

The

Alternative contemporary photography from the Soviet Union

MISSING

Boris Michailov

PICTURE



The Missing Picture

**Alternative contemporary photography from the Soviet Union**

**MIT List Visual Arts Center** December 8, 1990–February 3, 1991

Boris Michailov

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Boris **M**ichailov





B. MICHAILOV  
from the series FROM AN ALBUM  
1970-80









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B. MICHAÏLOV  
from the series LURIKI

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1975-85





B. MICHAILOV  
from the series SOTS ART-1  
1975-85



об одиночестве

С 121 122

1) всег. ст.м.х

2) всег. ст.м.х

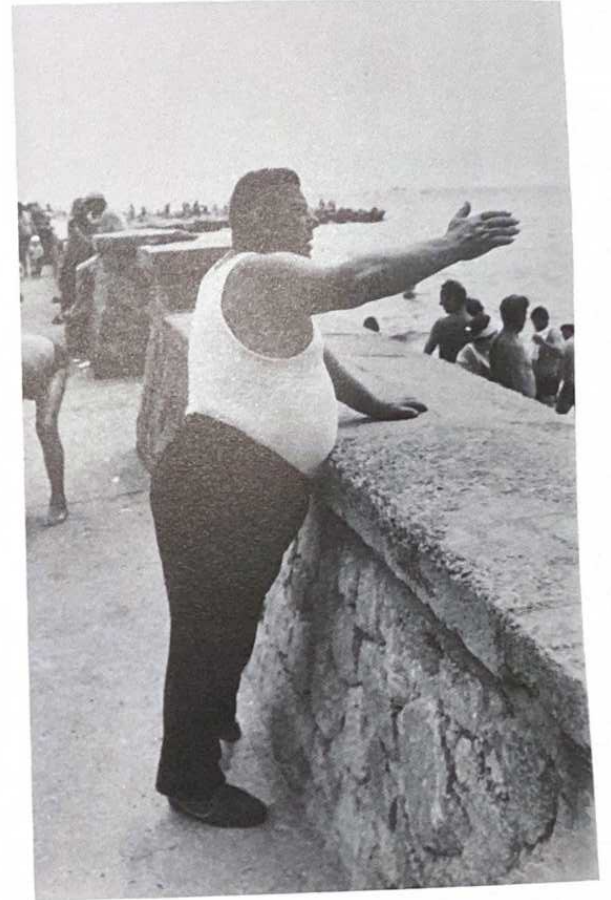
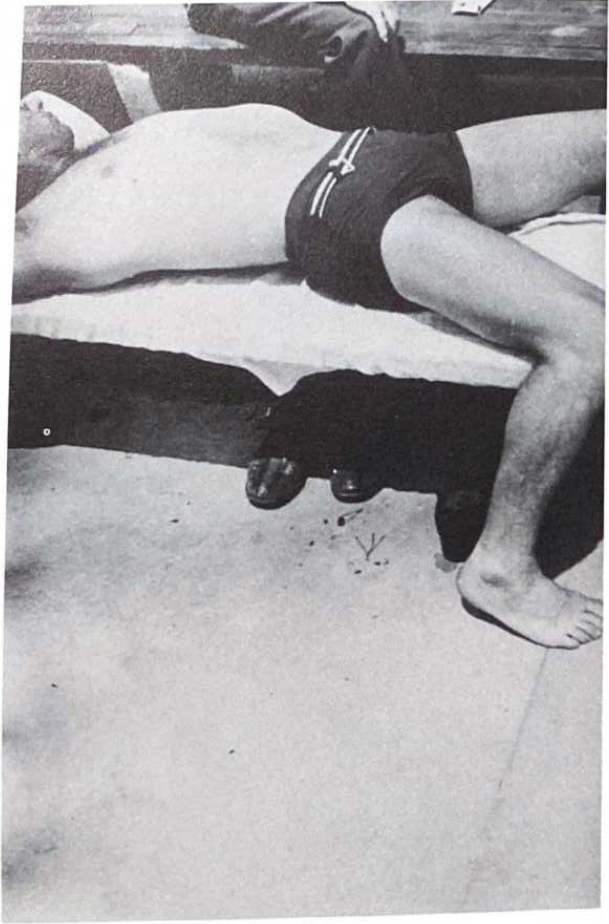


→ - Эти стрелки обозначают, что девушку справа надо соединить на одной фотографии с солдатом, а на другой с музыкантом ... а девушку слева ни с кем.

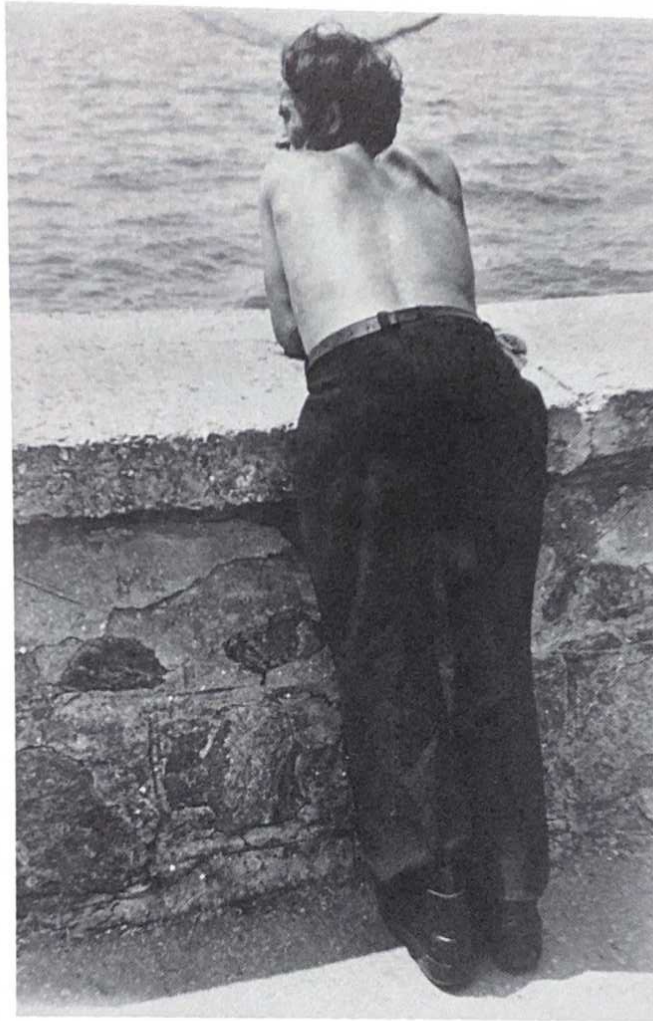
B. MICHAILOV

from the series BERDYANSK. THE BEACH

1980







B. MICHAÏLOV  
from the series BERDYANSK. THE BEACH  
1980



Берлин. Третье  
(мне превратился в кат)

Места уже больше не открываю  
люблю гулять  
Все стало серым  
Листья стали дорожкой по направлению  
к будущему



Все стало серым

Утренние беседы  
самому себе



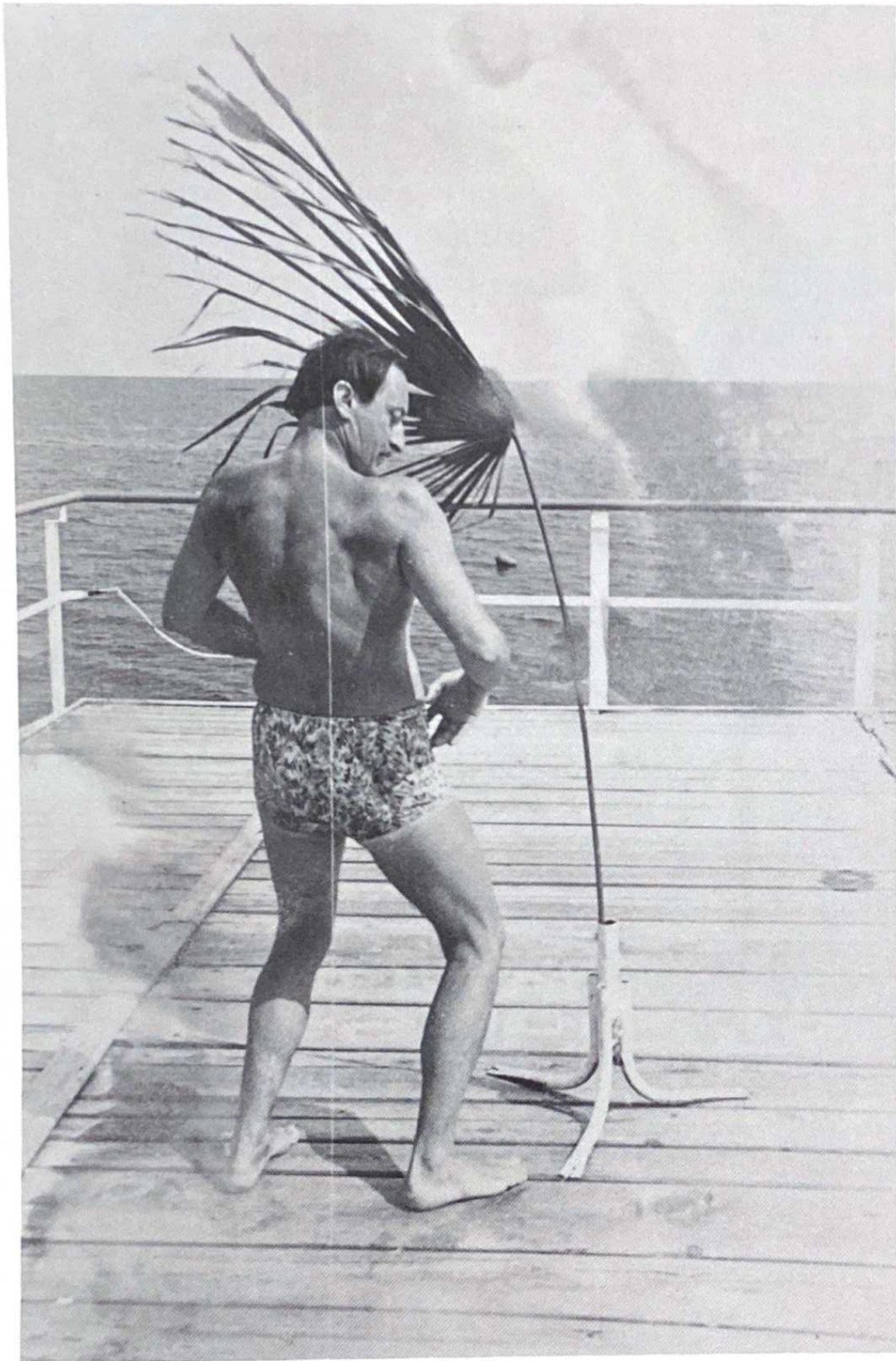
Вели бы утром я мог  
молиться  
Карточки, наверное, были бы  
другими

B. MICHAILOV

from the book UNFINISHED DISSERTATION

1985







## Checklist of the Exhibition

### BORIS MICHAÏLOV

- Unfinished Dissertation* 1985  
Handmade book with photographs and text, 170 pages 21 x 29 cm (page)
- Luriki* 1975–1985  
Twelve from a series of black and white photographs 24 x 30 cm; 18 x 24 cm; 20 x 29 cm
- Salt Lakes* 1985  
Handmade book with photographs, 100 pages 23 x 30 cm (page)
- Berdyansk. The Beach* 1980  
Fourteen from a series of black and white photographs 30 x 40 cm
- From an Album* 1970–1980  
Eleven black and white photographs 25 x 34 cm; 30 x 40 cm
- The Crimea Snobbery* 1982  
Handmade book with photographs, 113 pages 21 x 29 1/2 cm (page)
- Sots Art I* 1975–1985  
Five from a series of painted photographs 50 x 60 cm
- Sots Art II* 1985  
Fifty-five color photographs 16 1/2 x 25 cm
- Tests* 1970–ongoing  
Forty-nine black and white photographs 21 x 30 cm
- Self-Portrait* 1982  
Color photograph with mixed media 50 x 60 cm

## Artist's Biography

BORIS MIKHAILOV born 1938, Kharkov (Ukraine)

### **Bibliography**

- Mzrakova, Daniela and Vladimir Remes, *Another Russia*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986
- Arbetaren (Moskva)*, No. 41, 9/10, Stockholm, 1987
- Picture Show*, No. 5, Sweden/USA, 1987
- Die zeitgenossische Photographie in der Sowjet Union*, Zurich, Edition Stemmler, 1988
- Eskola, Taneli and Hanny Eerikainen, *Toisinnakijat (Uusi vazokuva neuvostoliitossa)*, Kirjat, Helsinki, 1988
- "Valokuva," *Finnish Photography*, 4/1988, Helsinki
- Image*, 2/1988, Helsinki
- Photo*, November 1988, France
- Art Press*, No. 130, November 1988, France
- Teatr, [Theatre]* No. 3, 1988, Moscow
- Studencheskij Meridian, [Student Meridian]* No. 8, 1989, Moscow
- Iskusstvo Kino, [Cinema Art]* No. 8, 1989, Moscow
- Sovietskoje Foto, [Soviet Photo]* No. 4, 1990, Moscow
- Taide*, February 1989, Finland
- Photographies*, No. 15, July/August 1989, France
- Photo: Special URSS*, No. 2, July 1989, France
- Kamera Lehti*, 12/1989, Helsinki
- Sartorti, Rosalinde, "No More Heroic Tractors: Subverting the Legacy of Socialist Realism," *Aperture*, No. 116, Fall 1989, pp 8–10
- Contemporanea*, September 1989, pp 64–71
- Katalog*, 1. arg., No. 2, Denmark

Gumanitarnyj Fond, [Humanitarian Fund]  
No. 4/37, June 1990, Moscow

### **One-Person Exhibitions**

- 1989 Museum of Contemporary Art, Tampere, Finland
- 1990 Central House of Cinematographers, Moscow  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Tel-Aviv

### **Group Exhibitions**

- 1982 Bratislava, Czechoslovakia
- 1984 *All-Union Photo Exhibition*, Moscow
- 1985 *Another Russia*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England
- 1988 *Contemporary Soviet Photography*, Museum of Photography, Lausanne, Switzerland  
*Contemporary Soviet Photography*, Museum of Photography, Odense, Denmark
- 1988–89 *Kodak Exhibition*, Paris, London, America, Moscow
- 1988–90 *Smile, please!*, Paris, London, Moscow
- 1989 *Contemporary Soviet Photography*, Stockholm; traveled to other Swedish cities  
*150 Years of Photography*, Prague, Czechoslovakia  
*Photobridge*, Moscow  
*PHOTOsummer* 1989, Moscow  
*150 Years of Photography*, Moscow
- 1990 *International Biennale of Photography*, Turin  
*Contemporary Photography from the USSR*, Walker, Ursitti & McGinniss Gallery, New York  
*Opposition: II International Biennale of Photography*, Rotterdam



The List Visual Arts Center has been interested in the conditions of visual creativity in the Soviet

**Foreword and Acknowledgments**

Union since whetting our appetites with a previous curatorial joint venture with John Jacob in 1987, *Out of Eastern Europe: Private Photography*. And, together with the rest of the world, we have continued to be spellbound by the course of events radiating out from the Soviet Union over the past three years. It is a privilege to contribute to the presentation in the west of work by artists from two generations who have been steeped in a period of such dramatically dismantled expectations and who continue to challenge the traditions and expectations of the medium of photography itself.

Though their stamina was sorely tested, my colleagues on both sides of the world could not have been more cooperative. Pavel Khoroshilov and Vassiliy Orekhanov of Soyuzkhudozhexport in Moscow took on the daunting assignment of organizing and financing a considerable part of this adventure. The five artists, and particularly Alexey Shulgin, their designated representative, shared many hours and much instructive advice with John Jacob, and participated generously and enthusiastically in preparing and providing work for the exhibition. John Jacob has once again brought attention to and created a context for understanding a varied and provocative body of work. Donna Griesenbeck proved an intrepid and dedicated translator. I have long since run out of superlatives or other vocabulary adequate to express my admiration and affection for the List Visual Arts Center staff.

The exhibition and catalogue could not have been realized without the generous and understanding support of the Trust for Mutual Understanding in New York. The Soros Foundation-Soviet Union helpfully contributed to the expenses of the artists while in the United States.

And, finally, the crucial intercontinental communication and exchange required by this ambitious undertaking depended upon good will, mutual commitment and several strategically placed fax machines.

Katy Kline  
Director, List Visual Arts Center



Pictures at an exhibition represent only a momentary pause in the ongoing process of cultural production and analysis. Before the pictures are collected and hung, months, even years, may be

by **John Jacob**

spent in meetings, negotiation, and renegotiation. Between formal encounters occur numerous late night discussions, fueled as much by coffee and tea as by the desire to define and cross the borders of cultural identity. Punctuating each step in the process are the pleasures and worries of departure and arrival: the sadness of leaving one's home tempered by the joy of arriving in the homes of distant friends; the anxiety of decision-making transformed by the satisfaction of a mutual understanding. The foundation upon which an exhibition is constructed is communication. Hidden behind the pictures: the development of one idea through the contributions of many voices; the interweaving of hard work and enthusiasm that culminates as the first viewers enter the hall.

I traveled to the Soviet Union for the first time in November of 1986, while collecting materials for the exhibition *Out of Eastern Europe: Private Photography*, which opened at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in early 1987. During that visit, with addresses supplied by friends who had emigrated to the United States from the USSR in the 1970s, I met with the artists who had formed the core of what has come to be known as the Moscow School. Many of them had worked with photography during the 1960s and 1970s, when conceptualism and performance were prominent and documentation was a critical consideration for artists who sought to preserve some record of their activities. By the time that I reached Moscow, however, most had returned to painting. Anyway, they assured me, the time was not yet right for their participation in an exhibition of the sort I was planning. The legal technicalities that made possible an exhibition of unsanctioned works by Central and East Central European artists did not apply to artists working in the USSR.

Since 1986, I have returned to the Soviet Union three times, in 1988, 1989, and 1990. During each of those visits I have witnessed remarkable changes in Soviet cultural life which, in 1986, would have been unthinkable. What especially distinguishes this exhibition is its evolution during this period of dramatic transition. It is a transition that encompasses all aspects of Soviet life, and demands the development of new forms of representation in the arts as well as in politics. It is a transition during which the cultural identification of a people, long determined by a series of endlessly uniform images, is being revised.

