*BY MASHA
UDENSIVA-BRENNER*

# FORGOTTEN ART

## CHRISTOPHER HERWIG AND THE WORLD'S LARGEST COLLECTION OF SOVIET BUS STOP PHOTOGRAPHS

The former Soviet Union is remembered as a bastion of uniformity—drab, awkward clothing, monotonous concrete buildings, pyramids of condensed milk cans on empty shelves. David Remnick, in his book *Lenin's Tomb*, describes the "classic Soviet city" as "an urban mass indistinguishable from hundreds of others, with a Lenin Avenue and broad and pitted streets and apartment blocks so ugly and uniform that you could weep looking at them." But there are exceptions to the rule. During the Brezhnev era, a period notorious for its repression of creativity, architects and artists evaded the watchful state by designing what were considered "minor architectural forms"—

Pitsunda, Abkhazia (2013).

playgrounds, pavilions, bus stops—in remote areas of the Soviet Union. These relics of artistic expression (some belonging to artists as famous as Georgia's Zurab Tsereteli, who designed bus stops all over Abkhazia) had been largely neglected and forgotten. Then, last summer, the Canadian photographer Christopher Herwig published *Soviet Bus Stops*, the biggest and most diverse collection of bus stop photographs from the region. Twenty-two of these were on exhibit at the Harriman Institute from October 20 to December 20, 2014, and, next fall, a new edition of the book will be released by Fuel Publishing.

Herwig, who has no background in the region, first noticed the bus stops in 2002, while riding his bicycle from London to St. Petersburg. The trip took two months, and he spent much of it cycling through flat, barren territory. To pass the time, and to push the limits of his creativity, he tasked himself with producing one photo per hour. "I would not normally go out of my way to take a picture of a power line," he says, "but when you only have five minutes left in the hour, that's what you do."

The bus stops appeared when he got to the Baltics. They are laid out sporadically, and at first he didn't pay much attention— they can seem dismal in the context of weeds, tires, broken beer bottles, and gray skies. But since they were often the only structures he encountered, he ended up photographing many.

The first bus stop photo Herwig ever took depicts a rectangular brown and white construction in Marijampolė, Lithuania, with peeling paint, a solitary bench, and a set of small, brown steps leading to a flat brown column of the same width. As he biked, he noticed that the Lithuanian designs were cold, Spartan, and somewhat futuristic, with sloping lines and sharp angles of painted concrete, whereas once he got to Estonia, the bus stops were usually made of wood—a three-dimensional hexagon with two open sides for an entrance; a glass decagon with wood panels and six wooden spider legs emerging from the top; a triangular hut with an entrance in the shape of a pine tree. In Ukraine, he encountered yet another aesthetic—brightly painted bus stops adorned with mosaic representations of flowers and shining suns. Herwig perceived the strangeness and variety, but it was not until he developed the photographs and saw just how many bus stops

*To pass the time, and to push the limits of his creativity, Herwig tasked himself with producing one photo per hour. "I would not normally go out of my way to take a picture of a power line . . . but when you only have five minutes left in the hour, that's what you do."*

Pitsunda, Abkhazia (2013).



he had captured, and what they looked like in the context of a collection, that the trend struck him. "They clearly went beyond pure functionality and into the realm of artistic expression," he says. "These were not created by a big Soviet machine."

After his bicycle trip ended, Herwig moved to Sweden to live with his girlfriend (now wife) and exhibited his photos in a Stockholm gallery. Along with twenty-five bus stops, he included shots of power lines, clotheslines, graffiti, and apartment blocks. The bus stops were the most popular, he recalls. But, when the exhibition ended, he moved on to other projects. Then, in 2003, Herwig's wife, who works for the United Nations, was transferred to Almaty, Kazakhstan. He joined her and started working on a photo project about Central Asia and the Silk Road. Since he spent much of his time driving around the "five 'Stans," he kept running into (and photographing) more bus stops. A lot of them were heavily influenced by Islamic and agrarian traditions, incorporating mosque-like shapes and sculptures of peasants and animals.

As Herwig accumulated more photos, he posted them online, where they quickly garnered traffic and reposts from other blogs. At first he was upset that his work was being reposted for free, but the buzz attracted magazine editors. Over the years, Herwig's bus stops have appeared in magazines about fashion, German architecture, and Chinese history. "If people hadn't stolen my photos, I doubt I would have ever continued with the project," he says.

And continue he did. Suddenly, Herwig was seeking out new bus stops whenever he got the chance. No database existed, so he went online, Googling his search parameters in various languages. "It was like a scavenger hunt," he says, "and it became my reason to travel." To get around, Herwig hired taxis. (Buses are actually the most inconvenient way to hunt bus stops—they either fly by or stop so quickly that there is no time for a photo; and, if you hop off, you might end up stranded in the middle of nowhere, waiting hours for another bus.) The taxi drivers were always puzzled that he would want to photograph something so ugly and dirty. But sometimes, the act of the hunt would change their perspective.

Once, after hours of driving fruitlessly around the peripheries of Kazakhstan, Herwig finally found a stop. It was freshly painted and, he recalls, the most beautiful thing he'd seen that day. When he got out his camera, a local woman yelled, "You're going to take these back to your country and show everyone how dirty and backward we are." He tried to explain his project, but she wouldn't listen. For her, he realized, the stop blended seamlessly into the landscape. "They forget it's there," he says, "or they find it offensive, because of the smell." The stops, often on dirt roads and in places without towns or people, make good shelters for drivers who need to relieve themselves.

Over the years, Herwig photographed bus stops in thirteen countries. At one point, he even encountered competition: while scouring blogs and websites, he discovered a German journalist (also named Christopher) who had photographed stops in Ukraine. He emailed him for tips. "I know who you are," the journalist replied. "I've been hunting these for years, and I'm not giving away any locations."

In July 2014, Herwig released his book, self-published with funds from the crowd sourcing site Kickstarter.com (he managed to raise nearly $52,000). The 1,500 copies of the edition sold out quickly and received press from *The Guardian*, BBC, and *Vice* among others. Though the project is finished for the time being, Herwig hasn't ruled out the possibility of a return. "There are many more bus stops out there," he says, wistfully, to a crowd at his Harriman exhibit opening. The guests nod their heads, ask questions. Nicholas Hutchings, a medical student who spent two years in Armenia with the Peace Corps, always noticed the bus stops and is surprised to discover that they exist in different forms all over the region. Another guest, Al Rivera, a friend of Herwig's, is reminded of the bus stops in his hometown, Aibonito, Puerto Rico. "They've been around for as long as I can remember and we would use them to graffiti and smoke pot as teenagers," he recalls, explaining that he always took them for granted. "This exhibit makes me want to go home and shoot a picture." □

From left to right, top to bottom:
Nova Dykanka, Ukraine; Kootsi, Estonia; Kablakula, Estonia; Poltava, Ukraine; Gudauta, Abkhazia (2013); Shymkent, Kazakhstan (2005); Parnu, Estonia; Garga, Abkhazia; Skverbai, Ukraine; Leliunai, Lithuania (2013); Taraz, Kazakhstan (2005); Pitsunda, Abkhazia (2013).