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Nostalgia

Pavel Romaniko

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NOSTALGIA

by

Pavel Romaniko

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

The visual part of this project has revolved around ideas that have been in the process of forming themselves for a few years. But if I could assign a topic or a totalizing theme to the project, I would be limiting it in a very particular way. I see Nostalgia as a beginning and in no way something that has come to fruition or to a specific resolution. If anything I consider it as a still evolving subject; it is very youthful and fresh for me. The project also reflects a new way of working for me from creating the set to the final production of images. The aim of the piece was to engage in a dialogue with a tradition of image making and reflect upon photographs and its role in forming of collective memory. I wanted to examine the role of the space in the formation of one’s recollection of the past and to emphasize the impact of such onto present behaviors and understanding of the space and the codes of power that it conceals. My evaluation will directly address historical, psychoanalytical, and biological questions of dominant visuality and sight in the contemporary societies of spectacle. 1 I want to relate to Maurice Blanchot’s passage about how “everyday losses its power to reach us; it is no longer what is lived, but what can be seen or what shows itself, spectacle and description, without any active relation whatsoever” or2, to go even further, to employ words of Alice Yaeger Kaplan who blames the denigration of memory in this society of spectacle, where visuality and recall is so heavily centers itself around visual sensory experience and memory heavily relies on use of images as a primary basis for the authenticity. 3 I would like to amplify necessity of rigorous interrogation of the images and concepts that inform and later constitute our

1 I refer here to writing of Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle
2 Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes, (Berkley, 1994), p. 432
memories as individuals and as a collective society as a whole. The body of work presented as photographs under the title of “Nostalgia” that hung on the walls of the SPAS gallery in October-November of 2008 are a manifest to my thought process and my reflections on the impact and danger of image-based recall. I further examine the-known-to-me nature of what appears to be personal recollections and the role of them in the creating the final images. As they exist in their final form they present no validity and yet violently defend their role in my memory and, perhaps, from now on in the memory of many others.
Introduction: Why Nostalgia?

“You have to differentiate between memories,” she says at one point. “Are you going to them or are they coming to you. If you are going to them you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.”

Louise Bourgeois 4

“A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers...”

Michel Foucault 5

When Nostalgia? The term “nostalgia” has become of great interest to me in the process of this work. I think I have been concerned with the word and the symptoms of “nostalgia” for a quite a long period of time. However, much of my thinking has been paralyzed by a certain anxiety of being found out or being seen. I came to consider feeling nostalgic as a derogatory term or, at the very least, a word that has negative connotations; something that would make me a subject of spectacle; a public embarrassment. Yet it also puzzled me to consider its power over my emotional state. Was it a traumatic experience to live away from home for so long? I would argue “yes, it can be”. As I tried to assimilate to the culture of my new country of residence, I felt the pressure of memories and habits that would not go away very easily. It seemed unnatural to behave in certain ways or to confront things that seemed aggressively foreign and uncomfortable.


At first I felt homesick, and then, as the years went by that feeling grew into something more complex. There was almost nothing in the process of recollection that was not a beautiful warm memory. Even little things that I thought would never strike me as exciting, came back as very pleasant memories. I found myself missing almost everything, including memories and events that, at times, I considered unpleasant. All of a sudden, I remembered subtle particulars of every corner of the town that I grew up in; even the graffiti on the sides of the apartment complexes and overfilled garbage containers seemed like topics for nostalgic admiration. At first seduced by the polished exteriors of American suburbia, soon I lamented home and my family. Now many years later, as my feelings of longing for return still persist, my awareness of the deceptive nature of memories brings me to a more comfortable position as an observer and, for this thesis, as a commentator. My visual thesis exists as an exploration of the “symptoms” of what is termed as “nostalgia”; the written thesis serves as an historical and theoretical side note.

I understand and explore the term “nostalgia” in its political and psychoanalytical context. Even though the experience of nostalgia is only accessible to us on an individual level, to me it partially derives its meaning from such terms as “melancholia” and “longing” and, therefore, locks one into a particular semantic framework and set of myths. I will be arguing that the term has masqueraded itself as a “disease of memory” by summoning a certain romantic language, at the same time directly making an inquiry into trauma and

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Fred Davis is interested in the investigation and the dynamic of the nostalgic memory. In his words to understand “nostalgic experience as encompassing some necessary inner dialogue between past and present is not to suggest that the two sides in the dialogue are of equal strength, independence, or resonance or that there is even any serious doubt over which way the conversation is destined to go.” He goes on to establish that “for nostalgia’s mise-en-scene to fall into place, in the ensuing dialogue it is always the adoration of the past the triumphs over lamentations for the present.” *Yearning for Yesterday*, (Washington D.C., 1979), p. 16
politics of the body by masking itself with a particular medical language.\(^7\) \(^8\) \(^9\) In the course of this paper I will be asking the following questions. What kind of consequences does nostalgia has on the society as a collective whole as a phenomena? How does nostalgia work? Finally, of upmost concern for me is how these modes of remembrance impact the present and considerations for the future, specifically in forming sociopolitical and cultural constructs? Consequently, I am interested in participating in a specific dialogue about the term “nostalgia” by using the images which constituted my thesis show, and where this short thesis serves as a clarification and framework for structuring the ideas and complex thoughts that originated quite a while back and now have expanded with the resolution of my project.

The term “nostalgia”, just like any other set of signs, works on the level of language and therefore also functions on the level of myths. Roland Barthes points out that mythical speech “is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication”.\(^10\) Using Roland Barthes’ words, it can argued that nostalgia had been summoned into describe a historical condition and its symptoms and language are

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\(^{7}\) Marcos Piason Natali “History and the Politics of Nostalgia.” http://www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/nostalgia/nostfe1.htm

\(^{8}\) Ibid. Natali, Marcos Piason states the following in his essay “The word nostalgia would come to be used increasingly as a means of representing problems of a different sort, namely ones related to politics and empiricism.”

\(^{9}\) ex. 'Melancholia' which takes its language from medical history, is frequently a term associated with 'nostalgia'.

