THE CITY: AFTER AND DOUBLE AFTER

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In 1931, the magazine USSR in Construction, by then in its second year of production, published an issue dedicated to Moscow, the capital of the new union of Soviet republics. The magazine's title page announced that the city had been transformed from "the 'cotton' Moscow of the past" to what it called "the metal Moscow." A photomontage by German political artist John Heartfield showed Lenin looming over the city's urban landscape and declaring it, with his dictating hand, the springboard of a social utopia. With this image Heartfield, who came to Moscow in 1931 and plunged into the activities of the Soviet post-abstract avant-garde, affirmed the redefinition and relocation of the practice of the international radical aesthetic.

A similar attitude can be detected in Aleksandr Rodchenko's 1925 correspondence with his colleague and wife Varvara Stepanova, at the time of his visit to Paris. He wrote, from the city which had launched the formal innovations so essential to his formation as a nonobjective painter: "Advertising in Paris is very weak, but in Berlin there are good things. I look a lot, I see a lot, I learn and love Moscow even more." Rodchenko's travels to Berlin and Paris, although accompanied by internationalist engagements, were oriented toward making a distinction between the European capitals based on "national" socio-cultural concerns. The belief that Paris was the indisputable locus of avant-garde production was shaken, and Soviet radicals like Rodchenko and a small fraction of Western leftist artists and intellectuals (Heartfield and Walter Benjamin among them), looked toward Moscow as the new possible cultural epicenter. It was in Moscow that the social utopia was being forecast and the status of avant-garde artists had been upgraded from marginal to that of a ruling force in major schools, museums, architectural projects, and mass media.

Following this context, the Paris of 1925 was an architecturally and culturally “archaic" city for Rodchenko, and it did not provide suitable subject matter for his newly acquired camera. When he returned to Moscow with it, he feverishly photographed the city, producing his famous photographs of the building on Miasnitskaia street, a location that carried the weight of Rodchenko's identity as he both lived and worked there. The Building on Miasnitskaia series was followed by a bird's eye view of the Museum of the Revolution, thus further connecting Rodchenko's photographic activities with the specificity of the country's political reality.

In his post-Paris photographs, Rodchenko was committed to showing Moscow as the epicenter of modernity in respect to both city planning and everyday life He photographed the newest Constructivist buildings, workers' clubs, gigantic parks, apartment buildings, factories with advanced machinery, and mass kitchens. His image of urban men and women as physically fit enthusiastic workers, politically conscious citizens, and intelligent relaxers is optimistic. It demonstrates an expanse of collective energy without alienation In their comprehensive survey of a variety of city locations and everyday routines, Rodchenko's photos convey a sophisticated modern life determined by a specific time and place. He recorded the physiognomy of a city which no longer exists; Moscow has been transformed several times since then.

Intensely photographing the city throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, in 1932 Rodchenko was asked to contribute his images into a book "Two Moscows," as it was before and after the Revolution. His photos compiled as the representation of the “New Moscow" persuasively illustrate that in 1932 the city was in a festive mood. Thefirst Five-Year Plan was coming to an end a year ahead of schedule. Stalin took credit

for the new Moscow which had been undergoing transformation throughout the 1920s. According to the Russian architectural historian Selim 0. Khan-Magomedov, an outline for the replanning and extension of Moscow had been prepared by 1919. "Its main emphasis was on the provision of open green spaces for a healthier environment, a reduction of population density in the central areas of the city through the construction of garden villages on the outskirts..." Various architectural groups competed within the framework of the "New Moscow" general reconstruction plan. These groups can be separated into the "Disurbanists" and the "Urbanists."

Because of the first Five-Year Plan, there was limited availability of appropriate construction materials. This meant that the ambitious, complex, and often futuristic projects of the "Urbanists" remained on paper. The "Disurbanists" "believed that Moscow was a dying city" and they dreamt of "'utopian' schemes for creating a new spatial world of work and residence." Unlike the "Urbanists" who had difficulty with the realization of their grandiose buildings, the "Disurbanists," "in the brief era of their prominence (ca. 1928-1932), ... believed in and worked for the immediate and complete realization of their designs." As a result, the Constructivist buildings (both residential and public), which we see in Rodchenko's work, can be classified as functional and humane. The city planning exemplified by the new ambitious parks, botanical gardens (with exotic plants), and wide green boulevards emphasized "air, drenching sunshine, and greenery." Demonstrating a similar concern for the environment, Rodchenko applauded cars for being efficient transportation tools, but glorified trams as an alternative to car pollution and traffic jams.

