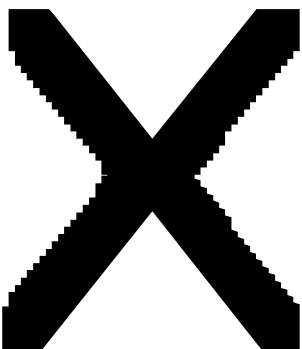




Boris Mikhailov, *Salt Lake* series, 1986, C-print, 60 x 84 cm, edition of 7. © Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



# SALT LAKE

BORIS MIKHAILOV

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## **Exhibition**

From January 20 to March 11, 2012  
at La Criée

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## **Opening**

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

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## **Guided Tour**

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

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## **Curator**

Larys Frogier

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## **In partnership with**

Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève Paris

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## **« Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino » (2000-2010)**

From January 14 to March 3, 2012  
Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève  
7 rue Pastourelle - 75003 Paris

## **« I am not I » (1993 - 2002)**

From January 13 to March 10, 2012  
Suzanne Tarasiève / LOFT 19  
5 passage de l'Atlas, Villa Marcel  
Lods - 75019 Paris

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# Press release

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

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

## The «Salt Lake» series:

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

Boris Mikhailov captures a succession of strange scenes in which we see a carefree people bathing in murky waters, seemingly indifferent to the chaotic landscape around them. There are crowds of thickset men along with women clad in both bikinis and headscarves, apparently enjoying the moment to the full. Bodies lie stretched out to sunbathe, while a group of women chat happily. The calm exuded

by this series becomes a pictorial element in its own right, reminiscent of some of Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs from the time of the first paid holiday leave in France, or George Seurat's painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.

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

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

«*There's a kind of interplay between the old and the new going on here. [...] It was an outworking of an old idea I'd entertained before: we're right there, and yet not there. It's both today – and a long long time ago.*»<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul. Munich : Edition Hirmer Verlag GmGH / Paris : Edition Les Presses du réel, 2011. Extracts from David Teboul's film *Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière* ©Arte France - Images et compagnie, coproduced by Suzanne Tarasiève.

# Visuals for the press

Please, respect captions and copyrights



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



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



# Visuals for the press

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



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

# Works exhibited

*Salt Lake*

1986

Series of 50 photographs , C-print, 60 x 84 cm, edition of 7.

© Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

Collection: Boris & Vita Mikhailov

# Biography and bibliography

## Boris Mikhailov

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

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### RECENT SOLO SHOWS (selection)

#### 2012

*Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France

*I am not I*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève/LOFT19, Paris, France

*Salt Lake*, La Crieé centre d'art contemporain, Rennes, France

#### 2011

*Case History*, MoMA, New York, USA

*I am not I*, Art Hall Gallery, Tallin, Estonia

*Banzai!*, Galerie Ilka Bree, Bordeaux, France

*Black Archive*, *Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany

#### 2010

*At Dusk*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève/LOFT 19, Paris, France

*Yesterday's Sandwich*, Damian Casado, Madrid, Spain

*Utopia and Reality*, Kunstverein Rosenheim, Rosenheim, Germany

#### 2009

*Dusk*, Deweer Art Gallery, Otegem, Belgium

*Yesterday's Sandwich*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève/ LOFT19, Paris, France

#### 2008

*Bricolage*, National Center For Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia

*Look at me I look at water or perversion of repose* (1999), Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France

*Wedding*, Sprovieri, London, United Kingdom

#### 2007

*Banzai !*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany

*Look at me I look at Water*, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany

*Intimacy*, Matthew Bown Gallery, London, United Kingdom

Boris Mikhailov, Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich, Germany

*Yesterday*, Merano Arte, Merano, Italia

#### 2006

*Yesterday's Sandwich*, Shugoarts, Tokyo, Japan

*Intermezzo*, Guido Costa Projects, Turino, Italia

#### 2005

*Butterbrot from the 60s/70s*, Galerie Ilka Bree, Bordeaux, France

*Look at me I look at Water*, Centre de la Photographie, Geneva, Switzerland

*Look at me I look at water, If I were a German*, *I am not I*, Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, France

#### 2004

*Boris Mikhailov: A Retrospective*, ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, Boston, USA

