Exhibition
From January 20 to March 11, 2012
at La Criée

Opening
Friday January 20, 2012, at 6:30pm
at La Criée

Guided Tour
Friday January 27, 2012, at 5pm
at La Criée

« Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino »
(2000-2010)
From January 14 to March 3, 2012
Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève
7 rue Pastourelle - 75003 Paris

« I am not I » (1993 - 2002)
From January 13 to March 10, 2012
Suzanne Tarasiève / LOFT 19
5 passage de l'Atlas, Villa Marcel
Lods - 75019 Paris
Press release

From January 20 to March 11, 2012, La Criée will be presenting the French premiere of the Salt Lake series by Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov. Dating from 1986, this series of 50 photographs takes us back to Soviet-era Ukraine, on the edge of ruin, to a place where life’s simple pleasures were played out against the backdrop of a lake assailed by industrial pollution on every side.

Boris Mikhailov was born in Ukraine in 1938. His career as a photographer really began as a reaction to the Soviet regime, which objected to some of his works. An engineer by training, he was dismissed from the factory where he worked when the KGB discovered nude photographs he had taken of his wife. From then on, for over forty years he gave himself wholly to photography, documenting life in the Soviet era, the end of the latter, and the changes that followed, through raw, human portraits of his contemporaries. Today, he is one of the most acclaimed photographers of the former USSR on the global artistic scene, representing Ukraine at the Venice Biennial in 2007 and with a show at the MoMA in New York in 2011.

The «Salt Lake» series:
In 1986, Boris Mikhailov travelled to the shores of a lake in the south of Ukraine. His father, who had lived in the region in the 1920s, remembered it as a favourite spot with the locals, who were convinced its warm, salty water had healing properties. The photographer was curious to find out whether the place was still there. He discovered that while habits had not changed, the lake was now surrounded by factory chimneys, brick warehouses and industrial-sized pipes discharging waste into the water. Throughout the year, families would meet on the shores of the lake. At first glance, it looks like a Soviet version of Baden-Baden.

Boris Mikhailov captures a succession of strange scenes in which we see a carefree people bathing in murky waters, seemingly indifferent to the chaotic landscape around them. There are crowds of thickset men along with women clad in both bikinis and headscarves, apparently enjoying the moment to the full. Bodies lie stretched out to sunbathe, while a group of women chat happily. The calm exuded by this series becomes a pictorial element in its own right, reminiscent of some of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photographs from the time of the first paid holiday leave in France, or George Seurat’s painting A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.

Salt Lake portrays a little-known, almost secret Soviet Union. This is hardly surprising, given that like much of Mikhailov’s work, this series was undertaken clandestinely. The environment is one in which the population appears to be indifferent to its environment, or at least puts up with it for want of anything better, in order to make the most of their freedom, however transient. Did these people have a choice as to where they could relax? Did they wonder about whether there could be anything better anywhere else – or could this freedom be the very best kind of all?

Discovering this work today engages us in a work of remembrance – perhaps akin to that of the photographer himself, retracing his father’s steps. One’s attention is irresistibly drawn to the date, one year before the Chernobyl disaster and three years before the collapse of the Soviet system. History has endowed Salt Lake with the status of a valuable testimony, embodying the artist’s perceptive and timeless view of his day.

«There’s a kind of interplay between the old and the new going on here. […] It was an outworking of an old idea I’d entertained before: we’re right there, and yet not there. It’s both today – and a long long time ago.»

Press release

Visuals for the press
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Boris Mikhailov, Salt Lake series, 1986, C-print, 60 x 84 cm, edition of 7.
© Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

Boris Mikhailov, Salt Lake series, 1986, C-print, 60 x 84 cm, edition of 7.
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Visuals for the press
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Works exhibited

*Salt Lake*
1986
Series of 50 photographs, C-print, 60 x 84 cm, edition of 7.
© Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

Collection: Boris & Vita Mikhailov
Biography and bibliography

Boris Mikhailov
Born in 1938 in Kharkov, Ukraine
Lives and works in Kharkov and Berlin.
2000 Hasselblad Award Winner, and 2001 Citibank Photography Prize Winner.

