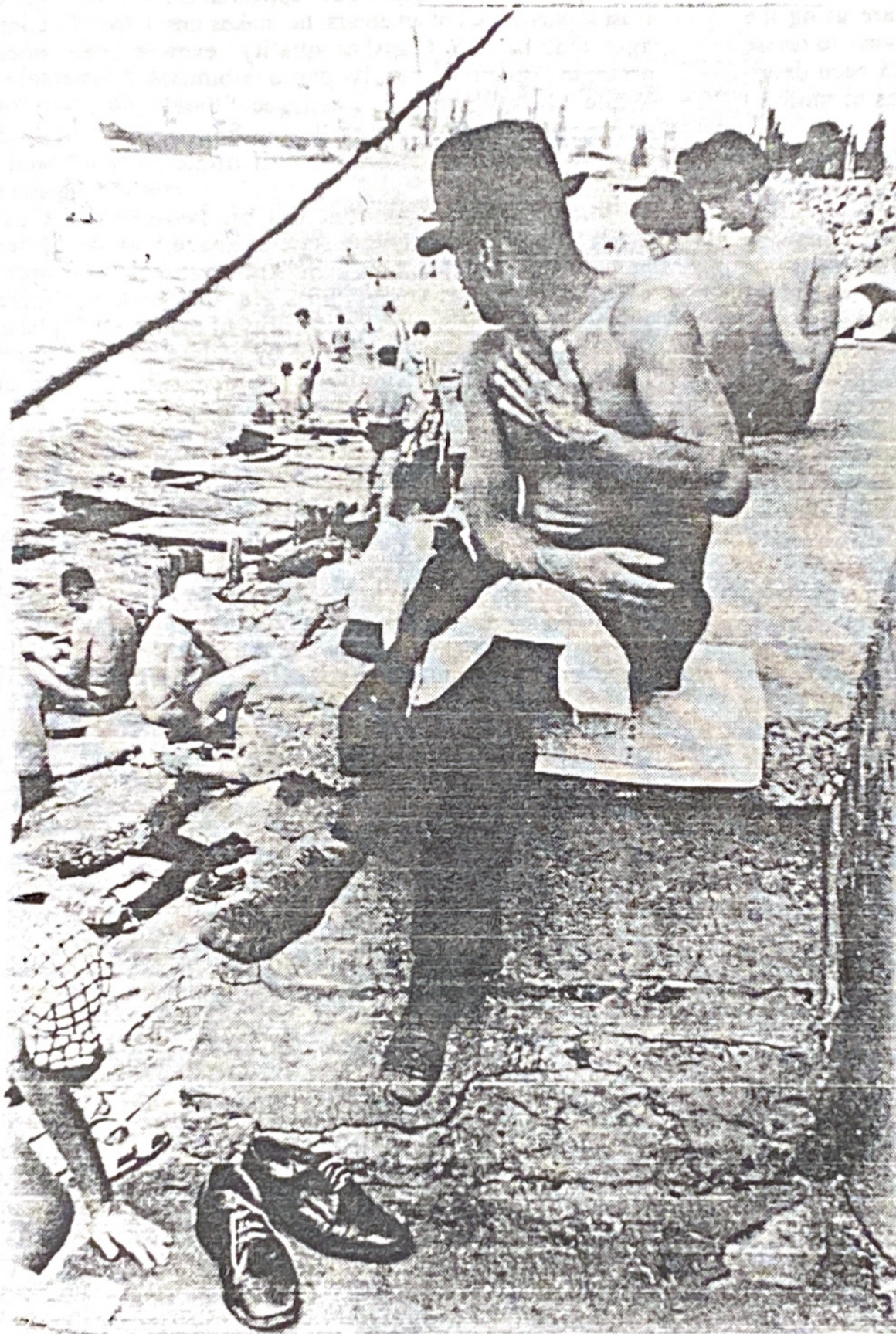


LEHMAN  
COLLEGE  
■ ART  
GALLERY

THE MISSING PICTURE  
ALTERNATIVE CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY  
FROM THE SOVIET UNION



Boris Michailov, Berdyansk The Beach

LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY

NOVEMBER 14 - DECEMBER 21, 1991

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition of works by five contemporary Soviet artists (four from Russia and one from the Ukraine) was organized by guest curator John Jacob in collaboration with SOYUZHDOZ-EXPORT in Moscow for the MIT List Visual Arts Center, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since this exhibition first went on view at MIT in December of 1990, the Soviet Union has been shaken by an attempted coup, declarations of independence by various republics, and other dramatic political events. This exhibition, constructed in two parts, reflects the climate leading to those changes. The artists in this exhibition are using the photographic medium in new ways to revise cultural identifications that had been determined by a decades-long series of uniform images, objects and events.

