture and what is called 'awakening', the growth of political consciousness and independence. The Singing Revolution was already the third (post) Soviet awakening for Latvia after the first national-romantic one in the middle of the nineteenth century and the second- the social-democratic one at the very end of the nineteenth to early twentieth century. The Russian Finno-Ugric peoples went through similar stages of 'awakening' at about the same time as the peoples of Latvia, but their 'third awakening' did not end with gaining independence, and in this sense it was a weaker counterpart to The Singing Revolution.

For example, the Udmurts, after a long period of colonisation and Christianisation by the Russians, began to (re)construct a popular, pre-Christian religion within the framework of national-romantic movements, such as the Linden Adherents in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1910s to 1920s, there was a surge of national consciousness: the national intelligentsia was formed, which, as part of their programme, (re)constructed the Udmurt Vos (the Udmurt religion) in a decolonial manner. However, with the strengthening of Soviet centralisation, manifestations of the Udmurt Vos were largely suppressed, just as it happened to the Taaraus followers after the Sovietisation of Estonia. The 'third awakening' of the Udmurts took place synchronously with the Baltic one. In 1989, a society of Udmurt culture 'Demen' ('Society' in Udmurt) was established; one of the founders was Albert Razin, a scientist, activist and shaman of the Udmurt tradition of *tuno*. Razin urged his compatriots to return to the origins of their pagan religion, considered the Udmurts to be the descendants of the Aryan tribes and the creators of a unique ancient civilisation close to Zoroastrianism, and actively advocated the compulsory study of the Udmurt language in schools. In 2019, after the abolition of compulsory study of the Udmurt language in schools, which Razin regarded as the return of the 'Stalinist policy of assimilation', he committed a *tipshar*- a ritual self-immolation in front of the building of the State Council of the Udmurt Republic in its capital, Izhevsk<sup>7</sup>. According to pagan views, one who commits a *tipshar* in the courtyard of his enemy dooms the latter to be persecuted by his vengeful spirit, unable to find peace after a violent death.

---

<sup>7</sup> Smirnov, N., 'Shaman, Schismatic, Necromancer: Religious Libertarians in Russia' / e-flux Journal, #107



Dainis Stalts as part of Skandinieki group raises Latvian flag at the Baltica-88 Festival. [Image](#)





Skandinieki. Kekatas costumes. [Image](#)



Latvian masks. The image provided by Julgi Stalte, Andris Kapusts and folk collective Ritums





Latvian masks. The image provided by Julgi Stalte, Andris Kapusts and folk collective Ritums



Latvian masks. The image provided by Julgi Stalte, Andris Kapusts and folk collective Ritums





Latvian masks. The image provided by Julgi Stalte, Andris Kapusts and folk collective Ritums



Sindija Mačtama. CERU MĂTI. Image from the artist's Facebook page





Sindija Mačtama. Gausa mate. Image from the artist's Facebook page



Urve Hermann. Sisenemine hiide. Image submitted for Hiite Kuvavoistlus-2019 photo competition run by Maavalla Koda. [Image](#)



Pille Porila. Korneti jumalamaeel. Image submitted for Hiite Kuvavoistlus-2019 photo competition run by Maavalla Koda. [Image](#)





Kairi Kalmann. Suureks kasvanud kungas. Image submitted for Hiite Kuvavoistlus-2019 photo competition run by Maavalla Koda. [Image](#)



Humala Ristallikas. Allikal kuulamas ja motisklemas. Image submitted for Hiite Kuvavoistlus-2019 photo competition run by Maavalla Koda. [Image](#)





Olga Kozhemyakina (Udmurtia). Women by the sacred pine. Image submitted for Hiite Kuvavoistlus-2019 photo competition run by Maavalla Koda. [Image](#)





Albert Razin. Collage. [Image](#)

### 3. From an occult underground to a spiritual supernova explosion

So, we have seen that non-conformist religiosity can be directly related to political emancipation and progressive decolonial values. The combination of neo-pagan (re) constructions and processes of ethnic-national 'awakening' among the Finno-Ugric and Baltic peoples in the (post-)Soviet context offers a striking example. In parallel with the religious and cultural restoration of ethnic-national communities in the late USSR, religious/spiritual diversity also grew. That was due not only to the dismantling of Soviet universalism, but also to the worldwide process of increasing religious and spiritual diversity, which Charles Taylor called a 'spiritual supernova explosion'. As a result, in the 1970s, the USSR saw the emergence of what Birgit Menzel called the 'occult underground', circles of intellectuals who expressed their opposition to the Soviet system not through political dissent, but through various marginal spiritual and religious systems, up to the most radical ones. A striking example of that was the Yuzhinsky Circle in Moscow, whose members at various stages went into traditionalism, alchemy, hermetic tradition and fascism.

