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„Testing the Limits of Self: (Supra)National and Regional Identities Through Kharkiv School of Photography Oeuvre (1965-2013)“

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Abstract

The thesis traces the ways regional and (supra)national identities are manifested through the visual oeuvre and writings of the Kharkiv School of Photography artists (1965-2013). Building on Paul S. Pirie's classification of Ukrainian citizens' modes of belonging, the thesis employs semiotic and discourse analysis methodology to uncover the dynamics behind the Kharkiv artists' gradual turn towards embracing the marginalized *local* and constructing (inter)regional solidarities. Situating the three generations of artists' photography within the socio-political context underlying Kharkiv's multifaceted identities, it explores the ways the trope of "provinciality" was used to articulate the city's positioning in relation to the external centers of (artistic) recognition. By deconstructing imperial form and content, Kharkiv artistic scene moves from Alexey Yurchak's "vnye" community's struggle for subjectivity to identity frustration and, eventually, to positive regional identification formation.

Abstract

Der Arbeit geht der Frage nach, wie sich regionale und (supra)nationale Identitäten in den visuellen Werken und Texten der Künstler der Kharkiv School of Photography (1965-2013) manifestieren. Ausgehend von Paul S. Peiries Klassifizierung der Zugehörigkeitsformen ukrainischer Bürgerinnen und Bürger werden semiotische und diskursanalytische Methoden angewandt. Diese Methoden offenbaren die Dynamik der allmählichen Hinwendung der Charkiwer Künstler zum marginalisierten *Lokalen* und zur Konstruktion (inter)regionaler Solidaritäten. Die Arbeit untersucht die Fotografien von drei Künstlergenerationen im sozio-politischen Kontext, der den vielschichtigen Identitäten von Charkiw zugrunde liegt, und erforscht das Motiv des "Provinzialismus". Dieses Motiv wurde verwendet, um die Positionierung der Stadt in Bezug auf externe Zentren der (künstlerischen) Anerkennung darzustellen. Durch die Dekonstruktion der imperialen Form und des Inhalts bewegt sich die Charkiwer Kunstszenen von Alexey Yurchaks "vnye"-Gemeinschaft, die um Subjektivität kämpfte, über Identitätsfrustration bis hin zur Bildung einer positiven regionalen Identität.

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1. Introduction

Founded in the mid-17th century by Ukrainian peasants fleeing from the Cossack-Polish war, and most actively populated under the Tsarist administration by a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian settlers, the Eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv has for a long time remained a bulwark of hybrid identities. A hotbed of Ukrainian romantic nationalism in the 19th century, at the same time being a trendsetting intellectual hub of the Russian empire, an important industrial center and a transport junction connecting Moscow and Crimea, Kharkiv *'borderland'*, or *liminal* self-identification strategies go back centuries. While retaining a distinct Ukrainian ethnic profile, its syncretic identarian system has become even more complicated with the emergence of the Soviet supranational identity – and the dernier cri of the 1990s-2000s, a distinct *'Kharkiv'* identity, framing the city as a *'neither Russian nor Ukrainian'*, a *'shapeshifting'* spatial entity of a multicultural *polis* profiteering from mediating the economic and cultural relations between the two neighboring countries.

The shimmer of identity frontiers, frustrated memories, and the symbolic violence of ideologies, have always been a critical focus for Kharkiv art scene. Ironic and subversive portraitists of (post)-Soviet grim realities, three generations of the Kharkiv School of Photography (KSOP) have been for almost half a century producing mesmerizing and disturbing images tearing the patterns of what was deemed to be ideologically correct. From *Soviet as psychosomatic* creating a new avant-garde aesthetics of precarity in the 1970s, to late 2000s *vandalism against vandalism* testing the limits of kitsch and cliché to reveal the monstrosity of any imposed belonging patterns, KSOP artists were always in the rearguard of criticizing of *what they are not* – yet to what extent do their works speak of what they *are*?

In my MA thesis, I aim to trace and compare how the competing regional, national and supranational identity discourses are manifested through the visual practices and texts of the Kharkiv school of photography` three generations of artists.

- What are the differences in various generations of KSOP artists' positioning towards the major national and supranational identity-building projects?
- Which visual tropes and formal approaches do the various generations of KSOP artists employ to construct/ reflect on the Kharkiv identity?

With the recent trend for decolonizing Ukrainian art history, it can be increasingly tempting to fall for the reductive theorizing about the "all-Ukrainian" anticolonial art process, while not paying enough attention to the diversity of local art scenes, influenced heavily by the regional identarian amalgams. Therefore, I believe that the academic debate on Ukraine's de/post/self/trans coloniality can substantially benefit from the emergence of a new wave of nuanced, region-focused research, engaging local perspectives to analyze the concepts and strategies artists use to address the issues of memory, societal transformations, local and national ontologies, as well as their own sense of identity and belonging. Ranging from the iconic "Vremya" with its leader Boris Mikhailov minutely dissecting the absurdity of Soviet life, or not less acclaimed SOSka group deconstructing the Orange Revolution-era mass media, to the names less known for both foreign and national audiences - Kharkiv art scene proves to be a fertile soil for the regional identity studies. With my thesis, I am interested to employ visual (semiotic) analysis and discourse analysis methodologies to look closer at the liminality of Kharkiv artists' search for and evolvement of identities, thus contributing to the wider academic discourse on Ukrainian regionalism.

After discussing my theoretical framework, which stems from, on the one hand, scholarly contributions on regionalism and identity, in particular, Paul S. Pirie's classification of Ukrainian citizens' modes of belonging, and the photographic theory as framed by Susan Sontag, Vilém Flusser, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes et al. on the other one, I continue to present my methodology and sources review in parts three and four accordingly. In the fifth chapter of my paper, I dwell on Kharkiv's historical background, identifying the main actors and phenomena contributing to the heterogeneity of identarian discourses in the area. This is followed by an overall review of the Kharkiv school of photography activities, where I elaborate on the three generations of the KSOP, and the socio-political contexts behind their artistic contributions. The seventh chapter contains the findings of my analysis of the KSOP's visual practices and texts. For convenience reasons, I divide the seventh chapter into three subchapters, with each of them covering the peculiarities of identarian positioning of one of the KSOP artists' generations.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Identities: national, supranational, regional

One of the key works that have laid the foundations for national identity studies is "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism" by its Benedict Anderson. In this book, Anderson reflects on the concept of the nation as a modern category that emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, replacing earlier forms of population consolidation that were built on sacral cultures¹, loyalties to specific ruling dynasties² or particular perceptions of time³. Members of such imagined communities do not necessarily know each other personally, but they envision themselves as a collective entity with defined boundaries, led by a sovereign power. For Anderson, nationalism as an idea that forms the basis of community can take various forms. He mentions models such as creole communities that emerged in North and South America, the model of advocates for the rights of oppressed languages and cultures at the end of the 18th century, the model of imperialistic nationalism shaped by monarchical authority in opposition to the previous model, and the model applicable to some Asian and African states where nationalist discourse was popularized by a bilingual intelligentsia educated abroad.

Fredrik Barth suggests that the primary element in the formation of an ethnic group is not a shared culture or language, but the presence of what he calls "social boundaries" between that group and others.⁴ In other words, a group is created based on a negative principle—defining who we are *not*—reinforced by a specific set of cultural features. Thomas Hylland Eriksen explores the question of what ethnicity is in his work "Ethnic identity, national identity and intergroup conflict". Investigating the relationship between personal identities and their political instrumentalization, Eriksen argues that identities are never constructed "from the air," and any "abstract" identity is always based on specific preceding personal experiences.⁵ However, each individual carries multiple identities simultaneously, and drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, Eriksen concludes that in the postmodern situation, the modern problem of identity—

¹ Anderson 1991: 12

² *ibid*: 19-20

³ *ibid*: 22-33

⁴ Barth 1998: 24

⁵ Eriksen 2001: 59-61

how to create and maintain it—has shifted significantly, taking on the form of "*how to keep the options open*."⁶

In his work "*National Identity*", Anthony D. Smith explains how ethnicity has been utilized by states and preceding entities to shape structures of consolidation. According to Smith, the survival of a particular ethnic community is determined by maintaining a delicate balance between flux and durability, encompassing ever-evolving individual and cultural expressions within specific social and cultural parameters. Under such conditions, *ethnies* emerge as the foundation for subsequent social and administrative structures unified by common traditions, myths, and memories, including the geographically oriented Westphalian concept of nation-states.⁷ In contrast to the ethnic-based mode of identity, Smith provides the example of African states, which, due to their former reduced subjectivity on the international stage, had to construct consolidation post-factum, often harmonizing existing *ethnies* within their territories, delineated by colonizers with little regard for the ethnical processes. In this manner, they consolidated communities not so much around *ethnies* but around the state apparatus itself. This mode of identity can be termed the civic-based identity mode.⁸

In many ways, this framework can be adapted to the Ukrainian situation. Subject to the ambitions of numerous external actors, Ukrainian territories encompass a range of diverse hybrid identities. Meanwhile, the state narrative regularly shifts between the prevailing identity models, oscillating between ethnic-based and civic-based. Henke, paradoxically, connects the popularization of civic-based national identity with the Maidan revolution in 2014 and the Russian invasion of the Donbas region.⁹ These events provoked a sharp transition in Ukrainian political discourse from the tacitly pursued civic-based concept to a distinctly nationalist ethnic-based one, necessary to strengthen the country's stance against Russian propaganda but also exacerbating social divisions, thus triggering the need for an identity model not associated with extreme national sentiments. Schulman emphasizes that this mode of identity focuses on identification around the common state-defined political principles and values, state territory, institutions, and citizenship rather than shared culture and heritage.¹⁰ This mode proved to be

⁶ Bauman 1996: 18, as cited in Eriksen 2001: 66

⁷ Smith 1996: 38-39

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Henke 2020: 7

¹⁰ Schulman 2004: 35

more comprehensible for a population that had endured the dominance of Soviet supranational identity, which, in essence, was civic-based.

In Paul S. Pirie's work "National Identity and Politics in Southern and Eastern Ukraine" the author presents a classification of identities held by Ukrainian citizens from the "east and south," dividing them into four types: *strong unitary identification*, *dual identity*, which implies a sense of belonging simultaneously to both a regional and national community, *indeterminate* – approximating the phenomenon of national indifference as defined by Tara Zahra, and *transnational identity*¹¹, where the significance of the state in an individual's self-positioning is substantially reduced.

Formally, the first category, strong primary regional identification, can be associated with a variation of the civic-based identity, but on a regional scale. Actors involved in constructing projects of consolidation at this level can take various forms, including regional authorities and political elites, as well as grassroots artistic collectives like those examined in the chapter on the third generation of KSOP - SOSka group, Shilo group, and Boba Group. Investigating the identity narratives these groups and their predecessors construct for themselves to create a discourse of consolidation on the Kharkiv and international art scenes, and the formal methods they employ for this purpose, will be the focus of this study.

Regarding the potential for both destructive and productive correlations between national (both ethnic and civic) identities and specific forms of regional identities, Balabanov, Pashyna & Lysak note that establishing certain hierarchies between these identities can naturally provoke competition between them. In cases where national identity is weakened, regional identity may be securitized at the national level, thereby exacerbating toxic regionalism. However, regional and national discourses can also complement each other when a certain balance of power is established between them.¹²

Balabanov, Pashyna & Lysak categorize Kharkiv as part of the "eastern" macro-region and, in a narrower sense, the "Sloboda Ukraine," one of Ukraine's nine socio-cultural regions.¹³ The question of dividing Ukraine into identity-based regions has also been raised in the works of

¹¹ Pirie 1996: 1084

¹² Balabanov, Pashyna & Lysak 2019: 499-500

¹³ *ibid*

Barrington & Herron, proposing the identification of eight regions, among which Kharkiv belongs to the "east-central" region.¹⁴ However, such an approach can often be constraining, descending into a politicized and oversimplified discourse about "two Ukraines," assuming a conditional division of Ukraine into the "pro-Russian" east and the "pro-Western" west¹⁵, resonating with the Huntingtonian idea of Ukraine as a '*cleft country*,' one of the loci of "clash of civilizations."¹⁶

Paasi highlights that "*regions are contested social processes*".¹⁷ Identifying with a specific region is not necessarily a singular process; it can involve various overlapping constructions associated with the same – or different - spatial units. Furthermore, such identity constructions may encompass or exclude multiple dimensions, including cultural, political, and economic aspects; such mode of regionalism emerges based on three factors within a specific spatial unit: the formation of a common economic strategy, new forms of cultural identification, and the mediation of existing social interactions. Murphy explains that such phenomena result from parallel processes: on one hand, historical interactions between major international players offering their own ideological and identity narratives, and on the other hand, local forces.¹⁸

Agnew theorizes that with the onset of globalization, the burden of constructing and maintaining identity has shifted from the nation-state to diverse spatial units in which localities, global city regions, regions, and trading blocks connect or network to challenge the primary state-based territorial divisions.¹⁹ This has led to both deterritorialization and its reverse process, reterritorialization, of identity. To a large extent, the features of these parallel phenomena are reflected in the work of the SOSka group.

Returning to Pirie's classification, the second mode he identifies, dual identity, in the context of Kharkiv, relates more to the overlap of regional and national identities and to the liminal identity, transitional between national and *supranational*, as theorized by Fitzpatrick and Yurchak. Fitzpatrick suggests that during the Soviet era, the prevailing identity construction, primarily built on class identity, involved concealing and masking other individual

¹⁴ Barrington & Herron 2004: 57-58

¹⁵ Ryabchuk 2002

¹⁶ Huntington 1996

¹⁷ Paasi 2009: 141

¹⁸ Murphy 1991: 29

¹⁹ Agnew 2005: 438

identifications, whether they be national, ethnic, or regional.²⁰ Building her work on documentary sources that reveal the individual dimension of the (post-)Soviet citizen, Fitzpatrick resonates with the creative credo of the first-generation KSOP representatives, who explored the personal, *subjective* dimension, thereby opposing the totalitarian regime's suppression of individuality. Likewise, the first and partially the second generation can serve as examples of communities identified by Alexei Yurchak as "vnye" communities, which preferred to coexist alongside Soviet institutions, developing their personal, typically cultural interests.²¹ Yurchak highlights literary clubs and youth rock 'n' roll bands as examples of "counter-culture" movements which, however, still remained within the coordinates of the socialist system.

Alexei Yurchak, when discussing the last generation of Soviet citizens who witnessed the collapse of the Soviet utopia, introduces the concept of *hypernormalization*. This concept largely forms the basis for the identity of those accustomed to the conformist collective-oriented existence of Soviet citizens after the former Soviet republics declared independence. Furthermore, Yurchak delves into the hyperfixation of Soviet citizens on an exoticized Imaginary West.²² This fixation largely correlates with the hypothesis of self-colonization among Ukrainians proposed by Kiossev in his work "The Self-Colonizing Metaphor."

Kiossev employs the postcolonial paradigm to analyze the distinct mixture of fascination and resentment directed toward the collectivized West by Eastern European societies. He argues that for them, Europe became *'both the subject of criticism and a civilizational superego, ... the recognition-granting gaze.'*²³ These and other social tendencies of post-Soviet mentality, as well as the ideological frustration of citizens of the once-young Ukrainian state, are significantly reflected in the oeuvre of the second generation of artists with their aggressive aesthetics of total denial.

Pirie's third mode of identities, indeterminate with neither state nor regional identity, closely correlates with the concept of "national indifference" described by Tara Zahra. Zahra examined the phenomenon of a certain "passivity" among Central and Eastern Europeans in embracing national-oriented identity discourses. Zahra writes, "Once imagined, indifference to

²⁰ Fitzpatrick 2005: 4-5

²¹ Yurchak 2006: 128

²² *ibid*: 209

²³ Kiossev 2011

nationalism became as real and meaningful a category as the nation itself."²⁴The apolitical youth of the 2000s, unwilling to lean toward any specific identity category, became the subject of early works by the SOSka group.

Pirie himself associates the concept of indeterminant with neither state nor regional identity with the concept of "marginal" identity, which echoes the somewhat outdated but partially applicable *marginal man theory* in the Kharkiv context. The marginal man situation, as theorized by Milton M. Goldberg, is defined as the result of an individual existing at the intersection of various cultural contexts.²⁵ The representative of the "Other Ukraine," a category often emphasized by politicians as a euphemism for a marginal subject, becomes the subject of social reportage in the second generation of Kharkiv photography. Economic and external marginalization serves as a metaphor for the marginalization of identity, extending to a broader range of Kharkiv residents.

The fourth and final category according to Pirie, transnational identity, is elaborated upon in the works of Taras, Filippova & Pobeda. It is defined as a rejection of identification with a single national narrative and, unlike the previous category, implies a clear sense of belonging to a specific supranational narrative(s).²⁶ In a certain interpretation, this mode is close to supranational identities as described by Fitzpatrick and Yurchak. However, in the context of this work, it aligns more with the idea of a "fluid," situational identity formulated by globalized culture and increased possibilities for interregional and international mobility. As mentioned earlier, the issue of interactions and dialogue between the local and the global is explored in works by the SOSka group.

2.2. Kharkiv (regional) identity

The issue of Kharkiv identities has been partially addressed in a wide range of scholarly works focusing on Ukraine's national identity. The evangelists of the 'Two Ukrainian identities' school, prevailing in the 1990s, have numerous referred to Kharkiv as the center (or one of the centers) of the so-called "pro-Soviet (Russian) East", as opposed to a "pro-European West". Nevertheless, the questionable binarity of the 'Two Ukrainian identities' school may be easily

²⁴ Zahra 2010: 105

²⁵ Goldberg 1941: 53

²⁶ Taras, Filippova & Pobeda 2004: 836

criticized as explicitly reductionist, limiting all the variety of Kharkovites' multifaceted identities to an uncomfortable and increasingly black-and-white (ethnic) dichotomy.

In 1996, analyzing sociological surveys conducted by local centers for the study of public opinions since 1980, Paul S. Pirie first applied to Kharkiv the notion of regionalism. Through highlighting the high rate of urbanization and intermarriages in Eastern Ukraine – as well as the substantial number of residents who were born outside of Ukraine's borders - Pirie argues that Kharkovites' self-identification strategies do not fit into simple paradigms of Russification and assimilation.²⁷

The discussion on Kharkiv citizens' 'regional' understanding of their identities was continued by Peter W. Rodgers through his *Nation, Region and History in Post-Communist Transitions: Identity Politics in Ukraine* published in 2008. Opting for in-depth qualitative interviews with school directors, history teachers and schoolchildren in Kharkiv, Sumy and Luhansk, Rodgers studies the factors Ukrainians deemed to be defining in their self-identification, and the extent to which Russia was perceived by them as *the other*. Rodgers' field work allowed him to argue that Kharkiv identities should be studied “*not in terms of division, but rather in terms of regional differences and diversity.*”²⁸

Similarly, in 2010 Tatiana Zhurzhenko went to Kharkiv and Belgorod regions' villages to find out how their inhabitants feel about the new border. For the first time applying the notion of *borderland identities*, Zhurzhenko delves into the “post-soviet identity” phenomenon describing the soviet-nostalgic population characterizing their villages as “multinational” or a “small Soviet Union” – though pointing out to the gradual growth of the national consciousness of the locals. In her further studies, Zhurzhenko explains how the image of Kharkiv city, as of the successor of Sloboda Ukraine's Cossack traditions, the academic and cultural center of the Russian Empire, the dynamic capitalist metropolis, and the “First Capital” of Soviet Ukraine with its pragmatism, ethnic tolerance and bilingualism - was historically constructed.

In 2016, Tanya Zaharchenko published her book *Where Currents Meet: Frontiers of Memory in Post-Soviet Fiction of Kharkiv, Ukraine*. Although opting for the analysis of literary and not visual media, focusing on how the regional identities are manifested through the prose of young

²⁷ Pirie 1996

²⁸ Rodgers 2008:

Kharkiv writers, she comes as close as possible to the objectives and scope I defined for my thesis.

3. Methodology

In the exploration of the identity dynamics within the three generations of the Kharkiv School of Photography, this research employs a multifaceted methodological approach drawing from the rich toolkit of interdisciplinary qualitative methods. Understanding identity, both encoded visually, and expressed in writing and interviews, necessitates a comprehensive and nuanced investigative strategy at the intersection of social sciences and art history. This chapter introduces the two primary methods employed in this study: semiotic analysis of visual materials, and discourse analysis of artists' individual accounts. These methodological choices are guided by the need to ground the artistic oeuvre review into the social and biographical context of the Kharkiv artistic community development stages.

3.1.Semiotic Analysis

Ferdinand de Saussure's insights into the structure of signs have been pivotal in shaping the semiotic analysis, which serves as a foundational method in this research. Grounded on "*Course on General Linguistics*," semiotic analysis offers a systematic framework for understanding how (visual) languages operate, fundamentally hinging upon the concept of the sign. A sign, as conceptualized by Saussure, comprises two integral components: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signified represents a concept or an object, while signifier embodies a sound or an image intrinsically linked to the signified. A cornerstone of semiotic analysis, as expounded by Saussure, is the recognition that no inherent or necessary connection exists between a specific signifier and its signified; furthermore, a single signifier can assume divergent meanings. The stability of a sign's relationship between its signifier and signified does not hinge on an inherent connection but rather on the differentiation it maintains from other signs. Within the realm of semiotics, the actual entity in the world to which the sign pertains is termed the sign's *referent*.²⁹ This analytical approach, rooted in Saussurean semiotics, forms the foundation for our exploration of identity manifestations within the symbolic language of the KSP artists, as they systematically resort to creating additional meanings through complex techniques of collage, or performative auctions.

