

Conference Paper

Second-Hand Nostalgia: Composing a New Reality out of Old Things

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Abstract

In the last few years, the Moscow photographer Danila Tkachenko has produced several highly successful photo-series that creatively reworked and reframed important material objects of the socialist period. Using some of his projects as a case study, this article offers a methodological shift by approaching a second wave of nostalgia for communist past without relying on socialist experience as a key interpretative and explanatory frame. As the essay shows, the decreasing prominence of the firsthand knowledge of socialist lifestyle is compensated by the increasing visibility and importance of (old) socialist things. The essay introduces the term 'second-hand nostalgia' to refer to this type of interaction with the material culture of the socialist period. Retaining the melancholic longing for the times past (typical for any nostalgia), the term points, simultaneously, to a condition of historical disconnect from ordinary contexts, which made possible the objects of current nostalgic fascination in the first place.

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1. Introduction

Museums and exhibitions dedicated to Soviet and, more broadly, Socialist, life-style became ubiquitous during the first decade of this century. Jonathan Bach argued recently in an essay on museums of daily life in the German Democratic Republic that these – mostly private – institutions deploy everyday material culture as a “vehicle for an implicit argument for legitimately representing the past” [1]. Rows of teapots, racks of clothing, and stacks of LPs are supposed to produce an *object-ivist* and authentic display of socialist years, uncontaminated by post-socialist revisionist discourses. Encouraging visitors to engage freely in tactile contacts with the objects on display, these exhibitions are decidedly interactive and deliberately non-monumental. Their thing-systems made the past highly informal and ostensibly non-discursive: history is here to be touched, grasped, and handled.

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For Bach, these museums enable a kind of ‘antipolitics’ that foregrounds – through material remains of the socialist past – the lived experience of ex-GDR citizens in the situation of their current “powerlessness over the rapid dominance of Western political and media institutions” [1]. Cluttered with multiple variations of the same objects, such museums implicitly invited the audience to read the physical excess of stuff as a silent evidentiary support for the idea that life under socialism could not be reduced to a dominant narrative about lack and deprivation in the form of perennial shortages, censorship, political repression and violence. The story that these museums tell is highly selected: people’s direct familiarity with “really existing socialism is filtered here through their post-socialist knowledge of socialism’s demise. The lived experience of the past acts here as a material foundation for building various nostalgic superstructures in the present. Or, to quote a recent study with a characteristic conclusion, “[m]emories inherent in the post-communist nostalgic thoughts may [...] be based on real common experience of people and are not solely a product of biased memory” [2, 3].

But what happens when the spirit of the actually lived socialism, which permeates such exhibitions, is gone – together with the experience of current ‘powerlessness’? When the indexical nature of (socialist) things is not transparent anymore, do these rooms – flooded with toys, jackets, and communist insignia – still resonate? What kind of cultural values could these things abstract and represent, then? How do they fit in the mental environment of a visitor who never experienced socialism firsthand?

As the first truly *post*-communist generation is taking over creative industries, social media, and politics, it becomes more and more obvious that the experience-driven approach to nostalgia might have run its course. Engaging with socialist themes and symbols, this young generation does not shy away from framing their interactions with the objects of the past as ‘nostalgic’. But clearly, this rendition of ‘Red nostalgia’ is not rooted in any direct experience of everyday socialism, making the original double vision of nostalgia studies – with its emphasis on the trauma of transition and the therapeutic effect of nostalgic reaction formations – analytically unproductive and ethnographically inappropriate.

In what follows, I approach this second wave of nostalgia for communist past *without* relying on socialist experience as a key interpretative and explanatory frame. Through a close reading of one case, I show that the decreasing prominence of the first-hand *knowledge* of socialist lifestyle is compensated by the increasing visibility and importance of socialist *things*. I call this type of interaction with the material culture of the socialist period *the second-hand nostalgia*. This description, I hope, retains the somewhat melancholic longing for the times past (typical for any nostalgia), while

pointing, simultaneously, to a condition of historical disconnect from ordinary contexts, which made possible the objects of current nostalgic fascination in the first place.

