

Who's Afraid of Neo-Socialist-Realism?
Klara Kemp-Welch.

While collecting materials for The Golden Age for Children (2008) in the archives of the Museum of the City of Bucharest, Ștefan Constantinescu came across a pile of discarded propaganda photographs. He recalls being struck by a particular quality they radiated: 'the light in them caught my eyes, they erupted hope'.¹ He chose a hundred or so images from the pile and included a selection in his extraordinary pop-up book, The Golden Age for Children, which combines official photographs with the artist's own childhood images to produce a visual history of Ceausescu's Romania after 1968, seen from above and below. But there remained a number of other images that fascinated him: 'I liked them very much. That is when I got the idea to paint them', he explains.² These remaindered photographs served as the basis for a new series of 10 drawings and 22 paintings entitled An Infinite Blue (2009-2011). In what follows, I ask what it means, today, for a Romanian artist residing in Sweden to produce a series of realist paintings derived from official, Ceausescu era photographs.

Constantinescu's account of his chance encounter with the propaganda images echoes accounts of the Surrealist fascination with the found object. Margaret Iversen has argued that 'the space occupied by the found object is carved out by traumatic experience defined as an experience that has failed to achieve a representation, but on which, nonetheless, one's whole existence depends'.³ Corroborating this sort of reading, Constantinescu links the series to earlier, traumatic, experiences:

'The autumn of 1986 at the age of 17, I was enrolled in the army, 150 Km South of Bucharest. Because I had an uncle who defected to Sweden, I was enrolled in a disciplinary unit actually designed for soldiers and army personal with disciplinary issues. I was working at a mill car-

rying bags of flour all day long. It was hard, working 12 hours a day and cleaning the place after. My mother was desperate and called on all her connections to help me move out of there. Having graduated from an art college, my mother's relations managed to obtain a transfer for me to the Army General Headquarters as an official painter's apprentice. The main task was to paint a series of murals depicting scenes from Romanian history, starting with the founding fathers and ending with Nicolai Ceausescu. The work was under the supervision of master painter Ghelu Horia and the team members were Corina - the master's assistant and myself'.⁴

But it was not the manual labour, the compulsory apprenticeship, nor even socialist realism itself that constituted the trauma, in themselves. Constantinescu's primary trauma was, he says, the 'first interaction as a young man and artist with an authority system', occasioned by the apprenticeship:

'For each scene we would first make a small layout that the commissioners would correct. The head of the commission was general Ilie Ceausescu, the dictator's brother. He would often come and check on our work in progress. He was a quiet man who kept to himself most of the time. He would walk through the room and whistle as he inspected the paintings. During his work visits, he was often accompanied by a couple of other generals and colonels. Their comments were very direct and precise. We weren't allowed to use green, because it was considered to be a fascist colour, or black which symbolized death. These were some of their comments: "The woman on the right looks Chinese, change her face." or "The horse is badly painted, as if it was made of stone. Too much grey." The most difficult part was painting Ceausescu's portrait: the space between his eyes turned out rather large making him look mentally challenged. That is why the three of us were terribly worried that our artistic inability might be

interpreted as an act of sabotage'.

Constantinescu's formative encounter with authority resonates with Iverson's Lacanian account of the traumatic experience as one on which one's whole existence depends. Being accused of sabotage, under Ceausescu, was a life-threatening scenario. Small wonder then, that when Constantinescu studied at the Arts University in Bucharest, where as the artist recalls, there was a similar 'emphasis' was on execution. It was all supposed to be recognizable', he found this mode of realism restrictive ('Mimeticism annoyed me').⁶ In 1988, exhibiting at an important "Painting Salon" event at Dalles Hall in Bucharest after having succeeded in deceiving the selectors that he was a graduate from the officially favoured Art Institute "Nicolae Grigorescu", he showed three tempera paintings inspired by the work of Corneliu Vasilescu and Willem de Kooning. This passage from realism to gestural abstraction is absolutely paradigmatic of the more widespread disavowal of enforced socialist realism in favour of more expressive, individualist, styles, characteristic of the various periods of 'thaw', at different times, across the former Eastern 'bloc'. Several decades would elapse before the artist's primary trauma could 'achieve a representation', prompted by the chance encounter with the found photographs.