²⁹ Rose 2001: 74

However, debates persist regarding the applicability of Saussure's framework to the dynamism of visual representations, particularly in understanding how meanings evolve in their usage. Scholars like Bal, Bryson, and Hodge and Kress have raised questions about Saussure's static view of sign functioning, prompting a search for more nuanced approaches.³⁰ Iversen highlights a crucial distinction between linguistic signs and visual signs: linguistic signs are considered arbitrary because there is no inherent connection between the sound of a word and its meaning; instead, meaning is established through convention or rules. In contrast, visual signs are described as "motivated" because they have a rationale for the choice of their signifiers. For instance, the word "dog" and an image of a dog convey meaning differently.³¹

In light of these considerations, this research turns to Charles Sanders Pierce's typology of signs, which offers a more intricate understanding of semiotics. Pierce delineated three categories of signs: *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*, each revealing distinct modes of signification. Iconic signs, characterized by their likeness to the signified, play a prominent role in visual images, notably within the realm of photography. Indexical signs rely on inherent cultural connections between the signifier and the signified, while symbolic signs establish conventional but arbitrary relations between them.³²

As illuminated by Hall, the semiotic codes offer a gateway to unravel the broader ideologies shaping a society. Indeed, as Hall notes, codes are the conduit through which we access the underlying orders of social life, economic and political power, and prevailing ideologies, effectively contracting relations between signs and the wider universe of societal beliefs and values. The meanings encapsulated within signs are, without a doubt, exceptionally intricate, engendering a complexity that gives rise to their multiplicity.³³ This multiplicity of meanings is referred to as *polysemy*, signifying that a single sign can convey multiple interpretations. The intriguing question that arises, as posited by Williamson, pertains to the ability of an advertisement, for instance, to assert a dominant and potent "preferred meaning" among these meanings, thus situating its viewers within a distinct socio-imaginary construct.³⁴ These preferred meanings, or *ideologies*, assume the mantle of preferred readings when interpreted

³⁰ Bal and Bryson 1991: 191-194; Hodge and Kress 1988: 15-18

³¹ Iversen 1986: 85

³² Bal and Bryson 1991: 188

³³ Rose 2001: 89

³⁴ Ibid: 92

by audiences in a manner that retains the institutional, political, and ideological structures imprinted upon them.³⁵

Hodge and Kress delve into the mobilization of signs as *metasigns* by social groups to demarcate their distinctiveness from others. These metasigns often find a place in advertisements targeting specific audiences, attempting to encode messages that resonate with that group and motivate them to make a purchase. For Hodge and Kress, social identity is fundamentally constructed through the lens of ideologies of social difference.³⁶ As demonstrated in this paper, the metasigns employed in photography works can indeed construct the difference of Kharkiv's chronotope, for instance, to establish a visual identity of its 'proud' provinciality which would turn to become a consolidative trope for the local art scene.

Semiological studies in the realm of image analysis require a profound familiarity with the specific type of images under examination. Scholars like Judith Williamson and Goldman have emphasized the importance of accumulating extensive collections of relevant images to support their research. However, it's worth noting that semiologists do not necessarily adhere to the rigorous sampling procedures employed, for instance, by content analysts. Instead, their selection of images appears to be driven by their conceptual significance. Unlike content analysis, there is no strict concern among semiologists to ensure that the chosen images represent a statistically representative sample of a broader image pool. The success or validity of the chosen visual case studies hinges primarily on their analytical rigor and the depth of insights they provide, rather than their ability to generalize to a wider range of visual material.³⁷

3.2.Discourse Analysis

In addition to the semiotic analysis, it is imperial for me to situate the photography works within the broader artists' sentiments about their identities and sense of belonging. With that aim, I resort to their writing and interviews, conducting a comprehensive critical discourse analysis of their statements.

Critical discourse analysis is a qualitative method allowing to explore data in the form of text, speech and conversations, verbal as well as non-verbal. Through discourse analysis, a

³⁵ Hall 1980: 134

³⁶ Hodge and Kress 1988: 79-80

³⁷ Rose 2001: 73

researcher may investigate the purpose and motivation underlying the data source. Discourse analysis has several characteristics, including action(s), context, historical background, and power.³⁸

Likewise, Van Dijk suggests that discourse analysis has three dimensions, i.e. text, social cognition, and social context.³⁹ There are three paradigms in critical discourse analysis. The positivist paradigm implies that the main objective of the discourse analysis is to investigate the compliance of the discourse to the syntactic and semantic rules, while the specific context is not of the principal importance. In contrast, the constructivist paradigm emphasizes the role of the hidden intentions underlying the discourse, while the critical paradigm examines the power relations and social forces behind it, thus emphasizing the role of the context. In analyzing the data source of this paper, I draw predominantly on the Critical and Constructivist paradigms. Therefore, the stages of this study include reading the interviews with and writings by the artists, defining their social and political context, connecting it to the backgrounds of the authors, analyzing the discourses expressed by them, and tracing their connections to the identarian narratives dominant in the political imaginaries provided by the various (supra)national actors involved in the Kharkiv area.

Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl and Liebhart differentiate a range of macro-strategies employed in the discursive formation of identities. Constructive strategies are aimed at consolidating a certain identity by emphasizing unification, singularization, homogeneity, and distinctiveness from the Other. Perpetuation strategy allows to securitize the issue of identity by constructing a threat to its existence, thus encouraging its support and protection. The strategy of justification is employed to exonerate the actor involved in certain problematic events through legitimizing his actions. Transformation strategies attempt to reconstruct the existing identity, while dismantling or destructive strategies are employed to demolish one.⁴⁰ Building upon the findings of visual semiotic analysis, this approach would allow us to trace how different identity construction strategies were employed in different artistic periods of KSP activity.

Anssi Paräkylä and Johanna Ruusuvuori note that a degree of predefined sets of procedures varies from one text-based research to another – some of them opt to rely to a larger extent on

³⁸ Jahedi, Abdullah, and Mukundan 2014: 29-30

³⁹ Ibid: 32-33

⁴⁰ Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart 2009: 36-42

some theoretical presuppositions about the cultural and social contexts of the materials analyzed. This allows us while analyzing the artists' interviews and writings, to combine the critical discourse analysis methodology, with the one inspired by oral history.⁴¹

Patel who resorted to oral history methodology to examine transracial adoption, points out that "As a methodological approach, oral history interviews seek to access the socially constructed reflective thoughts about an individual's life. That is not only accounts of their life experiences, but also how and why they have lived their life in the way that they have, and the thoughts and ideas that have guided their everyday behavior and interaction with others".⁴² For the purposes of this paper, I refrained from conducting any supplementary interviews with the artists. This decision was guided by the fact that the extant interviews, meticulously documented for both research and press purposes, have proven to be adequately comprehensive in addressing the research objectives of this study. Using elements of the oral history approach while analyzing them allows a better understanding of the social milieu of the respective eras, drawing on, for example the artists' personal experiences of dealing with administration, audience, or each other, memories of exhibitions, political attitudes, values, beliefs, artistic opinions and perspectives on their photographic philosophy.

4. Sources for KSOP Oeuvre Analysis

For the purposes of my thesis, I combine the analysis of the visual oeuvre of the Kharkiv School of Photography with a close reading of artists' individual written accounts, setting their photography within a wider identarian and emotional context. Hence, I rely primarily on the two types of sources, namely, visual materials (photography, collages, photomontage pieces etc. produced by the KSOP artists), and the KSOP artists' interviews and (auto)biographical publications. With a view to better contextualize my research, I as well refer to secondary academic literature, both on the KSOP itself, and Kharkiv (regional) identities in general.

4.1. Visual materials

As extensively seen as contrarian and ideologically troublesome during the Soviet era, the photographic works of the KSOP artists have for a long time remained unavailable for the general public, either kept in private collections, or unsystematically appearing within Western art publications and exhibitions, typically without a comment on their socio-political context.

⁴¹ Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori: 1164-1165

⁴² Leavy 2011: 10

Through refusing to fit into the master narrative of Soviet propaganda seeing photography as an instrument for creating the `right` image of the `right` people, Kharkiv art enthusiasts produced intentionally “out of norm” images of poverty, suffering, deviations and non-conformity, dooming themselves to ostracism. Either accused of pornography, as it happened to Mikhailov and Malyovany, or prohibited from sending their works abroad, the `amateurish` photo club members thus had little to no chances to share their art practices. Until recently, except for the world-famous Mikhailov, a significant part of the KSOP creative oeuvre was considered lost; even in 2023, there is still only minor visual documentation of practices by Sytnychenko or Tubalev, though both are generally referred to as remarkable `Vremya` group members and activists. With the earliest visual source of this paper being Daniela Mrazkova and Vladimir Remeš 1987 artbook *`Another Russia. Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers`*, mostly consisting, ironically, of the works of Lithuanian and Ukrainian photographers, it becomes apparent that I build my analysis on a far from exhaustive selection of images, found, arranged and published well after the time they were produced.

During the first two decades after the dissolution of the USSR, only several attempts were made to tackle the issue and exonerate the previously censored artists` creative heritage; in particular, such attempts were made within the other two visual sources I refer to in this paper. Launched in 2010 by Andriy Avdiyenko known for assembling a suitably impressive digital archive of KSOP images, Kyiv-based photography magazine 5.6 dedicated some of its issues (notably, No.7, May 2012, featuring Malyovany, Pavlov, Pyatkovka, Solonsky, Kochetovy, Rupyn, Suprun, Konstantinov, Bratkov, Sledyuk, Pesin, Okun`, Chursin, Pedan, Makiyenko, Minin, Avdiyenko, some of them being published for the first time) to the KSOP oeuvre. Similarly, in 2014 VASA online photography portal led by Ihor Manko presented a collection of a relatively vast number of KSOP artists` works, contextualized with a range of interviews and critical articles by Tatiana Pavlova and Manko himself. In this light, it is necessary to mention the efforts undertaken by other activist groups during the 2010s; in 2017, the growing interest in the KSOP practices was materialized through a total of three exhibitions in Poltava (`The Politics of Body. Kharkiv Photography from Hriniov Family Collection` curated by Halyna Gleba), Odessa (`Kharkiv 18+` curated by Sergyy Lebedinsky), and Kharkiv (Evgeny Pavlov` works retrospective curated by `Come in` gallery). Nevertheless, the efforts remained non-synchronous and somewhat fragmentary.

The situation changed dramatically in 2018 with the establishment of the MOKSOP (The Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography), which transformed into a centralized institution for preserving, researching, and popularizing Kharkiv photography. Initiated by Sergyy Lebedinsky, 'Shilo' group member and curator, the MOKSOP currently hosts the most comprehensive collection of the KSOP works, most of them being available digitally on the MOKSOP webpage. During 2018-2022, the museum regularly hosted exhibitions and educational events, prepared four printed editions of KSOP-related photo books (notably, 'KOCHETOV' by Victor and Sergey Kochetov in 2018, 'Schwarzenegger is my idol' by Sergey Menlnitchenko, 'Lillies' by Alexander Chekmenev and, eventually, a monumental critical contribution *'Kharkivs'ka shkola fotohrafyi: hra proty aparatu'* by Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk in 2020), and in 2021 facilitated the inclusion of some of the KSOP works into the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In February 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the MOKSOP carried out the evacuation of its artistic collection to Germany and Austria.

4.2. Individual accounts

Understandably, among all the representatives of Kharkiv photography circles, the most powerful bulwark of publications, both autobiographical and critical, is made up of those connected to the figure of Boris Mikhailov. Mikhailov started working with text as a medium in the late 1970s - early 1980s, when he moved to Moscow conceptual artists, notably Ilya Kabakov; with verbal part of an artistic practice being for conceptualists as important as the visual aspect, Mikhailov increasingly integrates author commentaries in his "Horizontal Pictures, Vertical Calendars" (1980), "Viscosity" (1982), and "Unfinished Dissertation" (1984–1985) series. After having his works featured in the aforementioned "Another Russia" in 1987, and later "Ny Sovjetisk Fotografi" [New Soviet Photography] exhibition in Denmark and Sweden, Mikhailov gradually gained a worldwide recognition; with his 'By the Ground' series becoming a part of New York's MOMA collection in 1993, the Gossler Kaiserring (2015) award-winning artist's texts, articles, excerpts from lectures and public discussions have extensively proliferated through a wide range of media and publications.

Nevertheless, some of the other KSOP artists have likewise expressed their visions on photography, Soviet heritage and Kharkiv creative environment. In his "Photographer's Diary", Juri Rupin, one of the "Vremya" group founders, stems from the perspective of a Kharkiv

photographer, who is also an informant for the KGB and thus bound to carefully observe his colleagues and the ideas discussed by them. A substantial contribution to the discussion of the KSP artistic methodology is the publications produced by the tandem of Evgeniy Pavlov, one of the most prominent KSOP representatives, and his wife Tatiana Pavlova, an art historian and author of a wide range of essays dealing with the KSOP visual oeuvre. An important part of the sources I use for this thesis is selected interviews with the KSOP artists, both featured within academic literature (as conducted by Nadiya Bernard-Kovalchuk etc.), and those available as digital publications - with many of them published not only through the MOKSOP, but also through other institutions (Pinchuk art centre, VASA portal etc.) and various art media (Bird in Flight, Your Art, Art Ukraine, Korydor etc.). Among them of particular prominence is the series of interviews conducted by Alina Sandulyak in 2017-2018, Sandulyak being one of the first art historians systematically approaching the KSOP heritage. Furthermore, for the purposes of my thesis, I am interested in the interviews (most of them with Boris Mikhailov, but also some other photographers) initiated by foreign media, in particular, Western and Russian, as they open up intriguing perspectives on the artists' visions of their identities.

4.3. Critical literature

For a moment of the year 2023, the most overarching and nuanced academic publication on the history of the KSOP, and the visual peculiarities of KSOP photography, is Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk's *Kharkivs'ka shkola fotohrafiyi: hra proty aparatu*. Having authored more than a dozen scholarly work pieces on the KSOP since 2017, in her 2020 monograph Bernard-Kovalchuk brings up Vilém Flusser's concept of experimental photography as a game against the rules of the *apparatus*, i.e. the camera⁴³; the leitmotif of the eponymous work (*hra proty aparatu* meaning 'the game against the *apparatus*'), the maxim becomes an apt metaphor for the KSOP enthusiasts' life-long fight against the totality of the Soviet regime – but not only.

Besides Bernard-Kovalchuk, within the MOKSOP umbrella, a whole constellation of Ukrainian art historians turned to the heritage of Kharkiv photography scene, producing extensive research on the different aspects of various artists' practices. Though Tatiana Pavlova's essays still remain the most classical and unparalleledly 'first-hand' critical accounts on the photographic processes of dissident Kharkiv, the younger generation of researchers appears to be increasingly engaged in bringing the new critical perspectives to the scholarly discourse

⁴³ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020:178-179

on the KSOP. In her 'Urban Opera of Boris Mikhailov' Olena Chervonik focuses on the role of the city in the Kharkiv artistic processes, while Halyna Hleba and Kateryna Yakovlenko make a daring attempt to address the issue of queer representation in the KSOP visual oeuvre. Lia Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev explore the tropes of historical trauma and collective memories as the KSOP artists' instruments to resist the Soviet master narrative.

Among the authors not directly affiliated with the MOKSOP, it is crucial to distinguish Alisa Lozhkina and her brilliant 2020 monography 'Permanent Revolution. Art in Ukraine. 20th to the early 21st century; in 'Permanent Revolution', Lozhkina dedicates substantial attention to the KSOP works, setting them within the wider all-Ukrainian art process. Beyond that, during the recent decades KSOP has become an object of interest for a significantly wider academic audience, both in Ukraine and abroad; in 'The Lithuanian and Kharkiv Schools of Art Photography: Intersections in 1969 – 1991', Vilnius-based Ukrainian scholar and photographer Valentyn Odnoviun explores the bilateral influences of the KSOP and the Lithuanian Schools of Art Photography, while Małgorzata Radkiewicz draws parallels between the works of the KSOP artists and their Polish contemporaries. Additionally, Boris Mikhailov's creative oeuvre has been extensively covered through books and articles of the world's prominent critics (Boris Groys, Margarita Tupitsyn etc.) Nonetheless, the identarian aspects of the KSOP artistic heritage remain understudied.

5. Historical Background

The onset of Kharkiv's settlement is commonly associated with the eruption of the Khmelnytsky Uprising on Ukrainian lands in the mid-seventeenth century. The streams of peasants who fled from Polish landowners of Right-Bank territories constituted the majority of settlers in lands that were once inhabited but practically entirely devastated as a result of the Mongol-Tatar invasion, turning them into the *Dyke Pole* ("the Wild Field") Engaging with the irregular population of the *Dyke Pole* in various forms – including chaotic settlers and individual communities involved in raiding along trade routes from Crimea to Moscow – the new wave of runaway peasants gradually transformed the former zone of anarchy and discord into a border region known as "Sloboda Ukraine" or "Slobozhanshchyna" (Kravchenko 2020: 171). The name of the region derived from the word *sloboda*, meaning a settlement exempt from taxes– a "no man's land".⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Zhurzhenko 2010: 222-223

The self-awareness as of a "*no man's land*," tolerant to influences from all sides and profiting from these influences, persisted in Kharkiv, found in 1654, in a certain form until relatively recent times. With the influx of Russian settlers who became interested in the growing city on the intersection of trade roads, a specific national and linguistic parity was established in the region, downplaying affiliations with identity narratives dictated by various external geopolitical forces. This lasted until 1765 when the lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire, and the Cossack administrative unit of *Sloboda Ukraine* was replaced with the status of the Sloboda-Ukrainian governorate with its capital in the city of Kharkiv.⁴⁵

As the first of the Ukrainian territories to be annexed by the Russian Empire, Slobozhanshchyna was significantly russified, adopting the category imposed by the St. Petersburg regime, "*Little Russia*".⁴⁶ However, due to a favorable tax regime established by the tsar, the city gained impressive economic influence and by the early 19th century had become a significant trading and educational hub. In 1804, a university was founded here - the second oldest in modern Ukraine - where, fueled by a wave of ethnographic and cultural research, a movement emerged based on the aesthetics of Ukrainian romanticism⁴⁷ and united by the Ukrainian national idea.⁴⁸

Riding the wave of industrialization, by the end of the nineteenth century, Kharkiv had become one of the empire's key industrial and railway centers, leading to a significant influx of Russian migrants into the region.⁴⁹ Confronted with intensified russification, Kharkiv's intelligentsia, now bearers of ideas of a more mature modern nationalism, began to consolidate their efforts to create an alternative to the "Little Russian" identity, which was reinforced by the broader doctrine of Orthodox-Slavic "Russianness." In 1906, a Ukrainian-language newspaper called "*Slobozhanshchyna*" was established in Kharkiv. According to the 1897 census, 63 percent of city dwellers identified themselves as Russian speakers, while the voices of predominantly Ukrainian-speaking peasants settling in the outskirts of the city were not taken into account in this survey.⁵⁰ However, in this context, the prevalence of the Ukrainian

⁴⁵ Baker 2016: 10

⁴⁶ Kravchenko 2020: 180

⁴⁷ Bilenky 2012: 270

⁴⁸ Himka 2006: 484

⁴⁹ Baker 2016: 11

⁵⁰ Ibid

language among the peasant population did not necessarily indicate specific national sympathies.⁵¹

This shapeshifting characteristic of Kharkiv's population became even more pronounced after 1918 when Kharkiv was declared the capital of the Ukrainian SSR (a status it held until 1934), solidifying Kharkiv's dual identity as both colonized and colonizer. With the majority of the population (38.6 percent) identifying as Ukrainians in 1926, Kharkiv strengthened its role as a military-industrial center⁵², but at the same time, it became a hub for avant-garde art, to a large extent due to the contributions of the constructivist artist Vasyl Yermilov and poet Valerian Polishchuk. In comparison to Kyiv, for which the Bolsheviks' rise to power resulted in shattered hopes for independence and a symbolic "downgrade" in status, Kharkiv experienced the opposite – an elevation in significance.⁵³ Naturally, many representatives of the progressive creative and scientific intelligentsia in Kharkiv – many of whom attempted to preserve their Ukrainian identity – became victims of Stalin's repressions in the 1930s.⁵⁴ The Ukrainian-speaking population of Kharkiv also suffered significant losses during the Holodomor of 1932-1933, an event the collective oblivion of which photographer Roman Pyatkovka would reflect upon in 1988.

After Ukraine declared its independence, the situation in the region became even more complex. As Kravchenko notes, Kharkiv "*contributed immensely to both modern Ukrainian and Soviet national culture and mythology*".⁵⁵ Shedding the aura of Soviet grandeur proved to be a challenging task for Kharkiv. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, local political elites in Kharkiv attempted to popularize a regional version of "Ukrainianness" – one that turned out to be almost quasi-Soviet.⁵⁶

Zhurzhenko suggests the following attributes of "Kharkiv identity" based on the image constructed during this period by representatives of the city's political elite, most of whom were Russian-speaking: the glorious Cossack past with its democratic traditions, the peaceful character of hardworking Ukrainian peasants, a "multiculturalism" and ethnic tolerance typical of borderlands, the historical experience of cooperation between Russians and Ukrainians, the

⁵¹ Ibid: 202-203

⁵² Kravchenko 2020: 188

⁵³ Lozhnikina 2020: 90-91

⁵⁴ Zhurzhenko 2016: 103

⁵⁵ Kravchenko 2020: 220

⁵⁶ Zhurzhenko 2016: 104

settlement mentality with its liberal and individualistic attitudes, and the prosperity of merchants and the capitalist spirit of Kharkiv.⁵⁷ In this context, the template both directly and indirectly presented in the discourse of certain Kharkiv politicians is the one of Kharkiv as an alternative to the "westernized" Kyiv. It was during the period of the early 2000s that Kharkiv adopted its quasi-official brand of being the "*First Capital*".⁵⁸

In the 2004 presidential elections, the majority of Kharkiv residents supported the pro-Russian-oriented Viktor Yanukovych.⁵⁹ The discourse surrounding the recognition of the Holodomor as an artificially orchestrated act by the Stalinist regime, later promoted during President Yushchenko's term with its explicitly anti-Soviet connotations, was largely not embraced by the Kharkiv community. This contributed to the intensification of discussions about the region's "special" status.⁶⁰ The consensus reached between the pro-European "Orange Coalition" and the largely pro-Russian "Party of Regions" was practically shattered against this backdrop.