While the second-hand nostalgia is not exactly ahistorical, it significantly downplays the importance of stories of origin. As I will demonstrate, objects are often utilized as expressive means rather than encoded messages. Biographies of things are eclipsed by their *faktura*, color, or form. What is essential about the objects of second-hand nostalgia is not their ability to communicate or symbolize the proper historical location of these objects' appearance. Rather, it was their evocative capacity to generate various sensations (e.g. tactile, visual, or aural) in their audience. Objects are approached not as vehicles of memory, but 'instead of' memory [4].

Danila Tkachenko, a visual artist whose work I discuss below, came up with the term *trukhliashechka* to describe old "things that make him reverberate" [5]. This made-up word is rooted in the Russian *trukha*, i.e. a pile of dust left behind by a decomposed object. Literally it means 'a little trashy thing' or 'a tiny piece of rot'. A term of endearment and a description of something that is rotten beyond repair, *trukhliashechka* is a material thing in a state of its (playful) afterlife. Despite losing its physical integrity, it continues to reverberate in those who handle it. It is precisely this enticing postmortem agency of Soviet *trukhliashechkas* that I am interested in exploring here. By looking at several recent visual projects of this young Moscow photo-artist, I trace techniques through which iconic things of the Soviet past are relieved of their original contexts and reinserted into new – visual – frames. I want to understand how objects of the second-hand nostalgia resonate, what kinds of entanglements they generate, and what configurations of thing-systems they enable.

2. Materials and Methods

In the last few years, the Moscow photographer Danila Tkachenko (b. 1989) produced several highly successful photo-series that creatively reworked important material objects of the socialist period. In 2014, his *Restricted Areas* won prestigious international awards. In 2015, it was featured in *National Geographic* and *The British Journal of Photography*. In 2016, the original photo-exhibit was adopted for a book format, and came out in five languages: in English, Italian, German, French, and Spanish [6]. His latest project – the photo-series *Motherland* (2017) – also generated a lot of interest in Tkachenko's artistic methods, this time – mostly from the Russian-language social media [7]. In a sense, Tkachenko's projects offer a virtual version of the museums of communist

nostalgia that I have mentioned earlier. Obsessed with Soviet things, Tkachenko puts their images on display, subjecting them to all kinds of visual manipulation.

Tkachenko described himself as “a visual artist working with documentary photography” [8]. While reality in his photographs tends to be augmented, he is careful about the degree and the scope of his interventions. Depicted objects normally retain their shape; what changes is the surrounding that envelops them. Tkachenko mostly works with different levels of the image’s ‘skin’ in order to transform the object’s context in the background or foreground. In an interview to *LensCulture*, the artist explained his approach:

I see myself more as a ‘composer’ and creator of a new reality. Photography for me is the way to create new meanings and interpretations – not a method to show the world as it is. I’m using the artistic prism as a way to purposefully manipulate time and weather, and the possibility to unite different places into one visual space. [8]

Tkachenko ‘paints’ with things and expressive means provided by nature. For instance, the article in *National Geographic* reported: “To capture his vision of the abandoned spaceport and oil field pump jacks littering the land, ‘I needed a lot of snow falling,’ he says. ‘This created a special atmosphere in the photograph, a kind of ... very diffused light’” [9] (Figure 1).

Indeed, his *Restricted Areas* is a masterful combination of light, things and snow that offers a tour through a collection of oversized industrial structures suspended in a white-out space: a boiler house of a closed aerodrome in Kazakhstan, an antenna built for interplanetary connection near Arkhangelsk, Russia; an office building of the Communist Party in a Bulgarian province, to name just a few. Striking examples of Communist obsession with science, space, and power (nuclear or otherwise), most of these structures are now abandoned, dysfunctional, half ruined or even half built. (Figure 2)

Devoid of their former purpose, function, staff, content, and context, in *Restricted Areas* these constructions are morphed into compositions, and a layer of snow (or a fog) clouds the structures, creating fuzzy, dream-like, shots. Surprisingly, even in their minimalist condition, their graphic architectural outlines continue to entice and mesmerize. Boris Arvatov’s idea of the dynamic, morphogenetic thing (*formoobrazuiushchaia veshch*) has been taken to its logical end in Tkachenko’s projects [10], [11]. Having lost their past functionality, these things could deliver literary nothing except for their purified form, their streamlined outlines, and their sanitized silhouettes [cf. 12].



Figure 1: Danila Tkachenko. Part of an unfinished space port. Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda region. From the series *Restricted Areas*, 2013. Courtesy of the author.

