

PhotoBook Lust: Justine Kurland on Nicholas Muellner, The Amnesia Pavilions

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This is part of the feature “PhotoBook Lust,” a collection of writing on photobooks and desire by artists, curators, and writers, first published in The PhotoBook Review 006. Read [the Lust introduction](#) by guest editor Bruno Ceschel.

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Nicholas Muellner

The Amnesia Pavilions

A-Jump Books

Ithaca, New York, 2011

The Amnesia Pavilions chronicles Nicholas Muellner’s 1990 and 1992 trips to a small town in post-Soviet Russia and his subsequent return in 2009, in search of a boy he had met there nineteen years earlier. The boy is named Aleksei Tsvetkov, and it’s a love story. It is

also a book that speaks to my own obsessive photographic road trips, as I constantly retrace steps I made in previous years, frantically looking for something in the same places I've already checked.

Three distinct photographic vocabularies are in operation. The photographs from the early '90s are made with a hungry eye, strong faith in photography's ability to tell a humanist story, and the visceral physicality of young Russian men. Next are snapshots that Tsvetkov sent Muellner in the intervening years. Their contingency as cultural artifacts imbues them with an aura of authenticity, but they seem standoffish, offering evidence of Tsvetkov's life carried on in Muellner's absence. The final pictures made in 2009 deliver the stuff of the world with a taxonomical and formal eloquence. Here, remarkably unremarkable buildings and listless saplings are at once indifferent to this story and inextricably marked by it.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes that the picture of his mother “fulfill[s] Nietzsche's prophecy: ‘A labyrinthine man never seeks truth, but only his Ariadne.’ The Winter Garden Photograph was my Ariadne, not because it would help me discover a secret thing (monster or treasure), but because it would tell me what constituted that thread which drew me towards Photography.”

In the accompanying text, Muellner sets his memory of Tsvetkov against a contemplation of photography, moving from the crushing disappointment of Tsvetkov's disappearance to the introspective unveiling of self-knowledge. Muellner describes the suppressed eroticism he felt in Tsvetkov's presence and the pathos he sank to in his absence. In reading Muellner's book, I feel a strange inversion, where I'm the one looking for Tsvetkov. Every adventure I've ever had with love and photography has ended in a similar misadventure. As is often the case, the rush of longing detaches from its object of desire, and my photographic ghosts only lead me back to myself, alone.

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Justine Kurland was born in 1969 in Warsaw, New York. Her photographs have been exhibited extensively at museums and galleries in the U.S. and internationally.