Thus, Kharkiv's identity profile appears to be quite multifaceted and multi-level. Kravchenko identifies three main modes of belonging for Kharkiv residents - Ukrainian national, Russian Orthodox-imperial, and regional post-Soviet.⁶¹ Consequently, regional identity here is seen as a direct heir to the supranational social structure of the Soviet era. Zhurzhenko suggests that the popularization of "Slobozhanshchyna" identity largely emerged in response to the aggressive promotion of exclusively Ukrainian national identity. "Slobozhanshchyna" can be seen as a concept that implies a balanced and mutually beneficial interaction between Ukrainian and Russian elements on the "free land." This discourse resonates with Rodgers' thesis that positions Kharkiv as a "mediator of relations between Russia and Ukraine."⁶² Zhurzhenko also notes that in addition to widespread intermarriages, economic factors have influenced Kharkiv's hybridity and cultural ambivalence. Unlike other regions, such as Rinat Akhmetov's dominance in Donetsk, Kharkiv did not have a hegemonic oligarchic interest group.⁶³ In one way or another, Kharkiv's ideological pluralism allowed for the coexistence of various political forces within the city, including non-liberal ones, both Soviet-nostalgic and pro-Russian,

⁵⁷ Zhurzhenko 2010: 221-222

⁵⁸ Kravchenko 2009

⁵⁹ Rodgers 2008: 75

⁶⁰ Kulyk 2019: 1034

⁶¹ Kravchenko 2019: 330

⁶² Rodgers, 2008: 75

⁶³ Zhurzhenko 2016: 105

Ukrainian far-right organizations, and the pro-Ukrainian liberal democratic scene. These dynamics exist alongside the equally heterogeneous sentiments of the city's population.

6. Evolution of the Kharkiv Photographic Community (1965-2013)

6.1. Predecessors

It was Kharkiv's 1960s counterculture scene that laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Kharkiv School of Photography. Despite the city's self-perceived status as a cultural "periphery" in relation to Moscow and Western countries, the post-avant-garde era of the 1960s marked a rekindling of cultural vibrancy in Kharkiv, particularly responding to the thaw of Khrushchev's era. This cultural rejuvenation, however, was coupled with a persistent awareness of its own "province" position, contributing to a distinct sense of underground identity within the city's cultural scene. Key figures like poets Boris Chichibabin and Yuli Daniel, as well as writer Eduard Limonov and conceptual artist Vagrich Bakhchanyan, cultivated connections within this milieu. These individuals, rooted in the poetic and literary circles of Kharkiv, shared an affinity for non-conformist expressions and artistic experimentation. This environment fostered interactions between established historical avant-garde figures and the emerging generation of the 1960s, setting the stage for the subsequent photography movement.

The city's artistic life revolved around poetry during the mid-1960s, to a large extent catalyzed by the return of poet Boris Chichibabin from Stalinist labor camps. Chichibabin's popularity, sparked by his self-published poetry collections, drew attention not only from the local intelligentsia but also from the entire USSR. This literary resurgence also featured the presence of Yuli Daniel, a Soviet poet, writer, journalist, and dissident who maintained connections with the intellectual community in Kharkiv, indirectly bridging the gap between generations.

Institutional platforms, such as the "Metallurg" and "Communication" played a crucial role in nurturing the cultural movement. These state-sanctioned studios, originally established to channel the potentially explosive energies of young people to a 'healthy' direction, unintentionally became hubs of artistic exchange and non-formal education. Notably, artists like Eduard Limonov and Boris Chichibabin made their initial consolidative artistic steps within these contexts. Artist and puppeteer Oleksiy Shcheglov utilized the Palace of Culture "Metallurg" to host artistic workshops and performances. This venue also became significant

due to the presence of workshops of artists who had played pivotal roles in the avant-garde movement of the 1920s, such as Vasily Ermilov and Boris Kosarev. The "Communication" Palace of Culture, overseen by Boris Chichibabin, came to be known as a "phenomenon of the early 1960s."

Interestingly, the rise of the Kharkiv School of Photography was also closely linked to the emergence of the "Blue Horse" group, a clandestine collective primarily comprised of young individuals from privileged bureaucratic families. This group embodied a countercultural movement that challenged the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable by the Soviet authorities. The aftermath of the group's public demonstration and its subsequent repression highlighted the tensions between the emerging artistic expressions and the authorities' attempts to control them.⁶⁴ The significance of this manifestation of freedom was underscored by Boris Mikhailov when he titled the first section of his diary "Blue Horse." Another display of audacity during the 1960s was the exhibition organized in May 1965 by representatives of the Kharkiv avant-garde, including Bakhchanyan and Hryhorov, held in one of the courtyards on Sumskaya Street. Named "Under the Arch," it became a legendary gesture of "terrifying disobedience," challenging the heightened criticism of formalism that followed the Khrushchev-initiated dismantling of the Manege exhibition in 1962. The nexus between two generations of the Kharkiv underground - the writers of the 1960s and the photographers of the 1970s - lies in their shared motivations. Yuri Miloslavsky, a writer and journalist who was part of the clandestine literary community in Kharkiv during the 1960s, succinctly articulated the significance that literature held for him and his contemporaries during that era: "...literature allowed us to escape from boredom and insignificance." Remarkably, this definition resonated with the words of Yevheniy Pavlov, who explained the motivations behind the birth of the Kharkiv underground photographic movement as a desire to "live not in a boring way." "Even as a provincial but former capital of Ukraine, Kharkiv knew how to engage in cultural games," wrote Limonov in 1986. He, like many of his contemporaries such as Vagrich Bakhchanyan and Yuri Miloslavsky, could not reconcile himself with the "peripheral" atmosphere and chose emigration. However, it is precisely through this internal struggle and resistance to the provincial complex that many of the processes that commenced in Kharkiv in subsequent years are intertwined.

⁶⁴ Pavlova 2019

Despite their worship for freedom, most of the artists of the 1960s generation were not overtly political dissidents. Raised by parents who had experienced the Great Patriotic War and who supported communist ideals, these artists were nevertheless intrigued by the post-Stalin thaw, artistic freedom, and Western pop culture. Events like the Picasso exhibition in 1956 marked the introduction of Western modernism into the late Soviet artistic landscape. The establishment of the Regional Photo Club in the Palats Profspil'kok (the Palace of Trade Unions) introduced a new dimension to the Kharkiv cultural scene becoming a center for photographic non-conformism in the following decade.

6.2. Kharkiv Regional Photo Club

Despite the closed nature and constant departure of the most talented figures of local culture, non-conformist artists, photographers, and writers continued to emerge in Kharkiv who were simultaneously responsive to the city's specifics and open to external influences. It was the ability to consolidate communities through communication and mutual assistance that allowed artistic experiments to be revived in the city. In the field of photography, such a community formed around the regional photo club founded in 1965. Initially, its activities promoted education and technical improvement of photography among the city's photo enthusiasts. However, at a certain point, the focus within the club began to shift toward reflecting on photography as an art form: in the early 1970s, a kind of generational split happened: eight members of the future "Vremya" group came to the forefront.

In the mid-1960s, other workshops and photo clubs were functioning in the city in addition to the one that opened on April 26, 1965, in the Palace of Trade Unions on Haharina Street. For example, the workshop of the artist-sixtiers Vladimir Hryhorov was attended by Oleg Malovany, Hennadii Tubaliev, and Yevhen Pavlov, while Alexander Suprun and, again, Oleg Malovany participated in the photo club of the KhEMZ (Kharkiv Electromechanical Plant) Palace of Culture. However, it was precisely from the second half of the 1960s that the city's photographic life significantly revived due to regional-level exhibitions and other events, often initiated and led by one of the leaders of the new photo club, Herman Driukov (1934-2001).⁶⁵

The first journal of the photo club analyzed by Bernard-Kovalchuk allows us to understand the peculiarities of club work from its founding until 1970.⁶⁶ The journal includes a list of club

⁶⁵ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 38

⁶⁶ *ibid*: 39

participants, monitoring attendance, dates of meetings with the number of attendees, a list of speakers, and topics of presentations. The reports most often dealt with reviewing works, preparing for club exhibitions, presenting photographic equipment, and information about official photo contests. This clearly manifests that during the period between 1956 and 1970, the target audience of the club was, at least nominally, the broad masses of the population: at the time of its establishment, there were 105 individuals, by the end of 1966 – 76, then 82 in 1967, 64 in 1968, 82 in 1969, and 97 in 1970. Despite this claimed amateur status, according to the recollections shared by Yuri Rupin in his "Photographer's Diary" and the testimonies of Alexander Suprun, the club discussions demanded a good technical level from the participants and concerned relatively advanced photo enthusiasts.⁶⁷ Suprun asserted that "the older generation came to the club mostly to socialize, to show off the equipment they bought, the developer they used. They mostly discussed matters related to the photographic 'kitchen,' rather than creative themes." ⁶⁸ Rupin, who joined the photo club after 1970, quickly realized that the dominant mechanism for defining photography as "artistic" was built primarily on its technical quality:

In the photo club, those who had a direct or professional relationship with photography or were passionate about it as a hobby gathered. Later, when I became a member of this photo club and got to know almost all of its members, it turned out that not everyone who attended these meetings had the same attitude towards photography. Most saw and valued in it mainly the technical aspect, even evaluating from this perspective those photographs that they submitted to various exhibitions claiming the title of "artistic." ⁶⁹

Concurrently, Repin observes that such emphasis on technique is justified not so much by the technical essence of photography, but rather by the scarcity of quality resources in the Soviet Union, especially in relation to personal, non-professional, or artistic photography. Via the club's archives, we can chart the emergence of forthcoming members of the "Vremya" association, who commenced assembling regularly around 1971. The initial name to surface in the journal was Boris Mikhailov in June 1906, trailed by Oleksandr Suprun, whose irregular appearances at the club commenced in 1967. Meanwhile, Boris Mikhailov, following a certain

⁶⁷ Rupin 2008

⁶⁸ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 321

⁶⁹ Rupin 2008

hiatus, reemerges in the journal within the 13th edition of 1968-1969, and thenceforth, his presence becomes more consistent. In the same year's December, Hennadii Tubalev enrolled in the club. In 1969, the designations of Oleh Malovany, Oleksandr Sitnichenko, and Yuriy Bratkov, the elder sibling of Serhiy Bratkov, appeared. In 1970, amidst the attendees, we also identify Mikhailov, who participates in the gatherings with reasonable regularity, Tubalev, Malovan, and Suprun.

One of the unwavering leaders of this club evolved to be Herman Dryukov. Commencing with the inaugural selections to the artistic committee, he steadfastly occupies leading roles, even following March 1975 when the members of the already formed "Vremya" group - Mikhailov, Malovan, Rupin, Suprun, Pavlov, Sitnichenko, Tubalev, Makienko decided to assume command of the photo club. On April 5, 1966, Dryukov delivered an address concerning the measures requisite to avert the dissolution of the photo club. He suggested, acknowledging the diverse composition of the photo club, the establishment of two distinct segments: one for "novices" and another for a "creative division," underscoring the necessity to elevate the degree of "expertise" within the club.⁷⁰ This address enables us to comprehend the primary trajectories and objectives of this preliminary phase of the club's operations, when the instruction of fundamental photography techniques, lacking in state educational institutions, triumphed over aesthetic considerations.

The roster of subjects put forth for club competitions, as announced on April 19, 1966 – namely, Best Genre Photography," "Kharkiv Today," "My Holidays" - illustrates their triviality, conformity, and repetitious character. Herman Dryukov was part of the generation that still read and held the magazine "Soviet Photo" in high regard, primarily due to the technical quality of the photographs it featured. For the younger photographers, as later chronicled by Repin in his Diary, the magazine exemplified "creative inadequacy and stagnation." Herman Dryukov possessed exceptional technical knowledge and proficiency in photography, and his creations continued to be showcased in the pages of "Soviet Photo" even after the closure of the regional photo club (Issue 3, 1976, Issue 517, 1977). Yet, his photographic creations reveal not only an interest in the technical quality of the image and its ideological content but also a quest for formal and pictorial effects in photography. In Dryukov's graphic experiments, art historian Tetiana Pavlova perceives connections to historical avant-garde and a tendency toward abstraction. Dynamic collages by Dryukov,

⁷⁰ *ibid*

reminiscent of the photographic avant-garde of the 1920s, show that the connection with the avant-garde heritage, suppressed by the Soviet regime, was restored.⁷¹ It seems truly significant, thanks to the efforts of Herman Dryukov, to nuance the notion of the "creative sterility" of the photo club during its early stages and also the undivided dominance of the "technical aspect" within it until the emergence of the "Vremya" group. According to Yuriy Repin, it was during the club meetings that he first learned about the concept of "artistic photography," whereas previously, he considered photographic illustrations for newspapers and magazines to be the pinnacle of photographic practice. Thus, credit must be given to the first generation of photo club members who introduced the concept of "artistic photography" into operation, even if this term was primarily interpreted through the lens of technical excellence. For the members of the "Vremya" group, it remained to adjust the criteria for assessing the "artistic," enabling the course of audacious photographic practices to fully take root in Kharkiv.

The divergences that separated the group of young photographers from the rest of the photo club could initially be explained by a commonplace generational conflict. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the root of their confrontation was more closely linked to their understanding of the nature of photography and the criteria for its evaluation. While according to the tenets of official aesthetics, photography was for most club members a technical means of reproducing reality, for the young photographers, this tenet appeared overly restrictive or even entirely erroneous. Repin notes that in the early 1970s, the photo club divided into "those for whom 'quality' and the technical details of the photographic process were pivotal in photography," and "those for whom such criteria were not defining."⁷² Even if, according to the guest book of one of the club's exhibitions dated 1972, photographs by Mikhailov, Pavlov, Suprun, Repin, and Tubalev evoke the same positive reaction from the audience as photographs by other club members, the split nevertheless seems inevitable.

6.3. Kharkiv School of Photography

In his 2018 interview, second KSOP generation artist Roman Pyatkovka connects the emergence of the *Kharkiv School of Photography* term to the latter half of the 1980s when some Western art theorists including Daniela Mrazkova, Vladimir Remesh, and Hannu

⁷¹ Pavlova 2018

⁷² Rupin 2008

Erikainen arrived in Kharkiv.⁷³ The conceptual foundation of the Kharkiv School of Photography (KSOP) was further developed by Boris Mikhailov, its significance being later accentuated throughout the period of *perestroika*, referred to by some Kharkiv artists as the *Gorbyboom* ("Gorbachev boom"), a phenomenon of a rapid surge of interest in contemporary art within the Soviet Union, prompting western galleries and festivals to engage Soviet artists and photographers. «It turned out that the art *here* was not worse than *there*», Pyatkovka comments.⁷⁴

In delineating the KSOP contextual landscape, it is pertinent to acknowledge the challenge of categorizing the Kharkiv photographic movement under the term "school." In her «*Kharkivs'ka shkola fotohrafii: hra proty aparatu*», Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk notes that unlike the unequivocal association of the term "school" with the Düsseldorf School of Photography, the application of the term to Kharkiv's context is less straightforward. Kharkiv "school", devoid of an educational institution, teachers, or a structured curriculum, has initially comprised a circle of photographers driven by the latent potential of the medium and disheartened by its societal neglect stemming from prevailing biases.⁷⁵

The precise moment of the "school's" inception remains elusive. Its genesis can be traced to the emergence of new generations of photographers who shared the same objectives and principles as their predecessors. This linkage, however, manifests in diverse expressions: some assert lineage, while others markedly distance themselves. The pivotal junctures encompass the one-day exhibition of the "Vremya" group in 1983 and the "F-87" and "F-88" exhibitions curated by Misha Pedan, which united representatives of two generations. The subsequent declaration of the "Shylo" group in 2010 epitomizes an ongoing architectural layer within this narrative, centering on the reinterpretation of the Kharkiv School's legacy.⁷⁶

The initial employment of the term "school" remains similarly unresolved. The publication of Mrázková and Remeš' 1986 collection of "new soviet photography" fails to mention the term "school" in relation to Kharkiv, despite referencing Boris Mikhailov, Misha Pedan and Sergey Bratkov.⁷⁷ One of the earliest and most significant publications mentioning Kharkiv artists

⁷³ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Pyatkovka 2020: 333

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 12

⁷⁶ About Shilo. URL: <https://cargocollective.com/shilo/about-shilo>

⁷⁷ Mrázková and Remeš 1986

(Boris Mikhailov, Misha Pedan, Sergey Bratkov, Oleh Malovanyi, Yevhen Pavlov, Roman Pyatkovka, Boris Redka, and Kostyantyn Melnyk), "*Seeing Things Differently: The New Soviet Photography*", the work of Finnish researchers Hannu Eerikänen and photographer Taneli Eskola, published in 1988 - references the "Gosprom" group and a certain group of artists referred to as "Panorama".⁷⁸ Although the publication provides the most comprehensive information available at the time about the Kharkiv photographic scene, its authors never employ the term "school." Instead, Eerikänen and Eskola include Kharkiv photographers within a broader circle of artists from the entire Soviet Union, whom they categorize using a term borrowed from the cinema world - the "new wave of Soviet photography." With few exceptions, the subsequent phase of unveiling unofficial Soviet photography, the longest and most prolific stage, witnessed Boris Mikhailov's works receiving their first international recognition. This recognition resulted from efforts by American critics, collectors, and institutions. This movement was initiated by a special issue of the journal *Apertur* dedicated to "new Soviet photography," in which Kharkiv authors are featured, including photographs by Bratkov and Mikhailov.⁷⁹ Starting from this issue, a global tendency emerges, characteristic of the entire historiography of the "new photography," to emphasize Boris Mikhailov's closeness to the Moscow art scene and to ignore the existence of any community of photographers in Kharkiv. An exhibition held in 1990 at the MIT List Visual Arts Center consisted of two parts: a personal one dedicated to Boris Mikhailov, and a collective one that brought together young Moscow photographers influenced by his work (Vladimir Kupriyanov, Ilya Piganov, Maria Serebryakova, Alexey Shulgin). The sole reference to any presence of art in Kharkiv is summed up by the sentence "His [Boris Mikhailov's] works influenced the orientation of Moscow photographers and the development of artistic trends in Kharkiv."⁸⁰ One of the most evident examples of this disregard, at times appearing deliberate by critics, can be found in the catalog of the 1995 exhibition held in Berlin at the Akademie der Künste. In this context, respected Russian art historian Ekaterina Diogot refers to the series "*If I were a German*," created by the Group of Immediate Reaction (Boris Mikhailov, Vita Mikhailova, Sergey Bratkov, Sergey Solonsky) in 1994, but misattributes the date (1995) solely to Mikhailov and throughout the passage does not mention either Kharkiv or its artists.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Eerikänen and Eskola 1988: 18

⁷⁹ *Apertur* 1989

⁸⁰ Jacob and Salzirn 1990: 28-29

⁸¹ Dyogot 1995: 17

One of the earliest instances of the term "school" appears in an article by Tetiana Pavlova in the Slovak journal *Imago*, discussing the Group of Immediate Reaction exhibition at the Kharkiv Museum of Fine Arts in 1995.⁸² Notably recognized for the swift reaction of the museum administration and societal censorship to Boris Mikhailov's "*I Am Not I*" series (1992), this collective exhibition consisted of three projects by Boris Mikhailov, Sergey Solonsky, and Sergey Bratkov. Referred to as "neo-expressionist photography,"⁸³ "neo-photo-expressionism,"⁸⁴ or "subjective photography," as proposed by Tetiana Pavlova, this exhibition served as a catalyst for introducing the concept of "school" from the outset of the article. The article suggested that *authenticity* can be characterized as a distinctive feature of Kharkiv photography, aligning with the hedonistic principle inherent to this school: "*This principle, rooted in the pursuit of pleasure derived from revealing the truth, further substantiates the usage of the term 'school'.*"⁸⁵ If this quoted passage indeed represents one of the earliest instances of the term's usage in historiography, it becomes evident that this theoretical construct emerged relatively late. Interestingly, the term is systematically employed most significantly by the youngest generation, notably the participants of the "Shylo" group. However, while some photographers advocate for its use (Yevhen Pavlov, Ihor Manko, Oleh Malyovany, "Shylo" group), others approach it skeptically (Victor Kochetov, Sergey Solonsky). Bernard-Kovalchuk argues that this disparity necessitates a reevaluation of its legitimacy – «*could alternative terms such as "movement," "community," "scene," or "circle" be more appropriate?*»⁸⁶

Bernard-Kovalchuk concludes that considering the term's usage in art history, it becomes apparent that several precedents justify its application to the Kharkiv context. For instance, she refers to the example of the New York School of Photography showcasing photographers with distinct orientations, ranging from strengthening the ties between photography and socio-political issues to those renowned for advertising and fashion photography or celebrity portraits. However, between photographers active in the 1930s and those embarking on their careers post-war, a generational lineage persists, fostered by shared educational environments like Brodovitch's Design Laboratory and common cultural orientations. historians and critics

⁸² Pavlova 1995: 67

⁸³ Kuzma 1995: 166

⁸⁴ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Solonsky 2020: 339

⁸⁵ Pavlova 1995: 67

⁸⁶ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 16

find legitimacy in characterizing this context as a "school."⁸⁷ In the context of this example, both conditions necessary to define a specific circle of individuals within the Kharkiv photographic community as a "school" are met: periodic presence and work creation by photographers within a defined, localized space, as well as tangible intergenerational connections.

Still, the artistic processes in the Kharkiv photography scene have been seething long before they were theoretically conceptualized. Starting from the early 1970s, the Kharkiv School of Photography emerged as a distinct force marked by a departure from conventional Soviet paradigms of photographic representation. Originating from the accomplishments of Boris Mikhailov and Sergey Bratkov, whose works garnered international recognition from the 2000s onward, Kharkiv photography is renowned for its unembellished, unapologetic documentary aesthetics that cast an unyielding light on the imperfections of Soviet and emerging Ukrainian societies. Mostly famous for Boris Mikhailov's controversial series *"Case History"* (1997-1998) and Sergey Bratkov's *"Kids"* (2000), the movement is commonly associated with a stark, candid portrayal of societal realities that defies traditional representational norms.