*Untitled*, Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid, Spain

*TV-Mania*, Kunstverein Arnsberg, Arnsberg, Germany

*In the Street*, Barbara Weiss Gallery, Berlin, Germany

# Biography and bibliography

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## RECENT GROUP SHOWS (selection)

**2011**

*The world belongs to you*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italia

*New Documentary Forms*, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

*Aires de Jeux*, Pavillon Populaire, Montpellier, France

*Ostalgia*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA

*Breaking News, Fukushima and the consequences*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany

*Investigations of a Dog*, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden

*Photography Calling!*, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany

**2010**

*Les recherches d'un chien*, La Maison Rouge, Paris, France

Photo I, Photo You, Calvert 22, London, United Kingdom

1989. *End of History or Beginning of the Future?*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria

*October*, White Space Gallery, London, United Kingdom

*Arbeit / Labour*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Zürich, Switzerland

*Sexuality and transcendence*, Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev, Ukraine

*Four Perspectives through the Lens : Soviet Art Photography in the 1970 - 1980*, The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, USA

**2009**

1989. *Ende der Geschichte oder Beginn der Zukunft?*, Villa Schöningen, Potsdam, Germany

*Movie Painting*, National Center For Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia

1968. *The Great Innocents*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany

*Printed Matter*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Zürich, Switzerland

**2008**

*Fluid Street - Alone, Together*, Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland

*Total Enlightenment : Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960-1990*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid, Spain

*After Eisenstein*, Lunds konsthall, Lund, Sweden

**2007**

*52<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale*, Ukraine Pavillon, Venice, Italia

*Hot + Bothered: Looking at the Landscape / Thinking about the World*, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, USA

**2006**

*In the Face of History: European Photographers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, United Kingdom

*Twilight-Photography in the Magic Hour*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom

**2005**

*Circa Berlin*, Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, Denmark

**2004**

*Outcasts and Sundaychildren*, De Hallen Harlem, Harlem, The Netherlands

*Social Creatures. How Body becomes Art*, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany



# Biography and bibliography

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## COLLECTIONS

Art4.ru - contemporary art museum, Moscow, Russia

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany

Cal Cego - Colleccion de Arte Contemporaneo, Barcelona, Spain

Castello di Rivara, Centro d'arte contemporane, Rivara, Italia

Centro de Artes Visuales Helga de Alvear, Cáceres, Spain

CGAC - Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Saint Jacques de Compostelle, Espagne

CNAP Collection, France

Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan

Deutsche Bank, Berlin, Germany

Foam Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, Switzerland

FRAC - Languedoc-Roussillon, Montpellier, France

Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands

Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, The Netherlands

Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Germany

Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, USA

Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland

Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France

MoCP - The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, USA

Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia

MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Moscow House of Photography, Moscow, Russia

Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany

Musac - Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, León, Spain

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris - MAM/ARC, Paris, France

Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany

Museum für Photographie, Braunschweig, Germany

Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia

National Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA), Moscow, Russia

NMAO National Museum of Art Osaka, Japan

Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany

Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, Ukraine

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art - SFMOMA, San Francisco, USA

Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki, Finland

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA

Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Japan

UnicreditGroup Art Collection, Austria

UnicreditGroup Art Collection, Italia

# Biography and bibliography

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## ARTIST'S BOOKS (selection)

*Boris Mikhailov, j'ai été ici un jour*, David Téoul, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2011

*Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, Cologne : Walter König, 2011

*From Japan*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2011

*The Wedding*, Londres : Mörel books, 2011

*Maquette Braunschweig*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2009

*Suzi et Cetera*, Cologne : Walter König, 2007

*Crimean snobism*, Tokyo : Rat Hole, 2006

*Yesterday's Sandwich*, Berlin : Phaidon, 2006

*Look at Me, I Look at Water or The Perversion of Repose*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2004

*Salt Lake*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2002

*Dance*, Zurich : Scalo, 2000

*Case History*, Zurich : Scalo, 1999

*Unfinished Dissertation*, Zurich : Scalo, 1997

*By The Ground / At The Dusk*, Cologne : Oktagon, 1996

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## CATALOGUES (selection)

*Photography Calling!*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2011

*Fluid Street – Alone, Together*, Helsinki : KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008

*In the Face of History, European Photographers in the 20th Century*, London : (Ed. Kate Bush, Mark Sladen), Black Dog Publishing, 2006

*Verbal Photography, Boris Mikhailov, Ilya Kabakov, and The Moscow Archive of New Art*, Porto : Museu Fundação de Serralves 2004

