

It Is Possible

On Axel Straschnoy, We Believe and Accept that These Beings Exist

By Charles Esche

1.

Three words painted by hand in red on a large piece of raw linen, hanging free in the dark: *it is possible*. No object, no complement. Whatever is possible has been left off the cloth, and possibility remains endless.

The sentence belongs to J. Posadas, the Argentine Trotskyist who told his comrades in 1968 that flying saucers were real and that the civilisations flying them were necessarily communist because they were both advanced enough to travel the galaxies and progressive enough to peacefully aid human development. Fourteen more of his sentences hang alongside it in Axel Straschnoy's installation. The artist brought this Posadas figure to my attention for the first time, and I have been puzzling over him, as well as the artwork, since then. Still, I have not yet settled on a verdict. Posadas is part comic figure, part visionary, and the two are not separable in the way most modern interpretations of the world would like them to be.

Some background is useful here. Posadas was born Homero Cristalli in Buenos Aires in 1912, the son of poor Italian immigrants, and came to socialism by way of professional football and a players' strike that got him blacklisted. By the late 1950s he led the largest Trotskyist organisation in Latin America, with sections across the continent and militants who fought in Cuba and made weapons for the Algerian FLN. In 1962 he split from the Fourth International to found his own, and it is inside that shrinking, increasingly devoted organisation that the flying saucers appear. The speech was internal, an intervention in an argument among comrades about what Marxists should make of the sightings then being reported everywhere. It reached the wider left by being printed, and it destroyed his reputation: rival Trotskyists took to calling his people *extraterrestres*, and the organisation itself *la internacional platillista* — the flying-saucer international — with some mean rhymes to go with it. The exhibition takes fifteen sentences from it. Some sound cosmological and some sound political, but the distinction is one Posadas refused: for him a claim about the universe and a claim about society were the same claim. Painted on the linen, in his English translator's words, they read:

in other galaxies and planetary systems it is possible to fully utilise matter and eliminate all this concern with hunger and class struggle

the scientific capacity of humanity is determined by societal organisation

existence and progress will be identified with one another

These claims read as both dated and propositional: a puzzling set of claims that ask to be reprocessed for today.

What I can say is that he never wrote a word of what we are reading. They are records of speech and they are more potent for being read that way. Fifteen sentences, one to a panel, each hanging twenty-one centimetres clear of the floor — the wavelength at which, by convention, radio astronomers expect a signal from elsewhere to arrive. The panels are large and the lettering is not. Words occupy a small block in the middle of a great expanse of unpainted cloth, lit narrowly, falling off into black at the edges.

What follows describes the work as it was first built, at EMMA in Espoo. What hangs in Milan is a smaller selection, and some of what I describe will have changed in the move. That seems to me appropriate for an installation whose subject is what happens to speech as it travels.

The paint has bled through, so from behind the text appears mirror-reversed and reads for a moment like an unknown alphabet. This is something you chance upon simply by moving among the panels, seeing four or five at once and at every angle. Nothing settles: a sentence you have just read turns to calligraphic pattern as you walk on, while another comes round into sense. Legibility is not a property of the panel but of where you happen to be standing.

Backwards on the plate, forwards on the sheet. Type is cut in reverse so that it prints the right way round, and the work was first built inside a place that did exactly that: the halls of the former Weilin+Göös print works in Espoo, where the EMMA Museum now is. Hung in rows in the dark, the panels are also sheets drying. ‘Show-through’ is the flaw a printer spends a career preventing, and here it is all over the installation making the work unstable and credible as you move.

As I said, Posadas did not write. He talked into a tape recorder, sent the tapes, and had them transcribed. His old comrade Carlos Suárez, one of the featured voices in the work, remembers passages the transcribers did not dare to remove and questions that went unanswered. Nobody corrected him, yet what we have is still secondhand, filtered unconsciously through an unknown ear, unedited because no one in the organisation had the standing to prune the leader. Yet still the pamphlet became notorious for what it claimed: it took a resolutely materialist ideology and made it fly into space – though it wasn’t the first time that had happened. But its form, the meandering length and the tone of the lecture and the command, is the direct consequence of there being no editor. Now, Straschnoy has given that speech a body it never had — one phrase at a time.

