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Ostalgia as a special artistic development in the Contemporary Art.

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Abstract

*"Nostalgic love can only survive
in a long distance relationship "
S. Boym*

Key words: Ostalgia, Post, Soviet, Contemporary, Art.

Much attention has been given to the consequences of the falling down of the Soviet Union. One expression of this is the phenomenon of "Ostalgia", a form of post-communist nostalgia. Originally the term Ostalgia is limited to feelings of *Ossies*, former German Democratic Republic citizens. Today, this phenomenon is, however, also recognized by former Soviet citizens.

Ostalgia is studied in philosophical, sociological and psychological research. In the art Ostalgia is approached by means of using Soviet symbolism, which is rooted in the imagery: consumer products, utensils, objects, photographs, uniforms. In short, everything that people keep from the "good old days", evoking memories, everything that has a sentimental value.

In my opinion Ostalgia is some emotional bond, attached to the Soviet past, which reflects a specific selection of autobiographical memory. But is Ostalgia a form of propaganda for an absolute ideology? Must an artist have an experience with the system to be able to create images about? Are these art works are the new images, new insights into the past through the eyes of the last Soviet generation? What feelings are hidden behind this phenomenon? How does it change though the time? Is Ostalgia a longing for the past or a desire for what is gone? Can Ostalgia be an providing aesthetic beauty of the terrible past?

Within this artistic research Ostalgia is the starting point. Based on existing memories of witnesses, literature and visual material about the Soviet era, character of Ostalgia is examined, and the boundaries of the phenomenon with the Contemporary Art are explored.

The research intends to represent Ostalgia as an artistic subject. The process and the final result play an important role during the creating of the artistic work. Installations and objects, that are realized during this research, will be the artistic result of this complex phenomenon.

Memory and longing for the past.

The phenomenon of post-communist nostalgia, Ostalgia is a neologism indicating a nostalgia for the "East", to daily life in the former East Germany during the Soviet regime. In a broader sense Ostalgia is nostalgia for the socialist past, in the entire former Soviet Bloc arose after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ostalgia is a feeling that has developed through the years. The desire to the "stable" state among some former East Germans and Soviet citizens. For recognition that not everything from the Soviet GDR era was without value (Blade, 2005: 1-17).

In post-communist nostalgia in Eastern Europe there is a vast amount of research devoted to Ostalgia. Some studies have been focused on the identification of the political reasons of this phenomenon, and others on the analysis of associated economic reasons. Yet another portion is directed to the symbolic representation of the past. According to Varvara Kobisha none of these trials give adequate answers to the questions:

- Why do people encounter problems in the transition from communism to capitalism?
- Why do people tend afterwards to demand back to a failed communist reality, from which they fled?
(Kobisha, 2011: 71-78)

Ostalgia can be seen in terms of nostalgia and homesickness. So according to the Dutch dictionary Van Dale Ostalgia is "the idealized nostalgia for what it was." Ostalgia is not just a personal emotion or political issue. It is rather a collective feeling, which can be examined from studies of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Collective emotions and memories can be objectified in material objects with a symbolic meaning. In traditional societies, such objects are used in rituals and totems. In modern societies they are sooner reflected in urban material culture. Some specific products of Ostalgia are associated with the collective emotions of the community. Mainly Ostalgia will keep living in the memories and will be linked to symbols of a community (Kobisha, 2011: 73).

From the studies of British sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1939 °), a community clench on the basis of rituals and symbols. First, there are attributes of nations such as flags, anthems, parades, coins, capitals, traditional costumes, folk museums, war memorials, passports and national boundaries. On the other hand, there are hidden national symbols such as national forms of relaxation, typical landscapes, heroes and heroines, fairy tales, etiquette, architecture, crafts, legal procedures, education and military codes. Analyzing works of Anthony D. Smith, these symbols of the nation are visible and concrete, and they represent a strong emotional and cultural value (Smith, 1991: 77).

The interpretation of Ostalgia as a post-communist nostalgia, even if you have not experienced this time yourself consistent with the way I approach Ostalgia in my artistic research. I consider, that Ostalgia can be approached in the works of art from expiries, memories, stories of other people and from my own childhood memories.