3. Discussion

Tkachenko's focus on the remains of socialism is not new: photographic portrayals of 'socialist ruins' is a booming field in commercial publishing. Not without their own market-oriented sensibility, Tkachenko's projects occupy a different field, though. Unlike the widely acclaimed recent album *Soviet Ghosts. The Soviet Union Abandoned* by the photographer Rebecca Litchfield [13], Tkachenko does not let the viewer anchor his or her fetishistic fantasies in the material detail of the bygone era (Figure 3). Any possibility for a visual intimacy is effectively undercut by his characteristic combination of a bare-bone depiction and long-distant shots: "minimum details and maximum attention to the object," as he defined it [6]. The difference between the two approaches is especially visible in the ways the two photographers shoot decided to represent the same building (Figures 4–5). Where Litchfield pushes the viewer to establish a close contact with porous texture of the snow that covers the building, Tkachenko uses the same snow to maintain a cool distance.



Figure 2: Danila Tkachenko. The world's largest diesel submarine. Russia, Samara region. From the series *Restricted Areas*, 2013. Courtesy of the author.

Similarly, by radically uprooting the objects of his photographs, Tkachenko productively escapes the temptation to exoticize the eccentricity of Soviet architectural forms, which permeated (unintentionally, perhaps) yet another widely popular photo-representation of socialism-as-ruins: the two-volume series *Soviet Bus Stops* by the photographer Christopher Herwig [14, 15].

Many of these recent albums offer a one-dimensional nostalgic teleology, presenting Communist utopia as a self-ruining ensemble, as a material structure frozen in space, or as 'the lost vanguard', as Richard Pare, the author of yet another important photo-album, aptly called it [16]. Technical choices allow Tkachenko to avoid this retrospective teleology of failure even when he tries to find one. Thus, his *Restricted Areas* (2012–2014) was supposed to document a "utopian strive of humans for technological progress;" his *Lost Horizon* (2016) visualized "half-forgotten traces and ruins" of "the utopia of constructing the ideal world;" and his latest *Motherland* (2017) lamented the fate of Russian villages, disappearing from the map of the country [17].



Figure 3: Rebecca Litchfield. Young pioneer camp, Russia. From the series *Soviet Ghosts*, 2014. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 4: Rebecca Litchfield. A fragment of the Buzludzha Monument (Headquarters of the Communist Party of Bulgaria). From the series *Soviet Ghosts*, 2014. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 5: Danila Tkachenko. Headquarters of the Communist Party of Bulgaria (the Buzludzha Monument). From the series *Restricted Areas*, 2015. Courtesy of the author.

These attempts to provide a narrative backbone for his images are hardly effective, though. The virtual Museum of Soviet Things that Tkachenko painstakingly compiles suggests no plot development to follow, no lesson to learn, and no conclusion to make. His series could be endlessly extended, and images could be changed. To put it differently, the thing-system that Tkachenko envisions is decidedly non-systemic. Objects co-exist there side by side, without being inter-connected. Perhaps, it is exactly this persistent emphasis on disconnect, on distance, on detachment from the past that Tkachenko tries to abstract and communicate in his second-hand entanglement with Soviet things.

The message of the second-hand nostalgia seems to share a lot with the logic articulated some time ago by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky. Summarizing his generation's approach, the Formalist emphasized by the end of his life, "We created long-term things (*dolgie veshchi*). We always oppose (*otritsaem*) the old. But we do not denounce it (*ne otrekaemsia*)" [18]. In Tkachenko's projects, 'the old' similarly resonates, inspiring simultaneously a desire to overcome it, and an acknowledgment of the constitutive dependency on the old. Far from being captivated by the enchanting

power of decay and abandonment, Tkachenko tries to reject the old order of long-term things without erasing them from history.

The artist treats the monuments of Soviet technology structurally and negatively – in order to acknowledge them as spaces of non-belonging. There is very little illusion or romantic feeling about these things. Objects of the past are hardly the objects of endearment. As Tkachenko recalled it, the idea for *Restricted Areas* emerged during a visit to his grandmother who lived

in a closed and previously secret city where the first Soviet nuclear bomb was developed. While there, I learnt that in the 1960s, there had been a nuclear disaster but it had been completely classified. As it turns out, a vast territory had been contaminated and the people living there developed a variety of chronic diseases because of the accident. The first shot of *Restricted Areas* was made in this city [8].