RECENT SOLO SHOWS (selection)

2012
*Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France
*I am not I*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève / LOFT19, Paris, France
*Salt Lake*, La Criée centre d’art contemporain, Rennes, France

2011
*Case History*, MoMA, New York, USA
*I am not I*, Art Hall Gallery, Tallin, Estonia
*Banzai!*, Galerie Ilka Bree, Bordeaux, France
*Black Archive, Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany

2010
*At Dusk*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève / LOFT 19, Paris, France
*Yesterday’s Sandwich*, Damian Casado, Madrid, Spain
*Utopia and Reality*, Kunstverein Rosenheim, Rosenheim, Germany

2009
*Dusk*, Deweer Art Gallery, Otegem, Belgium
*Yesterday’s Sandwich*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève / LOFT19, Paris, France

2008
*Bricolage*, National Center For Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia
*Look at me I look at water or perversion of repose* (1999), Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France
*Wedding*, Sprovieri, London, United Kingdom

2007
*Banzai!*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany
*Look at me I look at Water*, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany
*Intimacy*, Matthew Bown Gallery, London, United Kingdom
*Boris Mikhailov, Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich, Germany
*Yesterday*, Merano Arte, Merano, Italia

2006
*Yesterday’s Sandwich*, Shugoarts, Tokyo, Japan
*Intermezzo*, Guido Costa Projects, Turino, Italia

2005
*Butterbrot from the 60s/70s*, Galerie Ilka Bree, Bordeaux, France
*Look at me I look at Water*, Centre de la Photographie, Geneva, Switzerland
*Look at me I look at water, If I were a German, I am not I*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France

2004
*Boris Mikhailov: A Retrospective*, ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, Boston, USA
*Untitled*, Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid, Spain
*TV-Mania*, Kunstverein Arnsberg, Arnsberg, Germany
*In the Street*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany

Biography and bibliography
Biography and bibliography

RECENT GROUP SHOWS (selection)

2011
The world belongs to you, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italia
New Documentary Forms, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom
Aires de Jeux, Pavillon Populaire, Montpellier, France
Ostalgia, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA
Breaking News, Fukushima and the consequences, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany
Investigations of a Dog, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden
Photography Calling!, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany

2010
Les recherches d’un chien, La Maison Rouge, Paris, France
Photo I, Photo You, Calvert 22, London, United Kingdom
1989. End of History or Beginning of the Future?, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria
October, White Space Gallery, London, United Kingdom
Arbeit / Labour, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Zürich, Switzerland
Sexuality and transcendence, Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev, Ukraine

2009
1989. Ende der Geschichte oder Beginn der Zukunft?, Villa Schöningen, Potsdam, Germany
Movie Painting, National Center For Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia

1968. The Great Innocents, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany
Printed Matter, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Zürich, Switzerland

2008
Fluid Street - Alone, Together, Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
Total Enlightenment : Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960-1990, Fundación Juan March, Madrid, Spain
After Eisenstein, Lunds konsthall, Lund, Sweden

2007
52th Venice Biennale, Ukraine Pavillon, Venice, Italia
Hot + Bothered: Looking at the Landscape / Thinking about the World, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, USA

2006
In the Face of History: European Photographers in the 20th Century, Barbican Art Gallery, London, United Kingdom
Twilight-Photography in the Magic Hour, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom

2005
Circa Berlin, Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, Danemark

2004
Outcasts and Sundaychildren, De Hallen Harlem, Harlem, The Netherlands
Social Creatures. How Body becomes Art, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany
Biography and bibliography

- COLLECTIONS
  Art4.ru - contemporary art museum, Moscow, Russia
  Art Gallery of South Australia, Adeláide, Australia
  Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany
  Cal Cego - Colleccion de Arte Contemporaneo, Barcelona, Spain
  Castello di Rivara, Centro d’arte contemporane, Rivara, Italia
  Centro de Artes Visuales Helga de Alvear, Cáceres, Spain
  CGAC - Centro Galego de Arte Contemporáneo, Saint Jacques de Compostelle, Espagne
  CNAP Collection, France
  Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan
  Deutsche Bank, Berlin, Germany
  Foam Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdan, The Netherlands
  Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, Switzerland
  FRAC - Languedoc-Roussilon, Montpellier, France
  Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands
  Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, The Netherlands
  Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Germany
  Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, USA
  Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
  Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France
  MoCP - The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, USA
  Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia
  MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
  Moscow House of Photography, Moscow, Russia
  Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany
  Musac - Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Léon, Spain
  Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris - MAM/ARC, Paris, France
  Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany
  Museum für Photographie, Braunschweig, Germany
  Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany
  Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia
  National Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA), Moscow, Russia
  NMAO National Museum of Art Osaka, Japan
  Pinakotheke der Moderne, Munich, Germany
  Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, Ukraine
  San Francisco Museum of Modern Art - SFMOMA, San Francisco, USA
  Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany
  Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
  Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom
  Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel
  The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki, Finland
  The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
  The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
  Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Japan
  UnicreditGroup Art Collection, Austria
  UnicreditGroup Art Collection, Italia
Biography and bibliography

ARTIST'S BOOKS (selection)

