Elizabeth Guffey

Constructing a New World

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we encounter a rift between what "the future" meant yesterday and what the word signifies today. The sculpture of Tobias Putrih plumbs this fissure. His reinterpretations of the visionary, optimistic strain of utopianism that defined early and mid-twentieth century modernism are tempered with gentle humor and nostalgia. By immersing himself in the boisterous idealism of such early modernists as Friedrich Kiesler, Buckminster Fuller, Charles and Ray Eames, and El Lissitzky, Putrih acknowledges how our collective understanding of "the future" has changed. Putrih uses self-consciously abject materials to evoke the work of an earlier avant-garde. In the art of many contemporary artists such allusions would suggest cynical posturing. Putrih's work is more elegiac than ironic. But he does hint at a darker side to these utopian aspirations. As much as Putrih plays with older ideas of modernity, his work echoes the German critic Adolf Behne, who in 1919 declared, "Utopia ... is no laughing matter."[1]

Tobias Putrih occupies an ideal position to evaluate the poles of mid-century modernism. He entered the Academy of Fine Arts Ljubljana, Slovenia, following a year of studying physics. Claiming that this earlier schoolwork "grounded my illusions about science and confronted me with the fact that I'm neither ready nor able to invest the amount of energy expected in such a specialized field," Putrih still evinces a fascination with the "heritage of quasi-scientific production."[2] Yet he also appreciates what he calls "the historic avant-garde."[3] With this scientific background, he explores the themes of romanticism and science that crisscross twentieth-century modernism.

In both avant-garde architecture and popular culture, a palpable excitement infused the futuristic imaginings of artists and writers in the first half of the twentieth century. From telegraph to radios, airplanes to motor cars, the almost miraculous fruits of the industrial revolution utterly transformed lives. A hundred years earlier, most people quite logically imagined that the basic contours of their grandchildren's lives would remain all but identical to their own. But the rapid pace of technological innovation, coupled with industrial manufacture and distribution in the nineteenth century, allowed for unbridled optimistic imaginings of machine-driven utopias. These filtered into the popular imagination in the form of Jules Verne's submarines and propeller-powered balloons, *Amazing Stories* and Buck Rogers spacecraft. Yet such visions were also

1. Adolf Behne, "Unbekannte Architekten," in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* no. 25, April 18, 1919, p. 422.

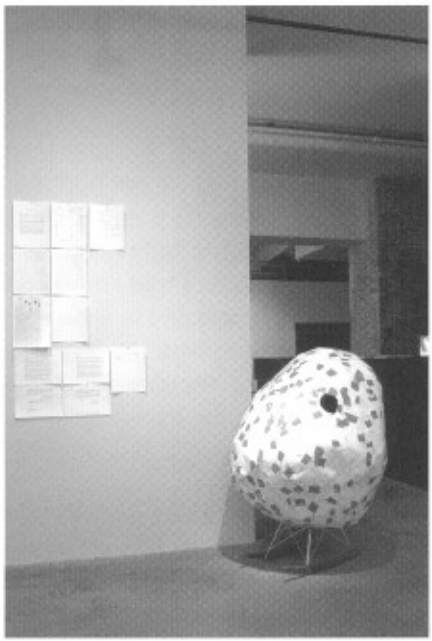
2. Tobias Putrih, interview by Lívia Páldi, unpublished, 2002.