The artists included in *The Missing Picture* are not so much indicative of the state of Soviet photography today as they are of the new directions taken by photographers working within the current crisis of cultural representation and identification in Soviet art. To stress this point, *The Missing Picture* is constructed as a two-part exhibition. The separation of Boris Michailov's photographs from those of Alexey Shulgin, Maria Serebrjakova, Ilya Piganov, and Vladimir Kupreanov, serves to distinguish Michailov's work and to draw attention to its innovation. Michailov's influence on the younger artists may be clearly seen in the interplay of theme and technique that unites his photographs with theirs.

*The Missing Picture* also addresses the connection between artists of the current young generation and those of the earlier Moscow School, demonstrated in a renewed interest in conceptual strategies. Vladimir Kupreanov was a participant in several AptArt exhibitions in the



1970s. (See Margarita and Victor Tupitsyn, *AptArt, Moscow Vanguard in the 80s*, Cremona Foundation, Mechanicsville, 1985.) Masha Serebrjakova's landscapes are distinctly reminiscent of the landscapes of painter Eric Bulatov. Alexey Shulgin and Ilya Piganov were both members of the notorious Ermitazh group, and founded the Moscow-based group Immediate Photography. Together with several other artists, Piganov and Shulgin have recently formed a Free University in Moscow, which takes on students by application and for a small fee. The students and instructors of the Free University exhibit their work in an abandoned stall near Moscow's Hippodrome.

*The Missing Picture* presents work from the first generation of artists to have grown up in the shadow of cultural repression, but emerged as artists during a period of expansive liberation. These young artists have witnessed the almost simultaneous rehabilitation of Soviet revolutionary artists of the 1920s and the underground and emigré artists of the 1960s–1980s. Above all, their work is distinguished by the depth of its critique. Not only do these artists speak of the political successes and failures of the last seventy years, but also of the aesthetic successes and failures of artists working during that period. Their critique encompasses not only the concerns of artists struggling to stay alive, but also the role of their chosen work, and of the photographic medium in particular, in that struggle. While countless others use the photographic image to portray the failures of socialism, this small group of artists uses the photographic medium to reveal such portrayals as semiotically grounded in the very ideological systems they seek to condemn.

While the artists represented in *The Missing Picture* may be said to be closer to the conceptual strategies of the Moscow School than to the realist traditions of Soviet photography, it is also true that their work is informed by the teachings of several master photographers whose experiments have been carried out in conditions of obscurity during the last twenty years. Among these master photographers, the work of Boris Michailov is notable. Michailov is among the earliest of Soviet photographers to have adopted a critical stance toward the role of the photographic medium in the representation of Soviet reality, and he is regarded as a leader and mentor by many Soviet artists. Characteristic of Michailov's photography is a dual level of intervention in the image, such that the invisibility of the artist's hand that lends photography the look of documentary authority is undermined by traces of the artist's doubt or skepticism, expressed in short texts and/or overpainting. I am especially pleased, therefore, to have this opportunity to present a retrospective examination of Michailov's photography. Michailov's *oeuvre* clearly reveals that the last thirty years of Soviet culture have not been entirely stagnant.

Many people have contributed to the development of this exhibition. Rimma and Valeriy Gerlovin have greatly inspired me. They also gave me my first contacts and taught me the etiquette of riding in a Russian taxi. Marie Cieri, with whom I visited the USSR in 1988, forced me to learn Cyrillic by refusing to read street signs for me. Dana Friis-Hansen, Curator of the MIT List Visual Arts Center, bought back my passport with American postcards when I lost it in Leningrad in 1989. The List Center was the first to support my work in the Soviet Union, and has generously provided me with funding to travel and work there. I am deeply indebted to Dana and to Katy Kline, Director



of the LVAC, for their confidence and enthusiasm. Toby Levi has proven the model of patience. Jill Aszling, Cynthia Cole, Ron Platt, and Jon Roll have each added unique contributions to the exhibition. I am also grateful to the Soros Foundation: USSR, which provided me with a travel grant to visit the USSR during 1988.

Many Soviet artists have participated in the development of this exhibition. Sergei Leontiev, Igor Mukhin, and Alexandr Slyusarev guided me to important events and people, and provoked me with difficult questions. Yuri Babitch and the Readers of the Letter group attempted to teach me the rudiments of non-linear thinking, though I proved a disappointing student. Ilya and Ira Piganov arranged numerous meetings with artists in their kitchen, and introduced me to Pavel Khoroshilov. Mr. Khoroshilov, Director of Soyuzkhudozhexport, the export branch of the USSR Union of Artists, facilitated the transport of the works between the USSR and the USA, as well as framing, and generously arranged for each of the artists to be provided with airfare. Although I suspect that Mr. Khoroshilov understands English better than he admits, Vassiliy Orekhanov proved a patient translator and skillful negotiator. Photographic documentation for this catalogue was prepared by Vladimir Kupreanov and Alexey Shulgin, working with Soyuzkhudozhexport. Each of the participating artists, Boris Michailov, Vladimir Kupreanov, Ilya Piganov, Masha Serebrjakova, and Alexey Shulgin, has added to the exhibition through their thoughtful contributions. Tatiana Salzirn has contributed a valuable text concerning the role of photography in Soviet culture. Our thanks are due Antanas Sutkus, Laima Skeiviene and the Society for Creative Photography of the Lithuanian SSR for the gracious granting of reproduction rights.

Alexey Shulgin has been an advisor, guide, translator, and friend during and between my visits to Moscow. Alexey also acted as Artists' Representative during our negotiations with Soyuzkhudozhexport, and, together with Tatiana Salzirn and Pavel Khoroshilov, helped to select and assemble the exhibition materials for shipment from Moscow. I am deeply indebted to Alexey for his insights, without which this exhibition would surely never have reached completion, and for his support, without which I might have considered giving up at any one of the several difficult bridges that we crossed together.

Finally, my wife, Deb Chapman, has endured the highs and lows of my work with patience and humor. I am grateful to Deb for her trust and support.

Thank you all.

JPJ



It behooves us as Americans...to repress, and if possible to extinguish once and for all, our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves. In our relations with the people of Russia it is important, as it has never been important before, for us to recognize that our institutions may not have relevance for people living in other climes and conditions and that there can be social structures and forms of government in no way resembling our own and yet not deserving of censure. There is no reason why this realization should shock us. (George F. Kennan, 1951)<sup>1</sup>

## **The Crisis of Identification in Soviet Photography**

I. In the 1960s, as Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw" extended to encompass art and literature, Western  
by **John Jacob**

artists and cultural institutions "rediscovered" Soviet revolutionary art. This rediscovery was enlivened by extensive media coverage of such cultural phenomena as the Manezh Event (Moscow, 1961) and the "Bulldozer Show" (Moscow, 1974), and by an increase in the number of exhibitions from private collections of Soviet Art.<sup>2</sup> In exhibitions as well as in the media coverage they received, the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" Soviet cultures was clearly and repeatedly emphasized.

As Central Europe and the USSR "opened" in the late 1980s, artists, particularly those already recognized for their "unofficial" position in relation to Soviet culture, have found Western institutions eager to "discover" them. In the largely unknown field of Soviet photography, however, it has been the artists who adhere to the aesthetic of photojournalism and the bankrupt tradition of realism, rather than those allied to the experiments of "unofficial" culture, who have received almost exclusive attention in the West.

It is, perhaps, inevitable that one culture emerging from "Cold War" with another should desire to "see the face of the enemy" after years of isolation. Photographic exhibitions and publications, with all the baggage of objectivity that tends to accompany them, are the medium of choice for such revelation. Ranging chronologically from *Another Russia* (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1986), to *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union* (Collins Publishers, New York, 1987), *Say Cheese! Un Regard sur la Photographie Sovietique Contemporaine* (Mois de la Photographie, Paris, 1988), *Die zeitgenossische Photographie in der Sowjetunion: Reportagen sozialer Wirklichkeit* (Edition Stemmler, Zurich, 1988), and, most recently, *Photostroika: Contemporary Soviet Photography* (Aperture Foundation, New York, 1989), the exhibitions and anthologies of "new Soviet photography" that have been assembled in the era of *perestroika* have focused almost exclusively upon the work of photojournalists and social documentarians.

In the text that follows, I will examine a prominent example of "the new Soviet photography" from the cultural perspective in which it was created, attempting to identify the elements or signs that it uses to create a distinct statement. I will then contrast the use of this photography within its original cultural context with its uses in other contexts, specifically in several recent exhibitions and publications. This examination, questioning why one style of photography has been privileged by Western institutions to the exclusion of others, will serve to introduce a selection of recent



images made in opposition to social documentary photography. It is this “oppositional” stance that informs much by the work of the artists represented in *The Missing Picture*.



Figure 1

II. I am looking at a photograph in a recent issue of the Soviet photography journal *Sovietskoje foto* (No. 3, 1990). The photograph is one of many selected by the journal for having been presented in “the most representative of photoexhibitions ever put on in the Soviet Union, the All-Union Exhibition 1989, dedicated to the 150th anniversary of photography.”<sup>3</sup> In the foreground of the photograph, a young boy with his head shaved to bare stubble stares into the camera. His gaze meets mine. (figure 1) The boy in the photograph is a Young Pioneer; his neckerchief identifies him instantly.<sup>4</sup> In this photograph, however, the boy looks like a prisoner. Specifically, the boy’s face and expression are

reminiscent of photographs of the inmates of Nazi death camps made by their liberators; emaciated faces on which expressions of exhaustion and fear are fused with desperation and hope. This similarity is enhanced by the harsh contrast of the photograph, emphasizing the glare on the boy’s nearly bald head and creating dramatic shadows around his eyes. The image appears less a portrait than an identification photograph. The photograph is identified, simply, as “A. Sutkus, Pioneer.”

A little research reveals that Antanas Sutkus is a Lithuanian-born photographer whose childhood was marked by tragedy and political intrigue. His father, a Communist official in Kaunas, committed suicide in protest of Stalin’s denial of the right to self-determination in the group of small nations that included Lithuania. Sutkus was a founder of the first state-supported photographers’ union in the USSR, the Society for Creative Photography of the Lithuanian SSR, in 1969. He is considered one of the spiritual leaders of the Baltic photography movement, and his photographs are regarded as being honest, warm, human, and optimistic. Although he is reported to have given up long ago his “socio-critical” interests, it is nevertheless clear that, from the Lithuanian point of view, “Pioneer” represents the imposition of Soviet order upon Lithuanian culture.

In this issue of *Sovietskoje foto*, “Pioneer” is presented as one of ten photographs on a two-page spread. Included alongside “Pioneer” are several landscapes, a nude, several “evocative” images, and a commercial photograph, all printed more or less the same size (approximately 3¼ x 3¼ inches) in harsh, black and white gravure. The inclusion of “Pioneer” among this group of otherwise undistinguished images is compelling. Given the artist’s background and the political implications of his photograph, “Pioneer” would, until quite recently, have been an unlikely selection for presentation in *Sovietskoje foto*. Its use in this issue suggests a transformation not only in Soviet culture, but also, more importantly, in the significance of the photograph itself.

“Pioneer” was first seen outside the USSR in 1986, as plate number 89 in *Another Russia*, edited by historians Daniela Mrazkova and Vladimir Remes and published coincidentally with an exhibition of many of the same photographs that they co-curated for the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. In the book, “Pioneer” is presented as one of eight images excerpted from a larger series titled *People of Lithuania*, (1970–85). “Pioneer” is coupled on a two-page spread with an untitled



photograph of an innocent looking lad clinging with both hands to the sleeve of a man's suit. (figure 2) The boy's head rests on the man's upper arm; his large eyes are directed at the camera. The man's face is not shown. The juxtaposition of these photographs makes a clear statement. The simplicity of both boy's and man's garments signify precisely by their lack of distinguishing characteristics; the boy wears no neckerchief, the man no medallions.<sup>5</sup> Unlike "Pioneer," they are identifiable to us only through the title *People of Lithuania*. The absence of any signifiers of Soviet order in the untitled photograph suggests the dignity and independence of the *People of Lithuania*. The slightly frayed neckerchief of "Pioneer," by contrast, suggests the faltering struggle of Soviet culture to maintain order in Lithuania.

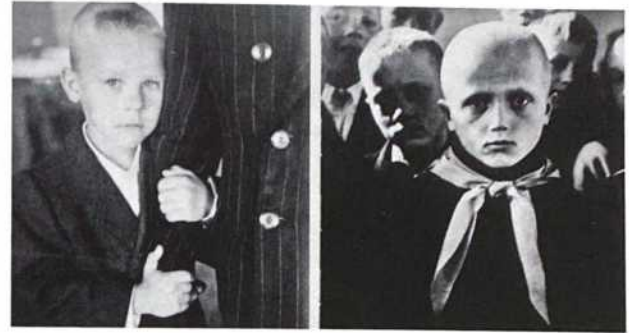


Figure 2

In *Another Russia*, the untitled photograph and "Pioneer" are juxtaposed to contrast the "sacred order" of the family against the "secular order" of the state. The plain garments in one photograph and the neckerchief in the other, made potent by their juxtaposition, are the critical elements through which we receive meaning. The representation of dignity and independence conveyed through the clothing worn in the untitled photograph is heightened by the boy's tight grip on a body that offers safety and protection, presumably the body of his father. Although the Pioneer's neckerchief is a powerful symbol, no such protection is available to him. The juxtaposition of these two photographs creates a complex message that the individual photographs, seen separately, are incapable of suggesting. The Lithuanian youth possesses a very real father. This implied lineage signifies the boy's place in Lithuanian history; he is the embodied legacy of the *People of Lithuania*. "Pioneer" possesses the sign of a father (the neckerchief of Lenin), an emblem which signifies his place in Soviet order. The Pioneer is the child of a mythical being so fabulously well-known as to be totally unknowable. He is a child of the state. In effect, he is an orphan.

Viewers of both the exhibition and the book titled *Another Russia* will note substantial differences between the organizing principles that inform them. To begin with, the subtitle of the exhibition, *Unofficial Contemporary Photography from the Soviet Union*, has been changed to *Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers* in the book. The word "unofficial," implying innate opposition to "official" or state-sanctioned photography, established an overt political context for the exhibition. Given that many of the artists represented were, in fact, members of one or another Soviet photographic society or Union, or worked as professional photographers, this political context appears deliberately misleading.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to its change of title, however, the book is distinguished from the exhibition by the total absence of experimental photography. While the exhibition attempted to present a diversity of voices, including photomontages by the late Vytas Luskus and the conceptual projects of Francisco Infante, the book is devoted exclusively to social documentary and photojournalism. The inattention to experimental photography underscores the editors' claim that, even today, photojournalism "remains the dominant trend and determining characteristic of Soviet photography."<sup>7</sup>

This extremely confining definition of contemporary Soviet photography obscures a more subtle



editorial agenda. The exhibition entitled *Another Russia* was about photography, and it identified important contemporary photographers by relating their work to the work of their historical predecessors. *Another Russia: Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers* is only peripherally about photography. More concretely, it purports to be about Russia, and it uses the photographic medium to portray the “look” of the Russian land and people. Using the format of the photographic book in much the same way that editors of documentary images have done for decades, to “carr[y] (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful,”<sup>8</sup> the editors of *Another Russia* have created a document with all the manipulative sentiment of such humanist classics as Erskine Caldwell’s and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937).

The degree of editorial manipulation in *Another Russia* may be easily seen by contrasting it with a second photographic anthology focusing on the look of Russia. In *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union* (1987),<sup>9</sup> an average day is photographed by a team of artists spread throughout the USSR. The presence of well-known foreign reporters in *A Day in the Life*, including Eddie Adams, Mary Ellen Mark, Sebastiao Salgado, and numerous others, suggests an objective, “outsiders” viewpoint, there to diminish any political agenda the Soviet photographers might put forward. The “new Soviet photographers” of *Another Russia* serve a similar function. By contrasting the “new” photographers with the “old,” the honesty of the new regime against the dishonesty of the old, the editors of *Another Russia* imply that the Russia portrayed in their book is more real than any other Russias we might have seen portrayed in the past.

In both books, the look of Russia appears realistic only until the viewer recognizes that it has been constructed through the suppression of still other Russias (as well, of course, as numerous Soviet non-Russias), and of the many forms of photographic representation that artists might use to portray them. Just as photographic experimentation is absent from *Another Russia*, economic decay, social upheaval, and political unrest, the very forces that have determined recent events in Soviet history, are absent from *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union*. The absences in both books are eloquently obscured by the rallying cries of aesthetic expression and international goodwill. Nevertheless, the result of such absences is, in both books, a one-dimensional representation of a many dimensional culture, and a unified political statement about a very un-unified situation. Dissent, other ways of looking, have been eliminated altogether.

Similar absences inform *Photostroika: New Soviet Photography*, number 116 of *Aperture*,<sup>10</sup> which features Sutkus’s “Pioneer” on its cover. (figure 3) In *Photostroika*, the halftone printing of “Pioneer” is so much less harsh than in *Another Russia* that it appears at first to be another

photograph, separated by a fraction of a second or by a change in lighting. The deep shadows that encircle the Pioneer’s eyes and the darkness that obscures the faces of the children grouped about him in *Another Russia* have disappeared in *Photostroika*. In *Another Russia* the Pioneer appears grim and fearful. The boy looking out from the cover of *Photostroika* appears completely innocent, and absolutely yielding. Framed by light blue cover stock, with titles printed in soft, not-quite-red ink, *Photostroika*’s Pioneer is surrounded by colors associated with birth.

Figure 3

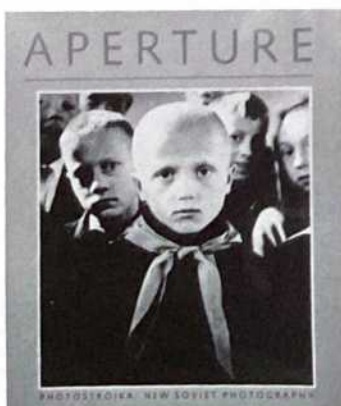




Figure 4 A. Rodchenko, Pioneer-Bugler, 1930



Figure 5 A. Rodchenko, Pioneer Girl, 1930

In *Another Russia*, the editors' juxtaposition of "Pioneer" with other photographs from the same series created a dialogue of signs in and between images. For its use as the cover photograph of *Photostroika*, "Pioneer" has been isolated from its original context. The photograph, identified (by a note in compressed type that accompanies subscription information, a list of the officers of the Aperture Foundation, copyright notification, etc.) as "Pioneer, from the series *People of Lithuania, 1970–1985*," is the only image by Antanas Sutkus in *Photostroika*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, rather than appearing as one element within a larger, authorial concept, as originally intended, "Pioneer" is now emblematic of Aperture's editorial agenda. With a caption beneath it reading *Photostroika: New Soviet Photography*, "Pioneer" has been imbued with special significance: it is the paradigm of contemporary Soviet photographic activity as selected by Western photographic authorities. *Photostroika* redefines Sutkus's "Pioneer," replacing social signification with historical significance.