Soviet nostalgia is related to a number of important reasons, provided by the former Soviet citizens and those, who feel called to be attracted by this phenomenon, whether they lived were or born in the Soviet Union just before or after 1991. The first cause has to do with the need to order. In addition, it identifies the desire for the friendly atmosphere where people trust each other and are ready to help each other. The atmosphere of mutual help and solidarity was, according to many former Soviet citizens, plentiful in the Soviet Union but is absent in modern times. Another motive is the broad social concern of the Soviet state, which gave confidence in the future and helped to cope with feelings of loneliness. Because of these securities they wished to give up their political freedoms. It is said that democracy has brought them no luck. One of the last reasons cited is the desire to live in a "strong, powerful and big" country like the Soviet Union (Kasamara, 2011: 18-31).

In the artistic work the Ostalgia phenomenon lets the viewer to decide which feeling and what message the artist shares with the audience. The place where the work of art is located plays an important role. As Ilya Kabakov gives in an interview that when he shows his work in Russia that the Russians will wonder what he wants the hell to say with it. According to the Russians Kabakov's works are not an art, but a reality. A kind of mirror, which works only in the West. (Illés, Banality corrupts every sense, 1993: 64-67)

Does Ostalgia apply her influence on the viewers? Some of the viewers are filled with prejudice going to an exhibition of an artist former Soviet country. During my interview in 2013 with the Russian artist duo Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko told me that they had had an experience with prejudice of the viewers. During a house exhibition of Volkova and Shevelenko where works were shown derived from images, which were bought at a flea market in the Netherlands. Dutch viewers were convinced of the idea that all was filled in with Russian motives. After all the artist duo used this expectations in their future work being focused on the Russian themes. Volkova says that it is difficult to distance yourself from your origin. Many creations of artists are directly and indirectly connected with their childhood memories of the Soviet past. (Fig.1)



Fig. 1: M.Volkova and S.Shevelenko. *From the Life of Beetles*. 2013.
Schunck, Heerlen, The Netherlands.

In the West and America, with attention to the Russian avant-garde, an interest is growing to the art behind the "Iron Curtain". During 2008-2016 there was a long-term international research, education and exhibition project called "Former West". As a critical landmark and as its starting point that project occupied the field of contemporary art and theory around the year 1989 (Former West, 2015). The exhibition "Progressive Nostalgia" in Italy at the Luigi Pecci Centre of Contemporary Art devoted to this project (Fig.2), wanted to show what was happening in the art of the many countries that were formed on the territory of the former Soviet Union . This exhibition was not about the past but about the present in its natural interaction with the past. The exhibition showed an artistic reflection on the experience of trauma as a consequence of the opening to the Western world. This was an exhibition devoted to the painful search of artists of their own place in the world. The exhibition was attended by artists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Estonia. (Progressive Nostalgia, 2007)



Fig. 2: exhibition in Italië in de Luigi Pecci Centre of Contemporary Art .
"Progressive Nostalgia". 2007

Works of various European artists from the late eighties were collected on another exhibition "Ostalgia" in New York in 2011 (Fig. 3). These works showed a yearning for forms of collective life. The large number of Russian artists was striking at the exhibition. This exhibition is a reflection given by the historical and cultural situation of the moment, a political self-identification of artists from the former Soviet Union, *Sotsblok*. They focus their art on a common historical experience of Utopia (Kopenkina, 2011).



Fig. 3: Andrei Monastyrski. *I do not complain about anything and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place.* 1977. Installation.

The foregoing examples are clear responses to the Soviet past. The search for a lost home that needs to be rediscovered with the help of Ostalgia. A variant of the restorative nostalgia, not so much a discussion about the history of good and evil.

Artistic methodology.

Within my artistic designing research Ostalgia is thus the starting point. Based on existing memories of witnesses from the Soviet era, on the literature and images from the Soviet era, the character of Ostalgia is examined and scanned as the boundary between the phenomenon and the arts. To be able to call an Ostalgic art objects I must start with a clear framework on the depicted theme. What time and period present in the image I create? Does the image have a positive, negative or ironic statement? Is the artist directly or indirectly involved in the Ostalgia topic?

The Ostalgia theme is usually associated with childhood sentiments of Soviet citizens. The period under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev from 1964 to 1982 is seen as the culmination of the Soviet Union as regards influence and prestige. Generally positive connotations, a romanticized image and focuses on some details are typical for the youth sentiment. Ostalgic art object must relate directly or indirectly to the Soviet era. This relationship of art to the Soviet era can be performed by using the symbols, or by showing artifacts from the Soviet period, popularization of products from the Soviet era, revival of rituals and traditions.

