

Naked in the Grass: Absurdity and Play in the Ideological Field
A Conversation between Lev Manovich and Nick Muellner

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I introduced Lev Manovich and Nick Muellner to each other by email for the purpose of creating the following cyber-conversation. After an initial correspondence — Lev from California, Nick from New York — they met only once in person. Nick agreed to explore the Dodge Collection photographic works and found, as he put it, “a number of obviously humorous images that indulge in home-made glamour and fantasy, and a joking use of photography’s documentary function.” The series of e-mail exchanges below is based on those selected images.

-Diane Neumaier, Editor

NM:

What strikes me about the work that I pulled from the collection is the particular vocabulary that photography brings to the subversion of late Soviet imagery and ideology. So much non-conformist art of the 70s and 80s took on authority by using – and subverting – its own means: realist painting, stylized graphics, textual slogans, over-determined symbolism, etc. Even when nonsense and humor infect this vocabulary, they create a dialectic within an art-historically (and ideologically) serious framework.

The particular value of photography in this situation is its vernacular ability to evoke entirely different frames of reference: the casual photographing of friends, the banality of identifying reference, the frivolous glamour of Western media culture (film, pop music, fashion, etc.). These vocabularies do not create the same direct confrontation with the rhetoric of state power. Photography here allows something more akin to a provocatively nose-thumbing escape.

Look at the book *Beatles* by the *Mukhomori* Group. *Mukhomori* (1978-1984) was a conceptual and performance group with a substantial presence in the Moscow underground art scene – both because of the prominence of some members, and the sometimes dramatic extremity of their work. The group included (but may not have been limited to): Sven Gundlach, Vladimir Mironenko, Sergei Mironenko, Alexei Kamenski and Konstantin Zvezdochetov. The two artists depicted in the *Beatles* piece are Zvezdochetov and Gundlach.

This book of 9 images with text immediately establishes itself as both an art object – a focused, cleanly constructed, hand-made book – and as an aesthetically blunt object. The book begins, following the graffiti-scrawled cover image, with 2 banal and unconvincing assertions (fig. 1):

(1) An image of two men in a public space, photographed at medium distance – too far to read as a portrait, but central enough that they must be the subjects. The image says only (in the language of holiday photos), “we were there.”

(2) The caption states: “We are two Beatles – Kostya and I.”

They are obviously *not* Beatles (even, or especially, because they say they are). They are just two guys standing in a public square. The ridiculous contradiction here – between textual assertion and blunt photographic fact – is what gives this piece its force. As the next page makes clear, it is a silly, willful, unstoppable act of imagination that allows the contradiction. Again, they are just two guys standing on a stairway – no place in particular (fig. 2). One gestures to the other, and the caption reads: “Now and then I say to him: ‘Well, you are Beatles, Kostya!’” This almost juvenile flaunting of make-believe does not confront the rhetoric of state ideology or official art; it does a joyous end-run around it. As the book

escalates to the purer nonsense of phonically written musical utterances (fig. 3) and idiotic pop posing in banal settings, the implicit assertion only becomes stronger: We will be as absurd and foolish as we want to be. We will think about ourselves however we like. It may be play and fantasy, but it is ours.

I have a couple of particular questions about this piece for a native Russian:

1. Is there additional nuance that I'm missing about the significance of The Beatles in the USSR in the late 70s? I know that they were popular, but could you expand on what images or feelings were associated with their popularity?
2. The group name – Mukhomori. What are the connotations of that word? A poisonous toadstool? An hallucinogenic? Something a gnome lives under? Just curious about how their name functions.

LM:

1. The Beatles were very big in Russia at that time, almost standing for the whole of Western pop music. I remember playing their records over and over when I was a teenager in the 1970s.
2. Mukhomori are poisonous mushrooms which masquerade as good ones: that is, they look very similar to another mushroom which is edible. It is a big and colorful mushroom: big red dots over the white mushroom's "cap." Given that, the name Mukhomori can be taken to signal the group's self-proclaimed poisonous / devious / dishonest pose (in relation to official culture and ideology). We are

the poisonous ones: and yet we are also the colorful ones, we stand out against the monochrome palette of Soviet life. This strategy of masquerade is also at work in this particular group of photos where the group members proclaim themselves to be the Beatles.