*Photostroika's* "Pioneer" is especially poignant to viewers familiar with the canons of photographic history, as subscribers to *Aperture* are presumed to be. Here, (despite the fact that it may have been made as early as 1970, when the Soviet Union was under the leadership of Yuri Andropov, and as late as 1985, the year that Michail Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko; in either case well before Gorbachev transformed the words *perestroika* and *glasnost* by making them the slogans of his own leadership), Sutkus's "Pioneer" embodies the rebirth of Soviet photography under the liberalizing program of *perestroika*. Specifically, "Pioneer" is presented as taking up where Alexandr Rodchenko left off in the 1930s. Within the context of photographic history, Sutkus's "Pioneer" represents a dramatic and revisionist response to Rodchenko's heroic "Pioneer-Bugler" (1930), and "Pioneer Girl" (1930). (figures 4 & 5)

In *Photostroika*, "Pioneer" is presented as an example of the central task set to contemporary Soviet photographers by the editors: to "redefine the past."<sup>12</sup> The Soviet past, by implication, is a period when photographs were used to deceive, and when artists were complicitous stooges in the game of deception. Sutkus's "Pioneer" performs this task by addressing Rodchenko's photographs as both historically relevant and socially mendacious. In *Photostroika*, as in Mrazkova's and Remes's research into Soviet photographic history,<sup>13</sup>

the sixty years that separate "Pioneer" from "Pioneer-Bugler" and "Pioneer Girl" are portrayed as a vast, empty period in Soviet cultural history, interrupted only by war. Soviet photography is represented as an experiment that, with the exception of a few, short-lived innovations, never really happened.

As the cover photograph of *Photostroika*, Sutkus's "Pioneer" reaches across the empty period in Soviet culture to form a dialogue with Rodchenko's Pioneers, uniting important "new" Soviet photography with important "historical" Soviet photography. Within this new context, both the revolutionary zeal that informs Rodchenko's early work and the condition of Baltic unrest that underscores the work of Antanas Sutkus are effectively neutralized. In *Photostroika*, as in *Another Russia* and *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union*, the underlying contradictions and unruly crosscurrents of Soviet photography are smoothed out to simulate an appearance of aesthetic unity.

The simulation of aesthetic unity in both *Photostroika* and *Another Russia* constitutes a revision of the historical record. A quick look at almost any newspaper today will reveal that the



USSR is profoundly divided, socially as well as politically. This divisiveness extends to encompass cultural activities. Artists from the Baltic states are not at all eager to be presented as Soviet artists. None but the citizens of the Russian Republic wish to be presented as Russian artists. The revisionist history of the Soviet Union that has been constructed in the West through photographic exhibitions and publications is a transparent fiction. The very transparency of this record, so obvious in pseudo-documents like *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union*, is obscured in *Photostroika* and *Another Russia* by the myth of the objectivity of the documentary image.

Cloaked in the aura of humanist objectivity and removed from the temporal and cultural contexts within which they were created, photographs like Sutkus's "Pioneer" are stripped of their original meanings. Cultural traces, such as the Pioneer's neckerchief, lose their significance. Transformed as the object of Western fascination, the "Pioneer" becomes a relic of Soviet culture within a vast reliquary of similar treasures; an empty sign, timeless and politically neutral. Transformed from subject to object, the photograph acquires the institutional status of a work of art.

In *Sovietskoje foto*, too, "Pioneer" is removed from the context of the *People of Lithuania* to accompany other evidence of change. The nude beside "Pioneer" on the two-page spread in *Sovietskoje foto* is far less significant as an example of nude photography than as an emblem of the new liberalism of contemporary Soviet culture. The commercial photograph, too, is less significant as an image than as an emblem; as the indication of a new direction. In the same way, the neckerchief of the Pioneer symbolizes a way of life that is now disappearing from the Soviet Union. Thus, like *Another Russia* and *Photostroika*, *Sovietskoje foto* re-presents Soviet photography by removing images from the cultural context in which they were created. In contrast with those publications, however, the new *Sovietskoje foto* refrains from defining contemporary Soviet photography in terms of a single tradition, movement, or form of expression. Indeed, this issue of *Sovietskoje foto* includes an article on the conceptual tendency in contemporary Soviet photography, focusing on the work of the "Immediate Photography" group. Struggling to maintain its integrity in the face of cultural upheaval, *Sovietskoje foto* is forced to acknowledge the international esteem with which Sutkus's "Pioneer" has been recognized side by side with the challenging photographic work of a new generation of image makers.

It is precisely the unexpected audacity of *Sovietskoje foto* in presenting diverse practices as equals that undermines the historical revisionism of *Another Russia* and *Photostroika*. Through the uniformity of their selection of images, the editors of *Another Russia* and *Photostroika* have constructed a hybrid: "the new Soviet photography." Their selection simulates the appearance of a unified front of social critique by Soviet photographers that is entirely fictional. This fiction, while endowing Soviet photography with a power that it does not, in fact, possess, simultaneously constructs a one-dimensional interpretation of the many conflicting concerns and practices of Soviet artists working today.

III. In her recent history of Soviet artists who have worked at the edges of state sanction, *Margins of Soviet Art* (1989), Moscow-born art historian Margarita Tupitsyn concludes: "Moscow artists...are still crippled by the ambivalence of their position in respect to the West...One wonders whether



alternative Soviet art will finally become integrated into international discourse or be doomed to even further marginalization as an ultimate exotic resort for a libidinal investment of Western orientalist fantasies and desires."<sup>14</sup>

In fact, as we have seen, the direct result of the integration of Soviet photography into international discourse has been the neutralization of the artwork's cultural value(s) that occurs simultaneously with the transformation of its contextualized subject into fantasized object. Within this schema, integration appears to be synonymous with marginalization.

For Tupitsyn's "alternative Soviet art," as for Mrazkova's and Remes's "new Soviet photography," "the West for many years has been the ultimate referent."<sup>15</sup> Constructed in reference rather than in opposition, the "alternative Soviet art" of which Tupitsyn, Mrazkova, and Remes write is easily assimilated into Western aesthetic discourse through its pro-Western stance. Thus, much Soviet alternative art from the 1950s through the 1980s is precisely positioned by its relation to Renato Poggioli's maxim that "avant-garde art can exist only in the type of society that is liberal-democratic from the political point of view, bourgeois-capitalistic from the socio-economic point of view."<sup>16</sup> The more avant-garde it is, in other words, the less directly critical and the more referential the artwork is likely to be.

Recent Soviet social documentary photography, like much Soviet alternative art, refers to Western practice in its use of modernist critical terminology. In Soviet social documentary photography the artist's reference to modernism is distinguished by his/her faith in the photograph as a neutral transcription of the real, validated through the mediation of the author. Soviet social documentary photographers sought to critically undermine the political mandate of the "old" Soviet photography (to use the medium "in the name of the ideas of socialism, in the name of the prosperity and the happy life of the people, in the name of the material and spiritual growth of the Soviet people, and in the name of the friendship and mutual understanding of the peoples of different countries,")<sup>17</sup> by adapting the neutral stance of Western documentary photography. And, until recently, objectivity, the neutrality of the photographer from political engagement that the old guard did not possess, was opposition enough.

Today, "Soviet artists are...confronted with a whole new set of concerns, symbolized by 'the Western market'."<sup>18</sup> The USSR is slowly evolving into a market economy. In the same way that artists worked in the years immediately following the Revolution, creating images, objects, and events to persuade the illiterate masses of the validity of the new system, many artists are working today to revise the cultural self-identification of a nation that has, for too long, been determined by a series of endlessly uniform images, objects and events. In essence, it is a period of crisis for artists as they reflect upon the order of the past and the disorder of the present, and consider the uncertainty of the future. Called upon to participate within a social and economic system that has not supported them in the past and is incapable of supporting them now, many Soviet artists are torn between a sense of historical responsibility and the allure of the West. It is this crisis in particular, of anticipating the need for new forms of representation and attempting to find them with one eye focused on the long forbidden West, that has engendered a whole new set of oppositional practices. Many of these practices deal directly, as Tupitsyn has put it, with the



crippling ambivalence of the West to Soviet art.

Although Soviet oppositional photography has had little exposure in Western institutions and publications, it has assumed an important role in the reconstruction of contemporary Soviet culture. Inherently different from Soviet social documentary photography, oppositional photography is distinguished by its direct intervention in cultural construction from the level of the medium upward to the levels of form and content. Among the critical issues espoused by the oppositional Soviet photographers are: the rehabilitation of history (as opposed to *Photostroika's* "redefining the past"), to the extent of addressing the role of photography in the construction of a history that needs rehabilitating; the opening of the archive, and the liberation of the names, faces, things, and ideas that have been labeled, numbered, and stored away for privileged use; examination of the construction of the sacred, for example the "motherland," and of the forbidden, for example sexuality; examination of the effects of image repetition upon self-identification, even in such ironic forms as *Sots Art*; and the undermining of the authority and/or autonomy of the artist. Above all, Soviet oppositional photography seeks to define the relationship of the artist to his/her culture, as well as to cultures other than his/her own, and to delineate the responsibility of the artist in maintaining the "integrity" of cultural self-identification.

"The only art that can come into being in the Soviet Union today is conceptual art," Viktor Misiano has written.<sup>19</sup> Misiano traces the emergence of a Soviet photographic avant-garde to the amateur photography movement.

One of the most popular and vital movements flourishing all these years beneath the bushel of official culture has been that of amateur photography. Spurred by the boredom of one-dimensional lives, thousands if not millions of people found the means of individual expression in the camera. These amateur photographers were inspired by two global spiritual ideas: the search for truth and faith in beauty. The former gave birth to alternative reportage, with many people from all walks of life using the photo lens as an instrument for objective analysis of Soviet society. Many others followed another path and used the camera to explore purely aesthetic values and abstract harmonies. In the quiet of their own improvised studios, these social loners photographed the contours of carefully arranged objects such as mirrors, glassware, and plaster copies of antiquities. A moral orientation and a spiritual aestheticism—these are the immemorial paradigms of Russian culture.<sup>20</sup>

The Soviet Union encouraged the amateur photography movement by supporting a national network of camera clubs, and through the publication of *Sovietskoje foto*, which occasionally reprinted the works of camera club members. In the 1980s, groups of photographers began to gather outside the amateur groups, and to explore new photographic ideas and techniques. One such group identified itself within the much larger *Ermitazh* (Hermitage) artists'



group. Founded in 1986, *Ermitazh* was among the first semi-official artistic organizations to emerge as a result of legislation permitting cooperatives and “informal associations” (*neformaly*). Its many members included “official” as well as “unofficial” artists, art historians, architects, filmmakers, and photographers, all of whom shared the desire to work outside the jurisdiction of the Artists’ Union. In 1987 *Ermitazh* was responsible for mounting the first major retrospective of Soviet “unofficial” art, titled *Retrospection*, in Moscow.

The Immediate Photography group, whose membership includes Sergei Leontiev, Vladislav Efimov, Alexandr Slyusarev, Ilya Piganov, Alexey Shulgin, and Boris Michailov, among others, emerged from the collapse of the *Ermitazh* group. “The immediacy of ‘immediate photography,’” Soviet art historian Tatiana Salzirn has written, “...is in the perception of the revelations of the most contemporary world; a world utterly unregulated...In the ‘epoch of glasnost,’ when Sots Art is becoming an anachronism, spheres of activity are being divided up, including artistic activity. Social aspects are moving into the background, and the visual-linguistic trend of the works is gradually crystallizing: just as criticism no longer needs to yield its opportunities for publication to social and political journalism, so also journalistic photography, having become a fully autonomous genre, is completely separate from photography proper as an immediate direction, freely experimenting with language in the course of stylistic strivings.”<sup>21</sup>

The December group, whose members included Yuri Babitch, Andrei Aksyonov, Vitalyi Dianov and S. Popatov, among others, was formed in indirect opposition to the Immediate Photography group. Experimental to the point of self-isolation, December’s photographic works were characterized by poverty of materials and technique. The group’s extensive photographic series documented conceptual performances and games which reflected the randomness of daily life. Following the emigration of Andrei Aksyonov to Finland in 1989, December regrouped under the leadership of Yuri Babitch to form the Readers of the Letter. Also in 1989, members of the Immediate Photography group and the December group joined with other Soviet photographers whose works had been selected for exhibitions scheduled to travel throughout Europe during that year to form the group PhotoBridge.

Within the proliferating groups of photographers, two distinct directions, exemplified by the activities of Alexandr Slyusarev and Boris Michailov, two elder members of the Immediate Photography group, have emerged from numerous less distinguished experiments. Slyusarev’s photographs, often appearing to be stylistically “cool” or removed from their subject, are made in extensive series, often comprising as many as 150 images. A subjective photographer *par excellence*, Slyusarev has declared that “I take photos of everything: objects are of interest to me only with regard to the relationship that is established between them and me.”<sup>22</sup> Slyusarev’s photographs propose that an artist may be at once distant from and intimate with his/her subject, and that no subject is too great or small for the artist’s attentions. Sergei Leontiev, a member of the Immediate Photography group and a disciple of Slyusarev, has labeled this tendency in his own photographs “post-industrial romanticism.” (figure 6)

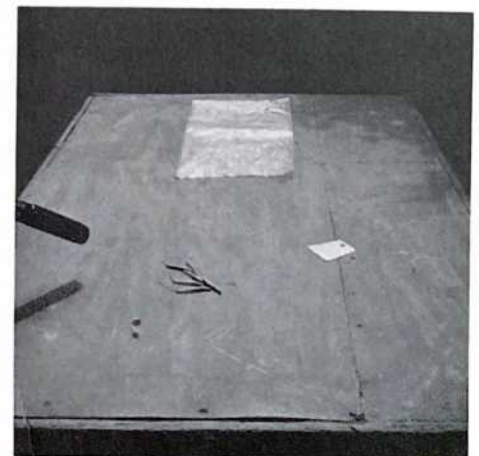


Figure 6 A. Slyusarev



Sergei Leontiev and Igor Mukhin are among the group of Soviet artists whose works refer to the subjective explorations of Alexandr Slyusarev. These photographers bring traditional approaches to

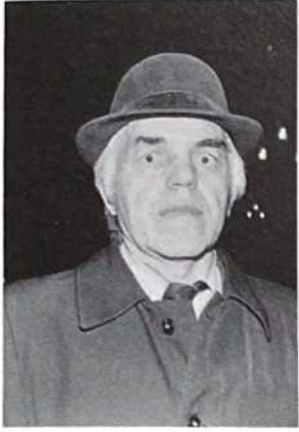


Figure 7 S. Leontiev

the photographic practice, such as portraiture and documentary, together with deeply personal experiments in visual expression. Leontiev's series titled *Experiment in Strict Photography* presents, in vertical quartets, a series of night-portraits made on the Arbat using a flash. The portraits are each framed by thick black borders that show the sprocket holes of the film, the name of the film manufacturer, and, most importantly, the number of the exposure. Each face, no matter how distinctly nature has formed it or how harshly its details have been revealed by the flash, is numbered as it is photographed; it is assembled in an imaginary order for some unimaginable later use. In this way, Leontiev uses his print to create a textual (rather than a strictly visual)

dialogue. The materials of the photographic medium form a dialogue with the subjects they portray, speaking about the act and the philosophy of portrait making. (figure 7)

Igor Mukhin is best known outside the USSR for his striking portraits of Soviet urban youth, featured in the exhibition *Un Regard sur la Photographie Sovietique Contemporaine* (1988). Among his conceptual works, a series of unsentimental images of Soviet monuments addresses the profound impact such sculptures have upon cultural memory and consciousness. Mukhin's series titled *Self-Portrait* is reminiscent of the work of Lee Friedlander. Using his shadow and other physical traces, the photographer reveals his presence in images from which he is physically absent, thereby questioning the possibility of photographic objectivity. (figure 8)

Mukhin's and Leontiev's photographs form a bridge between the subjective direction of Alexandr Slyusarev's photographs and the conceptual strategies employed by Boris Michailov. Whereas Slyusarev relies on the clarity of the unmanipulated, printed image to convey the relationship between photographer and subject, Michailov's photographs are characterized by interaction with the printed image. Slyusarev's photographs function through a sensuality of vision; his subtle use of the photographic medium transforms objects and spaces into deeply personal expressions of interaction with the world. Thus, for Slyusarev, it is more important that photographs convey feeling than meaning. Michailov's photographs function by engaging the viewer in a textual dialogue. Whereas Slyusarev's photographs are meditative, Michailov's are, without exception, confrontational.

Michailov's imagery functions simultaneously on two levels: the negative and the print. He presents himself and his experience as representative of Soviet experience in general; on this level Michailov's photographs function as documentary images. However, the documentary authority of Michailov's photographs is undermined by the artist's intervention at the level of the print. Overpainting his prints or accompanying them with short texts, Michailov reveals the ideological discourse of signs not only within his photographs, but, by extension, within the world that he photographs.

Michailov's intervention, be it in the form of words or colors, invariably works against the



Figure 8 I. Mukhin, *Self-Portrait*, 1989



implicit text of the photograph. Thus, in a photograph from the series *Sots Art-I* (1975–85) in which a grinning street vendor stands behind a table stacked high with baked goods, Michailov's intervention by coloring the two monuments at either side of the image, as well as the vendor's hat and the fruity filling of the cakes, reminds viewers that the comfort and pleasure portrayed (the hat and cakes) are directly related to the event(s) and/or organizations portrayed by the monuments. This dialogue of signs suggests that neither the image of plenitude nor the monuments that inform it are neutral signifiers; the reality that each serves is equally suspect.

As socio-political commentary, Michailov's photographs rely as much on popular culture as on the political imagery that they lampoon. In particular, Michailov's photographs are reminiscent of the *lubok*, a traditional form of Russian illustrated broadside that was often used to comment upon political developments in an allegorical manner. Following more than a century of suppression by the Tsar, the *lubok* tradition was revived following the Bolshevik revolution. Between 1919 and 1922, a wall newspaper using special windows and large, color drawings was created by the Russian Telegraph Agency (Rosta) in Moscow. Designed and executed by a staff led by Mikhail Cheremnykh, Ivan Malyutin, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, the "Rosta Windows" used the *lubok* form to convey news and agitational information concerning the civil war.

Characteristic of early *lubki* is the use of bold, energetic colors as easily readable symbols.