Currently in Russia and Belarus, there is a booming in products and labels with claims such as "from good old days" of Soviet times, or with phrases like "Tastes like before", or "Taste of our youth" etc. These products enjoy tremendous popularity among the people of all generations. Taste, as one of the five senses, is one of the most potent activators of the memories. The commercial success of products from Soviet times reflect the fear of uncontrollable desires and fears of the new and unknown. Also many products with the logo "Soviet Standard" or "Tastes like in childhood" can be found in Russian stores in Europe. Many of these products are simply made in Western European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. Some of these products are imported from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. It is not important where and how the products are made, but just that these products are available all over the world. So we got stuck in a kind of circle, in which the desire is a commercial success, which in turn awakens a yearning for the Soviet era in us. That way the Russian immigrants are a new target in the commercial market of the world. All this is certainly source for new ideas and new materials in the course of my research.

The book by Svetlana Boym "The Future of Nostalgia" constructs a frame of artistic methodology in my research. In her research she gives a clear definition of nostalgia, and how it can encounter in daily life. I take this terminology as a basis for my artistic methodology for applying this to my artistic research.

"Boym's method"

Building on the work of Svetlana Boym a restorative nostalgia is about *nostos*, where the lost home needs to be rebuilt and the memories gaps to be walled. The word explores marks by his blindness and misunderstanding to label as nostalgia. I am speaking about the truth and tradition that should be repaired. So called invented traditions are presented as true and eternally valid. These traditions are not just themselves and build upon the modern sense of loss of community. In this case, traditions act as a comforting collective script to the individual desire. Typical for the restorative nostalgia is that it gives a clear answer. Past gets caught in one truth. To achieve salvation just need one to recover the past and Motherland. Discussions about the difference between right and wrong are not important. Elements of a total reconstruction of the restorative nostalgia can be found in every type of art, which evokes a lifelike dream of past (Boym, 2001: 41-48).

The imperfect process of remembrance dwells in *algia* of the reflective nostalgia by Boym. Reflective nostalgia focuses on the historical and individual time. It mourns the inability to recall the past and engages in human finitude. According to Boym the restorative nostalgia wants to conquer time, the reflective nostalgia will cherish the fragments of memory. Reflective nostalgia takes itself less seriously and often finds the language of irony. "Home" under the reflective nostalgia cannot be restored. It is a ruin where old and new elements come together and where the lost identity can be rediscovered. But a journey to search for the lost identity will never end. In this case *nostalgicus* will be disappointedly watching how new Motherland will be completed (Boym, 2001: 49-55).

Applying "Boym's method" to my artistic work I highlight some points:

- Restorative Ostalgia: rebuilding the lost home in the form of total trans-historical reconstruction; individual past-oriented collective. (Fig. 4, 5 and 6)
- Reflective Ostalgie: the desire itself in the form of sadness, despair, disappointment, nurturing; correlation of old and new elements; central importance of return of products. (Fig. 7,8, 9, 10 and 11)

"At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams"(Boym, 2001:XV). A long distance and homesickness have pushed my emotions to create a new image. An image where I am between home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. I try to force these moments into a single image of Ostalgia.



Fig.4: Natalia Drobot. *Ты носи меня река (Carry me river)*. 2015.
Mixed media (porcelain chair, soldier uniform, sunflower seed, tomato glass, vodka)

In my art work "Carry me river" (Fig. 4) I try to capture the moments around the theme of standard products in daily life in the Soviet Union. This is a mocking with the simplest thing – a chair. A banal chair made of one of the most noble materials in ceramic – the porcelain. Through porcelain I take away a functionality of the chair, by giving it the aesthetic quality of the sculpture. Every composition has its own history and they all present a Soviet daily life from my perception.