The proliferation of modes of individual spirituality accelerated. In the (post-) Soviet space, it reached its climax in the late 1980s to early 1990s. When censorship had finally collapsed, together with the USSR, it became possible to print any literature within the framework of private initiatives, and the post-Soviet republics, in particular, Russia, overflowed with various esoteric information and related practices<sup>8</sup>. The occult underground turned into an occult revival. Numerous esoteric phenomena of the 1990s became the culmination of processes that had been taking place at least since the 1970s, forming a single line of development, and today we continue to observe it.

The example of the Nizhny Novgorod *necropolist* Anatoly Moskvina is typical. He evolved in the 1980s among anti-Soviet intellectuals looking for their own individual spiritual path among various marginal teachings. Like representatives of the Yuzhinsky Circle, Moskvina got acquainted with the classics of traditionalism, in particular with the works of René Guénon and Julius Evola in Moscow libraries, exchanged valuable information with other illuminati, translated Thomas Wilson's book 'The History of the Swastika' and wrote a detailed afterword to it: 'A cross without a crucified', explored the cemeteries of Nizhny Novgorod, read the almanac 'Magic Mountain' and published his own almanacs 'Celtic Dawn' and 'Memory of the Earth'.

As a result, he formed a very individual spiritual and religious system at the intersection of integral neo-paganism, Gnostic Luciferianism and occult practices of working with the spirits of the dead. Moskvina became infamous in 2011 after 26 life-size puppets made using the mummified remains of tragically perished girls were found in his

---

<sup>8</sup> Menzel, Birgit; Hagemeister, Michael; Bernice Rosenthal (ed.), The New Age of Russia. Occult and Esoteric Dimensions, Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2012

apartment. Visiting the cemeteries, he heard their restless souls and, pitying them, the necromancer mummified the remains in order to preserve them for future resurrection. In addition, he used them in the manufacture of magic dolls to communicate with the world of the dead, just as shamans use their dolls.<sup>9</sup>

Society took the Moskvina case extremely negatively and took an extreme dehumanising measure – punitive psychiatry. Since 2012, the necromancer has been subjected to compulsory treatment. While the desecration of graves is subject to a moderate criminal penalty, Moskvina was subjected to a far more severe treatment as mentally abnormal, although the belief in posthumous life is quite widespread in Russian society. Society is blatantly reluctant to understand its own religious and spiritual syncretism. Instead, the tradition of Soviet punitive psychiatry is used, when people try to solve complex issues of religious and political marginality by forcibly ‘erasing’ the problem. At the same time, society shows a persistent affective interest in such cases, as evidenced by the scale and degree of emotional reactions to Moskvina’s case, when people (unfortunately, often professional journalists) totally ignore some important nuances and mistakenly consider him both a murderer and a necrophilous paedophile. Perhaps, under the pressure of circumstances, the authorities were partly forced to make a decision on the compulsory confinement and ‘normalisation’ of the necromancer in a psychiatric clinic, realising that an unenviable fate of public lynching awaited him at large.

Less controversial cases generate public interest without disgust and stigmatisation. For example, the Yakut magician Nikolai (Klaus) Wetter works and lives in one of the cemeteries in the city of Yakutsk. He received magic knowledge from a sorceress who had previously worked in the same cemetery and he receives magic powers from working with the dead. According to Wetter, in the process of performing the functions of a cemetery caretaker (specifically, he digs graves), his body is filled with a colossal force which requires an exit. Like those blacksmiths in the traditional mythology of many peoples who received their powers from the underworld, Nikolai finds an outlet for this anomalous power in working with metal. In particular, he bends nails into various figures which, according to his statements, have healing properties. When Wetter was offered to act as an artist as part of the Permafrost project, he agreed with pleasure. The role of an artist turned out to be quite organic for him: at the opening he performed a power bending metal performance, which aroused great interest among the public. That said, he asked not to advertise the occult and spiritual-religious side of his practice, naturally fearing that this could cause rejection and stigmatisation.

We see that religious and spiritual marginality is closely tied to public interest, and this interest is rather cruel: from the very beginning it exoticises its object, borders on ridicule and easily turns into condemnation and stigmatisation. Moreover, the situation