Red, in particular, was a colour greatly favoured by Russian icon painters as well as (for political and other purposes) by poster artists in the Soviet period. Red represented the blood of martyrs and the fire of faith... Poster artists...employed similar colour conventions to mark out the proletarian (red), the bourgeois (black), the Pole (green or yellow) and other figures in their work.<sup>23</sup>

Michailov's photographs are similarly notable for their use of color. Using color film without manipulation of negative or print, Michailov's series *Sots Art-II* nevertheless represents a conceptual rather than a documentary project. In a style reminiscent of the paintings of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, the ubiquitous color red vividly marks all but one of the resulting fifty-four photographs of Michailov's series.<sup>24</sup> In *Sots Art-II*, Michailov recognizes color as a signifier already present within the world; it need not be painted into the image. In a strictly visual sense, therefore, Michailov's photographs are reminiscent of the early works of Komar and Melamid. Michailov's photographs present highly ironic juxtapositions of cultural signs without resorting to the displays of intellectual and creative defiance that characterize the works of many later *sots* artists.<sup>25</sup> He points with amusement to both the signs that surround us and to our casual interaction with them.

It is in the work of Boris Michailov that the use of found or acquired imagery becomes a strategic practice in Soviet photography. Having worked professionally as a photographic restorer in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov, Michailov has accumulated an extraordinary archive of "popular" or "amateur" images, which he presents in the series *Berdyansk. The Beach*. As is often true in Michailov's series, one photograph reveals the technique and the concept of the group. (figure 9) *On Loneliness* presents three separate images attached to a board and surrounded by text and other written notes from the artist to himself. The center photograph shows two women



standing side by side, one of whom is posed formally with her hand inside her coat. The photograph to the left, cut in a rough circle, shows a man with a mustache playing a balalaika. The photograph to the right is a close-up portrait of a stern man in a uniform. Arrows leading from the center photograph to the photographs on either side suggest, and the text confirms, that two new



Figure 9. B. Michailov, *On Loneliness*

photographs are to be constructed from this group. The female companion of the woman with her hand in her coat in the center photograph is to be eliminated and, in each of the photographs to be constructed, replaced by a male companion.

It is not clear which of the photographs in Michailov's *Berdyansk* are and which are not constructions. Thus, in direct contrast to the documentary pretensions of "the New Soviet Photography," *Berdyansk* shows photography as a medium that is popularly used to alter reality and to invent events and memories.

Michailov's use of acquired images in *Berdyansk* is simply an extension of the activity of invention for which he is being paid. By bringing together such a body of acquired images, he has created an extraordinary cultural document which is itself an elaborate invention. *Berdyansk* is a documentary study of Soviet mythology. In its refusal to distinguish invented from "real" moments, *Berdyansk* runs parallel to the official history of the Soviet "people." The loneliness of *On Loneliness* is that of a people so far distanced from its own reality.

The issue of authorship is critical to the work of Alexey Shulgin, Maria Serebrjakova, Vladimir Kupreanov, and Ilya Piganov. Each uses images and forms acquired from institutions of power. Shulgin's photographs are printed from negatives lifted from a private archive, or photographed directly from the television screen. Serebrjakova utilizes mass-printed materials ranging from the labels of consumer goods to halftones discarded by printing houses. Piganov's bookworks and numbered objects refer to the institutional cataloging of things and ideas. Kupreanov's photographs use such familiar forms as the "plaque of respect" and the family photograph.

Within totalitarian regimes such as the USSR from which Shulgin's archive and Kupreanov's plaques have emerged, the state is the ultimate author. The state controls the words (as in Kupreanov's poetic texts), images (as in Shulgin's archive and Piganov's numbered objects), and the media (as in Shulgin's televisions and Serebrjakova's mass-printed materials) through which its historical record is created, maintained, and preserved. The state's absolute control confers upon image and/or text a closure, such that it is closed to interpretation. Images and texts emerging from state control may therefore be understood only through the closed text of the state; neither artist nor viewer is permitted a role in the construction of meaning.

Thus, when a photograph is authorized by the state, levels of meaning appear to merge within it, forming a closed or ideological text. Ideology, however, cannot exist independently within an image. Rather, validation of the ideological text is dependent upon the viewer's *a priori* acceptance (faith) of its terms (signs). In their use of images and forms lifted directly from the state and its institutions, Shulgin, Serebrjakova, Kupreanov, and Piganov address the photographic



image as a carrier of ideological information. Using ironic juxtapositions, they create subtexts which provide the viewer the means to active participation in the construction of meaning. In so doing, they dramatically and irreparably undermine the viewers' faith in the authoritarian text.

Like Boris Michailov, Alexey Shulgin and Maria Serebrjakova use found or acquired images in their photography. Shulgin's *Others' Photos* is an extensive series of images made from an archive of negatives found in the warehouse of a Moscow construction firm. The archive contained negatives made by several generations of photographers who documented scenes of construction throughout the Soviet Union. To Shulgin's surprise, the unknown photographers' personal photographic records (his/her family, vacation, and "creative" photographs) were stored side by side with images of construction. (figure 10)

Ranging from architectural photographs of construction and destruction to pastoral scenes and landscapes, *Others' Photos* represents what Viktor Misiano has referred to as a "panorama of photographic clichés."<sup>26</sup>



*Others' Photos* are clichés in the sense that they repeat endlessly the scenes of industrial progress that Soviet citizens already know all too well. Yet Shulgin's photographs are evocative in a way that more familiar depictions of Soviet progress, such as Rodchenko's White Sea Canal construction series and Max Alpert's Fergana Canal Construction series, are not. In *Others' Photos*, images of vast emptiness and construction half-completed contrast powerfully with Rodchenko's and Alpert's crowded frames. Rodchenko's and Alpert's photographs gloss over the well-known if rarely mentioned subjects of enforced labor and the mass resettlement of ethnic minorities by means of which such construction was effected. *Others' Photos*, scarred and empty, underscore the great and tragic losses that accompanied the industrialization of Soviet Russia.

Tatiana Salzirn has written that Shulgin's re-contextualization has transformed *Others' Photos* into "commentaries on the genetic code of cultural memory which view every 'new' entry in the form of one's own photographs as meaningless artistic activity."<sup>27</sup> If cultural memory is a genetic code, as Salzirn suggests, then, like DNA, it functions by endlessly duplicating itself. Indeed, the visual depiction of Soviet culture has been duplicated with only slight variation since the early 1930s. Yet the structures performing that duplication have been institutional rather than cellular, and forced rather than natural. Shulgin uses photographs made by anonymous authors because to make new images would be to repeat, and by repeating to reify, the institutional discourse of Soviet culture. His appropriation disrupts the flow of coded memories, thus empowering the viewer with the potential for opposition. Shulgin's re-presentation of the private lives of the unknown photographers facilitates the rehabilitation of Soviet cultural memory.

Poignant in their anonymity, *Others' Photos* function stylistically as documentary images. Removed from their institutional context, however, the documentary value of *Others' Photos* disappears. Finally, Shulgin's appropriation subverts the authority of the photograph as a "carrier" of institutional messages. Shulgin's recent work with images photographed from television

Figure 10 A. Shulgin, from the series *Others' Photographs*, 1987



performs a similar function. Isolating single images intended to be experienced only within the context of a series of other images, Shulgin again disrupts the flow of visual signs which form our cultural memories.

Like Boris Michailov and Alexey Shulgin, Maria Serebrjakova often works with found photographs. Margarita Tupitsyn has characterized Serebrjakova's images as "possess[ing] no *a priori* mythologies." They are successful as images because, in their "lack of local significations they are flexible in absorbing other discourses, specifically provoking thoughts about gender, authorship, the body, sexuality and everyday life."<sup>28</sup> Thus, according to Tupitsyn, Serebrjakova's images succeed through their ideological neutrality, their penetrability, their openness to interpretation.

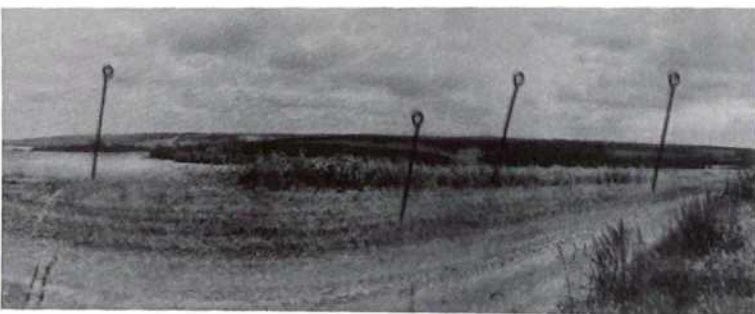
Serebrjakova has been recognized as among a small but growing number of artists whose work explores feminist issues within Soviet society. Yet the neutrality of images and the absorption of (neutral) imagery within the discourses of power (ideology) are among the many significant issues being addressed by contemporary feminist aestheticians. The neutrality of an artwork is no more likely to provoke lofty thoughts of authorship and gender than to remind the viewer that it is time for lunch or to walk the dog. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Serebrjakova has constructed works from which meaning may be determined simply through recognition of lack and/or penetrability.

Serebrjakova's landscapes are a case in point. Landscape painters in pre-Revolutionary Russia were honored for their loving representations of the grandeur of the Motherland. In the Soviet period, the landscape tradition was redefined as a form of national patriotism, thereby separating the Western interpretation of land as property from depictions of the Russian landscape as a source of pride and power. In the era of Socialist Realism, the landscape came to be increasingly dominated, and its meaning determined, by the presence/activity of workers. "Soviet art is characterized by one common feature: the endeavor to express in images of art the new aspect of the country, the rapidly changing mode of life, the new thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of the millions of people shedding the vestiges of private-property consciousness and becoming active builders of the new life." A.Y. Arosev, President of the Soviet All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, wrote in 1935.<sup>29</sup> Thus, images of the landscape,

particularly in its use for agricultural and industrial development, became an expression of Soviet power and progress.

Maria Serebrjakova's landscapes depict a Motherland that has been simultaneously over-sentimentalized and overdeveloped. A short, poetic text superimposed on an image of a newly plowed field recalls the deep sentiment with which the Motherland has traditionally been revered, yet this plowing, like the sticking of pins into another of her landscapes, refers also to penetration and rape. (figure 11) By awakening the sentiment of the viewer, poetry and image join to form an authoritarian text that obscures the reality of the photograph: that the landscape has been

Figure 11 M. Serebrjakova, *Untitled*, 1988



that the landscape has been



ravaged. But Serebrjakova's juxtaposition of poetic text with landscape is ironic. Like other images in the series, in which areas of the landscape are blotted out or measured by color and number, the visual texts created by Serebrjakova's unusual juxtapositions serve to reveal loss rather than gain. Thus, it is clear that Serebrjakova's photographs are deeply rooted in local mythologies. Moreover, because they require that the viewer participate in the construction of meaning, the mytho/ideological function of the image is directly addressed. Therefore, Serebrjakova's photographs must be regarded not as neutral, but as powerfully motivated oppositional works.



Vladimir Kupreanov, like Maria Serebrjakova, creates ironic juxtapositions, bringing textual fragments together with photographs to study the ideological function of the image in Soviet culture. His series *In Memory of A. Pushkin* (1985) is built from portraits made for a commission intended to honor Soviet working women. (figure 12) The structure of the individual images is based upon the standard "plaques of respect" format. Plaques of respect are frames within which the photograph of a worker of merit may be inserted, accompanied by a short text describing the significance of his/her work or deed, and crowned with a red star. Such plaques are commonly found in public areas like parks, as well as in the meeting rooms set aside in all buildings for Party meetings and events.

*In Memory of A. Pushkin* functions on more than one level. It is, on one level, an ironic visual pun. Juxtaposing Pushkin's romantic text with mug-shots of working women, Kupreanov establishes a disjunction between the romance of Russian poetry and the monotony of Soviet life, much as Serebrjakova's photographs use ironic juxtapositions to contrast the romantic memory of the Russian Motherland with the reality of the ravaged Soviet landscape. On another level, *In Memory of A. Pushkin* suggests the failure of both text and image as forms of representation. If the romantic text defines the individual in the photograph, as it is intended to do in plaques of respect, then something is wrong with the picture. Likewise, if the photograph is an accurate representation of its subject, then something is deeply wrong with the text.

*In Memory of A. Pushkin* is something of a visual trick, suggesting a relationship to viewers where none, in fact exists; "The breach," Manfred Schmalriede has written of the series, "is spectacular."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the effect of Kupreanov's juxtaposition is a powerful semantic conflict which, by providing the key to interpretation of an absurd relationship, transgresses photographic tradition. Revealing the relativity of both text and image, Kupreanov suggests that control over visual and spoken language is never absolute, but depends upon the complicity of the reader/viewer for its validation. The power controlling such forms of representation is therefore always in jeopardy. Kupreanov's recent *Family Portraits* function on a similar level, and are related to Shulgin's *Others' Photos* in their resistance to the power of our most revered institutions by revealing the repetition of its visual forms in cultural memory.

Figure 12 V. Kupreanov, from the series *In Memory of A. Pushkin*, 1985



The subject of the archive is addressed in the work of Ilya Piganov. Alexey Shulgin's appropriation of negatives from a Moscow construction firm for *Others' Photos* represents the opening of an extraordinary file of Soviet images and experiences, returning them from the private domain of the archive to the public memory of the people. The file from which Piganov's photographs are drawn represents a vast holding of the objects through which we affirm our human individuality. Each photograph in Piganov's series *Untitled* (1988) presents a numbered object photographed



Figure 13 I. Piganov, *Untitled*, 1988

against a dark background. (figure 13) Most of the photographs reveal their subjects: shoes, cheese graters, childrens' toys, etc. Others, like a parcel whose torn wrapping reveals what may be matchboxes, conceal identification. (figure 14) Virtually all of the objects photographed are suffused with sensuality.

Sensuality pervades Piganov's photographs, from his earliest constructions, reminiscent of the work of Joel Peter Witkin, to his most recent wood panels. The objects presented in *Untitled* (1988) were printed using very old Soviet photographic paper, giving them



Figure 14 I. Piganov, *Untitled*, 1988

a tonal quality impossible in works printed on new materials. The diversity of Piganov's objects in the series indicates that his goal was not merely to undertake the endless task of cataloging events of anthropomorphism. Rather, in *Untitled* (1988) Piganov suggests that human sexuality and identity may be extended to objects through design (the faucet) as well as through use (the worn out boots). Regardless of how it occurs, however, such anthropomorphism is a form of individualism, and is therefore subject to control. Piganov's *Untitled* (1988) represents the liberation of objects from the ordering scrutiny of control. The glowing quality of the photographs effected through the use of old paper, as well as the age of the paper itself, suggests the release of documents containing knowledge of the ancient art of alchemy.

Piganov's recent panels, *Untitled* (1990), relate directly to the crisis of the contemporary artist in the Soviet Union. Each of the five photographs in this series are constructed by attaching small images in grids to form a large base image; occasionally single photographs or new grids are superimposed over the base image to establish a visual text or dialogue. The first image in the series presents, in a neatly constructed grid of nine photographs, a pair of old pants, suggestively stained at the crotch. The grid of the second photograph is also neat, but rather than forming a single large picture it repeats twelve times an image of a torn paper pasted to a concrete wall. The paper shows a hand-drawn chair and an indecipherable fragment of text. In the third photograph, the base grid of eighteen images shows a series of military heroes in silhouette, surrounded by garlands of laurels. In a smaller grid pasted over the base image, a naked man, tensed and bent to deformity, stands perched tiptoe on a scarred wooden box. The grid lines between the photographs have disappeared. (figure 15) The grid lines of the twelve images in the fourth photograph are cut at random, and one side of the image is constructed from the edges of photographs whose subject(s) cannot be seen. The base image forms a single large picture of a machine. A small photograph of a boy in a naval uniform is pasted to the larger base image. In the final photograph of the series, the grid lines of eight images are disrupted by the vertical and



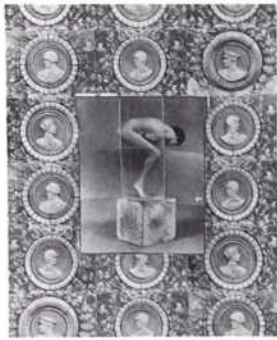


Figure 15 I. Piganov, *Untitled*, 1990

horizontal placement of rectangular paper in a single plane. The image formed by the grid is of a hooded woman, looking away from the camera.

*Untitled* (1990) suggests a narrative self-portrait, speaking of the recent changes in the role of the artist in contemporary Soviet society. The first photograph shows a pair of work pants made ugly by use and misuse, suggesting work and degradation as the sum of the artist's life. The hand-drawn chair in the second photograph is all that remains from something larger that has been torn away. The chair and the incomplete text suggest the possibility of a place for the artist to work

within a vast, hard zone from which all comfort has been stripped away. The central photograph depicts the artist as a monument among other monuments to Soviet heroes. It is not clear from his position, however, whether the artist is shown uncurling from a fetal position, implying birth, or contorted with pain, implying death. In the fourth image the artist has become a patriotic little boy lost in the machinery. In the last image, the artist appears to look backwards with romantic longing.

The narrative of *Untitled* (1990) is reflected in the use of grids. The number of images forming the grids multiplies from nine to twelve to eighteen in the first three images, then descends from eighteen to twelve in the fourth and to eight in the fifth image. The construction of the final image of fewer pieces than the first suggests that the artist ends his cycle of work with less than he began. The dissolution of the grid form, represented in the transition of grid lines from neatly defined to randomly placed and worn, reflects the disillusionment of the artist himself.

**IV.** In his classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968), Renato Poggioli defined the modernist faith that "avant-garde art can exist only in the type of society that is liberal-democratic from the political point of view, bourgeois-capitalistic from the socioeconomic point of view."<sup>31</sup> In truth, the "official" histories of both Western and Soviet art have functioned to obscure the possibility of diversity within the culture of the other, claiming that all art within communism is inherently political, or that all art within capitalism is inherently materialistic. Such histories, incapable of accounting for the avant-garde movements that have worked in obscurity in Central Europe and the Soviet Union, must shortly collapse under the weight of the ideological function(s) they have served. Indeed, as the Soviet Union has "opened" in the late 1980s, and as *samizdat* and other alternative histories have been published with increasing regularity, it has become abundantly clear that the Soviet artists who worked during the second half of this century are distinguished by the diversity of their interests and activities.