I think you are right in that many photographs of this period function differently from the paintings, works on paper, or installations. While the latter often invoke the ideological imaginary – subject matter, symbolism and the visual style of official paintings, billboards, and slogans – the photographs focus on the persona of the artist/performer.

At the same time all works of Soviet non-conformist art share many similar devices regardless of the medium: for instance, the use of text on the image or next to it which often represents literal “speech acts” of the people in the image. We can find such strategies in the albums of Kabakov, for example. It is also central to the *Beatles* album: the text which surrounds the photographs of the two “Beatles” is supposedly what they are “singing.”

What strikes me in this album – and in many other photographs of the collection – is the visual contrast between the rather “Western” looking (in the context of Soviet culture of the 1970s-early 1980s) performers and the ordinary, humble, down-to-earth, totally un-glamorous surroundings against which they strike their heroic poses. This contrast makes the ridiculous nature of Soviet “Beatles” even more ridiculous. What is important to realize – and this is yet another way in which non-conformist photography may be different from works of other media of this period – is that the same contrast characterized everyday life in Moscow (and to some extent Leningrad). That

is, many people were able to dress up nicely – and many women would pour all their earnings into buying certain prestigious pieces of clothing – a leather jacket, a pair of boots. But outside of their apartments, they could not do anything about the ugliness of the public sphere. So my typical visual memory of Moscow at that time is of elegantly dressed up people walking on some totally dirty street, with some construction materials lying here and there... My point is that the *Beatles* album and many other photographs inevitably rely on this visual aesthetics of everyday life – for just as everyday citizens, the artists doing their performances outside, in the public sphere, could not control it – they were lucky if they were not arrested!

Here lies one of the differences between Soviet non-conformist photography documenting performances and similar photography done in the West. Soviet non-conformist artists did not have their white cube – the space of the gallery which can be controlled, painted, lighted, and so on. They had three basic choices: either do their performances in private apartments (for instance, works by Bacharev [fig. 4] and Chezhin [fig. 5]), do them in the city (Mukhomori, Borisov [fig. 9]), or take a train and do a performance in the country (Gerlovin [fig. 6], Donskoi [fig. 7], Grinsberg [fig. 8]) where nobody was watching and it was possible to do a real “performance” (see Gerlovin), rather than simply strike a pose (Bacharev) or dress-up in the privacy of a friend’s apartment (Chezhin). Looking through the photographs, I notice less the individual differences between this or that performance than their similarity – people doing something in the open field, often naked.

NM:

Your “typical visual memory of Moscow” seems an eloquent distillation of what you’re talking about in this work: obvious discontinuities between the actor and the quotidian stage. This also seems to tie-in with your elaboration of the Toadstool. Isn’t it also an individualistic and demonstrative fungus – popping up singly in it’s garish splendor – clownish but dangerous? In recognition of this threat, both Gundlach and Zvezdochetov – the 2 ‘Beatles’ – were punished for their artistic activity by suddenly having their routinely obtained Muscovite military service exemptions (for ‘insanity’) revoked in 1984. Their subsequent , punishing military service in the Soviet Far East signaled the end of Mukhomori’s work.¹

My favorite example among these pictures of artists audaciously inserting the absurd into the Soviet mundane – and again we have the Beatles in the USSR – is Sergei Borisov’s 1983 photograph of the “Dialog Group” [fig. 9]. The conflict, in this one image, between the imaginative play of the actors and the dilapidated banality of the surroundings (featuring your “construction materials” in the form of small piles of asphalt) functions here on several levels. As you have noted in many of the images, their appearance is clearly crafted and Western youth-culture oriented – leather jackets, pointy black boots, white sneakers, long hair, etc. – especially if you compare them to the startled Soviet pedestrians in fur hats behind them. As with Mukhomori, there is the obvious Beatles reference – a recreation of the iconic *Abbey Road* cover image of the band walking mid-stride in a straight line. Again, they are not the Fab Four, or even remotely successful fakes. They are characters asserting their right to self-determined make-believe.