Boris Mikhailov, j'ai été ici un jour, David Téboul, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2011
Tea Coffee Cappuccino, Cologne : Walter König, 2011
From Japan, Göttingen : Steidl, 2011
The Wedding, Londres : Mörel books, 2011
Maquette Braunschweig, Göttingen : Steidl, 2009
Suzi et Cetera, Cologne : Walter König, 2007
Crimean snobism, Tokyo : Rat Hole, 2006
Yesterday’s Sandwich, Berlin : Phaidon, 2006
Look at Me, I Look at Water or The Perversion of Repose, Göttingen : Steidl, 2004
Salt Lake, Göttingen : Steidl, 2002
Dance, Zurich : Scalo, 2000
Case History, Zurich : Scalo, 1999
Unfinished Dissertation, Zurich : Scalo, 1997
By The Ground / At The Dusk, Cologne : Oktagon, 1996

CATALOGUES (selection)

Photography Calling!, Göttingen : Steidl, 2011
Boris Mikhailov: The Hasselblad Award 2000, Zurich : Scalo, 2000

MONOGRAPHS (selection)

Boris Mikhailov - A Retrospective, Zurich : Scalo, 2003

ARTICLES (selection)

« Boris Mikhailov, portfolio », in Les InRockuptibles, n° 817-819, August 2011
« Boris Mikhailov’s photographs, Harsh pictures of harsh » in The Economist, June 28, 2011
Erik Vroons, « Boris Mikhailov, Yesterday’s Sandwich », in GUP International Photography Magazine, n° 31, October 2011
Aude Launay, « Soviet Union », in Technikart, October 2009
« Schorr edits Mikhailov », in Frieze, n° 114, April 2008
Christine Meffert, « Boris Mikhailov », in Die Zeitzeitmagazin Leben, n° 41, October 2007
Larissa Harris, « Boris Mikhailov: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston », in Artforum International, December 2004
Alexandre Castant « Boris Mikhailov : la fabrique », in Le Journal du Centre national de la photographie, n° 6, January 1999
Notes on Boris Mikhailov

It is very possible that future historians will consider these early years of the 21st century as the period when the status of photography changed radically; when it ceased to become a tool for recording reality and became a constituent element of reality itself, no more and no less a part of our daily lives than tap water or the asphalt of our pavements. We are increasingly disinclined to view a photograph as a trace or support of memory, or as the recording of a moment: it is lived moments themselves, freighted with static images, that call out to be framed and digitally retouched. Paparazzi, socialites with cell phones, journalists, technicians, tourists, conscientious parents, personal PR on myspace or facebook.com – we are all caught up in this iconic time, punctuated by the small syncope of the frozen image. In a word, in a world defined by representation, which is constantly recording itself and watching itself recording itself, the fixed image is a simple moment of movement.

Few photographers, and few artists, are contemporaries of this metamorphosis. But Boris Mikhailov is, for his practice is not indexed on any past mode of photography: rather, it invokes them all. His works are never limited to captured moments. The cultural value of the photographic image is erased, as is the aura of things in general, but Mikhailov is a poacher, for whom the famous “professional eye” is less important than the matter contained by the image, and it hardly matters how this got there. The primal scene that marked the beginning of his activity as a photographer is enlightening in this respect: using a camera entrusted to him by the state company where he was working as an engineer, he started taking erotic photographs of his wife. When he was found out he was sacked. He now started out on his career as a popular photographer, retouching old family photographs that people brought to him. From the outset, then, Mikhailov’s photographic practice was indexed on appropriation, prohibition and the manipulation of images from multiple sources.

Digitised, then, counted in dpi, customised by software like Photoshop, which allow for endless modification of the recorded image, and our relations to it, photography today is a long way from the luminous magic that revolutionised the artist’s relation to the real in the 19th century. Daguerre’s experiments enabled the Impressionist painters to rethink figuration in terms of light: the pixels of digital cameras allowed artists to conceive human space as a construction without a foundation, as a pile of illusions made of strata of images. The Soviet “master narrative”, a fiction that stopped bothering to embody itself in reality, enabled Mikhailov to perceive the world as a phantasmagoria, a plethora of images that he would simultaneously hollow out and retouch.

“Case history” (1997-1998) is an urban opera, Mikhailov’s most brutal and wildest series. In an incredible whirlwind of photographs (over five hundred), he directs the tramps of Kharkov, directing these paid actors as if he were a Vincente Minnelli of society’s lower depths. He is part of the image, and this is simply the product of his participation: the real is not some raw material that it is the job of the camera to reveal; it is simply one modality of the image.
In Boris Mikhailov’s works, the status of the photograph is that of a magic that is already in the past: the scenes are sometimes imbued with nostalgia, and the shots themselves seem to be reprints, the umpteenth version of a lost original. This is because, as a practice, it belongs to a lost continent, to an obsolete universe whose fragments Mikhailov is happy simply to collect. Stan Douglas explains that he uses yesterday’s technologies for his film installations, because “obsolete forms of communication become an index for an understanding of the world that we have lost.” This is exactly why Rodney Graham installed a heavy old-fashioned projector at the centre of one of his exhibitions, and why William Kentridge uses silent film for his black-and-white animations. With Mikhailov, photography is at once the vestige of a lost world and the bond that connects us to that world.