The melancholy of abandonment seems to be overcome here by a more active desire for a rejection through recognition: the second-hand nostalgia operates as a way of getting to know things that should be avoided. Old things, in other words, are still acting as models, but they are models of what Tkachenko called “the perfect technocratic future that never came about” [17].

As a detour through the past to confirm the vision of the future, which should be rejected, the second-hand nostalgia emerges as a strangely balanced affective state in which various *trukhliashechkas* both attract and repel. Tkachenko’s projects helpfully visualize this double dimension of old things by translating their push-and-pull effect into graphic idioms. I already mentioned the layers of obfuscating snow, which he used to materialize and thicken the distance between the viewer and the object in *Restricted Areas*.

Of course, this snow does not just diffuse light, as Tkachenko explained. It also creates a (visual) barrier that restricts the direct accessibility of the object to the viewer. In his *Lost Horizon*, the artist adopted a similar technique but changed its tone. In this series, recognizable symbolic objects of Soviet socialism – from a model of the rocket which carried the first cosmonaut into space to a model of the Soviet *sputnik*; from the spaceship-like building of the hotel *Saucer* in Dombai to Tatlin’s Tower – are wrapped by engulfing blackness (Figures 6–7).

In his introduction to the project Tkachenko pointed out that this compositional structure was more than a formal play. It was a visual superimposition of two Soviet utopias, in which the contrastive structure of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* was