---

<sup>9</sup> Smirnov, Nikolay; Moskvina, Anatoly, Кладбищенский цикл и другие газетные сериалы, Магическое либертарианство Анастасии Москвина, Центр Экспериментальной Музеологии

threatens the carrier of religious marginality with discrimination up to official repression, as evidenced by the case of the shaman Gabyshev. In 2019, Alexander Gabyshev, who considers himself a warrior-shaman, left Yakutsk to walk up to Moscow to 'exorcise an evil daemon from Putin'. At first, society perceived this campaign as entertainment, but when supporters began to join the shaman along the way, it became clear that this enterprise was becoming something more grave, and Gabyshev's statements that when he approached the Kremlin, 'all Russia' would join him did not sound that far-fetched. A small civic community with its own mythology was formed around 'Sanya the Shaman': Gabyshev assigned a function and gave a nickname to each member of the posse, considering his two closest and oldest companions, the Angel and the Raven, as his white and black wings. The posse got a car, a flag and other symbols- in particular, Sanya the Shaman was now depicted in the image of Che Guevara and printed on T-shirts, as there appeared many cartoons, memes and even souvenirs associated with his name. As a result, the authorities interrupted the procession of the posse, put Gabyshev under house arrest in Yakutsk, and when he was about to resume the campaign, he was placed in a psychiatric clinic. It is interesting that Gabyshev's political protest is passed through the prism of animism: one must not drive out Putin himself, but drive out his evil spirit.

From the animist point of view, such an interpretation is absolutely logical: spirits, both evil and good, constantly infiltrate certain objects and change their carriers. Such views are not abnormal from the point of view of Eastern Orthodoxy: the church still practices the ritual of driving evil spirits out of 'possessed' people. Thus, the very belief in 'possession' is normal not only for paganism, but also for Christianity, and therefore it is possible to generally assert that this or that person is 'possessed' by an evil spirit. Then what is so abnormal about Gabyshev?

He does not violate the Criminal Code, his declared views are not so marginal from a religious point of view. Apparently, the issue is that he does not respond to informal exhortations to stop his campaign: it is 'abnormal' that he 'does not understand' the unequivocal wishes of the authorities. Unfortunately, as in the case of Moskvina, we see that the method of 'erasing' the problem — punitive psychiatry — is used to solve a labyrinthine religious-political case that uncovers the dead ends of legal, authoritative and spiritual practices.

Adherers of marginal spiritual and religious views find themselves 'between the devil and the deep blue sea': between the painful attention of society, always willing to turn to stigmatisation, and potential repression and normalisation by the authorities. That is why we are talking about Religious Libertarians Foundation as a kick-off initiative aimed at supporting them. It is important to understand that their views are not just exotic and monstrous constellations, but are an exuberant expression of the problems inherent to all of society. Moreover, their excessive expression works similarly to activism- it reveals contradictions and dead ends that are invisible at the 'normal' level of tension, and therefore is especially valuable.





Anatoly Moskvina from Nizhegorodskije Novosti newspaper, issue 137 of 2011. Photo collage by Alexandr Volozhnin





Magic dolls found in the apartment of Anatoly Moskvina. Police shooting. Taken from the Internet.



Magic dolls found in the apartment of Anatoly Moskvina. Police shooting. Taken from the Internet.





Magic dolls found in the apartment of Anatoly Moskvina. Police shooting. Taken from the Internet.





Magic dolls found in the apartment of Anatoly Moskvín. Police shooting. Taken from the Internet.





Magic dolls found in the apartment of Anatoly Moskvina. Police shooting. Taken from the Internet.

