



*Eli: So, the twenty-seventh floor again. Everything comes full circle.
Alicia: Yes. First the tragedy, then the farce.*

—“Monday,” *The Good Wife*, season 7, episode 14, 2016

Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852

IN SEARCH OF THE TWELFTH CHAIR: PAVEL ROMANIKO'S *NOSTALGIA*

BY ALEX MIKOVIĆ



Pastiche. In *Untitled (Gallery)*, 2008, we see walls in shadow, a shiny wood floor, a doorway trimmed in white paint, portraits on the wall . . . a gallery? What kind of gallery is it? The portraits hang at different levels; none at eye level. The doorway is the only visible light source. After a while, one recognizes them as portraits of former Soviet leaders. Lenin's portrait hangs above the doorway. Stalin is over on the far right edge where the frame cuts off. There are also portraits of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, and, in relative darkness, a small horizontal portrait of Putin (all the others are vertical) seemingly looking down at Medvedev.

This is just one example of the photographs created by Pavel Romaniko. Since 2008 his pictures have focused on interior spaces that he fabricates in miniature out of paper and which exist only to be photographed. All the works in his *Nostalgia* series, which spans the last eight years, are untitled and include only a short description of what is visible in the picture. The sources for Romaniko's miniaturized interiors are his memories of spaces he grew up with in the Soviet Union or pictures culled from archives that represent Russian and Soviet "collective" memories. He also relies heavily on his personal archive of photographs that he has been collecting since 1998.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson juxtaposes pastiche with parody. Both concepts are quite similar on the surface; both borrow from elsewhere, somewhere from the past. Below the surface of parody, however, one senses an ulterior motive, but for pastiche there is only the surface itself. "In this situation a parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that

Untitled (Gallery), 2008.
Archival pigment print,
32 x 40 cm. Edition 10.
All photos in this essay,
with the exception of the
Lenin portrait on page
56, © Pavel Romaniko

strange new thing—pastiche—slowly comes to take its place. . . . Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.” For Jameson, although the logic of pastiche is spatial rather than temporal and, therefore, ahistorical, there is nevertheless some possibility of mapping it and returning it to its historical moment. This moment can only be found in the relationship of pastiche to the “logic” of capitalism.

When a popular television show borrows a quote from Marx, it empties out most of the historical significance of the original statement or, at the very least, the gravity or irony of it. Unlike parody, the television show becomes a clever device—a flourish, a stylistic stroke, but not much more. In Romaniko’s photographs, there is definitely both style and flourish: something borrowed—from memory, other photographs—as well as the clever “device” of distinguishing surface—the superficial flatness of the photograph itself versus the surface from crafting a miniaturized space out of paper and photographing it in a way that has us believing we are looking at “real” spaces. But when we do believe, *if* we do, then we realize that the photographs and the objects in those photographs are intentionally fabricated to mimic Soviet-era propaganda, and we begin to think about the context of those “original” images and examine the relationship to both sets of pictures. (Vestiges of this Soviet propaganda can still be seen in present-day Russia.)

Indeed, in *Untitled (After Brodsky)*, 2014, we are confronted with a room with covered chairs, a Biedermeier table with a newspaper on it, and paper, perhaps the pages of a book, strewn on the floor. Like all of Romaniko’s photographs, there is only the vague (and mostly imagined) evidence of human presence. Here, “Brodsky” refers to the source of this photograph: Romaniko has carefully reconstructed the space in Brodsky’s 1930 painting *Lenin in Smolny*. But in this reconstruction, Lenin is missing.

Nostalgia. “At an art exhibition in Moscow, there is a picture showing Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, in bed with a young member of the Komsomol. The picture is titled *Lenin in Warsaw*. A bewildered visitor asks a guide: ‘But where is Lenin?’ The guide replies quietly and with dignity: ‘Lenin is in Warsaw.’”

Lenin in Warsaw was a well-known Soviet joke, retold by Slavoj Žižek in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. *Untitled (After Brodsky)* does not depict Lenin, but he may as well have been included. It is interesting that during Soviet times, the rewriting of history, and in particular the “rewriting” of it through the use of photography, seemed to work only partially. On the one hand, there was an image