However, a closer examination of the Kharkiv School reveals a more profound hallmark: a persistent determination to transcend established frameworks of photographic comprehension. Beyond its internationally acclaimed exemplars, the school's repertoire features works that challenge photography's role as a direct mirror of reality. These interventions into photographic materials manifest as deliberate photomontages, double exposures that complicate immediate interpretation, diverse color manipulations, and experimental darkroom processes. This concerted effort to disrupt the seamless correspondence between photography and reality is indicative of a deeper engagement with the medium's intrinsic properties. Utilizing diverse strategies, Kharkiv School photographers either amplify the space between the image and its subject or introduce doubt regarding their unequivocal alignment. This duality often intertwines with irony and expressions of absurdity, capturing the essence of surrealism, or *"shiza"*, as referred to locally. By shedding light on this inherent discord concealed beneath the official Soviet aesthetics, the Kharkiv School photographers simultaneously challenge photography's essence and broaden its creative potential.

⁸⁷ Ibid

Boris Mikhailov succinctly captured this approach, stating that during the 1970s, *"All unofficial art was regarded as secondary, provincially imitative appropriation of discourses and styles passed by Western art... Perhaps, for the general direction, it doesn't seem like it; it was an expansion of its possibilities."*⁸⁸ This inclination towards expanding photography's horizons emerged as a distinct feature, setting the movement apart from other non-official artistic endeavors.

The formal approaches within the Kharkiv School of Photography can be discerned through the lens of experimental photography as proposed by Flusser. Firstly, photographers of the school aimed to subvert the conventions of journalistic reportage photography, which held societal recognition due to its utilitarian nature in the Soviet Union. This involved notions of "fiction," "photographic games," and manipulations of photographic time. Some photographers sought to reappropriate historical narratives, while others reexamined the principles of reportage photography, emphasizing authorial subjectivity.

Secondly, a series of works complexified photographic imagery, such as collages and juxtapositions (*"buterbrody"*). These endeavors engage the viewer's sensory experience, prompting a more prolonged and conscious observation. Situational creation holds central importance, intertwining text and image, notably championed by Boris Mikhailov. This practice shifts photographers away from the realm of autonomous paper sheets towards a play between photography and the tangible world, primarily books, as their presentation medium.

Moreover, manipulation of objects has taken root within Kharkiv photography, becoming an enduring method of practice, facilitating the transition from flat image surfaces to object manipulation in space. These pieces, inherently object-oriented and assembled from diverse, not always photographic, elements, challenge traditional photographic gestures. Yet, by emphasizing presentation contexts, they contribute to challenging the notion of the camera's neutral and transparent nature.⁸⁹

In attempting to define unofficial and non-traditional photographic practices in the former USSR, Western critics hesitate with terms. Suggestions like "artistic photography," "photo-

⁸⁸ Mikhailov 2005: 185

⁸⁹ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 182

based practices," "photo-dependent practices," or even "photo-related works of art" can be encountered. However, all of them seem imprecise and, more importantly, affected by a significant shortcoming: these terms do not fully capture the central problem of most of the works in question. This problem is photography itself. In light of this, it seemed imperative to find a different way of explaining what precisely unites all these experiences, from the destruction of photographic images to their integration into three-dimensional objects.

The movement is traditionally considered to encompass three generations. The first generation is represented by eight members of the "Vremya" group: Boris Mikhailov (1938), Gennady Tubalev (1944-2006), Oleg Malovany (1945), Alexander Suprun (1945), Yuri Rupin (1946-2008), Alexander Sitnichenko (1948-2018), Yevgeniy Pavlov (1949), and Anatoliy Makienko (1949). Evidence from photographers, documents found in Yuri Rupin's family archives, and his diary entries lead to the conclusion that the actual existence of the group ceased after the club's closure in 1975 or 1976.

Defining the individuals belonging to the second generation, the most populous and diverse, is challenging. Some entered the Kharkiv photographic community in the early 1980s, while others became active in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Certain members, like Victor Kochetov (1947), positioned themselves between the first and second generations. Others, such as Sergey Solonsky (1957), Roman Pyatkovka (1955), and Igor Chursin (1962), show variations in ideals from the previous generation. Those taking a position of distinctiveness include representatives of the "Contacts" group, many of whom later joined the "Gosprom" group. Formed around 1986 after Gennady Maslov's (1959) departure to Ethiopia, the "Gosprom" group dissolved in the early 1990s. The group included seven photographers: Volodymyr Starko (1956), Leonid Pesin (1956), Misha Pedan (1957), Boris Redko (1959), Sergey Bratkov (1960), Konstantin Melnik (1960), and Igor Manko (1962), with Grigoriy Okun (1957) also closely associated. Some members of the previous generation continued to participate in the city's photographic life, while others, particularly Yuri Rupin, shifted focus away from artistic photography to other projects. Rupin's case illustrates a common challenge for all members of this unofficial photographic community: photography demanded significant time and resources, with material costs being high and processing labor-intensive. The economic gain from photography was negligible for authors, except for a few works by Oleg Malyovany. Beyond state information agencies, engaging in photography was primarily a lifestyle, not a profession.

The third generation emerges in two stages on the Kharkiv scene: first in the socio-critical works of the "SOSka" group active from 2005 to 2010 (Elena Polyashchenko (1972), Bella Logachova (1973), Sergey Popov (1978), Mykola Ridnyi (1985), and Anna Kriventsova (1985)), and later, from the early 2010s, with the "Shilo" group (Vasilisa Nezabora (pseudonym of Oleksiy Sobolev, 1975), Vladislav Krasnoshchok (1980), Sergey Lebedinsky (1982), Vadim Trykoz (1984), as well as Roman Minin (1981) and Igor Chekachkov (1989)). In addition to confirming lineage, the youngest generation illustrates a certain evolution in the photographic movement: while some representatives of the Kharkiv School gradually moved beyond the exclusivity of photography, turning to video, performance, and installation already in the 1990s, for the third generation the absence of constraints on expressive means is a completed process.

6.3.1. Vremya Group

In trying to explain the reasons for the emergence of the "Vremya" group, Boris Mikhailov recalls the ecological tension that pervaded the city at that time:

*Why did the "Vremya" group emerge in Kharkiv at that time? It was born from the very nature of the city. It has a highly developed industrial infrastructure, enormous scientific potential, and a very small museum. A small river flows through the city, which is very different from the Dnipro River in Kyiv with its relaxing visual effect. We, on the other hand, had nowhere to relax. The city was always full of tension.*⁹⁰

Evgeny Pavlov also points to a situation of tension, but more of a cognitive kind, related to "information noise" that gave rise to doubts about the hermeticism and flawlessness of the system. "Our minds were processing completely different information, which we had to acquire with force."⁹¹

According to Oleg Malovany, the "Vremya" group was launched as a result of the merger of two groups of friends during 1971-1972. The first group included Malovany himself, his university friend Oleksandr Suprun, and Gennadiy Tubalev, with whom they attended the photography workshop of Volodymyr Hryhorov. The other group consisted of Evgeny Pavlov

⁹⁰ Matulytė 2014

⁹¹ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Pavlov 2020: 16

and Jury Rupin, who lived in the residential district of the *HTZ* (Kharkiv Tractor Plant area) and often returned home together by trolleybus after the photo club meetings. Jury Rupin writes in his Diary: "The first person I met there was Zhenya Pavlov. He, as I recall now, was not yet a member of the photo club, and this circumstance involuntarily brought us closer. But besides this general matter, we also shared a common attitude toward photography, the essence of which we understood similarly - as one of the forms of art. It turned out that he lived in the same part of the city as I did, and we had to return home together after photographic gatherings, which sometimes ended very late. As Kharkiv was, and still is, quite a big city, and we lived in one of its suburbs, the journey home by trolleybus lasted no less than an hour, which allowed us to discuss in quite a detailed manner the photographic issues that concerned us at the time. [-] Without having our own works at that time, which we risked bringing to these discussions, we nevertheless actively criticized the works of others, quickly earning a reputation as "overly clever".⁹² Boris Mikhailov, who had long been a member of the club, met the idea of creating the group with enthusiasm, according to Rupin. He persuaded Dryukov to negotiate with officials to settle bureaucratic matters related to various permissions. Oleksandr Sitnichenko, who was serving in the military in 1971, joined the group "remotely." After returning from the army, he became one of its most active participants, quickly gaining a reputation as a "loudmouth," as jokingly expressed by Oleksandr Suprun. Jury Rupin also emphasizes Sitnichenko's speaking abilities: "As soon as he started speaking at the club meeting, everyone immediately fell silent, listening to his words and gradually falling under their magical influence. I can't remember a case when he finished speaking unwillingly, so strong was his impact on the listeners who forgot everything when Sitnichenko took the floor." Finally, Anatoliy Makienko, who was a friend of Evgeny Pavlov, joined the group last, around 1974. At this time, the group already had the name "Vremya," presumably coined by Jury Rupin.

Analyzing the photographs of the "Vremya" group members from that time, it is impossible to overlook the degree of their dissimilarity, bordering on incompatibility. The motivations for uniting photographers with such diverse approaches to their craft seem non-obvious. However, despite all the divergences, the forefront highlights positions of resistance, the conviction that photography belongs to art, and participation in a community that, by the attributes of its functioning, can be defined as "subversive." It is precisely these factors that become central reasons for the group's formation.

⁹² Rupin 2008

"Our formation into a creative group occurred not on the basis of shared creative approaches and styles, but on mutual rejection of official art," Jury Rupin wrote in his diary. The negative approach, one of the motivations for forming the group, actually contains several components. Firstly, it concerns the refusal to confine the practice of photography to technical mastery. This spiritual opposition to the provincial photography club, however, does not mean that the group's members disregarded technical proficiency. On the contrary, the "technical question" occupied a central place in the photography of most group members: Oleg Malyovany, who gained renown as a collage virtuoso; Oleksandr Suprun, who, starting from 1973, experimented with hyperrealistic applied photomontage; Jury Rupin, whose primary aspiration, as expressed by Evgeny Pavlov, was to create "solarization of party gatherings"; and finally, Anatoly Makiyenko, who actively explored the graphic possibilities of photography in the 1970s. According to Evgen Pavlov, he and his colleagues possessed photographic technology in all its details. However, the questions that interested them the most went beyond technical problems.

According to Yevheniy Pavlov, the central, shared desire of all group participants was to reconcile with the *subjectivity* of photography: "We had to meet on the basis of a criterion that was obvious to all. And I asked myself, What is this formative principle? Well, it lies in the desire to make photography *openly subjective*."⁹³

The decision to create interesting and distinctly different photography entailed the need to develop criteria for distinguishing this "new photography," which the members of the "Vremya" group aimed to produce, from the ubiquitous official and conformist photography. Initially, the photographers united based on the aspiration to express subjectivity, but later there emerged a necessity to theoretically conceptualize their commonality. One of the paths of this conceptualization was the "theory of impact." The succinct form explaining the "theory of impact" lies in the idea that photography should "hit the viewer in the face." According to Oleg Malyovany, this theory was publicly declared by Jury Rupin as a manifesto during the group's first and only collective exhibition in 1983 at the House of Scientists in Kharkiv. The authorities' reaction to this exhibition was quite expected and symptomatic: due to the threat from the director of the House of Scientists, the KGB closed the exhibition, and the works were removed a few hours after its opening. To this day, only documentary photographs of the hall

⁹³ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Pavlov 2020: 303

and the scene where Juri Rupin stood, taken by Viktor Kochetov, have been found. These documentary shots, which unfortunately do not show the exhibition itself, nevertheless allow for certain assumptions. Among them, one can find a photo of Boris Mikhailov operating a projector from the hall, displaying photographs on the screen. It is quite likely that this concerns the projection of his "sandwiches," which he often showed at gatherings and bohemian cafés in the city starting from the late 1970s. The reason for choosing this method of presentation, which was also adopted by Oleg Malovany, was primarily technical: printing such "sandwiches" on paper, created by overlaying two color slides within a single frame, was extremely complex and labor-intensive at that time. Only in the mid-2000s did Boris Mikhailov manage to present a book version of his overlays to the public. The second reason, which precisely added a more performative dimension to this method of presentation, lay in the possibility of presenting these "sandwiches" with musical accompaniment. Mikhailov used songs by the band Pink Floyd during such viewings. Oleg Malovany notes that the music added depth to these overlays, while for Roman Pyatkovka, "it was the first cultural shock."⁹⁴

Photographer Andrii Avdeenko confirms the striking effect that the "sandwiches" had on young photographers of the 1980s: "The first most important impression for me was Bob's [Boris Mikhailov's] slide film called 'Beauty.' There was also another one, 'Sweet.' Just the titles alone were enough to understand that it dealt with an aesthetic and philosophical term and its 'processing.' At that time, such a visual sequence was completely atypical." Sergiy Solonsky, a photographer belonging to the second generation of the Kharkiv school and a member of the Group of Immediate Reaction along with Sergiy Bratkov and Borys Mikhailov, recalls the one-day exhibition of 1983 as one of the most significant events at the beginning of his photographic career. He provides one of the most detailed descriptions of it: "In the mid-80s, I began attending our rare Kharkiv exhibitions. The first exhibition I visited in Kharkiv was the 'Vremya' group exhibition at the House of Scientists. Suprun, Malovanyi, Borya Mikhailov, Rupin. I found myself in a powerful atmosphere, in an environment of people mainly engaged in aesthetic photography, and collages. There was hardly any social photography at that exhibition, except for works by Sitnichenko, I think. Even in Borya Mikhailov's works, there was this humorous photograph done in the 'sandwich' technique, which he used to like to do back then. There were Oleg Malovanyi's montages, his famous 'Fresco,' and Mikhailov as a model, the Gravity series, Juri Rupin's naked lady on cobblestones, pure aesthetics, what I

⁹⁴ Pavlova 2018

liked. It was reminiscent of photographs in hard-to-reach Polish magazines on photography: then, everything that could be seen was what had an impact. Suprun's collages, of course [...]. Half of my life was taken away by our metrics, which forced me to do collages, while I could have been shooting 'clean' photography. [...]. So, Suprun, Malyovanyi, Zhenya Pavlov influenced aesthetically, not sensually." ⁹⁵To supplement this description, it can be added that, according to Andrii Avdeenko, Oleksandr Sitnichenko presented one of the three slide film projects at the exhibition, titled "Stroibat" (not found to this day), while Evgeny Pavlov showcased his first and, at the time, most famous series "Violin," created in 1972.

The event at the House of Scientists allowed for the first public declaration of the "theory of impact." However, as noted by Oleksandr Suprun, "the exhibition at the House of Scientists in 1983 already had the character of a certain reunion." Establishing the date of the development of this concept for Evgeny Pavlov proved impossible, and he insists that the internal necessity for the positions expressed by the "theory of impact" was shared among the group members over many years. "I can say that we discussed it quite a lot. This phrase, 'a photograph can be like a punch in the face,' was first publicly verbalized at the House of Scientists by Rupin. But this was discussed during all our meetings over many years, when we shouted about something, talked, debated. And there, of course, some words were born."⁹⁶ Juri Rupin's diary confirms this thesis. "During these debates, we gradually formed our understanding of photography as a form of art and even developed our own theories of its perception. One of such theories was the 'theory of impact.'⁹⁷ This somewhat crude name implied creating work that would instantaneously affect the viewer, similar to a blow, intensifying the impression with its nonsubtlety. Taking this approximate list of photographs presented at the 1983 exhibition into account, one can notice that it mainly consists of the most well-known works of the "Vremya" group members. Thanks to this, as well as the evident retrospective character of this exhibition, it is possible to attempt to analyze the realization of the "theory of impact" in the group's direct practice. We primarily observe the dominance of nude photography, which fell under a categorical prohibition in Soviet times (Oleksandr Suprun, Juri Rupin, Evgeny Pavlov). In it, the desire to cross the prohibited boundaries finds its embodiment; expressions of intimacy

⁹⁵ Manko, Solonsky 2016: <https://korydor.in.ua/ua/voices/sergej-solonskij-moj-ded-prodal-korovu-chtoby-kupit-obektiv.html>

⁹⁶ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Pavlov 2020: 303

⁹⁷ Rupin 2008

excluded from the Soviet universe; purposeless appreciation of the fragility of female beauty forms.

In order to create new worlds, model dramatic situations impossible to experience directly, and reveal the absurdity of reality, the group members develop, internalize, and invent new methods of shooting and manifesting photography. Years later, Juri Rupin, analyzing the embodiment of this theory in the practice of the "Vremya" group, emphasizes the connection of their photographs with painting. Among the shortcomings of photography, some representatives of the group singled out the automatism of the viewer's recognition of their immediate surroundings in the image. Group members actively developed certain strategies to counteract this automatism, incorporating painterly and graphic techniques into photographic processes. For Yevhen Pavlov, "hitting the viewer in the face" also meant questioning the limits of contemporary photography. In his series "*Skrypka*" (Violin), he resisted the norm of autonomous images by creating a work based on seriality and duration. In the photo collages of the 1980s, he experimented with combining the principles of cinematic storytelling with static imagery. Initially emphasizing, rather than concealing, inevitable defects in the prints ("*Archive Series*", 1988), then transforming old archival photographs through complex photographic and painterly gestures ("*Total Photography*", 1990-1994), and finally working on photographs with a painter-artist Volodymyr Shaposhnykov, he embarked on a path of increasingly blurring the boundaries between photography and painting, while always remaining within the coordinates system and typology of photography itself.

6.3.2. "Group of Immediate Reaction" and "Gosprom"

There is no clear point of definitive dissolution for the "Vremya" group. In 1986, Boris Mikhailov was offered to hold a meeting at the regional photography club in Syktyvkar (the capital of the Komi Autonomous Republic). However, he redirected it to Yevhen Pavlov, who, bringing a significant collection of works by the "Vremya" group members, along with Viktor Kochetov, carried out this event. The creative encounter resulted in a statement to the local KGB on the same day. But once again, the swift reaction of the local community came to the rescue: the exhibition curator was forewarned, Pavlov hastily gathered the photographs and promptly left the capital of Soviet camps.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Pavlova 2019: <http://korydor.in.ua/ua/context/11657.html>

The final stage of active interaction for the "Vremya" group became the period of collaboration with the Ukrainian Experimental Creative Association "Panorama." The Ukrainian youth creative association "Panorama," organized by Leonid Zaslavsky (1951), emerged as a film association, but soon "photo" and "visual arts" were added to its name, quickly gathering all active representatives of non-conformist directions. Boris Mikhailov headed the photography department, while the visual arts department was led by Tetyana Pavlova, who was originally hired as the chief editor of the information center.

The office, initially located in the basement of the ZhEK (public utilities department) on Saltivka, unexpectedly transformed into an art center known beyond the city's borders. By the late 1980s, it attracted photographers and artists not only from Ukraine but also from Russia and Belarus. Ivan Dykhovychny filmed the works of Kharkiv photographers for his film "The Red Wheel" (1988). Thanks to the consolidation of forces within "Panorama," which actively welcomed representatives of the global photographic community, Kharkiv authors gained access to numerous exhibitions and publications. Among them was the "Exhibition of American, Estonian, and Kharkiv Photographers" at the alternative Moscow Gallery "Na Kashirke" (1989), where Tetiana Pavlova first delivered a lecture on the Kharkiv School of Photography.

After "Panorama" moved to Rustaveli Street in 1990 and due to its unsuccessful reorganization, cultural activity came to a halt. Interestingly, even after the dissolution of this creative association, a new center for alternative art emerged on the same street (Rustaveli, 32). In the "Litera A" workshop, where Sergei Bratkov and Boris Mikhailov transferred their activities, they established the Up/Down Gallery, laying the foundation for the active engagement of the second generation.

As Bernard-Kovalchuk argues, despite the conventional historiographical division of the Kharkiv School of Photography into three generations, from a sociological perspective, there is a delineation of two generations.⁹⁹ One can be referred to, as proposed by Svetlana Alexievich, as the "last generation of the red people," while the other constitutes the first generation of independent Ukraine, seeking to construct their identity on the ruins of the disintegrated empire. Nevertheless, in the late 80s-early 90s Kharkiv witnessed increased

⁹⁹ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 181

interest in its photographic oeuvre – the unprecedented openness of the yet-underground group laid the foundation for the differentiation of the second generation of the Kharkiv School, much more populous and diverse than the first one. This tectonic change in the artist-milieu relationship can be traced even to the "Soviet Photo" magazine known for its conformity and allegiance to the state-promoted narratives. While in the 1950s to 1970s, the pages of "Soviet Photo" magazine were filled with eloquent declarations about the primacy of photojournalism, adhering to the method of socialist realism with reportage remaining the sole 'useful genre' of photography, since the 1980s the magazine has occasionally featured texts dedicated to "artistic" photography contributing to the genuine discussion about "artistic" versus "non-artistic" photography. With the onset of the "perestroika" era, the journal's orientation shifted dramatically, and works of photographers associated with what the Western critics termed "new Soviet photography" were published. For photographers who had previously not crossed the threshold of censorship approval, it became possible to exhibit their works in official institutions. This time witnessed a dual discovery of information – Western critics enthusiastically discovered unofficial Soviet art, while Eastern artists learned about ongoing artistic processes abroad. This increase in information flow during "perestroika" is comparable to the early stages of the "thaw," a moment when new information resonates and confronts previously acquired knowledge, generating unexpected results. The second and third generations of the Kharkiv School thus experienced a sudden and brutal shift in reference points, affecting all post-Soviet nations. The trauma induced by changing values, criteria for assessing the "beautiful" and the "true," along with a deep sense of emptiness behind both old and new symbols, formed the basis upon which the Kharkiv photographers constructed their photographic and artistic practices starting from the 2010s – while some works based solely on opposition to the official discourse suddenly lost their relevance during this period of change.

