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## Short Circuit

# Nostalgia

Pavel Romaniko



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‘The afflicted, meanwhile, could only be cured by returning to their native climate.’  
Dominic Boyer, *From Algos to Autonomous: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania*

SOME TIME AGO, I read an interview with Vladimir Nabokov in *Strong Opinions* in which he states that no portrait of the government elite should exceed a postage stamp in size.<sup>1</sup> That is how the series of ‘Nostalgia’ began in 2008 with the photograph *Untitled (Gallery)*.

In the first forty years of Soviet rule, 50 billion stamps were issued commemorating thousands of various subject matter. If considered, a stamp is an oppressive medium; only the state is able to decide what one can put on an envelope. In the late 1940s, Soviet Russia’s vice minister of communication Konstantine Sergeichuk stated: ‘Postage stamps have become, in the years of Soviet rule, miniature works of art that reflect the events of our epoch [...] the postage stamps of the USSR also fulfill the role of propagandist and agitator.’<sup>2</sup> In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin defends the power of reproducible images, which by reaching every household would negate an artwork’s exceptional value (aura), and thus liberate the public from the oppression of institutional aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin expected a critical

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> E.A. Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p.164.

<sup>3</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008)

introspection on the part of the viewers. However, in reality, in the then young Soviet Union, quite the opposite was taking place. By a token of tiny pictures arriving to millions of people's homes (Benjamin's nightmare of sorts) in a brilliant stint of propaganda miniaturization, an aestheticisation of history and of politics was taking place at the hands of every person sending an envelope. Soon, the portraits of the heads of government grew far beyond the limits of the bounds of postal stamps, populating newspapers, posters, and monument pedestals.

Few of the people and places depicted on those stamps reflected reality. A new geography, new faces and a new time continuum were deposited into people's consciousness via images. An entire country had to be convinced of its new home, and to do so it was necessary to forget the old one.

In the early part of the twentieth century, politicians, activists, and writers, with the help of many artists in Communist Russia, were involved in an act of building a Soviet myth: creating a new space-time continuum, while violently eradicating the past by erasing facts from the history texts, documents, photographs, and subsequently from the consciousness of a people. In the process, a new history was fabricated, thus creating a new order, a new collective memory, and turning an entire country and its many cultures into exiles in their own land. Almost a hundred years after the revolution Russia seemed to be slowly creeping back into its shadowy past, with old ghosts unwilling to leave the walls of the Kremlin.

In the years since, Vladimir Nabokov's explorations of nostalgia and reflections on exile in many of his works and Ilya Kabakov's reconstruction of the past in *Toilets (1992)*, to name two examples, are both part of a ritualistic return or an obsessive homecoming and anxious preservation of memory. Nostalgia in the work of these artists is palpable and real, and has a great impact on constructs of cultural memories. They do, however, remind us that the images produced and circulated within that culture need to be carefully examined. Perhaps while remnants of history are scattered all over with no sign of provenance, they have no ability to tell a story of their own but can only remain in a form of melancholic nostalgia.

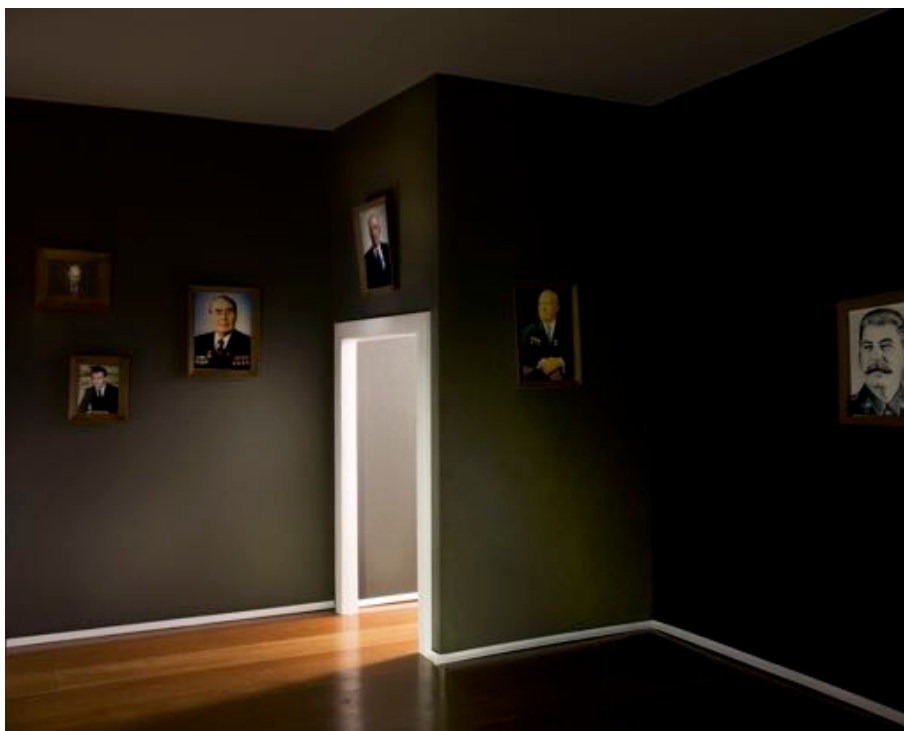


Figure 1. Still frame, *Untitled (Gallery)* (2008)



Figure 2. Still frame, *Untitled* (2008)



Figure 3. Still frame, *Untitled* (2008)



Figure 4. Still frame, *Untitled* (2008)



Figure 5. Still frame, *Untitled* (2008)



Figure 6. Still frame, *Untitled* (2011)



Figure 7. Still frame, *Untitled* (2011)



Figure 8. Still frame, *Untitled Lenin's Desk II* (2014)



Figure 9. Still frame, *Untitled Brodsky* (2014)



Figure 10. Still frame, *Untitled Chairs* (2014)