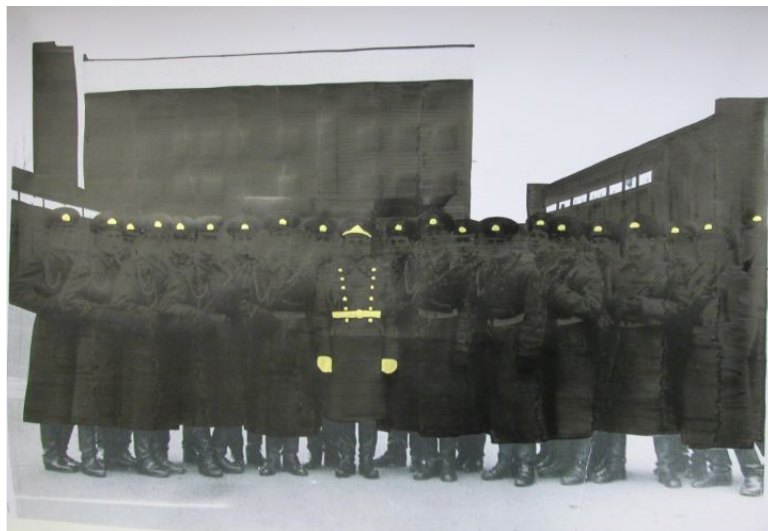


Fig.5: Natalia Drobot. *Ohne Dich*. 2015.
Collage. 84x59,4 cm



Fig. 6: Natalia Drobot. *Lenin 42*. 2014 - 2015.
Porcelain. 11 x 8 x 26 cm

My growing up was constantly surrounded by military environment, environment of Soviet heroes. From the words of my mother and many women at that time I learned that in the Soviet time to be married to a military man was an honour. My father had a long military career and my brother continued the way to prove his manhood. Witnessing the changes and the collapse of the Soviet Union my parents often told me about “the good old times” while sitting in the kitchen. In my artwork “Ohne Dich” (Fig. 5) I used a photograph of my father during his Soviet military service. I covered all that was not important for a soldier and left only symbols of difference.

Lenin is the biggest recognized symbol from the Soviet times. Now it is comparable to Soviet era and everything that had to do with it. For example you can see how people in Ukraine attached Russian and Soviet past to the statue of Lenin. For me it is very interesting how people deal with the statue of Lenin in different countries. Starting to collect and exam all kind of actions around statues I create a series of figuring. In my works I try to find the esthetical solution for conservation of cultural property.



Fig. 7: Natalia Drobot. *Geschmack des Mutterland*.
2014. Silkscreen 42x29,7 cm



Fig. 8: Natalia Drobot: *3L, 1L, 0,5L*.
2014. Installation (porcelain, Russian store environment)

Taste, as one of the five senses, is one of the most powerful activators of memories, it seems. Commercial success of products from Soviet time reflects the fear of the indomitable desire. So you can find a lot of products with the logo “Soviet standard” or “Tastes like in childhood” in Russian stores in Europe. A lot of products are simply made in Germany, The Netherlands, or specially imported from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. But it’s not about where and how the products are made, but it’s about the idea that these products are now available all over the world. So we find ourselves in some circle, wtehe the desir is commercial succes, which awakens a yearning for the Soviet era in our minds. Through the integration of my art work in a Russian store in Hasselt, Belgium, I tried to give a reflection on the commercialization of the Soviet memories. I criticized the hypocrisy of these goods, which are created by people just to gain money by selling nostalgia in a bottle, produced elsewhere.



Fig. 9: Natalia Drobot *Bye, Bye Maria! Bye, Bye Lenin! III* 2014. Mixed media (porcelain, wood) 14 x 6 cm



Fig. 10: Natalia Drobot. *Kolchosbäuerin*. 2015 Mixed media. 30 x 60 cm

In my other artworks I play ironically with the recognized symbols of Soviet time, such as a pioneer star, a sickle, figurine of Lenin, roly-poly toy Masha and so on. I change these objects, I destroy them and then I reconstruct their initial value by give them a new value. It's like revealing the magic of it. In my art work "Bye, Bye Maria! Bye, Bye Lenin!" I take symbol of West and East and bring them together. Two symbols of socialistic world and catalytic world, which do not longer exist any longer, but keep burning in the hearts of older generations.

Another work with recognized symbols is "Kolchosbäuerin", inspired by well known sculpture of Vera Mukhina "Worker and Kolkhoz Woman"(1937). In the sculpture of Mukhina a working man and a working woman are the ideal symbol of the Soviet epoch. As an artist I can only admire such simplicity and symbolism in this work. To complement and understand the essence of this work the viewer has to referent the most famous fragment of Nikolay Nekrasov's poem "Frost, Red Nose" about Russian woman.



