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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 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 GDR citizens. Today, this phenomenon is, however, also recognized by former Soviet citizens. Ostalgia is studied in philosophical, sociological and psychological studies. In the art Ostalgia is approached by means of the use of 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 any 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 experience with the system to be able to create images about it? Are these new images, new insights into the past through the eyes of the last Soviet generation of young artists? What fore feelings are hidden behind this phenomenon? How it changes over the time? Is Ostalgia a longing for the past or an desire for what is not anymore? Can Ostalgia be an providing aesthetic beauty of a terrible past?

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

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 an 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 arose the entire former Soviet bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ostalgia is a feeling that has developed over the years. The desire among some former East Germans and Soviet citizens to the "stable" state. 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 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 Varvara Kobisha, none of these trials give adequate answers to the following questions:

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

Ostalgia can be seen in terms of nostalgia and homesickness. So does Ostalgia according to the Dutch dictionary Van Dale "the idealized nostalgia for what it was." Ostalgia is not just a personal emotion or political issue. It's rather a collective feeling, which can be examined from studies of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Collective emotions and memories to 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 reflected more often in urban material culture. In some specific products Ostalgie can be associated with the collective emotions of the community. Centrally Ostalgia will live on in the memory's which are linked to symbols of a community. (Kobisha, 2011: 73)

According to the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1939 °) specialized in the study of a community 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 borders. 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 code. According to 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 experienced this time not for yourself, it's not consistent with the way I approach Ostalgia in my artistic research. I consider that Ostalgia can be approach in works of art from experiences, memories, stories and others from my own childhood memories.

Soviet nostalgia, Ostalgia, is related to a number of important reasons provided by the former Soviet citizens and those who feel have the tendency to be attracted by the phenomenon of whether they are living or been born in the Soviet Union just before or after 1991. The first cause has to do with the need for order. In addition, it identifies the desire for a 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 help to cope with feelings of loneliness. Because of these concerns they were willing 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 an artistic work the Ostalgia phenomenon lets the viewer decide which feeling and what message the artist shares with the audience. Not in the least the location of the art display plays an important role. As Ilya Kabakov says in an interview, that when he shows his work in Russia that the Russians will wonder what the hell he wants to say. According to Russians Kabakov's works are not 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 in influencing on her viewers? Some of the viewers are filled with prejudice going to an exhibition of an artist from the former Soviet Union. During my interview in 2013 with the Russian artists duo Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko told me that they have had an experience with prejudice of the viewers. During a house exhibition of Volkova and Shevelenko have showed work's derived from images which were bought at a flea market in the Netherlands. Dutch viewers were convinced of the idea that all was full with Russian motives. After all artist duo used these expectations in their future work by being focused on the Russian themes. Volkova says that it is difficult to distance yourself from the origin. Many creations of artists are directly and indirectly connected to their childhood memories of the Soviet past. In the installation "Paintings about me" ( Fig.1) Volkova and Shevelenko present a dacha as a manifest to almost two hundred years of turbulent Russian history, beauty, simplicity and imperfection.

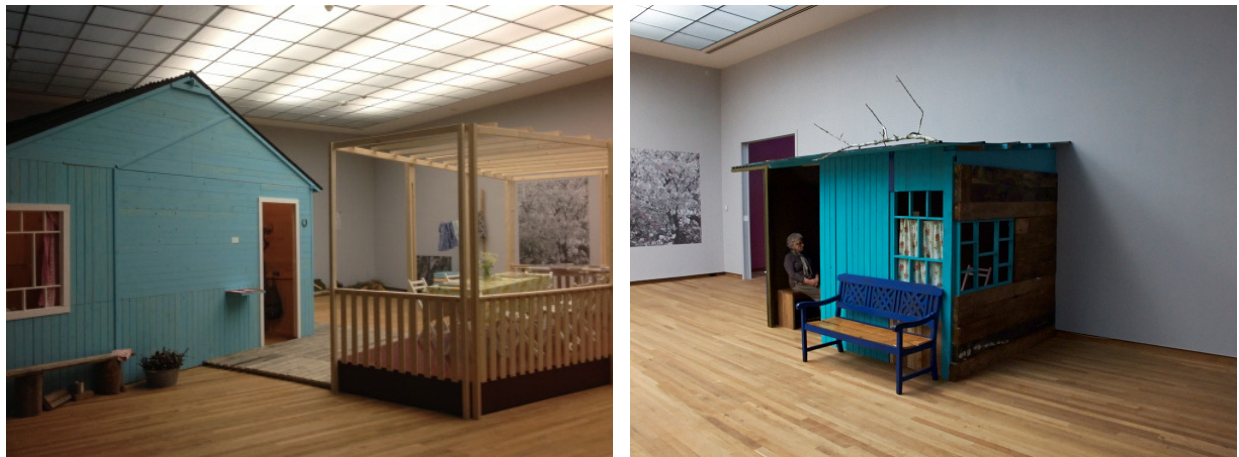


Fig. 1: M.Volkova and S.Shevelenko. *Paintings about me*. 2013.  
Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

