TERRA AESTHETICAE 2 (12) 2023 : ARS
Samuel Proffitt Driver : pp. 64-98

# BLURRING BOUNDARIES: THE EVOLUTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER STALIN AND BORIS MIKHAILOV'S ENQUIRING GAZE

***Samuel Proffitt Driver***
Visiting Assistant Professor of Russian, Dickinson College
Carlisle, USA
*E-mail:* drivers@dickinson.edu

The aim of this article is twofold: first, to make a significant intervention in the historiography of Soviet photography, offering a more nuanced approach to the medium's evolution following the death of Stalin, and second, to utilize this approach in a case study of the Nonconformist Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov. The article begins by elucidating and re-examining central problematics indicative of post-Stalinist photographic discourse. The first of these problematics is the oversimplification of photography's state of affairs as a simple rejection of Stalinist norms. Other key problematics concern the enduring confusion regarding what constitutes photographic art within the Soviet project and, crucially, the tendency to rewrite Soviet cultural history by positioning Nonconformist artists not just as an avant-garde but as the logical continuation of the capital "A," Soviet Avant-garde. After examining these three problematics in detail, the article turns to one of the most influential, yet still understudied, Nonconformist photographers: Boris Mikhailov. Through the analysis of his series *Viscidity* (1982), the article demonstrates how Mikhailov interrogates the splintered Soviet self, the boundaries between author and subject, art and non-art, and his own role as both enquiring observer and participant in this new landscape.

*Keywords:* photography, Boris Mikhailov, Nonconformist art, Socialist Realism, late-Soviet identity.

# РАЗМЫВАНИЕ ГРАНИЦ: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ ФОТОГРАФИИ ПОСЛЕ СТАЛИНА И ВОПРОШАЮЩИЙ ВЗГЛЯД БОРИСА МИХАЙЛОВА

**Сэмюэль Проффитт Драйвер**

Приглашенный преподаватель, Дикинсон Колледж
Карлайл, США
*E-mail:* drivers@dickinson.edu

Цель данной статьи двояка: во-первых, внести существенный вклад в историографию советской фотографии, предлагая более нюансированный подход к эволюции фотографического медиума после смерти Сталина; во-вторых, использовать этот подход в исследовании украинского фотографа-нонконформиста Бориса Михайлова. Статья начинается с выяснения и переосмысления основных проблем, характерных для постсталинского фотографического дискурса. Первая из этих проблем – чрезмерное упрощение положения дел в фотографии через манифестацию простого отказа от сталинских норм. Другие ключевые проблемы касаются сохраняющейся путаницы в вопросе о том, что является фотографическим искусством в рамках советского проекта, и, что крайне важно, тенденции переписывать советскую культурную историю, позиционируя художников-нонконформистов не просто как авангард, а как логическое продолжение советского Авангарда с большой буквы «А». Подробно рассмотрев эти три проблемы, статья обращается к одному из самых влиятельных, но все еще недостаточно изученных фотографов-нонконформистов: Борису Михайлову. На примере анализа его серии «Вязкость» (1982) статья демонстрирует, как Михайлов исследует расколотое советское «я», границы между автором и субъектом, искусством и не-искусством, и свою собственную роль пытливого наблюдателя и участника этого нового ландшафта.

*Ключевые слова:* фотография, Борис Михайлов, нонконформистское искусство, социалистический реализм, позднесоветская идентичность.

"Until recently, Soviet museums rejected the classics of Soviet avant-garde photography," (p. 40) writes Alexander Borofsky, renowned art historian and then-chief curator of the Contemporary Department at the Russian Museum, in 1994. This institutional rejection, he argues, stemmed from Soviet curators in the 1950s

and 1960s adhering to the rigid generic hierarchy of Stalinist classicism, and because of this systematic neglect, all notable works of Soviet avant-garde photography went to Western institutions and collectors. The Russian Museum's response is to mend this absence by establishing a collection of "conceptual photography," encompassing "everything that is not straight photography or, to use Andy Grundberg's definition, everything that in some way relates to 'the crisis of the Real' and consequently emphasizes individual vision" (Borofsky, 1994, p. 40). As Borofsky describes, their collection ranges from works by Alexander Rodchenko—serving as «homage to the roots of contemporary experimental photography" (p. 40)—and Alexander Lavrentiev to photography spanning from the 1960s to the post-Soviet period, creating a direct photographic lineage from the Soviet avant-garde to the Nonconformists.

This institutional narrative, with its diverse assemblage of avant-garde, Soviet, post-modern, and conceptual photographic discourses, raises a critical question: Is Borofsky's perspective merely an isolated viewpoint, or is it symptomatic of broader historiographical issues that continue to shape our understanding of Soviet and post-Soviet photography to the present day? This article demonstrates the latter, arguing that such institutional approaches reveal foundational misconceptions that obscure the complex evolution of post-Stalinist photography and perpetuate biases that were inherent to Soviet fine art discourse. Revisiting these foundational historiographical problems, in turn, offers a renewed framework for approaching post-Stalinist photography in general and Soviet Nonconformist photography in particular.

Borofsky's curatorial approach, indicative of broader institutional tendencies, exemplifies three significant and deeply interconnected problematics that have dominated post-Stalinist photographic discourse. The first is the oversimplification of the state of photography following Stalin's death—a period constantly in flux, even within the sphere of the official. The second concerns the persistent uneasiness regarding what constitutes photographic art throughout the Soviet project, particularly from the Thaw onward, a confusion stemming from and highly informed by an unconscious, continued adherence to the official language of the Soviet art discourse. The third is the problematic narrative that arises from

an effective erasure of the Stalinist period from Soviet photographic history, positioning later Nonconformist photographers as not merely a new avant-garde but as the logical continuation of the capital "A," Soviet Avant-garde.

The following article examines and deconstructs these three problematics in detail, complicating long-held institutional approaches to Soviet photography from the Thaw to the Soviet Union's collapse. I demonstrate that the later development of Nonconformist photographic practice represents neither a straightforward continuation of the Soviet Avant-garde nor a derivative of Western movements that became accessible during the Thaw but instead constitutes a complex and nuanced response to these influences. After addressing these problematics and recontextualizing the Stalinist period as a significant influence on Nonconformist photography, rather than merely a bracketed period between the Imperial Russian and Soviet Avant-garde and later Nonconformist work, this article applies its framework in a case study of Boris Mikhailov, arguably the most influential yet still egregiously understudied Nonconformist photographer, whose work illuminates both the unstable nature of post-Stalinist photography and the striving to attend to the newly-splintered Soviet self.

The first problematic to examine stems from Borofsky's claim that museums rejected avant-garde photography due to curators simply "acting in full compliance with Stalinist classicism," a characterization suggesting an unchanged and uniform adherence to Stalinist aesthetic principles far into the post-Stalinist era. As will be demonstrated, such an assertion is not only symptomatic of a broader tendency to utilize Stalinist Socialist Realism as a one-size-fits-all scapegoat but also mischaracterizes the complex cultural politics of the early post-Stalinist period.

**Who is to Blame?**

On February 25th, 1956, Khrushchev delivered the infamous secret speech denouncing Stalin and his cult of personality almost three years after Stalin's death, serving as a watershed moment in Soviet political and cultural history. And yet, even considering this speech alongside other epoch-shaping cultural events of the early

Thaw, from the Picasso exhibition of the same year to the 1957 World Youth Festival, the broader institutional response to the repudiation of Stalinist aesthetic norms was far from unified[1].

The entire period of the Thaw consisted of many skirmishes, such as Khrushchev's profanity-laden attacks on "decadent" artists during the infamous Manege Affair in 1962, prefiguring the renewed assertion of state control over the arts, or the Hermitage affair in 1964 . This instability persisted well into the 1960s, as evidenced by how, in a single year, exhibitions of several previously blacklisted "formalist artists" like Alexander Tyshler were permitted, whereas, at the end of that same year, officials abruptly shut down an exhibition of Marc Chagall just hours after opening. The back and forth among the artistic and political elite underscored both the instability of the cultural apparatus following Stalin's death and the impossibility of viewing the era as uniform.

