



Nikolay Bakharev
#14, from the *Relationship* series,
1989, gelatin silver print, 29 x 29 cm.
Courtesy the artist and
Gallery.Photographer.ru, Moscow

OSTALGIA

Ostalgia
New Museum, New York
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Erik Bulatov's *House (Dom)*, completed in 1992, just months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, could serve as an emblem of the kind of time slip that is everywhere present in *Ostalgia*, New Museum director of exhibitions Massimiliano Gioni's love letter to the art and artists of the former Eastern Bloc and the contemporary artists who remain fascinated by the latter. Running vertically down a background of photo-based, faded Kodachrome-coloured sky cracking with baroque rays of light are the three large block letters of the Russian word for 'house'. The painting as a whole mobilises familiar pictorial tropes, such as tensions between surface and depth, image and text, form and content, but there is something more to *House* than this. It recalls, rather, those kitschy credits from 1970s science fiction movies – think *Zardoz* (1974), or *Logan's Run* (1976), or *Solaris* (1972) – with their equal mixtures of techno-utopianism and environmento-Wagnerian romanticism.

The point here is not to saddle Bulatov's work with some particular iconographic resource but rather to note that those films themselves, their aesthetic and their narratives, were, like Bulatov's paintings and much of the best work in *Ostalgia*, products of the Cold War, which was everywhere itself a product of collective fantasies and fears and desires. The future, back then, was a contest played out on the field of the present with the weapons of history, both personal and political; and SF offered some of the most compelling diagnoses and representations of that contest, precisely because the horizon of time that formed SF's core orientation was also the

horizon that organised the two superpowers' duelling collective projects. For capitalism and socialism alike (but notably *not* democracy), the modern nation state was merely an exit vehicle, one that could be discarded as the consumer or working class, as the subject and so the inevitability of history, traversed the globe.

Yet these grand time scales often leave behind the everyday lives of real subjects. For example, Bulatov's paintings grew out of his dissatisfaction with the creative restrictions of his role as a children's-book illustrator for the Soviet state. Beginning in the late 1960s, and throughout the 70s and 80s, Bulatov, along with others, such as Oleg Vassiliev and the Kabakovs, began a campaign of 'nonconformist' work that set itself against the official aesthetic of socialist realism by laying claim to the landscape of the everyday and of the intimate, zones into which ideology could never fully penetrate without suffering certain deformations.

The self-taught Nikolay Bakharev's photographs from his *Type* (1980–2000) and *Relationship* (1991–3) series, and a body of work, *Suzi Et Cetera* (1960s–70s), from the better-known Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov, strip bare this intimate landscape. Bakharev photographed couples, families, girls and boys whom he approached and befriended at a local public beach. The shots are intimate but also awkward, which Bakharev seemed to favour. The displays of flesh and skin, some loose and some taut, pristine here and inked there, are never without idiosyncrasy or singularity, and offer the antinomy of any abstract social 'type'. Mikhailov's early image world, on the other hand, was formed behind closed doors; it shows the bedrooms and kitchens, the nudity and gestures, that could only exist in the enclosed spaces of familiar and safe settings. Evgenij Kozlov's *The Leningrad Album* (1967–73) does Mikhailov one better. Begun when he was twelve, the *Album* comprises an extensive series of drawings that reveal Kozlov's sexual fantasies about life in the communal apartment

where he grew up. Young enough to be brought by his mother into the 'women's' world of the housing block, Kozlov projects his soon-to-be-young-adult self into all sorts of kinky and voyeuristic scenarios with the women to whom he enjoyed uncommon access.

These pieces serve the self-proclaimed 'ethnographic' aspirations of the exhibition, as do the works that conform to more conventional and stereotypical artistic categories: there is the 'outsider' artist, Alexander Lobanov, whose obsessively designed compositions reveal an odd and disturbing fascination with rifles (and apparently Lobanov *was* odd and disturbing, not to mention violent); there is the 'Fluxus-type' performance artist Jiří Kovanda, whose series of pieces from the mid-1970s offer up photographic documentation and description of the artist doing various banal things, such as *Waiting for someone to call me... November 18, 1976, Staroměstské namesti, Prague* (1976) or *I carry some water from the river in my cupped hands and release it a few meters downriver... May 19, 1978, Strelecky ostrov, Prague* (1978); and there is the 'conceptualist', Andrei Monastyrski, whose fabric banner *I do not complain about anything and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place* (1977) is cleverly installed on Governors Island off the southern tip of Manhattan, a newly popular urban refuge.

More interesting though are those artists who mine the SF vein, such as Stanislav Filko, whose *Associations* and *Cosmos* print series from the late 1960s look like the storyboards for a propaganda film about interstellar travel; or Dimitri Prigov, whose typewritten calligrammes – eg, *Citizens, Air Raid Warning* or *Comrade, I Cannot Leave the Squadron. You Must!* (both undated) – resemble nothing so much as the plaintive outputs of some early-1980s form of computer intelligence.

Whatever nostalgia for the old Soviet 'East' exists in *Ostalgia*, it belongs to the younger generation; and its best rendering belongs to Deimantas Narkevicius's *Once in the XX Century* (2004), a video that takes archival footage from Lithuanian state TV (Lithuania was the first Soviet republic to declare its independence, in 1990) of the celebratory dismantling of a statue of Lenin, and recuts it in order to imagine just the opposite: goodbye Lenin indeed.

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