The artist refers to An Infinite Blue as a 're-enactment', invoking the mechanism of repetition as a manner of 'working through' and reflecting physically on his early experiences as a painter.⁷ The neat execution of the series suggests a degree of performative overidentification with the style in which he first trained. The new work goes a step further than the earlier work though, appropriating and mastering the style retrospectively, this time, by choice. There may even be hints of unconscious wish-fulfilment entailed in the artist's transition from his junior role in a collective of three, to working on complete paintings, alone, as an adult. Constantinescu had had little say in de-

termining the compositions that he worked on as an apprentice - his role at the Army General Headquarters had consisted primarily of 'washing the brushes, preparing the backgrounds and sometimes painting minor characters'.⁸ The process of self-conscious, motivated, re-enactment redresses this imbalance, confronting, head on, his small-scale complicity in producing state propaganda. The series thus becomes a way to reckon, more broadly, with the ideological formation that has not been entirely excised from his mature practice in other media. Since embarking on the series, he has been able to reflect upon certain stylistic decisions, remarking, among others, that 'in my painting the brush is not visible. Just like the camera movement in films, I believe the brush movement should be very well motivated'.⁹ As this comment suggests, the values he inculcated at an early age continue to surface in his work.

While such a biographical account of the series may be compelling, it also seems to me to have limitations as a framework, not least because, as Boris Groys has remarked, we seem to have reached a stage where 'the past as such has now become inconceivable as being anything other than traumatic' and 'we now live in a world in which everyone seems to be traumatized by one thing or another', which means that, ultimately, 'the various forms of traumatization all begin to look remarkably similar'.¹⁰ How to distinguish between these traumas, and the artistic returns that they have instantiated? What art historical tools are at our disposal for thinking through the particular problems they raise? Arguably the most productive forum for this debate, in the last century, was the debate about the critical status of the so-called 'neo-avant-garde' of the 1950s and 60s. In what follows, I want to test out the use value of calling Constantinescu's series 'neo-socialist realist', as a way to probe its wider historical and contemporary ramifications. What might we understand by 'neo' in this context? And, after Hal Foster's 'Who's afraid of the neo-avant-garde?'; Who's afraid of neo-socialist realism?¹¹

1. Ștefan Constantinescu, email to Klara Kemp-Welch, July 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Margaret Iversen, 'Readymade, Found Object, Photograph', *Art Journal* Vol. 63 no. 2, Summer 2004, p. 49.
4. Ștefan Constantinescu, email to Klara Kemp-Welch, July 2011.
5. Ibid.
6. Ștefan Constantinescu, Artist's Statement for *An Infinite Blue*, London: GALERIE8, 2011.
7. Ștefan Constantinescu, email to Klara Kemp-Welch, July 2011.
8. Ibid.
9. Ștefan Constantinescu, Artist's Statement for *An Infinite Blue*, London: GALERIE8, 2011.
10. Boris Groys, 'Back from the Future', in Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *2000+Arteast Collection. The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West; from the 1960s to the present*, Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2000, p. 10.
11. Hal Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', in *Return of the Real*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996.
12. Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', *October* 70, Fall 1994, p. 5.
13. Foster, 1994, p. 5.
14. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
15. Bürger, 2003, p. 60.
16. Ibid.
17. Benjamin Buchloh, 'The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October* 37, Summer 1986, p. 42.
18. Ibid.
19. Buchloh, 1986, p. 43.
20. Buchloh, 1986, p. 48.
21. Buchloh, 1986, p. 52.
22. Buchloh, 1986, p. 48.
23. Buchloh, 1986, pp. 48-51.
24. Iversen, 2004, p. 51.