\(^{10}\) see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York, 1972), p. 110
distinctly defined by modernity. 11 12 13 Peter Fritzsche makes a similar point in defending the fact that the contemporary experience of nostalgia is summed up under a term that is a result of modernity and argues that shifting historical consciousness and memory crisis consequent to the events of French Revolution and its metaphysical and physical aftermath, emphasis being put onto the fact that the conclusive events of the eighteenth century France led to a rupture of a historical time continuum, marked by the past becoming a problem of knowledge. 14 Kimberly K. Smith’s position is that nostalgia “is a rhetorical artifact of the politics of industrialization”. 15 Finally, Susan Stewart in her book On Longing, makes an argument that at the beginning of the eighteenth century the shift in the concept of realism takes place, subsequently changing the experience of reality from

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12 In Arjun Appadurai’s words “the world which we now—in which modernity is decisively at large, irregularly self-conscious, and unevenly experienced—surely does involve a general break with all sorts of past. What sorts of break is this, if it is not the one identified by modernization theory…?” “Here and Now”, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, The Visual Culture Reader, (New York, 2007), p. 173

13 R. J. Snell describes Lonergan thoughts on modernity as following: “He recognizes with great clarity the disillusionment of the twentieth century with its ‘prolonged cultural crisis and its related disarray and conflict within the domains of philosophical and theological practice.’ The strong poets of modernity triumphed. collapsing the common framework of meaning and value by which the West understood and guided itself and philosophy and theology lost their footing, replaced first by the so called and later by the soft sciences.” Through the Glass Darkly, Bernard Lonergan and Richard Rorty on Knowing Without a God’s-Eye View, (Milwaukee, 2006), p. 143


collective to individual\textsuperscript{16}. Stewart goes on to say that nostalgia is a “social disease” that
decries experience of the present as it is lived. Linda Hutchinson in the examination of
Stewart’s thoughts emphasizes that nostalgia “makes the idealized (and therefore always
absent) past into a site of immediacy, presence and authenticity”.\textsuperscript{17} In Stewart’s words
nostalgia is the desire for desire.\textsuperscript{18}

In the last year, following a life-altering event in my personal life, I entered into a period of
self-discovery and found that I become increasingly interested in making some sense of
what makes who I am. I considered what defines me as a subject of certain socio-cultural
circumstances and history and how perhaps certain cultural codes and myths reflected my
own position and my relationship to power, authority and history at large. My
examination became a way to look into the past that is blanketed by a mist of
manufactured history and photographic images, and consequently prompted me to make
an inquiry into the relationship between the photographic image and memory. In fact, it is
the association and proximity of the two that come under scrutiny of my interest in this
paper and the accompanying body of work. I had become a historical subject.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., I believe this point by Susan Stewart can be regarded as one of the many claims (another
not an ahistorical condition that somehow has embedded itself into our biology, but, on contrary
it has history and the language around has shifted with the political, cultural, and other changes
that could be tracked with history. Aforementioned Kimberly K. Smith supports a similar notion
that ‘nostalgia’ is a product “of nineteenth- and twentieth-century conflicts over the political
significance of the past,” pp. 505-527

\textsuperscript{17} Hutcheon, Linda. “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.”
http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html

\textsuperscript{18} Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing}, (Baltimore, 1984 ), p. 23
How do I understand my life defined by temporal dimension, in terms of events and experiences, broken up into tightly organized blocks of time and outlined by larger than life documented historical events? I started to discover that the motions that I was going through are familiar symptoms of many immigrants and long-term travelers. The encounter of nostalgia and the longing for one’s distant land and a wish to return to a life that once was are fueled by strong reminders from memories and other forms of cultural recollection of such space promote nagging desires for going back there. Such experiences of “there” might be explained by the fact that the subject of such desires does not have a physical manifestation outside of a utopian space, therefore such places, by definition are absent. Nostalgia approaches the past as a subject of mourning and, therefore, already presumes the perpetual utopian space or, in other words, it concentrates on the something irretrievable and perhaps inaccessible. 19 There is a point of non-arrival and perhaps this creates a tragic experience in general. Consequently, the experience of nostalgia attempts to bridge the unattainable non-existent past (similarly the future) and objective present, creating a dysfunctional relationship. Such behaviour serves as a manifest to inherent human impulses “to transcend everything into some kind of a collective fairy tale, and to inhabit the most uninhabitable ruins, to survive and preserve memories.” 20 Yet, needless to say, nostalgia relationship to the past in terms of mourning is important, since it allows for pleasant sentiments to obscure the loss (of what is never there). Therefore, nostalgia is a reflective process, it is transient. It allows for healing and gradual resignation to the inevitable loss. Joel Whitebook summarizes Freud’s link between mourning and resignation to the loss in terms of a narrative process: “mourning, in response to loss, results in the symbolization and psychic structure that makes

19 Peter Frietzsche, “Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity,” par. 18
transience, and hence reality, tolerable.”

Thus, perhaps, in terms of my own past, the nostalgia I experience is infused with a particular framework, that allows one to be hypersensitive to the reminders of a land lost. Therefore, I consider the following to be a valid argument to make that nostalgia touches the past (and the future) in terms of mourning and reflection.

**Nostalgia: Considering The History**

The history behind the term of nostalgia is an old one and just as any concept or idea it is a quite complex one. Perhaps, some of reflection can be prompted by considering that this word and it's meaning are derived from a field of medicine. Describing nostalgia has a direct relationship to the politics of the body. The term first appears in records as early as 17th century taking its roots from Greek. As any illness of the body the prescriptions for such incurable but treatable sickness had stretched from assigning various substances (such as opium) to the procedures of purging of the stomach; it was widely assumed for a long time that nostalgia resulted from the effects of the excess of black bile in the liver.