Although photography was not included and often vilified in official art discourse[2] , the photographic arm of the Union of Journalists would soon follow the example of other cultural organs and begin to debate future directions, namely the role of photography in this new Soviet era. However, the impact of Khrushchev's Thaw was not felt as immediately as within the Union of Writers and the Union of Artists, with the critical reassessment of photography emerging more gradually[3]. Amid Khrushchev's Seven-Year Plan and the Space Race, photo reportage and scientific photography dominate the issues of *Sovetskoe foto*; alongside these images are technical questions and a focus on amateur photographic culture, particularly as photography was again "presented as the most popular and accessible of the arts" (Reid, 1994, p. 33). Within a few years, however, photographers and photo critics writing for *Sovetskoe foto*, the singular publication representing theoreticians, photojournalists, and photo amateurs alike, began to heighten their

[1] See Sjeklocha & Mead (1967) and Kizevalter (2018).

[2] As an example, the use of "photographic" or "fotografizm" as pejorative terms was rampant during the process of de-Stalinization.

[3] Some earlier publications, such as S. A. Morozov's *Russian Art Photography* (1955) and *Soviet Art Photography* (1958), already contained much of what will later emerge in broader photographic discourse.

call for the rejection of Stalinist norms, although with an approach to photography differing markedly from the artistic establishment, particularly in their response to institutional attacks conflating photography with naturalism and *fotografizm* – a term with a long and varied history from the mid-19th century onward.

The term *fotografizm* found new life in broader cultural discourse when V. Kemenov spoke at the 1951 All-Union Conference on Political Posters, mounting a polemic against the then-current ideological and artistic practices in political posters; a year later, the speech was published in the journal *Iskusstvo* (Morozov, 1958, p. 280). As the renowned historian, critic, and photographer S. A. Morozov (1958) describes, though initially unrelated to the relationship between photography and the fine arts, the term's revival would soon transform and gain ground among artists:

> In the pre-Congress discussion and at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Artists, held in February-March 1957, the term *'fotografizm'* was once again heard dozens of times. Some authors of articles and participants in discussions infused this concept with their hostile attitude toward photography, completely denying it any potential for artistic and expressive representation of life's phenomena. These arguments introduced nothing new. And, as had often happened before, when speaking about a photographer, they actually meant the camera lens—that is, they excluded human artistic intervention in the shooting process… Unwilling to familiarize themselves with photography's arsenal of artistic techniques, some discussion participants deprive photography of its "right of citizenship" in the contemporary world of art with incredible ease. (p. 280)[4]

In light of a growing discourse focused on the purely mechanical nature of photography, photographers sought to distance themselves from accusations of merely "copying" nature by emphasizing improvements in practice and quality, as well as the significance of the photographer's role throughout the process. This effort to secure photography's place in the pantheon of fine art existed simultaneously with efforts to reclaim its status as a document of "objective" truth, a fact that will indelibly shape subsequent evolutions in Soviet photographic practice and discourse.

[4] All translations, unless otherwise noted, are the author's.

What becomes evident is that this emergent photographic discourse is perceived by photography's proponents as being in direct conflict with the preceding era of Stalinist Socialist Realism. Yet, paradoxically, within this perceived disconnect, there exists a continuity of rhetoric that defined photography during the preceding decades, though now presented as novelty. Within this discourse, one can observe a clear reinvigoration of photography as technology alongside a renewed, albeit slightly amended, status as a medium of truth. There is a resurgence of the notion prevalent throughout the 1920s of photography as a universal language, along with its importance in broadcasting the Soviet Union's technological achievements, including the Soviet space program (Reid, 1994). While much of the terminology and purported aims echo discourse already present during the Stalinist period, significant deviations do emerge, particularly concerning the individual's role within Socialist Realism, namely, the re-emergence of the artist-creator and the artist-individual.

The artist's skill and individual perspective, as well as the Khrushchevian take on *partijnost'* (Party-mindedness) and worldview, becomes foundational in the call for a new approach to photography. According to the emerging discourse, photographers "must insert all the strength of their soul, political passion, patriotic feelings, energy, and experience into each photograph," no longer acting as "passive observers, indifferently fixing all that catches one's eye" (Satiukov, 1961, p. 3); rather, they should be truthful chroniclers of this new, glorious epoch. This notion of indifferent observerhood, an effort to reframe calculated Stalinist photographic construction, further reveals the underlying tensions between the Stalinist past and the uncertain present, particularly in relation to the previous decades of staging and photographic manipulation. These tensions become even more apparent in the call for Soviet photojournalists to be "documentarily reflecting the essential phenomenon of the life of the people, of work and creation, as an active fighter for the new, an agent of the future, passionately propagandizing the germs of communism" (Satiukov, 1961, p. 1). Only within the context of the Soviet art establishment's attack on the mechanical nature of photography and the photographic "naturalism" of painting in the

late Stalinist era does the logic of these pronouncements takes on a more definite shape.

The paradoxical character of the emerging post-Stalinist discourse becomes even more apparent in Pavel Satiukov's admonishment of contemporary Soviet photographers, asking why Soviet workers are depicted in the same manner as they were in the 1930s. Surprisingly, Satiukov's reproach is not an attack on Stalinist representation itself since those "photographs reflected reality" at that moment (1961, p. 2). Instead, he argues that because technology, the nature of work, and the Soviet people have evolved, so must photography. Rather than a simple acceptance or repudiation, a complex dialectic with the Stalinist past emerges, aiming to re-justify photography's status[5] as an authentic document, a record of truth, while reasserting the role of the photographer-artist. Throughout this turbulent period, the dual claim of the photograph as both a "truthful" document and a work of art defined and profoundly muddled official and unofficial discourse concerning the medium's status . While these tensions would be explored by theorists and practitioners alike, particularly among unofficial artists, they nevertheless remained unresolved and continued to shape discourse on photography far beyond the Soviet project, contributing directly to the emergence of the second problematic: the persistent confusion regarding what constitutes photographic art.

**What Counts as (Photographic) Art?**

The continued ambiguity concerning photography and its relationship to art is exemplified by Borofsky and the Russian Museum's characterization of the collection's "conceptual" nature more than three decades later. While the collection is delineated as such for several reasons, including an effort to escape the deluge of reportage, there remains an apparent uneasiness in defining what constitutes photographic art. This ambiguity is not simply a reflection of post-Soviet curatorial approaches but instead a

[5] See, for example, Satiukov's (1961) pronouncement: "Photography today occupies an honored place in newspapers and journals, and we are making new, high demands of photographs, considering them a political document truthfully reflecting the life of our people, constructing communism, and simultaneously a work of art" (p. 1).

continuation of unresolved tensions that pervaded Soviet discourse surrounding photography and persists to the present day[6]. This apprehension is underscored when Borofsky readily includes the photo-documentation of Francisco Infante's "synthetic artifacts" and Komar and Melamid's 1979 "Buying Souls" auction while simultaneously noting the presence of only "very few works that belong to the Moscow school of conceptualism"—conspicuously excluding comparable "photo-documentation" from this milieu, despite the fact that such documentation was often central. This inconsistent inclusion and categorization of photographic works, significantly influenced by the post-Stalinist bending and blending of the medium, serves as a central touchstone for understanding Soviet photography's unstable identity. To better understand the roots of this unease, we must return to Sovetskoe foto and the period of the Thaw, where many of these contradictions first crystallized.

Judging by the editions of *Sovetskoe foto* from the early 1960s, it appears as if photography finally gained its coveted place in the fine-art pantheon. However, outside the closed milieu of photographers and photo-theorists, this status is far from universally accepted. In fact, despite the powerful rhetoric of photography's proponents, very little change had occurred within the official sphere. The medium was still not taught as fine art in the Academy of Arts, nor was it included under the umbrella of art history. Photography was still not included in fine art exhibitions, and when there were exhibits, even those with the descriptor "art" in the exhibition's title, such as the Moscow International Exhibition of Art Photography, these were organized not by the Artist's Union or the Academy of Arts but by the Union of Journalists (Reid, 1994). Thus, amongst the broader fine art establishment and Soviet officialdom, there was no divorcing photography from photo reportage, mechanical copying, or its Stalinist past.