With attention to the growing interest of the West and America in the Russian avant-garde especially in the art behind the "Iron Curtain" was started the long-term (2008-2016) international research, education, publishing and exhibition project "Former West". This project occupied the field of contemporary art and theory around the year 1989, noted as a critical landmark and as its starting point ( Former West, 2015 ). One of the happenings devoted to this was the exhibition in Italy at the Luigi Pecci Centre of Contemporary Art: "Progressive Nostalgia" ( Fig.2). It wanted to show what was happening in the art of the many countries that have 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 up to the Western world. This was an exhibition on the painful search of artists to 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

On another exhibition "Ostalgia" in New York in 2011 (Fig. 3) were collected works of various European artists from the late eighties where present. These works showed a yearning for forms of collective life. Striking at the exhibition was the large number of Russian artists. This exhibition is a reflection given to 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. Ostalgia as a variant of the restorative nostalgia and 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 the boundary between the phenomenon and the arts. To be able to call an objects as an Ostalgic art I must stated with a clearer framework on the theme depicted. What period it represents in the image I created? 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 sentiment 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 regarded to influence and prestige. Typical of the youth the sentiment is generally positive connotations, a romanticized image and focuses on some details. 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.

The book by S. Boym "The Future of Nostalgia" is a basis for my research. In her research she is doing a clear definition of reconstructive and reflective nostalgia, and how one can encounter it in daily life. I take this terminology as a basis for my artistic methodology. I apply this to create my artistic images and further build my research. Below I give some examples of application of the "Boym method" in my artistic work.

### “Boym’s method”

According to Svetlana Boym restorative nostalgia is about *nostos*, where the lost home needs to be rebuilt and the memories gasps to be walled. The word explored and is marked by its blindness and misunderstanding to label as nostalgia. It’s speaking about the truth and tradition that should be repaired. So the named invented traditions are presented as true and eternally valid. These traditions are not justified to themselves but build upon the modern sense



of loss of community. In this case, traditions act as a comforting collective script to the individual desire. Typical of the restorative nostalgia is that it gives a clear answer. Past get caught in one truth. To achieve salvation you just need to recover the past of the motherland. Discussions about the difference between right and wrong is not important. Elements of a total reconstruction of the restorative nostalgia can be founded in every type of art, which evoke a lifelike dream of the 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 Boym as restorative nostalgia wants to conquer time, the reflective nostalgia will cherish the fragments of memory. Reflective nostalgia takes itself less seriously and often find the language of irony. “Home” under the reflective nostalgia cannot be restored. It’s a ruin where old and new elements come together and were the lost identity can be rediscovered. But a journey to search for the lost identity will never end. In this case nostalgic will be disappointedly watching how the new Motherland will 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 in 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 “Ты носи меня река” ( Fig. 4) I try capture the moments around the theme of standard products in daily life in Soviet Union. This is mocking of the most simple thing – a chair. A banal chair made from one of the most noble ceramic material – porcelain. Through porcelain it takes the functionality of a chair by giving it the aesthetic quality of the sculpture. Every composition has its own story and it’s all present in daily life from my perception.

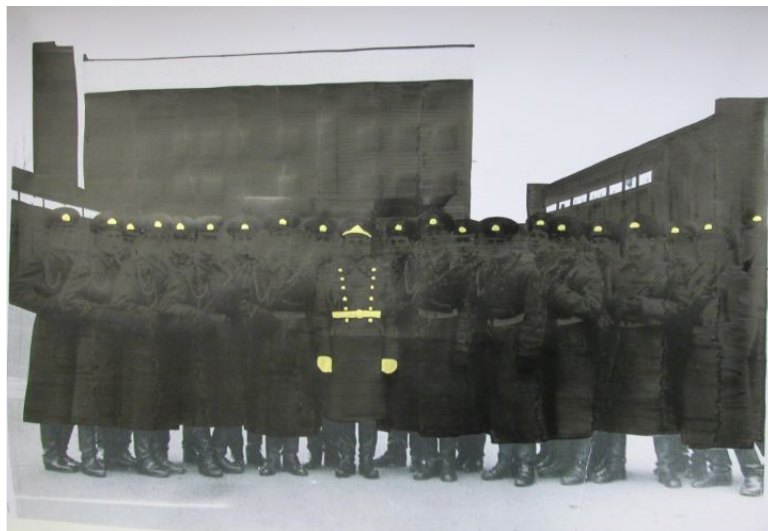


Fig.5: Natalia Drobot. *Ohne Dich*. 2015.  
Collage. 84x59,4 cm



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

Growing up in Soviet time you are constantly surrounded by military environment, environment of Soviet heroes. From the words of my mother and from many woman's of that time I learned that in the Soviet time to be married with a military man was a honor. My father had a long military career and my brother proved his manhood continuing in this way. In my artwork "Ohne Dich" (Fig. 5) I using a photo of my father during his Soviet military time. I covered up all that is not important for a soldier and leaved only the symbol of differences.