But this still leaves us with the most startling fact: they are all lying on their sides in the middle of the sidewalk in the middle of the day. This silly photograph manages to depict two co-existent worlds at right angles to each other: the vertical world of the street and the perpendicular space of these striding pseudo-rockstars. Here the fact presented by the photograph, rather than the 'action,' becomes essential. Despite our ability to understand the truth of the situation – they are immobile and prone – the still image allows us to subscribe to the illusion that they are photographically frozen in mid-stride. Any actual presence or temporal documentation would have erased this perception. But in the image, they are convincingly stepping, arms swinging in choreographed lock-step, especially if you turn the picture on it's side.

Not only does their perpendicular relationship to the 'upright' world of Soviet Moscow constitute a political stance, it also invokes – and compromises – the mythology of forward motion that infuses Soviet ideology. This photograph comes from an urban landscape that had been dominated for the preceding 65 years by pervasive images of striding figures (Lenin, Stalin, Workers, Young Pioneers, etc.) and the exhortation (often, literally, up in lights): "Forward!" (to the victory of socialism, to the next 5-year plan, etc). The photograph's illusion of forward motion – momentarily compelling but so obviously wrong – turns the imagery of "Forward!" on it's side and then stops it dead in it's tracks. "Forward!" is an illusion supported only by the willful suspension of disbelief. As soon as it is punctured, you know that they are going nowhere fast.

This notion of subverting the positivist rhetoric of state ideology with "cheap" illusionism brings me back to the politics of masquerade that you

raised earlier. It also suggests interesting relationships to the trope of failed illusionism in American photography in the 70's.

LM:

Your interpretation of the semiotics of horizontal vs. vertical in the Borisov photograph is fascinating. Of course we should note that in other photographs by Borisov we see artists taking a different path: carefully emulating the iconography of official representations [figs. 10 and 11]. I think that such emulation is more common to Soviet non-official art of the period: think, for instance, of the painting by Komar and Melamid where the two artists are depicted as young pioneers making a salute.

These two strategies – “resistance by inversion” and “resistance by emulation” – can be traced not only in relation to iconography but also in relation to style. So, if we for a second consider Soviet non-official painting of the 1960s-1980s, we will see that at first it was dominated by the “resistance by inversion”: if the official style was 19th century realism, non-official artists turned to what they thought was its opposite: abstraction. Later, however, the leaders of so-called Sots Art (Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid, Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov) adopt the opposite strategy. They begin to painstakingly emulate the official styles: Socialist Realism in painting, the texture and color of Soviet photography, the look of official posters. The irony here is that many artists have supported themselves by making such official representations, either freelance or full-time (Bulatov and Kabakov, for instance, worked as children's book illustrators). So the artists simply adopted their already honed “official”

skills to their “unofficial” art practice. We can ask to what extent this constitutes a genuine resistance as opposed to self-deception.

The irony continued. As we know, it is these Sots Art artists who became well-known in the West, while everybody who was doing abstraction never “made it.” Why? One explanation is that, behind the sophisticated theoretical and ideological façade of modernism and the Cold War, the Western public always wanted realism. The West also wanted to continue maintaining the distinct difference between itself and the post-Soviet “other” that during the Soviet period was expressed by the abstraction-realism opposition. So it welcomed Komar and Melamid, Kabakov, and Bulatov precisely because of their skillful realism. It was OK to accept painting in the old realistic style as long as it was done by outsiders. And, even better, these outsiders happened to oppose their totalitarian regime! Better yet, one of these outsiders (Kabakov) continues to represent the dirty, rotten, dark Soviet world of communal apartments – a wonderful advertisement for Western capitalism and a constant reminder of its victory over the Soviet Union.