Like all technologies, photography produces ghosts, as Jacques Derrida has explained. They are, more precisely, revenants: this image, which has just been made of my face, will be the one that others see after my death. In a word, as soon as there is an inscription, a recording, future and past come together, and what is the past becomes to-come. All traces produce a haunting, a world peopled with revenants: “technology multiplies the power of ghosts,” writes Derrida. But at the same time these ghosts intensify life, give it a new dimension, new potential. One could also say of Boris Mikhailov that he is building the haunted house of the Soviet world, a strange collection of images that each bear the trace of a collective hope, of private dreams and forgotten sensations.
Rouge Babylone

[... ] Déambulant aujourd’hui dans les rues de Berlin, de Potsdam ou de Kharkov, désormais citoyen du monde, tour à tour rusé, ironique et sentimental, pudique et farceur, Mikhailov s’apparente parfois à l’acteur d’une comédie disparue, ou qui n’a pas eu lieu. De cette comédie invisible ne nous restent que quelques décors et ses scènes, non pas à la façon de vestiges, de bas-reliefs décolorés pieusement conservés, plutôt à la façon de mille-feuilles où travaillent sous de multiples forces des frottements internes. Témoin de l’intérieur d’un ancien empire et de sa chute - qui connut ses victoires et ses vices, sa démesure et sa corruption - Mikhailov a déployé ses stratégies multiples pour montrer la vie nue et préserver la liberté de voir, libre-preneur comme on dit libre-penseur, avec l’intuition de ce qui restera au cœur de ce qui va disparaître. À cet empire dont le nom s’efface, superposons un instant un autre nom pour lui rendre couleurs. Babylone. Rouge. [...]

[... ] Les images de Mikhailov sont celles d’un homme ordinaire. Il est parmi les autres et témoigne de la vie ordinaire dans un pays sous surveillance. À la façon d’un prisonnier qui photographierait le quotidien de ses co-détenus, dont il partage le destin. Ne sera-t-il pas, celui là, le plus libre d’entre eux ? Ne montrera-t-il pas chez ses camarades les coins où la liberté, voire la dignité, se réfugient ? Il sort dans la rue, aime sa femme, boit, joue, et vie sa vie ordinaire d’homme soviétique. Quand il marche et photographie, il est heureux. Il appartient au même cercle des « Soviétiques moyens » - moyen entre quoi et quoi ? Dans un monde où tous sont égaux, l’expression ne revêt plus une signification sociale et culturelles, comme on dit « Français moyen ». Le geste s’ancre dans une double exclusion fondatrice, le mythe personnel du photographe : exclu de son usine où l’on a découvert des nus de sa femme ; refusé par une autre usine au motif que sa mère était juive, son chemin se trace à l’écart du lieu même où s’accomplit le héros prolétarien. Déployant ses stratégies photographiques, développant dans sa salle de bains assis sur les toilettes, Mikhailov ne s’invente pas non plus héros de la dissidence. Ses images ne sont pas dissidentes. Disons plutôt dissonantes : elles gênent, touchent aux limites de l’autorisé, transgressent en secret. Certaines attendent leur heure. Leur force tient d’ailleurs à ne pas s’être épuesées à braver les interdits du temps - sans quoi elles seraient mortes avec ces interdits même. Elles ne s’enracinent pas non plus dans la résurrection d’un passé immémorial, ni ne redéploient le mythe d’un peuple éternellement voué à la soumission, ni n’espèrent le monde qui lui succédera. À vrai dire, elles naissent à un endroit où les liens avec le passé et l’avenir sont rompus, tronqués. À une époque où le pouvoir dévoie moins ses enfants, qu’il ne les laisse pas vivre sans surveillance. C’est ce peuple sans cause, sans destin, dont il fait partie, qu’il regarde, tantôt comme un médecin, tantôt comme un satiriste. Les photographies de Mikhailov ont constitué une forme singulière et silencieuse de conjuration. Et ce geste, libre malgré tout, est aussi à comprendre comme un legs. [...]

Extraits des entretiens réalisés par David Teboul avec Boris Mikhailov pour le film « J'ai déjà été ici un jour ». 