Soldiers in the 18th on the campaigns away from home would fall strong to the “effects” of the decease and presented serious problems to commanding officers by exhibiting symptoms of loss of vital spirits, nausea, loss of appetite and etc. The French army, during and after French revolution would apply brute force and punishment in order to “beat” the nostalgia out of the affected servicemen. In 1733 Russian general threatened to bury

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22 Svetlana Boym is very explicit in her links to the facts that nostalgia for a considerable period of time was regarded and treated as a physical disability or a disease. *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York, 2001), p. 4
the first soldier that will fall prey to nostalgia; and after following up on the threats a number of times such instances of this decease were successfully cured. Boym continues by stating that perhaps such repression had vital role in nostalgia becoming a vital part of the “Russian national identity”.23 In a recent case of nostalgia-as-a-decease, World Health Organization has officially labeled many of the former Diego Garcia island’s Chagossian indigenous population being ill and dying of sagren—“the deep melancholy brought on by the loss of homeland”, who were misplaced by U.S. government establishing military launch pad in pursuit and reinforcing its foreign policy interests in the Middle East.24

The historical precedent and a certain state of the nation is an important element in my work. Considering the context and the circumstances, I find it incredibly crucial to consider cultural memory in terms of the backdrop of memory. Relying on a photograph as a final result of my work, I understand the importance of the medium to reflect the content, and since photography has been long compared to the dynamism of human memory in terms of representation and experience. However, a photograph presents us with a more concrete physical referent to the events themselves, empirically binding us to an idea of “document”. Everyone is looking at the same object, the same representation.

**From Haunted Houses to Mausoleums**

In first issue of the *Glimpse* journal Nadej Giroux writes the following:


I felt he always was a part of my family, this man I never knew. None of us knew him, actually, And yet, there he hung on a wall of every institution: from office buildings to grocery stores to hospitals, always beaming on with his strong eyebrows and a far away gaze to the 'beautiful future'. For all of us he was just that - the good old gramps.  

The sentiment is widely shared, especially by the generations that can only observe and reflect on its own history through a collection of carefully selected array of photographs and documents. It is the generation that I could claim to be a part of; the generation that is supposed to usher Russia into its free democratic future. We are the hands and the intellects that are perhaps the most removed from the Soviet collective experience so familiar to our parents and especially to many previous generations. So why does it feels so sad to let go of that past that has very little to offer in terms of pride and greatness? Why is it so shameful to separate oneself from the history that over the course of seventy-five years has brought so many lies, pain and suffering. Why do the people directly responsible for atrocities of repressions, wars, persecutions and crimes against humanity still hang on the walls of Russian offices, schools, barber shops and etc.? Why, when Egyptians mummified their leaders they made everything possible for the path to the tomb not to be found, and Russians, on contrary, keep the mummy of the leader of the “great” Soviet Revolution” to remain on display, attracting a consistent flock of pilgrims and tourists? Why does Kremlin still remains a primary ideological apparatus in the country instead of distributing and promoting free thought and free enterprise; constantly centralizing power and persecuting everyone who is not “playing by their rules”?

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Being physically absent from the actual events in my homeland I struggle with my own role as a citizen of Russia. Through my many trips home, to visit with my family, I leave a certain amount of time to photographing and exploring the town that I grew up in. The topics of belonging and/or longing have been of interest for me for a while. I always found it to be some my most creatively productive time, whenever I would travel to Russia. A strong sense of longing would always render me extremely attentive to detail and time spent there. Feeling of certain urgency and yet shame would be overwhelming and at some time around 2001 I began to hide behind a camera, anxiously snapping images of my friends, family and places which in the past I found quite ordinary and without a particular interest to me. Every trip would turn up more shot film then the previous one. everything became a subject. Being much younger and still quite interested in form I would play with angles, compositions, variations, sometimes re-photographing the same locations and people over and over again, and as an eagle going back to Prometheus I was attacking my own past bound by a sense of duty that came from somewhere else. I wanted to remember, and such desire drove me to aestheticize every moment that I could take with me, as almost I forgot to pack all of those things along when I first boarded the plane back in 1997 never presuming that I would be gone for over eleven years. But ever since I betrayed my parents hope to become and engineer of sorts and took up the arts, my work has always been connected to Russia in one way or another. Even when I would extensively make friends and strangers’ portraits in United States, they were almost always in my mind done as an exercise to what will I do during my next trip home. I imagined home in all of its “photographic” beauty; I already photographed my hometown in my imagination long before I would physically set up the tripod and release the shutter cable. I knew every shot, every place I wanted to photograph; I would obsessively question my own memory, examining its every corner from basement into the attic, compiling a
mental list of all the “shots” that I will bring back. I gave my images their meaning and their form long before I would board the plane and travel to Russia. Rarely did I appear in my photographs myself. I hid behind the large ground glass, not willing to return the gaze of my posers, or concentrating on not to misjudge the composition of the space that I was about to capture. The ground glass slowed me down, became my first digital screen, my first cutting board. And yet, inescapably, I became a cutting board for a more complex process of my cultural remembering.

As I see it now, I carried some images within myself and in the assembly of those impressions and visual acquisitions through my life I sliced and cut and then pasted and taped, creating collages, building a memorial to my own and paying tribute to the shared, collective past, anxious about my own mortality and, perhaps, becoming more and more aware of the nature of the photographic image itself, especially in relationship to one’s memory. Roland Barthes described such state as the the child play, an illusion of improvisation informed, controlled, codified and locked in by image-repertoire that has formed and archived within one’s psyche and which. Such repertoire, according to Barthes, wedges us in, forces us to construct, produce “work”. And if Rodchenko or the likes willingly participated in a visual experimentation, less likely informed and influenced by the same kind and volume of images as a society to come during his lifetime and years to follow. Then, the photographs they created were employed in the

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27 I assume the willingness of Alexander Rodchenko participation since there is very little evidence (actually none that I am aware off) that he was doing his work against his will. It was hard to obtain a permission to photograph national events or similar during the Soviet times. Therefore, Rodchenko must have had to be acting upon directives from the ruling apparatus.
manufacturing of the Soviet myth. Now, to me and to many others, all of those images seem awfully familiar and, at the same time strangely unknown.

Recently Chronicle Books had published TASS archives collection of photographs spanning the twentieth century of Russian History. Flipping through the pages I found many of the images quite familiar: they are, reminiscent of the ones that I saw in the pages of textbooks and on TV screen. I started to wonder about which images were not included. I decided to make my own to fill those in.