The exclusion of photography from the pantheon of fine arts continued to make itself felt in Khrushchev's 1961 Third Program of the Communist Party. In the section "In the Field of Cultural Construction, Literature, and Art," the idea is presented that in this

[6] For an earlier evaluation of this problem and an overview of early Soviet debates on photography and its relationship to art, see Morozov (1958).

final stage of the "great cultural revolution," the ideological and cultural conditions needed for communism's victory will indeed come to fruition, in particular, due to the labor of the arts. However, even when the arts are individually listed, that is, "Soviet literature, music, painting, cinema, theater, television broadcasting, all the other arts," there is no mention of photography (*22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 1962, p. 326). The proliferating claim that photography had already secured its position as art seems to have been completely ignored, and this omission is not lost on the Soviet photographic community. In response, the photography section of the Union of Journalists would soon publish a collective response in 1961 in *Sovetskoe foto* No. 10, an issue dedicated to Khrushchev's new Program

The authors of this article, which was entitled "In honor of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU," proceed with their bid for entry into the art establishment: "*Fotopublitsistika*[7] , the art of photography, has won the recognition of millions. The works of Soviet masters and amateurs, published in the press, exhibited at the All-Union exhibitions 'Seven Years in Action,' at the Moscow International Exhibition of Art Photography, are evidence of their great achievements" ("In honor of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU", 1961, p. 22). While members of the photojournalist section of the Union of Journalists in attendance continued to praise the new Program, the apparent neglect of photography was impossible to overlook:

> Considering that photographic art has long earned the right to be considered on the same level as other types of fine art, that it plays a significant role in the ideological and aesthetic education of workers, in the promotion of Soviet achievements abroad, in strengthening peace and mutual understanding between peoples, the participants in the meeting made a proposal to include the name 'photography' when enumerating the types of art. ("In honor of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU", 1961, p. 22)

These members also requested that photo clubs be included alongside the other arts in the section of the Program highlighting the importance of the "organization of wide networks" of scientific, technical, and art and cinema studios to support cultural

[7] Photos of socio-political problems

development, as these photo clubs serve as "the main technical and creative base of amateur photographers" and facilitate "the desire of the masses to master photographic art" (Reid, 1994, pp. 36-37). Despite the article concluding with resounding enthusiasm concerning photography's role in the new Program, their pleas will be ignored.

A curious paradox emerges in post-Stalinist artistic discourse. While the art establishment attacks the "mechanical" or the "photographic" in art, photo critics repurpose this same rhetoric to prove photography's status as a legitimate art form. Both sides utilize the very same framework to achieve opposing goals: the art establishment positions painting in opposition to photography's supposed mechanical nature and its perceived relation to Stalinist "naturalism" to re-legitimize painting under Socialist Realism, whereas photographers appropriate this discourse, distancing the medium from questions of naturalistic or strictly mechanical practices across the arts in order to reclaim artistic legitimacy. The repurposing of official art discourse to achieve contradictory aims exemplifies a tension Alexei Yurchak (2006) considers intrinsic to late socialism: "The more the immutable forms of the system's authoritative discourse were reproduced everywhere, the more the system was experiencing a profound internal displacement" (p. 283).

To counteract the Soviet art establishment's denigration of photography, there is an emphasis on the medium's "specificity" as an art form, appealing to the Third Program's notion of sincerity and "Party-mindedness" and rejection of the notion of photography as a mere mechanical copy. In their formulation, this specificity is centered on the idea of a dual-natured *dostovernost',* or authenticity, as both an "authentic record of the visual appearance of contemporary achievement and social processes, and at the same time… an authentic expression of the artist's vision, mediated by his/ her *partijnost*'" (Reid, 1994, p. 38).

Photography, these critics argue, should not be characterized by a lack of authorial presence but should be defined by authorial expression. As such, there was a call for a break from strict verisimilitude, as the "transformative capacity of art—its *non*-identity with 'reality'—made possible its ideological role as the

bearer of Party-mindedness" (Reid, 1994, p. 39). By arguing for a return to the author-creator, the proponents of photographic art strategically align themselves with Khrushchev's forceful pronouncements in the "Third Program of the Communist Party," which, at least rhetorically, called for a disavowal of the Stalinist past, while concurrently distancing their practice from accusations of the ever-pejorative *fotografizm*.

The calls for a return to the author-creator thus serve contesting purposes within Soviet artistic discourse: for proponents of photographic art, emphasizing the foundational aspect of individual authorship elevates photography to the status of fine art; for the Soviet art establishment, the same principle reinforces distinctions between photography and painting while preserving the elevated status of the latter. Through this lens, we may reconsider Ekaterina Degot's (2004) statement that "in the official Soviet art hierarchy, photography rated very low. Museums did not collect photographs… they could join the Union of Journalists but never the Union of Artists. Photography was simply not seen as art" (p. 107). Photography was often seen as art, just not by those who held the keys to the pantheon of official fine arts.

The persistence of photography's marginalization cannot, as Borofsky claims, be traced to a simple adherence to Stalinist classicism; such an explanation contradicts the period's theoretical debates and blends opposing historical contexts into a singular whole. The far-reaching impact of these post-Stalinist photographic debates becomes particularly evident when we examine Borofsky's curatorial approach three decades later, revealing a marked continuity in the official language of the art establishment, namely the emphasis on "individual vision." This continuity undermines any attempt to establish a clear delineation between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present.

As we have seen, the post-Soviet hesitancy in ascribing the label of art to photography can be traced back to unresolved tensions between the Soviet fine art establishment and the proponents of photographic art. This hesitancy, however, is further complicated by two interrelated factors: first, the increasingly fluid boundaries of the medium itself in Nonconformist practice following Stalin's death, which will be examined through the work of Ukrainian

Nonconformist photographer Boris Mikhailov; and second, the continued refusal to consider Stalinist photography as anything other than a period to be bracketed. The latter contributes directly to our third problematic, as the deliberate bracketing of the period from Soviet photography's historiography facilitates the construction of an artificial lineage that portrays Nonconformist artists as direct heirs to the Imperial Russian and Soviet Avant-garde.

**Nonconformism: avant-garde or the *New* Avant-Garde?**

Having examined the oversimplification of the state of post-Stalinist photography and the enduring uneasiness surrounding photography's status as art, the final problematic to be addressed is the rampant tendency to trace Nonconformist photo-movements, as if self-evident, to a singular predecessor: the Imperial Russian and Soviet Avant-garde. In Margarita Tupitsyn's (1994) influential article "Against the Camera, for the Photographic Archive," the author states that no one paid attention to Soviet photography, the "amorphous mass undeserving of attention from a creative person," leading to a complete "non-practice" of photography by unofficial artists; this is, of course, until the early 1980s, when Ilya Kabakov would turn out to be the only artist who had the wherewithal to examine the "dead body of the Soviet mass media" and its photo archive (p. 60). This narrative of the "non-practice" of photography and a revival of the medium only through the excavation of a long-dead Soviet past obscures the seismic post-Stalinist shift that occurred due to both epistemic and systemic breakdowns, quickly losing foundation once the nuances of photography's evolution are more closely examined[8] . The development of the medium cannot be divorced from attempts to reappropriate the role of photography as "authentic," with a new-found focus on the "dual nature" of the medium as both art and a conveyor of truth.

The trend of referring to Soviet Nonconformist art and photography as the "new avant-garde" is neither new nor rare,

[8] M. Tupitsyn's notion of "non-practice" within Soviet photography was recently revisited by Daria Panaiotti (2022), who laments, "as if the medium was completely alienated from contemporary art" (p. 674).

and these designations of Nonconformist art as a resurrection of the capital "A" avant-garde extend beyond the myriad of exhibition or book titles[9] . The idea of this period as either the "new" or "second" Avant-garde is mired in complications. Certainly not the least of these complications that arise is the homogenization of the historical Avant-garde, which was, as the art historian John Bowlt (1998) underscores, "a mass of contradictions, an avant-garde of avant-gardes that, by its very nature, defies rigid categorization and precise denotation" (p. 49). Even after referring to the Nonconformists as *"the second avant-garde,"* [10] Bowlt subsequently describes the question of a relationship between the avant-garde and the Nonconformists as "intriguing, though complex, in part because of its illusory and artificial formulation" (p. 51). He goes on to state that "in examining the attitudes of the Soviet dissidents to the Russian avant-garde, the critic must exercise extreme caution and approach visible symptoms more as isolated facts than as a wholesale borrowing" (p. 52), not least in part due to the sheer variety of generations and artistic approaches included under the Nonconformist umbrella.