I talked about painting, but the same arguments apply to non-conformist Soviet photography. It seems that in the binary culture of the Cold War there was no “outside” – by resisting and criticizing one system an artist automatically became a supporter of the other. (So the official Soviet art criticism of the period, which always accused non-conformist artists and writers of being advocates of capitalism, was right!).

In another Borisov photograph [fig. 12] a woman reveals a naked breast while the man unbuttons his shirt to reveal the equally transgressive image of Marilyn Monroe. As can be judged from the expression on her face, apparently the woman experiences an extreme pleasure as her breast

touches the Marilyn Monroe image. Not only is the Monroe image equated with a naked breast – and thus with freedom and pleasure – but apparently it has the power to bring a Soviet woman to orgasm. What can be a better advertisement for the Western system!

In retrospect, the artists working during the Cold War had some advantage over us. If you were living under one system, you always had a hope that the other system was better – a kind of paradise on earth. Many artists and intellectuals on both sides of the iron curtain dreamed of crossing it – and many did, only to be disappointed. Perhaps the best strategy was to emulate the other system while not leaving: for instance, by pretending to be Beatles.

But we, who live in a single global system, where can we escape to? Whom can we emulate now?

NM:

The melancholy problem that you describe – of a contemporary world unshaped by the enviable surety of battling belief systems – does weigh on our viewing of these images now. The inviolable desirability of a world that you do not inhabit seems impossible. But on a good day it seems that there is (and was) a way to hold out for something else: a resistance to tyrannical ideological determinism.

The predicament of lacking an ideological alternative is what leads me to look at Soviet photographic work that, as you point out, was not representative of most artistic practice of the period. This Soviet work from the 70s and 80s shared tactics with some notable American photo-works of the 70s. In both contexts, artists used photography's materialism as a

medium to break down the power of abstract ideology. These are the moments that can still seem instructive now.

If we look at Valery Gerlovin and Rimma Gerlovina's series of 1977 outdoor pictures [figs. 13-15], we see photographic documentation apparently in the service of spelling out the obvious or profane. Again, I think it's important to look at these pictures as photographic tableaux rather than documentation of performance. They read as textual human pictograms: using themselves, their friends and family to illustrate 'Two Times Two Equals Four' and 'The Big Dipper' and to spell out 'Shit'. These works bring to mind the broken-down documentary 'empiricism' of such American work from the same period as William Wegman's early videos, Charles Ray's photographic self-portraits and the 70s photography of Robert Cumming.

In Cumming's staged photographic work, including the 1974 diptych, "Zero Plus Zero Equals Zero / A Doughnut Plus a Doughnut Equals Two Doughnuts," [fig. 16] the dumbness of fact and physicality assert themselves with a sneaky subversion similar to the Gerlovin/a images. The representation of the doughnut is both a symbol – a zero – and a thing – a mechanically molded food product with a hole in it. It either adds up to a sum of nothing, or it doesn't add up, in which case the objects have no iconic value. Cumming's empirical demonstration of fact undoes the most basic binary structure of logic (and capitalism) by suspending the subject between object (doughnut) and symbol (zero).

The Gerlovins similarly present photographic facts that fail themselves. We both understand the prone subjects as integers, and appreciate their obvious differences – of gender, age, size, attire – so that *this* two

multiplied by *that* two does not really equal *those* four. In “The Great Bear” (*sic*) we confront both a constellation, and the activity of seven people in a field, absurdly trying to represent an astronomical fact.