I have no recollection of the events or happenings pictured; and quite obviously, most of the dates render it is impossible for me to be a part of “having-been-there”. I stare into the eyes of Lenin, Stalin, a peasant, a soldier and there is always a returned gaze. I feel all too close to the much of the portrayed and yet I know that it is all an illusion, a learned set of responses contingent to certain experiences, remembering and recognizability. I reason with myself; I explain that all it is a response to a visual stimuli which can be easily explained by the fact that I have seen these photographs many times before. What puzzles me is the enthrallment that I feel in the presence of theses pictures. Roland Barthes comes to mind again in the words that state some fascination with images from his youth, refusing to dismiss the complexity of nostalgic feelings stirred by looking at those as a mere melancholia. He prescribe an ignorance as being at the very core of such fascinations with pictures. Were many images and portraits that I see in the Soviet Image intended to inspire childhood-like memories of awe and intimacy shared and stored in the deepest crevasses of human memory? Was my concern with the quality of

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28 TASS is the official news agency of Russia and former Soviet Union, see The Soviet Image

29 Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes, p. 2
such book a legitimate one? Are all the portraits of Soviet leaders suspended and the heights points of the interior spaces’ walls and facades of the buildings supposed to remind one of the remarkable and exciting childhood once was, for the bright promising future is always in the distance, perhaps unreachable in this life time, and therefore suppose to remind one of her own mortality and yet relieves the burden of it and establishes ones belonging in the past that is always the referent to or a signifier of the times to come. Dore Bowen notes that photographs’ committed reference to the past always disturbs their synchronic analysis.  

In the Soviet Union one of the forms of the control over the information was reached by regulating who and when could photograph at the national celebrations, demonstrations, commemorations, marches, gatherings, etc.; everyone else with recording devices were forbidden from “documentation” of such events. Soviet leaders quickly realized the potential of photography as tool for propaganda and therefore as a powerful ideological tool. Consequently, the bombardment of the population with manipulated and staged images became very valuable in terms of creation and perpetuation of the Soviet myth and creation of the “legitimate” Soviet history.

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31 *The Soviet Image* p. 13

32 Susan Sontag stresses that for the society to be modern is to participate in production and consumption of images, since images allow us to place certain “demands on reality and themselves are coveted substitutes for firsthand experiences...” *On Photography*, (New York, 1990), p. 153
Often, published images portraying the Soviet land, were heavily manipulated in terms of content and staging of the povsednevnuy life (’byt’), the everyday realities of which were far more grim than the peasant basing in the morning light while racking in plentiful harvests or heroic workers-overachievers defiant in the face of the West, ready to prove that the only reward for hard work a citizen needs is a promise of the bright and victorious future. Children smiling and joyous were portrayed embracing and gifting flowers to the powerful and humble “fathers” of the nation (Stalin had a taste for being photographed with children). The life was staged and the reality was constructed and not accidently or through experimentation, but quite particularly and with great surgical precision. The Soviet designer Nikolai Troshin formulated the tasks and mechanisms of the staged photographs as:

Another way of creating photo pictures is through staging. It is very difficult, demanding deep knowledge of life. Here a photographer is not taking life as it is, but rather imitating it according to his design. Here are many things depend on those helping the photographer to construct his picture and on those “acting” for him, as well as on the surroundings and the general rhythm of movements used in the plot.\(^{34}\)

And even thought the medium of photography undergoes a truly anxious and turbulent journey through the length of Soviet rule, repeatedly reinventing itself and attempting to compete or to assimilate to another medium (such as painting in 1930s or graphic arts

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\(^{33}\) This untranslatable word from Russian into English which is in simple words a “basic” term for existence (“being”) but in direct relationship to functionality in a functional industrial societal structure induced by necessity and struggle for survival. The connotations of this term are of both dependencies -- metaphysical and physical.

1970s), its role is to reconstruct the reality; its mechanical reproducibility and its participation in mimesis can never be compared to the effects of any other medium, even cinematography. Perhaps, in a sense those carefully constructed photographs become so effective only because of their own ontology, their own potency to bring about in Barthean terms “the return of the dead”. 35 I think the question of why one looks at a photograph of Stalin [or other leaders36] and feel nostalgic can be addressed through a brief psychoanalytical interrogation along with addressing the archeology of the photographic image.

Similarities can be drawn between the photographic image and the subject of death or mortification. A great deal is written about the effect of the photographic image (Roland Barthes would be an important one to cite) has in its service to the subject of death. But the whole idea of preservation and mummmification creates an interesting dialogue between the preservation of Lenin's body and perpetuation of Stalin's personality cult through a multiplicity of images. He is mummmified in the portraits of self. He is preserved and resurrected as a new symbolic power. The great leader is preserved as a mummy and then paraded through the the country safe from the spiritual death. 37 On this matter Krysztof Wodiczko writes:


36 Though I believe Lenin and Stalin occupy a special role in the mythology of Soviet figures, they do stand apart in the mythical hierarchy in contrast with the other leaders of Communist Russia.

37 In words of W. J. T. Mitchell photography “preserves the object, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact ... in amber,” What Do Pictures Want? (Chicago, 2005), p. 54.
Thus the spirit of the father never dies, continuously living as it does in the building which was, is, and will be embodying, structuring, mastering, representing, and reproducing his ‘eternal’ and ‘universal’ presence as a patriarchal wisdom body of power.  

By looking at a photograph of Stalin, we are really looking at a signifier, not at the Stalin himself; he is long gone and mummified just like the one of the Lenin. The only difference is that Stalin’s mausoleum is not at the Red Square, it is in a far more sacred place; he is mortified in all the photographs that repeat themselves in the pose and appearance, solidified by his extended into the distance reaching gaze. Though, if with Lenin's portraits one wanted to follow the gaze and discover the place to where Lenin's finger of multitude of the monuments spread all over the country is directed. Stalin's portraits are different. They embody the gaze itself. Photographs of him manifest more then just his presence; the variations from a image to image are so minimal that his presence is magnified, spacial constraints are broken, he is distributed throughout - omnipresent; he becomes the space, the land of the very utopian future. Jan Plamper wrote the following about Stalin's portraits:

“Stalin quite simply monopolized linear movement: his gaze came to figure as the only axis pointing outside the circular pictorial patterns. [...] Movement through Soviet space without encountering Stalin coordinates became impossible.”


