

Sonia Balassanian

Nora Fisch

Leandro Katz

Ilya Kabakov

Oliver Nikolich

Michael Schwab

Ana Tiscornia

Guram Tsbakh

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cover: Oliver Nikolich, *Preserving What Is Mine*, 1997, dimensions variable, installation

We would like to thank Norton Dodge for lending Ilya Kabakov's work from the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformist Art at the Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers University. Also, the curator's personal thanks to Jan Baracz and Apex Art.



## Remembering Times Past

Curated by  
Irena Popiashvili

apex



Guram Tsbakh *Definitions-The Explorer* 1996  
15" x 20" hand-colored photo on X-ray paper

## Remembering Times Past

Remembering Times Past springs from a very personal place. I was born and raised in Georgia, in the former USSR. The unity of Soviet life was an "ideological fiction."<sup>1</sup> In reality everybody had their own perspective on things depending on their "special social situation."<sup>2</sup> In Georgia people of my generation never thought of themselves as "Soviets," always disparaging the official style and ideology. The disappearing Soviet reality was the environment that we lived in. Two years ago when I visited the country for the first time in five years, I realized that it was not the Soviet symbols that were missing but the whole system of terms; things had changed and been redefined. Since then, while reviewing extensive slide files and conducting studio visits, I have been looking for the kind of work that addresses realities from the recent past. I selected a group of eight artists from various backgrounds and generations. Their work is not ideological, didactic or judgmental. It offers us various perspectives on the assimilation of time into consciousness and the expression of that process through art.

Visiting local artists' studios in Georgia, I came across a rare series of photographs called *Definitions* by Guram Tsbakh. In these pictures the artist used old negatives from the late 1940's, 50's and 60's collected at Soviet flea markets during the last decade. He reprinted these negatives on special technical paper that was used for X-rays in the USSR. As a result the photos look faded and resemble archival images of mundane events: a man photographing a group in an atelier; a dinner party;

a Soviet tour guide in a party museum, etc. Tsbakh draws over the photos and inscribes them with explanations that verbally mock Soviet style. He creates a culturally specific context that is unique to the Soviet lifestyle. In other words, these photos are a tongue-in-cheek dictionary of a particular reality that is my most recent history.

Also from the former USSR is the well-known artist Ilya Kabakov. Unlike Guram Tsbakh, even after the collapse of the USSR Kabakov insists on being called a Soviet artist.<sup>3</sup> When moving to the West in 1988 he brought with him "the Soviet hell"—the Russian reality—to the "residents of paradise."<sup>4</sup> Visiting his installations the viewers in the West were coerced to experience that reality: "the reality of Russian hell."<sup>5</sup> The drawings included in the show are from the period of Kabakov's 1970's albums of ten characters. One of the characters is *Flying Komarov*. The text that comments on the character tells a story of a man who, after endless arguments and quarrels with his wife, steps out onto his balcony. Suddenly he sees that people and objects are flying through the air above the city and he joins them. As Robert Storr has noticed: "usually when something strange happens, it happens in the air. This is logical. People and things in Kabakov's world have nowhere to go except up—and so they do."<sup>6</sup>

This exhibition is a New York debut for German photographer Michael Schwab, who studied philosophy at Düsseldorf University. His series of photographs,



Ilya Kabakov from the series *They Are Flying* 1972  
8" x 10.5" ink and watercolor on paper

*Erinnern*, exposes German realities during and after the Second World War. In 1993, in Hamburg, Schwab found a bag full of old anonymous German family photographs. The artist reprinted

the images and overlaid them with the text from the backs of the photographs. Schwab, who is in his early thirties, approaches the war in a factual manner: in pictures relating to the bombing of Hamburg in 1944, the information comes from the



**Nora Fisch** *Nervous, Euphoric Audience (At Dine's Car Crash, 1960)* 1996 21" x 21" digital print on fabric

Oliver Nikolich, also debuting in New York, was born in the former Yugoslavia and came to the United States in 1989 at the age of nineteen.