7. L'exposition Salt Lake à Potsdam. Une Nice Soviétique / Ça existait cette appartenance / D’une étrange existence humaine /

[...] Je me suis retrouvé dans un lieu dont m’avait parlé mon père. Il avait vécu pas très loin. Ce sont des lacs salés où des gens se baignent nus. C’était juste après la révolution, dans les années 20 ou 30, il y a très longtemps. Et j’étais curieux de savoir si cela existait encore. J’y suis allé en voiture et ça m’a tout de suite frappé. Ce qui m’a frappé, c’est que c’était comme un gang russe. Il y avait une boue, une vieille usine, un tuyau sur lequel les gens étaient assis et se lavaient. C’était de l’eau très chaude. L’usine extrayait le sel de ces lacs salés et y fabriquait de la soude. Et cette eau chaude circulait en permanence entre l’usine et le lac. Les gens y viennent pour se soigner, s’enduisent de boue, s’allongent, se reposent, etc. Une sorte de gang russe [au sens de repaire clandestin] où les gens se soignent. Chaque endroit m’a impressionné. J’ai pris l’appareil pour aller photographier dans l’eau. Les gens avaient peur, se demandaient ce que je leur voulais. Ils sentaient qu’ils n’étaient pas à leur avantage. Je leur ai dit que je prenais des photos pour mon père, pour qu’il voie cet endroit où il était venue il y a longtemps. Et ils m’ont laissé les photographier, m’ont appelé près d’eux. Quand on leur demandait pourquoi ils n’arrangeaient pas un peu les lieux, ils répondaient : « Pourquoi arranger les choses ? Si on arrange, ça sera cher. » C’était une sorte de Nice soviétique. Voilà... J’ai dû tout photographier en une fois, en deux heures. Trois heures maximum. Quel que soit l’endroit où je regardais, il y avait toujours une photo à faire. Tout était intéressant. Là, il y a une sorte de jeu où l’ancien et le nouveau se mélangent. L’ancien, parce que c’est quelque chose que mon père avait vu. Et en même temps, c’était une réalité qui existait encore. Une sorte de jeu avec le postmodernisme. Un jeu photographique avec le postmodernisme. Ça prolongeait une vieille idée que j’avais eue un peu avant : on est à la fois là et pas là. À la fois on est là, et on est là il y a très longtemps. Il y a des gens. C’est calme. Le soleil brille. Et soudain, quelqu’un se déshabille. Il y a le tuyau. Le type se tient là, tout nu. Et il y a des poteaux, qui semblent mener sur le mont Golgotha. Tout était naturel, totalement naturel, c’était frappant de naturel, et en même temps il y avait des souvenirs anciens. Par exemple, une femme avec des boucles de cheveux, ou bien un fiacre avec une tente, ça rappelle certains tableaux de la Russie ancienne. Et voilà qu’un train arrive. Il y a des rails et des gens allongés dessus. Et voilà que le train arrive... Il passe, et tout le monde se réinstalle sur les rails. Là, ils sont assis, un peu plus loin, une main dépasse, ailleurs, il se passe encore quelque chose. C’est en quelque sorte la quintessence de la vie de l’homme moyen dans le contexte soviétique. En même temps, malgré un environnement atroce, des conditions de vie inhumaines, on voit que les gens se reposent réellement, et qu’ils sont contents. C’est quelque chose d’étrange, que les gens puissent rester dans une situation pareille. Il y a des rails lourds, des taches, des endroits impossibles, et tout à coup, des corps massifs sont allongés. Et juste au-dessus d’eux, une femme dans une posture grecque. Une femme assise dans une posture grecque. Ça me plaît toujours autant. Je n’ai jamais rien photographié de mieux. Quand j’étais à Tenerife, j’ai photographié un endroit chic, où les Occidentaux viennent en vacances. Et les vacanciers font comme ça... comme s’ils travaillaient. Là, c’est l’inverse. À Tenerife, tout est magnifique autour, et les gens marchent et sont tendus. Ça dépend des gens bien sûr, mais la plupart sont complètement pris par ce qu’ils font, comme s’ils travaillaient. Et ils contractent le visage. Alors que là, l’environnement est atroce, atroce, mais les gens sont relativement tranquilles, détendus. Ça fait réfléchir.

Ceux qu’on voit là, c’était des gens qui travaillaient à l’usine ?
Non... Je ne crois pas. C’étaient des gens qui étaient vraiment malades, et que la boue soulageait. Ils arrivaient de différents coins des environs. Il y avait énormément de monde. A vrai dire, je n’ai pas cherché à savoir. Je n’ai pas une approche de journaliste pour demander qui vient d’où et fait quoi.
Le lac était lié à l’usine. Je ne sais pas vraiment non plus ce que c’était que cette usine. On y fabriquait de la soude. Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est ce qu’on voit. Ce que je vois. Le côté visuel. Je sais que certaines choses sont liées, mais quant à savoir pourquoi, ça ne m’intéresse pas.