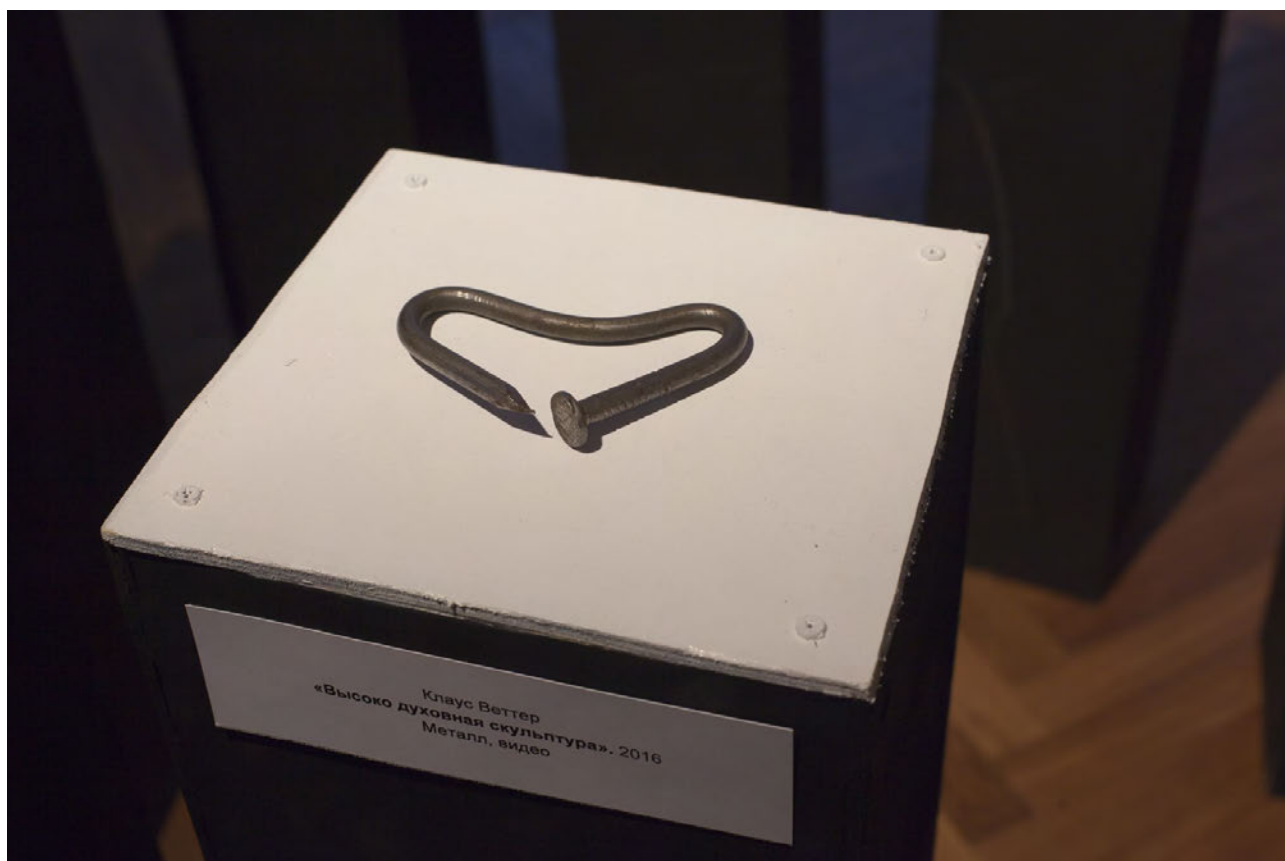


Nikolai (Klaus) Vetter. The Man Who Works With Earth. Video. Photo by Maxim Sher





Nikolai Vetter. The Man Who Works With Earth. Spiritual sculptures. Photo by Maxim Sher



Nikolai Vetter. The Man Who Works With Earth. Spiritual sculptures. Photo by Maxim Sher



Shaman Alexandr Gabyshev. [Image](#)



Gabyshev's squad camping down. [Image](#)





The flag of shaman Gabyshev's squad. Image taken from the Internet



The flag of shaman Gabyshev's squad. The sign: «For return of freedom to Russia! The way of Shaman». Taken from the Internet.