39 W. J. T. Mitchell’s book reminds us that “… familiarity blinds us to the strange life of these figures; it makes them dead metaphors at the same time it asserts their vitality. To make an image is to mortify and resurrect in the same gesture.” What Do Pictures Want? p. 53


41 Ibid., p. 25
It appears as he was everywhere at the same time, even now in any room with a portrait hanging above the desk. We don't need to follow the gaze in order to see the future, it is already there, embodied into Stalin’s image, signified by it. The sign of the icon already implies simultaneously instilled terror and nostalgia.

The Father

The idea of ‘desire for father’ plays a significant role in Soviet ideology. One would not dispute powerful dynamics of patriarchy underlining cultural codes. Michael W. Kaufmann’s writes that in patriarchal cultures the desire for the strong fathers does not seem to fade away; when such desire can not be satisfied it takes a form of severe nostalgia. Perhaps, it is not a far of a stretch to consider the popularity of the current Russian president Vladimir Putin and his political strategy as an macho-father-soldier-worker-wanderer ‘democratic’ ruler. The desire of the return to the idealized past, the ruler that successfully brings Kiev Russia to unity in the 10th century by forcing the disjoined lands into Christianity. In fact, outside of rare exceptions, reformists and “faint of heart” were not able to control or solidify Russia. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn exclaims in Russian Question that Russians have only two ways of relating to power -- either by

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43 Christian Caryl writes of a current Russian situation: “The result is a hybrid regime described by Putin and his supporters as ‘managed democracy’ – in fact a markedly authoritarian system that merges select trappings of liberalism (elections, the right to own property, and the freedom to travel) with an ideological mishmash of tsarist imperialism, Soviet nostalgia, and xenophobia inspired by nationalist visions of Greater Russia.” “The Russians Are Coming?” *New York Review of Books*, February 12, 2009, Vol. LVI, No. 2, pp. 21-24
violently revolting against it or through blindly submitting and suffering, which borderlines on a form of cultural masochism. 44

Historically, for those societies that attacked paternal power and executed their kings, the longing for a strong patriarch still remained; again, even though the father is gone the desire still remains. Kauffman continues to exemplify that history of institutions can be traced to Church’s longing for Christ return; here his absence and yet presence embodied in the nostalgia for his return. 45 Therefore, strong cultural elements and inheritance are at play in the formation of once dependency on the strong idealized patriarchal figure - the Father. To understand the Father it becomes quite important to look at Russian (Soviet) culture in terms of national character. Rancour-Laferriere insists that masochism (tendency for unconditional suffering and self-destruction) evolves itself as a valid trait of a Russian (Slavic) character long before Soviet’s come to power. However, at the same time that character is further imposed upon, almost certainly influencing individuals’ psyche when the fear became an extremely important psychological factor, specifically during the Stalin period. So quite a few elements fall in place. On one hand one observes a culture that is already infused with extreme nostalgia for the utopian future (space), yet at

44 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century: Toward the End of the Twentieth Century.

45 Michael W. Kaufmann, Institutional Individualism, (Middletown, 1998), p. 93
the same time the subjects of such subjugation or imposition are “masochists” with an exaggerated sense of abandonment by the Father. 46 47

To get back to the image of the Father – Stalin, more so then Lenin, is the much necessary punishing-but-just-tyrant-God, who is the source of salvation and protection for the faithful. Yet they both are a father that is already missed before his pending returned. The representation of Stalin is reinforced by folklore and the role of the icon in Russian culture, which in its place takes roots in Byzantine empire. The effect is multiplied by the ability to reproduce images (icons) of Stalin (or others) and distribute them all widely; consequently images are hung and exhibited in the variety of spaces, infiltrating every functional space. Portraits of the Soviet leaders are either replace religious icons entirely or at least take place next to them as the focal point of the wall surfaces. The same portrait (or at least the same few repeat from one place to another) seen everywhere forces a sense of constant presence, omnipotent surveillance which imposes a silent terror, manifesting the presence of the “virtual father.” 48 The space itself becomes the surveyor, the voyeur, the oppressor, the confessional; it is the “Ezenstein’s cardboard box” which is only two brick

46 I am making relying on the words in Daniel Rancour-Laferriere’ psychoanalytical analyses of a Russian soul in the Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering, (New York, 1995), pp. 9-13

47 Reference to masochism is important to mention here. During my defense, I referred to particular fetishism and, perhaps, a sense of masochism, that has developed throughout the meticulous and long process of creating the delicate miniature models to be photographed. Such analogy is quite important to the process and my theoretical understanding of the underlining factors that infuse my work.

48 Slavoj Zizek, The Reality of the Virtual, (film). Zizek speaks of the power of the virtual father whose symbolic power is reinforced by the knowledge of his absence but supported of the impending punishment, which can come from any direction.
width away from the rooms of the Kremlin and subsequently Stalin himself. The ears of the "comrades-neighbors" are the ears of Stalin and his apparatus of terror. Therefore one must always be aware of the fact that there is someone on the other side of the wall, in the next room, perhaps pressing their ear to the cover of the electrical socket, listening in. I remember doing that as a little boy and being fascinating of how much I could hear happening in conjoined flat. Subsequently, my father reverted to whispering when voicing his opinion in regards to the events of the 1991 turn over of the power. I clearly remember him saying that depending on the outcome this can be consequential because of his words in case wrong people would cease power. He was afraid to be heard.