Spatially, it’s important to take note that you do not stand in front of this work; you go through it. That is not the conceptualism of the wall-mounted proposition: the New York solidity of Joseph Kosuth’s chair or a Lawrence Weiner sentence stencilled on a wall. The tradition Straschnoy comes out of is not so hegemonic. It recalls Hélio Oiticica’s *penetráveis* and *parangolés*, the walk-in structures and wearable capes he made in Rio in the 1960s — cloth suspended in space that means nothing until a body moves among it.

Both traditions inherit the same prewar avant-garde. What differs is what could be seen from where they received it. In New York the modern settlement still looked intact, and the modernist language of Europe could be treated as a model to be inherited without the politics of conflict and war. The United States had won and the cracks in modernity were visible somewhere else, in other people’s countries. In São Paulo and Buenos Aires that crumbling facade was closer to the eye, and a good number of artists had no option but to take the aesthetic with the political, because the two had never arrived separately. This is not a difference between Western art and

some outside. It is a difference of vantage inside one modernity, between a position that can afford not to notice and one that cannot.

2.

I want to use this text to bring a reading of Axel's work into my own thinking. Demodernising, as I understand it, is not anti-modern, not a return, and not an escape to somewhere modernity failed to reach. It is the work of dismantling modernity's surplus from inside it, by people who never left and cannot pretend to have done. The tradition this work stems from, a Latin American lineage, seems to me more open to that than the New York conceptualism of the same years. It is working through some of the ideas without naming them as such but it knows the aesthetic and the political cannot be separated so easily. It has what Walter Mignolo calls 'the darker side of modernity' in closer view and it understands that following is unlikely to get you anywhere new.

The lettering is borrowed from protest placards. But a placard is held up in daylight, in a crowd, above heads, among hundreds of others, and these hang alone in the dark and are met singly. What the room stages is not a demonstration though the material of the banners remain. It would be easy to say that Straschnoy has simply done the editing the movement could never do to itself, taking the pruning shears to a text nobody dared cut. That is not quite it. It is an edit of speech that reflects back quietly on a moment that is past. There is mourning and nostalgia here and the cloths can appear like funeral shrouds, but they remain capable of action when the time is ripe again.

The selection of the texts is not neutral. The fifteen are almost all deductions — *they must exist; they must have a societal organisation superior to our own* — and Posadas never claims to have seen anything. What has been kept is the grammar of expectation and desire, and that is how the work remains more than a memory or a loss.

The four projections are close-ups, and more than life-size. What you watch is not delivery but thinking: four people working out, in real time and at some cost, what this Posadas business might mean to them. Nobody is reciting a position. They alternate, and you enter at whatever point the cycle has reached, so almost nobody receives it as composed. What you walk into is a discussion already in progress that you can join only partway and that will begin again without concluding.

What the alternation exposes is something the banners conceal. Every living voice in the room qualifies their relationship to Posadas. Suárez as a witness and through his own quixotic relationship to the protagonist. The astrobiologist Ximena Abrevaya explains that her discipline must define life in order to search for it and does so practically, by taking life as we know it here, so that the search is calibrated to the searcher; she ends on a question, are we alone or are there others? Jaakko Närvä, who studies sightings as religious experience and has had one, will say only that he cannot explain the accounts except by supposing the witnesses describe something real. The historian Hernán Camarero appears to be the exception and turns out to be the limit case, speaking in the flat indicative throughout but almost always on loan: Posadas says that, the Posadists declared that.

Straschnoy has traced his own genealogy for this material, in a paper he gave to the astronomical congress in Paris in 2022, running Posadas back through a Russian line of thinking, from Nikolai Fedorov through Aleksandr Bogdanov and Cosmism. Fedorov decided that

every human problem is subsidiary to the problem of death and that the task is to bring back everyone who has ever lived. He also saw that they would not fit on Earth and therefore concluded that other planets would have to be colonised: an idea of ancestor primacy so absolute that it requires occupying new territory in order to do justice to the past, a strange twist on a restitutive motive that justifies an expansionist, colonising method. Beyond Fedorov, the line runs through Tsiolkovsky into rocketry and into all the current talk of backup planets.