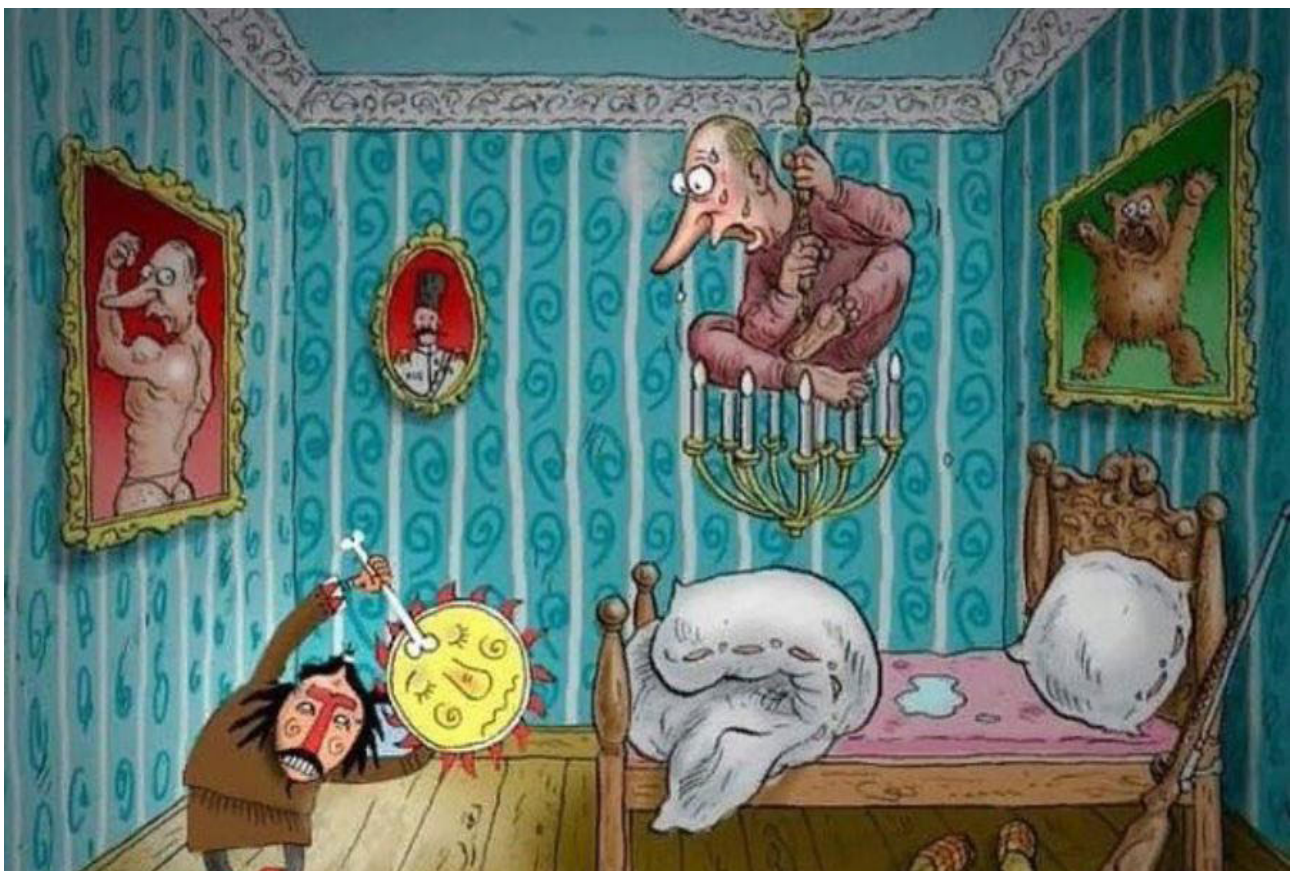


T-shirt with the image of Gabyshev as Che Guevara worn by his comrade Ded Moroz (Father Frost). Image taken from the Internet, youtube screenshot





Kamil Buzykaev. Riot policeman exorcises Shaman with a cross made of batons. Image from press.lv



Marian Kamensky. Shaman and Putin. Transformed caricature of 2013 «Putin and Pussy Riot». Image taken from the Internet.



shamanvoin.com



Refrigerator magnets sold through shamanvoin.com to support shaman Gabyshev

## 4. The Artist's Role

Religious libertarians' activity is often accompanied by artistic practices, or is seen as a form radical activism in itself. Many religious libertarians find themselves at the point where identity studies, religious creativity and the desire to influence the world – similar to the aspirations of avant-garde artists – merge. A striking example of this synthesis is the manifesto of Ethnofuturism, drawn up by a group of Estonian intellectuals in Tartu around 1994 during an ethnofuturistic conference of artists, writers and other creative professions' representatives from various Finno-Ugric peoples: Udmurts, Komi, Mari, Karelians, Livs, Erzya, Sami, Hungarians, Vyrus and Setos.

The manifesto is pronounced as 'a way of thinking for an alternative future'; it provides an overview of the formation of national identity in Estonia and argues that the revival of Ethnofuturism is associated with the restoration of independence in 1986-1991. It goes on to say that all Finno-Ugric peoples and their problems are similar. In particular, many of them are under threat of assimilation by other cultures. The solution to these problems, as well as 'The Ugrians' plan to conquer the world, relies on the creative harmony of the ancient turn of mind and contemporary technology. This is the great hidden opportunity for the Finno-Ugrians. Ethnofuturism, putting in motion creative powers, is not an ideology but a way to survive as well as a *modus vivendi*.<sup>10</sup>

The broad interdisciplinary field that the authors of the manifesto set by their activities is quite indicative. The very term Ethnofuturism was coined around 1989 by the poet and journalist of the social democratic persuasion Karl Martin Sinijärv, who understood it as his own avant-garde method of poetry, characterised by a combination of archaic content and futuristic form. The 1994 Ethnofuturism Manifesto itself was signed by four people. Kauksi Ülle is a poet, playwright and cultural activist who associates herself with the tradition of the Võro ethnic group that live in the southeastern part of Estonia and have a strong regional identity.

Andres Heinapuu started out as a theatre critic associated with (neo)traditional theatre. Later, he headed the Information Centre for Finno-Ugric Peoples, was the General Secretary of the IV World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples and coordinated the Estonian Association of Regional Languages.

The writer Sven Kivisildnik made his debut as an Ethnofuturist poet in the late 1980s, and in 2015 founded the Estonian Independence Party (EIP) which calls for Estonia to leave the European Union and to be considered a separate geopolitical space. Maarja Pärl Lõhmus is a journalist, researcher of Finnish and Estonian-speaking socio-semiotics and an activist fighting against the construction of the Trans-Baltic Railway (Rail Baltica).

---

<sup>10</sup> From the Ethnofuturism Manifesto

Thus, both the activities of each of the creators of the Ethnofuturistic manifesto, and the interdisciplinary field that is formed as a result of the intersection of their interests, are complex combinations of research, politics, social activism and artistic creativity.