Nevertheless, most of the "new" Soviet photography that has been presented outside the Soviet Union is that which functions dialectically with the "old" Soviet photography. This photography is represented as new not because it is current, but because it is novel; it is a novelty. In fact, much contemporary Soviet social documentary employs the same forms of visual language to critique the failure of the communist party that the old Soviet photography used to glorify the CPSU. Unlike *Sots Art*, the Soviet equivalent of Pop in which Soviet iconography is appropriated by artists to construct ironic juxtapositions of high and low cultural signs with deconstructivist



intent, today's Soviet social documentary photography neither recognizes nor critiques its own role in the history that it now repudiates; it simply continues along the well-marked path.<sup>32</sup>

Social documentary photography, particularly when it emerges from second and third world cultures, lends itself to appropriation by Western (first world) institutions. This is so not simply because its critique is easily assimilated within our institutional discourse of otherness, "the implicit hierarchical nature [of] which invites seemingly innocent practices of representation that amount to (often unknowing) strategies of domination through appropriation,"<sup>33</sup> but also because social documentary is a form of representation that we recognize as our own. Western viewers respond to social documentary photographs as we respond to the critique of communism: as texts deeply ingrained in our own culture. Soviet social documentary photography confirms what we already knew about ourselves and about the Russians; it functions as a very flattering mirror to Western culture. In this sense, "the new Soviet photography," as it has been presented in the West, functions simultaneously as validation and valorization of Western interests.

Our failure, as editors and curators, to seek out and present the work of Soviet artists whose critique includes the uses of the photographic medium and the relationship of the artist to such use, in addition to work that critiques the failures of the Soviet system, reveals a distinct agenda. Taking advantage of our audiences' faith in photographic objectivity, Western editors and curators have used the photographic medium to construct a self/other opposition, representing the USSR as a mythical or "folk" culture in contrast to which our own progress may be more clearly viewed. Observed in relation to the ongoing depiction of the collapse of Communist Party hegemony in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by the news media, this "objective" representation cultivates the viewers' faith in the superiority of the United States' melting pot, post-industrial culture and the European Economic Community (EEC) over the revival of village/clan traditions, and the religious and nationalist disputes that have reemerged in Soviet Russia in the wake of *glasnost*. It is my hope, and the desire of all those involved in this exhibition, that by addressing these issues and presenting work by artists whose work falls outside the scope of institutional purview, *The Missing Picture* will begin the process by means of which this trend, and the vast misunderstandings that naturally accompany it, may be reversed.

#### Notes

1. George F. Kennan, "America and the Russian Future", *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1990, v. 69, no. 2, p 160.

2. For information on the Manezh Event, see John Berger's *Art and Revolution*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1969 and Roy A. Medvedev's *Khrushchev*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982. For information on the Bulldozer Show, see Igor Golomshtok, "The History and Organization of Artistic Life in the Soviet Union," *Soviet Emigre Artists: Life and Work in the USSR and the United States*, Marilyn Rueschemeyer, ed., M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1985. Also, Alexander Glezer, "The Struggle to Exhibit," in *Soviet Art in Exile*, Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer, Random House, New York, 1977. For listings of exhibitions of art from the USSR in Western Europe and the United States, see "Chronology of European exhibitions, United States exhibitions, publications, and

Wars, New York, 1978; and *Early Soviet Photography*, Oxford, 1982. Also see Mrazkova's *The Story of Photography*, New York, 1989.

14. Margarita Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art*, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Milan, 1989, p 136.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 1968, p 106.

17. Olga Suslova, "Photojournalism in the Soviet Press," *The Photographic Memory*, Emile Meijer and Joop Swart, eds., Quiller Press, London, 1987, p 114.



special events, between 1930–1980," compiled by Gail Harrison-Roman in *The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910–1930: New Perspectives*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1980. A short list of recent exhibitions of 'Contemporary Soviet Art in Western Europe' appears in "Report from Moscow: Soviet Art Today," Jamey Gambrell, *Art in America*, November 1985.

3. From the section translated as "In This Issue," *Sovietskoje foto*, Moscow, no. 3, 1990.

4. "In the third year of elementary school, as children turn nine, bright red neckerchiefs suddenly flare against the somber brown and dark blue [school] uniforms, signifying entry into the first formal, institutionalized commitment to a political idea. The children become Young Pioneers as naturally as they come of age. They are inducted, in the illusion of having been carefully selected, with fanfare and ceremony, with banners and solemn oaths. But this passage is virtually automatic and universal, like a puberty rite, a bar mitzvah, or a first communion. Nobody is not a Pioneer." David K. Shieler, *Russia. Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams*, Penguin Books, New York, 1986, p 118.

5. "Over the years photography has been reduced here to a narrow collection of visual clichés, and the portrait has become the leading genre, with the quality of the portrait measured by the quantity of medals adorning the chest of the subject." Viktor Misiano, "Photographers Without Photography," *Contemporanea*, 9/89, p 65. See, for example, plate number 90 from the same series in *Another Russia*.

6. Further, as Alison Hilton and Norton Dodge noted in 1977 "[p]articularly in the Baltic republics and the Transcaucasus, the administration of the arts seems to permit rather than to thwart experimentation and innovation. The artists who benefit from such favorable conditions cannot, strictly speaking, be called unofficial artists, since they function within the established cultural structure.... The essential difference between the unofficial artists of Leningrad and Moscow and the artists of Tallinn, Tbilisi, Yerevan, and certain other provincial centers is that the greater the distance from Moscow, the greater the leniency of the local officials toward the artists." Since a substantial percentage of the artists represented in *Another Russia* work professionally and live outside Moscow and Leningrad (thirteen out of twenty-one in the exhibition; twelve out of eighteen in the book) the decision to alter the title seems most appropriate. Alison Hilton and Norton Dodge, eds., *New Art from the Soviet Union: the Known and the Unknown*, Acropolis Books, Washington D.C., 1977, p 9.

7. *Another Russia*, p 171.

8. Martha Rosler, *3 Works*, Press of the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, Halifax, 1981, p 73.

9. *A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union*, Collins Publishers, New York, 1987.

10. *Photostroika: New Soviet Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 1989.

11. Other artists are represented by small portfolios accompanied by critical or biographical texts, and their photographs are credited with standard bylines.

12. *Photostroika*, p.1.

13. The editorial agenda of *Another Russia* is ideologically consistent with the promotion of social documentary and photo journalism promoted in Mrazkova's and Remes's earlier studies of Soviet photography. Having constructed an historical foundation in those studies, the editors of *Another Russia* present contemporary Soviet social documentary photography as the legitimate heir to Soviet photographic tradition. The apparent independence of its critique lends weight to their claim. Concerned yet independent, the new Soviet photography is, the editors suggest, a worthy participant in the larger arena of world social photography. See: Mrazkova and Remes, *Soviet Photography Between the World*

18. Jamey Gambrell, "Perestroika Shock," *Art in America*, February 1989, p 124.

19. Misiano, *op. cit.*, p 69.

20. *Ibid.*, p 66.

21. Tatiana Salzirn, "Immediate Photography," *Sovietskoje Foto*, no. 3, 1990., pp 40–43. Translated by Donna Griesenbeck.

22. *Another Russia*, p 162.

23. Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, Yale University Press, 1988, p 5.

24. The single photograph of the series in which there is no trace of the color shows a statue of Lenin, his head surrounded by the halo of a fluorescent light and his ankles bound with string, attached to which, one presumes, is a price tag.

25. See Margarita Tupitsyn, *Sots Art*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1986.

27. Misiano, *op. cit.*, p 71.

27. Tatiana Salzirn, "Moscow–Vienna, New York–Moscow," *Moskau–Wien–New York*, Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, 1989, p 106.

28. Margarita Tupitsyn, "U-Turn of the U-Topian," *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington, 1990. p 49.

29. A.Y. Arosev, in *Art in the USSR.*, C.G. Holme ed., Studio Publications, New York, 1935, p 10.

30. Manfred Schmalriede, "Images and Text," in *1 Internationale Foto-Triennale Esslingen 1989*, Galerie der Stadt Esslingen, Germany, 1989, p.69.

31. Poggioli, *op. cit.*, p 106.

32. "The new photographers are not dissidents....Dissidents, as they are generally seen in the Soviet Union, are unconditionally opposed to the entire society. They wage a personal struggle against a system which they experience as faulty and unfair. The new photographers, in contrast, might better be characterized by the word 'subversive'. Rather than repudiating the system, they question basic values....Soviet citizens who think and act subversively, in this sense, have lost their confidence in official authority, but they are not completely critical." Hannu Eerikainen, "Up from the Underground," *Photostroika*, p 56.

33. Virginia R. Dominguez, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, no. 1, Bay Press, Seattle, 1987, p 132.



Nocturnal gardens under slowly ripening mangoes  
 M. dances what one day will be a tango.  
 His shadow twirls the way a boomerang does...  
 Joseph Brodsky<sup>1</sup>

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it. To do this it possesses two means....The first consists of making Photography into an art, for no art is mad....The other method of taming the photograph is to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness.  
 Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup>

### **Solid Objects<sup>3</sup>**

The Soviet system has never trusted society. Photography had yet to receive the definitive status  
 by **Tatiana Salzirn**

of an art, but neither had it become completely universal, and it was "tamed" by quite barbaric and  
 Translated **from the Russian by Donna Griesenbeck**

violent methods, characteristic of the dogmatic system which engendered them. We were all born in a society where photography had been "tempered" to the point of vulgarity, a society in whose footsteps Eastern Europe "followed" for decades. As a result, a sort of isolated photographic preserve was formed, with utterly unique characteristics, in spite of which, or perhaps, precisely because of which, the local contemporary art of photography was born. Its peculiarities can be interpreted and categorized in many different and even contradictory ways for the local mind and the outside observer. Rather obvious and prominent features from the "internal" point of view and characteristic linguistic peculiarities may be invisible to the distant and detached observer, who, on the contrary, notices rather important generalized features and new original interpretations which may have seemed banal to their creators and their milieu.

The work of Moscow photographers Ilya Piganov, Vladimir Kupreanov, Alexey Shulgin, Maria Serebrjakova and Boris Mikhailov of Kharkov is united by an artistic thinking unbounded by the more traditional limits of photographic space and the standard textbook understanding of photography, its means and its possibilities. They approach their work in visual art with less interest in actually using a camera than in manipulating the photographic products of other artists for their own artistic goals (Alexey Shulgin, Ilya Piganov), using their own earlier works, transformed and mediated by new goals (Boris Mikhailov, Vladimir Kupreanov), or using anonymous remnants of photographic prints which are often removed from the original context in which they arose. In this sense the choice of these particular artists is absolutely correct, and indeed is the only possible choice when seen against the background of the rest of Soviet art photography production. In addition, this choice represents an undeniably successful attempt to reveal the up-to-date content of their photographic works, and gives the opportunity for a closer comparative examination of the chosen artists' creative aims, both among themselves and within the overall context of contemporary Moscow art.



There is no designated or described general tradition behind the existence of contemporary Soviet photography, and it one can even question the very fact of its presence. Today's photography exists in a context where it is unable to identify itself with its own past, in the absence of any sort of local factor which could be taken for a positive cultural base or stylistic aims. In our country photography has always been the property of a fairly exclusive group with a homogeneous way of looking at things. The usual things that accompany a "social rehabilitation" were never instituted; there are no photography galleries and never have been; there has been no notion of art photographer or photography critic as professions with official status, and the real internal photography market which was liquidated in the time of NEP<sup>4</sup> has yet to be renewed. Unlike the situation with painting, photography simply is not collected privately unless it has obvious historical value. From the moment "Socialist Realism" was sanctioned in 1934 as the sole and essential cultural dogma, contract reporting, censored both ethically and aesthetically, took the lead in photography and immediately subsumed the concept of photography itself. (All other types of photography were declared amateur, and with rare individual exceptions they were just that.) As is always the case in a hierarchical totalitarian structure, the canon of the attitude towards photography in Soviet cultural dogma was reproduced over the course of several generations and took shape as an understanding of photography as something applied, illustrative or documentary. Thus the ideological dogmas and the socialist-realist canon virtually divorced photography from the unique *a priori* expressions of its evolution as an art form, the ever-advancing discoveries of applications and methods unique to photography, thereby violating the international logic of its existence.

Photography at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, first with its experiments in impressionism and then with the early avantgarde of Rodchenko's time, did not make it into the genetic code of cultural memory, and was excluded from it for a long time as a result. Photography, like all phenomena related to the concrete realities of life, was politicized. In the absence of a true historical memory and a true past, photography's root relations with the time and place of action were displaced. A concept established by force, like any exaggerated experiment, comes to naught and cannot but lead to its being replaced by its opposite. Except for Boris Mikhailov, the participants in the exhibition, who have hardly any "pure" photographs, demonstrate a lack of interest in the existing order and in real circumstances in the artistic forms their creative strategy takes. This lack of interest is transformed into an automatic inattention to the primary visual phenomena of this reality, into political indifference. It stimulates a retreat from photography as a means of making permanent the events of life and of maintaining the recognizability of the imprints' temporal category, a retreat from the significance of its function as "testimony"—that is to say, a retreat from those very important qualities. For example, Roland Barthes formulated these qualities in his definition of the *noeme* of photography in *Camera Lucida*, correlating its essence above all with the time, and not the object portrayed: "The Photograph does not call up the past...The effect it produces on me is not to restore what has been abolished by time, by distance, but to attest that what I see has indeed existed."<sup>5</sup>

The overall semantic and stylistic direction of the group of works displayed is also linked



to technical issues. One observes an apparent inconsistency in the choice of techniques and means in the work of each artist. Here, of course, the question arises whether this variety is the consequence of programmatic eclectic combinations, a conscious artistic gesture of renunciation of the convenience food of established process and traditional concepts of photographic quality, the absence of a commitment to "good" printing technique, or whether after all it is explained by the inaccessibility of materials, supplies, and quality equipment to Soviet photographers. Both explanations are now equally justifiable, and not merely in the sense of the proverb "Necessity is the mother of invention." Of course, a photographer cannot simply choose a particular technology once and for all and stay with it, above all because that opportunity is virtually nonexistent for all of them. For the more radical artists, though, the chosen field of work itself gradually narrows down, and life is in constant dialogue with the merciless demands for novelty and individuality from one work to the next, and there is an atmosphere of close human contact and true mutual understanding which supports the overall mentality and the general criteria for evaluation. All this results in the virtual absence of the usual structure of such interrelated elements as the artist, artistic and commercial institutions, free criticism, the viewer, the market... All these relations are displaced toward the artist himself and the circle of his like-minded colleagues, also artists, but they are absolutized almost to the point of the "truth in the final instance." They are fruitful in their own way, accelerating the stages of individual development and the introspectiveness of the photographic situation. The experience of substituting for more civilized technical procedures leads to a situation where the resulting artistic projects are conceived and realized precisely due to the crudeness of "bad" paper or "bad" printing or "bad" film, or the lack of a good enlarger, and this technological "kitchen" also brings out significant elements of the artist's language. The absence of a number of pieces of high-quality photographic equipment traditionally considered essential stimulates the quest for a radical artistic consciousness and the composition of personal codes in autonomous creative work.

At a time when many photographers, whose work remains beyond the pale of this exhibit, continue to strive toward the qualities of immediate photography, using all sorts of techniques, tricks and inventions, almost all the photographers represented here went through a phase of a more "pure" photography, and consciously renounced its canons. Having arrived at an eclectic postmodernist understanding, it is as if they had, as externs, passed through the period of international art development in which photography, together with the other visual arts, has exhausted the traditional genres, stylistic manners and combinations.

The photographers represented at the exhibition at MIT are united more by the orientation of their work toward certain artistic tendencies, e.g. the further development of photography as an art, than they are by a common medium. The preceding long cultural isolation and other lingering consequences of the national disaster have become part of the heritage of the national cultural tradition, part of the peculiar mentality which unites them. Their authentic existence may be perceived with political overtones because of the unofficial status of their art and their artistic views, but this attitude is more typical of Boris Mikhailov's generation. The younger artists in the exhibition, on the other hand, reveal their artistic opposition in the quality of their resistance to



the category of "unofficial" art, in the desire not to deal at all with the existence of official and unofficial delineations, a desire not to emphasize or subject to artistic exploitation any purely social aspects, and in a certain apolitical artistic attitude and nihilism as regards the obvious value of their own photography.

So, the transparent positives that have been found are not remarkable in the least: "neutral" average Russian landscapes, and in the works of Maria Serebrjakova, a "ready-made" part of the overall composition such as a Leica plaster, pins, or a store receipt on blank sheets of paper. These "alien" objects are simply more real in the space of the final act with a photographic image when it is partially covered with glued-on strips of plaster, or when its defenseless illusory quality is destroyed by the illumination of a striped receipt placed face down on it, or when pins are stuck into it. What is designated and what is meant come together in the single semantic field of a sheet of paper, and a personal world of signs (with the three universal creative principles — nature, culture and mythology) brings out the individual semantic space which is defined by the phenomenon of signs belonging to these three principles. The allegorical caption on one of the sheets neither adds to nor subtracts from the visual declaration by its proximity, but it does aid in its verification, and also represents problems of the verbliness of representative languages. In other works in this series, photographs of pieces of contour-bevelled furniture, taken from albums of antique collections, are covered with transparent positives of landscape images, and the polarities of what is designated and what is meant are intertransitional.

The development of visual spaces which cannot be captured verbally relates Maria Serebrjakova's work with the creative strategy of Ilya Piganov. The attempt to disorient the thoughtful viewer by the apparent lack of artistic intention is achieved through the neutralization of the personal qualities of each individual "beautiful" work by uniting them into a single series ("Untitled, 1990") merely on the basis of common tone and format. In the key of a unified series, all techniques become deliberately heterogeneous, and the labor the artist expended on the production of each work is perceived as a deliberately simulated profane act. The attention paid to the marginal spaces of the visual structure, like everything else in the creative arsenal of Ilya Piganov, has a certain semantic reading. Take, for example, the intentional sloppiness of the emphasized edges at the intersections of enlarged fragments of the whole negative, cut into separate unsealed parts, reproducing the original image. The conceptual process overflows into the technical, and the technical into the conceptual, as in an earlier series by Piganov with small portraits of random objects printed on old paper, objects which just happened to be at hand, and which were most likely chosen from among the surrounding objects because they were especially photogenic. Objects from the artist's everyday life, shot in direct light with flash, are numbered and made into a sort of archive. This sightseer's approach to visual *realia* snatched from the stream of observation, indeed the very type of search for objects to photograph would, it seems, transform life experience into a souvenir image. But the plot rests on the ironic incongruity of the resulting "souvenirs" with the associated global artistic acts, and on the transformation of "testimony" into a bureaucratic record. Such an unaccentuated debunking of photography's original imperial plans to record and preserve impressions of the unending phenomena of visual



reality, as well as the understanding of the photographic process as the outward appearance of acquisition, a pseudo-mastery of the imprinted objective realities, may be linked with a latent overcoming of the cynical, to use Susan Sontag's definition, side of sentimental photographic cognition. To the extent that this overcoming takes place, it may be interpreted as proof of the *a priori* renunciation of the very function of "cognition" in the original artistic strategy.

