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Communist History, Unclassified

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Yevgeniy Fiks, *Communist Guide to New York City*. Photographs. "Common Room 2". Lower East Side. From January 20th to March 7th, 2008

In our receding political culture, any attempt to point out the alternative paths of history can be tagged as nostalgic. It's hard, however, to notice a melancholic reverie in "Communist Guide to New York City", a photographic project by Moscow-born, New York-based artist, Yevgeniy Fiks, which tackles the Communist movement in the USA, using the technique of frontal laconic photography practiced largely in the political 'department' of conceptual art of the 70s (works by Hans Haake and Martha Rosler come in mind here). Fiks' photographs of historical sites, which relate to the Communist movement in New York, do not suggest any subjectivism that one would likely expect from an artist with the post-Soviet background. It rather deals with the US political psyche, which is shaped by the lack of historical memory and longing for the strong political movement that the country had in the past. The "Guide" consists of more than 70 photographs highlighting New York's buildings and sites connected to the history of the CPUSA (Communist Party USA) - its headquarters, magazines, prominent leaders' residencies, sites of rallies and demonstrations, as well as the court houses where the trials of "red suspects" took place in the 40s and 50s. Since the time of the big "Red Scare" that culminated in the infamous trial of the Rosenbergs and their execution in the New York prison Sing-Sing, Communists' activities and their influence in US political life has fallen into near obscurity, although the myths about Trotsky dining in Lower East Side and 'red diaper babies' have continued to

circulate. Based on the scrupulous research, “Communist Guide to New York City” outlines the city with a history as barely known, as the Algonquian culture, and literally invisible, for the buildings on the photographs feature little of Communist aesthetics. This presents (involuntarily) a stark contrast to, for example, the photographic series “Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922-32” by Richard Pare¹, which focuses on the Soviet architecture built in the period of 1928-1932, when socialist construction in the USSR was especially intense and the architecture materialized the functionality of the Communist rule. The Marxism and class issues in US are notable only in few murals of the 1930’s by WPA painters, and surprisingly, in the building of the socialist newspaper the Jewish Daily Forward, built in 1912 and decorated by the bas relief of Marx, Engels, and workers’ unions leaders – the landmarks that still evoke a bitter memory of class struggles and hopes of the past.

What is indeed seen in Fiks’ photographs turns out to be not the history of American Communism as such, but the sense of mutability of American landscape – a quality so well documented by the entire tradition of American photography and described by Susan Sontag in the following passage:

“Americans feel the reality of their country to be so stupendous, and mutable, that it would be the rankest presumption to approach it in a classifying, scientific way. One could get at it indirectly, by subterfuge – breaking it off into strange fragments that could somehow, by synecdoche, be taken for the whole. American photographers posit something ineffable in the national reality – something possibly, that has never been seen before. [...] Any inventory of America is inevitably anti-scientific, a delirious

¹ *Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922-32*. Photographs by Richard Pare. MoMA, July-October, 2007.

“abracadabrant” confusion of objects, in which jukeboxes resemble coffins.»²

This refusal to classify American political history is noticeable in Fiks' method of numbering and grouping his photographs: he avoids any «scientific» logic, presenting unclassified data collected by the artist over two years, with no attempt to construct any kind of chronology, or order. He supplies the maps with the marked Communist sites on them, but leaves up to a viewer to decide in which order and what sequences the images should be viewed, when unpacking the fragmented, unmarked, delirious political landscape of New York City.

It is obvious, however, that Fiks' foray into American «built environment» is driven not by the pure fascination with it, but by his reflections on world's history marked by the failure of a particular political system. Moreover, his work talks not only about past Communist utopia, but the most significantly, about the fate of utopian thought at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and does it through representational shifts traditionally practiced in conceptual art. The laconic photographs of «Communist Guide of New York» evoke Martha Rosler's series “The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems,” which refuses to depict the homeless on the Bowery as a cliché of the culture of Imperialism that tends to show victims as a spectacle. The absence of Communist representation and aesthetics in Fiks' photographs could be seen akin to absence of the homeless from Rosler's photos. The Communists and their sites don't appear in one “descriptive system” because the former are no longer present in the field of representation once used in a culture defined by the hope of improving the world through revolutions and class struggle. Rather, they fall somewhere in between this past culture and the growing commodification of the revolutionary «icons»

² Susan Sontag, «On Photography», Picador, New York. P. 66

(like images of Che Guevara on T-shirts). Communists in their «descriptive system» are absent from the landscape of our cultural and political life, and this absence is so remarkable.