In other cases, an artist may act directly as an inventor of a new religious doctrine, understanding it in the avant-garde logic and moving from creation of art objects to creation of religious systems, social structures and world-building. Stalwart of the Latvian neo-avant-garde, Valdis Celms became famous in the 1960s and 1970s for his kinetic objects that further developed the constructivist tradition. In the 1980s, he began combining constructivist graphics with national ornaments and exploring the meanings and formal logic of the latter. The results of his research he presented in his book *Latvian Patterns and Symbols (Latvju raksts un zīmes)* in which he developed an original hermeneutics of national ornaments, combining knowledge of the tradition with modernist art principles. The key concept of the book is *raksts* – patterns, and all signs are deduced from each other graphically and summed up in an grid (*režģis*) – the basic element, according to Celms, for both national patterns and modernism. In Celms' system, signs and the concepts they denote logically flow into each other both graphically and at the level of concepts, forming a kind of graphical-logical organism. In 2003, the artist designed gigantic ornaments that the participants of the 13th Latvian Song and Dance Festival (*XIII Latvīešu Dziesmu un Deju svētkos*) formed at the stadium using their bodies. In addition, Celms became one of the leaders of the *Dievturība*- Latvian neo-paganism: he performs rituals as its priest and he also designed the Lokstena sanctuary of the Dievturs. It is noteworthy that the original Dievturība was also created by an artist, Ernst Brastiš, who in the 1920s set the task of (re)constructing an original Latvian religion, drawing on the intentions of romantic nationalism of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1926, the Community of Latvian Dievturs was registered; poets, writers and artists became its founders. In 1929, Dievturība was recognised as a spiritual organisation, and Ernst Brastiš set about compiling its spiritual books out of folk songs – *dainas*. In this he relied on the statement of one of the leaders of the second 'awakening', a Social Democrat Jan Rainis: 'Our folk songs contain an ancient religion that needs to become a new religion'. In the spirit of his time, Brastiš emphasised the Latvian-Aryan connection, which brought him closer to Latvian radical nationalists and fascists. In the USSR, Dievturs were banned and repressed, many ending up emigrating. The organisation's activities were resumed on the wave of the third 'awakening' in 1989-1990.

Ideas related to the existence of an 'Aryan Ur-people' were very popular in the first half of the twentieth century. The last word has not yet been spoken here, and researchers have yet to separate these theories from their use by communities experiencing resentment, in order to examine them more objectively. Moreover, there is no need to fully identify them with one specific case – their interpretation by German Nazism –



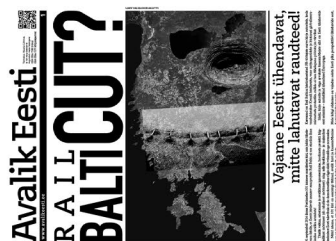
although these connections need to be recognised. It is important for us to emphasise the role of the artist in the construction of new religious phenomena. It is obvious that the expansion of the avant-garde's understanding of art made it possible to regard religious and social constructivism as a worthy goal for the artist. At first glance, the path of Valdis Celms may seem too florid and illogical: from kineticism and international neo-avant-garde to the (re)construction of a neo-pagan religion. However, in the logic of the avant-garde, which has always been important for Celms, this path appears quite natural. He himself came to the understanding that 'avant-garde is eternal', and its principles have always existed in the form of 'the eternal today'<sup>11</sup>.

Now it can be seen that religiosity and spirituality were often associated with a search for identity, self-determination and political emancipation. It is in such constellations that the phenomenon of religious libertarians arises, where progressive goals are often combined with nationalism and revolutionary traditionalism. Such movements were of particular progressive importance in oppressed communities such as the Finno-Ugric and Baltic peoples. Upon reaching emancipation, such movements, as a rule, change their character from progressive to conservative, thus revealing their ambiguity, complexity and irreducibility to any single characteristic or function. This complexity may be the key to a number of phenomena in today's world, in particular to neo-reactionary movements (NRx), where the secularity-religiosity axis loses its unambiguous correspondence to the progressive-reactionary axis.

Religious libertarians often collapse the traditional left and right division, making it meaningless, which is also one of the important characteristics of today. In the living and mobile nature of their worldviews, it is impossible to separate research activities, socio-political activism, and spiritual and religious and artistic creativity, which generally corresponds to the radical avant-garde interpretation of an artist. Despite the fact that religious libertarians are important cases for understanding the spiritual life of contemporary society, they are often threatened with stigmatisation and repression. This combination of importance and fragility makes us talk about the *religious libertarians foundation* as an intention to think about the structures of their public support, as well as an increase in spiritual and religious diversity and the study of contemporary processes of religious and spiritual creativity in all their complexity and ambiguity.

---

<sup>11</sup> From a private conversation with the artist.



Vejame Eesti ühendavat  
mõtte lahutavat raudteed!