From top to bottom: *Untitled (Smolny)*, 2014. Archival pigment print, 30 x 44 cm. Edition 10; Isaak Brodsky, *Vladimir Lenin in Smolny* (1930). Opposite page: *Untitled (Kitchen)*, 2009. Archival pigment print, 22 x 32 cm. Edition 10

and a representation of how things were *supposed* to be, and on the other, the reality of how things were, and most people knew that. Thus, as the history of past events both in Russia and the Soviet Union were systematically manipulated and, if you will, miniaturized, what was omitted became even more present. In this way, the titles of Romaniko’s images are actually not “untitled.” Rather the act of not titling the works points to that which is not and cannot be titled. In a sense, all the photographs—from dark stairwells to empty chairs gathered around the radio or a single chair in front of a small television—reveal that something is not quite right. Something is missing and we know exactly what that something is! Or



do we? Do we forget that longing for that which is not there, and that which at one time was with us and made us so comfortable, is now regained only in part and probably was not as comfortable as we remember? Pictures have borders, dark places and spaces, that we cannot walk around or move through; there are spots that leave us blind. They are flat, miniaturized objects that only permit an imaginary entrance. This is the treachery of the image, of *any* image. This, too, is the peril and predicament of nostalgia.

Nostalgia . . . a seemingly uncomplicated term. Yet, while viewed as a form of *melancholia*, nostalgia is also often juxtaposed against it. Indeed, it is the more frivolous cousin of melancholia. It is a longing for the past in the sense of “the good old days.”

The *Wikipedia* pages for nostalgia and melancholia use photographs to help illustrate the meaning of each. They are astoundingly different. For nostalgia, we see an antique, circa 1940s, front desk from the Beverly Hills Hotel, now preserved as a bar for the new hotel. The old is new but still old and comfortable. The desk has not been forgotten; it has merely been turned into an object of surface and fantasy—oozing, we are told, with sentimentality. Meanwhile, for melancholia—

the black bile, one of the four temperaments of medieval science—the curious are presented with Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, a sixteenth-century woodcut. It is an image from an era about which we cannot be nostalgic because it is not of our own time—there is no connection—but the image *is* something we can contemplate from a distance.

The distance in melancholy, however, can make us vulnerable—all is gone, all will go away, and we will go away as well. Romaniko’s photographs allow the viewer to see nostalgia through the eyes of melancholy. It is contemplation through the sadness of irretrievable loss, the possibility of nothingness, of no *body*, and we realize there is no returning to the past and, thus, it is the present moment and its outcome in the future that *really* matters. In this way, through the melancholic look, there is a possible future. Romaniko’s nostalgia is turned into *melancholia*—or an optimistic end.

At Romaniko’s exhibit at the Harriman Institute (January 29–March 10, 2016), a group of dramatically lit pictures present miniature, peopleless rooms. The title of the exhibit is *Nostalgia*. A bewildered visitor asks his guide: “But where is the nostalgia?” The guide replies quietly and with dignity: “The nostalgia is in Warsaw.”





From top to bottom: *Untitled (Stairwell)*, 2008. Archival pigment print, 24 x 30 cm. Edition 10; *Untitled (Lesnaya Street)*, 2010. Archival pigment print, 22 x 32 cm. Edition 10. Opposite page: *Untitled*, 2008. Archival pigment print, 30 x 24 cm. Edition 10

Utopia. In a recent conversation with the artist I asked him why there were no people and why his spaces looked as if they had been abandoned. He answered, “They could come back.” My next question had to be, “Would their return be a good thing?”

There is something in Romaniko’s photographs that makes one anxious, even uneasy. And this uneasiness might be more about what is absent than what is present: the people might return! In Thomas More’s sixteenth-century fictional narrative, *Utopia*, the reader is introduced to an imaginary country where everyone is satisfied with his or her existence and all people live in harmony. Today, sadly, we disparage the idea. “If only!” We should remember, however, that *Utopia* is also a pun. In Greek, *eu-topia* means a good place while *ou-topia* means no place. More’s country was a nonexistent country but also a representation of ideal good. In Romaniko’s photographs, when the people do return, one wonders from where they are returning. With what knowledge? And, perhaps most importantly, will the place to which they are returning become a better place?

Utopia as an ideological apparatus could lead one to the predicament that was the Soviet Union, and, once again, in the words of Jameson, where “[u]topian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions . . . [and] now it is practical thinking which everywhere stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform its adversaries into its own mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one.”

Untitled (Meeting), 2010, presents a room that appears to be uninhabited, with white walls and daylight streaming in through the windows. Chairs lie heaped in disarray on the floor. Like an abstract expressionist painting, there is no room for us to enter the pictorial space. So, what will happen when the people return?

And *Untitled (Kuntsevo)*, 2010 (see the cover of this magazine), is another room that appears to be uninhabited, with white walls, dark wainscoting, and a diamond-patterned floor. Harsh, artificial light streams in through the windows. A solitary chair with a red back and seat rests against the wall. The empty room could accommodate several people. What will happen if Stalin returns? ■

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