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Eastern Promises: The New Museum Gets Post-Soviet with "Ostalgia"

Photo by Benoit Pailley, Courtesy of New Museum

An installation of 84 photographs from Boris Mikhailov's series, "Suzi Et Cetera"

By Marcia E. Vetrocq
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Courtesy of New Museum

A still from Tibor Hajas' film,"Self Fashion Show, 1976"

NEW YORK— Once upon a time, the phrase "new art from the East" was likely to announce discoveries hailing from the countries of the Soviet Bloc, not Asia. Exhibitions of dissident art from the Soviet Union began to crop up in the West in the 1970s. During the following decade, dealers Ronald Feldman and Phyllis Kind introduced American viewers to the work of Ilya Kabakov, Komar & Melamid, Eric Bulatov, and others. East Germany? That was the grim place left behind by the luminaries of the '80s painting resurgence — Polke, Baselitz, Richter, Penck. Most of us in the States wouldn't really think about culture in the GDR until we saw its faded popular imagery in Neo Rauch's haunted canvases, painted around the time the new millennium dawned.

Back in 1989, when Kabakov exhibited his "Ten Characters" at the ICA London, the installations retained their claim to heroic defiance, even though Gorbachev had already begun to loosen the bolts that held the Soviet Union together, and the Berlin Wall would be reduced to souvenir paperweights in a few months' time. Looking at that show's catalogue today, I'm struck less by the position of political resistance that gave Kabakov's installations their urgency and more by the bleak irony of the 10 tales of communal apartment life in Moscow that serve as backstories. With his pre-Sebald insertion of uncaptioned and equivocally related photographs into the texts, Kabakov's overall project now seems less a condemnation of state control as such than an existential meditation on the ultimate unknowableness of one's neighbors, regardless of physical proximity, and a dramatization of the soul-withering isolation that persists within the collective.

I'm reappraising my 22-year-old Kabakov catalogue because I've recently spent several hours at the New Museum, immersed in the ruminative atmosphere of "Ostalgia." The exhibition presents works by nearly 60 individuals and teams from 20 Eastern European countries in an effort to anatomize artistic responses to the mixed blessings and outright traumas that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc. The inclusion of a handful of works by Western artists is mostly a distraction, with the notable exception of Phil Collins's sharply edited yet deeply patient

"Marxism Today (Prologue)." With a wistfully dated, pan-Euro-sounding score provided by Laetitia Sadler (of Stereolab) and Nick Powell, the 2010 film interweaves archival footage and present-day interviews with residents of the former East Germany, giving a voice to non-artists (including a surpassingly idealistic, one-time teacher of Marxist-Leninist studies who laments "my country is dying") as they recall the experience of loss and disorientation that attended reunification.

The exhibition's name derives from the 1990s German neologism "Ostalgie" (East + nostalgia), invented to describe the longing for the stability and clear precepts of the old order. Retrospectively articulated in Collins's film, the period of reunification is more immediately summarized in Michael Schmidt's justly celebrated series "U-NI-TY" (1991-94). The 163 black-and-white prints, some original and others appropriated, run the gamut from contemporary portraits of young Germans to news photos from the eras of Nazi and Stasi oppression, from gymnasts and clergymen to specific tokens of the moment: a bottle of Valiquid (Valium to you and me), for instance. The multiplicity of sources and time frames, the frequent presence of blur and grain, the lack of discernible order — it all conveys a condition of dislocation in which there is too much history to absorb, too many changes to reconcile, too many "truths" to recalibrate. Hence the fragmented title.

Advance a few years, shift to Lithuania, and you'll find a prescription for post-Soviet distress in "Once in the XX Century" (2004), a video by Deimantas Narkevicius that records the reinstallation of a public statue of Lenin. Delivered by truck, the familiar effigy is hoisted aloft, suspended like a holy figure — think of the Virgin Mary statue dangling from a helicopter in "La Dolce Vita" — against a cyan sky pierced by twin church towers. To cheers and applause, Lenin is restored to his pedestal, resurrected, his 20th-century deposition a thing of the past.

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A still from Tibor Hajas' film,"Self Fashion Show, 1976"

Centered on the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, "Ostalgia" reaches back to 1960 and up to the present. (In this respect, the show follows the precedent of the Pompidou's 2010 exhibition "The Promises of the Past, 1950-2010: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe.") Apart from Jonas Mekas and Thomas Schütte, the more towering figures of Eastern European art (notably Kabakov) have wisely been sidelined, leaving a level playing field for artists whose reputations have soared in the last two decades (Miroslaw Balka, Michael Schmidt, Pavel Pepperstein, Anri Sala) along with rising stars (Paulina Olowska, Roman Ondák, Andro Wekua) as well as a wealth of artists, from the past and the present, whose work is known to cognoscenti in the U.S. but infrequently shown here.

The strong presence of Moscow Conceptualists (Erik Bulatov, Andrei Monastyrski, Dimitri Prigov Viktor Pivovarov), meanwhile, is part of a wider wave of interest in the group reflected by the exhibition "Total Enlightenment: Moscow Conceptual Art 1960-1990" (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2008); by the recent publication of comprehensive studies by Matthew Jesse Jackson, Boris Groys, and Alla Rosenfeld; and by the selection of Monastyrski and Collective Actions, the group he co-founded in 1976, to represent Russia in the current Venice Biennale.