*Boris Mikhailov: The Hasselblad Award 2000*, Zurich : Scalo, 2000

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## MONOGRAPHS (selection)

*Boris Mikhailov - A Retrospective*, Zurich : Scalo, 2003

*Boris Mikhailov*, collection 55, Berlin : Phaidon, 2001

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## ARTICLES (selection))

« Boris Mikhailov, portfolio », in *Les InRockuptibles*, n° 817-819, August 2011

« Boris Mikhailov's photographs, Harsh pictures of harsh » in *The Economist*, June 28, 2011

Ariella Budick, « Boris Mikhailov: Case History, Museum of Modern Art, New York » in *Financial Times*, June 9, 2011

Ken Johnson, « Behold the Anonymous Downtrodden », in *The New York Times*, June 2, 2011

Erik Vroons, « Boris Mikhailov, Yesterday's Sandwich », in *GUP International Photography Magazine*, n° 31, October 2011

Aude Launay, « Soviet Union », in *Technikart*, October 2009

« Schorr edits Mikhailov », in *Frieze*, n° 114, April 2008

Christine Toomey, « The barefaced cheek of Boris Mikhailov », in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, June 3, 2007

Christine Meffert, « Boris Mikhailov », in *Die Zeit-Zeitmagazin Leben*, n° 41, October 2007

Larissa Harris, « Boris Mikhailov: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston », in *Artforum International*, December 2004

Vicki Goldberg, « Record of Wretchedness From the Soviet Eden », in *The New York Times*, April 28, 2002

Alexandre Castant « Boris Mikhailov : la fabrique », in *Le Journal du Centre national de la photographie*, n° 6, January 1999

# Text:

Nicolas Bourriaud in *Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul. Munich : Edition Hirmer Verlag GmgH / Paris : Édition Les Presses du réel, 2011.  
Extracts from David Teboul's film *Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière*  
©Arte France - Images et compagnie, coproduced by Suzanne Tarasieva.

## Notes on Boris Mikhailov

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

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

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

“Case history” (1997-1998) is an urban opera, Mikhailov's most brutal and wildest series. In an incredible whirlwind of photographs (over five hundred), he directs the tramps of Kharkov, directing these paid actors as if he were a Vincente Minnelli of society's lower depths. He is part of the image, and this is simply the product of his participation: the real is not some raw material that it is the job of the camera to reveal; it is simply one modality of the image.

# Text:

Nicolas Bourriaud in *Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul. Munich : Edition Hirmer Verlag GmgH / Paris : Édition Les Presses du réel, 2011.  
Extracts from David Teboul's film *Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière*  
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In Boris Mikhailov's works, the status of the photograph is that of a magic that is already in the past: the scenes are sometimes imbued with nostalgia, and the shots themselves seem to be reprints, the umpteenth version of a lost original. This is because, as a practice, it belongs to a lost continent, to an obsolete universe whose fragments Mikhailov is happy simply to collect. Stan Douglas explains that he uses yesterday's technologies for his film installations, because "obsolete forms of communication become an index for an understanding of the world that we have lost." This is exactly why Rodney Graham installed a heavy old-fashioned projector at the centre of one of his exhibitions, and why William Kentridge uses silent film for his black-and-white animations. With Mikhailov, photography is at once the vestige of a lost world and the bond that connects us to that world.

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

# Text:

François Prodrômides in *Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul. Munich : Edition Hirmer Verlag GmgH / Paris : Édition Les Presses du réel, 2011.  
Extracts from David Teboul's film *Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière*  
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## Rouge Babylone

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

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

# Text:

*Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul.  
Munich : Edition Hirmer Verlag GmgH / Paris : Édition Les Presses du réel, 2011.  
Extracts from David Teboul's film *Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière*  
©Arte France - Images et compagnie, coproduced by Suzanne Tarasieva.

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

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

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

*Ceux qu'on voit là, c'était des gens qui travaillaient à l'usine ?*

Non... Je ne crois pas. C'étaient des gens qui étaient vraiment malades, et que la boue soulageait. Ils arrivaient de différents coins des environs. Il y avait énormément de monde. A vrai dire, je n'ai pas cherché à savoir. Je n'ai pas une approche de journaliste pour demander qui vient d'où et fait quoi.