MAARJA PÄRL-LÕHMUS



Estonian Independence Party



ANDRES HEINAPUU

Manifesto  
of Etnofuturism,  
1994



SVEN KIVISILDNIK



KAUKSI ÜLLE



Advisory Committee of  
Finno-Ugric Peoples

**Etnofuturism,  
around 1989**

**Hirohall**  
literary group, 1988-1991  
KAUKSI ÜLLE  
KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV  
SVEN KIVISILDNIK  
Valeria Ränik  
Jüri Ehlvest

**Eesti Kostabi-Selts**  
(Estonian Kostabi-Society)  
1989



Karl Martin Sinijärv



Võro



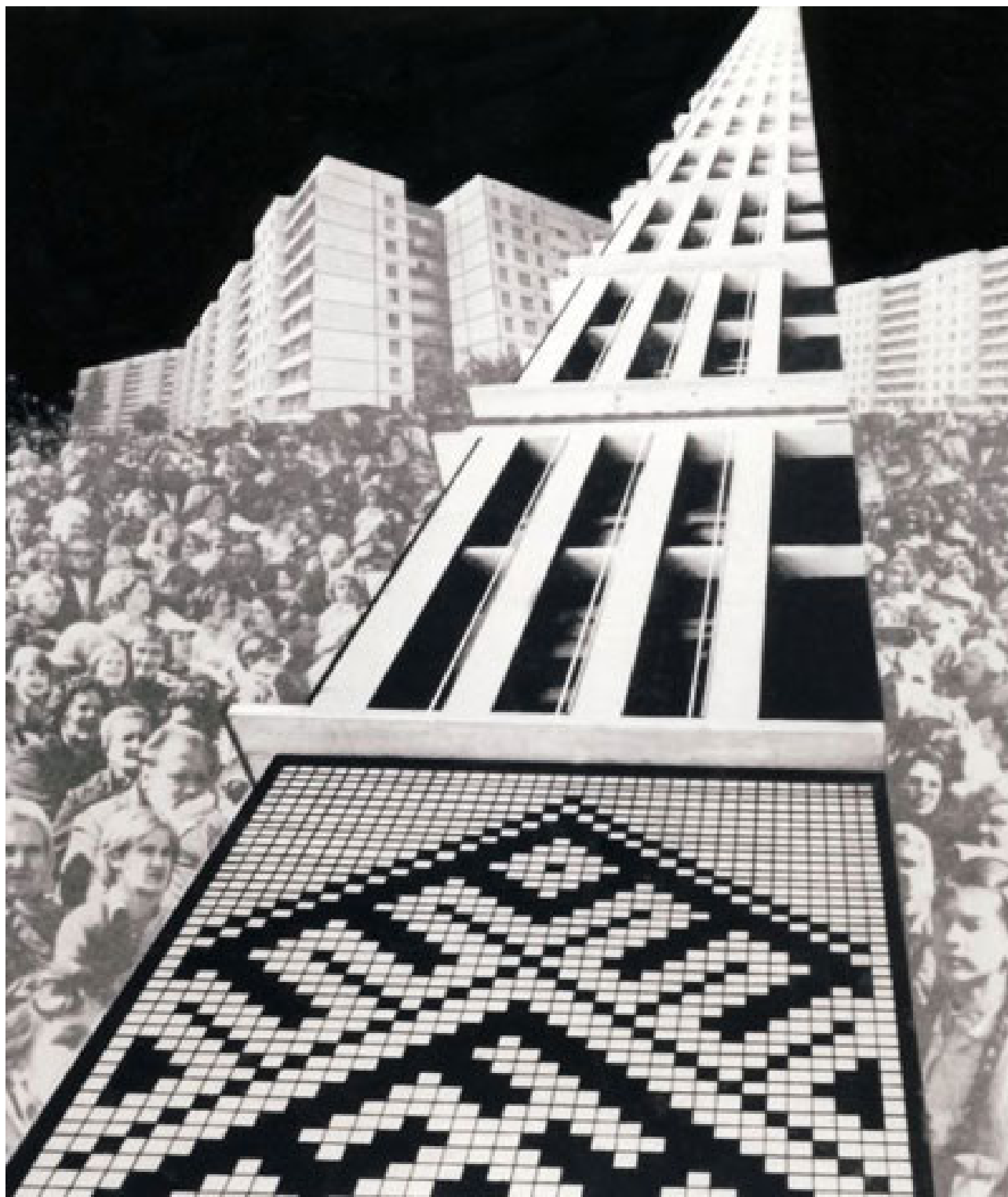


Valdis Celms. Revolving Cylinders. 1972. [Image](#)



Valdis Celms. Positron. In Balance, 1976. [Image](#)