Included in the exhibition are Alexey Shulgin, Maria Serebrjakova, Ilya Piganov and Vladimir Kupreanov: four young artists from the first generation to grow up knowing cultural repression, and emerge as artists in a time of greater liberation. They have had the opportunity to witness the rehabilitation of earlier generations of Soviet artists from the revolutionaries of the 1920s to the underground and emigre artists of the 1960s-1980s. These artists address the ideological functions of the photographic medium within contemporary Soviet culture. They refute the established western notion of Soviet photography as predominantly photojournalistic or dominated exclusively by a Social realist esthetic. Working with found or manipulated images, they do not generally practice "straight" photography; and their works are much closer to the conceptual approaches of the Moscow School than to the realist traditions of Soviet photography. However, their works have also been informed by the teachings of several master photographers who have been working in obscurity for the last twenty years. A major influence on these younger artists is Boris Michailov, whose largely unknown works are presented here in a nearly complete retrospective in a separate section of the exhibition.

Photography in the Soviet Union was never really accorded the status of fine art. The systems that support experimental photography in the West: photo galleries, photo critics, and collectors of new forms of photography, are only now becoming known in the Soviet Union and are still rare. Photographic material and equipment are scarce and expensive. Nevertheless, photography was enjoyed as a hobby by many, and the government supported both a national network of camera clubs and the publication *Sovietskoje foto*. In the 1980s photographers began to gather outside of the amateur groups to explore new ideas and techniques. One such group identified itself with the larger group *Ermitazh (Hermitage)* which was responsible for organizing *Retrospection*, the first major retrospective of "unofficial" Soviet art in Moscow in 1987. Out of the collapse of the *Ermitazh* group was formed The Immediate Photography Group. Ilya Piganov and Alexey Shulgin were among its

members, as was Boris Michailov.

Born in 1938, Boris Michailov is one of the oldest members of The Immediate Photography Group, and he has emerged as one of its most preeminent artists. Michailov works within the amateur tradition that is his background. Since the 1930's (essentially all of Michailov's lifetime) all forms of photography except Social Realism were delegated to the realm of the amateur. Rather than work against his own identity as an amateur photographer, Michailov works in accordance with it. Using the cameras and photographic papers that would appeal to the least sophisticated of amateurs, he makes images that have a snapshot quality, even arranging them in family photo albums. While Michailov's works critique Soviet society, he does not set himself apart from it. The works have an affectionate, if ironic, quality.

Michailov's images function on two levels. Using a documentary style of image, he presents himself and his own experiences being typical of Soviet life. He then undermines the documentary authority of the images by overpainting them or by adding intervening texts. Symbolic color is important in Michailov's work, and he uses it in the popular tradition of the *lubok*, a form of Russian illustrated broadside suppressed for a century under the Tsars, and revived after the Bolshevik Revolution. In the *lubok*, specific strong colors function as symbols: red for the proletarian, black for the bourgeois, and so on. In his series *Sots Art - II*, Michailov uses color film, and without manipulating either the negative or the print, discovers and photographs color signifiers already present in the real world.

Michailov's use of found or acquired images has had strategic importance in the history of Soviet photography. Working as a photographic restorer in the city of Karkov in the Ukraine, he amassed a remarkable archive of images by amateur photographers which he used in his series *Luriky*. Some of the images in this series have been combined or reconstructed to invent new images, but it is not always clear when this is the case. In another series, *Berdiansk The Beach*, some works are staged while others are not. Photography is often used to alter history and invent memories and events, and in this way, Michailov's works parallel the reconstruction of the "official" history of the Soviet "people." Michailov is one of the artists included in the 1991 *Carnegie International Exhibition*. In the catalogue for that exhibition Lynne Cook writes:

Highly influential on younger, unsanctioned photographers, Michailov, holds a seminal place in recent photography in the Soviet Union comparable to that of Ilya Kabakov among visual artist. 1