Bowlt's inconsistency in approaching such a designation, first speaking of the Nonconformists as "the second avant-garde" before cautioning against it, exemplifies how entrenched this narrative is within art historical discourse, even for those who understand its limitations. Within one and the same article, we find how immensely this concept has affected our understanding of Soviet art history, revealing the challenge of disentangling oneself from the numerous contradictions that emerge when considering the two groups as a part of a direct lineage and the difficulty of breaking free from this pattern of categorization.

Indeed, unofficial Soviet artists were a product of various traditions: from Western art and culture that was either exhibited,

[9] For example, Daria Khristova, the head of Bonham's Russian Department, evokes this idea of the new "Avant-garde" when speaking about Bonham's "Rebellious: Russian Non-conformist Art from an Important European Collection" auction: "The artists represented in this sale emerge as an essential part of the movement praised as 'the Second Russian Avant-Garde'" (Russian Art + Culture, 2020, para. 2).

[10] Italics mine.

as restrictions eased, or reproduced illegally from smuggled or stolen publications to the art of Imperial Russian and Soviet Avant-garde preserved and shared by collectors like George Costakis. However, these influences were only a part. As Bowlt (1998) himself notes, "the influence of the very artistic system that the dissidents questioned, namely Socialist Realism, was also deep and lasting," with one of the "main paradoxes" being that "the underground… was itself the progeny of Soviet art history cultural behavior rather than heir to a remote avant-garde" (p. 52). Thus, this adverse reaction to the notion of the Nonconformists as "the new Avant-garde" is not pedantic. Instead, it is based on the keen awareness that within the general and broader academic imagination, particularly concerning photography but also Socialist Realism in general terms, the transformative role of photography under Stalin has been almost wholly ignored, save by a handful of theorists and art historians. Only through a reintroduction of the preceding Stalinist period, one usually bracketed within art historical discourse, can the shades and nuances of influence and novel production be properly understood.

**Bridging the Epochs**

Through a complete consolidation of power, Stalin sought to shape Soviet existence across all aspects of lived reality, effectively achieving the avant-garde's unrealized goal of creating a "new public with new eyes" and a unitary plan that fused aesthetics and politics[11]. This totalizing approach—what Boris Groys terms Stalin's Gesamtkunstwerk—embodied the paradox that Yurchak (2006), drawing on Claude Lefort, identifies as inherent to the Soviet system, that is, "the independence of creativity and the control of creative work by the party are not mutually contradictory but must be pursued simultaneously" (p. 13)—a goal "of total liberation by means of total control" (p. 284). Within this system, photography became central as both a producer of message and material. The avant-garde concept of photography underwent a profound transformation, assuming a new function entirely subordinated to Stalin's vision. Viewed through this new designation of photography, violently stripped of any autonomy, it becomes possible to reassess how Stalin sought

[11] See Groys (1992) and Yurchak (2006).

to mold and transform reality, shape the new Soviet citizen, and systematically restructure truth according to his internal logic. This perspective moves us beyond viewing editing, manipulating, staging, or retouching as simply "lies" or propagandistic "hack-work" toward reframing these acts as deliberate interventions deemed necessary to accurately represent the epistemological foundation of Stalin's world-construction.

Following Stalin's death, however, the system underwent an irrevocable shift "as a result of the disappearance…of the external editorial voice," the locus of meta-discourse on ideology (Yurchak, 2006, p. 14), which would fundamentally alter photography's role within the Soviet system. Yurchak (2006) terms this process the hypernormalization of discourse, defined as "the process of normalization [that] did not simply affect all levels of linguistic, textual, and narrative structure but also became an end in itself, resulting in fixed and cumbersome forms of language that were often neither interpreted nor easily interpretable at the level of constative meaning" (p. 50). Consequently, as evident in discussions surrounding Socialist Realism and artistic hierarchies, all knowledge was presented as "knowledge… already established," meaning that knowledge production and presentation, namely in the sphere of the official, were about mediation rather than creation (Yurchak, 2006, p. 284).

As discourse becomes normalized and fixed due to the loss of its external-to-the-system editor (Stalin), there is a shift toward replication, enabling engagement in "new, unanticipated meanings… not necessarily determined by the ideological, constative meanings of authoritative discourse" (Yurchak, 2006, p. 27). Through what Yurchak (2006) calls the "performative shift"—where the performative dimension of "ritualized speech acts rise in importance… while the constative dimension of these acts becomes open-ended, indeterminate, or simply irrelevant" (p.26)—we can reconsider the contradictions found in post-Stalinist photographic discourse, namely the utilization of Stalinist tropes to reclaim photography's authenticity and reposition it as art. This turn is especially significant as it does not "preclude a person from feeling an affinity for many of the meanings, possibilities, values, and promises of socialism," even allowing "one to recapture these…

from the inflexible interpretations provided by the party rhetoric" (Yurchak, 2006 p. 28).

This theoretical framework significantly reshapes our understanding of photography after Stalin in several key ways. Crucially, it refutes the notion of the Stalinist period as a void in Soviet photographic history, bookended by several "renaissances." This framework also offers a new perspective on Groys' assertion that photography's post-Stalinist development "emerged not out of the history of avant-garde photography but as a result of the blurring of the boundaries separating photography from other forms of art" (Groys, 2004, p. 120). Groys (2004) attributes this emergence almost solely to Western conceptual influence and to the avant-garde being "part and parcel of the official Soviet visual propaganda of the time from which Russian unofficial art wanted to distance itself" (p. 119). However, I argue instead that this phenomenon stems directly from photography's co-option within the Stalinist project and its complex role as both accommodation and technology that revealed the now-unfolded system of truth and power. Thus, instead of a breakdown of state propaganda, what occurred was the collapse of an epistemic structure that served as the framework for the entire period, negating the possibility of simply returning to the pre-history of the avant-garde. This epistemic breakdown directly informs the significant tensions that emerged after Stalin's death regarding photography's dual status as both authentic documentation and art.

With the Stalinist system having come apart at the seams and the project of creating a new reality fallen by the wayside, Nonconformist photographers would soon be forced into a state of reflection and reckoning with the fragments of the past-as-now. Thus, as Groys (1992) observes, this "retrospective view… is anything but extraneous to the culture of the Stalin years… it represents not simply the next stage in the history of Russian art but is vital to an understanding of the internal logic and true nature of the Stalinist project" (p. 75). It is precisely this reception of Stalin's total work of art, this reflection upon it, that reveals its "internal structure" and allows for the Stalinist project to be "grasped in its entirety" (p. 75). This idea allows one to understand more fully why Nonconformist photography was defined by the blurring of boundaries between

mediums, between the documentary and the artistic, between the self and the Other. Rather than representing a return to the Avant-garde, Nonconformist photography emerged from the interrogation, suspicion, and deconstruction of both Stalinist Socialist Realism and the Imperial Russian and Soviet Avant-garde.

**Case Study: Boris Mikhailov's *Viscidity***

With this renewed framework concerning post-Stalinist photography, I now turn to Boris Mikhailov, whose work provides an ideal case study for reinterrogating Nonconformist photography, not least because he is widely considered the first unofficial Soviet photographer. More importantly, Mikhailov's work embodies the post-Stalinist production of discontinuities, where a multiplicity of positions, realities, and bodies coexist, not simply reduced to a mere resistance against the dominant. As Elena Petrovskaya describes, unlike the now "closed book" of Sots-art, Mikhailov, though adjacent to these artists (even later renaming part of a series *Sots-Art*), has a "much more blurred object," one not "directed unequivocally against ideology… [but instead] connected with human manifestations," with life (Petrovskaya, 2012). His analysis of the inner self lays bare the paradox of everyday Soviet life and the discrepancy between the official and the lived, yet this is all done from the locus of the in-between. Groys (2000) notes that Mikhailov was one of those who called "this very chasm into question and observe[d] the Soviet cultural context in its entirety with an enquiring gaze, neutral and analytic, quiet alien to it" (p. 75). However, I argue that Mikhailov's work is actually predicated on the understanding that the removal of oneself is not possible.