Likewise in "Ostalgia" and the Venice Biennale (in the central exhibition) is a selection from Wekua's "Pink Wave Hunter" (2010-11), a series of models of buildings in the artist's hometown of Sukhumi, Georgia, which descended into ethnic violence after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union. "Ostalgia" has room for some fine oddities, too, like the drawings of benign-

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looking group sex in "The Leningrad Album" (1967-73) of Evgenij Kozlov (E-E) — the "E-E" translates as a Beatles-inspired "yeah-yeah." A teenager at the time, Kozlov appears to have been as interested in rendering sports gear and record players as garter belts and breasts. The self-taught artist Alexander Lobamov has the requisite outsider resume of affliction (deaf, mute, violent outbursts) and institutionalization. His insistently detailed drawings feature stolid self-portraits and — since he worked in the land of godless communism — symmetrical arrays of soldiers and serried ranks of assault rifles instead of seraphim and cherubim.

Organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's associate director and director of exhibitions, "Ostalgia" gathers art that is by turns revelatory, raunchy, baffling, seductive, cruel, melancholy, and inspiring. If you aren't worrying away like a terrier at the show's premise and roster by the time you leave the museum, then you weren't really paying attention. Installed throughout the museum's five floors, the exhibition possesses neither a clear beginning nor a clear conclusion. The presentation obeys neither chronology nor geography, but is ordered according to Gioni's perception of sympathies and counterpoints between works. He makes a good case, but he expects you to do a lot of thinking, too.

Some correspondences are overt. Mekas's "Lithuania and the Collapse of the USSR" (2008) is a 289-minute, multi-monitor collage of U.S. news programming that reports — with varying degrees of perspicacity and cliché — on the unraveling of the Soviet Union. The TV footage was taped between 1989 and 1991 by the Brooklyn-based artist, who left his native Lithuania a half-century earlier. Mekas's work shares a gallery with a rather more arch exercise in telemediated history, Irina Botea's video "Auditions for a Revolution" (2006). "Auditions" is a re-enactment of the television coverage — extraordinary at the time, because anti-government demonstrators had seized the state broadcast facilities — of the uprising that culminated in the 1989 execution of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The reporting now is re-performed by uncomprehending American students who speak Romanian phonetically. Additionally, Botea incorporates footage from Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica's archive-based film on the subject of the Romanian revolution. The enterprise, in the end, is numbingly didactic.

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Other groupings by Gioni are more open-ended. The Moscow artist Viktor Pivovarov's "Lonely Man" paintings (1974), delicately compositions that diagram a life of few possessions and hour-by-hour regimentation, are hanging across from Polish-born Helga Paris's black-and-white photographs (1984) of formidable, vividly present women employed by a Berlin clothing factory. Everything is in play between these two series: gender, nationality, medium, artistic sensibility, and — in the largest sense — the question of the place of labor and the individual in a highly organized society. In the same room, but striking another key entirely, are the mixed-medium works of the Czech artist Anna Zemánková, organic abstractions from the 1960s and '70s that incorporate embroidery and are all about the hand and the singular imagination. Centered in the gallery is a platform with an assortment of maquettes by Hermann Glöckner, a Dresdner whose Constructivist projects for monuments found little favor in the eyes of the Nazis or the abstraction-abhorring officials of the GDR. The maquettes date from 1960 to 1983, and they incorporate anything and everything, from colored stones and flower pots to the Plexiglas and brass that hark back to Gabo and Pevsner. Long denied commissions by the state, was Glöckner a "lonely man"?

If the exhibition title is narrowly construed as referring to post-communist malaise, then the many communist-era works are on hand to set the stage. But they wind up stealing the show, particularly photographs and films. Widely recognized today (MoMA is showing his 1997-98 "Case History" series through September 5), the Ukrainian Mikhailov trained as an engineer. Charged with documenting the factory where he worked, he found himself more inclined to shoot nude women. The brazenly nonchalant outcome is the "Suzi Et Cetera" (1960s-1970s). Randy and cold, the early series portrays a world of crumbling buildings and weedy yards, the setting for a gamut of private and mostly unexceptional experiences, from the lewd to the maternal.

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The factory was also the birthplace of the amateur films that comprise "Enthusiasm, the Films of Love, Longing, and Labour" (2004), a three-channel compilation of communist-era projects by workers who participated in Poland's state-sponsored film clubs. Selected and sequenced by Neil Cummings (U.K.) and Marysia Lewandowska (Poland), the films are ambitious and varied: a Surrealist-influenced montage that includes a tight shot of make-up being applied to an eye, cigarette smoke pouring from a mouth, and a razor blade sharpening a pencil; a homoerotic tale of a young photographer who fires his imagination with pictures of ancient sculpture and invites hunky athletes to pose in his studio; a subversive little animation in which a swarm of differently drawn arrows are organized to point in one direction, only to be encompassed by the outline of a massive arrow pointed the opposite way — a tidy allegory of the individual and the collective at cross purposes.