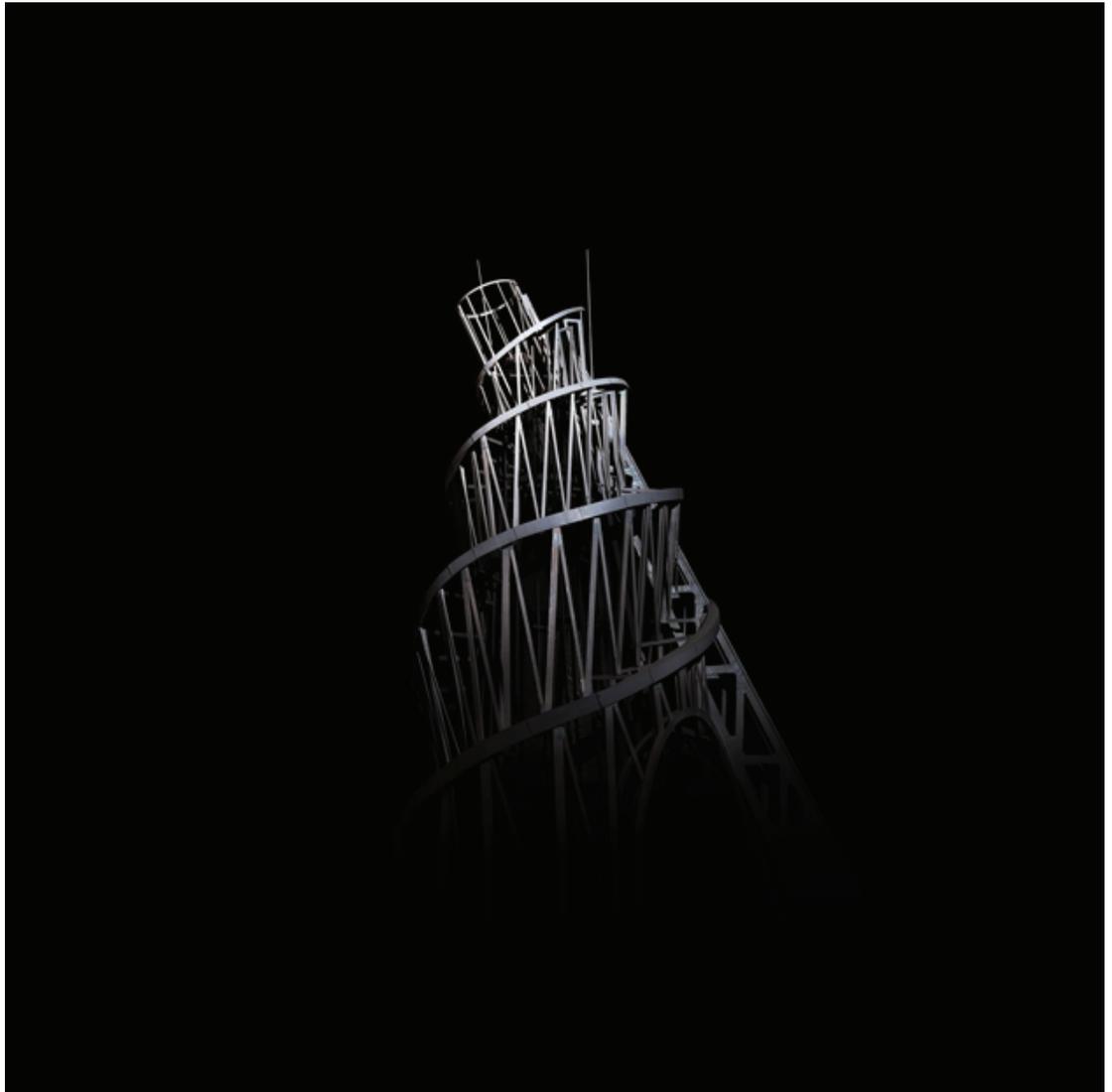


Figure 6: Danila Tkachenko. Model of the Headquarters of the Third International, Moscow (Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International). From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

called upon to frame, to contain and to present examples of Soviet attempts to conquer space and nature [17]. The superimposition, of course, was also a way of reformatting the past: to fit differently sized objects within the same black square, Tkachenko played with scaling. He leveled the objects' dimensions in such a way that a humongous architectural structure would look no bigger than a fragment of a monument's bas-relief. As a result, regardless of their original measurements, all objects appeared in the series as fundamentally commensurable.

Distancing resulted in a strange historical de-hierarchization: the artifacts emerged as even, while different. Size did not matter in this world of things. But neither did color. Nor texture. The black and white scheme of the squared images stripped the objects of their individual detail, retaining only their shapes and structures (Figures 8–9).



Figure 7: Danila Tkachenko. *Hotel Saucer*, Dombai. From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

Shot at night with the help of a powerful light source, these compositions send a very ambiguous message, though. Indeed, the horizon is lost, and Tkachenko leaves it for the viewer to decide if these things and buildings of the past are gradually retreating – for good! – into the black nothingness or, alternatively, these long-term things are re-emerging – finally! – from the darkness to see the proper light of the day.

Tkachenko's lost horizon would come back, but at a high price. His series *Motherland (Rodina)* is a visual story about a Motherland that he set on fire. Each image of the series depicts one or more objects in flames. Two of these images depict iconic Soviet things: a small bust of Lenin and a radio-set from the 1960s (Figures 10–11). The rest of the series, however, portrays wooden village houses, burning alone or as a group. Located in the middle of nowhere and shot from a distance, these log cabins are too far removed to



Figure 8: Danila Tkachenko. Sanatorium *Friendship*, Crimea. From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

convey any individual details. Photographed at night, they look almost identical, being overshadowed, so to speak, by the dynamic dance of the tongues of fire [17].

Within the narrative of the series, the role that these houses are forced to play is mostly organizational. In some cases, their rectangular shapes provide a necessary geometric contrast to the shapeless chaos of fire. In others, a repetition of burning vertical structures creates a rhythmically organized sequence, punctuating the disarray of the blazing volume (Figures 12–13). As *Motherland* implies, the incinerated objects have very little to offer apart from their structuring input. Just like in his other projects, any signs that might indicate the location of these log cabins, their internal content, their architectural distinctions, their own history and the history of their owners have been