Mikhailov interrogates multiple boundaries: between photography and other artistic mediums, the inner and outer self of the new Soviet collective, and his own role as an observer and participant in this new landscape. This is not done simply as one outside the system looking in but as one taking part from afar. Instead of embracing the Avant-garde and then Stalinist drive to be both figuratively and literally an "engineer of the human soul," Mikhailov, an engineer by education and a new representative of the artist-creator-engineer, turns away from this tradition. He becomes

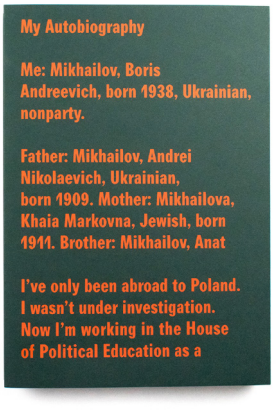
an engineer-after-the-fact who must poke and prod within to better understand the faulty machine of which he is a part. Within this context, it is possible to push against the pervasive descriptions of Mikhailov's work as ironic and cynical with "no reformatory goal," something defined as "a destructive and mocking act" (Zanot, 2015, p. 3). Instead, Mikhailov dissects *Homo Soveticus* not as a self-superior anthropologist but as one wishing to discover what is inside himself as well. Thus, while irony plays a significant role in his work, it is a playful irony directed as much at the Soviet mass and officialdom as at himself. Through such an approach to Mikhailov's photographic practice, we develop a more nuanced portrait of the nature and evolution of Nonconformist photography while demonstrating how our reassessed problematics can illuminate the complexities of Mikhailov's oeuvre. By rejecting broad oversimplifications of photography's status, artificial delineations between artistic practices, and the bracketing of the Stalinist period that creates a false lineage between the Avant-garde and their supposed "direct heirs," our understanding of Mikhailov's work takes on a sharper outline and opens up new avenues of inquiry regarding the post-Stalinist crisis of self.

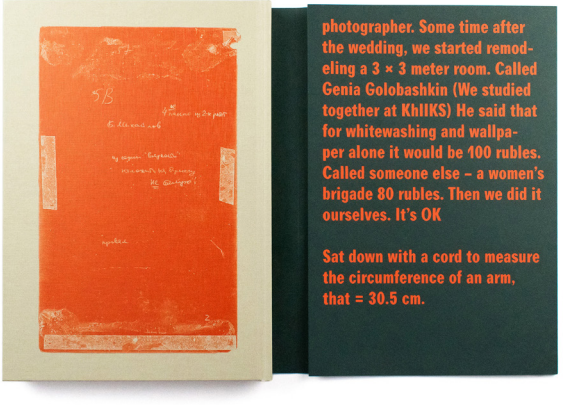
The following case study centers on one of Mikhailov's most peripherally treated series, *Viscidity* (1982), published for the first time in a limited run in 2020. To better contextualize Viscidity, it will be put into conversation with several of Mikhailov's earlier series: *Red* (1968-1975), *Superimpositions* (late 1960s-70s), *Luriki* (1971-1985), and *Sots-Art* (1975-1985). By examining these frequently cited examples of Mikhailov's supposed cynicism and biting irony, it is possible to reform one's approach to his early Soviet series and transpose this approach to a series situated, like the photographer himself, in an in-between state. With a dispensation of the "heroic" figure of the anti-Soviet Nonconformist or the pure, removed outsider critiquing what their camera registers, what comes to the fore is the inherent search for the splintered self both within and outside the post-Stalinist system.

But why examine *Viscidity*? A precursor to Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation* (1984), the series serves as a liminal space, tying together past, present, and future preoccupations, even introducing what will become some of the foundational pillars of his later work.

As far as the author can ascertain, this article is the first in-depth examination of the series, and, as such, there exists the chance to chart new paths and complicate the discourse surrounding Mikhailov's work. Since much of the photographer's work centers on the physical, corporeal, and tactile, it seems fitting to begin with the publication of *Viscidity* in its physical form.

Once removed from its decorative outer casing, the book's jacket immediately arrests the viewer's attention with the pronouncement, "My Autobiography," in English on one side and Russian on the other, with the texts filling the inside and outside of the jacket (Fig. 1 and 2).




*Figures 1, 2. Details of Viscidity book jacket. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

This "autobiography" combines two texts from the series' most recognizable works. Although boldly displayed on the book's cover, within the series itself, the two photo-texts are only to be found somewhere in the middle, tucked away. Such a disconnect is underscored by the fact that there even exists a variability from collection to collection of this "autobiography" and its accompanying images, as will later be seen.

*Viscidity* is situated in the middle of Mikhailov's three photobook-texts, preceded by *Horizontal Pictures and Vertical Calendars* (1978/1980) and followed by *Unfinished Dissertation*. In the series' essay "I was walking through a field," Mikhailov describes the three books as such: "At first the texts tautologically repeated what was

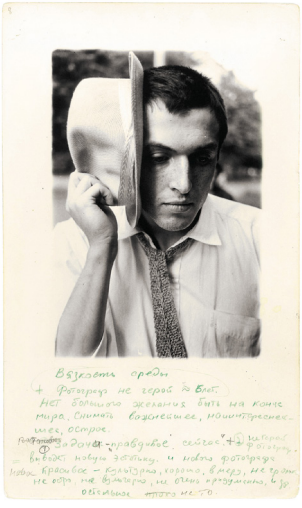


*Figure 3. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

visible in the image, as though they were simply drawing attention to the photograph (the first book), gradually the texts changed and became more poetic and deeper (the second book) … and then I added quotations in addition to my own reflections on photography" (Mikhailov, 2020) . Coinciding with Brezhnev's death, an event referenced in one of the series' photo-texts, *Viscidity* emerges during what Mikhailov (2020)[12] describes as "a peaceful, quiet, fearless, and dull life, a time of political stagnation." In this moment of stagnation, Mikhailov undergoes an internal transition that radically alters his relationship to the subject of his work:

> The book 'Viscidity' began with the announcement, 'I got married and I want to take beautiful pictures." Yes, I want to take beautiful pictures! But my pathetic urge to search for ideal beauty, an infantilism, is gradually dying down, as it comes into conflict with life around me: ...a wall...a noticeboard...an error...a dull portrait of a contemporary...a dull genre scene...a dull landscape...and even the policeman was surprised-'well, what's beautiful around here(?)'-confirming the fact that there ISN'T anything beautiful here. But there is unchanging ordinariness and timelessness. (Mikhailov, 2020)

On the surface, there is indeed often a feeling of nothingness, a pervasive monotony, where his photos are nothing new and neither are the texts, yet this is wholly deliberate, for "no one wants anything like that [the beautiful]" (Mikhailov, 2020). Gone is the moment of exploring Otherness with the bright and garish. Now is the moment to turn one's gaze inward without the mediation of the Other as the frame. For Mikhailov (2020), this moment of unchanging "ordinariness and timelessness" could only be approached with "lousy photographs" and "lousy texts".

[12] All quotes from Viscidity are without page number.

Similar to the later *Unfinished Dissertation,* there is a theoretical turn for Mikhailov towards both the external-as-impression and internal guiding forces in this new era of photography and of being. Near the beginning of the series, we see in the writing around a section of portraits what Mikhailov deems "new photography": the average, where the photographer is no longer a hero and the task at hand is to portray "the truthful thing now," all of this "introducing a new aesthetic and a new photographer" (Mikhailov, 2020). He expands upon this "new photography" in the concluding essay, describing a critical moment when a new equation begins to guide his approach: .

> I was walking through a field. I didn't have a camera with me. Then suddenly the shadow from an airplane passing overhead fell over me. I went home, grabbed a camera and photographed that location, and then under the photograph, which showed only grass and sky, I noted: 'An airplane cast a shadow on me here.'

The dialectical tension between presence and absence, "truth" and "untruth," is epitomized by a new equation—"SUM TOTAL = PHOTO + TEXT"—that serves as a salient reminder of the epistemic unmooring of post-Stalinist Soviet existence. This new formulation—the "SUM TOTAL"—serves as a physical manifestation of this new state of the in-between.