Several photos from the "New Moscow" series publicize the workers' dwellings that were built as a reaction to a failed idea to build communal housing projects in old

buildings and apartments nationalized by the government, In these spaces provided by old-fashioned architecture, communal ways of life developed very slowly. This inspired the belief that it could only be achieved in specially designed dwellings. The housing complex built in 1930 on Novinskii boulevard by Moisei Ginsburg and Ignatii Milinis (as a residence for the employees of Narkomfin), and the buildings on Shabolovka street built in 1930 by an Asnova team, are among the most ambitious and successful dwelling complexes of the first Five-Year Plan period. Rodchenko depicted a building on Shabolovka from inside the courtyard with a limited view that reveals its moderate height, and a close-up that provides a detailed picture of entrances, balconies, and other architectural details. "The Ginsburg" building on Novinskii boulevard was more generously recorded with a combination of exterior and interior views. A tilted photo with a view of the facade, advertises the building's pronounced horizontal shape, structural elevations, and abundance of windows. In another example, Rodchenko takes us into the interior of the apartment building where we are confronted with a female resident drinking tea at a dinner table. The woman, whose back is to the viewer, is captured alone, although the display of two extra table settings, in addition to her own, suggests that the living arrangement is communal. Rodchenko concluded his representation of "the Ginsburg building" with a close-up of utility pipes, a mundane but specific detail that illuminates the building's overall modernity.

Other Soviet models for workers' joint activities were factory or mass kitchens and workers' clubs. As in the case of communal living spaces, the first factory kitchens were situated in existing buildings. In the official press these kitchens were identified as vehicles to "free women from primuses and stoves and allow them to be involved in

production and public offices." Rodchenko devoted four interior and exterior shots to a factory kitchen. The shots of the cooking space grasped the busy chefs as well as the size of the cauldrons and attested to the vastness of the population that benefited from this service. The photo of the factory kitchen's street sign was based on Rodchenko's earlier method of constructing his reportage as an anti-narrative achieved through reductive views and seemingly disconnected details of both buildings and people. He retreated from this visual obliteration into another photo that offered a view of the factory kitchen's building and its environs in a legible and complete form.

As a prime example of the Soviet architectural format for workers' educational, cultural, and recreational activities, Rodchenko chose the Rusakov club built by Konstantin Mel'nikov in 1929. An exterior shot attends to the building's clearly innovative architecture by emphasizing the facade's "trumpet-like shape with three projecting brackets". As a sample of the club's interior, we have a photograph of its spacious auditorium which is shot from above on the diagonal. Intended for large audiences, the auditorium is shown empty in an attempt to arouse the viewer's appreciation of its grand spatial scale and its architectural detail. The photograph, which succeeds this view of the auditorium, captures a reading room in the Lenin Library also from above. This image however, is tilted to the left in order to counteract the diagonal movement of the auditorium shot which oscillates to the right. In further contrast to the image of the Rusakov auditorium, the library is full of readers which propagandizes the wide literacy rate in the Soviet state.

As I pointed out earlier, in the “New Moscow," Rodchenko documented images of the Soviet "after," to contrast with the oppressive "before" images of pre-

Revolutionary Russia. To obtain his images, he plunged into the street activities of Moscow but he stayed away from direct contact with the people and things he caught in his lens, believing he was connected to them by the higher force of socialist unification. Sixty years later, a contemporary photographer Boris Mikhailov, attests to a similar identification with post-Stalin society by remarking, "In my work, I identify with the period and the process our country is going through." To gather visual material for his major project from the Brezhnev era, called Unfinished Dissertation, Mikhailov revisited a Soviet city, in his case not the capital but provincial Kharkov, and returned with photos that can be identified as images of the "double after.' These are post-utopian with respect to the documentary photographs of the 1920s and early 1930s, and post-mythographic vis a vis the staged images of subsequent decades.