The Gerlovins and Cumming adopted philosophical stances in their ‘documentary’ photographs that transcend the historical moment of ideological conflict that the Cold War allegedly presented. These works, by compromising basic logic, poke holes in the evolutionary determinism that these ideologies share. Cumming has described his working process as that of “a product designer of things whose usefulness is in question.”ⁱⁱ In the late 60s and early 70s a number of American artists found their way to photography as a means to lay bear the frailty of idealizing practices – in minimalist art, market consumerism (via Hollywood and Madison Ave.) and technocratic rationalism.ⁱⁱⁱ In the Soviet Union, this same tendency cropped up in unofficial photography as something of a third way between the two primary resistance strategies that you describe above (inversion and emulation). As in the U.S., this work was often produced by artists who did not come to their work as photographers. Perhaps this allowed them to use the medium in a more blankly indexical fashion. The photograph could say: look at this. It achieves no purpose, supports no plan, argues no ideology and implies no higher logic.

In both Communism and advanced Capitalism, the individual tends to be evaluated within a rhetoric of production. Production, as an idea, feels concrete – credible within the intellectual tradition of enlightenment rationalism that produced these ideological structures. Expending obvious effort and labor to make something of no purpose or consequence is, in its small way, an affront to these systems.

In “Ivory-Dial Switch,” [fig. 17] Cumming has gone to great manual labor to undermine the brand-identity that years of advertising and product development have sought to define. The Gerlovins subvert the Soviet rhetoric of inspiring public slogans, bringing six people to a field and arranging them carefully to articulate the word “shit”. In these artists’ hands, photography becomes a tool to materially express the accomplishment of the unproductive act.

You mentioned the advantage of emulating one system while staying in the other: the romantic ideal of the unavailable opposite. Another option – and the one that seems even more vital in the globalizing sweep of capitalist positivism - is to remind oneself that there is not really a coherent system – just the ideological pretense of one.

LM:

Thinking about the show as a whole and the works we discussed, I am struck by how far away these times seem today. The Cold War ended only a decade ago, and it seems to be so far away already. I remember as a teenager in Moscow in the 1970s desperately trying to find out more about what was going on outside, in the rest of the world – trying to catch the BBC or Voice of America on a portable radio, hungrily reading “samizdat” publications, lining up for many hours to see the show of the Hammer art collection at the Pushkin Art Museum. Today, with the end of the Cold War and the help of the World Wide Web, information is so easy to get and everybody, from the CIA to the Russian Communist Party, has their own Web site.

Totalitarian ideologies tried to control people's consciousness by severely limiting the amounts of information available and by repeating this information ad infinitum – a form of behavioral conditioning. In contrast, modern capitalist societies discovered a more effective and subtler strategy of control – multiplying the amount of information and available choices to such an extent that any particular message becomes lost. You are free to go to any street corner and make a speech against the government – or to put your statement on your Web site – but with millions of other voices being freely available, how do you get people to listen to you? You can reach the masses if you have the huge financial resources of a major international corporation that allows you to present your message over and over and in multiple channels. Therefore, in information society the popularity curves typically follow the same pattern, regardless of whether it is music, literature, clothes, or politicians: a small number of players controlling most of the market, with all the other players sharing the small remaining portion.

The photographs of Russian “non-conformist” artists come from another time, and yet their strategies are relevant to our own period of the victory of shopping and branding over old ideologies. For instance, Russian artists would escape the city environment that was always saturated with ideological messages by making trips into the countryside. There they staged performances before the camera that often involved naked bodies – bodies free of ideological messages.

There is something naïve and charming in this gesture – which apparently worked then. Today, in the world of GPS, location-based services for cell phones, and other technologies that try to map, or at least account for, every

point on Earth's surface, such an escape becomes more difficult – although it is still possible. So, while the cities, both West and East, have become saturated with brand advertising, we can still retreat into the countryside, take off our clothes and leave our branded humanity behind - at least for a few hours.

ⁱ Solomon, Andrew. *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*. New York: Random House, 1991. pp. 117-120

ⁱⁱ Robert Cumming et al. *Robert Cumming Photographic Works: 1969-80*. Limousin: F.R.A.C. Limousin, 1994. p. 150

ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to Cumming, Ray and Wegman, one might think of the early work of John Baldessari's, among others.