In the present day, Fedorov's debt to the dead and Cosmism's desire for general human welfare have been eliminated, and only the colonial expansion and the occupation of space is left. What passes for cosmic ambition now is thinner than anything Posadas or even Fedorov proposed. In January 2015 Elon Musk named SpaceX's two landing barges *Just Read the Instructions* and *Of Course I Still Love You*, in honour, he said, of Iain M. Banks, who had died two years before. Both are ships from Banks' novel *The Player of Games*, where they are General Contact Units: vessels built for exploration and communication rather than for war. They also belong to a post-scarcity civilisation with no property, no money and no coercion, which conducts its relations with other societies through an agency called Contact and whose entire moral argument concerns how to meet difference without destroying it. Musk takes the vessels but rejects the civilisation, peace or any notion of justice. His backup planet owes nothing to anyone. It is an evacuation dressed as an adventure, and it requires no account of restraint because it has no intention of exercising any.

Importantly for this work, Posadas' intentions run the other way, and the banners let you watch the reversal happen. His rhetoric shares the techno-scientific future quoted above, with its full utilisation of matter and its unlimited capacity. Yet he reasons that the communist salvation comes to humans from beyond Earth. There is no need for earthlings to conquer and potentially subdue other planets because Posadas' aliens, by contrast, come to share the peace of communism with humans. Camarero reports the sharper version that proves their good intentions. They have the capacity to destroy us, he says, but they do not, and that restraint is proof of their communist advancement. This self-denial of their power is a beautiful example of intelligence for humans. It measures capacity by the ability to withhold it; a way to use knowledge to refuse to do something. And having appealed for help, Posadas defers the going: first resolve the problems of humanity on Earth, and afterwards go and look. That is the opposite of Musk and his ilk, and as close to a demodern proposition as the twentieth-century left ever came. Though typically it arrives by accident, inside a speech about flying saucers that seems illogical if not straightforwardly mad.

3.

I want to put the obvious objection here rather than leave it for someone else. This is a beautiful installation, and what it makes beautiful is a political catastrophe — a movement that fractured, expelled its veterans, congealed around one man's paranoia and dwindled to nothing. Darkness, pools of light, red on raw linen, the voice of the dead: the wreck is rendered as atmosphere for a privileged art audience, one trained to find a failed revolutionary sect absorbing rather than embarrassing and to take pleasure in the way it has been arranged. I have curated this kind of exhibition myself often enough to recognise the manoeuvre and to question it but it works here because of the possibility of rebirth (or resurrection) that persists in the aftermath of communism's demise — partly because no more convincing political horizon has yet been sketched out to displace it.

What is also crucial in justifying the work's presence in a safe, bourgeois art world is the implications behind the work about the present day and its impoverished imagination of utopia. In contrast to the 'tech bros' dreams of planetary escape and manosphere fantasy, Posadas' utopia is complex and caring. Camarero begins by saying that the left was born bound to utopia, to the idea of another world, even while Marxism spent a century insisting it dealt only in the visible and the measurable. The reintroduction of a utopian dimension by Posadas might be one reason it caused such irritation but it was also necessary, though the utopianism was techno-scientific in a way that orthodox scientific Marxists could still recognise.

And it points at what makes Posadas available to us now. He is not substituting faith for politics. He is asserting that scientific capacity and social organisation are a single thing, which is what one of the banners says outright. That proposition needs to be legible as art in 2026 precisely because it is no longer legible as politics. We can hang it, light it and walk among it because nothing it proposed is on the table any more in the crude debates about migration and climate change denial that pass for 21st century politics. I suspect the aesthetic availability of Posadism is a direct function of its defeat but also the route to its reinvention.

The shortest banner reads *it is possible*. Three words, no object, alone on several square metres of linen, legible from one position and reversed from the next. The question this work leaves me with is not whether we might learn to imagine an elsewhere again. Rather, in demodernising terms, it asks if the sentences can turn to face the ground they are suspended above. Is it possible here and now, with this and among the things and people that are around? We can both wait for the aliens to land and we can prepare a better world with what we have to hand. It is possible.

WIZARD LAB

Corso di Porta Ticinese, 87
20123, Milan
lab@wizardgallery.com
W: lab.wizardgallery.com
I: @wizard__lab
X: @wizard__lab
F: @WIZARDLAB.gallery