

**Jeffrey Rubinoff and the Cold War**

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*Artist and Scientist*

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“... I was born on October 23 1945.

I was born in the shadow of the Endgame.”

- Jeffrey Rubinoff

It is natural for all wars slowly to fade into the history. Never a smooth process, it tends to drag on while some are trying to remember and some are trying to forget. That is why it is so remarkable how quickly the Cold War became nearly forgotten soon after it was declared to be over. The speed with which it was moved into a distant past after the collapse of the Soviet Union makes one suspect that there was something shameful in the whole affair, something that our collective memory would rather not deal with. Yet it could not have been the atrocities, the destruction or the number of the dead: far worse had happened before.

Many of those who were directly involved in the nuclear programs on both sides used the opportunity of what seemed at the time to be the end of the struggle between the superpowers to exorcise themselves of the heavy burden by pronouncing the end to the Cold War (7). However, that alone would not explain how this view achieved such widespread global acceptance so quickly, and why most of humanity was so easily convinced. There must be a deeper reason why even the brightest minds were so eager to believe that there is no longer a reason to be afraid of nuclear war.

Why did an intelligent race that praises itself on bringing purpose and structure to the chaotic universe also acquire the ability to kill itself in the nuclear holocaust — and continue to live with it? Millions of years of evolution went by, perfecting the survival of the species; and yet in just a few decades humanity found a sure way to destroy all life on Earth. So disturbing and so depressing is such a thought that most of us cannot dwell on it for any considerable length of time. It is our collective shame at throwing away the gift of life that we would rather forget. We would rather move on than live with a constant reminder. It requires unwavering commitment and strong character to pursue the subject whether it to be in science, politics, philosophy or art. For someone outside of circle of experts who deal with nuclear weapons issues professionally, Jeffrey Rubinoff, an artist, is exceptionally persistent in trying to find meaningful answers to impossible questions. His life's work is a remarkable example of how one can overcome the dark energy of fear and doom, and turn it into a positive creative artistic force.

“In 1962 I received the Cuban Missile Crisis for my 17th birthday. We actually expected annihilation at any time.”

- Jeffrey Rubinoff

The first generation of children in North America born after World War II were made to ‘duck and cover’ under their school benches and look at the pictures of mushroom clouds in the Civil Defense drills alongside everyday activities such as baseball and corn on the cob. Yet they received no guidance growing up in a world with nuclear weapons. Neither their parents nor teachers had adequate answers. Everybody struggled to comprehend this new kind of war where you do not follow troop movements and battle lines on a distant continent while listening to a radio. Instead, a bright silver speck in a blue sky on a hot summer day could be the enemy’s high altitude strategic bomber bringing the end to your world.

“In August of 1949 the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon. The Endgame was on. In November of 1952 the first thermonuclear explosion vaporized the island of Elugelab in the Marshall Islands. The hydrogen bomb was born. The explosive and radiation yield was many orders of magnitude higher than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

In August of 1953 the Soviet Union exploded its first hydrogen bomb.

The shadow darkened and spread globally throughout the 1950's. We became certain of mutually assured destruction regardless of either side's preparation for victory.”(3)

It would be wrong to think that some in Jeffrey Rubinoff’s generation developed an inexplicable, overwhelming fear of nuclear weapons because they were traumatized by them to a point that it grew into an obsession. In fact, it was a rational response to a global threat that has no precedent in human history and is outside of human comprehension. It is the rationalization and justification of nuclear weapons, which came later, that has been an irrational reaction to an extremely dangerous situation.

Although one can understand the desire to rationalize the unthinkable —to see the unknown through the prism of the familiar— when a person is actually confronted with an impossible situation, a denial of truth never leads to a solution. Jeffrey Rubinoff makes this position on rationalization of nuclear weapons very clear in his criticism of Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War* which was one of the first major intellectual attempts to find alternatives to mutual annihilation:

"In spite of his arguments, or perhaps because of them, these alternatives appear equally absurd to the possibilities of a 'Doomsday Machine' which he cogitates. This 'Doomsday Machine' and Herman Kahn will be central to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* released in 1964.

Kahn's arguments rationalize mega death. The destruction of major cities is exchanged in favour of ending escalating war. Mega death becomes transactional."(3)

Nuclear weapons became a threat to all humanity, yet both the Soviet and the United States governments failed to rise to the occasion and develop a new common identity that would embrace the entire human race. Instead, they crawled back into the familiar world of confrontation and power play: 'us' versus 'them'. While both sides claimed to be the guardians of the future of humanity, the nuclear standoff continued with endless acts of intimidation and provocation. The Cuban Missile Crisis and many other close calls have come and gone, strategic arms treaties signed and let expire, but the nuclear stockpile still reaches approximately 17,000 nuclear devices. Seven more countries have joined the 'nuclear club' bringing the total to nine.