Cette série est différente de celle sur les lieux de vacances en Crimée…

La Crimée est un lieu de vacances raffiné, avec toute une grande tradition russe. Il y a des dames à chapeau, des arbres magnifiques. L’atmosphère est pleine de souvenirs, de beauté. Tout cela est magnifique. C’est un peu gâché par ces atroces constructions en béton au bord de la mer qui abiment la vue. Et puis les gens aussi… Ici, j’ai photographié des gens, d’autres gens. Alors que là-bas, j’ai essayé de me prendre en photo moi-même. Peut-être qu’ici les gens, c’est le peuple…

Est-ce que cette série a quelque chose d’érotique pour vous ?

Les femmes ont des formes comme ça : pour moi, ces formes, c’est une sorte de sexualité originelle. Là, il y a des tas de femmes allongées. Et elles ont des poses… Allongées, comme ça… C’est très sexuel. L’atmosphère est saturée de sexe. Alors que les gens sont vieux. Mais il n’empêche que c’est très vivant. C’est comme si le lac respirait. C’est une impression très forte.

Cette série est importante pour vous ?

Cette série n’est pas tant importante pour moi que pour l’histoire ! Non, mais c’est vrai qu’elle est importante pour moi. En même temps, c’est l’histoire de ce qui est le plus soviétique possible. Là, on atteint le maximum du soviétisme. Un des maximums. C’est là, ça existe… Je ne sais pas si ça existe toujours, sans doute que non. J’ai téléphoné là-bas, j’avais envie d’y aller, mais on m’a dit que l’usine était fermée. Comme il n’y avait plus d’eau chaude, les gens n’y venaient plus. Et donc que cela n’existait plus. Si l’usine se remet en marche, ça recommencerà peut-être.
The twenty-six photographic series that Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov made between the late 1960s and 1990s (all but three of which are represented in this exhibition) include several varieties of homemade antidote to official Soviet visual culture as well as negotiations—some shifty, some masterful—with the many new “freedoms” of the post-Soviet world. Though the series vary enormously in format, technique, and strategy, Mikhailov’s interests in the individual rather than the type, immediacy rather than distance, and the everyday rather than the ceremonial remain constant throughout, constituting a direct challenge to what Boris Groys might call “the Soviet promotion machine.”

In the large sepia prints of “Salt Lake,” 1986, for instance, members of the working class are seen basking in a giant pool of soda-factory effluence near the Ukrainian capital of Kharkov. Nobody here resembles those active youths on propaganda posters. And after the disintegration of the USSR, Mikhailov continued to confront power with truth. Both “On the Ground,” 1991 (the Russian title of which is taken from the Gorky play The Lower Depths), and the mural “Case Histories,” 1998, chronicle the street life of Moscow and Mikhailov’s native Kharkov with an unblinking eye.

These and other series have obvious analogues in Western documentary and street photography. But other material cannot fully be described by the Western art-historical terms “conceptual,” “found,” or “staged,” though there are family resemblances. Take for example, “Sots Art,” 1975–78, and “Lure,” 1971–87. Because color printing was extremely expensive in the Soviet Union, family, or other personal black-and-white photos were often hand colored. Mikhailov did this for money but also found inspiration in it, overpainting his own and others’ photographs to make works like one from “Sots Art” (not included in the current show) of six stout amateur gymnasts, their rubber balls tinted startling shades of green, yellow, red, and pink. Here Mikhailov frames a popular practice against the dark backdrop of the regime’s own retouched photography, underscoring the pathos both of this particular practice and of photography itself.

Degot usefully reminds us that a public and professional tete-à-tete stripped of meaning refocused Soviet citizens on human relationships and amateur pursuits, and further states that (unlike the Western-capitalist figure of the flaneur) an amateur is not alienated from his subject matter. And Mikhailov certainly inhabits the communities he depicts. Whether in “Crimean Snobbery,” 1982, in which he documents his friends pretending to be rich folks at the beach, or in individual shots of, say, a woman pointing the camera, there’s an overpowering feeling of people taking pictures of themselves, for themselves. Fortunately, Mikhailov’s slapstick impulse was not snuffed out with that animate world; it reemerges postmigration in a project on (European) football commissioned in 2000. Here, Mikhailov and his wife and longtime collaborator, Vika, are pictured in a Berlin park goofing with a soccer ball (pretending to give birth to it, or swallow it, or corral other passersby to do similarly absurd things with it). It’s a strange group of images, but it’s gratifying to see how Mikhailov continues to seek the grotesque and the warmly playful, even after the society that honed his vision has disappeared.