The above-named tendencies, like the characteristic principle of serial expansion, are also widespread in the work of Vladimir Kupreanov and Alexey Shulgin. Characteristic of Vladimir Kupreanov's work are reminiscences of conceptualism, the dominating movement in art and literature in Moscow "unofficial" culture of the seventies and early eighties, which allowed photography to pass through the experience of conceptual enrichment. The series of documentary portraits of telephone operators from the Honor Board displaying heroes of labor (taken by Kupreanov himself under contract to the telephone exchange) unfolds as a narrative based on the lines of Aleksandr Pushkin's elegiac poem "Light wanes...", where each line is combined with a separate photograph of a woman's face. As a result of the too-literal combinations of different semantic and aesthetic canons which have non-intersecting layers of associations, the narrative links are transformed in the concrete semantics of the series "Memories of Pushkin." The theme of memory arises from the presence of the theme of death in the elegiac poem, as in any work of the genre, and from the connection of any sort of concrete photography, especially portrait photography, to the illusion of possessing the past. In another work by Vladimir Kupreanov, "Cast me not away from thy presence," a portrait of a group of workers, broken into seven stretchers with photo fabric combine with a fragmentary line from the Psalms ("Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy holy Spirit from me," Psalm 51:11).

A summary understanding of Alexey Shulgin's artistic strategy boils down to the results of a gesture in reaction to the fact that the potential of contemporary art has been exhausted, when any one of a line of "new" contributions in the form of one's own photographs becomes a meaningless artistic act. The unknown authors of "Others' photographs," found by Alexey Shulgin as negatives in the archives of the Design Institute, were not pursuing any particular artistic goals — their work was intended for purely utilitarian ends as documentation of construction, and were dictated by the corresponding demands. The [art] photographer was able to work them into the structure of visual consumption by consistent acts of selecting negatives, by the photographic process, by the disruption of the context in which these images arose, and by giving to them an artistic function after assimilating some aspects which were not intended by the original photographers, and focusing all of this on the act of display. A similar thing happened with the images re-photographed from the television screen by a special technique, snatched from the stream of visual information. These images, encircled by the frame of the TV set housing, became easel pictures, eliciting retro-associations with abstract art.

One of the most important events connected with this exhibition is the nearly complete retrospective of the works of Boris Mikhailov, a unique and probably the only attempt to do an in-depth individual show of the work of the "patriarch" of contemporary Soviet photography. His works influenced the orientation of Moscow photographers and the development of artistic



tendencies in Kharkov. The great variety in Boris Mikhailov's work demands a separate monographic treatment; it has a peculiar philosophy, a peculiar everyday semantics, and its own "folkloric" qualities. It was, for example, none other than Mikhailov who introduced the type of photography known as "luriki," the coloring of prints, the use of staged pop photographs. His many old, organically conceived intuitive discoveries, while they have already become classic, remain up-to-date even today. An exhibition in a formal exhibition gallery will no doubt strengthen the grotesque effect of many of his works, and will give a new interpretation to works which, at the time they were created, were impossible to imagine leading an exhibition existence. But times change...

#### Notes

1. "Mexican divertimento," *A Part of Speech*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1980. Translated by Alan Myers with Joseph Brodsky.
2. *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981. p 117. Translated by Richard Howard.
3. The title of the article is taken from the story by Virginia Woolf.
4. NEP refers to Lenin's New Economic Policy, which allowed for some private economic initiative in the 1920s. (trans. note)
5. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p 82.



*Moment*, October–December 1989,  
pp 41–42, Yugoslavia

*Art*, No. 12, 1989

*Art in America*, March 1990

*Artisti Russi Contemporanei*, Museo Luigi  
Pecci, Prato, Italy, 1990

#### Group Exhibitions

1987 *Representation*, Moscow

*A Retrospective of Moscow Artists  
1957–1987*, Moscow

1988 *Labyrinth*, Moscow

*XVIII All-Union Exhibition of Young Moscow  
Artists*, Moscow

1989 *Expensive Art*, Moscow

*Serebriakova, Zhuravlev, Kirtsova*,  
Belgrade, Yugoslavia

*Alternative?* (group exhibition of Moscow  
artists during the Festival of Contempo-  
rary Music in the Glinka Museum of  
Musical Culture), Moscow

*Installation*, Belgrade, Yugoslavia

*Inexpensive Art*, Moscow

*Unfinished Works*, Moscow

*Exhibition*, Gallery of Monumentalists in  
Porto, Lisbon, Portugal

*Moscow–Vienna–New York*, Messepalast,  
Wiener Festwochen, Vienna

1990 *Maria Serebrjakova & Anatolij Shuravlev:  
Malerei und objekte*, Inter Art Gallery,  
West Berlin

*Mosca Moscow Moskva '90*, Sala  
Umberto Boccioni, Milan

*Towards the object*, Moscow

*Katalog*, Moscow

*Exhibition*, Provincial Museum of Contem-  
porary Art, Ostende, Belgium

*Between Spring and Summer; Soviet  
Conceptual Art in the Era of Late  
Communism*, Tacoma Art Museum,

Tacoma, Washington. Traveled to ICA,  
Boston and Des Moines Art Center, Des  
Moines, Iowa

*The Work of Art in the Age of Perestroika*,  
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

*Artedomani: 1990 Punto di vista*, Ex-  
ospedale San Matteo, Spoleto, Italy

*Da Mosca*, Unione Culturale, Turin, Italy

ALEXEY SHULGIN born 1963, Moscow

#### Bibliography

*Sovietskoje foto [Soviet Photo]*, No. 9, 1988,  
Moscow

*Die zeitgenossische Photographie in der  
Sowjet Union*, Zurich, Edition Stemmler, 1988

*Eskola, Taneli and Hanny Eerikainen,  
Toisinnakijat (Uusi valokuva neuvostoliitossa)*,  
Kirjat, Helsinki, 1988

*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 December  
1989, p 37

*Contemporanea*, September 1989, pp 64–71

*Bildtidningen 41*, No. 1, Stockholm, pp 59–60

*Bildtidningen 41*, No. 2, Stockholm, p 3–12

*Katalog 1*, arg. No. 2, Denmark, pp 4–12

*Artisti Russi Contemporanei*, Museo Luigi  
Pecci, Prato, Italy, 1990 pp 103–107

*Gumanitarnyj fond [Humanitarian Fund]*, No.  
4/37, June 1990, Moscow

*Sovietskoje foto [Soviet Photo]* No. 3, 1990,  
Moscow

*Artscribe*, March–April 1990, p.5

*New York Times Weekend*, 13 April, 1990

*New York Observer*, 16 April, 1990

#### One-Person Exhibitions

1988 *Exhibition*, Ukhta, Komi ASSR, USSR

1989 *Exhibition*, Finnphoto Gallery, Helsinki  
Group Exhibitions

#### Group Exhibitions

1987 *Photofestival*, Krasnogorsk, USSR

*Representation*, Moscow

*Photoexposition*, Moscow

*XVII All-Union Exhibition of Young Artists*,  
Moscow

1988 *Contemporary Soviet Photography*,  
Museum of Photography, Lausanne  
Switzerland

*Contemporary Soviet Photography*,  
Museum of Photography, Odense,  
Denmark

*Contemporary Soviet Photography*, Stockholm;  
traveled to other Swedish cities

*150 Years of Photography*, Prague,  
Czechoslovakia

*Photobridge*, Moscow

*PHOTOsummer 1989*, Moscow

*Moscow–Vienna–New York*, Messepalast,  
Wiener Festwochen, Vienna

*150 Years of Photography*, Moscow

1990 *The Logic of Paradox*, Moscow

*Mosca Moscow Moskva '90*, Sala  
Umberto Boccioni, Milan

*Exhibition*, Split, Yugoslavia

*Contemporary Photography from the  
USSR*, Walker, Ursitti & McGinniss  
Gallery, New York

*Da Mosca*, Turin

*Artedomani: 1990 punto di vista*, Spoleto  
Italy

*Opposition: II International Biennale of  
Photography*, Rotterdam

*Exhibition*, Provincial Museum of Contempo-  
rary Art, Ostende Belgium



Checklist of the Exhibition

VLADIMIR KUPREANOV

*In Memory of A. Pushkin* 1985  
Sixteen black and white photographs with text  
30 x 40 cm

*Cast me not away from thy presence* 1989  
Fourteen photographs with mixed media  
145 x 615 cm; 265 x 615 cm

*Family Portraits* 1990  
Four photographs with mixed media  
30 x 40 cm

ILYA PIGANOV

*Untitled* 1988  
Eleven photographs with mixed media  
13 x 18 cm

*Untitled* 1990  
Five photographs with mixed media  
100 x 80 cm; 100 x 75 cm

MARIA SEREBRJKOVA

*Untitled* 1988  
Four photographs with mixed media  
21 x 10 cm; 11 1/2 x 10 cm

*Untitled* 1989  
Photographs with mixed media  
50 x 70 cm

ALEXEY SHULGIN

*Others' Photographs* 1987  
Twelve black and white photographs  
50 x 60 cm

*TV Sets* 1989  
Black and white photographs  
50 x 60 cm

Artists' Biographies

VLADIMIR KUPREANOV born 1954, Moscow

**Bibliography**

*Die zeitgenossische Photographie in der Sowjet Union*, Zurich, Edition Stemmler, 1988

*Sovietskoje foto [Soviet Photo]*, No. 10, 1989, Moscow

*Contemporanea*, September 1989, pp 64-71

*Gumanitarnyj fond [Humanitarian Fund]*, No. 4/37, June 1990, Moscow

*New York Times Weekend*, 13 April, 1990

*New York Observer*, 16 April, 1990

**One-Person Exhibitions**

1990 *Middle Russian Landscape (Conceptual Photography)*, Interart Gallery, West Berlin

**Group Exhibitions**

1980 *Five young photographers*, Youth Club Raduga [Rainbow], Moscow

1984 *Graphics in the City*, Moscow

1985 *Portrait*, Moscow

1986 *All-Union and Moscow Exhibition of Book Graphics*, Moscow

1987 *Photoexposition*, Hermitage Art Association, Moscow

*Kupreanov and Shcherbakov*, House of the Sculptor, Moscow

1988 *Contemporary Soviet Photography*, Museum of Photography, Lausanne, Switzerland

*Book Graphics*, Central House of the Artist, Moscow

*Today's Artistic Consciousness*, Gallery Mars, Moscow

1989 *Photobridge*, Moscow

*First International Photo-triennale*, Essingen, Germany

*150 Years of Photography*, Moscow

1990 *The Logic of Paradox*, Moscow

*Contemporary Photography from the USSR*, Walker, Ursitti & McGinniss Gallery, New York

*Da Mosca*, Turin, Italy

*Opposition: II International Biennale of Photography*, Rotterdam

ILYA PIGANOV born 1962, Moscow

**Bibliography**

*Contemporanea*, September 1989, pp 64-71

*Gumanitarnyj fond [Humanitarian Fund]*, No. 4/37, June 1990, Moscow

**One-Person Exhibitions**

1989 *Exhibition*, Nikolaev, USSR

*Exhibition*, Finnphoto Gallery, Helsinki

**Group Exhibitions**

1987 *Representation*, Moscow

*Photoexposition*, Moscow

*Autumn Photo Salon*, Moscow

1988 *Spring Photo Salon*, Moscow

1988-90 *Smile, please!*, Paris, London, Moscow

1989 *Photobridge*, Moscow

*Alternative?* (Moscow artists, Festival of Contemporary Music, Glinka Museum of Musical Culture)