There had been many genuinely profound moments that kept reminding us how precious our little blue bubble is in the vast empty space of the universe: first view of Earth from orbit by Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, Earth rise over the Moon's horizon witnessed by Apollo astronauts and Earth as a tiny dot of light photographed by Cassini spacecraft through the rings of Saturn, to name just a few. But they never triggered a global revelation, a chain reaction of understanding that would be powerful enough to break the cycle of nuclear arms race madness. Of course there were demonstrations, some reaching hundreds of thousands of protesters at a time, but even the largest was just a tiny, negligible portion of the entire population of the planet. Unlike alien invasions in sci-fi movies that bring humanity together to fight the common enemy, nuclear weapons —the first

real threat to the existence of the entire human race—drove us apart instead of uniting us. Now far gone is the bipolar world of the Cold War with nuclear confrontation between the only two superpowers: United States and the Soviet Union. We now have India vs. Pakistan and China, Israel vs. Iran and nuclear terrorism vs. everybody. Not to mention France and Great Britain, who have their own nuclear arsenals but not a clearly defined objective or North Korea which multiplies the insanity of its nuclear weapons by the insanity of its leadership.

As real as the threat of the nuclear holocaust may be, an average person does not believe there is anything that one can do about it. They find comfort in the thought that we have been already living with the nukes for 70 years without the nuclear catastrophe occurring. This is flawed reasoning but typical of human nature: the longer something terrible does not happen, the less likely it seems to happen at all. Ironically, in the cultures and the societies that value and promote extreme individualism a person is far more likely to think that a death is still a death, whether it happened in a nuclear explosion or in a car crash and therefore to perceive the nuclear threat as nothing special, no different from many other unpredictable dangers we may face in life.

However unlike most, Jeffrey Rubinoff had never lost an acute apprehension of the threat of nuclear annihilation since he set to *explore his way out* on a personal quest at the age of nineteen.

“I knew that there had to be another way through this. It took another year and my first real existential crisis. I began to look to art and started writing. I know now that I could only do this as an a priori cognition and in an ad hoc way. I had no plan where it might lead. Eventually it led to my undergraduate education and my first emergence as an artist.”(3)

It was inevitable that in the course of this exploration Jeffrey Rubinoff was confronted with the contradiction of art being the means of overcoming this existential threat and the seeming pointlessness of pursuing it when the very existence of humanity is threatened.

“The Enlightenment that had meant to liberate civilization with the spirit of knowledge had evolved through that knowledge the means to destroy civilization itself. Under the most extreme circumstances, it may prove to have evolved the means for the extinction of the very humanity it means to uplift.

For me, art had become the means to work through this ...” (3)

One of the key questions that has always defined human behaviour is whether one believes that there is a common purpose to human existence, or whether it is just the sum of our individual aspirations. But positing a common purpose is senseless when nuclear weapons call into question not just the qualities of a future humanity but whether it will have any future at all? It is hard to believe in progress throughout history knowing that it led to our species acquiring the irrational ability to kill itself. More and more intellectuals are living their lives in the nuclear age as “strangers in a strange land” when our entire history is viewed just as a set of accidental initial conditions at the moment of one’s birth and time has no meaning outside of one’s life span. This is not the “there is only ‘now’ ” concept of Buddhism, it is a resignation from being a part of human history and perceiving one's life as a self-contained bubble. Nuclear weapons threaten our future, but they have been already destroying our past by negating any concept or principle that implies continuity throughout human history.

“I realized that to make original art with artistic depth I would have to return to the lineage of the ancestors—the history of art by artists. So began a dialogue with the ancestors, artist to artist via the work itself.”