The second generation of the Kharkiv school of photography is also associated with the emergence of a new type of artist, whose art is inseparable from social activism and directed towards shaping the cultural environments gap. This position has become an alternative to the parallelly evolving type of Ukrainian artist, solely orienting herself towards market integration. Subverting the rules of journalistic reportage photography, the oeuvre of the second generation is increasingly characterized by the notions of "fiction," "photographic games," and manipulation of photographic time; some of the photographers aimed to reappropriate historical narratives, while others revisited the very core of the first generation's philosophy – the deconstruction of imperial form through the complication of aesthetical imagery, turning

to the `pure`, `clean`, unedited photography. At this point, some artists have also moved away from the realm of the autonomous paper sheet to initiate a play between photography and the object in space, primarily the book, serving as its presentation carrier. Their works, fundamentally object-based and assembled from various, not always photographic, equal-status elements, seem to transcend the bounds of photographic gesture. By emphasizing the context of photography presentation, they contributed to the struggle against the notion that the camera is neutral and transparent.

The "Gosprom" group, formed in 1986, took its name from the globally renowned architectural landmark in Kharkiv city. These artists elevated documentary photography to a pivotal aesthetic principle of the "Gosprom" group: in essence, "Gosprom's" documentary photography stood as a reaction by the photographers to the intricate, alluring, and vibrant photography practiced by the "Vremya" group. "While the "Vremya" group and its followers engaged in photographic collages, overlays, and manual colorizations, thereby altering the visual aspect of traditional photographic images, the collective of younger artists drew its inspiration mostly from Mikhailov's black-and-white documentary images, emerged onto the Kharkiv art scene. They were the complete antithesis of the "theory of impact." "We certainly had no impact whatsoever, only everything was gray, flat, and irrelevant to anyone. If one were to encapsulate the aesthetic of the "Gosprom" group, the term would be *"indifference."* Refuting the complex photography and technical experiments of the preceding generation was, undoubtedly, one of our most significant positions".¹⁰⁰

"*There is no pain here*", commented Boris Mikhailov on "Gosprom" group photography during a discussion following the "Ukrainian Time" retrospective exhibition at the "ArtHouse" gallery in Kharkiv in September 2012.¹⁰¹ The "Gosprom" group's majority of photographers – Misha Pedan, Volodymyr Starko, Ihor Manko, Leonid Pesin, Boris Redko, Serhiy Bratkov, and Kostyantyn Melnyk – adopted a position characterized as "painless," calmer, and more meditative photography. The aesthetic foundations of "Gosprom" diverged from the "ruthless documentary" nature of their predecessors in pursuit of more nuanced compositions and philosophically oriented positions. For Guennadi Maslov, these foundations stemmed from the Lithuanian photography of the 1980s and the works of Oleksandr Slyusarev, the head of the

¹⁰⁰ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Pedan 2020: 342

¹⁰¹ VASA project: <https://vasa-project.com/gallery/ukraine-2/maslov/index-maslov.php>

so-called Moscow "metaphysical photography school." Among the expressions of the group's participants regarding their works, an attempt can be discerned to apply classical logic from the puristic and "direct" photography paradigm. Introduced by American photographer Paul Strand in 1915 and developed by the "f/64" group in the 1930s, this paradigm advocated complete non-interference of the photographer in the image, both in terms of the negative and the print. One of its staunch advocates in Kharkiv was Volodymyr Starko: "Photography is a mirror; the camera is like a pair of scissors. It cuts out a part of reality that corresponds to the artist's ideas, thoughts, and even philosophy when they press the shutter button. Therefore, any interference with the image, including framing, is a sign of incompleteness, as if the photograph itself is not good enough."¹⁰² However, within the atmosphere of Kharkiv photography, the interpretation of this radical logic in practice has taken on voluminous, liberating, and nuanced embodiments. For instance, Ihor Manko emphasizes his desire to achieve effects through "direct" photography that the "Vremya" group achieved using complex invasive techniques: "What I wanted at this time was to achieve, through direct photography, what the 'Vremya' group achieved through their montages, 'sandwiches'".¹⁰³

The Group of Immediate Reaction, an opposing current within the second generation of the Kharkiv School, emerged as a complex fusion of photography and actionism. Its co-founders, Boris and Vita Mikhailov, Sergei Bratkov, and Sergey Solonsky, aimed to address the most pressing social issues of contemporary society, reflecting them in a burlesque manner. Their collaborative works initially took shape within the aforementioned Up/Down gallery. The group's actual formation date can be traced back to 1994 when Martha Kuzma, the curator of the Soros Center in Kyiv—an institution at the forefront of Ukrainian art—invited Boris Mikhailov and Sergey Bratkov to participate in the exhibition "Alchemical Capitulation" aboard the ship "Slavutich" in Sevastopol. This event unfolded during the height of the conflict related to the division of the Black Sea Fleet between Ukrainian and Russian parties.

The questions raised by the exhibition—disputed territories, language issues as a constant driver for political and social manipulation, and societal patriarchy—only escalated in the aftermath. All works for "Alchemical Capitulation" were created aboard the ship. The artists, perceived and experienced by the "Slavutich" crew as a semi-freakish ensemble, engaged in

¹⁰² Manko, Muffoletto 2015: 33

¹⁰³ Bernard-Kovalchuk, Manko 2020: 347

project implementation, cohabitated on the ship for a week, and, for the most part, crafted site-specific works that ironically problematized the rapidly shifting political landscape. These works primarily employed a playful strategy, later conceptualized by the curator.

In their piece *"Sacrifice to the God of War,"* (1994) Sergey Bratkov and Boris Mikhailov commented on women's status in the post-soviet area playfully addressing superstitions regarding the presence of women on the ship. Perhaps the most ironic gesture, considering that in this case, the presence of a woman on the ship—the exhibition's curator—shifted the power dynamics, with the curator's voice being on equal footing, or perhaps even more influential, than the ship's captain. The installation comprised video documentation and three photographs: an image from Mikhailov's *"Luriki"* series depicting soldiers with a child's toy, a photograph from the Soviet era featuring women dressed in bathing suits, and a photograph of a cannon covered with fabric bearing a red spot. The final photograph was complemented by a small bag of cotton soaked in menstrual blood and a tiny piece of cotton under glass, evoking the artifact's museumification. The video documented the process as the artists searched for and collected used absorbents along the railway tracks near Kharkiv. The group's final collective work was *"Guard Duty"* in 1996.

6.3.3. KSOP Third Generation

In the early 2000s Kharkiv's cultural processes were managed by several artistic institutions, including an art museum serving as a repository for classical art, a municipal gallery hosting salon exhibitions, and the Kharkiv Academy of Design and Arts - all of them vaguely understanding contemporary art processes. This scenario relegated contemporary artists to the margins, bereft of rights and territory. The social context fostered a level of activity extending beyond artistic practices alone.

In October 2005, a group of young artists initiated the self-seizure of an abandoned single-story residential building in the city center, leading to the establishment of the "SOSka" gallery. This space evolved into a non-commercial art venue with both communicative and representational functions. Drawing inspiration from squats in Kyiv and Moscow of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as from the local experience of the "Up/Down" laboratory, the initial exhibitions held at "SOSka" were experimental in nature. Curators Mykola Ridny and Anna Kriventsova emphasized tabooed socio-political issues: SOSka's exhibitions addressing themes such as pornography, poverty, and presidential elections exceeded aesthetic concerns, becoming

activist statements. The `do it yourself` principle became fundamental to the laboratory's strategy.

Kharkiv alternative artistic scene engaged in collaborative projects with young artists from other cities, such as R.E.P from Kyiv and David Ter-Oganyan and Alexandra Galkina from Moscow. Guided by principles of collectivism and self-organization, the laboratory's core group of co-authors gradually formed. The actions of SOSka transcended the confines of its derelict space, leading to collaborations with other institutions. A significant curatorial project for the group was the "*New History*" exhibition at the Kharkiv Art Museum in 2009, featuring artists from Eastern European countries. The exhibition included works by established artists as well as students from the local art school, created specifically for the exhibition as a result of regular meetings and discussions held by the SOSka group with students, informally referred to as the "Class" program. However, the exhibition was prematurely closed at the museum director's discretion, sparking active discussions about the need for cultural reforms and the issue of censorship.

While the Vremya group drew upon the collective myth of Soviet reality, the third generation of KSOP employs the myth of Kharkiv photography to perceive Soviet reality through the double prism, both capturing the presence of the empire's phantom on the horizon, and heralding the proximity to the reconsideration of socio-political attitudes, reinforced by the longstanding activity of the Kharkiv underground. Established in 2010, the "Shilo" collective comprises young photographers Vladyslav Krasnoshchok, Sergiy Lebedynskyy, and Vadym Trykoz. Their portfolio spans a spectrum from audacious pastiche reminiscent of Mikhailov's "*Unfinished Dissertation*" to subversive `mockumentary` style shootings as "*UPA Hände Hoch*," but also pieced of subjective reportage from Euromaidan the conflict-ridden Donbas region. Notably, their two-volume publication "*Finished Dissertation*" incorporates collaborative ventures like "*Timoshenko's Escape*" and "*Night*," alongside individual endeavors such as Lebedynskyy's poignant "*Healing Muds*" and Krasnoshchok's evocative "*Bolnichka*," (`The Hospital`) all enveloped within a documentary layer, encapsulating the creators and their intersecting lives.

Evident ties to the Vremya group and the broader Kharkiv School emerge in the works of the "Boba" collectives. These artists vocally affirm and visually display a thread of continuity, particularly resonating with the oeuvres of Boris Mikhailov, Eugeny Pavlov, and Juri Rupin.

Vasilisa Nezabarom and Yulia Drozdek embraced Mikhailov's moniker "Bob" for the name of their collective. The "Boba" group thrives within the domain of public art, delivering prompt responses to social, political, and cultural dilemmas, reminiscent of the ethos of the Group of Immediate Reaction. Until the third generation, the trajectory of women's photography in Kharkiv had remained somewhat restricted, barring the presence of portrait artist Valentina Belousova in the 1990s. In this third generation, a few female photographers have risen onto Kharkiv's artistic stage: Elmira Sydiak, Oksana Kurchanova, and Polina Karpova.

7. Findings

7.1. KSOP First Generation

A monochrome photograph from Evgeny Pavlov's *"The Archive Series"*, untitled, captured in 1985, shortly before the dissolution of the "Vremya" collective (1). In a year, Pavlov would replace Mikhailov and perform at the regional photography club meeting in Syktyvkar, Komi – the capital of the infamous Soviet Gulag system - compelled to flee back to Kharkiv after a visit from the KGB.¹⁰⁴ An imperfect physique within the dimly illuminated hall of a Kharkiv *dvorets kultury* (Palace of Culture) oscillates against the heroic image of a bodybuilder-olympian—titled "Kharkiv-85." What subversive resonances did the Soviet leadership detect in the allegedly naïve photographs Pavlov opted to show in Syktyvkar? Commenting on his series *"Berdyansk, Beach, Sunday, from 11 am to 1 pm"* (1981), Boris Mikhailov formulates the answer as follows: "The hero had become fat, obese. He took vacations. He got naked and *ceased being merely Soviet*." Asserting the personal and subjective against the imperialism of content and form, the "Vremya" collective seeks apertures amid the pervasive "Sovietness."¹⁰⁵ But what does it proffer in exchange?

The virtuosic masters of formal experimentation, the representatives of the first generation of the Kharkiv School unquestionably disrupted the entire system of Soviet photography. Nevertheless, what kind of identities did they manifest through their photographic oeuvre—and did they manifest them at all? In a broader sense, to what extent is it feasible to posit any form of identity within photography works? How is identity constructed through photographic capture, and is it even susceptible to reflection within the photographic realm?

¹⁰⁴ Pavlova 2019 (<https://korydor.in.ua/ua/context/11657.html>)

¹⁰⁵ Mikhailov 2022

The philosophy of photography provides manifold responses to this inquiry. In her seminal treatise *"On Photography"*, Susan Sontag posits, that photographs are not interpretations like writing and handmade images. For Sontag, photographs seem to be pieces of reality that one can own. They impart knowledge about the world that gives power to the viewer, but having power over something is the first step towards being alienated from it. Neither the deficiencies inherent in amateurish lack of technique nor the distortions introduced by artistic interpretation undermine the notion that behind every photograph there was something there in the first place.¹⁰⁶ This proximity to reality distinguishes photography from the other artistic modes of representation. Sontag contends that painting, speech, and writing constitute "narrowly selective interpretations," while photography embodies a "*narrowly selective transparency*".¹⁰⁷ Somewhat similar to Sontag, John Tagg sees pictures as a mere visual reflection of the socially prevailing power structures in the Foucauldian sense; analyzing photography use by the nineteenth-century governmental institutions (e.g. police, prisons, orphanages), he conceptualizes photography as a medium allegedly deprived of any meaning additional to the material reality, instead emphasizing its technological monstrosity:

*Photography as such has no identity. Its status as technology varies with the power relations that invest it. Its nature as practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set to work. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.*¹⁰⁸

In reflecting upon the work of Lithuanian photographer Vitas Luckus, Boris Mikhailov articulates with precision the aesthetic ideal of the first generation of the Kharkiv School:

What we observed in Luckus's work resonated with our perspective. We perceived it in the monochromatic overlays, within the pantomime project. Suddenly, a distinct theater unveiled itself before us—a theater profoundly disruptive within the Soviet milieu, which sternly forbade any form of avant-garde expression. [...] We discerned an internal morbidity, a sentiment that dared not be voiced in that era. We witnessed grandeur, aggression [...] These photographs were never exhibited. Why? Because any party official would assert: "No, we have no need for formalism." Today, it might seem that there is nothing objectionable in these photographs—

¹⁰⁶ Sontag 1977: 5-7

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*: 4

¹⁰⁸ Tagg 1988: 63

*just individuals facing away from the viewer. However, in that era, comprehension was different. [...] Why was this significant? Because any form of formalism was proscribed. It was here that the demarcation between "yes" and "no" was drawn. [...] Vitas's works articulated the "no".*¹⁰⁹

Encountering Luckus's works at the outset of the 1970s made a decisive contribution to the aesthetic stances of the entire "Vremya" collective. Deconstructing imperial form and content—albeit in varying degrees for each member of the group—was the principal preoccupation of the first generation of the Kharkiv School. This is how Mikhailov describes his vision of the photographer's mission during the years of "Vremya" activity:

*As a photographer without official credentials, I discover, I observe, I stalk clandestinely. This series was my first attempt to bring together photography and the reality around me, to introduce openness and frankness into traditional photographic subjects, and it was very unusual. I was searching for 'the average', 'the anonymous'. By adding something previously unacceptable to photography, I was violating the canons of Soviet photography. I was shooting allegedly wrong things in an allegedly wrong way. And this 'wrong' or 'no' in relation to what was official remained one of my main priorities until almost the end of the 1970s. The 1970s for me were all about 'freedom' and 'no'. Every little 'no' in every picture was a plea for sincerity.*¹¹⁰

Nonetheless, analyzing some other KSOP works, for instance, the "Gravitation" series (1976) by Oleg Malyovany (2), a natural question arises — is there any kind of criticism immanent in it? Apart from the nudity, unacceptable for Soviet photography, nothing in the image seems to have any connection to Soviet symbolism or ideology. Naturally, interpretations are countless—Malyovany recalls "a Moscow journalist" telling him once that "Gravitation" series predicted the Chornobyl disaster 10 years before it happened"¹¹¹—but does it inherently hold subversive potential? Bernard-Kovalchuk argues, that it is in the complex techniques of collage applied themselves.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Matulytė 2014: 33-34

¹¹⁰ Mikhailov 2022

¹¹¹ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020 : 318

¹¹² *ibid*: 90-91

The rebellion against the very technological nature of photography enabled the first-generation artists of KSOP to forge their Barthian punctum. Interestingly, many of them, coming ironically from engineering backgrounds, employ the image as an Armstrongian "*site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable*".¹¹³ This divergence primarily arises from the expansion of horizons prescribed for photography within the Soviet institutionalized visual culture. Astutely identifying this antitechnological vector of the KSOP struggle, in her monumental study of the Kharkiv School of Photography, Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk adopts the theoretical framework of Vilém Flusser's '*fight against an apparatus*,' a metaphor that resonates twofold, encapsulating both the KSOP's artistic methodology and the thematic spectrum of their works, typically construed predominantly as an acerbic critique of the Soviet regime.¹¹⁴ In his 1983 treatise "Towards A Philosophy of Photography" Vilém Flusser suggests a perspective that stands in stark contrast to the contributions of "indexicality" advocates within photography. According to Flusser, the technical image, primarily photography, is inherently entwined with technological, political, cultural, economic, and ideological apparatuses. The camera itself serves as a prototype of other apparatuses that define the condition of contemporary post-industrial society.¹¹⁵

The specificity of Flusser's theory lies in its dismantling of the role of human creativity as a free creator and author of Photography. Flusser defines the latter as an "image [...], necessarily created and reproduced automatically through programmed apparatuses during the course of play." The agent taking the photograph merely plays, akin to a chess player with predetermined moves defined by the apparatus. The number of these possibilities-moves is substantial but not infinite. Thus, the photographic corpus around us consists of such similar photographs, which Flusser terms as "*redundant*," in the sense that they lack new information and merely replicate frames that have been captured multiple times before. Nevertheless, Flusser acknowledges the existence of the figure of the "Photographer," who is characterized by him as an *experimental* photographer. The Flusserian photographer endeavors to exhaust the photo program, realizing all the possibilities. Their task is to counteract the surplus of the environment by creating "meaningful" or "informative" images. Although the Photographer resembles a chess player seeking novel moves and combinations in a game with rules they do not control, there remains

¹¹³ Armstrong 1996: 28

¹¹⁴ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020 : 178-179

¹¹⁵ Flusser 1983: 28-29

a fundamental distinction – "the photographer plays not *with*, but *against* the toy."¹¹⁶ Ultimately, the Photographer and their photographic practice are incompatible with any ideology. Indeed, while ideology seeks to establish a singular perspective on things, the "photographer-experimenter" strives for the opposite – to explore multiple viewpoints and approaches to the subject in order to generate unprecedented and informative images. Echoing the philosopher's call to "outwit" the apparatus, certain photographers from the Kharkiv School distort its traditional use not to illustrate narratives but to create new storylines. By smuggling human intentions into the pre-programmed apparatus, they express their subjective viewpoints in their photo reports.

The frontline pursued by the representatives of the first generation is considerably narrower than the one of their colleagues from the second and third generations. Their deliberate use of randomness, the absence of significant events on film, and the intentional embrace of an amateurish approach instead of artfulness all function as methods within the KSOP's singular vector attacks, pitting individual subjects against the Leviathan. "The only thing that we shared was our riot against the *objectivity* of Soviet photography," writes Evgeny Pavlov.¹¹⁷ The pursuit of subjectivity, in contrast to the dehumanized "politicality" or "electorality" dictated by state propaganda, while single-pointed in its fight, simultaneously results in a certain muffling of identitarian construction processes. With the enemy clearly identified, there's no sense in dispersing; all the efforts are focused on deconstructing the *sole* Leviathan openly or implicitly present in every image.

The peculiar nature of photographing *only one subject* is a concern that engages Sontag in her essay on the New York school of photography ("*Melancholy Objects*"), where she centralizes her focus on the body of work by Diane Arbus, "making everybody, freaks, suburban couples and nudists look the same, all members of the idiot village America", thus crossing the threshold into an open conflict with Walt Whitman's hyped awe of the photography's "democracy-spreading mission".¹¹⁸ If for the first generation of KSOP artists the Leviathan is the collective Soviet, then for Arbus it is clearly consumerism with the concomitant greed, ennui, isolation and lack of communion. "The implicit intent of Arbus... is to show America is the grave of the Occident", as contrasted to the notion of the lost "spiritual America" as argued

¹¹⁶ *ibid*: 25-27

¹¹⁷ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 304

¹¹⁸ Sontag 1977: 47

by Stieglitz. In "*Melancholy Objects*", Sontag suggests that this *loss of affirmative basis* was the very reason for American photography to turn to surrealism.¹¹⁹

For Sontag, surrealists' purpose is to blur "the lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders"¹²⁰. In this sense, photography, allegedly the most "primitive", realistic, and uncomplicated media turns out to be a native habitat for surrealism with its artists 'duplicating world, creating "a reality in the second degree...".¹²¹ Sontag points out that the major role in the expansion of surrealism into photography is played out by the relative lack of photographer's influence on the final artistic results with the factor of the camera itself, the machine, intruding into a "loose cooperation" between the photographer and the subject. In addition to highlighting the natural, "technical" surrealism of photography, Sontag also comments on the thematical scope of surrealists. In the world of photography, surrealism and counter-culture merge when photographers become seekers of the hidden realities in society's lower echelons, documenting aspects concealed from the middle class, as it happens in works by Martin, Genthe, Atget, Brassai, and Weegee.

In this context, what becomes a stumbling block between the New York school of photography and KSOP is the very positionality of the photographer towards the Spectrum. As a hunter for the manifestations of the middle-class taboos, e.g. sex and poverty, a New York school photographer like Arbus, Steichen, Brandt, or Cartier-Bresson leaves her social strata environment for a 'class tourism' experience, exploring the exoticized Other conventionally remaining in the shadow. Citing Jacob Riis's "*How the Other Half Lives*", Sontag points out the two distinctive features of such photography practices: preference for the poor, marginalized subjects, and the implicitly "*humanist*" character of revealing what is hidden through social documentation.¹²² For Kharkiv photographers, the 'Other' subject to an encounter with the photographic machine is not perceived as a phenomenon external to the photographer – in their subjects they capture the all-Soviet marginality they all share: they are taking pictures of themselves, and are fighting themselves accordingly. While a New York photographer, for Sontag, is "colonizing new experiences in a fight against boredom", thus,

¹¹⁹ *ibid*: 48

¹²⁰ *ibid*: 51

¹²¹ *ibid*: 52

¹²² *ibid*: 56

ideally, becoming a "supertourist" staying "outside rather than inside a situation"¹²³, Kharkiv artists, though resorting to somewhat similar visual language, aesthetics and methods, use them for a drastically different purpose: they are fighting not against their personal boredom, but their shared experiences of oppression by a specific political regime.