While existing more fleetingly, other conceptual exploration is present, such as the few instances of collage. From Suprematist shapes and a three-ruble note


*Figure 4. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes, collage. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

*Figure 5. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

*Figure 6. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Nalozhenia (Superimpositions), late 1970s. Chromogenic print on paper. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, object #D16063. Photo by Jack Abraham*

to cut-outs of magazines in the shape of basketball players, space is invaded, made absurd; all of this is in the service of a "new beauty." This aesthetic turn is particularly evident in one of the series' rare collages (Fig. 4), where Mikhailov writes: "For the new beauty, it's dangerous to say that these are boats, the entrance to a wharf, and so forth… And if this wasn't there, there might be a lot to consider, the grass and the curb… But since it's boring to look at anyways, I stuck on a basketball player facing backward." What does this new idea of aesthetics have to do with rethinking Mikhailov's relationship with his work, and how can we situate it within the frame of the artist-engineer-as-(self)-explorer? A reconsideration such as this can only be accomplished by analyzing the throughlines of Mikhailov's larger project, specifically how he complicates the author-subject relationship and the "compromising" and revelatory intervention: one on the physical surface of the photograph and the other around it.

Throughout *Viscidity,* hints of Mikhailov's past work come to the fore: just a few pages before the two-part autobiography, the

viewer is met with the inscription "our girls," followed by a portrait of a woman in black and white, naked with a floral pattern projected on her body (Fig. 5). If only drowned in bright colors, this piece could easily be mistaken for work from Mikhailov's earlier series Superimpositions (see Fig. 6). This work signals a monumental change: the layering of multiple realities, as in *Superimpositions*, and the use of color as a driving force, as in *Luriki, Sots-Ar*t, or , are subsumed by the aesthetics of this "new beauty."

**Complications of Authorship and the Subject**

Mikhailov's preoccupation with interrogating this new Soviet reality, or realities, was present from the outset of his artistic career. *Red* demonstrates this early approach, as Mikhailov probes the new Soviet self while situating himself both within and without the subject's space (see Fig. 7). Here, we find the photographer's search for the average person is complicated by his own position within the system. *Superimpositions* extends this investigation to more personal subjects, pursuing the liminal within oneself. Through his random, playful, and often ironic approach to the superimposed images, Mikhailov interrogates both the body and the concept of the Soviet past, present, and future.

In *Luriki*, his theoretical practice and then-working conditions overlap. This series, founded on Mikhailov's appropriation and re-photographing of family albums with a characteristic style of amateur, anonymous photographs, can be seen as a multivalent system of exploration: an attempt to remove oneself as self-object of one's own gaze, a commentary on the practice of the *lurik*, a referenc e to the often painterly nature of Stalinist photography, and, most importantly, an injection of the physical, one's corporeality into the space of the anonymous, unknown. Thus, while the *Luriki* series is often portrayed as a mocking commentary on Soviet culture, due in particular to the garishness of the colors, there is far more beneath the surface.

In *Viscidity*, with Mikhailov's eschewing of the hero, we see the continuation of the movement from the artistic to the anonymous. While in *Unfinished Dissertation*, there is no longer a need for a signature when in "a discussion with oneself," the apt subtitle of the series, in *Viscidity*, more than a third bear this mark of authorship.

*Figure 7. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Red, 1960s-1970s. Color photograph on paper. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, o bject #2000.1134. Photo by Peter Jacobs*

The unsigned works seem to act as a dual commentary on Stalinist photo brigade methods, purposefully obfuscating the creator and commenting on the anonymity inherent within the family album. The presence of the signature is sporadic: we find "B. Mikhailov" on the opening title card of the series, followed by its absence, until it is found again under several portraits. Other signatures are seemingly randomly interspersed throughout. As the photo-book continues, there are even moments when the signature blends in with the color and position of the rest of Mikhailov's scribbled text; sometimes, the first initial disappears, and, in one instance, the translated portion of the book omits the signature entirely.

Tellingly, only two photos of Mikhailov himself are signed, neither being his "autobiography," as one might expect. Instead, we find a portrait with his cat under the word "belonging" and another, still alongside his cat, where the photographer poses seductively. The second portrait is accompanied by a note describing how a police officer requested Mikhailov print this "new classic[ism]," as the officer had never seen anything like it in *Sovetskoe foto* before. The destabilization of authorship extends beyond the printed series. Comparing the published version of the unsigned autobiography with that in the Zimmerli Museum's collection reveals variations that disrupt both the internal narrative and the space of the photograph itself (see Fig. 8, 9).

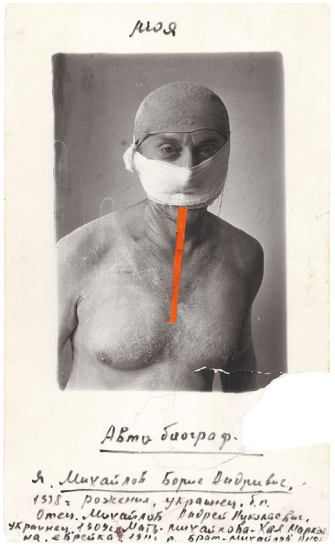



*Figure 8. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled (My Autobiography), from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

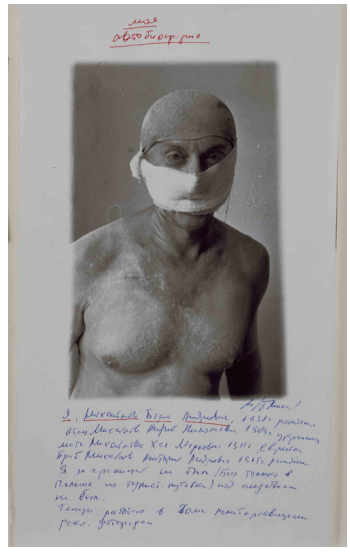



*Figure 9. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled (My Autobiography), from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, object #2001.1473. Photo by Jack Abraham*

The presence of a red strip of paper, the bifurcation o f "my" and "autobiography" in one and not the other, the change in writing utensil, and even different information included in the text all signal the instability of even the most personal, the self-authored self-history. By no longer focusing on the mass Soviet body, Mikhailov takes a Benjaminian turn by interrogating the self in the age of mechanical reproduction. Here is Mikhailov, the new artist-engineer-as-(self)-explorer.

**From Visible Intervention to a Retreat Inward**

In Mikhailov's early work, there is an exploration of the legacy left by the previous decades of Stalinist photography in his practice. In both *Luriki* and *Sots-Art*, as well as in several later cycles, Mikhailov's hand-colored photographs not only reference the history of pictorialism and possibly even its resurgence in the Baltics during the 1970s, but also the Soviet tradition of retouching photographs, something heightened by his usage of both found images and photographs he took personally. Using bright, assaulting colors,

Mikhailov breaks down the meaning of the images by playing with their status as document, a part of photography he knew well. Yet, it is not only the deconstruction of "authoritative discourse" [13] or deciphering of codes that drives much of his early work .

There is an exploration of one's attempt to present themselves in a way that conforms with their internal conception of who they are, how Soviet citizens "style their self-display," highlighting the discrepancy between the internal and external (Groys, 2000, p. 76). Groys (2015) argues that in Mikahilov's later work, if there is any embarrassment-for-the-other, it is really an embarrassment-for-oneself: there is an unsettling as the viewer too has been caught. A similar dynamic appears within Mikhailov's early work, which is so dependent upon the disconnect between the internal and external: here, the photographer-subject has been caught. His analysis of the internal unveils the paradox within everyday Soviet people, yet the underscoring of a collective failure is done with a special kind of care, "without the slightest trace of *schadenfreude*" (Groys, 2000, p. 77).

There is an exploration of one's attempt to present themselves in a way that conforms to their internal conception of who they are, how Soviet citizens "style their self-display," highlighting the discrepancy between the internal and external (Groys, 2000, p. 76). Groys (2015) argues that in Mikhailov's later work, if there is any embarrassment-for-the-other, it is really an embarrassment-for-oneself: there is an unsettling as the viewer, too, has been caught. A similar dynamic appears within Mikhailov's early work, which is so dependent upon the disconnect between the internal and external: here, the photographer-subject has been caught. His analysis of the internal unveils the paradox within everyday Soviet people, yet the underscoring of a collective failure is done with a special kind of care, "without the slightest trace of *schadenfreude*" (Groys, 2000, p. 77).