# Text:

*Boris Mikhailov, I've been here once before / J'ai déjà été ici un jour*, David Teboul.  
Munich : Édition Hirmer Verlag GmgH / Paris : Édition Les Presses du réel, 2011.  
Extraits du film Boris Mikhailov, L'Art et la Manière, de David Teboul  
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Le lac était lié à l'usine. Je ne sais pas vraiment non plus ce que c'était que cette usine. On y fabriquait de la soude. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est ce qu'on voit. Ce que je vois. Le côté visuel. Je sais que certaines choses sont liées, mais quant à savoir pourquoi, ça ne m'intéresse pas.

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

La Crimée est un lieu de vacances raffiné, avec toute une grande tradition russe. Il y a des dames à chapeau, des arbres magnifiques. L'atmosphère est pleine de souvenirs, de beauté. Tout cela est magnifique. C'est un peu gâché par ces atroces constructions en béton au bord de la mer qui abîment la vue. Et puis les gens aussi... Ici, j'ai photographié des gens, d'autres gens. Alors que là-bas, j'ai essayé de me prendre en photo moi-même. Peut-être qu'ici les gens, c'est le peuple... Là-bas, on joue à une espèce de jeu, on se sent appartenir à la bourgeoisie. On joue à la bourgeoisie, et c'est le lieu qui invite à cela. Ici, c'est comme du pur reportage. C'est la vraie vie qui nous entoure.

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

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

*C'est une sorte d'archéologie soviétique ?*

Oui, une archéologie et puis aussi... pas une archéologie mais... comment ça s'appelle ? Tout ce qui concerne le corps... Une archéologie parce que c'est comme si on avait creusé une fosse, avec des pierres, et qu'on remue dedans. Mais là, ce n'est pas vraiment de l'archéologie, ni de l'ethnographie, mais... La science du corps... je ne me souviens plus comment elle s'appelle. Quand il s'agit d'un corps particulier... Il y a aussi un symbole soviétique... une certaine conception du corps soviétique.

*C'est une représentation très intime de l'Union soviétique...*

Oui, c'est quelque chose de caché. On peut parler d'intimité, mais c'est surtout quelque chose de caché. On pourra toujours aller partout, sans jamais voir ça. Il y a des plages, une belle nature, des endroits magnifiques. Et tout à coup, on découvre un endroit comme on n'a jamais vu. C'est comme ça. C'est vraiment comme ça. En tant que photographe, j'aimerais beaucoup retrouver un autre endroit comme ça. On peut trouver des endroits avec de la boue thermique, mais il n'y aura pas cette espèce de concentration folle. Comme on dit, je n'ai pas vécu pour rien. Un moment, ça donne l'impression d'avoir réussi à faire quelque chose. Ce n'est pas si facile de dire quelque chose à quelqu'un, de trouver quelque chose... Bien sûr, ce serait bien que ça reste. Que cela tienne dans le temps. À l'époque, on regardait ça différemment. On trouvait ça horrible. Mais maintenant ? Maintenant on adopte un point de vue historique. Cela n'existe plus. C'est fini. Oui, ça existait, cette appartenance. Et puis ici, il y a tellement de choses humaines qui transparaissent... Cela va sans doute rester longtemps. Il ne s'agit plus de ce qui était alors « mauvais », etc. Mais d'une étrange existence humaine. Comme tout le reste, comme toutes les photos, elles meurent toutes très vite. Pourtant celles-ci, Dieu merci, ont déjà 40 ans. Ou 30. C'était en 1986...

*Cette série est importante pour vous ?*

Cette série n'est pas tant importante pour moi que pour l'histoire ! Non, mais c'est vrai qu'elle est importante pour moi. En même temps, c'est l'histoire de ce qui est le plus soviétique possible. Là, on atteint le maximum du soviétisme. Un des maximums. C'est là, ça existe... Je ne sais pas si ça existe toujours, sans doute que non. J'ai téléphoné là-bas, j'avais envie d'y aller, mais on m'a dit que l'usine était fermée. Comme il n'y avait plus d'eau chaude, les gens n'y venaient plus. Et donc que cela n'existait plus. Si l'usine se remet en marche, ça recommencera peut-être.