*Moscow-Vienna-New York*, Messepalast, Wiener Festwochen, Vienna

*150 Years of Photography*, Moscow

1990 *The Logic of Paradox*, Moscow

*Katalog*, Moscow

MARIA SEREBRJKOVA born 1965, Moscow

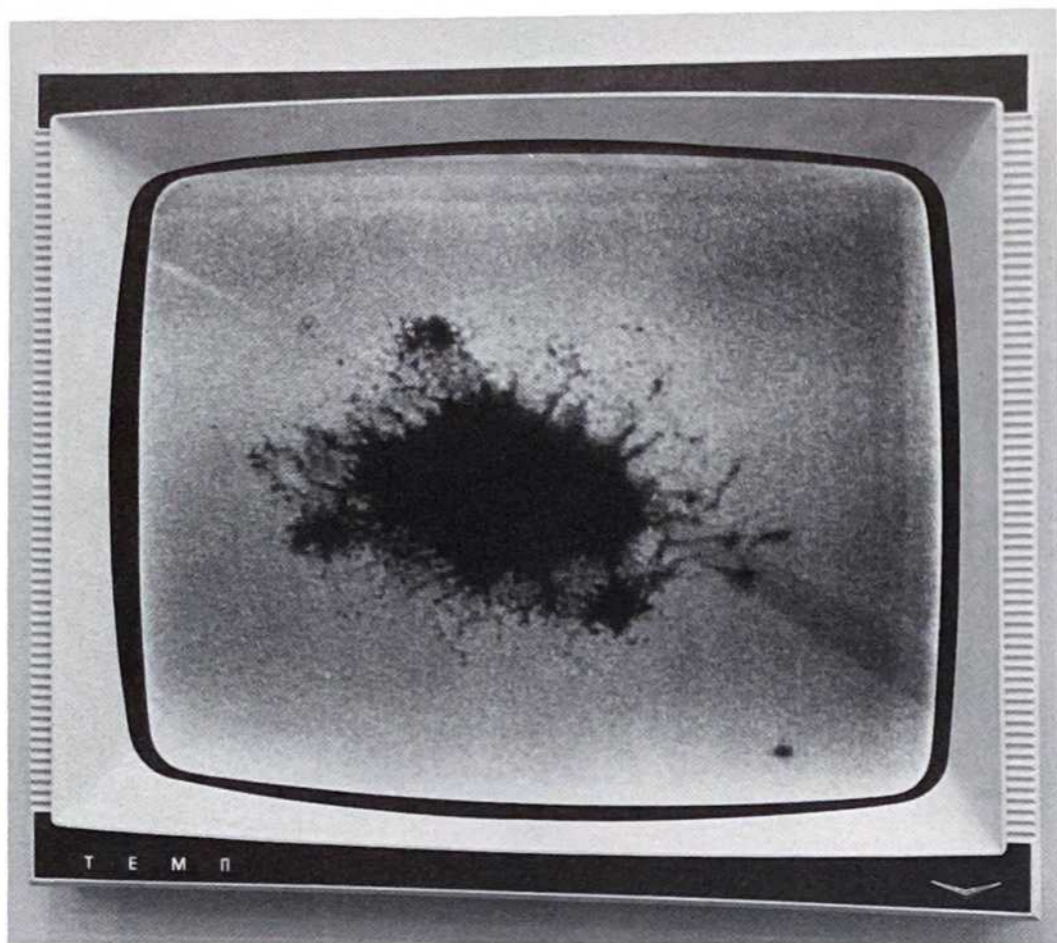
**Bibliography**

*Iskusstvo [Art]*, No. 2, 1989, Moscow

*Contemporanea*, No. 6, 1989

*Quorum*, No. 2, 1989, Yugoslavia



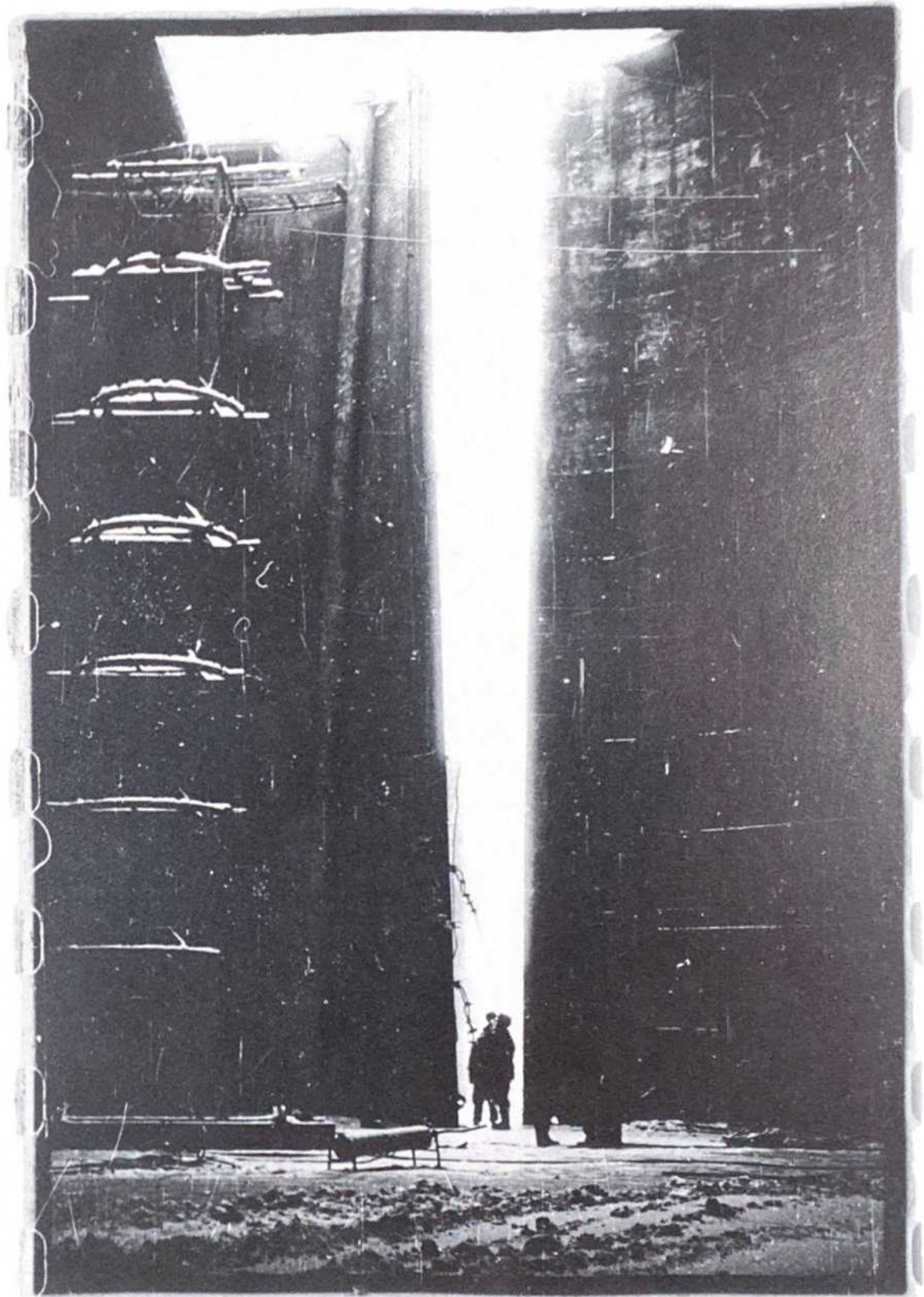


A. SHULGIN

from the series TV SETS

1989





A. SHULGIN

from the series OTHERS' PHOTOGRAPHS

1987





A. SHULGIN

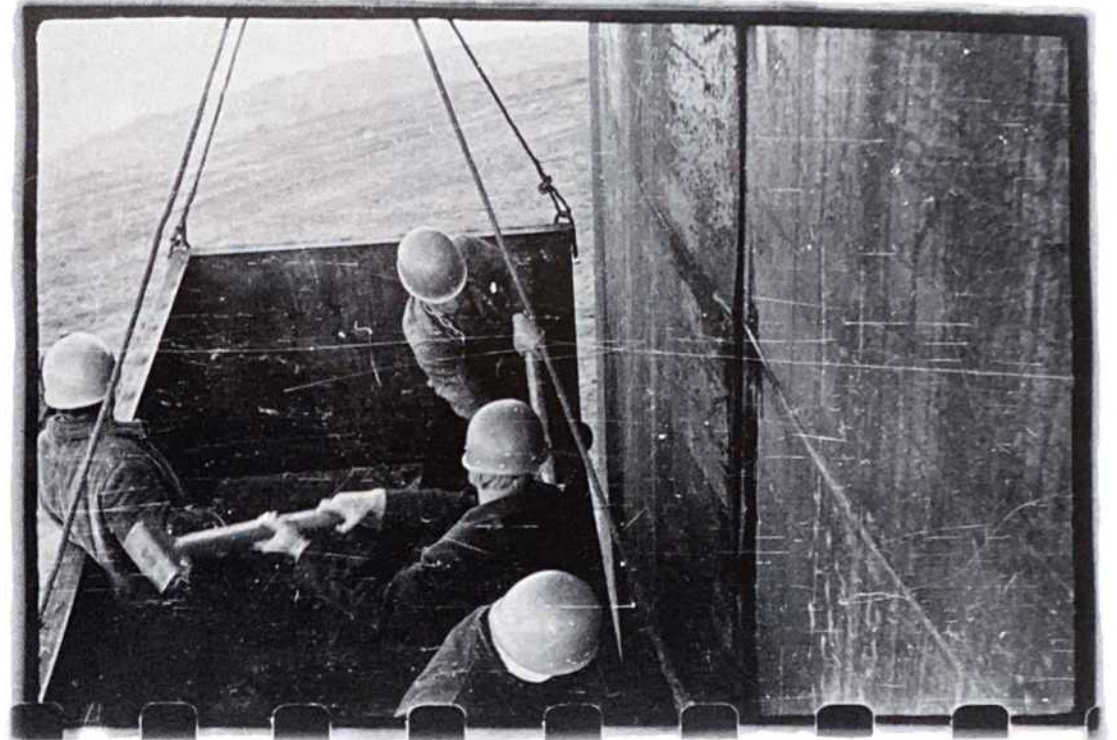
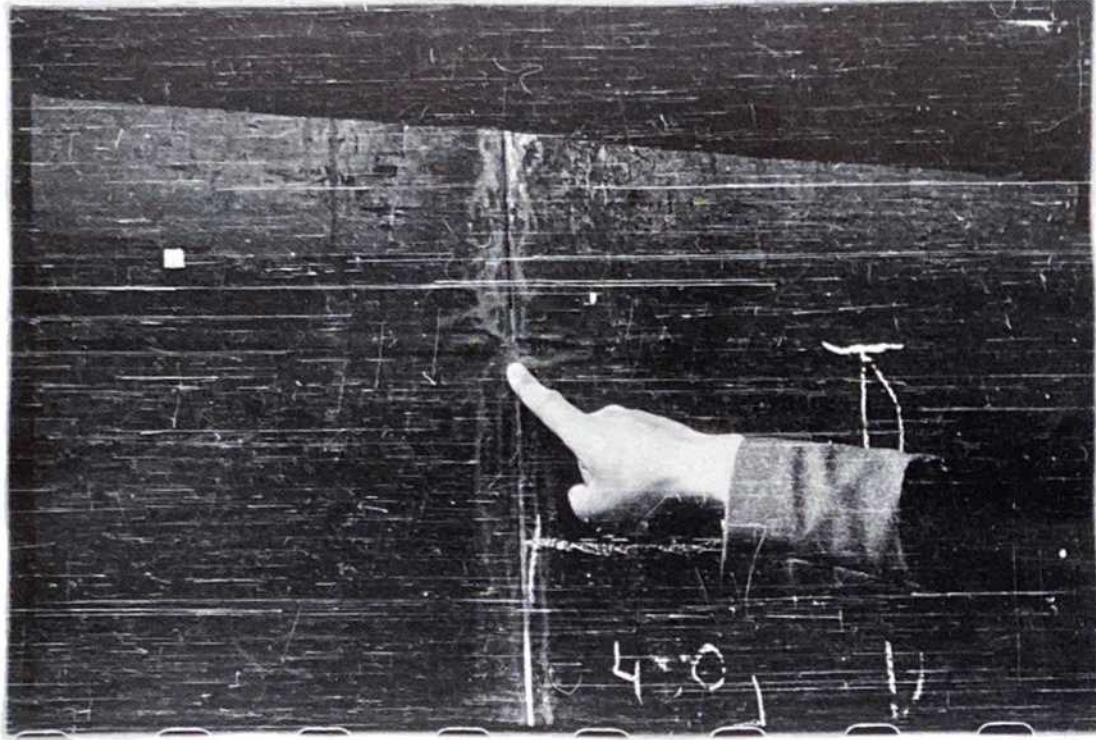
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1987

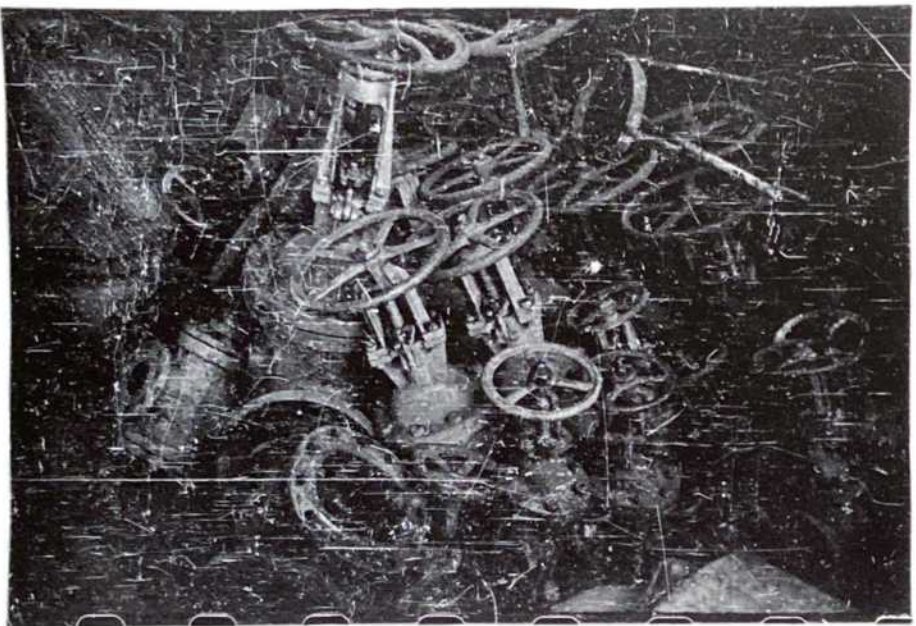








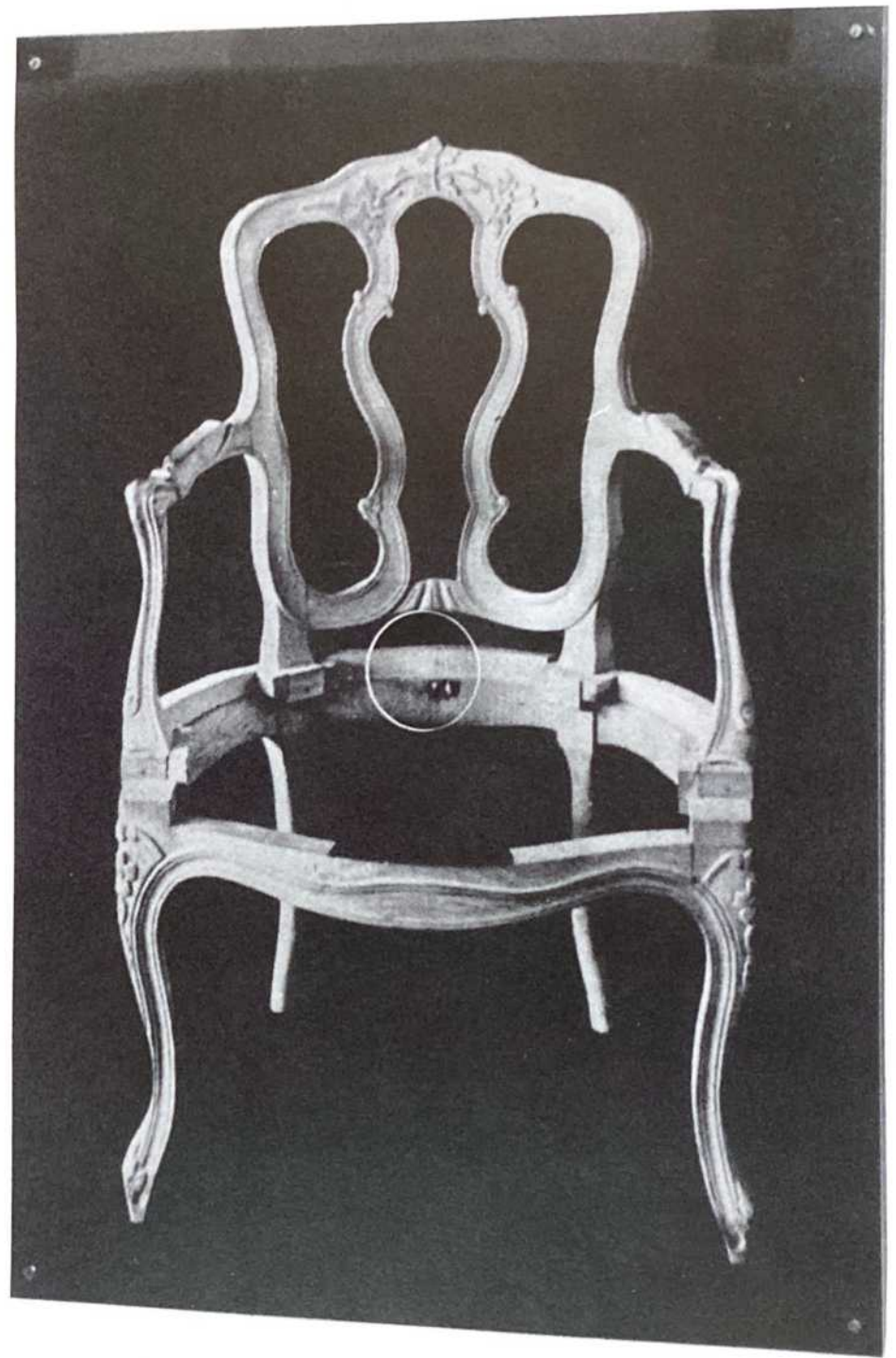






Alexey Shulgin





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M. SEREBRJKOVA

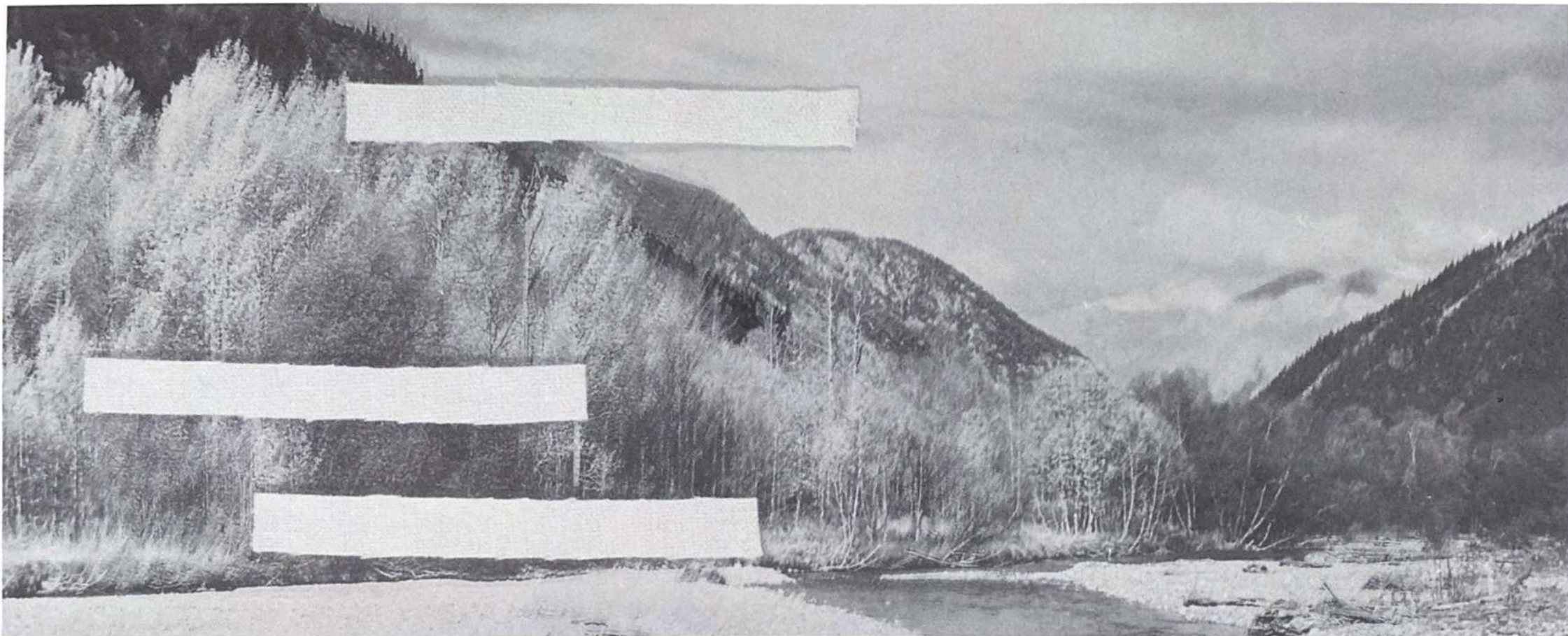
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UNTITLED

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1989





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M. SEREBRJKOVA

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UNTITLED

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1988





Лжец говорит: "Всё что я  
утверждаю, ложно."





0 90

0253

00 23

M. SEREBRJKOVA

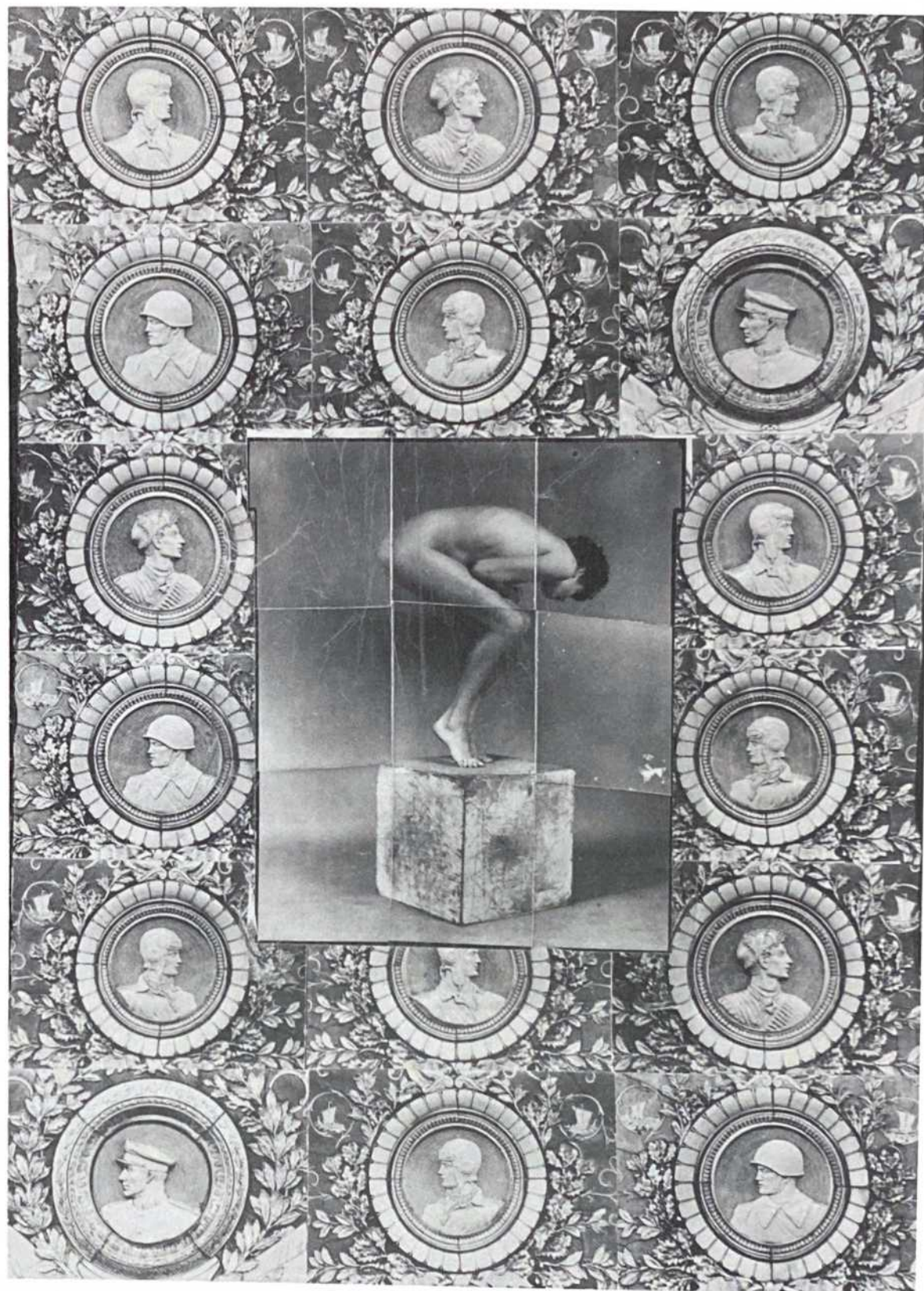
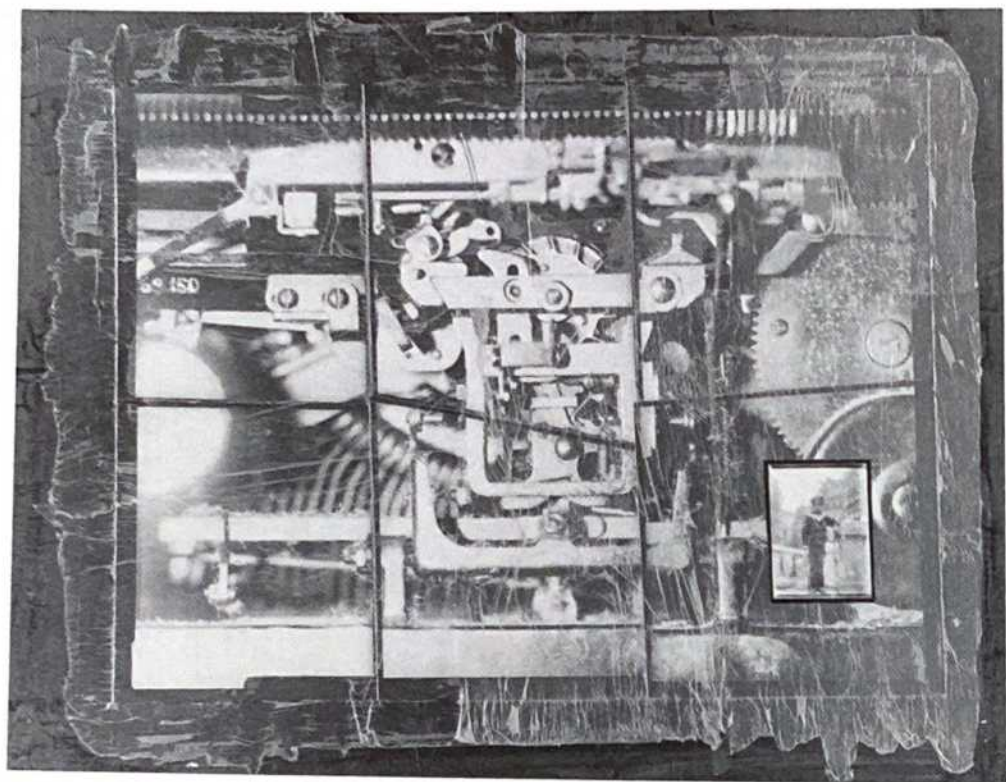
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1988