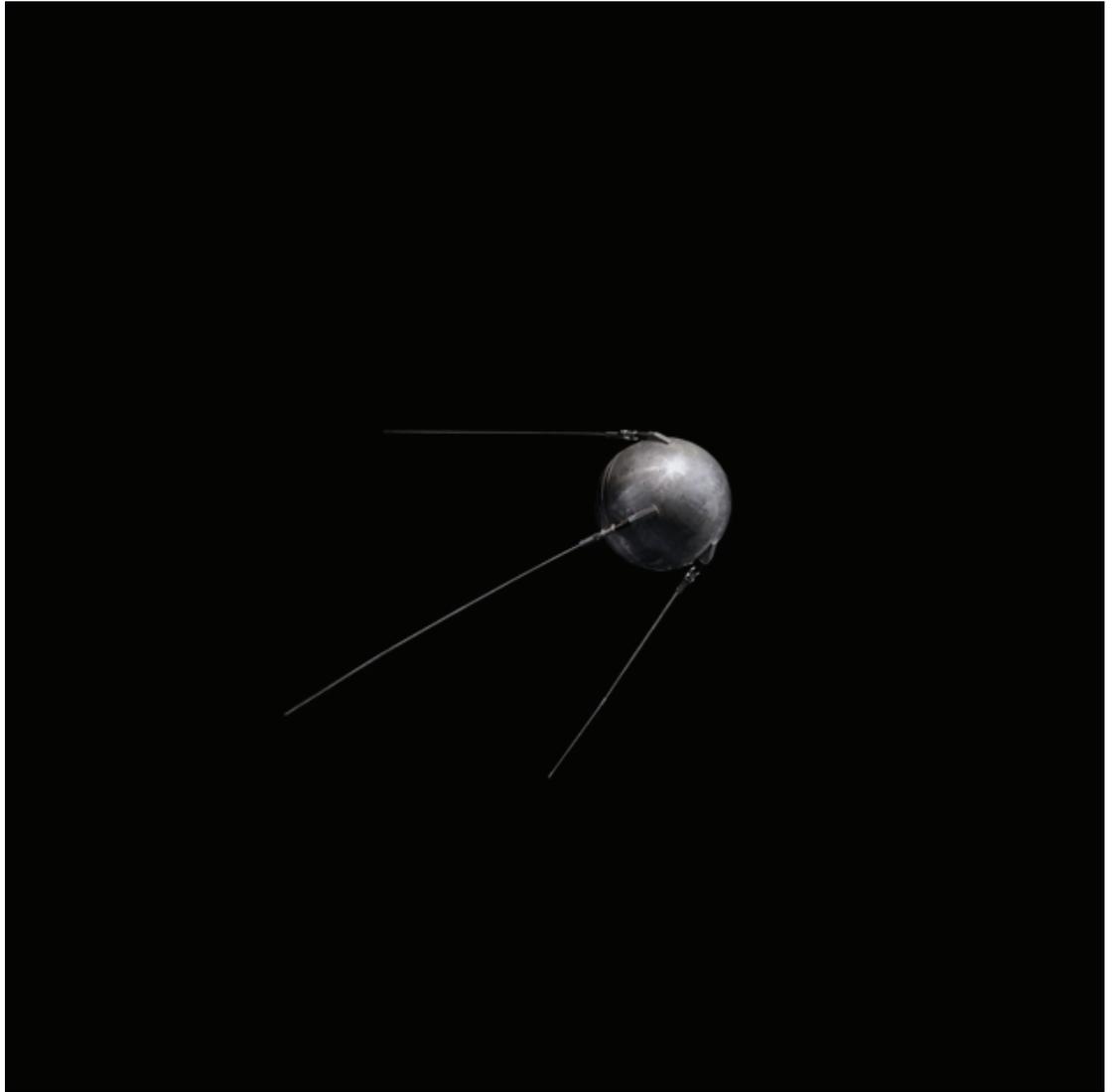


Figure 9: Danila Tkachenko. Model of the first artificial satellite of the Earth. St-Petersburg. From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

carefully evacuated in order to foreground the formal play of volumes, lights, colors, or shapes.

Despite all the flame (and smoke), Tkachenko's *Motherland* appears to be rather cool and dispassionate. The unsettling effect usually associated with images of uncontrolled fire is neutralized here by the safe remoteness of the viewer. If anything, the series looks like a visual documentation of a carefully scripted pyrotechnics show, which strategically interspersed moments of darkness with spaces of light. In one of the photographs, this approach is revealed, perhaps, most clearly. The shot captured the moment when the enflamed buildings merged into one continuous row (Figure 14). Outlined by burning houses, the fiery horizon divides the photographic space in the middle, separating one form of darkness from another. The image appears to draw the bottom line for the



Figure 10: Danila Tkachenko. Untitled. From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

historical period, but it promises neither obvious closure nor future: there are no images in the series that would display the aftermath of the fire. Instead, *Motherland* is depicted as a permanently burning issue, as a state of the lasting twilight and as a condition of the perpetual elimination: a line of indistinguishable objects of the past set on fire in order to be observed from a safe distance.