Asking 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?' (1994), in the first instance, Foster observed that 'post-war culture in North America and Western Europe is swamped by 'neos' and 'posts', and asked: 'How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return of a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working?'.¹² His methodological approach entailed proposing that 'in reality, these returns are more complicated, even more compulsive - especially now at the end of the century as revolutions at its beginnings appear to be undone, and as formations thought to be long dead stir again with uncanny life'.¹³ These issues are as pressing today, as they were then, I think. Not only do we remain swamped by 'neos' and 'posts' in art and politics, but also, amidst the on-going moral and economic crisis of neo-liberal capitalism, the 'idea of communism' has been making a remarkably swift return to critical discourse through the efforts of Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou and others. Meanwhile, we remain as undecided about the political status of what Foster calls 'returns' in the artistic field today, as we were in the 1990s.

Foster was of course responding to Peter Bürger's dismissal of any radicality attributed to what he termed, disparagingly, the neo-avant-garde, in the first instance, and to Benjamin Buchloh's critique of Bürger, in the second. Bürger's 'Theory of the Avant-Garde' had been published in German in 1974 and was not translated into English until 1984, after which there followed further delays in reception and then a steady flow of polemical scholarly retorts.¹⁴ Emerging from a Marxist historical tradition, Bürger viewed the institution of art as a manifestation of bourgeois culture located firmly within capitalism's economic and material regime, arguing that modernism's commitment to 'autonomy' was a social construct within the bourgeois society it served. Taking Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism as paradigms that sought to 'negate the

autonomy of art', he argued that they collapsed the cosy construct of the separation of art and life and unmasked the ideological foundations of bourgeois culture. He reasoned that while the historical avant-gardes sought to undermine the status quo, the neo-avant-garde accomplished the institutionalisation of the same critical strategies, thus negating any genuinely avant-gardist intentions. Bürger unfor- givably reasoned that 'since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as art, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic'.¹⁵ He found that the culture industry had 'brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life', with the result that art, because it was 'no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it', thereby lost its former 'capacity to criticise it'.¹⁶

Buchloh discerned a series of flaws in this argument. In his article 'The Primary Colors for a Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde' (1986), he pointed out Bürger's assumption that repetition within art production is always equivalent to failure and reasoned that this argument had its roots in a 'binary opposition ultimately deriving from the cult of the auratic original'.¹⁷ Bürger's methodology, for Buchloh, relied heavily on 'the fiction of the origin as a moment of irretrievable plenitude and truth', at the expense of the present, which, within such a framework, necessarily appears 'empty and meaningless'.¹⁸ By way of an alternative approach, Buchloh proposed to study the 'actual conditions of reception and transformation of the avant-garde paradigms' without recourse to traditional notions of 'influence, imitation and authenticity', drawing on a Freudian model of repetition originating in 'repression and disavowal'.¹⁹ Bürger argues that the neo-avant-gardes' repetition was designed to displace traditional structures and assumptions about imminent meaning, redirecting historical strategies towards new political situations in such a way that

meaning could only be assigned to the work from the position of 'outside, that is, the process of their reception'.²⁰ He illustrated his claim by arguing that Yves Klein's blue monochromes of the late 1950s were by no means a 'mere repetition' of Alexander Rodchenko's Pure Colours Red, Yellow, Blue, (1921), but, rather, pushed the contradictions of Rodchenko's monochrome strategy to their logical extreme, thus turning them on their head in the process. Buchloh concluded that while Rodchenko's triptych 'completed the modernist, materialist project in order to abolish the last vestiges of myth and cult to which high art had been inextricably tied within bourgeois culture', Klein's later pink, gold, and IKB (International Klein Blue) triptych 'resuscitated the idea of art as transcendental negation and esoteric experience precisely at that moment when the mass culture of corporate capitalism was in the process of dismantling all vestiges of bourgeois culture's individual experience and liquidating the oppositional functions of high art'.²¹ Klein's accomplishment, he proposed, was to show that 'meaning becomes visibly a matter of projection, of aesthetic and ideological investment, shared by a particular community for a specific period of time'.²² The neo-avant-garde had sought, above all, to 'provide models of cultural identity and legitimation for the reconstructed (or newly constituted) liberal bourgeois audience of the post-war period', ultimately finding its 'place as the provider of a mythical semblance of radicality' in the fetishist scenario of the spectacle.²³ If Buchloh was at pains to point out that the 'actual differences' between the two triptychs should be 'taken very seriously indeed', it is clear that the same is also true of Constantinescu's paintings and the photographs that gave rise to them, not least because of photography's inherently ambivalent status as 'not only readymade / simulacral, but also traumatic / real'.²⁴