3. Ibid.

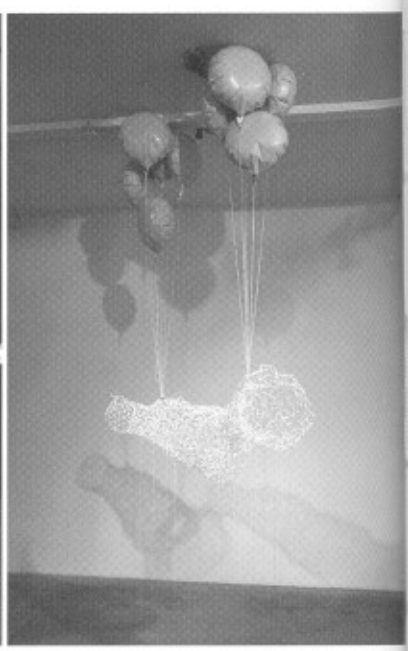
fundamental to the avant-garde projects of early modernists like Le Corbusier, whose Ville Contemporaine projected glass-clad skyscrapers set in geometric parks and gleaming superhighways, and El Lissitzky, whose abstract squares and circles were intended to evoke the technological change that the artist believed would transfigure Soviet society.[4]

Putrih probes the romanticism that often braced these fervent visions. From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, this earlier mélange of scientific rationalism and spirited expressionism might suggest a charming naiveté. But in works like *Anthropomorphic* (2003), *Unity: After Wolkenbügel by El Lissitzky* (2003), and *Endless Eames* (2003), Putrih reaches for more than simple satire. In his studies, models and maquettes, he reminds us that visions of utopia are often cobbled together out of wire and chewing gum. While these quirky attempts to construct a new world may seem strange or even fantastical today, they still bristle with a visionary allure.

4. For a fuller treatment of these themes see Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival*. London: Reaktion, 2006.

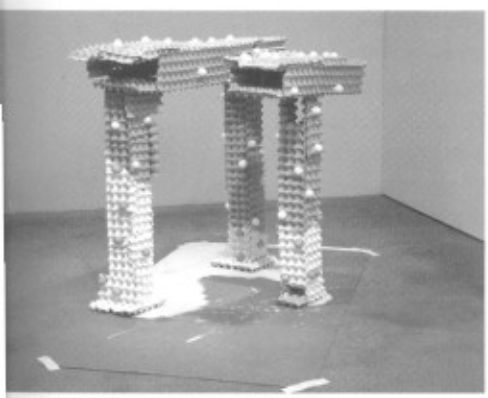


Endless Eames, 2003



Anthropomorphic, 2003

Putrih conflates the passionate futurism of Russian Constructivism with the ebullient postwar optimism of American mid-century Modernism, drawing our attention to the idealistic similarities that gird these two movements. *Endless Eames* (2003) is a wacky recollection of the famous Eames *Molded Plastic Rocker* (1948). A mid-century icon to pragmatic functionalism, the Eames rocker is recalled in the chrome base and wood runners of Putrih's sculpture. But he



Unity (after Wolkenbugel by El Lissitzky), 2003

surmounts this base with a biomorphic egg-like structure composed of invitations to a gallery opening. This curious appendage recalls an alternate and often forgotten strain of mid-century Modernism, quoting Friedrich Kiesler's 1952 *Endless House*. Part of a life-long project intended to rebuke the highly pragmatic ideas of contemporary designers like Charles Eames, Kiesler's house would blend painting, sculpture, and architecture with the surrounding environment. Presented at the Museum of Modern Art's 1952 exhibition *2 Houses: New Ways to Build*, this biomorphic, free-form living space would, as Kiesler later explained, be "endless like the human body—there is no beginning and no end."[5]

Though Kiesler came to the United States with bona fide modernist credentials (he helped bring the de Stijl style to the U.S. in the 1920s), his quixotic project seemed, at the time, antithetical to the highly practical Eames design. Indeed, Charles and Ray Eames intended to make modernism accessible to postwar Americans in the form of simple, cost efficient furnishings and functionalist housing. While Putrih's fanciful chair rejects simplistic notions of functionalism, it points to common ground between the pragmatic Eameses and the idealistic Kiesler. In fact, the Eameses peppered their version of modern design with capricious and organic forms, employing in their furniture playful bent plywood shapes and whimsical attributes. The jet-age base of *Molded Plastic Rocker*, for instance, uses wood runners that mimic nineteenth-century American rocking chairs.