Evaluating generally his aims, Mikhailov notes that "As a photographer endowed with unofficial authority, I, in some way, track down spy, sneak…Most important is to define after whom." Unfinished Dissertation shows that Mikhailov's response to his own query was to "spy," unselectively. In this way he engaged in an activity which may paradoxically be viewed as an intrusion parall to the government's. Clearly he did not "spy," in order to collect an archive of potentially damaging images to be used as the basis for effective social control. Rather, Mikhailov's maneuvering through his native dismal Kharkov and operating his small camera without permission or warning was an attempt to overcome a fear or stammering, shared by most members of the alternative artistic milieu, that occurred each time he encountered and responded daily to Soviet occurrences.

Mikhailov's handwritten autobiography above and below these two self portraits

is short and yet noteworthy text. After giving his name, date of birth, and nationality, the photographer makes sure we know that he is not a party member. Although he states his nationality as Ukrainian after his father, he tells us that his mother, two years her husband's junior, is Jewish. Mikhailov has a sibling. Before perestroika he left the USSR only once for a trip to Poland, a country in the Eastern bloc. Officially employed as photographer in the House of Political Education, Mikhailov cleaned the floors. The rest of the autobiography is devoted to his "living conditions," in which he describes problems common to all Soviet citizens. We learn that he lived in a nine square meter room in a communal apartment and after getting married he attempted to renovate his tiny space. Failing to find help (from friends and professionals) the newly-weds fixed up the room on their own. The autobiography concludes with Mikhailov's favorite phrase, “it is normal," as a rule said with a laugh.

Accepting Soviet living inadequacies as "normal" everyday occurrences, and thus repudiating signs of resistance or critique constitutes the essence of Mikhailov's urban images. This accustomed submission to a given reality creates a unique relationship between Mikhailov as an observer and the people and things he photographs. In this, his agenda is distinctly different from that of his Western colleagues. Some of them use the camera to show their identity by documenting their environment given that they are committed to particular segment of society. Others, following a more traditional journalistic path encounter trouble and danger in order to stir the world's conscience by recording acts of cruelty and social injustice, often happening far from home. Yet other photographers construct their images with a critical distance and urge further dialogue on less apparent social ills.

Coming from a totalitarian environment, Mikhailov had no choice but to operate within its boundaries. In other words, unlike Western photographers, he had no opportunity to segment his reality. This is comparable to living in a communal apartment (where you are stuck with your neighbors whom you meet everyday in the kitchen space) as opposed to living with roommates (where you have the option to choose or change them). Mikhailov saw no point in providing an explicit critique of Soviet way of living, either through mocking it or through unmasking its endless vices. Instead, his goal was to preserve Soviet life's sense of totality, but without its layer of systematically sustained external joy. This construct of "totality from below" rather than "from above" was achieved through Mikhailov's intrinsic rather than participatory identification with all Soviet inhabitants and all Soviet routine. The roots for this kind of identification or rather slipanie (sticking) with the object of photography were, as I mentioned established by Rodchenko and other early Soviet photographers.

According to Mikhailov, Unfinished Dissertation was conceived when he lost interest in the Western cultural production reaching the Soviet Union at the time. Instead, he began groping for local subject matter and in the process committed to transgress the "safe" boundaries of familiar spaces (his own or those of close friends and acquaintances) and step into the unknown and probably hostile areas of Soviet city and Soviet everyday existence. This decision resulted in several hundred snapshots all taken during a dreary winter month in 1984. They were then sequenced randomly and glued on cheap sheets of typing paper, on the back of which was someone's unfinished dissertation. Mikhailov's own "manuscript" was finished a few years after he took the photographs. Most of the time was spent filling the margins around all four sides of the images with scribbled texts.

The photographer's writing mixed autobiographical notes and remarks on his work with interpretive texts appropriated from philosophy, art, and science. The resulting self-made book which had no hope of being printed, was Mikhailov's alternative to numerous mass media photographic publications. These were started in the late 1920s as short, cheaply printed magazines on culture and economy. During the 1930s they evolved into elaborate periodicals that thoroughly covered the magnitude of changes brought about by Five-Year Plans. In the post war period, these magazines provided an arena for massive flow of Soviet propaganda; this function lasted well into the late 1980s when the Soviet media replaced its affirmation of the Soviet system with a relentless negation of the same. The concept of serial photography, that Mikhailov follows in Unfinished Dissertation was born within this format of mass media publications. It moved from promoting socialist work in cropped and spatially ambiguous compositions to glorifying it in panoramic views whose impact was at times reinforced by a method of placing two or more images side by side. In a similar metamorphosis, the texts which accompanied the magazines' photography switched from short and concise to long and overtly narrative.