One more instrument in the KSOP photographic arsenal turns out to be irony. Writing on Arbus, Sontag points out that her work "*had no humor or mockery*" seeing Arbus' strength in her allowing the innately pessimistic, vulnerable gaze.¹²⁴ Yet a single glance at Boris Mikhailov's works from the series "*Yesterday's Sandwich*" (late 1960s-1970s) is sufficient to capture a mocking rather than tragic tone, even in the midst of the severity of the surrounding circumstances. A giant ear eavesdropping on two men in coats (3); a queue at the store superimposed on a scrap of black bread (4): Mikhailov here takes a slightly different stance than the other representatives of the first generation — as we can see, a clear social critique is already evident in his work, which will become more characteristic for the second generation. However, the specific surrealist world vision Vremya group shared, commonly referred to by them as "*schiza*", was undoubtedly present in the majority of his works. Evgeny Pavlov comments on the issue of "*schiza*" as follows:

Surrealism was a platform on which we stood to a considerable extent, because despite the fact that the "sur" was born and ended before World War II, in reality, like Kandinsky and Malevich, it witnessed a second wave of rebirth in the 1960s. We had our own word, "shiza." And it was so deeply rooted that I remember when Yura Rupin brought me some pictures, and I told him, "Yura, what is this? Not shot from below, not with a wide angle, and without shiza!" I said this automatically, without thinking. It was formulated firmly: you have to shoot with a wide angle, from below, and with shiza! ¹²⁵

For whom did the photographers of the Kharkiv School create their works? Besides the obvious audience of each other, it's interesting to consider whose recognition they sought on the external stage. In addition to "Soviet Photo" magazine, there existed the Polish "Fotografia", and the Czechoslovakian "Reve Fotografie," as well as the Polish photographic festival "Venus"; all of them systematically received pictures from the "Vremya" group. To a large extent, the very

¹²³ *ibid*: 42

¹²⁴ *ibid*: 44

¹²⁵ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020 : 303

formation of the "Vremya" group was motivated by the circumstances of the "external market" - international salons in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania.¹²⁶ Rediscovered after the end of the Stalinist era, mobility allowed photographers in the 1970s not only to travel regularly with their boxes of full photographs and slides to cities where photographic communities held some weight, but also to maintain intensive epistolary relationships with each other.

It might seem paradoxical that photographers from the Baltic republics, especially from Lithuania, found themselves among those who could most fully utilize the freedoms announced by the political changes during the Khrushchev "thaw." These republics, which were annexed to the USSR relatively late due to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, fiercely defended their right to national self-determination. As Daniela Mrázková writes, the Baltic republics - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia - are quite different from each other historically and culturally, yet all three played a key role in the evolution of post-war photography in the USSR.¹²⁷ Lithuanian photographers, who opposed ready-made formulas in photography, found their inspiration directly in the still-living folk traditions, spontaneous and sincere emotions of their compatriots, urban and rural landscapes.

A somewhat similar tactic of work is observed among certain representatives of the Kharkiv School turning in their work to the aesthetic of Ukrainianess. Maximal detachment from Soviet everyday life gives rise to the idealization and perception of Ukrainian folkloric aesthetics as something surreal, elusive, not encountered in ordinary life. This territory belongs to lyricism, archetypes from myths and legends, contrasting the sharp irony of more realistic series. In 1994, Evgeny Pavlov created "*Ukrainian Night*" (5): apart from the female body, the entire ambiance of the picture was constructed using montage techniques - the photographer literally manipulated the film with sandpaper, applying images of a house, pots, and apples.

Another series focused on the theme of "naturalness", largely inspired by the works of Lithuanian photographer Aleksandras Macijauskas - is Oleksandr Suprun's series "*Gifts of Autumn*", depicting a rural market. Its title references the Soviet trope of "fertility" - a name often given to competitions celebrating the Soviet agricultural sector's labor triumphs. For both Lithuanians and Ukrainians, who were restricted in their right to national self-determination during Stalinist times and even earlier during the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, the

¹²⁶ *ibid*: 136-144

¹²⁷ Mrázková 1989: 24

fair, which preserved its medieval traditions, remained a place of memory that symbolically connected these two nations with their ancestors. Both photographers pay special attention to typical folk characters. In Suprun's series of photomontages, mountains of products for sale multiply until they begin to evoke a sense of threat. (6) The symbol of abundance and prosperity takes on an opposite meaning in these compositions.

Representatives of the Kharkiv School also maintained connections with other Ukrainian photography clubs. Malyovany recalls the experience of the "Ukrainian Circle" program. The "Circle" consisted of 12 photo clubs all over the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the collection was sent to a new club every month, and then returned to its authors. Each photo club had its own book.¹²⁸ "Our collection ended up in Zaporizhia, for example - they gathered there, displayed the works in the club, looked at the photographs, criticized or praised, and expressed their opinions about the authors. And so the notebook got filled. We also looked at others' photographs and gave our opinions. I think we participated in such "Circles" twice, in 1975 and 1976, two years in a row, first as a club, then as a group. Sometimes we received very sharp responses. About my work *"Act Trio"* (1972), they said it looked like decomposing bodies in a refrigerator," Malyovany recalls.¹²⁹

However, such exchanges seem to be a thoroughly systemic phenomenon within the Soviet Union. The 1960s in the USSR were marked by the blossoming of various leisure centers and clubs that promoted amateur artistic practices, with photography quickly becoming one of the most popular among them. In every major city of the Ukrainian SSR, photo clubs emerged - in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Lviv, Vinnytsia, Ivano-Frankivsk, and others. These clubs established a distinct zone within the field of photography, distancing themselves from the world of professional, official, and "serious" photojournalism. Although the activities of these clubs were scrutinized by censorship and even the KGB, it was within these clubs that the most interesting and innovative photographic practices were conceived and disseminated.

To maintain a semblance of inner freedom in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, it was necessary to employ double standards and possess a dual perspective. "Being able to read between the lines meant possessing information," recalls Oleg Malyovany.¹³⁰ The amateur photography

¹²⁸ Alekseyev 1979: 13

¹²⁹ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020 : 313

¹³⁰ *ibid*: 315

movement contributed to the formation of a virtual bubble of freedom and exchange, within which discussions and doubts regarding photography reached unprecedented scales. Due to the clubs' primary focus on social rather than artistic goals, these clubs, which were established in all the republics of the former USSR, fundamentally differ from other photography associations of historical significance, such as the pictorialist clubs of the early 20th-century. Thus, the primary task of photo clubs in the USSR was to channel citizens' potentially disruptive energy and occupy their non-working hours. At the same time, this movement also aligned with political aims: the establishment of photographic clubs and groups was widely welcomed and encouraged in satellite countries of the USSR, primarily in Poland. It was envisioned that mass engagement in amateur photography would foster connections between all the peoples of the socialist camp - ultimately leading to a further consolidation of the supranational Soviet identity.

In this context, it becomes evident that the relations between unofficial artistic practices and the centralized institutional system are more complex than they might appear at first glance. As according to the Achilles and the Tortoise paradox, while, on the one hand, artists strive to deviate from the norms established by the system, on the other hand, the system itself, through actions like providing unrestricted access to photographic materials and laboratories, nourishes these practices by equipping them with the means of existence. Photographers within the informal circles of Kharkiv, much like all Soviet citizens, had something akin to a universal income in the form of guaranteed housing, healthcare, and free education. This ensured the availability of free time, which could be dedicated to art. This ideal of the Soviet person envisioned that once their basic material needs were met by the state, they would be able to create. Therefore, the existence of photographers from the Kharkiv School was not, from the perspective of the Soviet state, inherently anti-Soviet; in fact, one can argue that they were effectively realizing the Leninist ideal.

Nonconformism, as a phenomenon of the late Soviet period, manifests not so much in political opposition, but in the desire for personal escape from the dictatorial regime's intolerance. For decades, individuality was considered a deviation in the Soviet Union, a sign of an inability to adapt to socialism. Those familiar with Soviet publications or exhibitions cannot help but notice the similarity of these images, aimed not to express individual life but rather a collective experience. As a result, the creator of these images disappears. However, Kharkiv photography emphasized the preservation of the photographer's identity and the photograph as a

manifestation of personality. Oleg Malevany reflects on the position of the "Vremya" group as follows:

"Inside each of us, there was a strong aversion to Socialist Realism, not because it was bad, but *because it was dictatorial*. For instance, in January 1971, my friend in the old district of Kharkiv did a paraphrase of Mane's "Breakfast," not on grass, but on snow. We brought accessories, lighting there... Suddenly, a sturdy man arrives and asks, "What are you doing here, what are you photographing? Should I call the police? Don't you know where you can shoot and where you can't?" This struck us profoundly – there are places where you can shoot, and there are places where you can't. "Go to the park or Gorky Park, photograph there." In the end, the shoot took place, the man was alone, and we were many. But the residue of this "can't" remained. " ¹³¹

Pavlov expresses similar ideas: "These were like gulps of freedom that stirred some chord responsible for the richness of life. And they filled you so much that you could dwell in this richness. This, by the way, is one of the arguments for the existence of nonconformist art. People simply aspired to fullness. They resisted being made into *political*, as they say now, *electoral units*." ¹³²

A parallel issue that ran through the minds of many representatives of the school is the idea of the "inferiority complex" of photography compared to painting and cinema, a challenge Kharkiv photographers tackled through formal experimentation. According to Pavlov, "the direct language of photography itself seemed insufficiently convincing to consider photography an art." ¹³³ Yuri Rupin pays special attention to the graphic transformations of images using the solarization technique. Evgeny Pavlov initially engaged in "staged," "theatrical" photography (*The Violin*) before dedicating himself to producing highly detailed collages that combine carefully selected elements. The inferiority notion largely resonates with the sense of Kharkiv's provincial identity, a sentiment held by photographers constantly finding themselves needing to prove their worth to external parties—"Soviet photography", Polish and Czechoslovak magazines, not to mention the unimaginable and elusive Western art market. For Boris Mikhailov, though, the path turned out to be somewhat different: recognizing his provincial identity, he used it as the basis for his creative method. According to Viktor Misiano,

¹³¹ *ibid*: 313

¹³² *ibid*: 302

¹³³ *ibid*: 305

it was precisely from the moment when Mikhailov "realized that it would be more fruitful not to ignore his identity as an amateur photographer, but, on the contrary, to act in accordance with it" that he became "the first contemporary photographer of the Soviet avant-garde."¹³⁴

Boris Mikhailov discovers his *Red* (1965-1978) (7) not only in flags and banners of demonstrations but also in his very subjects: from crimson lipstick and swimsuits to youthful pimples. In capturing the unfiltered Sovietness, instead of positioning himself above or beyond the object of his criticism, he places himself directly at the center, demonstrating in his works not only the banality of the surrounding environment but also the fact that he is nothing other than an ordinary Soviet person from the street. Being in the very center of his object, simultaneously cold, mechanical, sympathetic, and melancholic in his photographic exploration – this is the way of being an author that Mikhailov developed in Kharkiv in the mid-1960s and continued later, with the second generation of Kharkiv photographers.

Hence, the photographers of the first generation of the Kharkiv School can hardly be termed dissidents: they operated well within the framework of the Soviet system, although within the scope of their works, they reconsidered imperial forms and content. The forms of identity conveyed in their works primarily championed individuality against collectivism, or - acknowledged and satirized this collectivism, the Soviet supra-national identity within themselves. Ukrainianess is still idealized, while a distinct regional identity is difficult to pinpoint – it only emerges within the isothymic complexes of the "province" in comparison to the center.

7.2. KSOP Second Generation

The long-fought archnemesis of Kharkiv photographic underground died in 1991. The Leviathan is demolished, and it is not anymore clear against *whom among* should the image war be waged. There are quite a few candidates. Though the technical issue is, while choosing a side one is fighting *against*, is it also imperial to pick one one is fighting *for*?

In the core of Kharkiv's *angry young men* offensive strategy now lies their unhesitant turn to multi-vector attacks. Righteously inheriting the first generation's visual fascination with marginal and subversive, they now lack a single structural object to consolidate their criticism

¹³⁴ Misiano 1989: 66

against. From amidst the dispersion of their accusatory howl, the first sprouts of identarian wondering are gradually making way through the thick of indiscriminate fire: if the enemy is gone, and the cripples are still scattered around the house, then it probably means that we *are* these cripples.

In his resonant 1998 project *Bedtime stories* (8) Sergei Bratkov thoroughly recreates the scenarios from the popular Soviet-time `sadist verses` children folklore genre, featuring Young pioneers characters as engaged in various tortures against the erring adults. Similar to the recurring subjects of Bratkov`s imagery, generation two's subversion shares a lot with a childish, innately *infantile* riot. In the hysterical rush for autonomy, both *the spectrum* and *the operators* find themselves empowered yet fragile; still unable to come up with any reasons to be proud of one`s new independent status – reasons yet to be constructed – they decide for baring their fangs to each direction possible.

Everyone is a culprit in this whodunnit. Ranging from the unreachable collectivized West, a civilizational super-ego, through the precarious Ukrainian state with its vaguely defined and increasingly ambiguous identarian politics, to the chauvinistic `hand of the Kremlin` still encroaching upon the autonomy of its former republic.

In the actionist project "*Spitting on Moscow*"(1995) (9) as part of the "Group of Immediate Reaction," artists Sergei Bratkov, Vita, and Boris Mikhailov venture into the Kharkiv City Zoo to "teach" a camel how to spit in the right direction. Each time the animal turned towards the Russian capital, the artists spat alongside it. At the end of the performance, the camel was awarded a "Ukrainian Korovai", playing with the similarity between the word `korovai` (traditional Ukrainian and Russian bread) and `karavan`, a caravan. Simultaneously documenting the irritation caused by the haphazard Ukrainianization policy initiated by Leonid Kravchuk and capturing the resentment towards the Russian Federation, the "Group of Immediate Reaction " deliberately assumes an "against all" stance.

This "against" stance of the second-generation artists extends to the West as well. Bratkov`s 1996 project `Princesses` (10) features portraits of various female visitors of a Kharkiv fertility treatment center holding semen sample containers each one labeled with the name and title of a European royalty as a hypothetical donor. Through resorting to kitsch and obscenity, the artist brings up not only the issue of female status in post-soviet societies, but first and foremost

criticizes the subservience to the fetishized West with concomitant inferiority complex shared among the Kharkiv `provincial` population. The object of self-colonization as theorized by Kiossev¹³⁵, the intersecting imperial cultural influences from both Russia and the European community, as well as the young Ukrainian state, the complex of inferiority in Kharkiv - having evolved into a stage of aggression - is directed in all directions at once.

One of the boldest and most controversial works of the Group of Immediate Reaction is "The Box for Three Letters" (1994) (11). In the 90s, the language question became acute - Ukraine was transitioning to the Ukrainian language in official documents. The Ukrainian alphabet differs from Russian by three letters - Ї, Є, and І. The artists casted these letters in Latin script, and created a slogan that was meant to replace "Workers of the world, unite!" – "Хлопці, гуртуємось! Дівчатка, єднаємось!" ("Boys, let's come together! Girls, let's unite!"). Bratkov recalls: "With this box and the framed slogan, we went to institutions. We arrived there with a very serious look, like some kind of government designers, and sternly asked, 'Do you have a *krasnyy ugolok* ("red corner" referring to a space within an organization or institution that is designated for the purposes of propaganda and political education) in your establishment?' - 'Yes, of course!' - 'All right. It needs to be changed. We've brought new symbols for it. Let's try it on!' Employees of the institutions immediately opened the red corners and took out the flags, and we recorded this on video. It was a video work about how our people are ready to quickly adapt and change flags and symbols - even if it's for something quite foolish." ¹³⁶

A characteristic trait of the second generation turns out to be the near disappearance of formal experiments in image representation - aestheticized, experimental photography. There is no longer a need for photographs to prove their legitimacy as art. Marginality - both as a medium and within the local context at large - becomes an integral tool of the second generation, a relinquishment of which would render them utterly defenseless. Equipped with vulgarity, artists take upon themselves the task of provocation - targeting everyone they can.

Thus, non-manipulative, documentary photography enters onto the Kharkiv scene - allowing for the most rapid and acute responses to the social agenda. In the early 1990s, Kharkiv school's of photography most emblematic obsession with marginal reached a whole new level

¹³⁵ Kiossev 2011

¹³⁶ Chekh 2022: 125

by transforming its nature from figurative to literal. The oppressed groups are first called by their names; they are no longer abstract visual tropes utilized to encode some more general meanings or to saturate the grotesque surrealism of the Soviet system; they regain subjectivity through finally signifying what they actually are – the specific individuals suffering from societal inaction. The 1994 installation *Frozen Landscape* by Sergey Bratkov brings up an unprecedented for KSOP social agenda. Featuring the pictures of homeless people frozen into a block of ice, it is a commemoration to the real 45 homeless frozen during the winter of 1993-1994.

Through the author's personal involvement or their playful intrusion into the photographic sequence, the "social reportage" within the Kharkiv School of Photography undermines not only the foundations of the Soviet "mono-ideological" reportage, but also the classical Western documentary tradition. This same energy fuels another type of reportage that can be distinguished within the KSP - the "subjective" reportage. The term "subjective reportage" is used by Roman Pyatkovka to describe his series "*Maternity Ward*" (1987) (12), in which the photographer showcases the harrowing conditions of childbirth and labor in Soviet hospitals. The photographs from the maternity ward captured by Pyatkovka offer a completely different, contrasting view to the idyllic image of Soviet-era propaganda: childbirth in the anachronic institutions is harsh and painful.

Nevertheless, in his work, Pyatkovka does venture into formal experimentation, albeit in a certain way, deconstructing it as well. Pyatkovka recounts that when he began reviewing the photographs, he realized that their effect was insufficient. "Direct photography does not convey the feelings that were present in that dreadful Soviet maternity ward, where iodine was the only antiseptic, where the only disinfectant was bleach, where it was January or February, and the air temperature in the maternity wards was 14 degrees Celsius, where there were 3-4 beds and women cried out in labor simultaneously. I was photographing in the pathological department where young intern girls came and fainted. Direct photography lacks this fear, this pain, the smell of bleach, the blue walls, and the penetrating cold of the halls. I understood that they needed to be transformed, and I started degrading the quality, toning, and printing poorly. During printing, I shifted the image to make it blurry, because my hands were trembling. This is how my subjective reportage emerged".¹³⁷ Eventually, Pyatkovka turns to the widespread

¹³⁷ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 332

practice of manually coloring prints with aniline dyes to emphasize his impressions and emotions. Using only red, blue, and yellow colors, Pyatkovka significantly deviates from the tradition of coloring *luriks*, a vernacular method that undeniably influenced the penchant for hand-coloring photographs throughout the Kharkiv School. According to this tradition, the manually applied colors on the print surface had to follow the forms of bodies and clothing of the photographed individuals. Pyatkovka, however, contrary to this, uses the same traditional type of dye and applies strokes much more freely, not adhering to contours, or even disregarding them altogether as autonomous elements separate from the original image.

During the years 1986-1988, Misha Pedan documented another invisible layer of everyday life for the Soviet individual, absent from official photography - the time spent in urban transportation. The series "M" (Metro) (13) compiles frontal portraits of Kharkiv residents, with boredom and alienation taking center stage. Such a frontal approach is a rarity and audacity for unofficial photography in the USSR, where a person with a camera was invariably regarded with suspicion. However, amidst the hopeless grayness and tedium, an unexpectedly vibrant sequence with an accordion player emerges. The unstoppable sudden energy, vividly expressed through its unguardedness in the photograph, captivates both the passengers and the photographer. The author aptly characterizes this brief intrusion as "*intoxicated Soviet joy*."¹³⁸ This doesn't refer to celebrated optimism, but to an excessive and all-encompassing uninhibited carnival revelry.

The series "*Alcoholic Psychosis*" (1983) by Yevgeniy Pavlov was captured in the Kharkiv Psychiatric Hospital, which the city's residents commonly refer to as "Saburova Dacha" ("Saburka"). The artistic community of Kharkiv was well acquainted with the functioning of "Saburka": some of its members have personally experienced the rehabilitative procedures of this hospital, including Eduard Limonov and Oleksandr Sytnychenko. Pavlov's photographs focus on an individual in a state of alcohol-induced agony - and the photographer definitely identifies himself with the suffering man he is capturing.

Thus, the dialogue with *the social* does not become an experience of "class tourism" in the Kharkiv School; here, photographers are still inclined, if not to identify, at least to draw parallels between themselves and their subjects. In certain cases, this effect is further intensified

¹³⁸Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 344

by the element of performativity - as seen in the famous series "*Case History*" (1997-1998) (14) by Boris Mikhailov. In this series, the photographer captures the aftermath of recent changes in Ukrainian society, particularly through portraits of people who have just lost their homes. The novelty of this situation allowed him to get closer to the marginalized, overcoming their rejection and distrust. Rather than distancing himself, the fact that the photographer offered them monetary compensation in exchange for posing for the shots brought the artist closer. Mikhailov notes he was also contemplating creating a series on the theme of the "new rich", but unlike the homeless, they had already understood their significance, power, and distanced themselves from their fellow citizens into a separate and impenetrable social group. Establishing direct contact with them, which was crucial for the photographer, was already too late: "I missed the moment with the 'new rich.' There was a time when they still didn't realize their wealth and their position. Then came a time when one could start writing a book about another main feature of that time - poverty. The best way was to photograph the homeless. And this 'opportunity' was given, as it seemed to me, only for a short moment."¹³⁹

Unlike the previous examples, in the "*Case History*", the documentary style not only undergoes mutation due to the photographer's personal involvement but also completely subverts its rules. This is achieved through the performative dimension, the "game" introduced by Mikhailov, who captures himself simultaneously with the homeless, "playing" their role in front of the camera. Art historian Olena Chervonik, analyzing the subversion of documentary photography achieved by Mikhailov in this series, considers this intrusion of the author into the object of observation to be profoundly transgressive: "Is it even possible to call this project documentary as it seems to violate the primary unspoken rule of the genre predicated on the assumed objectivity, non-intrusion, and non-fictionality, of recording life 'as is'?"¹⁴⁰ "*Case History*" initiates debates not only about ethics but also about the nature and limits of representation as such and about the boundary of the viewing process itself. The final and most significant Mikhailov's intrusion into the logic of the documentary genre occurs in the photographs where he himself poses as the protagonist of his visual narrative - he adopts the role of a vulnerable subject, just as helpless and powerless as the homeless.