Fig. 11: Natalia Drobot. *Und die Vögel singen nicht mehr* . 2013. Mixed media (porcelain, iron plate, kirsei boots). 300 x 400 cm

In my own artwork "Und die Vögel singen nicht mehr"(2013) I reconstruct a game called "zarnica"(зарница) from my childhood which was surrounded by military presence. Zarnica is a pioneer military-sports game which was popular in the Soviet Union. It represents a simulation of combat operations, similar to the military training. The game is a part of the basic military training at school during Soviet time. So children can already be prepared to any kind of situations. You can see a special scheme painted on the floor for study how to march. The entire installation is located on the background of the "Iron Curtain", which is located behind the imaginary children. Only when a child grows up, he or she is faced with the reality. Up till then it functions only as a game, where you must win to get a candy.

My artistic design research and applying of the "*Boym's method*" go together with my visits to Minsk, Belarus. During these trips I try to visit as many different cultural institutions and speak to different people about their memories of the Soviet era. I take a suitcase full of artifacts from the Soviet period from Belarus. These objects serve to the beginning of my new artistic works. In addition I also make an extensive photo report, which is involved in to my artistic output. Technically, I consider my artistic oeuvre as multimedia. So I use ceramics, sculpture, screen printing, photography, video and installation. I also use various artistic methods or strategies to express my thoughts, such as:

- Elimination: certain elements away, isolate, remove from the image;
- Decontextualisation: object, image, story away from its original context;
- Romanticizing: greater attention to feelings, discovering the natural outdoor / indoor world, personal observation;
- Confrontation: at home and abroad, of past and present, from the dream to everyday life;
- Conservation: letting persist, keep it.

At the moment, I am more mostly used artistic method of conservation. One of ways to conserved objects is to use ceramics as a conservation medium. Ceramic is the specialty of my studio and I make extensive use of it. The ability of ceramics to survive throughout the centuries has always fascinated me. By using porcelain I transcend memorable objects from the Soviet era to eternity, for example Fig. 4,6 and 8. But I do not limit myself to a particular art medium. My methods are mainly focuses on the theme Ostalgia in my research. Various artistic media, disciplines and resources are used during the creation process. As you can see in my works I mention above I also make use of short video recordings (Fig.12, 13), photography, screen printing and installations.



Fig. 12: Natalia Drobot. *Pieta*. 2013.
Tableau Vivant (Video still).
<https://vimeo.com/113170779>



Fig.13: Natalia Drobot. *HEUTE BIN ICH MIT DIR*. 2014.
Tableau Vivant (Video still).
<https://vimeo.com/119570019>

"Pieta" and "HEUTE BIN ICH MIT DIR" are other artworks about military time in my family. I start from my memories and translate them to the artistic understanding of the situation. The glory of returning a hero and a fear of a losing beloved person are living together in my works. By using a video as an art medium, I try to catch together a fragility of human life and the ethical poem to the death.

Project 2017

During the next academic year, much importance will be attached to the organization of the symposium + expedition in 2017. This conference should raise the interest and show the nostalgic problem among Russian immigrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. Mainly the exhibition will occupy a central place in this symposium. To organize a higher quality symposium I continue to build my network with artists and galleries. During my acquaintance in Ghent, with Isolde De Buck the art consultant of the cultural center "Zebrastraat" we have discussed a possibility to organize "Project 2017" in Ghent. I see this as a perfect time to test myself as an artist, researcher and organizer.

Due attention should be paid to my artistic research in the form of exhibitions. By clear understanding of the phenomenon of Ostalgia I focus to the creation of my artistic works. For this I still need a careful and diverse supervision. The creation of artistic work is not only capturing of the sensual, but also examine how I'm going to convey this to the audience. Interviews with artists and theorists in this case are essential for the process of creation of my artistic work.

I have already spoken to the following artists about the possible participation in the "Project 2017" :

- Sergei Andreev (BE)
- Andrej Babenko (BE)
- Alexandra Dementieva (BE)
- Olga Gorokhova (BE)
- Vladimir Kaigorodov (BE)
- Jura Shust (BE)
- Nina Stoupina (BE)
- Marina Chernikova (NL)
- Victoria Kovalenchikova (NL)
- Ola Vasiljeva (NL)
- Marta Volkova & Slava Shevelenko (NL)
- Andrey Zadorin (NL)

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Images:

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