- Jeffrey Rubinoff (1)

Once the importance of artistic lineage is fully accepted by an artist, it is impossible not to see that it extends into the future as well as into the past. In this dialog the artist not only listens to the ones who came before, but also speaks to those yet to come. However, when the total annihilation of humanity is a very distinct possibility such a view no longer seems to make much sense. Many artists living in the nuclear age have resigned themselves to a rootless, contemporary view of art and have chosen to ignore the art history altogether. No matter how successful and commercially prosperous an artist is, ignorance is not bliss, but a sure way into the morasses of mediocrity. For Jeffrey Rubinoff, there is no other choice but to face the conundrum, no matter how difficult and

unsettling it is. He sees nuclear weapons not only as a threat to humanity but also as a threat to art itself:

“My perception of art is that it is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience. Nuclear Deterrence is the abrogation of conscience.” (2)

But identifying the problem correctly does not necessarily bring us any closer to finding the solution. Elsewhere he admits that:

“Still it can be argued that there is a moral imperative in maintaining Deterrence as the least worst option. Certainly moment to moment peace is better than the historical predictability of the exercise of these weapons.” (1)

Moment-to-moment peace still does not solve the cardinal problem: just the possibility of the end of humanity in the nuclear Armageddon of its own doing takes away any meaning out of our existence as a civilization. It only gives hope that somehow the solution perhaps might be found in future. But hope is not a method, it is more of an excuse to push the nuclear threat out of our minds —someone else’s problem, for some other time. Jeffrey Rubinoff, clearly realizing that, correctly points out that the art does not require a civilization:

“To an artist civilization may indeed be a temporary evolutionary upstart. Because I perceive the human soul as the sum of all human knowledge (how can it be any less?), I highly value civilization in its rapid expansion of that knowledge and its contribution to the evolution of the human soul. However should civilization prove to be short-lived by its own hand and humanity manages to survive, artists will continue as they did before civilization.” (3)

It is hard to argue with this statement, and the 30,000 years old prehistoric art from the Chauvet Cave is all the testimony that we need. However, this would be a very specific scenario that implies that at least some of humanity will survive. If a full blown nuclear war were to happen now, with a large portion of the current stockpile of nuclear warheads being used, any survivors of the human race would be highly unlikely. Also, the knowledge gained from the ‘Tzar Bomba’ test (5) and other thermonuclear explosions have confirmed that there is no practical limit to the yield

of a thermonuclear device. No one can guarantee that a true 'planet destroyer' will not be built in the future. One does not have to be certain in this grim outcome, just a mere possibility of it is enough to lose faith not only in the collective sanity of the human race but also in any endeavour that extends beyond our short individual lives. If all is gone, if our planet is literally blown to pieces or turned into a lifeless rock with all the traces of our existence wiped out, then what?

Jeffrey Rubinoff looks for a reassuring answer, an intellectual way out, a lasting knowledge that is not as fragile and fleeting as our lives and our civilization are:

"Nature, by the passage of time and by the genetic sculpting of life has created a history that is crushingly honest and constantly probing the future. It is thus simultaneously innocent and guilty of the most destructive crimes that lead to the most magnificent creations. Without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe.

As far as we know, we fragile humans are the only fully cognizant witnesses. With this capability comes the great responsibility of this knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists. The act of will that I describe in my definition of art is the act of witnessing and recording this knowledge. This is the highest of human values—the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being. Art is the map of the human soul.

Evolution in time will continue with or without human existence. Progress will remain—inexorable and unrelenting—even if we manage to destroy our necessary environment and perish in a nuclear winter." (4)

But then, as if not entirely convinced himself, he immediately continues with tremendous force and passion:

"Art is the authentic internal scream against the suicidal nature of our rooted tribal culture." (4)

Progress and evolution are concepts that exist only in human consciousness, even if when we apply them to the universe this is what we, humanity, have observed, this is what we have chosen

to notice. None of these concepts, even the concepts of 'concept' and 'existence' themselves, exists without humanity. A universe without conscious life remains unnoticed and therefore non-existing in a human sense. However, as self-evident it might be to some of us, the recognition of the responsibility to nurture life given to us by the universe is not something that comes naturally to all humanity. The human race may be mentally ill to develop and keep nuclear weapons, but it is not a patient that could be given a prescription with the expectation that it will follow it. Neither ideology nor mass culture can enforce it. The change has to happen freely, one human soul at a time and art is definitely one of the most powerful triggers to cause such awakening. But how could we possibly contemplate such a process with any degree of seriousness when our very existence is in question, when humanity continues to live in a perpetual limbo always 30 minutes away from the total annihilation - that is how long it would take from an accidental launch, or mistaken believe that there was one, to all-out nuclear war as the result of a superpower's retaliation. All one can do is to scream in deepest frustration at the stupidity of our own species which even after realizing the supreme danger of nuclear weapons refuses to dismantle them and instead keeps looking for ways to justify their necessity.