—Larissa Harris
Boris Mikhailov, born 1938 in Charkov, Ukraine, was first considered an artist when a photograph of a naked woman bathing was found amongst his private documents at the company where he worked as an engineer. This incident commenced the myth of Mikhailov's biography but at the same time it reflects the reverse relation of photography to art and of the photographer to society which prevailed in the Soviet Union at that time. The photographer was only considered an artist when he adopted the official modes of expression institutionalised by the authorities. There was little room for private matters. Every photographs beyond these boundaries was declared amateur photography and thus Mikhailov often introduced himself as an amateur, in order to express that he was an artist. Many of his photographs were created outside the recognized categories. They were private and were not intended for publication but were acknowledged as art amongst the private circle of friends in Russia which constituted an art community of its own.

The social and political context which engendered a response to Mikhailov’s work quite the opposite to that in the west, is fundamental to understanding the 1986 series Salt Lake. It is also of course significant in any understanding of the artist’s history. The Salt Lake photographs are one of his bodies of work which were created privately and which document a world removed from any ideal. Salt Lake is very Russian, to the extent that it was characteristic to show personal worlds distinct from power structures and to portray those people who, in defiance of all adversity, lived their lives to the full. Mikhailov's work encompasses both the tragic and the comedic aspects of life in a similar vein to the literary work of Fyodor Mikhail Dostoyevsky, in the tradition of generations of Russian artists who have explored the insoluble connections between artistic creation and the inner man.

With this sequence of photographs Boris Mikhailov documents summer days and bathing pleasure at a lake near Slavjansk in the Ukraine. It is the town where his father lives and the environment bears the scars of the local factories which produces soda water. The industrial process accounts for the high salt content of this inland water and it is this factor which attracts the old and aged, hoping for some alleviation or even cure of medical conditions. The water is said to be good for the skin and this has established the dirty lakeside promenade, where now and then freight trains are being shunted, as a health resort. This industrial context is not considered with the idea of a summer holiday but in the same way that concerns about pollution are disregarded, any notion of a bathing beach is ignored. There is a stretch of water, the heat of summer, and the possibility to escape from the sun by bathing in the salt lake, all topped by the illusion that is good for body and soul.

Boris Mikhailov shows us the people going for a swim in the salt lake, talking to each other on its shores, or simply sunning themselves. In his pictures there is a calmness which lends a pictorial element to this reportage photography. The calm of those depicted recalls a central work of the pointillistic painter Georges Seurat A Sunday afternoon at the Grande Jatte which was painted between 1884-86, and today is part of the Chicago Art Institute's collection. This comparison widens the perspective and helps to understand the photographs as works of art because they also capture and represent the human dimension, the tragic and comic of Dostoyevsky. [...] Today, Salt Lake can be seen from a different perspective: the Soviet Union is no more and the criteria which produced this kind of photography no longer apply; but the harmonious life which had been possible outside the state ideal it is also no longer possible. In the course of history, both political and personal, a distance is created and with it comes the objectivity to recognize these photographs as documents of an epoch. They are also born out of Mikhailov’s vision and he reminds us that, as Dostoyevsky claimed, «beauty alone saves the world», even if that beauty only survives in our memories.
Boris Mikhailov went into photography full time largely because the Soviet government did not approve of his photographs. He was an engineer who worked in a factory and took pictures in his spare time. The K.G.B., on one of its "checkups" found some photographs of nudes in his lab. He was fired.

After that, he worked unofficially and indeed illegally in what was known as the "shadow economy" where entrepreneurs practiced capitalism on a small scale. He enlarged and printed snapshots from people's family albums, which, as he has pointed out, gave him a vast knowledge of Soviet amateur photography.

He took another "forbidden" picture of a woman, this one fully clothed, that pleased him very much. She was holding a cigarette butt, which Soviet women didn't do in photographs because they were obliged to represent an ideal. Mr. Mikhailov decided that photography could be a means of self-expression that extended beyond the cramped limits of the Soviet rule book.

His work became a private protest. He was not allowed to photograph and did not show in official exhibitions, but in the Soviet Union and the countries it dominated, unofficial shows were held in apartments, even in cafes and laundries, where people gathered to talk and exchange ideas. The arts might be muzzled, but they could still growl.

When Soviet communism tottered and fell, Mr. Mikhailov kept on protesting against the old mandates of moderation and the long tradition of hiding, denying or simply ignoring the truth. «Boris Mikhailov: The Insulted and the Injured» at Pace/MacGill tells some pretty grisly truths. It is his first major gallery show in the United States, though he has had solo shows in a number of European museums. His message is important and forcefully delivered when at its most immoderate. Mr. Mikhailov is at his best when he does his worst. He has an uncommonly powerful grasp of misery.

Content is everything here. He has picked up from the carelessly inclusive nature of amateur photography a knack for throwing in extraneous details that turn out to be what really matters. In the eight pictures from the «Salt Lake» series of 1986 (soon to be published by Steidl), people bathe and chat and have a fine old time in a Ukrainian lake. These pictures, color images made from toned black-and-white prints, have acquired an off-putting sepia cast. They describe a dreary spot, with low concrete buildings, a huge pipe that people cling to in the water and little islands of bubbles that float placidly among the bathers. In fact, the untreated factory effluent empties right here into the lake, but the bathers evidently do not care.