[13] Here, I follow Yurchak's usage of "authoritative discourse" to emphasize that "during late socialism, the newly normalized Soviet ideological discourse no longer functioned at the level of meaning as a kind of ideology in the usual sense of the word" (Yurchak, 2006, p. 15).

*Figure 10. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Sots-Art, 1975-1985. Gelatin silver print hand-colored with aniline dyes on paper. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, object #2000.1132. Photo by Peter Jacobs*

The production of new discontinuities in the late Soviet period, as Yurchak (2006) argues, was "neither necessarily supportive of nor necessarily opposed to the values and ethics of socialism"; this notion is precisely why the production of the new, this creative process, "should not be reduced to resistance against dominant norms and rules" (p. 286). Through this lens, both the photographer and the subject take on a role that is no longer binary, unsettling simplistic notions of the disruptive, renegade Nonconformist and the unwittingly repressed Soviet citizen. Each participates in the production of discontinuities and the process of creating oneself.

Understanding the complexity of Mikhailov's work requires the rejection of binary socialism, a system conjured through "underlying assumption[s] that socialism was based on a complex web of immoralities" (Yurchak, 2006, pp. 5-8). These discontinuities emerge clearly in work from *Sots-Art* (Fig. 12), where Mikhailov's

*Figure 11. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Luriki, undated. Gelatin silver print with aniline dyes. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, object #2000.147. Photo by Jack Abraham*

childlike, haphazard scribbles with a felt-tip pen interact with the figure of a man standing before a playground tank. Upon examining the text, however, the playful picture takes on a different hue. The text written by Mikhailov is, in fact, the song *Marsh sovetskikh tankistov* (March of Soviet Tankmen) from the 1939 film *Traktoristy* (Tractor Drivers). The song, written in 1938, and the film were edited during Khrushchev's Thaw, removing lines referencing Stalin sending tankmen off to war. Mikhailov's play here is not just surface-level ironic mockery but instead reveals the emptiness of ideological content that still exists, ever-present.

The half-scratching out of the figure evokes the scratched-out faces in official portraits from the Stalinist era, yet even this is complicated by the figure staring down the barrel of a jungle-gym tank's gun—menacing and at the same time playful, hollow. The transparent nature of the tank highlights the forceful presence of (dis)continuities carried over from the Stalinist era and how they continue to both haunt and define this new reality of the late Soviet period. To move beyond simplistic appraisals of Mikhailov's work, one must reevaluate contemporary, visceral reactions to elements such as the color red, Soviet parades, *Homo Soveticus*, and the naked

form through this binary-rejecting lens. Instead of dismissing the photographs from *Red* and *Luriki* or the similarly hand-colored photos with aniline dyes in *Sots-Art* as mere ironic side-glances or judgments, we can approach them not only as a play on the changing state of the medium itself but also as a gaze upon the state of the new Soviet reality and new Soviet individual.

In *Viscidity*, Mikhailov intervenes less overtly with the photograph, either in terms of its physical nature, as in *Superimpositions*, *Luriki*, and *Sots-Art*, or careful curation, as in *Red* and *Luriki*. While there is a small selection of hand-painted photographs like those in *Sots-Art* or *Luriki*, they are more withdrawn: colors appear only as accents. All photographs in the series are black and white, with the majority of color found *around* the photograph, in the margins, whether written in pen, crayon, or colored pencil. Unlike the contemporaneous piece in Figure 12, writing is separated from the photographic image itself, overlapping only to accent writing already present on the negative. Though subtle, the viewer's eyes are often tricked, seeing the hue of the pencil or crayon transposed onto the black-and-white photo itself.

In Figure 13, a photograph captioned in part as "the last half-exposed photo on the roll, which was exposed" and "a car standing at the gates was photographed here," there is something singular found when compared to the rest of the series. Only half of the photograph is properly exposed, showing the top half of the gate and car, and yet as it fades into the white of the paper, the viewer is confronted by Mikhailov's crude pencil sketch of the would-be bumper, wheel well, and tire. From the extended, hand-drawn black

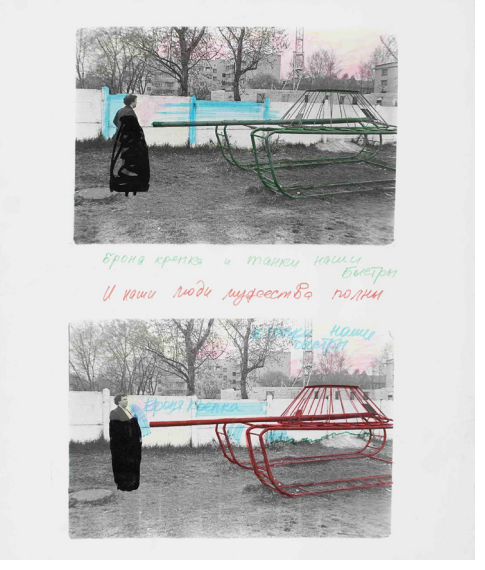


*Figure 12. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled (Green Tank and Red Tank), from the series Sots-Art, 1981. Photograph and felt-tip pen on paper. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Dodge Collection, object #D12980. Photo by Peter Jacobs*

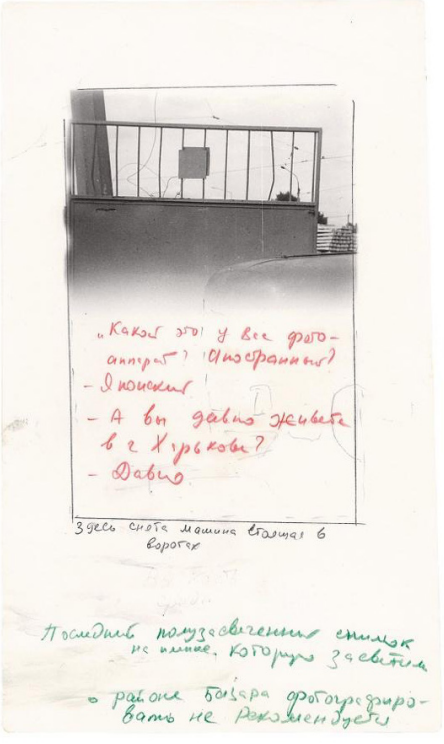



*Figure 13. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

border, the viewer surmises that this is a part of the photograph; it extends beyond the properly exposed into a white-spaced vacuum. Within this constructed space, Mikhailov transcribes a conversation likely with the policeman he refers to in the concluding essay: "A roll of film, exposed to light by a policeman at an outdoor market because I was taking photos there, tells you that poor quality photography is more important to understanding life in this country than a well-printed photo is." With a necessary and deliberate incompleteness, Mikhailov blurs the boundaries between the inner self and the external, between the objective and subjective, between documentation and artistic form, reality and "unreality."

While color abounds in much of Mikhailov's earlier work, in *Viscidity*, we find a collapsing of multiple realities into one defined by monochrome and slight accents. There is a movement towards the concrete, "the truthful thing now," which is no longer bright with ideological overtones but is seen through small traces of color, highlighting the material: metal on hats, cranes, stones, wires, guide rails. Here, a more introspective take on the interplay of the painterly and photographic emerges. However, the exploration of the in-between and color has not entirely faded, as seen in the series' final entry. Unlike the brighter hues of *Sots-Art* and *Luriki*, this flooding of color, while garish, is dark to the point of near illegibility (see Fig. 15). Oversaturated, this final piece removes the subject as such, replacing it with a three-ruble note.