"You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

— Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

If one follows Jeffrey Rubinoff's insights through his writings, without ever experiencing his art directly, one would have concluded that the main driving force throughout his artistic career has been his recognition of the importance of evolution of human consciousness for the survival of humanity and the essential role of art in this process:

"A philosophy based on our evidentiary knowledge of evolution and our consequential place in nature can provide a basis for the development of the order of consciousness necessary to overcome the virulent metaphorical forms of tribalism such as racism, nationalism and religion. Overcoming this socially atavistic, dangerous reliance is exigent given the advent of nuclear weapons.

...

What I learned was that to be able to measure the inherent value of an artist's work is to be able to accept each artist's perception of the extent of the sum of all human knowledge in that artist's time. Original art is created beyond the limits of that extent and informs rather than reflects. Consequently, original art itself becomes located on the map of the human soul, and in so doing, adds to the sum of all human knowledge. Original art and the human soul evolve together." (6)

The same theme culminates in a very concise and distilled form in Jeffrey Rubinoff's definition of art:

"Art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience" (3)

But we also may have felt that Jeffrey Rubinoff's insights, no matter how profound, leave us with a sense of uncertainty as to the outcome and powerless to influence it, remaining hostages to nuclear deterrent. There is always a danger that in following a concise definition of a fundamental concept such as 'art' or 'existence' one climbs to the top of a pyramid where, after a moment of being at a point of perfect lucidity, there is no other place to go but down again into a quagmire of possible interpretations and lengthy commentaries.

Journey for a purpose but void of destination, searching for the essence of art and existence perhaps is less of a contest of grand ideas and more like a fleeting scene from a moving car: driving along an ocean's coast and catching glimpses of something so big and profound that no single stationary view, no matter how perfect, can grasp in full clarity.

Jeffrey Rubinoff's writings, if taken by themselves, project a certain sense of incompleteness not just because he ponders some of the most difficult questions to answer, but because he asks the questions as a philosopher and as an intellectual, but answers them as an artist. Jeffrey Rubinoff's insights may open the door in someone's mind to highly troublesome and disturbing thoughts about the nuclear threat and the fate of humanity, but through his art he may also provide a place of active tranquility, an inner sanctum to think these thoughts through without being completely overwhelmed by their terrible implications. Very few are capable of being always aware of the impact of nuclear weapons on our lives. To most of us it is such a disturbing subject that we flee

from it at the first opportunity as our evolution taught us to do when we are confronted with overwhelming danger. To correctly point to the great existential threat is not enough to make people to pay attention; their minds would shut off out of fear, they would turn to ignorance or hope, no matter how irrational that might be. But they would not think hard nor long enough to overcome the threat unless there is mental place they can go to that is safe and sane, a shelter where one's consciousness can retreat at will, to become a detached observer weighing options and possibilities, and dealing calmly with the insane reality.

Even a first walk through Jeffrey Rubinoff's sculpture park may take a sensitive and willing observer on a journey of cascading perceived realities, further and further away from the normal space that we are so accustomed to living in.

The sculpture park starts with the oldest Series 1, cubes and rectangles caught in a delicate balancing act. There is a static grace in the objects tossed in the air that are joined together as if holding hands. Nevertheless the presence of gravity that binds everything together and linked to the ground is familiar and unquestionable.

In the Series 2 that follows, mechanistic jointed arms begin to rebel against the gravity in unmistakable attempt to move upwards. There is something very organic in their tense poses, although nothing even close in form, they somehow evoke the feeling of muscled arms trying to free themselves from captivity. Similar theme comes back in a later Series 6, 7 and 8 where skulls and vertebrae that one normally would associate with death spring to life as independent life forms that grow from the ground in defiance of gravity as only living things can do.

But in the Series 3 the gravity is simply gone. Groups of rectangular panels neither rest on the ground nor do they float above it, they exist by themselves as an independent entity that just happen to be in the vicinity of Earth and only accidentally touches it without any physical bondage. To experience this, all that one has to do is to let go of the conscious, literal interpretation of this series as post-industrial, heavy steel plates arrangements at various stages of deconstruction, and instead leave our subconscious visual apparatus free and alone to try to make sense of the lines and the angles. What starts as a hint of an optical illusion, a play of a negative

space, a form coalescing around a rupture, eventually becomes a new reality, different from our current point of observation.

In the latest Series 9 negative space reaches such dominance that the pieces themselves appear to be just cracks in a fabric of reality. Similar to the inversion of the subject in counter fugue, the negative space in this series becomes the new form to replace what is now perceived as immaterial filler where shine of stainless steel only enforces the feeling of light coming through a rupture.