The four younger artists in this exhibition, like Michailov, use acquired images. Alexey Shulgin works from negatives lifted from a private archive, or photographs directly from a television screen. Maria Serebrjakova uses

mass-printed materials ranging from labels from consumer items to halftones discarded by printing houses. Ilya Piganov mimics the institutional cataloguing of things and ideas. Vladimir Kupreanov adopts familiar photographic forms such as the family photograph and the "plaque of respect." All are addressing the question of authorship. In his catalogue essay John Jacob writes:

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 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. 2

Alexey Shulgin *Others' Photos* is an extensive series of images printed from negatives found in an archive of negatives in the warehouse of a Moscow construction firm. While the industrial nature of these works call to mind earlier photos of Soviet progress by Rodchenko and others, these works testify not to the greatness of Soviet progress, but to the great human and environmental costs of the industrialization of Soviet Russia. The fact that their makers are anonymous adds to the poignancy of the images. Within the setting of the archive, these photos served a documentary function. By removing them, and isolating them from their institutional context, the documentary value of the photos is taken away, and Shulgin, in his appropriation of them, undermines the authority of the photo as a "carrier" of institutional message. This is also the case with the images he photographs from television; by isolating single images intended to be experienced within the context of a series of other images, he disrupts the

flow of the visual signs that form cultural memories.

Maria Serebrjakova works with "readymade" images - landscapes, or images of furniture taken from albums of antique collections. Russian landscapes have historically been used to convey national value. After the revolution, the tradition of landscape was transformed to be read not as a depiction of private property, but as a source of national pride and power. Social Realist landscapes featured the presence and activity of workers and represented Soviet power and progress. The Motherland in Serebrjakova's landscapes has been oversentimentalized, over-developed, and ravaged. Her additions of texts and objects serve to enhance the sense of loss.

Like Serebrjakova, Vladimir Kupreanov combines texts and images in an ironic way to explore the ideological function of the image in Soviet culture. His series *In Memory of A. Pushkin* (1985) is constructed from portraits commissioned to honor working Soviet women in "plaques of respect." These plaques are frames within which the photo of a worker may be inserted along with a text honoring that person's achievements. These plaques are common sites in public parks, and party meeting rooms. Kupreanov, by superimposing a romantic text by the poet Pushkin over these deadpan portraits, points out the disjunction between the romance of Russian poetry and reality of the monotony of Soviet life.

Ilya Piganov, like Shulgin, works with the idea of the archive. In his series *Untitled* (1988) he presents a series of numbered objects photographed against dark backgrounds. These simple objects: shoes, cheese graters, children's toys, have an anthropomorphic quality that is highly sensual. Piganov heightens that sensuality by printing the photos on very old Soviet photographic paper, gaining a tonal quality impossible to achieve using new materials. Piganov is suggesting that human sexuality and individuality are extended to these objects by design. Individualism in the Soviet Union has had to be subject to control, and these photos seem to have been recently liberated from Piganov's archive, and to possess some special kind of knowledge or power. The subject of Piganov's recent panels is the crisis of the contemporary artist in the Soviet Union. The five photos, each constructed on a grid, form a narrative self-portrait marked by disillusionment and nostalgia.

The Lehman College Art Gallery is very pleased to present in *The Missing Picture* artists whose works give us a critical view of art and life in the Soviet Union as it exists today. We thank Katy Kline, Jill Aszling and the other staff at the MIT List Visual Arts Center for their assistance, and we congratulate curator John Jacob and all involved for their fine work on this project.

sylvania, Carnegie Museum of Art, 1991) Vol. 1, p. 104.

2. John Jacob, "The Crisis of Identification in Soviet Photography," *The Missing Picture: Alternative Contemporary Photography from the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1990), p. XVI.

### Artist's Biography

**BORIS MIKHAILOV**  
Born 1938, Kharkov (Ukraine)

#### 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

VLADIMIR KUPREANOV  
Born 1954, Moscow

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-trienale*,  
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

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 SEREBRJAKOVA  
Born 1965, Moscow

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  
*Serebrjakova, Zhuraviev*,  
*Kirtsova*, Belgrade, Yugoslavia  
*Alternative?* (group exhibition of  
Moscow artist during the Festival  
of Contemporary 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  
Contemporary 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 de vista*,  
Exospedale San Matteo,  
Spoleta, Italy

ALEXEY SHULGIN  
Born 1963, Moscow

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, 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  
Contemporary Art,  
Ostende Belgium

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