4. Conclusion

The profound fascination with the Soviet cultural legacy is inescapable in Tkachenko's work. But just as obvious is a fundamental lack of any (visual) interest in the historical layers that actually produced this legacy in the first place. Like in other cases that I discussed so far, he tears his objects – be it Tatlin's Tower or a nameless village cabin – out of their original environment in order to showcase their morphogenetic potential. Like many before him, through this decontextualization he flattened history in order to highlight the objects' material and volumetric affordances.



Figure 11: Danila Tkachenko. Untitled. From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

In a recent conversation, Tkachenko insisted that photography allowed him to “focus on things that make him reverberate (*volnuiut*)” [5] It is a very particular kind of focus, and it is a distinctive sort of emotion, though. As a technical device, “focusing” usually assists in bracketing off the context in the process of creating a portrait of the thing. However, in Tkachenko’s case, the focus on objects does not bring them any closer: there are no close-up portraits in his series. His ‘focusing’ does not seem to be motivated by a desire to deepen the contact with objects. Instead, it is a device for building and maintaining his distance. As Tkachenko put it, his *Motherland* was a way of purging himself from “a nostalgia for the old things [...] Incinerating that rubbish (*khlam*) was a way to finalize (*rasstavit’ tochki*) something inside me” [17].

Born in 1989, this visual artist is too young to have a nostalgia for the things he burned down. The Soviet utopia officially ended when he was only two years old. So when the interviewer asked him to clarify the nature of his nostalgic feelings, Tkachenko responded with this:

Imagine: you end up in a village where people had used to live. You see things that they’d left behind: letters, photos, piles of magazines and newspapers.



Figure 12: Danila Tkachenko. Untitled. From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 13: Danila Tkachenko. Untitled. From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 14: Danila Tkachenko. Untitled. From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

And this *trukhliashechka* starts to take over you; it casts a spell on you (*ocharovyvaet*). You can easily spend days and nights in these houses' attics. I was there for a long time. ... So, you sit there, digging through these things for hours, and eventually you find yourself in a strange foggy state, as in a Tarkovsky film. In a state of a dreamlike wondering. At one point, I made a decision to cut this off, in the most radical way. This is a very Russian thing to do, right? To get up suddenly and to burn the damn thing to hell. [...] But after two years [of doing this project], this was the most logical thing to do for me.

[5]

The type of nostalgia for the Soviet that Tkachenko spells out here is far from being typical: an emotional attachment to places and objects produces a form of daydreaming, which eventually leads to the destruction of the objects of attachment. Neither revivalist, nor escapist, this nostalgia is shaped in the process of an active (and lengthy) interaction with spaces, objects and structures. Each project envisions a particular form of being entangled with long-term things: his active search for abandoned objects (in *Restricted Areas*) was followed by the transformation of these things into black and white symbols

of the period (in *Lost Horizon*), and was concluded by a strange desire to subject old objects to the test of the perpetual fire (in *Motherland*). As if performing an act of exorcism, he tries to dispel the power of *trukhliashechkas*, which do not cease to resonate.

What this type of nostalgia produces, then, is – to use Tkachenko’s language – ‘a new reality’, created through a purposeful manipulation of old things. This second-hand nostalgia foregrounds objects instead of memory, offering a particular form of affective experience: ‘a dreamlike wondering’ through the material remains of other people’s lives.

Tkachenko’s projects and commentaries helpfully bring together the points I have been trying to make throughout the essay. His visual projects convincingly expose the lasting ability of Soviet objects to generate various entanglements of people, things, and ideas. Soviet things structure post-Soviet people’s experience and offer links to the past. Not without its own affective dimension, this second-hand nostalgia seems to be driven more by a desire for connectivity than by a desire for history, though. The scope of this generation’s reactions varies, and Tkachenko described the poles of these responses rather succinctly. As the ‘composer of new reality’ put it, “...one could keep digging into this shit, or one could burn it down, leaving behind an open space (*ploshchadka*) and bringing the historical period (*etap*) to its closure” [5].

Yet bringing the historical period to its closure is not an easy thing to do: the scene that Tkachenko has left behind is not an open space but a horizon burning in perpetuity. The spell of *trukhliashechkas* might be weakened but the flames of their attraction are still burning.

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