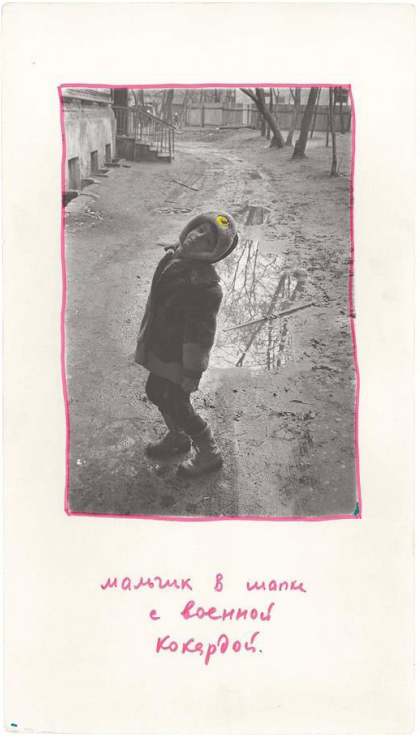



*Figure 14. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

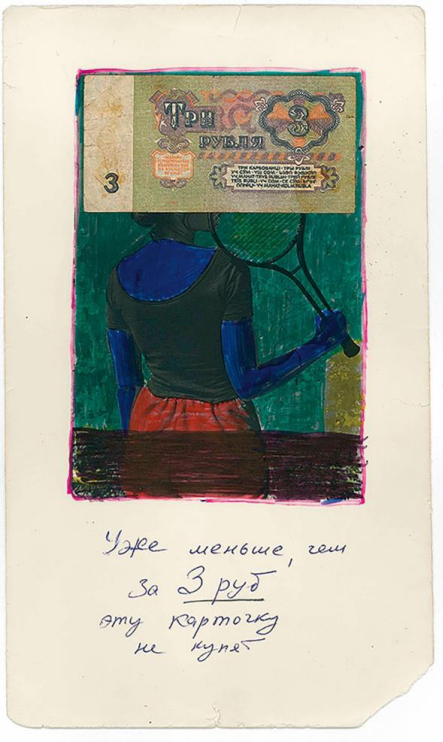



*Figure 15. Boris Mikhailov. Untitled, from the series Viscidity, 1982. Sepia toned photograph with handwritten notes, collage. Courtesy of PPP Editions and the artist. Copyright (1982) by Boris Mikhailov*

Mikhailov's gaze—at once loving and inviting yet alienating and jarring—turns to the personal, one's surroundings removed from ideology-as-individual-making. It is Mikhailov as artist-engineer-as-(self)-explorer, interrogating the Stalinist past and splintered present, blurring the line between author and subject, art and non-art, who reveals the complexity and nuances of both the post-Stalinist period and Nonconformist photography itself. His approach thus lays bare not only the varied origins of post-Stalinist photography but also the liminal status of the splintered Soviet self.

## Conclusion

Writing almost 30 years after Borofsky, Daria Panaiotti, curator of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, examines photography's contemporary status in Russia. She emphasizes how institutional resistance continues to marginalize the medium, something "aggravated by Russian museums' general reluctance to engage with the medium" (pp. 673-674). As Panaiotti observes, even now, "photography is rarely included in permanent expositions and 'encyclopedic' museum collections" (p. 674). Compounding these entrenched views is the prevalence of institutional resistance extending far beyond national borders: The Royal Academy in London did not mount its first photography exhibition until 1989, "150 years after Fox Talbot's announcement of 'photogenic drawing,'" while the Tate's first major show only occurred in 2003 (Wells, 2015, p. 292). In this context, Panaiotti's observation that "Russian art historians with a background in curating and/or traditional art history often look at photography with disdain, as if there were nothing to say about it except for debunking its claims to truth" (p. 674) is far from surprising.

Yet within certain spaces, such as the After (post-) Photography Conference, there is hope [14]. In these communities, there exists a clear rejection of a single static photography, instead advocating for "many *photographies* and *photographic cultures*" and embracing a "nomadic view of photography's identity through history" (Panaiotti, 2022, p. 674). However, this approach remains far from the norm: "Scholarship… is still relatively limited, in both its scope and approach," with recent surveys offering "mainly linear successions of authors, with occasional paragraphs on social history and almost no attempt at conceptualization," often resorting to binaries of "truth/lie, official/counterculture, oppression/resistance, person/state" (Panaiotti, 2022, p. 674). While this trend persists, recent years have seen important breaks from this pattern, exemplified by works founded on the reconsideration of the history of soviet photography, such as Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Schevchenko's *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos, Denis Skopin's*

[14] The author has participated in this conference and can attest to the incredible array of boundary-pushing work presented by participants.

*Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia: Defacing the Enemy*, and Margarita Matulyté's *Creating Altreality: The Sovietization of Lithuanian Photography*.

As these recent works demonstrate, embracing more nuanced frameworks and moving beyond entrenched binaries is essential for the field's development and continued evolution. With such an approach in mind, this article thus reconsidered three foundational problematics in the discourse surrounding post-Soviet photography: the simplification of the state of photography after Stalin, the confusion surrounding photography's status as art, and the bracketing of the Stalinist period. Moreover, through the case study of Boris Mikhailov's work, we see how such reconsideration affords new avenues through which to approach post-Stalinist photographic practice and the broader, complex realities of late-Soviet visual culture.

## REFERENCES


Borofsky, A. (1994). Conceptual photography in the Russian Museum. *Art Journal*, *53(2),* 40-42.

Bowlt, J. (1998). The Soviet Nonconformists and the legacy of the Russian avant-garde. In E. Bowlt, D. B. Kuspit, & J. E. Bowit, *Forbidden art: The post-war Russian avant-garde* (pp. 49-80). D.A.P.

Degot, K. (2004). The copy is the crime. In D. Neumaier (Ed.), *Beyond memory: Soviet Nonconformist photography and photo-related works of art* (pp. 103-117). Rutgers University Press.

Egbert, D. D. (1967). The idea of 'avant-garde' in art and politics. *The American Historical Review, 73(2)*, 339-366.

Groys, B. (1992). *The total art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, aesthetic dictatorship, and beyond*. Princeton University Press.

Groys, B. (2000). The eroticism of imperfection. In *Boris Mikhailov. The Hasselblad Award 2000* (pp. 2-23). Scalo Publishers, Hasselblad center.

Groys, B. (2004). Russian photography in the textual context. In D. Neumaier (Ed.), *Beyond memory: Soviet Nonconformist photography and photo-related works of art* (pp. 119-129). Rutgers University Press.

Groys, B. (2015). *Boris Mikhailov* (A. Aslanyan, Trans.). Ad Marginem Press. (In Russian)

In honor of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU. (1961). *Sovetskoe Foto*, 10, 22. (In Russian)

Kizevalter, G. (2018). *Time of hopes, time of illusions. Problems of the history of Soviet unofficial art. 1950-1960s: Articles and materials*. NLO. (In Russian)

Mikhailov, B. (2020). *Viscidity*. PPP Editions.

Morozov, S. A. (1958). *Soviet Art Photography*. Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo". (In Russian)

Panaiotti, D. (2022). Studying and exhibiting photography in Russia. *Russian Review*, *81(4)*, 673-676.

Petrovskaya, E. (2012). Materiality and memory in photography: B. Mikhailov's new documentality. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, *117(5)*. https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/117_nlo_5_2012/article/18933/. (In Russian)

*Rebellious: Russian Non-Conformist Art from an Important European Collection Online at Bonhams*. (2020, September 3). Russian Art + Culture. https://www.russianartandculture.com/rebellious-russian-non-conformist-art-from-an-important-european-collection-online-at-bonhams/

Reid, S. E. (1994). Photography in the Thaw. *Art Journal*, *53(2)*, 33-39.

Reid, S. E. (2005). In the name of the people: The manege affair revisited. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, *6(4)*, 673-716.

Satiukov, P. (1961). Soviet photojournalist. *Sovetskoe foto*, 1, 1-3. (In Russian)

Sjeklocha, P., & Mead, I. (1967). *Unofficial art of the Soviet Union*. University of California Press.

The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Artists. (1957). *Iskusstvo*, 3, 7-35.

Tupitsyn, M. (1994). Against the camera, for the photographic archive. *Art Journal*, *53(2)*, 58-62.

Wells, L. (2015). *Photography: A critical introduction*. Routledge.

Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation*. Princeton University Press.

Zanot, F. (2015). The Scorpion and the Coca-Cola: An autopsy of homo soveticus. In the Supplement to *Boris Mikhailov: Diary*. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig.

22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. (1962). [verbatim record]. Volume III. Gospolizdat. (In Russian)