Jeffrey Rubinoff is a master of ambiguity in visual perception. His confident technique turns what would, for a less talented sculptor, be an uncontrolled accident into a powerful and controlled instrument of creation. Human visual apparatus has not evolved for the purpose of looking at art. Natural selection perfected it as the means of survival, paying special attention to what matters most in order to quickly analyze surrounding space and identify threats and food sources. Only with the most recent advances in neuroscience we do begin to realize how much visual neural processing is happening in the retina and optical nerves before higher levels of our brains get involved. We now can appreciate that, like in music, point-counter-point interplay can happen in visual perception on many different subconscious levels and create a powerful underlying emotional context during conscious perception of a work of art.

Humans possess a highly developed ability for abstract thinking. We can focus so intently that, lost in thought, we suppress all sensual input and literally stop noticing what is happening around us. If one lets this ability go away, even for a moment, and look at the world in a more direct, naive way than a purposeful manipulation of visual apparatus at subconscious levels, through visual art, can induce in a willing observer a state of actual perception of somewhat altered physical reality.

The art in Series 4 is not only capable of creating such a perception, it actually can bring one into a different reality where an art object loses its physical fixed dimensions and appears to have no predefined size. It seems to be a tiny mechanism or gigantic space station at the same time. Its form vibrates in one's subconscious perception between multiple possibilities of interpretation and failing to resolve into one distinct shape and size, it tries to be all of them at once. Yet so strong is the evolutionary need for the exact interpretation of our surroundings that our subconscious

cannot just accept the ambiguity, and keeps trying to resolve it by placing one's point of reference inside that new reality to match it instead of remaining outside. We step through the looking glass and somehow we start losing perception of time.

The receding landscape of the sculpture park, its surroundings and perhaps its peculiar weather conditions create an interesting phenomenon where the horizon seems to be tightly, and without a gap, glued to the sky. Standing in front of pieces in Series 5, and in particular Series 5 – 5, amplifies this effect to a point that the universe shrinks to a bubble with the art piece at its centre and yourself as the only conscious being in it. The space is confined and visibly free of any danger. Time disappears, it does not just stop, it simply ceases to exist altogether. This is the experience of the ultimate peace, free from any existential threat: past, future or present simply because neither past, nor future, nor even present exist in this state without time.

The English word *timeless* is defined as 'unaffected by passage of time', but grammatically it really should be 'without time' as *endless* is 'without end'. In this sense Jeffrey Rubinoff's art is truly timeless. It does not matter how long one spends in a state without time, a nanosecond or an eternity are equally meaningless there, but once experienced it can never be forgotten.

1. Existential Realities of Post Agriculture, Jeffrey Rubinoff
2. Introduction 2010 Company of Ideas Forum, Jeffrey Rubinoff
3. Through the Lens of the Endgame, Jeffrey Rubinoff
4. Art Beyond War, Jeffrey Rubinoff
5. <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Russia/TsarBomba.html>
6. The Insights that Evolve With and From the Work of Jeffrey Rubinoff
7. Out of the Cold: The Cold War and Its Legacy, Bloomsbury, October 2013

## **Biography of Sergei Petrov**

### Artist and Scientist

Born in Moscow in 1953, Sergei Petrov graduated from the elite Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. He earned his advanced degree in Reliability of Complex Electronic Systems when subjected to the Effects of Nuclear Explosions at the Soviet Centre of Advanced Defence Studies in Moscow. His professional photographic career started in 1978 when Sergei left his position as a researcher in the Soviet defence industry and began working for leading Russian publishing houses. He photographed sculpture and paintings in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. In 1981, he became a dissident, first coming to international attention in 1982 when he spent 50 days on a hunger strike trying to win permission to emigrate. While unable to leave the Soviet Union, Sergei completed a number of assignments for Western magazines including Architectural Digest, Discover, New York Times Magazine, and Le Figaro. In 1988 an "in absentia" exhibition of his work was opened at the State Department in Washington DC by former US Secretary of State George Shultz. The following year Sergei was finally permitted to leave the Soviet Union, the culmination of years of sustained pressure from the US Government and, in particular, President Reagan and the US Ambassador to Moscow, Arthur Hartman, and his wife, Donna. His art was featured in American Photographer and The Washington Post Magazine. In 1991 The Corcoran Gallery of Art made a purchase of his work. Sergei's art was featured in the Masterpieces of the Russian Underground project at Lincoln Center in New York in 2003. He continues to pursue his passion for art along with his research in information technology and data security.