Lenin is the biggest recognized symbol from Soviet time. At this time it's comparable to a Soviet era and everything what have to do with it. For example you can see it in Ukraine how people attached the statue of Lenin to Russian and Soviet past. For me it is very interesting how people are dealing with the statue of Lenin. I start to collect all actions around the statue. I try to find the golden meaning to solve the problem of conservation of cultural property by giving to the statue an aesthetic value of figurine.



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)

In Russia and Belarus, there is currently a booming in products and labels with claims such as "out of the 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 the former 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 (Dovgan, 2015). Some of these products are imported from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. It is not a specifically concern where and how the products are made, but just that these products are available all over the world. So we end up in a kind of circle, in which the desire is a commercial success, which in turn awakens in us a yearning for the Soviet era. That way the Russian immigrants are a new target in the commercial market of the world. This all is certainly material for new ideas and new materials in the



course of my research. I use a Pop-art trend to registered this changing in the world marketing. Only little note can unblock the real meaning of the image – made in The Netherlands, by taste like Soviet (Fig.7). With the integration of my work (Fig. 8) in a Russian store in Hasselt (Belgium) I tried to give a reflection on the commercialization of the Soviet memories jets over the hypocrisy of some of these goods created by people just to gain money by selling nostalgia, in a tin bottle produced elsewhere, with etiquettes exchangeable per country.



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 some of my artworks I ironically play with the recognized symbols of Soviet time, such as the pioneer star, a sickle, figurine of Lenin, roly-poly toy Masha and so on. These objects I change, I destroy and then I reconstruct its initial value to give it a new value. It's like revealing the magic of it. In my art work “Bye, Bye Maria! Bye, Bye Lenin!” (Fig.9) I take symbol of West and East and bring it together. Two symbols of socialistic world and catholic world, which no longer exist, but keep burning in the hearts of both older generations.

Another work with recognized symbols is “Kolchosbäuerin”, inspired by well knowing sculpture of Vera Mukhina “Worker and Kolkhoz Woman”(1937). In the sculpture of Mukhina a working man and working woman are the ideal symbol of the Soviet epoch. As an artist I can only marvel such simplicity and symbolism in this work. To complement and understand the essence of this work the viewer have to refer to the most famous fragment of a Nikolay Nekrasov poem “Frost, Red Nose” about a Russian woman (“Есть женщины в русских селеньях...”).



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 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 painted on the floor a special scheme for studying how to march. The entire installation is located on the background of the “Iron Curtain”, which is located behind the imaginary children. Only then a child grows up, he or she is faced with the reality. Up till then its only functions as a game is, you must win to get a piece of candy.

My artistic design research and application of the "*Boym's method*" going together with my visits to Minsk, Belarus. During these trips I try to visit as many different cultural institutions and speak with different people about their memories of the Soviet era. I took a suitcase full of artifacts from the Soviet period from Belarus. These objects serve as the beginning of my new artistic works. In addition I also make an extensive photo report, which is involved in 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 and 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.

Right now I use mostly conservative artistic method. One of ways to conserve objects is by using 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 mainly are focuses on the theme Ostalgia in my research. Various artistic media, disciplines and resources 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 ether artworks about military environment in the family. I start with fillings and memories which are translated it to contemporary understanding of the situation. The glory of returning hero and the fear of losing a beloved person are living together in my works. By using a video as art medium I try to catch together the fragility of human life and the ethical poem of death.

## Project 2017

During the next academic year, much importance is attached to the organization of the symposium + expedition in 2017. This conference should raise the interest and show the importance for 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 Gent, with Isolde De Buck the art consultant of the cultural center "Zebrstraat" we have discussed a possibility to organize "Project 2017" in Gent. I have already spoke 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)

This is as a perfect time to test myself as an artist, researcher and organizer. As artist during this modern time, I must not limit myself to only creation of art work. This project can give me a statement as creator and as a carrier of truth, which have to awake the soul in man. Also due this Project 2017 attention will be paid to my artistic research around Ostalgia in a form of exhibition. For the artist, it is important to show their work for to start a necessary dialogue with the audience. Each artist have one story, which he or she want to tell or show. The importance of this project is not only in the public attention, but to give an alternative platform to developed the new relationship between artist and uncompromising critique of the current political system. The exhibition also visualizes the liberating and rehabilitating potential of a critically engaged artist/community.

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### Images:

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## BIO

Natalia Drobot (°1984) is a visual artist and PhD researcher in the arts originating from Belarus (Wit-Russia). She was born in Minsk, in the former Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic. Living during the Perestroika, the time of changing and new dreams, she stopped her study at the University in Minsk and did a sabbatical to travel through Europe. After 5 years being an au-pair in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, she started her study in the arts at the Provincial University College of Limburg, Hasselt, Belgium in 2008, and graduated as a Bachelor and Master of Fine Art. In 2013 she started her PhD research in the arts, driven by her fascination for the Soviet topic in Contemporary Art – Ostalgia, creating a body of work concerning this matter.