With reference to Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas', Buchloh was to argue that 'in the

exact duplication of the Real, preferably by means of another reproductive medium (...) and in the shift from medium to medium, the real vanishes and becomes an allegory of death. But even in its moment of destruction it exposes and affirms itself, it will become the quintessential real and it becomes the fetishism of the lost object'.²⁵ Constantinescu's investment in the propaganda photographs and reworking of their content in other media also performs this dual operation. On the one hand, it destroys the original: the photographs are not displayed alongside the paintings, which and remain discarded even as they promised to have been resurrected from the corner of the archive. On the other hand, the move entails a fetishisation of the lost object that illustrates the artist's nostalgic overinvestment in the repressed Real, like all fetishist interest, rooted in disavowal.²⁶ If remembrance is mobilised against the apparatus of repression, the 'punctum' is illusive. What we get instead is more or less what Buchloh discerns in Richter's 'Atlas': 'sterile functionality' and the vision of 'banality as a condition of everyday life' that Buchloh calls 'the condition of the repression of historical memory, as a sort of psychic anaesthesia'.²⁷

Repetition, then, can be a way to forget, as well as to remember. Like Richter, who only became actively interested in reworking his photographic archive after moving from East to West Germany, Constantinescu left Romania for Sweden long before embarking on An Infinite Blue. Richter's 'Atlas' has been designed 'to consider photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination and more precisely as one of the instruments with which collective amnesia and repression are socially inscribed'.²⁸ Constantinescu's paintings of banal, sterile, propaganda photographs, oozing an eerie sort of calm, for their part, invite us to consider what they omit as much as what they present. In so doing, they subtly enact a form of revenge: we begin to notice the small details re-

corded unwittingly by the photographer; if there is a 'punctum' to be found amidst the serialised serenity of industrial labour and peaceful study, it is the ominous black Militia van parked on the outskirts of the massive, empty sports stadium in An Infinite Blue (Stadium) (2011). But we would be forgiven for missing it, given this painting's uncharacteristic bird's eye perspective that transforms human figures into dashes of paint.

If repetition has the capacity to destroy memory, usurping reality and negating what came before, then Constantinescu's repetition is a negation of a negation. After all, there is no authentic auratic original to return to here - only the propaganda photographs, performing their script. Moreover, it seems that Constantinescu, too, could not resist departing from the role of the faithful copyist: 'the paintings are mixed, some are pretty close to the photograph and some are transformed a lot. For example my own class appears in my portraits'.²⁹ By choosing to paint only those photographs that he likes, of course, Constantinescu re-enacts the selective memory proposed by the propaganda images, excluding what they exclude, in favour of what they include. In doing so, he appears to speak for many of his peers - for his 'generation', as he refers to them in the film Dacia 1300, My Generation (2003). Constantinescu has observed that his generation tends to respond to The Golden Age for Children nostalgically: 'this was not at all my intention', he says, 'but in retrospect I think that nostalgia is an important part of how my generation and I feel about that period. Of course this feeling is not directed towards the system, but rather towards the holidays at the seaside, the sand between our toes, the Iris concerts, the butter and the cherry jam, all in all that period of our childhood and youth which coincided with Ceausescu's regime'.³⁰ Positive, photographically implanted memories continue to conspire to supplant those memories that have been repressed: Constantinescu stages the conflict between these

mnemonic regimes.