The Space

The question of architectural space is important to the conception of my work. I speak of a functional repetitive and tyrannical space. The following quotes are from Michel Foucault and Krysztof Wodiczko respectively:

The gradually space becomes specified and functional. We see this illustrated with the building of the cites ouvrieres... The working class family is to be fixed; by assigning it a living space with a room that serves as kitchen and dining-room, a room for the parents

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49 I refer here to Sergei Ezenstein's experimentations as described in Landscape of Stalinism with cinematic space in the early years of Soviet cinematography. "His project was founded upon his fascination with spatial illusions created in the studio, with copies, mock ups, and distortions, with imitation of the world in a cardboard box..."[p. 62] ... Filmmakers such as Ezenstein play with the medium and its possibilities, subsequently redefining the conceptions of cinematic space. As the author of the essay Oksana Bulgakowa writes: "...the distance thus loses its concrete characteristics. The space of the whole country is drawn together and filled by semantic unity," p. 58
which is place of procreation, and a room for the children, one prescribes a form of
morality for the family.  

or

[...] This embodies and physically represents the concept of the organization of a utopian
society in the form of disciplined-disciplining body, allowing for both the multidirectional
flow of power and controlled circulation of the individual bodies.

[...] The building is not only an institutional ‘site of the discourse of power’, but, more
importantly, it is a metainstitutional, spatial medium for the continuous and simultaneous
symbolic reproduction of both the general myth of power and of the individual desire for
power.  

Such space defined and constituted the backbone of the totalitarian Russia. Michel
Foucault wrote of the importance of the functional architecture in post-French Revolution
societies as the effective tool for governing of a utopian society. Foucault spoke of the
prisons, hospitals schools all sharing similar structural and symbolic qualities - a sense of
constant observance and directed movement,  

which is necessary for the ultimate justice
manifested in complete surveillance of the subject achieved sans direct physical presence
of the person in the position of power. The justice would be served before the subject is to
commit and offense, by creating an environment that is framed by and the power is
established through the ever-present gaze. The Soviet state was conceived as a utopia. And
just like the failed idea of the Panopticon where “every comrade becomes an observer,”  

infused with aspirations to create a transparent utopian society freed from the “dark

52 Michel Foucault, Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, (New York, 1977), p. 186-190
zones” created by the monarchial power (control of knowledge and information), the Soviet utopia turns the concept of a ever watchful neighbor into a country full of “dark corners” inhibited by citizens afraid to speak above the whisper.54

Therefore, consider experiencing a portrait of Stalin hanging on the wall or an image of somebody in such environment, in a functional space with thin walls where all of your actions and movements can be tracked and heard. Consider the fact that every step that one makes could be traced by a neighbor below; for they hear the shuffling of the or even slight shifting of one's weight revealed and amplified by the aged floor boards; that very neighbor would always know what TV program one is watching or what is one's choice of a morning radio host. The image need no further clarification. Such being or byt55 is observed by blank stairs of Stalin, Lenin and/or other party leaders whose portraits are suspended on the walls. James Elkins wrote that the environment, the physical state that one is in at the moments of being faced with the image, affects and solidifies the remembering and the experience of the portrait.56

If one is to spend time in front of a painted portrait, the figure's mood will begin to change the way one feel. That new mood might become a part of one, recurring months or years later in every different circumstances. ... One might be riding on a train or on the verge of falling asleep, and suddenly the image will appear to. Each time such happens, the associations one already has in her repertoire would mix-up

54 Ibid.
55 see footnote 32
with the events and experiences (byt) of that day. After a number of years one’s memories become distant, rich and entangled. Above all, with time, the more people one encounters the memories seem to coincide to the point of surprise and confusion.\textsuperscript{57} Were those otherwise distant people in the same place at the same time?

**The Process and Materials: The Photographs**

During a work in progress meeting, I had been asked by my thesis committee chair how the work I make while on my travels to Russia could be brought over or done here in United States. The approach ended up being very personal and very literal. I began to reflect on my memories and figure out the archeology of my influences and inspirations both from literature and other imagery. Many notions that existed enveloped into some form of romantic language have come under scrutiny. I started to become very interested in learning about what _nostalgia_ really meant and was.

The term _nostalgia_ had associated itself with words such as memory and recall, and therefore illusion and confusion and juxtapositions of things that perhaps don’t quite aline of themselves, yet are extremely participant in the forming of identity, whether on individual or collective level. I was also processing and considering an importance of recording of the memories and the role such documentation plays in remembering. Paper commonly serves as both receptacle and the material for documentation. It functions as the container for ideas, notes, confessions, etc. It can exist as an object, a “proof” or referent to reality. In the case of my work paper is all of that as it becomes the raw building

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 42
material – sufficient and malleable enough for sculpting and constructing – writing down. And just as memories don’t seem to align with the actual events; writing, drawing, sculpting, or any other form of actions – materialized ideas – take on a different form once they leave the realm of imagination. As the process went, ideas I had originated came from my memories, then were sketched out onto the paper, made their way into folded and glued models-miniatures, photographed, and finally printing back onto the photographic paper. The work printed on and eventually presented as paper objects (reinforced with sintra and wooden back-frames) later served as a documentation and proof of my process. Yet to an uninformed and none-scrutinizing eye the work leaves a few traces of the process, least of ideas. Just like memories they little reference exists to the actual events or experience-of-been-there. The critical question remains unanswered but yet reflected upon: were those my memories I worked from or did they become my memories through the process?

Paper served as main material for all the sets, and with the exception of one set, where I employed and electrical wire and a miniature lamp in the Untitled, 2008 entry-way scene (see Figure 1.5). I wanted to preserve consistency of the material throughout the body of work. The process and the materials were supposed to reflect and support the content. Long hours spent designing, sketching and producing work were on many levels a very much all-consuming but a reflective process. Sets, depending on complexity took a few days to about a week to finish. Constructing paper furniture and interiors had also become a reflective exercise on memory and recall. It is the process of building and careful manipulation of the objects constituting the sets that really made it a mediative exercise – recollection. Ricoeur calling on Aristotle states that the line needs to be drawn between
“the presence of memories and the act of recollection.” 58 I thought of the question similar to as how can one remember “an absent thing that one is not at present perceiving,” or in other words “ while perceiving an image, how can we remember something distinct form it?”59 So this is why I considered my reflective process very important – it mimicked and act of recollection.