Kiesler vs Fuller (2003) points to Putrih's deep fascination with the tension between romantic idealism and rational engineering. The 1952 MoMA exhibition explicitly contrasted Kiesler's "expressionist" visions with the engineering wizardry of R. Buckminster Fuller by juxtaposing his *Endless House* along with one of Fuller's designs in the shape of a geodesic dome. An assemblage of press releases, reviews, and correspondence related to the show, *Kiesler vs Fuller* reflects

5. Friedrich Kiesler, *Inside the Endless House: Art, People and Architecture*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966, pp. 566-7.

Putrih's research in MoMA's exhibition archives. Despite their contemporary reception as opposites, Putrih reveals these two paragons of mid-century modernism as equally fantastic in their utopian dreams. Fuller, who imagined his house to include floors that could be hydraulically raised or lowered and bathrooms and a kitchen placed on wheels that would be connected to flexible hoses, was widely acclaimed as an ingenious engineer. At the same time Kiesler's *Endless House* included a "color clock" with an observatory-like construction on the structure's roof intended to catch the sun's rays and project prisms of color into the house. The latter was considered, as Putrih notes, "artistic and elitist, what I guess were not compliments for an architect back then."[6] Indeed, *Endless House* was estimated to cost between $60,000 to $75,000;[7] Fuller, meanwhile, spoke of renting his houses for as low as one hundred dollars a month, earning him a reputation for designing economically and simply.[8] Reflecting on Kiesler's contemporary reception, Putrih realizes how anomalous his designs must have seemed. "To talk about [an] egg-like anthropomorphic shaped house in the age of steel, speed, and mass housing. At that time I think he sounded almost naïve," Putrih noted in an interview last year. Moreover, he insists, "to reveal such a utopia to postwar America, didn't quite work."[9]

Today, utopian schemes, whether based like Kiesler on organic forms or focusing on engineered precepts like Fuller, are often greeted with skepticism. While Kiesler and Fuller might have struck contemporaries as antithetical, from our current vantage point they share a buoyant optimism that is alternately enviable, quaint and disconcerting. Subsequent generations have questioned whether it is appropriate to predict the future and whether the optimistic dazzle and utopian claims of visionaries like Kiesler and Fuller are possible or even desirable. Although Fuller's visions were couched in the language of logic and rigor while Kiesler invoked values more akin to the dreamy expressionism of architects like Bruno Taut, today both attempts to conjure the future seem quirky and fantastic.

Although his sculpture echoes these earlier modernist projects, Putrih neither pays them simple homage nor does he lob ironic potshots. The fusion of Kiesler and Eames in *Endless Eames* reflects clear admiration bounded by an ambivalent rebuke to the very notion of functionalism. Both designers embrace organic forms. Both are confident that "the future" could contain virtually limitless possibilities. They recall an era when a "better tomorrow" seemed all but inevitable; designers' ingenuity and technical prowess, plus unlimited resources, virtually guaranteed a better future. Perched atop Eames' steel and wood scaffold, the somewhat abject eggplant form refers to Keisler's house. It also renders Putrih's chair functionless. In a deft sleight of hand, Putrih swaps the most significant technological

6. Tobias Putrih, interview by Catherine Chevalier, unpublished, 2006.

7. Ibid.

8. "Beyond the Horizon," in *Time*, vol. 60, no. 11. September 15, 1952.

9. Tobias Putrih, interview by Catherine Chevalier, unpublished, 2006.

achievement of Eames' chair, the reinforced fiberglass seat, with a subtle paean to the far edge of modernist idealism. The seat, which represented a triumph of manufacturing capability, is substituted with a form that evokes Kiesler's complex, even radiant vision. But Putrih's stand-in appears as a lumpy vegetable cobbled together from office supplies. It conflates skepticism and longing, defining our age of energy crises, environmental concerns, and technological wariness. The glistening, coherent, and rational "future" of the mid-century still serves as a plinth, literally raising the eggplant form off the floor. But it hardly harkens to a new and technologically advanced world.