An Infinite Blue lays bare the labour entailed in the construction of propaganda images but fails to achieve the seamless reality effect accomplished in the photographs. Constantinescu's desire to convey the sense of an untroubled collective fails to deliver the requisite radiance. For all his rhetorical commitment to 'motivation' and stylistic indifference, the endeavour seems to be unconsciously undermined and the psychological flipside of the coin creeps in. I am reminded of Edward Hopper's peculiar obstinacy in claiming that he never intended to paint sadness or loneliness, but that what interested him was the play of light on walls. An Infinite Blue speaks as eloquently of Ceausescu era alienation as it promotes the Golden Age dream, the propaganda images notwithstanding, just as Hopper's paintings show the melancholic side of the suburban American dream. Like Hopper, though, Constantinescu maintains that it was their 'light' that drew him to the photographs: 'Just like in film it is a certain light that interests me'.³¹ The result is peculiarly sublime. We are presented with highly polished, immaculately reflective surfaces that suggest the future has, indeed, arrived, but those that inhabit it appear to remain preoccupied with other tasks, still joylessly waiting and oblivious to the present. The present is transformed into a limbo populated by unsmiling people improving themselves, working in laboratories, and supervising the smooth running of machinery. The images propose a vision of the modernist dream, not just a Ceausescu era utopia. As Groys has argued: 'Communist-ruled societies might by all means have been hermetically sealed societies, but they were also utterly modern, asserting the credo or progress even more aggressively and combating the residue of pre-modern cultural identity with far greater vehemence than did liberal democracies in the West (...) communist society offers an outstanding example of modernity that, rather than opening out, led towards enclosure and isolation'.³²

There is clearly something wrong in a number of the paintings though. If this is Socialist Realism, it lacks the sumptuous texture of its 1940s Stalinist precedent. Stalinist Socialist Realism was a land more commonly inhabited by busy rosy-cheeked peasant women in overalls, taking a break from toiling in the fields alongside a tractor, to discover that 'they are writing about us in Pravda!'. Perhaps it is the lack of tractors, and the insistence of the urban. As we know, Ceausescu systematically destroyed the villages as part of his project to urbanise the nation in the name of the technical and scientific revolution. Instead, we see people squeezed into uncomfortable suits, in fashionable plastic swivel chairs beneath an impressive array of light fittings, reading, or swamped by machines in an apocalyptically lit nuclear plant. This is a world in which intellectuals must collaborate with the regime in return for the freedom to continue their professional life - closing their eyes to the reality beyond their particular lab or project. People are never alone but are isolated in little worlds - the world of the boiler room, of the gym, or of the college dormitory. Work does not look like work: it looks like killing time. Blue-collar workers try to make themselves look busy, inspecting this or that. The need for heavy manual labour has been eradicated: a man supervising a boiler just stares vacantly into space. Technological progress has produced surplus leisure time, at last. The machine has relieved the worker of her arduous duties and she can at last go to the library to read, or meet friends at the cafe for a pastry. Let them eat cake! The white collar workers, for their part, turn away from the camera and bury their noses in some book or other. An Infinite Blue undoubtedly presents a harmonious social panorama, but the images betray the psychological weariness of the subjects participating in the collective experiment. The colours are acidic and the protagonists are aware that they are being watched, as indeed they were, by the offi-

cial cameraman who immortalised them. This is also true of the kindergarten children - one boy looks cautiously our way.