The miniatures were photographed on the surface of my kitchen table, the wood surface which could be noted (see Figure 1.1) in the number of the photographs, in which it masks itself as a floor. The decision to use the surface was a symbolic and became a conversation piece. When looking at the photograph by Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko (see Figure 1.6) his hand frozen in mid-motion could be observed, and so as indirectly the movement of his eye (mechanical). I will expand my thoughts on this point in the following paragraph.

The work surface that Rodchenko appears to be sitting at is a work table which was constructed out of wood. Scraps of cut paper and scissors are visible in the left corner of the image. The left hand is holding up the pages of the book that Rodchenko is looking at, and the absent from the picture frame right hand is holding the camera using which the photograph is made. There is an implication of the image; it is a conversation piece. One is observing what Rodchenko is seeing; one shares this mechanical eye, the view from the cameras viewfinder. This is a common constructivists’ ploy to reduce the photograph to being an extension of one’s eye and perhaps become metaphorical to ‘seeing’ and

58 Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, (Chicago, 2004), p.19
59 Ibid., p. 17
‘knowing’ in this case. What does Rodchenko wants the viewer to know form this photograph?

This photograph by the Russian photographer has become an important piece of motivation for my project; the image has become a reference point for the thoughts, materials and the process that I had employed in constructing and to photographing my work. Just as Rodchenko in this particular piece I consider my work to be revealed only upon further investigation and careful visual critical scrutiny. The photograph is missing a title and is accompanied by a brief description, explaining the event and the visible contents in its plane.


“The chair is so small and we, who must remain in the being of our own bodies, are so very far in the distance.”

Susan Stewart 60

All of the photographs presented in this thesis can be better understood through a careful interrogation of the photographic plane itself. Just as in my verbal defense, I do find it unimportant to conceal much information about the constructing of the pieces. According to Barthes photograph always contains referents in reality; therefore, the viewer is imprisoned into a certain dialectic with the images regardless of their knowledge and

the evidence of how they were made. It is phenomenological approach to the images that we are well attuned to. As viewers of photographs and their referential nature one is bound to be consumed by his/her experience of the image and the referents in the reality, that any further examination of what is in front of them could only be a a product of will and necessitates a suspension of desire to be deceived by a particular photograph.

Therefore, relating to the image is bound by politics of the specifically in relationship to seeing and cognition. Thus, one must always examine what is placed in the line of sight, especially something as ideologically charged as photographs. Such scrutiny is necessary in light that the images are products of culture created by a maker who is already a subject to certain societal and cultural codes. Those codes and influences are frequently mediated through an artist who can function as an unaware tool.  

As previously stated all the images exhibited in the Nostalgia show began as built sets that were later photographed. Above all, photography became a tool to translate the models into a world of signs, to which one can allow self to enter and interact with the space more effectively as the objects were present on a pedestal or any other form. One bases the initial experience of a image on a concept of spectacle which a well executed photograph

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61 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. “A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent (as the case for every other image, encumbered--from the start, and because of its status--by the way in which the object is simulated): it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signer (certain professionals do so), but it requires a secondary action of Knowledge or of reflection. By nature, the Photograph (for convenience's sake, let us accept this universal, which for the moment refers only to tireless repetition of contingency) has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe.” [p. 5]

62 Maurice Merleau-Ponty text can serve as a valuable theoretical example in this case: “The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being. This extraordinary overlapping, which we never think about sufficiently, forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before mind a picture or representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality.” “Eye and Mind,” Images, (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2006) p. 131-132
allows. The simile is important in the work; it allows creation of a referential field, alignment of the fictive objects to the elements in the real world, which makes an effect to be remarkably realistic. Photographed miniatures will more effectively draw attention to the outside world rather then to self, as it would if being displayed as an object. The seduction is complete, the photograph transcends a set into a room that is recognized if not through the memory then through the familiar forms and shapes, signs and signifiers that function in direction of already prepackaged descriptions and meaning.

History is experienced in terms of an order and therefore is empirically organized and described in terms of space and time. Thus, such experience is always in a miniaturized form. The time-space continuum is compressed into set of iconographic events that exclude everything what occurs or happens in between them, allowing a multitude of interpretations. The access to the past is always interpretive and, thus cognitive and is always in reference to the present, we are not able to experience something that is not accessible or was not acquired through a senses and direct contact with the event. The context is constructed around a particular occurrence or a singular instant in history, always referring to a remarkable (iconic) event and accumulating detail by relying on present experiences, objects and events that are co-referents in one’s present life. Susan Stewart argues that miniatures in their description always move away from the narrative and towards the context. She continues that a miniature “offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time and that a

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64 Foucault writes “Just as Order in Classical thought was not the visible harmony of things, or their observed arrangement, regularity, or symmetry, but the particular space of their being, that which, prior to all effective knowledge, established them in the field of knowledge, so History, from nineteenth century, defines the birthplace of the empirical, that from which, prior to all established chronology, it derives its own being. *Order of Things*, (New York, 1994), p. 219
miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but
generalized in that instance comes to transcend, to stand for, spectrum of other instances.
Striking similarity becomes apparent between a miniature and a photograph -- the
generality and the masks that photographs allow us to access them through are observed
in the same manner in miniatures. Just as a photograph serves as a container of coded
information, referents and indexes, the same goes for a miniaturized space, as it
encompasses something that is contained and tightly controlled (manipulated). The
photographing, by stretching a frame, excludes the recognizability, concealing the outside.
The reference to the scale and the reminders of the process of constructing are eliminated.
The paper sets are a reflection on the visual deception that photographs present us, while
participating in constructing the social myth and influencing the collective memory.

In the the *Untitled* image (*Figure 1.1*) the space is functioning as a container, whose
borders are not obvious, and the edges of the set are eliminated through the process of
cropping, or exclusion. The interpretive field is replaced; the objectness of the set is not
recognized anymore, but it starts functioning as a photographed space, at least it lays a
claim onto and external referent or similitude to another space somewhere and sometime
else. Therefore, the space and the time continuum is compressed and confused; the set is a
stage which with help of the photograph and its mortification capabilities allows us a
narrative engagement with the image. The weaving of the narrative begins.