The rest of the show consists of 3 very large and 36 small (about 7-by-10-inch) color photographs from a series called «Case History» made in 1999. These portraits - no, that's too kind a word - these raw images of homeless people in Kharkov, Ukraine, Mr. Mikhailov's home town, are sometimes intensely painful. Outdoors in the snow, a woman who has pulled her panties to her knees holds her blouse above her breasts while a man with a woeful face holds her and cups one hand under the collapse of her scarred stomach.

Another woman, who points laughingly at her man's exposed, not particularly amusing stomach, had a bandaged head and an extravagantly black eye. One of his eyes stares permanently at his nose. Elsewhere a woman squats to empty her bowels on a concrete floor. One entire image is a discolored breast with three large stitches and a dark blue blouse folded around it.
«My aesthetic» Mr. Mikhailov told an interviewer two years ago, «talks mainly about the dissolution of beauty.» Well, it has dissolved, along with a society. Mr. Mikhailov has borne witness to a social history that did not, could not, exist before. The Soviets would not have allowed these photographs, but, according to Mr. Mikhailov, in those days there were no homeless people in Kharkov. This account is a lesson in the formation of class distinctions, which communism was supposed to erase. Mr. Mikhailov's pictures might just prove Marx right: look what capitalism has produced.

A gallery may not be the optimal place to see this work; its real force is better understood in a book titled «Case History» (Scalo, 1999). Though repeated assault has insulated and nearly bullet-proofed my visual responses, I find the book shocking. It's not just the poverty and hardship, not even the bodily erosion and stony sorrow, but the theatrical sense of intimacy that stings my eyes. People open up - unzip their jackets and trousers, display wounds, tattoos, growths on their genitals, suffering, resignation, defiant dignity and seriousness that is alternately wan and fierce. Complaisantly or matter-of-factly they strip away layers of human protective disguise, whether of fabric or pretense.

The pictures have a terrible cumulative power, and Mr. Mikhailov's use of sequential images illuminates both the way he works and his subjects' lives. He includes scenes of real affection, for the same or the opposite sex, one man for both a woman and a man. This man's male friend is fairly good looking until his mouth is forced open, exposing the few rotten teeth he has left.

A couple of women remember that it is supposed to be sexy to exhibit your body. A few laugh. The kids have a great time and inhale something or other from pink plastic bags. Mostly this life is not a laughing matter. Mr. Mikhailov writes that generally people forced into homelessness died and that those who elected it survived. Other photographers, like Luc Delahaye and Gueorgui Pinkhassov, have pictured the failed territories of post-Soviet life, and gruesomely. Mr. Mikhailov's photographs convey an unnerving sense of penetrating skin to the bone or to despair.

These photographs come smack up against the potential for exploitation so hotly debated in the criticism of documentary photography. He paid his subjects to pose - he says it would have been immoral not to - and often directed them, for instance, to take off their clothes. He writes that «manipulating with money is somehow a new way of legal relations» in the former U.S.S.R. and he wanted to show how openly people can be manipulated. His wife earned the trust of people who were afraid of everything, and he invited some of them to his home, let them take baths, gave them a drink and evidently food as well.

He had the power of money and of the camera; they had none. They all agreed to have their pictures published in magazines so others would know how they lived. The imbalance of power inherent in photographing the poor remains disturbing.

He has written that the homeless are either totally ignored or randomly kicked or shoved into the street. One passer-by shouted at him for photographing a man on the ground then walked on when he asked her to help stand the man up and take him home. He asks whether it would be better to let him die than to publish the photo. «In general» he writes, «it is hard to speak about morality when one is wearing long fur coats.»

And he says these photographs are his civic duty. There are no photographs of the 1930's famine in Ukraine, when millions died, no photographs of Soviet losses in World War II, an entire history either expunged from the visual record or glamorized. Something inside told him he was not allowed to let another era go undocumented. Like what he did or not, it is history, it's inflammatory - and it scorches the soul.
Visiting information

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FREE ADMISSION
from Tuesday to Friday 12noon-7pm
Saturday and Sunday 2pm-7pm
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VISITS

INDIVIDUAL
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is at your disposal in the art center. Visitor
assistants from La Criée are very pleased
to answer to your questions and talk about
exhibitions.

GROUPS
Groups are welcomed to visit La Criée either
freely or with our Visitor Service professional.
Only upon reservation - From Tuesday to Friday :
Children : from 10am to 12noon
Adults : from 2pm to 6pm

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