Two protagonists are notable for their absence; Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu are nowhere in evidence - a blind spot in the field of vision. Constantinescu's selection of images tempts us to reinvest in the dream, without its hateful executors. It is this omission that makes the series so much more interesting than the otherwise similarly neo-socialist realist gesture of offering bootlegged versions of Christoph Büchel and Giovanni Carmine's glossy book Ceau in the Romanian Pavilion in 2007.³³ Ceau bombastically collated more than 300 paintings of the dictator and his wife, dredging them out of storage at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, in a strategy akin to Fred Wilson's unearthing of Ku Klux Klan capes while 'Mining the Museum' (1992). The lurid paintings of Ceausescu had either been commissioned by political bodies or offered as gifts by artists to the Ministry of Culture, prior to 1989. 'Ceau' (whose titles, as listed by Constantinescu in the prologue to The Golden Age for Children, included 'the demiurge', 'all thinker', 'champion of peace' 'the flawless genius', 'the eternal star of the Romanian sky'), in the book which is tastelessly styled as a piece of edgy borderline totalitarian memorabilia, emerges victoriously as another Mao or Che, rather than a Komar and Melamid Stalin. Had Constantinescu included images of Ceausescu in An Infinite Blue its subtleties would doubtless also have been dissipated. Ceausescu's troubling absence, though, makes it possible for us to try to empathise with the subjects represented, in the act of being submitted to official scrutiny, and to excavate hints of a history from below, within an archive of images intended to represent history from above.

Foster makes the Lacanian argument that the subject is formed through deferred action and that subjectivity is 'structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events'.³⁴ He cites

Jacques Laplanche's observation that 'it always takes two traumas to make a trauma', explaining that 'one event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action, in 'Nachtraglichkeit'.³⁵ He expands this same logic to the avant-garde, arguing that it is by definition traumatic: 'a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately, at least not without structural change'.³⁶ The significance of the avant-garde, then, only becomes apparent retrospectively. In this case, 'the neo-avant-garde acts on the historical avant-garde as much as it is acted on by it; that it is less 'neo' than 'nachtraglich'.³⁷ He argues, persuasively, I think, that the historical and neo-avant-gardes are therefore 'constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of pretension and retention, a complex relay of reconstructed past and anticipated future', overthrowing any simple idea of origin and repetition.³⁸ Translating this from a discussion of the avant-garde to Socialist Realism entails further contradictions. Orthodox Socialist Realism, after all, sought to depict not reality, but 'reality in its revolutionary development'. Some might object that late Romanian 1960s and 70s propaganda photographs and their neo-Socialist-Realist counterparts cannot be compared with the 'hole in the symbolic order' proffered by the historical avant-gardes. But there are good arguments to the contrary. Indeed, Groys' major accomplishment of the 1980s was to argue that Socialist Realism, far from constituting a rupture with the project of the Soviet avant-gardes, represented its fulfilment in a different form: 'the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetic-political project'.³⁹ But what does it mean to revisit this aesthetic-political project, after 1989? If Bürger's introduction of the term 'neo-avant-garde' sought to reflect upon, as he put it, 'a historical constellation

of problems that emerged after the events of May 1968', can 'neo-socialist realism' become a discursive tool for unlocking the historical constellation of problems that has emerged after the events of 1989?⁴⁰

The various moves to redefine the 'neo' in the discursive formation 'neo-avant-garde' are, of course, political, as much as they are critical. All the efforts to call Bürger's label 'neo' into question bear witness to the power of this apparently innocent prefix. Susan Buck-Morss has argued that nowadays, 'post- is the position on the left, the moment of critical negation, while the neo- position forgets about the past and its disappointments, and with striking historical amnesia, attempts to bring the old up to date'.⁴¹ But she also recalls that there were better times for neo, before neo-liberalism. There was once a time when 'the neos were on the left not the right, and they indicated an optimism about political change, which was not just a mood but a real possibility, as there was a progressive political movement whose interests were expressed in neo-Marxism (socialism with a human face; Allende-style, elected socialism); and neo-Freudianism (critiques of the social origins of mental disorders)'.⁴²