Nikolich's installation, *Preserving What Is Mine*, was part of the "Traveling Scholars" exhibition at the Foster Gallery of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the winter of 1998. The artist downsized the scale of the installation to adapt to the specific space of Apex Art. *Preserving What Is Mine* refers to the recent chaos, despair and murder in the



**Leandro Katz** *Joaquin's Column* 1998 dimensions variable installation of digitized and plotted b/w photographs laserprinted on cardboard

text and not from the image. On a portrait of a woman the text reads, "bombed out." Both Schwab and Tsbakh use their native languages as visual co-elements within their work. When the text is incomprehensible our perception is particularly drawn to the image. In *Erinnern* history has been written on the photographs.

Balkans. The installation includes photographs rolled up in glass jars. These specially treated photos seem partially consumed by fire and stained by blood. Some jars contain soil, the moisture of which results in accumulated condensation. The photos were taken by the artist's friends and family still living in former Yugoslavia. Nikolich sent them disposable cameras and asked them to document their day-to-day realities. The film was then returned to him undeveloped. Christine Temin of *The Boston Globe* found affinities between Nikolich's work and Christian Boltanski's installations of yearbook photos of Jewish teenagers who later perished in the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

Nora Fisch is an Argentine artist who divides her time between New York and Buenos Aires. Her latest series of works (computer manipulated images digitally printed on fabric) evolves from images of early performance and conceptual art at the end of the 1960's and 70's in North America, as reproduced in magazines and art history books. The audience seen in these images is the focus of the work presented in the gallery. From her perspective as a New York artist, the work suggests a nostalgia for the spirit of those times. The images scanned and layered into vivid optical patterns evoke reverence and idealization. Fisch claims that the work refers to the images that she encountered while still living in Argentina in the 80's. At the time, these grainy black and white pictures carried a symbolic weight as sites of unbridled creativity and freedom. Fisch compares the impact of these images to the popularity of American blue jeans in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall: they function as conveyors of fantasy.

Ana Tiscornia is a Uruguayan artist living in New York since 1991. Her thirteen portraits titled *Trece Retratos* allude to the topic of the "desaparecidos" (people missing during Uruguay's military era).<sup>8</sup> Pictures of anonymous people are placed under semi-transparent

**Michael Schwab** from the series *Erinnern* 1994 19.5" x 23.5" b/w photograph



**Ana Tiscornia** *Trece Retratos (13 Portraits)* (detail) 1996 125" x 11" silkscreen, tracing paper, frosted plastic

glass. The surface layer does not allow the viewer to focus sharply on the images, revealing the impossibility of seeing clearly, the impossibility of knowing real identities.

*Haghat* (20 minutes, black & white), a video by the Armenian-born, New York-based artist, Sonia Balassanian was presented at the Armenian pavilion in Venice in 1997. The video depicts an image derived from a childhood recollection: a naked man disappearing into the dark cavities of gigantic clay wine barrels, buried in the grounds of an ancient Armenian church. This relentlessly repeated act refers to the tradition of cleaning wine barrels in the fall and visually references her memory of Armenia.

Leandro Katz is represented by two pieces: the installation *Joaquin's Column* and *El Dia Que Me Quieras (The Day You'll Love Me—30 minutes, color, sound, 1997)*.<sup>9</sup> The latter is a 16mm non-narrative film investigating death and the power carried by the famous photograph of the body of Che Guevara, surrounded by his captors. Not a political documentary in a traditional sense, Katz's film portrays Che "as a man for whom the world had become intolerable and reminds us that though the world is still intolerable, we simply cannot stand on the summit of the present as if we were superior to the past."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys in "With Russia on Your Back": A Conversation Between Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys," *Parkett* 34, 1992, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Robert Storr; "The Architect of Emptiness," *Parkett* 34, 1992, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ilya Kabakov in "With Russia on Your Back," p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Storr, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Christine Temin, review of "Traveling Scholars," *The Boston Globe* (February 10, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the "desaparecidos," Jean Franco quotes Leandro Katz in her forthcoming book, *Visual Culture*, that "the post-mortem appearances of Che, whose body was put on display only to disappear until 1997, inaugurated the practice of disappearing opponents (and innocent people) that would be put to devastating effect by Argentine [and Uruguayan] military."

<sup>9</sup> *El Dia Que Me Quieras* was awarded a Coral prize at the Havana Biennale in December of 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Franco in *Visual Culture*.



**Sonia Balassanian** *Haghat* 1997 color video stills 20 min.