Everyday people were drawn from the crowd to be the stars of the film "Self Fashion Show" (1976) by the Hungarian performance artist Tibor Hajas. Hajas invited passersby to stand before the camera and present themselves as they pleased. While his subjects shift and settle and primp — there's more naïve self-consciousness here than in a Warhol screen test — Hajas cajoles and calms them, his words ("You are in control of the image being made of you") evoking not the instructions of a director, as the museum's wall text suggests, but the mendacious reassurances of an interrogator.

The presence of so many works from a time and place that now feels immeasurably distant gives "Ostalgia" an ineffable, land-of-the-lost quality that certainly was unintended by the artists. The uncanny remoteness that softens Mikhailov's pervy pictures and the tenderness elicited by 1970s photographs of Jiri Kovanda's barely-there street actions in Prague are qualities experienced by today's beholder and, perhaps, tomorrow's, but they have little to do with the circumstances of the works' creation. For all the yards of expository wall text, Gioni seems to be steering us toward suspending any critical caution, daring us to feel something that exceeds a typically measured apprehension of art and its documentation. It's a dicey curatorial gambit. You might want to surrender — but just a little.

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When Gioni writes in the catalogue, "the artists in 'Ostalgia' are excavators of the past: their works are eulogies and requiems for a disappearing world," he's on more secure ground with the show's younger participants. Since 2007 Andra Ursuta, Romanian-born and New York-based, has been obsessively reproducing, in ink on paper, an Internet photograph of the decomposing corpse of a Chechen insurgent. Four are on view, but she plans to complete 100, each faithful to the "original," which is very faithful indeed for someone who has the drafting chops of an old master. Altogether lachrymose in the "eulogies and requiems" department is Petrit Halilaj's "Cleopatra" (2011). The Kosovo-born, Berlin-based artist photographed the surviving insect displays from Pristina's destroyed Natural History Museum. Slides of the dead specimens are projected by three carousels (oh, the allure of outmoded technology) that click and turn with a dirgelike beat.

"Ostalgia"'s appealingly open nature has some problematic consequences. The distribution of art without regard for national origin, for example, masks the numerical preponderance (15) of Russian artists. Surprisingly, there are just three artists from Germany. The issue is not merely one of balance, though with just one artist apiece from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Latvia, Armenia, Albania, Hungary, and Estonia, and none from Slovenia, balance is certainly worth considering. More important, though, the geographically lopsided roster of artists threatens to reinstate the impression of a largely undifferentiated Soviet Bloc, and to understate the specificity of local expression.

In a related way, the exhibition's emphasis on individual sensibility and tendency to present historical inquiry as a private quest have the effect of obscuring certain artists' political engagement. The Sarajevan documentarian Jasmila Zbanic is represented by "After/After" (1997), which considers the effects of four years of warfare on the lives of a group of the city's schoolchildren. Phobic, aggressive, detached — the various affects of the children show us the possible futures of the city. Even as she exposes the scars of the past, Zbanic's preoccupation with life ongoing in Sarajevo is paramount, and that couldn't be further from Wekua's frozen-in-time reveries of Sukhumi, though ethnic savagery figures in the histories of both places.

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Also taking a decidedly un-ostalgic position vis-à-vis history and responsibility is Chto delat? (What is to be done?), a shifting group or "platform" that takes its interrogative name from the title of a 19th-century novel by Nikolay Chernyshevsky, which was the source of the title of Lenin's 1902 essay. Far from raising a monument to Lenin, however, Chto delat? regards history as a tool of activism in the present. The group has taken over the museum's fifth floor, installing murals and a detailed timeline (knowledge is power) called "The Rise and Fall of Socialism, 1945-1991." There is also an unexpectedly fierce and funny video (which you can find on Vimeo here) called "Partisan Songspiel: A Belgrade Story" (2009). Inspired by the violent eviction of a Roma community from Belleville, Serbia, the quasi-Brechtian performance brings together symbolic characters and types — the Oppressed (Romany Woman, Veteran, Lesbian, Worker) and the Oppressors (Tycoon, Mafioso, Politician) — beneath the worried eyes of the immortal Partisans, who thought they had forged a better state than this. Chto delat? offers a richly satirical send-up of a society that is rotten to the core. The mode is broadly allegorical, but if any of this was insincere or ironic, I must have missed the air quotes.

Works like those of Zbanic and Chto delat?, which appear at odds with "Ostalgia"'s underlying thesis, make the show more thorny, less pat. Indeed, the exhibition escapes becoming a broody exercise thanks to the art that resists, and so develops, the theme. It's a contradiction that Gioni did well to introduce. Paradoxically, the older artists in "Ostalgia," particularly those who worked furtively and/or unofficially through the worst years of state oppression, come across as the most inventive, perhaps because they responded to the exigencies of living in the present. What alternative did they have? By comparison, many of the show's younger artists, archival diggers and global nomads, seem blocked and unmoored as they struggle to find a time and place of their own. I'll hang on to the "Ostalgia" catalogue and see how this generalization holds up 22 years from now.