¹³⁹ Mikhailov 1999: 5

¹⁴⁰ Chervonik 2020

Tackling the issue of identities, the Kharkiv School often turns to the well-familiar kitsch. For example, Pyatkovka notes: "Many of my works are kitsch, using the terminology of Viktor Tupitsyn, *communal postmodernism*".¹⁴¹ The apex of this approach can be seen in the controversial series by the Group of Immediate Reaction "*If I Were a German*" (1994) (15). In this series, participants of the group play on camera the roles of certain characters, behaving as if they were Germans in occupied Ukraine during World War II. In this concoction, most scenes are openly erotic, which profanes a theme that had been almost sacred for half a century. Through these serious yet sharply provocative "games," the group breaches the most untouchable, expertly instrumentalized taboos of Soviet society. Furthermore, apart from its overtly subversive and mischievous character, another specific feature of this series lies in its correspondence with the contemporary agenda of the day. An important event in 1994, hinted at by the series, was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Germany and Boris Yeltsin's speech in Berlin, in which he expressed forgiveness from the Russian people to the Germans. The images captured during the Russian Federation president's speech hardly reflected the historical significance of that moment, as well as its glaring ambivalence. "Did this historic forgiveness truly occur?" the group members ask.

Another starting point for the creation of the series was two "sociological surveys." The first, conducted by the photographers among elderly individuals who had lived through the war and the German occupation, showed that: in the majority of them, the memory had nearly erased images of violence, leaving behind the image of a German soldier as a strong, stern adversary, not devoid of human weaknesses, cultural, sometimes kind, capable of offering a piece of bread to the hungry.¹⁴² The second survey was conducted among young females. They were posed the question: "Which officer would you marry - a Russian or a German?" It's no surprise that the second option garnered more enthusiasm among the respondents. In times when the standard of living in Germany was significantly higher than in the former USSR republics, the German soldier became an object of desire, and his image no longer evoked fear or hatred. The intersection of the results of these two surveys formed a hybrid and unexpected image, left in the public consciousness by the German occupier. Then, three photographers dared to play the roles of German officers, attempting to answer the question: "What if I were German? What privileges would I enjoy? How would I treat those under my authority?" In this series, they

¹⁴¹ Bernard-Kovalchuk 2020: 328

¹⁴² *ibid*: 196

tried to achieve a genuine "forgiveness of the former inherited enemy," placing themselves in his position to understand the behavior of ordinary soldiers.

Roman Pyatkovka also engages in imagination games and "constructing" images that do not exist. His series *"Phantoms of the 1930s. Holodomor"* (1988) (16) demonstrates the author's captivation with mystifications. Photographic documentation of the tragedy of those years is absent from the history of Soviet photography. Moreover, almost all information regarding the famine in Ukraine, the intentional nature of which is still the subject of sharp debates among historians, remained practically inaccessible, even by the end of the 1980s. Pyatkovka managed to learn about this historical event through self-publishing, the main channel for distributing unofficial and prohibited texts in the USSR during that period. Impressed by the scale of the catastrophe and incensed by the cynicism of its suppression, he began developing a dramatic pantheon of phantoms of people whose tragedy lies not only in their physical destruction but also in the fact that collective memory left no trace of their fate. To achieve this, the author first turned to anonymous family photographs that he came across during his work on *luriky*. However, Pyatkovka did not limit himself to them: among the portraits that served as the basis for the series, old photographs are coexisting with the contemporary ones. He treated both old and new images as indistinguishable primal material, applying the same post-processing technique to both. Thus, any differences between the old and new images were erased. As the author asserts, documentary and historical authenticity had no motivational power in creating the series. *"Historical accuracy didn't interest me at all. The boy prisoner in this series was actually reshot from a newspaper. What mattered was to create a portrait series that disappeared from family albums. The vanished family album of the 1930s. Of course, I understood what these photographs were, where they came from, and roughly when they were taken. Initially, the cannibal woman was in a group photograph. But this project is not a series of documentary photographs. It is an artistic imitation that directs the viewer into the realm of the genetic memory of fear,"* comments Pyatkovka¹⁴³

Turning to one's own, often forgotten history also occurs through more localized narratives. By examining photographs taken by his older brother, the official photographer at a factory, Evgeny Pavlov reconstructs an entire era in the life of a specific enterprise. Appropriating such procedural and "naive" photos, Evgeny Pavlov created two series: *"Life of the Factory"* (1990)

¹⁴³ *ibid*: 331

and "*Energetic Portraits*" (1989). Given Pavlov's characteristic attention to cinematic methodology, these collages unmistakably resemble the form of storyboarding. Simultaneously, their structuring strongly evokes the classics of Soviet visual communication - spatial "object-photography" - wall newspapers and honor boards.

Thus, the photographic works of the second generation of the Kharkiv School demonstrated that the transition from the USSR to independent Ukraine proved complex not only from economic and ideological standpoints but also from the identarian one. Artists sensed the tension of this issue at the dawn of state autonomy; nevertheless, they chose a path of denial rather than construction. Feeling skeptical toward all the identity narratives suggested, the photographers opted for reflecting on the acute social issues, turning any identity discourses into provocation. Concurrently, an interest in the history of the Kharkiv region began to emerge, leading to an awareness of its suppression during Soviet times. In this way, artists took their first steps toward gradually shifting from their aggressive stance of *negative* identities to the local narratives' appreciation, which will be a general trend for the third generation.

7.3. KSOP Third Generation

"Who am I? ". "Teach me to live". "A heart brimming with tears". Within merely eight years, Bratkov's "Kids" (2000) have transformed into disillusioned, vacant-eyed teenagers —bereft of flag or emblem to follow or protest against —let alone going on a rampage attacking the erring adults as in "*Bedtime Stories*" (1998) and holding one's acrid saliva for spitting at Moscow ("*Spitting on Moscow*", 1995). Levitating amidst the rickety *panelkas* of Kharkiv residential districts, the emo kids from the "*Dreamers*" project (2008) (17) by SOSka group cry out rhetorical questions: «Whom can I trust?»; «How can I be born again?». Hesitant to descend to the earth where the burden of choosing one's identities and perspectives would hang over them, the "*Dreamers*" protagonists stay among the clouds, where they find peace in their shared black-pink stockings and kohl-rimmed eyes, the angelically politically unanchored attire dictated by the globalized subcultural fashion.

Witnessing the dissolution of the long-established behavioral patterns, identity narratives, and societal norms, young artists of Kharkiv begin to contemplate novel forms of their collective existence. By countering the market, the new "dream factory" succeeding socialism—yet, unlike the latter, failing to offer a consolidative principle to the population—the SOSka group not only documents the apolitical and agonizingly shelterless states of their subjects under the

banner of a self-proclaimed "social diagnostic" mission, but also, for the first time in the history of the Kharkiv School, endeavors to mend the identified gaps and blind spots, directing its efforts towards rectification, rather than mere indication or mockery, of the declared social issues.

Victor Misiano perceives a certain ideological kinship between SOSka's actions and the contemporary artistic practices of Moscow's actionists, who were concurrently formulating their utopian projects of the "new post-Soviet sociality".¹⁴⁴ If during the Soviet years, subcultural estrangement—"mockery"—was directed towards the language of official culture to differentiate one's identity from the dominant collective identity, much as occurred with the first generation, then in 2008, there was "no longer that dominant discourse through which, via erecting autonomy from which, identity could be reclaimed". Indeed, a connection might be drawn to groups like "Radek" or "What is to be done?". "*How can people exist together?*" was our main question", notes "Radek" member Petr Bystrov. The parallel is particularly valid within the context of the narrative of "Eastern European identity" (organically encompassing, for the KSOP artists, Russian Federation as well), passionately advocated by the SOSka group in its curatorial projects, notably "*New History*". While one may understandably argue that this western-centered identarian cliché can be perceived here as an externally imposed category barely different from *the black-pink stockings and kohl-rimmed eyes*, in this chapter I present the reasons why negotiating Eastern European solidarity paradoxically was one of the pillars for the further establishment of the balanced regional identity narrative within the Kharkiv artistic scene.

In this context, SOSka advances far beyond "Radek" or "What is to be done?". While Radek activists are content with modeling, simulating, constructing a *lorem ipsum* of a social movement, SOSka aims for solidarity cultivation and audience nurturing. Indicating the task of "studying the globalization of contexts process", SOSka representatives, having ingeniously absorbed and processed global contemporary art trends, project them to the Kharkiv ground, initiating a reverse process of localization, both ideologically and practically.

In the ideological dimension—representing a turn towards polylogue with *the local*—SOSka finds a kindred spirits in the local photographers of the Shilo group. Finding the bond of

¹⁴⁴ Misiano 2008: 22

consolidation in generational continuity, iconographic rootedness, in "*vollendete Dissertation*" ("*Finished Dissertation*", 2012) (18), Shilo produces an art object that might appear as a cryptographic puzzle to the external observer; they paste their photographs on top of Boris Mikhailov's photo book "*Unfinished Dissertation*" (1984). With the use of adhesive and aging agents for paper, Shilo not only forcibly inscribes themselves into the *opus magnum* of Mikhailov, the patriarch of Kharkiv's underground, imprinting their faces onto the Valhalla plaque of the Kharkiv School of Photography—by this gesture, they forge the plaque itself. "It is we who created the Kharkiv School", Lebedinsky jests.¹⁴⁵

Lebedinsky points out that at that time, very few people talked about the Kharkiv School of Photography. There was minimal information available; only the stories and novels of Juri Rupin, who was in the same "Vremya" group as Mikhailov and Pavlov, had been published. "We immersed ourselves in all of that back then, curious about how things unfolded in the Soviet Union, and it was intriguing to rekindle all of that. A school without successful students isn't really a school. So, if there's a group of people who did something at some point, of course, they are re impressive, top-notch, and all that, but without students, without multiple generations, they remain just a group."¹⁴⁶

Vladyslav Kasnoshok from "Shilo" also recalls Mikhailov's reaction to their project. "During that time, we were quite often at Bob's (Boris Mikhailov's) place on Pushkinska Street – drinking tea, we discussed this topic. Bob didn't really like what we had done. But if you're going to argue about visual, photographic matters with someone, it's only with a person who is at the pinnacle of that photographic chain. Bob is precisely that person who holds the entire Kharkiv School of Photography, all of us. One can say, the grandchildren played with their grandpa. Why should he be offended? We love and deeply respect Bob. This is Kharkiv, after all, and without a bit of teasing, it's impossible. The city is like that – everyone trolls each other here."¹⁴⁷

As with any sacred-epic text, engagement with "*vollendete Dissertation*" demands from the reader the exceptional familiarity with the local semiotic tradition, or rather "being part of the circle." Thus, only one acquainted with the context can decipher that through their meta-textual

¹⁴⁵ Steh 2017: <https://lyuk.media/city/gruppa-shilo/>

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*

¹⁴⁷ Vasina 2022: <https://lyuk.media/people/vladyslav-krasnoshchok/>

approach, Shilo concludes not one, but simultaneously three dissertations—thereby restoring a certain local equilibrium. Here, the artists not only throw down the gauntlet to Mikhailov—a trickster against *the* trickster—but summon the restless spirit of Kharkiv's semi-legendary figure, the 'blessed' Oleg Mitasov with his posthumous academic debts. Mitasov, presumably suffering from schizophrenia, has been known to the residents of Kharkiv since the 1980s for his numerous paradoxical inscriptions on fences and walls of buildings. Mitasov received a higher education in economics; he lived in a seven-room communal apartment in the center of Kharkiv. According to one legend, he went mad after forgetting his doctoral dissertation during a tram trip on his way to the Higher Attestation Commission, which resulted in him not becoming a Doctor of Sciences. Mitasov's paradoxical phrases serve as the backdrop for many photographs by the "Shilo" group. Through their audacious gesture, akin to the textbook "sons against fathers" (*nana cpaзy же – где на земле*, "father - right away - where on Earth", says one of Mitasov's graffiti), the Shilo group shifts the archon into the realm of photographically disembodied, incapable of speaking through camera Mitasov — word. The unexpected medial exchange bears fruit; all the participants assert themselves and find solace in their triunity. "Is this mockery or respect?" Mikhailov queries.¹⁴⁸ This seems to be a finely-calibrated Proppian transitional function.

Meanwhile, in the practical dimension, Shilo succeeded no less than SOSka— it is Sergey Lebedinsky who in 2018 established the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography.

The theme of generational continuity resonates closely with artists of the third generation, both in a literal and figurative sense. Ilya Pavlov, the son of first-generation representative Yevgeny Pavlov and the curator of numerous exhibitions, as well as the ideologue of the Kharkiv School of Photography, Tatiana Pavlova, employs his father's photographs in one of his projects, "My You" (2002), digitally transforming them. This simultaneously showcases the painful process of separation from the familiar and the act of inheritance. In another series, "At Belly Level" (2005), Ilya Pavlov delves into the technique once employed by his father and his colleagues for discreet photography.

Restless spirits, sanctified to varying degrees, pique the interest of Boba Group as well. Their project "Voyenved" (19) features edited negatives of the Second World War veterans' portraits

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*

found by the artists on the ground of Voyenved, a neglected area on the outskirts of Kharkiv. Nearly luminescent images of negatives (non-inverted; retaining the distinctive reddish hue of Kharkiv courtyard cobblestones and congealed blood) are adorned with flowers (a bleeding icon of the Mother of God also exists in Kharkiv, preserved in the Zhuravlevsky Church of the First-Highest Apostles Peter and Paul) and placed on the steles of an abandoned military park Voyenved, reminiscent of a circular pagan shrine "We have returned heroes to their heroic place", comments Nezabaram.¹⁴⁹

Since 2004, no one resides in Voyenved. In a time now past, Voyenved was home to one of the most famous aviation academies of the USSR, the Kharkiv Higher Military Aviation School of Pilots named after double Hero of the Soviet Union S.I. Gritsevets. 293 future Heroes of the Soviet Union were educated there (including Ivan Kozhedub, thrice Hero of the Soviet Union), as well as 15 future cosmonauts (among them Alexei Leonov, the cosmonaut who was the first to venture into open space). Now, this strategic military facility has been left behind by people. Several educational buildings, hangars, residential, administrative, and utility structures have been plundered. Boba Group returns "*heroes to their heroic place*", which exists as a refuge for local drug addicts and scrap collectors. In Voyenved, it is them with whom the dialogue is launched.

By consigning the "Immortal Regiment" ("*бессмертный полк*" which refers to the Soviet tradition of honoring the dead who participated in the WW2 through a 9th of May Victory day demonstration) of Voened to the conscious, articulated oblivion, Boba Group finds itself in a gray zone between the desecration of holy relics and the programmatic assertion of the intrinsic value of local narratives, akin to what SOSka and Shilo achieved (incidentally, there is also practical effort included, as before the exhibition organization, the group has cleaned the park's territory of debris and overgrowth). All three groups employ a magnifying glass of similar scale — the only difference is perhaps SOSka's interest in introducing external irritants. Infusing the global into the body of the local, SOSka members observe how it will be received, will it assimilate or not—as part of gradual vaccination, but also with almost scholarly interest to understand better the local family of both spectators, comrades, and objects.

¹⁴⁹ Leptuga 2017: <https://nakipelo.ua/ru/voenved-v-voenvede-fotonegativy-prevratilis-v-kartiny>

The photo and video project "*Be happy*" (2005) by the SOSka group is dedicated to a homeless woman. Despite her status, she conveys consumerist and hedonistic slogans, recently imposed by the post-Soviet advertising space on citizens of the region— "Everyone has to take it easy once in a while. And I also have the right to." In an even more revealing project titled "*Barter*" (20), the artists venture into one of the villages in the Kharkiv region, where they bring printed works by various contemporary artists. Placing these works in an empty courtyard, they invited village residents passing by to choose a piece they would like to exchange for something they could offer, whether it be eggs, potatoes, a hen, or something else. A mandatory condition for acquiring a work was also to explain why that particular piece was chosen and where in their homes the residents would hang it. The artists documented their dialogues with the villagers on video, and also took photographs of the works displayed in the houses, whether on top of a carpet, above the stove, or near the icon corner. An elderly woman, discussing her choice of Roy Lichtenstein's work because "it looks like my granddaughter," and another selecting a self-portrait of Cindy Sherman, dressed as a clown, explaining that "the man has good, big eyes, and a beautiful hairstyle." The "*Barter*" project manifests the "sacred" naivety of the Kharkiv provincial audience—specifically in the case of a dying village and more broadly—deprived of the opportunity to receive a decent cultural education and, as a result of harsh economic circumstances, distanced from contemporary discourses.

In KSOP's third generation, the proud provinciality of Kharkiv is hoisted as a banner; previously an instrument of subversion against the polished Soviet regime, the transformed-into-brand urban vulgarity, now multiplied by the legitimized kitsch of triumphant oligarchic capitalism, acquires value *per se*—regardless of the legitimation or outrage from any external geopolitical power: it is no longer aimed for shocking the Other; it is being carefully dissected for its own sake. Asserting shameless locality apart from the grand narratives of recent "civilizational" superegos and striving for cultural autonomy, the third generation almost unprecedentedly within Kharkiv's recent history lays the foundation for the formation of a *positive* (here: not through what we are *not*, but through what we *are*) regional identity.

In accordance with its name (in Ukrainian and Russian languages, *soska* also means 'a pacifier'), SOSka undertakes a philanthropic mission. If its aim is representation unaltered by communication solely to a limited or distant audience, the dialogue, the socialization of art, then nurturing and educating its naïve local public falls within its responsibility.

The institutional landscape responsible for art matters in 2000s Kharkiv consisted of the City Art Museum, housing a permanent collection of classical art, and the equally anachronistic Academy of Design and Arts. The former held the biennial NonStopMedia festival for young artists. Mykola Ridnyi shares his memory of the festival organization team "suggesting" the participating artists to "volunteer" for shipping boxes of expired "*golden age*" beer to the festival from Rogan, Kharkiv outskirts area.¹⁵⁰ The alternative to the outdated agenda of Kharkiv institutions was Kyiv's Pinchuk Art Centre, which at that time focused on bringing the works of famous Western artists. Protesting against both approaches, SOSka decided to introduce a new exhibition format to Kharkiv. In 2009, the controversial "New Histories" exhibition curated by SOSka dramatically shifted the power dynamics within the Kharkiv art scene. "We thought that if we take the East, but a slightly different East, just a bit more to the West, and Russia, which is a little more to the East and North, and bring them to us, it's like bringing the East to the East. We envisioned that this is the space where we could build a network of like-minded individuals and work with them, making a critical gesture against the trend of big star-studded show projects,"¹⁵¹ commented Mykola Ridnyi. However, on the second day of the exhibition, it was scandalously closed by the museum director Valentina Myzgina, who accused the young artists of debasing art – nevertheless, the process of rethinking Kharkiv's artistic stance was already launched. As part of its communitarian course, the SOSka group initiated a program of artistic workshops named "Class" in their laboratory. Concurrently, the fall of photographic authorities in Kyiv occurred, with the exhibition "Two Views on Ukrainian Photography," largely propelled by Shilo's disruptive potential.

By the early 2010s, the once untamed Kharkiv School started to appear as an almost *overly conformist* rebel: decentralization, a focus on grassroots horizontalism, institutional critique, and the romanticized marginality of the "poor but sexy"¹⁵²—tagged for the international audience as "post-soviet", "Eastern European". The Kharkiv art scene adeptly understands how to align with the agenda of grant providers: it commodifies itself resorting to labels understandable for a European curator, trying to look not toothless but rather domesticated.

¹⁵⁰ Kadan 2009: <https://archive.prostory.net.ua/de/art/206-2009-05-24-12-16-13>

¹⁵¹ German, Libet 2021: <https://supportyourart.com/conversations/grupa-soska-yak-formuvalasya-spilnotadovkola-suchasnogo-mystecztva-v-harkovi-2000-h/>

¹⁵² Pyzik 2014

Predictably, the newfound locality didn't render the young generation of the Kharkiv School an insular entity. Yet, while it is cozying up to the externally coined categories, its contexts beneath the standardized surface still stay not always hermeneutically friendly to the uninitiated.

Less evident than nods towards the Western art discourse, the late 2000s require proving Eastern European (in)adequacy to the Eastern European community itself. The East Art Map project by the Slovenian group Irwin, displayed in Kyiv's PinchukArtCentre in 2008, engaged with a critical reevaluation of the art historical tradition of "Western modernisms," historically neglecting the Eastern European processes. The project referenced works by artists from most Eastern European states—but no Ukrainian works were featured among them¹⁵³. Undoubtedly, this precedent sparked righteous indignation within the Ukrainian—and specifically Kharkiv—scene: where do we stand on the art map, if we are not included even among the "club of losers¹⁵⁴"?

Within this context, attempts to seize the initiative in constructing an alternative Eastern European solidarity do not appear overly excessive, contrived, or drawn from top-down directives. The Kyiv R.E.P. group undertakes a similar task, albeit in a slightly different manner. In the "*Mediators*" project (2006), R.E.P. artists invited folk musicians from various Eastern European cultures (performances took place in Armenia, Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, and Poland) to perform in their city squares with ballads narrating the most acute and controversial stories from recent news in contemporary art. Emerging from the very solidarity the SOSka intended to achieve, the ecstatic national unity of the Orange Revolution, and facilitating engagement with contemporary art institutions, R.E.P. resonates with Kharkiv artists in terms of both methods and ideas. However, it appears more as their twin predecessor in reverse rewinding: not aiming to seek new social consolidations or intensify cross-border self-organization, it engages with the international general public indirectly, through carriers of local cultural traditions, thus enabling its members to avoid `tarnishing` their hands with the Other.