The same fascination with modernism's heroic visions of the future infuses Putrih's *Anthropomorphic* (2003). Envisioning a geodesic sphere that would float in the sky, in 1958 Buckminster Fuller imagined a "flying city." Typical of Fuller's egalitarian and ostensibly pragmatic utopianism, the floating sphere would house thousands, enabling world-wide population growth and ensuring housing for all. While Fuller may not have expected to see the project built, he surmised that the structure, a sphere more than a mile in diameter, might trap heat from solar energy as well as from human activity; the whole structure would float like a hot air balloon. Fuller further proposed that such balloon cities could be moored to mountain tops between their travels, allowing inhabitants to move the sphere around the face of the earth. Putrih revisits this futurist dream by again conflating the romantic Kiesler with the "practical" visionary Fuller. Instead of reproducing Fuller's floating geodesic spheres, Putrih's model uses helium-filled balloons to suspend a biomorphic form that echoes the "continuous" surfaces of Kiesler's *Endless House*. Like the latter's aggregate of bulbous blobs, the work's title recalls Kiesler's desire to create an organic, humanized version of modern housing.

But it is Putrih's choice of materials that most distinguishes him from his modernist models. *Anthropomorphic House*, for instance, contains a biomorphic volume constructed out of hundreds of plastic twist ties. This chunky form is fastened to cheap mylar balloons that ordinarily embellish flower arrangements or are given away at children's birthday parties. Putrih's throw-away materials transmute both the steel and aluminum of Fuller's space-age engineering and Kiesler's quirkily visionary use of reinforced concrete. Made of balloons that might be purchased at a florist shop or grocery store and twist ties normally used to secure garbage bags, Putrih's models resemble the homemade contraptions found in a crafter's garage or the unpredictable projects on display at a school science fair. His use of "poor" materials has been noted before.[10] But they also distinguish his aspirations from those of the Modernists. Though

10. Évence Verdier, "Tobias Putrih pratique de l'anarchitecture," in *Art Press* no. 300, 2004, p. 49.

often constructing their own models out of cardboard or relying on early photomontage techniques, the early modernists imagined that they could solve social problems through engineered forms. Using poor or abject materials, Putrih has different goals. He comments not so much on what we should become but who we are today.

A studied fragility binds many of these pieces, including Putrih's evocation of the Russian visionary El Lissitzky. *Unity: After Wolkenbügel by El Lissitzky* (2003) deploys delicate cardboard egg crates to address Lissitzky's claim to a future based on science and rationality. The revolutionary avant-garde of Soviet Constructivism is most commonly associated with the work of Vladimir Tatlin. But numerous other artists, including Natalya Goncharova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Lissitzky responded to a similar calling, trying to remake post-Revolutionary society; they considered themselves engineers and often adopted uniforms of mechanics' coveralls while eschewing painting for graphic design and architectural projects. Indeed, Lissitzky deemed his *Wolkenbügel* (Cloud-Iron) photomontage of 1925 a "horizontal skyscraper." Its vast upper slabs were audaciously cantilevered on only three pillars, freeing valuable ground space for other uses while leaving the level units floating above the street. The *Wolkenbügel* reflects Lissitzky's personal fascination with American engineered skyscrapers but reimagines the form for Soviet use; he believed that tall, multistoried buildings were a reflection of capitalist dogma and opted to expand his new structure horizontally instead. But Lissiztky's visionary plan was never constructed, assuming a place in architectural history and theory rather than hovering over a major Moscow intersection as its designer originally intended.