In labelling Constantinescu's series 'neo-socialist realist' I want to invoke both these constellations of the neo. Its historical and political ambivalence is unique, and it is this quality that makes it such a good fit for An Infinite Blue. As we know, the distinction between left and right is less clear today than ever, not least in Romania where so many of Ceausescu's apparatchiks remained in power after the events of 1989. Constantinescu explores the gap between these two accounts of neo, challenging the viewer to determine the difference and to take a political position in relation to the work. If we opt for the leftist account of the neo, we might begin to see a glimpse of another future in the series, despite its melancholic re-enactment of the past. Dacia 1300, My Generation, among others,

conveys the genuine nostalgia for communist days of full employment and weekends away, despite the shortages and repression that framed them that some Romanians still feel today. As in the series, An Infinite Blue, work took centre stage, but there are also wholesome pursuits and the time to engage in them, that have, today, been squeezed out of the picture by aggressive capitalism. In the Cold War era, both sides of the East-West divide were equally keen to promote themselves as the true deliverers of the technological utopia, and equally concerned that their citizen's leisure-time should be filled with ideologically conducive activities. Indeed, Buck-Morss has even argued that 'the Cold War was internal to Western hegemony, not outside of it', thus the two sides of the iron curtain were united in a common 'materialism and atheism' that characterised both sides' 'quasi-religious faith that both Cold War enemies had in history as the time of human progress, the elimination of scarcity through heavy industrial development that was to deliver happiness to the masses'.⁴³ This phase of history has now come to a close. And there is nostalgia on both sides of the former divide. Judging from the myriad 'likes' it receives on YouTube, the song that inspired the title of the series, with a video of Angela Similea in a blue dress meandering across a windswept Romanian beach in 1978, remains as popular with new generations as it ever was.

An Infinite Blue throws open the question of the pre-neoliberal, leftist, sense of the neo. What if we take the opportunity offered by the erasure of Ceausescu from the pictures to see these images as inviting, after all? What if we say, 'I know very well, but nevertheless...'? The series is strangely novel fuel for Ostalgia, more commonly enthralled by unofficial than official trends. Constantinescu offers a vision of the East that refuses to quite conform to the market's thirst for 're-eroticizing, re-orientalizing and re-antiquitizing former communist countries'.⁴⁴ There is a level of resistance



Image 1: Detail from Stadium (2011), Oil on canvas

Image 2: Detail from Biology Laboratory (2010), Oil on canvas

25. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's "Atlas": The Anomic Archive', October 99, Spring 1999, pp. 117 - 145, reproduced in Iwona Blazwick and Joanna Graham, eds., Gerhard Richter Atlas: The Reader, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2003, p. 99.
26. Buchloh, 1986, p. 51.
27. Buchloh, 1999, p. 112.
28. Buchloh, 1999, p. 108.
29. Stefan Constantinescu, email to Audrey Yeo, 15 September 2010.
30. Ibid.
31. Stefan Constantinescu, email to Klara Kemp-Welch, 2011.
32. Groys, 2000, p. 11.
33. Christoph Büchel and Giovanni Carmine, eds., Çeau, Göttingen: Steidl, 2008.
34. Foster, 1994, p. 30.
35. Ibid.
36. Foster, 1994, p. 31.
37. Ibid.
38. Foster, 1994, p. 30.
39. See Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond, trans. Charles Rougle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 (1988), p. 36.
40. Bürger's post-script to the second German edition of The Theory of the Avant-Garde.
41. Susan Buck-Morss, 'The Post-Soviet Condition', in IRWIN, eds., East Art Map, London: Afterall Books, 2006, p. 494.
42. Buck-Morss, 2006, p. 494.
43. Buck-Morss, 2006, p. 495.
44. Groys, 2000, p. 11.

implied in presenting Romanian socialism as a thoroughly modern dream world rather than a dystopia. This dissonance, I think, is designed to test the limits of the market for Nostalgia. The capitalist culture industry has undoubtedly by now swallowed up and institutionalised the historical avant-garde. But it has had more trouble digesting Socialist Realism. This most despised of styles has proved harder to disarm, and it is for this reason, I think, that Constantinescu, and others, are still drawn to it.

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