**Maria Serebrjakova**



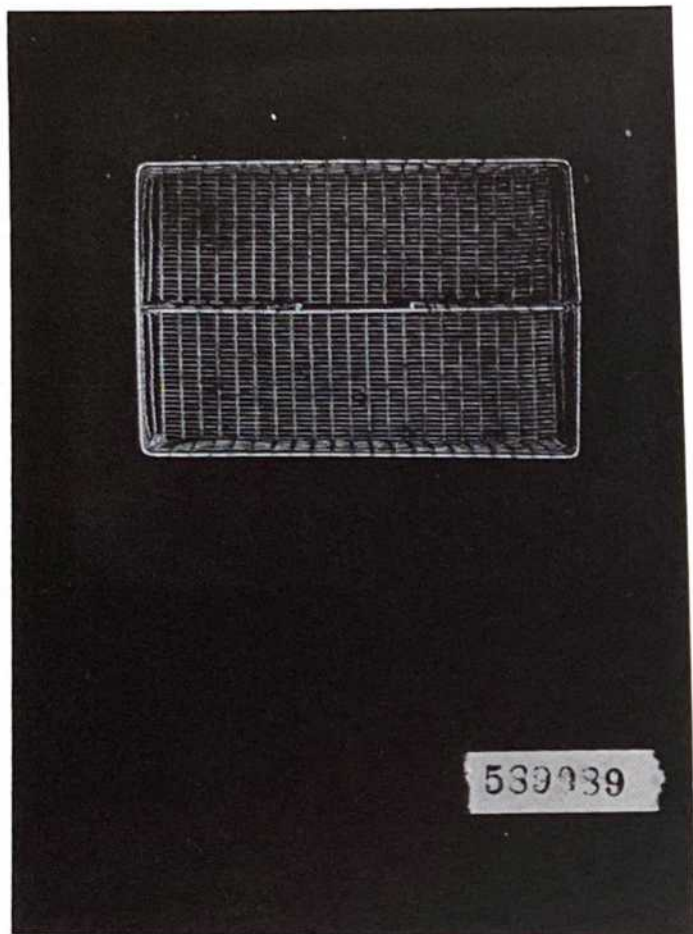


I. PIGANOV  
UNTITLED  
1990

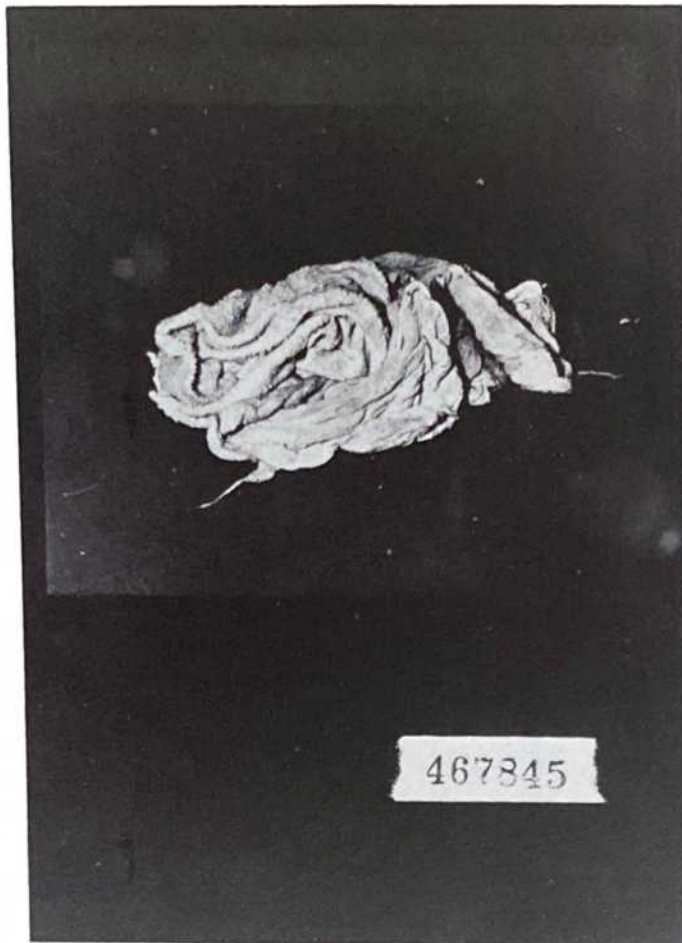








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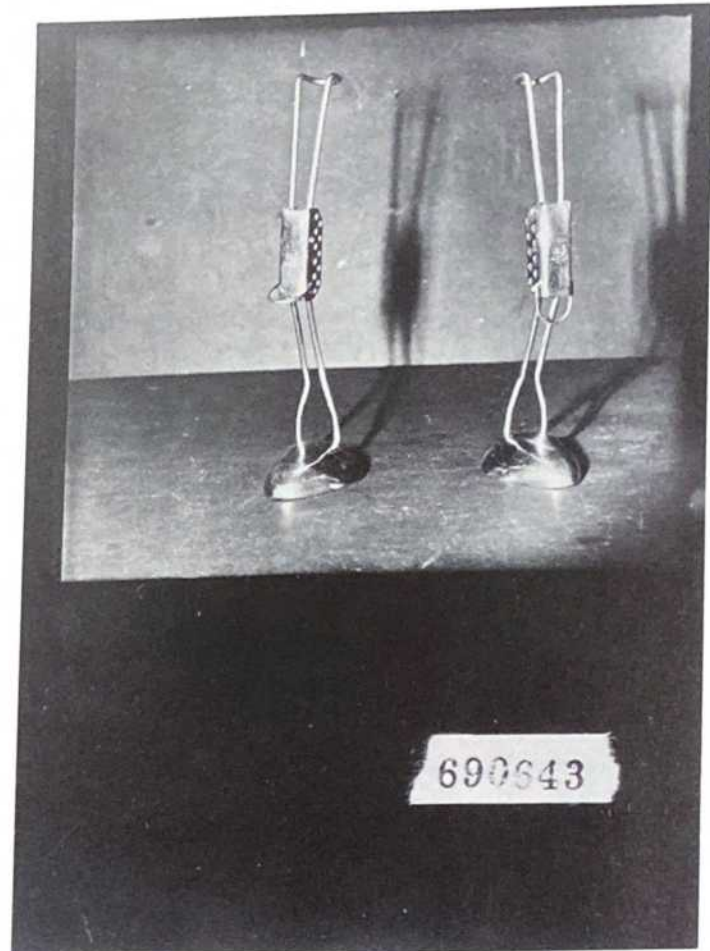
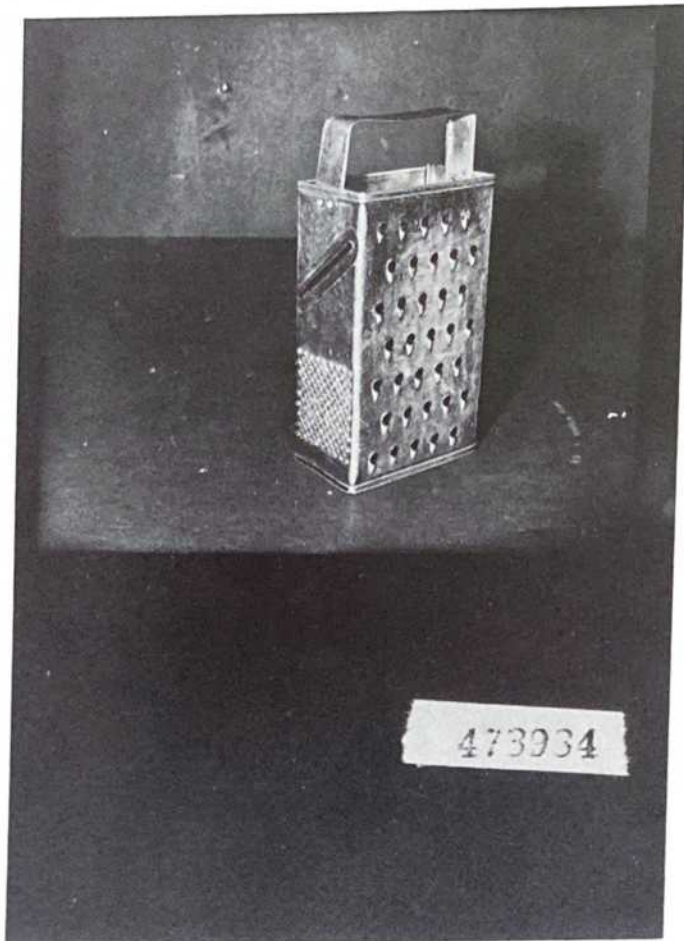
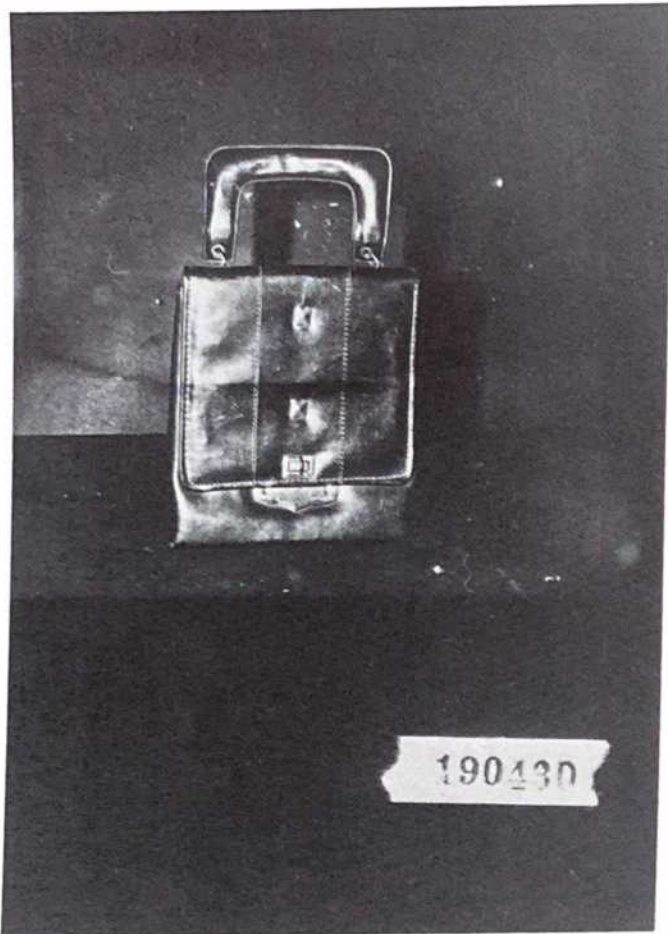
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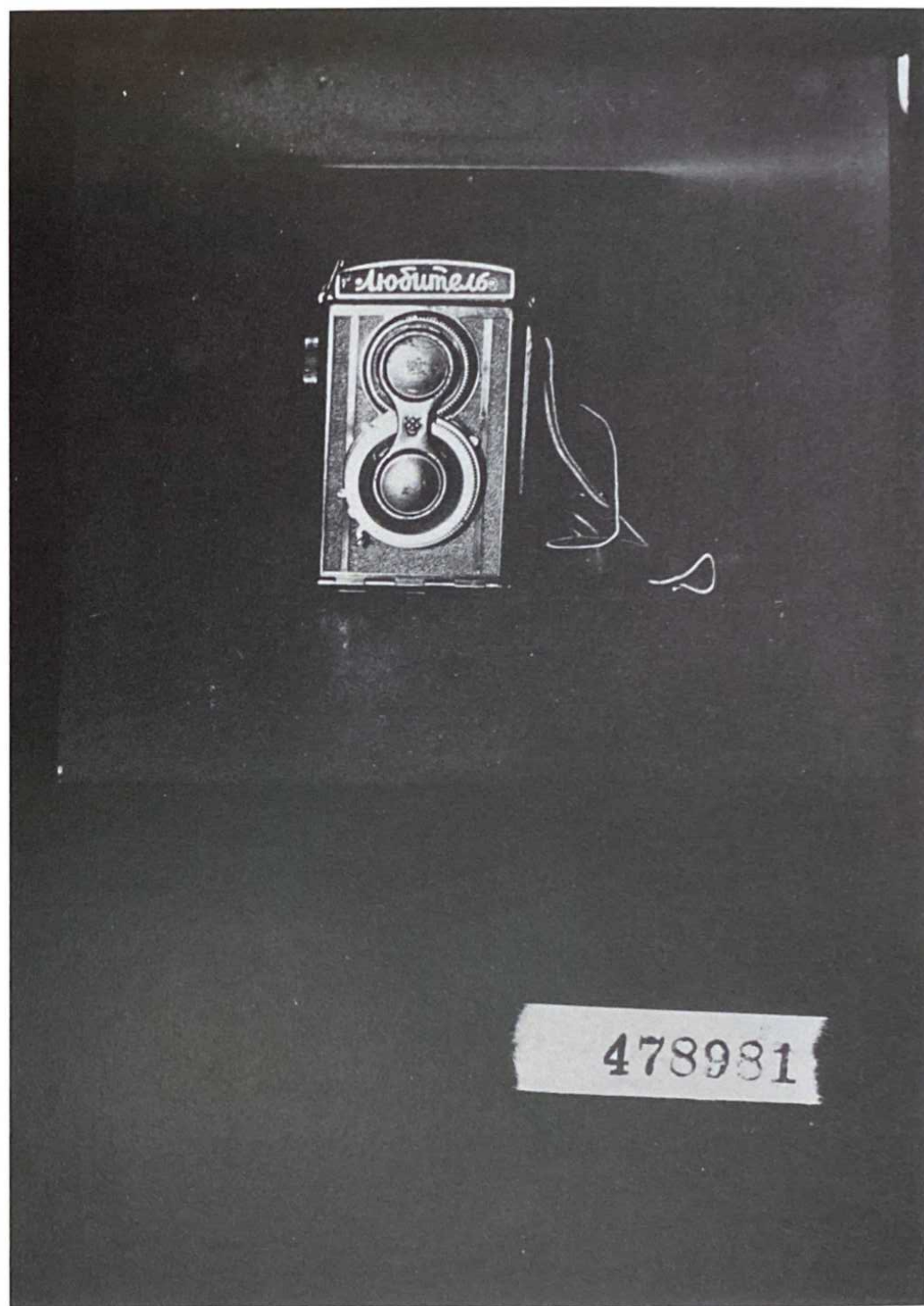
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1988









I. PIGANOV

UNTITLED

1988



Ilya Piganov





To shores left far behind transplanted...



Anew I am aflame; from out my eyes well tears



My heart now sinks, now soars in rapture



Its forfeited desires and hopes illusory...



Blow, winds! Fill, sails, their charge, obedient,  
meeting



Roll, gloomy waves, and play in furtive, fitful glee!





A southern land, a land enchanted



My heart with longing filled, I see before me lie



I gaze on it, enthralled, by wayward memory



Past dreams and fancies hover round me;



I recapture  
The mad, tempestuous love of half-forgotten years



With all its sufferings, its joys, however fleeting





V. KUPREANOV  
from the series FAMILY PORTRAITS  
1990





Не отъ отвержери ми мене отъ лица Твоего

V. KUPREANOV  
CAST ME NOT AWAY FROM THY PRESENCE  
1989



Vladimir Kupreanov



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The Missing Picture

**Alternative contemporary photography from the Soviet Union**

MIT List Visual Arts Center December 8, 1990–February 3, 1991

Vladimir Kupreanov  
Ilya Piganov  
Maria Serebrjakova  
Alexey Shulgin



The

Missing

Picture

Alternative contemporary photography from the Soviet Union

Vladimir Kupreanov  
Ilya Piganov  
Maria Serebrjakova  
Alexey Shulgin