¹⁵³ as well as works of Belarusian, Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani artists.

¹⁵⁴ Kadan 2009: <https://archive.prostory.net.ua/de/art/206-2009-05-24-12-16-13>

Still, recognition must also be pursued on the Western European front. Mykola Ridnyi's action "*Lie Down and Wait*", (2006) with the participation of Ivona Golybevskaya, is a manifestation of politics intruding into the artist's private life. A series of attempts to visit Europe culminated in a string of visa rejections for Ridnyi. Even with an invitation to his own exhibition, the artist couldn't travel abroad. The Schengen denials served as the origins of future visa setbacks. This paradoxical situation became the catalyst for an artistic gesture: when someone has nothing left to lose, they might simply lie down on the sidewalk outside the embassy and wait. Soon after, the security at the German embassy responded to his disorienting behavior – the artist was detained. The West, as exemplified by Germany in Ridnyi's action, here serves not only as a subject of isothymic complexes, especially within the discourse on Eurointegration context, but also as a case study for articulating the repressive and divisive nature of *any* identity project. By not assisting the artist in obtaining visas, European states essentially create 'Others' to safeguard their ontological unity – a pattern seemingly pervasive.

Starting from its earliest actions, SOSka group has set its course towards political provocations. Two weeks before the onset of the "Orange Revolution" in 2004, Mykola Ridnyi and Bella Logacheva staged the performance "*Politkonkretnost*" at the Kharkiv Municipal Gallery. One of the walls in the exhibition hall was covered with portraits of presidential candidates. In the presence of audiences and the press, the artists splattered the politicians' faces with white paint. The white wall—a result of the cleansing of "dirty reputations"—served as a metaphor for a clean slate from which to begin constructing a new politics. The action unfolded in interaction with the spectators, who actively participated in the "whitening" process. In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in 2005, SOSka group conducted a series of actions titled "*They Are on the Streets*"(21) in Kharkiv and Kyiv. Wearing masks of prominent Ukrainian politicians—the president, prime minister, and opposition leaders—the artists depicted "beggars" scrounging at metro stations.

In SOSka's actions, identity functions as a political technology and a product of media warfare. In the Ukrainian case, the theater has seized the medial monopoly: beggar politicians, orange-blue games of love and hate, Lenin's portrait replaced by Yushchenko's – and the questionable reputation of presidential candidates, which can only be whitewashed through the complete erasure of their images. The gestures of SOSka here share much resonance with the burlesque subversion of the second generation's Group of Immediate Reaction, and Kyiv's R.E.P., highjacking propaganda and marketing toolset. Political performance traditions of Kharkiv

school continue not only through SOSka, but also Shilo. In their project "Ukrainian Insurgent Army Hände hoch!" (2014) (22), artists take on the personas of Ukrainian insurgent army fighters, creating provocative and humorous scenes. If employing a single *camera obscura* allows the Ukrainian insurgent army warriors to – as a light-hearted jest - place a Ukrainian flag on the Kremlin spire, what is then true of the decades- and centuries-long perpetual spectacles of the unyielding, bound-to-the-map identities?

Notably, a pronounced contrast emerges as scathing criticism directed towards Ukrainian politicians and the political realm in general coexists harmoniously with an almost endearing advocacy for all matters related to Ukrainian (cultural) identity. If amidst the whirlwind of galloping Ukrainianization in the 1990s, the Group of Immediate Reaction could still offer officials, bewildered and incapable of distinguishing farce from true orders, the substitution of their red corners with brass-cast Ukrainian alphabet letters ("*The Box for Three Letters*", 1994), in the 2000s such a gesture would appear at the very least feckless and inappropriate. The third generation is unlikely to possess the mode of affection for Ukrainianess found in the first – elusive Ukrainianess, so distant from the prosaic urgencies of Kharkiv's contemporaneity, that automatically transposed into the realm of lyrical ideal setting for escape, rather than conversation; romanticized hymns to folkloric archetypes, rather than biting irony. Those born in the 1980s in Kharkiv had witnessed how such purity is debased in political races. Here, another scheme comes into play – the solidarity of *defect*.

Ukrainianness is fragile, susceptible to external badgering; those *big* oppress it – and the Kharkiv School has historically disfavored those *big*. Ukrainianness is as much a construct as any national project, yet its fragility requires support; it is guarded akin to a sister grassroots initiative. The enslaving Leviathan that the first generation overcame does not loom in Ukrainianness; it is also detached from to varying degrees aggressive windmills the second generation was fighting with. Audacity here seems to be out of place. As responsibility and civic stance come into play, the third generation of KSOP identifies as Ukrainians and is prepared to fight for the future. The Ukrainian artist of the 2010s politicizes their art both in form and content, articulating societal protest sentiments and establishing a cultural foundation for them.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this work was to trace how and which identity narratives are manifested in the photographic works of representatives from different generations of the Kharkiv School of Photography, as well as in their writings and interviews. Given that this study was built upon Pirie's categorization of identity modes, the following conclusions can be drawn. The category of *strong primary regional identification* only emerges within the Kharkiv art community with the arrival of the third generation of photographers. This generation attempts to build the idea of the self-worth of the regional, grassroots, and peripheral, creating their own local semiotic codes and plethora of heroes. However, such a construction never claims a monopoly, peacefully coexisting with discourses of national and transnational Eastern European identities, thus leaning towards Pirie's category of *dual or multiple identities*. The category of *indeterminate identity* actively manifests in the works of the second generation, characterized by a sharp antagonism towards any identity narrative. It is also criticized by the third generation, which sees its mission as correcting such political apathy among Kharkiv residents. The germs of the prerequisites for the formation of transnational identity are also reflected in the work of the third generation, which actively confronts the local with the global. At the level of the first generation, national and regional discourses appear irrelevant, as its representatives still see themselves within the framework of Soviet supranational identity.

One of the tasks of this work was also to determine how artists of different generations position themselves relative to external identitarian (grand) narratives. The theme of "Ukrainianness" was often addressed by the first generation of photographers. However, its aesthetic attributes appear in their works in an Orientalized, romanticized form, opposed to the harsh irony of Soviet everyday life as an ideal, unattainable lyrical substance not found in the mundane Kharkiv environment. The second generation, frustrated by the wave of chaotic Ukrainization, sees "Ukrainianness" as another repressive project—with which, like other externally imposed narratives, they have little affinity. The third generation popularizes the image of the artist as a politically responsible citizen, thus obliged to support the grassroots modus of the Ukrainian national project, largely due to its vulnerability to the encroachments of external aggressive actors.

Representatives of the KSOP also have complex relationships with regard to the Soviet supranational project. The theme of critiquing Soviet conformism, crucial for the first generation of photographers, does not necessarily translate into dissent or political expressions

against the regime. Paradoxically, by subverting the canons of Soviet reportage photography, the first-generation artists still operated within the system of "interest clubs" established by Soviet authorities to channel the energy and free time of its citizens into "productive channels", as described in Yurchak.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, these artists did not propose alternative identity narratives, often either reflecting on the "Soviet subject" with whom they identified themselves - in contrast to the "*class tourism*" of photographers like Diane Arbus¹⁵⁶, or limiting themselves to asserting their subjectivity through formal experiments. For the second generation, which found itself in the aftermath of defeated socialism, the theme of post-Soviet mentality and the specter of the Soviet era is important. They often perceive the emerging Ukrainian aesthetic system as another repressive project and view it with skepticism. The third generation, more detached from the Soviet past, approaches Soviet iconography as a now-empty symbolic system.

Additionally, this work aimed to determine the paths that KSOP artists used to construct positive regional identities. The primary means for artists to manifest their "Kharkivness" turns out to be their recourse to the trope of the city's "provinciality." With each generation of Kharkiv artists, the results show a progressive movement towards affirming discourses of locality. For the first generation, acting as evangelists of individualism as an alternative to collectivism, experiments with the deconstruction of imperial form and content were more a means of reflection on their own Soviet identity. This was linked to feelings of inferiority associated with Kharkiv's peripheral position in the network of their imagined geopolitical coordinates. However, the situation began to change significantly with the declaration of Ukrainian independence in 1991. The second generation, with its pronounced antagonism toward any identity projects, actively demonstrated its autonomy, using the trope of Kharkiv's provincialism as a tool for provocation and subversion. Only the third generation of artists begins to see the intrinsic value in Kharkiv's marginalized status and makes attempts to use it as a foundation for building local communitarianism. It is only in the third generation that the idea of the need for a dialogue with the local, nurturing and educating the local audience, emerges. In contrast, the creativity of other generations seems oriented towards seeking recognition either within the narrow photography community or, especially for the second

¹⁵⁵ Yurchak 2006: 128

¹⁵⁶ Sontag 1977: 56

generation, from external centers of legitimation. These external centers paradoxically become for the KSOP both artistic super-egos and direct targets of provocations and criticism.

In this way, photography has become the medium through hijacking and breaking the established standards of which Kharkiv artists secured opportunities to manifest their belonging sentiments—or their lack thereof—as well as to articulate their isothymic complexes and create the foundations for (trans)regional solidarity. From the "game against the apparatus" of the first generation to the transgressive photography of the third, expanding the notion of the *camera lucida's* toolkit, photographic medium comes across as a symbiosis of documenting *the real* and concurrently expressing one's authorial stance. At the intersection of these aspects, artists manage to construct image posing as a visual opposition for the politicized grand discourses through the deconstruction of their symbols, in turn asserting ideas of inherent yet cherished provinciality and generational artistic heritage to create an alternative local iconography.

9. Future Research

Given that this work focused on the period from 1965 to 2013, it seems relevant for further research to turn to the works of the Kharkiv photographic community that emerged after the Revolution of Dignity and Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, associated with the growth of national self-awareness across the country. In this context, it would be recommendable to examine the shifts in the relationship between national and regional aspects present in the later works of the artists. Additionally, investigating the connections between Kharkiv's artistic community and their colleagues from other Ukrainian regions, especially in light of the creative decentralization movement in 2013-2014, as manifested, for example, in *Deinde* project,¹⁵⁷ would be worthwhile. Similarly, it would be interesting to trace the dynamics of identity reflections provoked by Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine after February 24, 2022, and the direct attacks on Kharkiv. Another point of interest could be the photographic works by Kharkiv residents who have emigrated from the city to other regions of Ukraine and abroad due to these circumstances.

In line with this, there is a proposal to explore the visual practices of broader segments of Kharkiv's population—not only those legitimized by art institutions but also the many

¹⁵⁷ Lozhkina 2020: 530

individuals who have posted their works on the internet, contributing to the diversity of Ukrainian digital culture. In this case, the research object could encompass not only photographs but also text posts on various social media platforms, stories, memes, and videos.

Regardless, future investigations into Kharkiv's identity should not rely on a one-sided binary view akin to what was popularized by proponents of the "two Ukraines" discourse. Instead, researchers should pay attention to the nuances of the city's historical background and geographical location, thus taking into account the complexity of Kharkiv's multi-layered identity complex.

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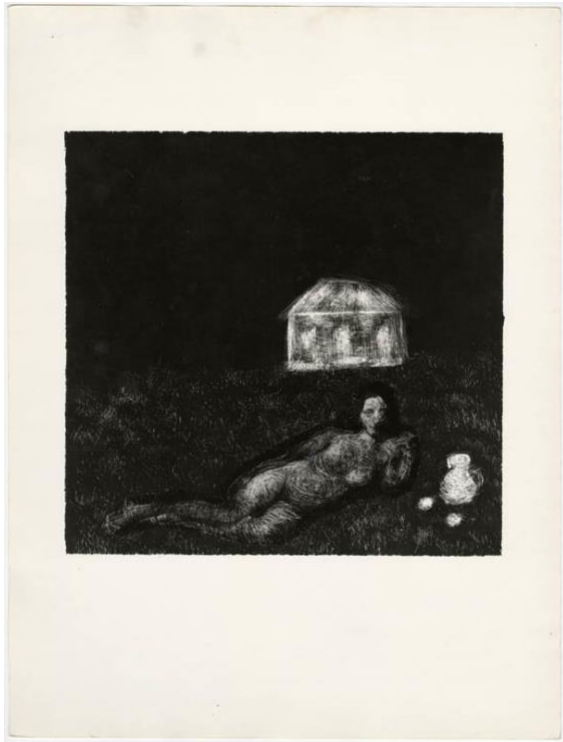


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3. © Boris Mikhailov. Overlays, 1968-1981. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP (*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)
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5. © Evgeniy Pavlov. *Ukrainian Night*, 1974. Courtesy: MOKSOP
6. © Oleksandr Suprun. *Gifts of Autumn. King of the Market*, 1975. Courtesy: MOKSOP



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7. © Boris Mikhailov. *Red Series*, 1956-1978. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
(*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)



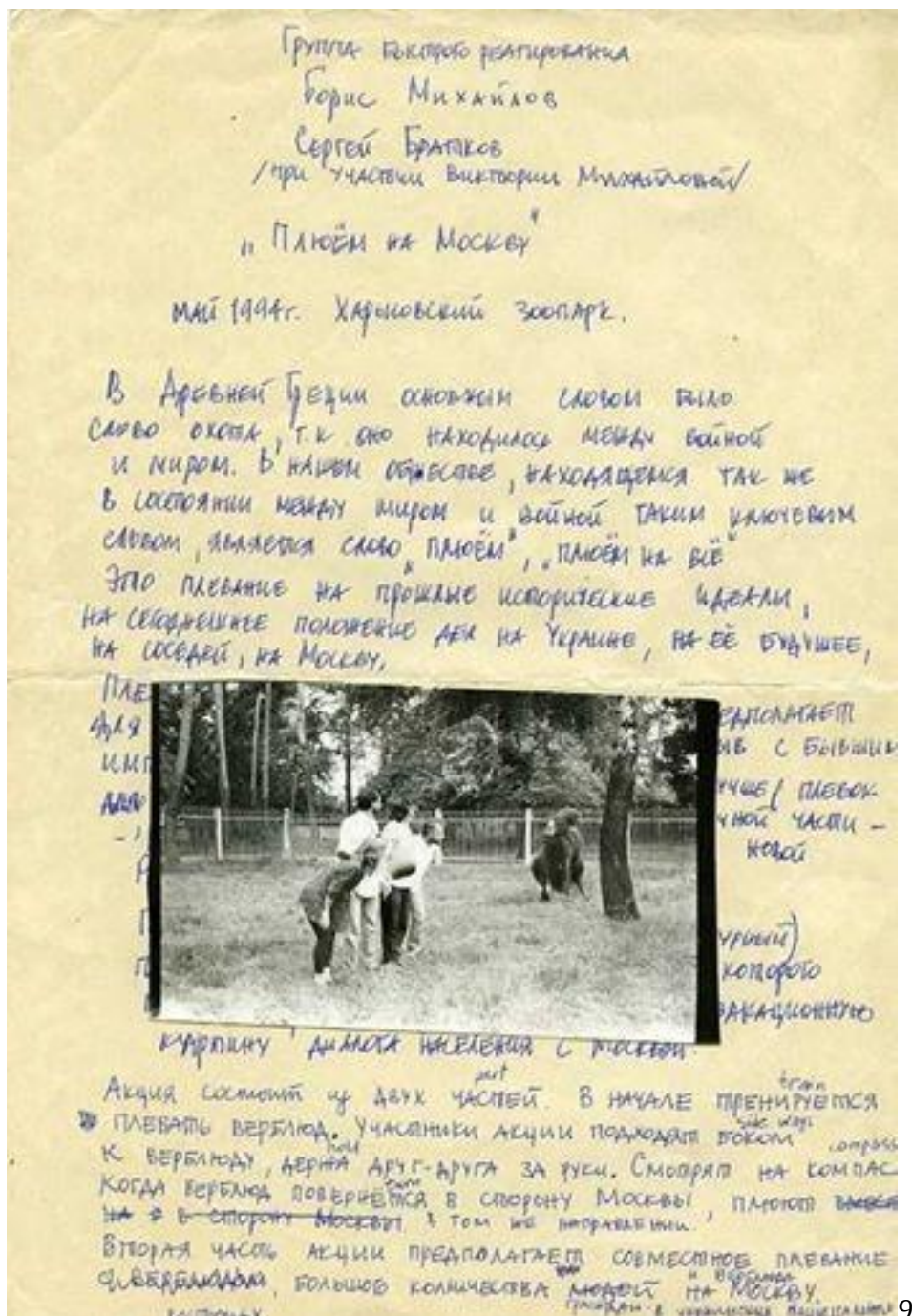
A guest heard pioneers' hail,
And in his head he had a nail.
He got it from their monitor,
To make him stay with them, that's for.



At the basement children were playing Gestapo.
Torture has killed our plumber Potapov.

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8. © Sergei Bratkov. *Bedtime Stories*, 1997. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
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9. © Group of Immediate Reaction. Spitting on Moscow, 1995. Courtesy: Pinchuk Art Centre Research Platform Online Tool



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10. © Sergei Bratkov. Princesses, 1996. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
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11. © Group of Immediate Reaction. The Box for Three Letters, 1994. Courtesy:
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12. © Roman Pyatkovka. *The Maternity Ward*, 1989. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP (*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)



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13. © Misha Pedan. Metro (M), 1980s. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
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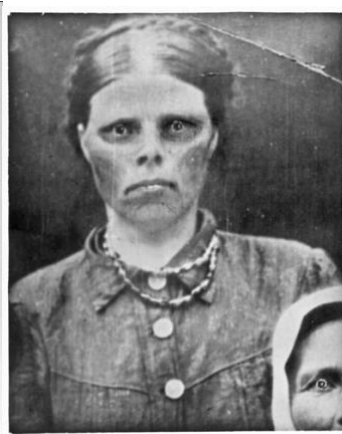


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14. © Boris Mikhailov. *Case History*, 1997-1998. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP (*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)



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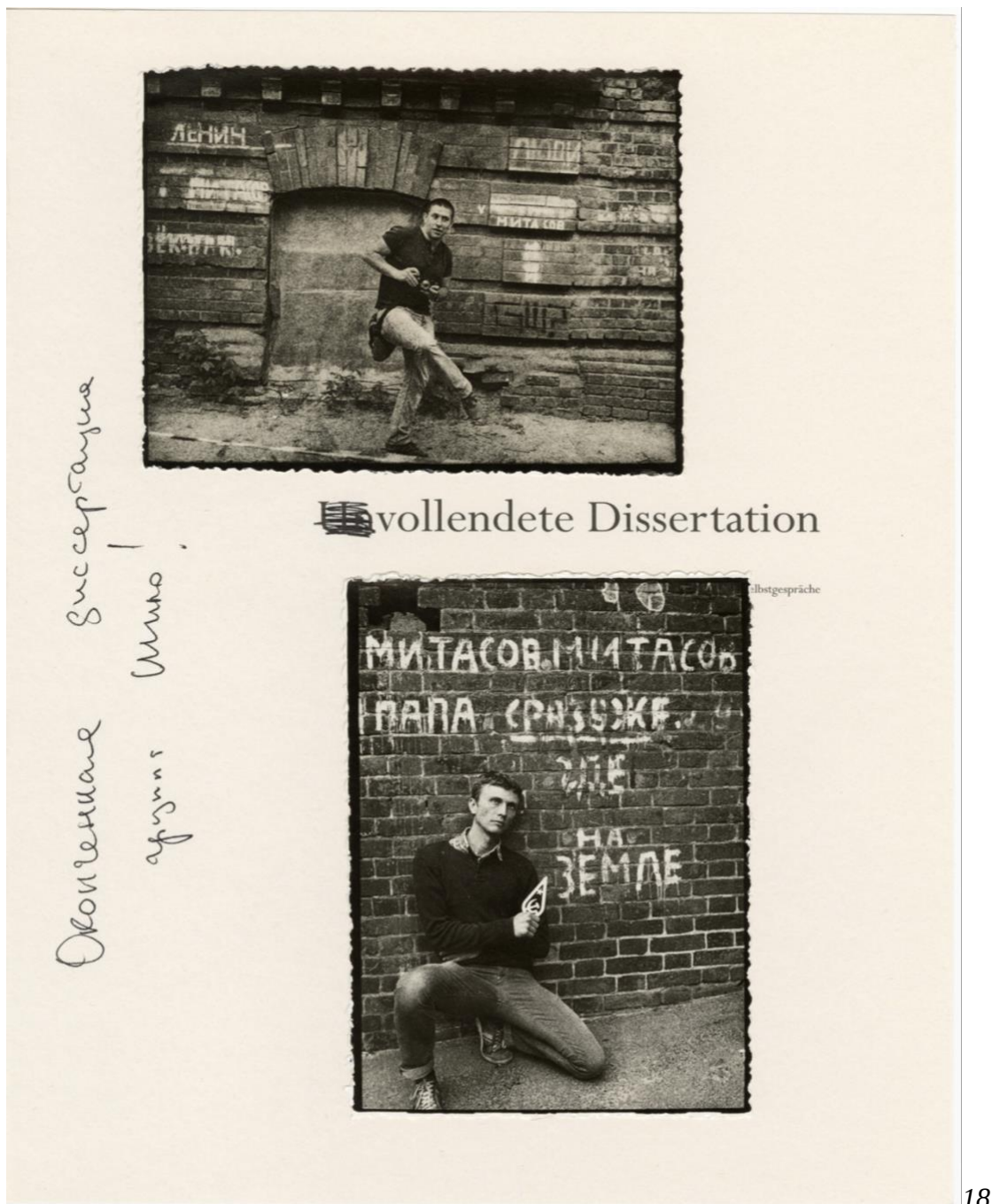
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17. © SOSka Group. Dreamers, 2008. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
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19. © Boba-group. *Voyenved Series*, 2012. Courtesy: Boba-group



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20. © SOSka Group. Barter, 2007. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP
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21. © SOSka group. Trapped on the Streets, 2006. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP (*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)



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22. © The Shilo. Ukrainian Insurgent Army Hände hoch!, 2014. Courtesy: Ukrainian Institute / MOKSOP (*The Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics Project*)

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