Based on Lissitzky's photomontage, Putrih's model maintains the building's three pillared form but subverts the architect's original vision by constructing the mock-up out of painted egg crates. Rather than choosing materials that mimic the flat surfaces and solid girders of Lissizky's original conception, Putrih transforms the angular Constructivist structure into a lattice of flimsy cardboard. Putrih's frail structure forms a system of orbs and voids; several forlorn eggs remain fixed in their cartons, surrounded by empty contours intended to hold others. For all its delicacy, Putrih's model is more tangible than Lissitzky's; while the use of photomontage describes the avant-garde architect's vision, his project was never realized as a three-dimensional structure.

Putrih's frankly delicate sculpture destabilizes more than Lissitzky's dreams of skyscraper engineering. Describing *Unity: After Wolkenbügel by El Lissitzky*, Putrih is less interested in the vulnerability of his own building materials than "the fragility of the utopian model."[11] These architects and designers believed that utopia could

11. Tobias Putrih, interview by Lívia Páldi, unpublished, 2002.

be achieved in the future, remaking society and man himself. Since the Renaissance, the optimistic remodeling of society focused on the ideal of utopia. Thomas More imagined utopia to be an island whose ideal society was organized according to principles outlined in Plato's *Republic*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many socialists believed that utopia could be achieved by leveling class differences and improving the material situation of the new legions of factory workers. Late in the century, however, a newer approach to utopia developed; extended studies of history, as well as the advent of Darwinism, encouraged both philosophers and the man on the street to embrace the fundamental idea of progress; each believed that positive change was all but inevitable. Many felt that technology would allow man to leapfrog toward this better world. Lissitzky looked to industrialization as a force to reshape Russian revolutionary society. Kiesler reflects a more mystical strain within the history of architecture; his *Endless House* embraced metaphysical conceptions of man and space, but he also sought to humanize the material potential of ferro-concrete construction.[12] Fuller's *Cloud Nine* looked to the future to enable equally ambitious building projects; his floating sphere project was intended to evoke the "idea of a perfect closed social environment, airborne city."[13]

While reveling in these bracing visions for the future, Putrih also senses something vaguely sinister in sweeping dreams for new worlds transformed by technology. He suggests, for instance, that Fuller's utopian *Cloud Nine* would have been run as a tyrannical regime; to remain buoyant and keep their weight constant, the city's inhabitants would require constant surveillance.[14] And we should recall that Lissitzky's imaginary architecture has been questioned today; how many pedestrians would appreciate walking under a monolithic slab hovering over city squares and streets? Putrih has good reason to be sensitive to the darker side to visionary projections of the future.[15] Born in the former Yugoslavia, he spent his childhood living in a softened version of totalitarianism. As Évence Verdier has noted, Putrih's *Anthropomorphic* replaces the spheres of the *Cloud Nine* project with a biomorphic form inspired by the *Endless House*. He uses Kiesler as an antidote to the tyranny that he perceives in Fuller's vision.[16] Putrih, no doubt, knows all too well how visions of utopia can go awry.

Tobias Putrih reminds us that utopia is indeed no laughing matter. These models evoke a potent and unrealized future. Today we approach such ideas with ambivalence. Quoting visions that are both futurist and archaic, at least one critic has noted that Putrih's egg crate recreation of Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel* resembles a "classical ruin."[17] However, if Putrih's egg cartons are meant to evoke decay, what they reveal is the ruin of our own memories of yesterday's tomorrows.

12. Though Kiesler stated that his house could be constructed of wood, it was stressed that the version exhibited at MoMA would be constructed of reinforced concrete.

13. Tobias Putrih, interview by Lívia Páldi, unpublished, 2002.

14. Tobias Putrih, correspondence with author, April 8, 2007.

15. Francesco Manacorda, "The Dark Side of Modernism," in *Flash Art* no. 36, March/April 2004, p. 91.

16. Verdier, "Tobias Putrih pratique de l'anarchitecture," in *Art Press* no. 300, 2004, p. 49.

17. "Tobias Putrih," in *Village Voice*, October 7, 2003.