Unfinished Dissertation's written comments, individualized and philosophizing as they are, bypass both the dry and utilitarian language of the early documentary images and the bureaucratic descriptions of the later period. In contrast, Unfinished Dissertation's photographs follow the official magazines' representational strategies as if surveying the long path of Soviet visual methodology. In a manner similar to the Russian avant-garde photographers, Mikhailov gives little significance to a photograph as an object whose function extends beyond its immediate application. He deprives the photograph of an aesthetic dimension by using cheap paper and sloppy printing. He

justifies this attitude as “the experimental method of an amateur who wants to develop and print all his films at night in the toilet... It is a continuation of style of Soviet society which is inadequate and unquestioned."

But even more importantly, Mikhailov displays no interest in controlling or directing his images visually, operating instead within the context of amateur practices with no guarantees of the aftermath. In this respect, his term "kartochki" used by him in regard to his work is significant. A diminutive for "cards," the word suggests that Unfinished Dissertation's photos are not made to be viewed in the traditional context of images which offer something new and unknown. Instead, they are made to be reviewed as index cards which catalog the known and easily recognizable. Mikhailov reinforces his proximity to the Foucauldian notion of "Archive" when he describes the objectives of his work in the 1980s: 'The new khudozhestvennost' [artistic Sensibility, or principal of “quiet adjustment,” consists of taking pictures in such a way that just-born photography appeared old, as if it had been met before." A drive to ransack old territories (even if unpleasant) rather than to reach for flew frontiers was imbedded in the structure of confined Soviet life before perestroika.

Mikhailov's "kartochki" trace Soviet landscapes and cityscapes (with and without people), views from train windows, stills from Soviet television, activities in a subway, and Mikhailov himself. This is the indexing of Soviet byt as it stagnated in the period between the death of Brezhnev and the beginning of perestroika. This is many years after byt was transformed from a negative concept of motionless routine to a positive experience of revolution reality awakened by "nonstop changes." In this rejuvenated state it was glamorized by photographer and film makers throughout the 1920s and early

1930s.

In one of his texts Mikhailov explains how he turned his "kartochki" into effective representations of Soviet byt Scribbling his remarks on a page with the two cropped close-ups of Kharkov's industrial paraphernalia, he makes no comment about their compositional properties. Instead he describes how the photos' content is manipulated towards what he defines as "the expulsion of sobytie [event] (in its everyday understanding)." Mikhailov explains that if broken into syllables, so-bytie has "something to do with Bytie [Being]" (given that this "something" is synonymous with eventuality in its, mundane understanding). From this he concludes that: "the more we can exclude sobytie (event) from representation, the closer we can approach the most important thing-- Being." This statement sharply deviates from Mikhail Bakhtin's insistence on Bytie-as-sobytie [Being-as-an-event] and from Heidegger's argument that "Being itself…is made visible in its temporal character." In his statement, Mikhailov claims that the existential void (an emptying of the eventuality from Being) which characterized the Soviet reality for many years, may be perceived as a positive phenomenon. In his view Being can be equated with a Sleeping Beauty in the sense that it is better preserved or less amortized on when Becoming (read eventuality) is kept frozen, stand-still. Whereas Bakhtin and Heidegger lobbied for bridging the difference between Being and Becoming, Mikhailov seems to believe that these two entities can exist separately and that due to the lack of Becoming, the event-less Soviet Union functioned as an enormous refrigerator of Being. At the time Mikhailov made his Unfinished Dissertation this subtle endorsement of Soviet suffocating immobility could only be judged as a repugnant thought. Now, however, when the circulation of

uncontrollable events has been unleashed into the sphere of "average everydayness," the event-less past sinks into the memory in the form of anesthetized recollections of Being. Being, proven negatively by the rule of contraries. Thus, just like Rodchenko's images of Soviet utopian city, Mikhailov's vision of its demise is destined to seduce us forever.