**BORIS MIKHAILOV**  
INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY  
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The twenty-six photographic series that Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov made between the late 1960s and 2002 (all but three of which are represented in this exhibition) include several varieties of homemade antidote to official Soviet visual culture as well as negotiations—some shaky, some masterful—with the many new “freedoms” of the post-Soviet world. Though the series vary enormously in format, technique, and strategy, Mikhailov’s interests in the individual rather than the type, immediacy rather than distance, and the everyday rather than the ceremonial remain constant throughout, constituting a direct challenge to what Boris Groys might call “the Soviet promotion machine.”

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

These and other series have obvious analogues in Western documentary and street photography. But other material cannot fully be described by the Western art-historical terms “conceptual,” “found,” or “staged,” though there are family resemblances. Take for example, “Sots Art,” 1975–78, and “Luriki,” 1971–85. Because color printing was extremely expensive in the Soviet Union, family or other personal black-and-white photos were often hand colorized. Mikhailov did this for money but also found inspiration in it, overpainting his own and others’ photographs to make works like one from “Sots Art” (not included in the current show) of six stout amateur gymnasts, their rubber balls tinted startling shades of green, yellow, red, and pink. Here Mikhailov frames a popular practice against the dark backdrop of the regime’s own retouched photography, underscoring the pathos both of this particular practice and of photography itself.

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In the mid-’80s Mikhailov made several series (some during photo-paper shortages) in which a number of small black-and-white images are printed or pasted onto a single sheet, often embellished with scribbled comments or identifiers. In one page from “Unfinished Dissertation,” 1985, for which he pasted hundreds of snapshots onto the backs of pages of the incomplete document of the title, we see the moustached artist in socks and underwear spread-eagled on his bed; another shot just like it, except that a cat has leapt into the frame; and yet another, slightly different from the first, but, as Russian curator and critic Ekaterina Degot notes in her catalogue essay, not in a particularly meaningful way. Unlike “Salt Lake,” these private experiments in antiphotography do not set out to capture beauty in the everyday but channel the unimportant moments of domestic life into images that are shorn of import themselves.

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

—Larissa Harris

# Text:

Friedrich Meschede in *Salt Lake*, Göttingen : Steidl, 2002

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

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

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

Boris Mikhailov shows us the people going for a swim in the salt lake, talking to each other on its shores, or simply sunning themselves. In his pictures there is a calmness which lends a pictorial element to this reportage photography. The calm of those depicted recalls a central work of the pointillist painter Georges Seurat *A Sunday afternoon at the Grande Jatte* which was painted between 1884-86, and today is part of the Chicago Art Institute's collection. This comparison widens the perspective and helps to understand the photographs as works of art because they also capture and represent the human dimension, the tragic and comic of Dostoyevsky.

[...] Today, *Salt Lake* can be seen from a different perspective: the Soviet Union is no more and the criteria which produced this kind of photography no longer apply; but the harmonious life which had been possible outside the state ideal it is also no longer possible. In the course of history, both political and personal, a distance is created and with it comes the objectivity to recognize these photographs as documents of an epoch. They are also born out of Mikhailov's vision and he reminds us that, as Dostoyevsky claimed, «beauty alone saves the world», even if that beauty only survives in our memories.

# Text:

Vicki Goldberg, « Record of Wretchedness From the Soviet Eden », in *The New York Times*,  
April 28, 2002

## Record of Wretchedness From the Soviet Eden

Boris Mikhailov went into photography full time largely because the Soviet government did not approve of his photographs. He was an engineer who worked in a factory and took pictures in his spare time. The K.G.B., on one of its ' «checkups» found some photographs of nudes in his lab. He was fired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another woman, who points laughingly at her man's exposed, not particularly amusing stomach, had a bandaged head and an extravagantly black eye. One of his eyes stares permanently at his nose. Elsewhere a woman squats to empty her bowels on a concrete floor. One entire image is a discolored breast with three large stitches and a dark blue blouse folded around it.

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«My aesthetic» Mr. Mikhailov told an interviewer two years ago, «talks mainly about the dissolution of beauty.» Well, it has dissolved, along with a society. Mr. Mikhailov has borne witness to a social history that did not, could not, exist before. The Soviets would not have allowed these photographs, but, according to Mr. Mikhailov, in those days there were no homeless people in Kharkov. This account is a lesson in the formation of class distinctions, which communism was supposed to erase. Mr. Mikhailov's pictures might just prove Marx right: look what capitalism has produced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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