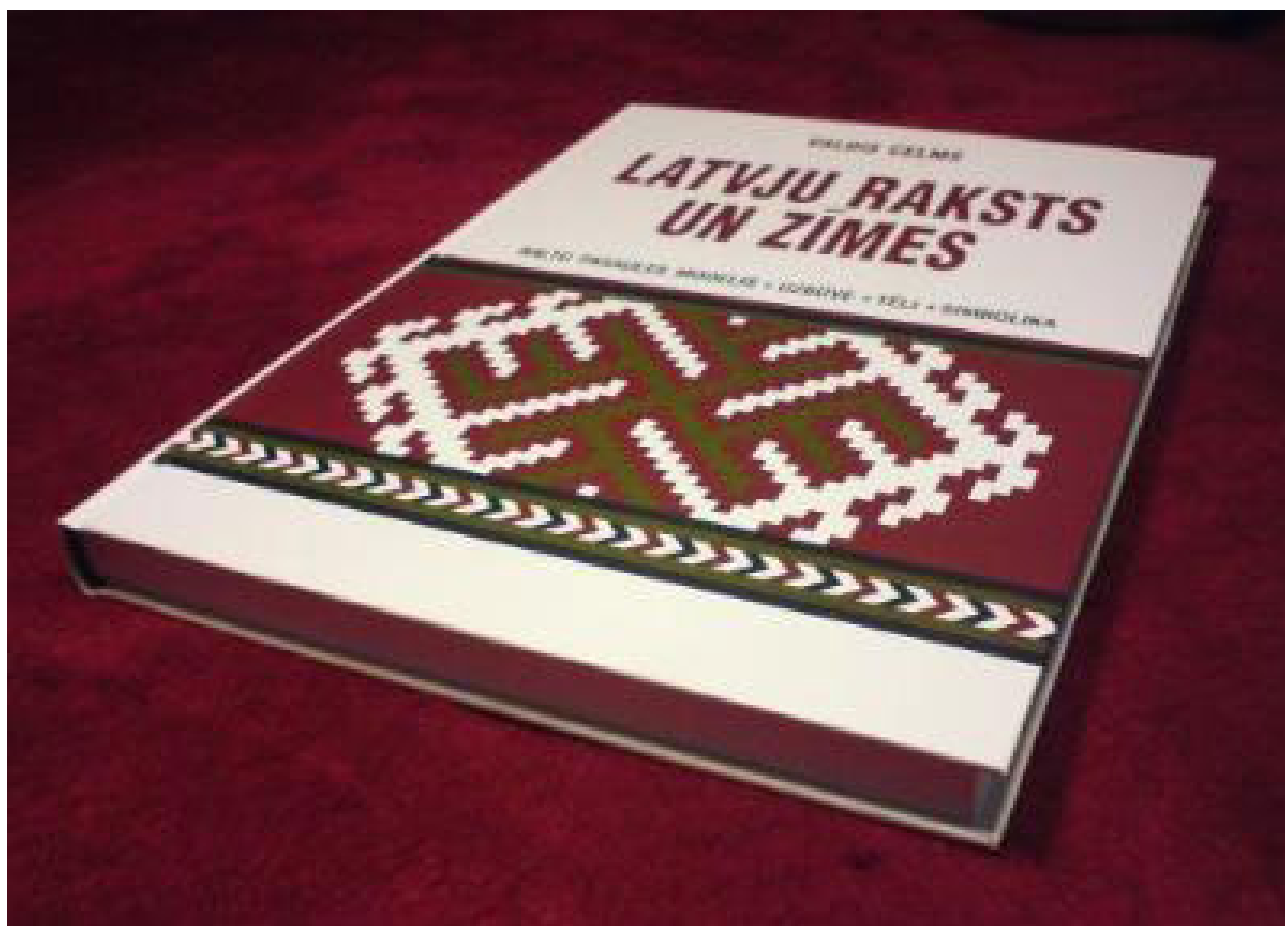




Valdis Celms. Photomontage. [Image](#)



Valdis Celms. Reflective Thoughts 2, 1988. Original painting. Gelatin silver photo paper, acrylic. 19,5 x 19,5 cm.  
Image: courtesy of the artist



Valdis Celms' book «Latvju raksts un zīmes». [Image](#)





XIII Latviešu Dziesmu un Deju svētkos. [Image](#)



Dievturs with Celms' work in the background. Image: courtesy of the artist





Valdis Celms and Dievturs. Krivule2012. Image: courtesy of the artist



Valdis Celms in the garments of Dievturība priest. J. Vaiškūno nuotr. Image from alkas.lt





Sanctuary of the Dievturs designed by Valdis Celms.  
Image: courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the 2nd Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA2)  
*and suddenly it all blossoms*  
20 August - 13 September 2020  
Curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel  
[www.rigabiennial.com](http://www.rigabiennial.com)