Another element that becomes to act on its own is the fact that in most of the images
(perhaps, all but one) the sources of light are not obvious, only the direction of the sources

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65 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Baltimore, 1984), p. 48
could be speculated. For example, in the Untitled (see Figure 1.2) the light is coming from the left, allowing for a metaphysical illusion of extended space. One would think that there is another room or a hallway that is illuminated to the left of the frame. Yet, in reality the only thing that exists is a manipulated source of tungsten light. Therefore, light in my photographs becomes a protagonist, it participates in the image as much as objects that are pictured. It invents and invites presence, yet denies its recognition, preserving the intimacy and the secret of the space itself.

**Conclusion**

“The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object, dualities we can conceive but not perceive (I didn’t yet know that this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for)”

Roland Barthes 66

“Only thought re-apprehending itself as the root of its own history could provide a foundation, entirely free of doubt, for what the solitary truth of this event was in itself”

Michel Foucault 67


In conclusion I would like to draw on a longer analysis and a further examination of Rodchenko’s photograph (see Figure 1.6), briefly introduced in the chapter *Materials and Processes*. To avoid unnecessary scrutiny and forced analysis, I can’t help but to stress the complexity of the image that was perhaps a quick snapshot by Rodchenko. Nevertheless, I want to underline that the image is carefully premeditated and executed with a message in mind. As mentioned previously, it is very curious that Rodchenko did not have to hold up the page of the book in order to present the viewer with a final image. Yet the careful pointers to construction and Rodchenko’s camera exact position present us with a complex set of meanings that perhaps arise. It is not a self-portrait, as a preconceived “mirror image,” portrait executed by an artist that reveals oneself as the other. Rodchenko, shows us his world through his “mechanical eye”; just as he sees it, he wants us to take a look. Are the scraps of paper and scissors are important elements for an allegorical reading? We are not presented with the inks and the brushes used to “black out” the face of a party member (likely forever “erased” during early Stalin’s purges). It is very likely that the photograph is a self-reflection, perhaps a poem of confusion and uncertainty; it is an inscription on a monument to the world that is being manipulated and constructed in accordance with the new history that is being re-written in terms and demands of the “new order”.

I imagine Rodchenko’s room. It is late at night. Just an cold light form an electric lamp in the corner of the table illuminates the work space, throwing of heavy shadows, giving the necessary light for the photograph to be properly exposed. It is both the light for working and constructing and it is also the light that helps a photograph to come into existence, as

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68 It is a presumed hypothesis for which I can present very little empirical evidence. Yet, my analysis is an attempt to present a base for the dialogue that I attempted to continue through the work presented in *Nostalgia* exhibit.
the impotent document that remains as snapshot of that moment in history. How much do we know about that moment by looking at it? Is it a heroic moment? We can only prescribe the meaning to the image in terms of the context, in light of the brutality of times, in terms of the helplessness of the imaginary to be anything but a pawn in the “construction” of history, over which he has no control, despite the idealism that prevailed earlier on with the birth of the Revolution and the New Order. The great illusion is in tact. The desk is lit by the harsh electrical light; it does not come from the nature, and therefore, interrupts expected order of changing from day into night. Electrical light does not go away with the dusk. It is the hand of man, that flips the switch and tells that light to bring the order and give shape to forms and objects. The electrical light breaks the time-space continuum, and just like a photo-apparat it functions only when summoned, at the click of electrical switch by human hand. Perhaps, this is a metaphor for the course of History. Maybe same are Rodchenko’s thoughts at the instant the shutter closed. We will never know, yet the photograph reveals all that or maybe nothing at all.

I have expressed a general concern with continuing such dialogue. I don’t wish to prescribe just to describe. I see my work as a comparative effort. I attempt to participate in the discourse, that spans from the moments of the conception of a text and written history to the moment when one is still revels in the melancholy of the times past without a critical interrogation of the language and imagery that such “past” has summoned in its anxious defense. In my thesis I engaged some questions in regards to the nature of images themselves. I wished to create an experience of the images that somehow would reflect as it appears to me a condition of being engaged into a melancholic forms of remembering and mourning fueled by an army of photographs that came to stand in as ones’ memories. I underlined that we are as a society that is accustomed (coded) to visual stimuli and
images as are sources of empirical evidence and “as a true historical fact”\textsuperscript{69} of the events and situations which actual appearance is carefully disguised and lost in those images. Perhaps, as I showed in both, the visual and the written parts of my thesis that it is a vigorous interrogation needs to be assumed by us as a form of responsibility towards the representations, imagery and facts presented to us with the immediate appeal to melancholy and a push towards a nostalgic trip to the well forgotten and thus always preferred past. Such imagery disguises itself as documents of real and seduces one to approach it as well preserved true historical facts. that will allow one to avoid modeling the future on the images that sometimes seem so closely to resemble the past. I would like to end with an example of a thoughtful response and criticism of the attempts of careless recruitment of memories and fear infused imagery of Cold war in the wake of current political situation in the world. Perhaps, my appeal and warning about nostalgia needs to be take with the same caution and future-minded and pragmatic form of thought. In a recent response to Edward Lukas’ new book with a nostalgic, fear-mongering and, thus in my opinion, very dangerous title \textit{The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West} Christian Caryl cautiously writes:

“One good start, though, might be to exercise a bit more caution in how we employ historical analogies. In reality we are not entering a ‘New Cold War’ or anything like it. What we are facing is the messy challenge of figuring out where a big, ailing mournful post-imperial Russia fits into the chaotic twenty-first century.”\textsuperscript{70}


Figures

*Figure 1 Untitled, 2008*
Figure 2 Untitled, 2008
Figure 3 The only surviving photograph of The Last Futurist Exhibition ‘0.10’, Petrograd, 1915

Figure 4 Untitled, 2008
Figure 5 Untitled, 2008

Figure 6 Untitled, 2008
Selected Bibliography:


