

Fractured Horizon

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Artist statement

Memory is a fragile thread that holds together the tapestry of history and culture. My work explores the collapse of the Soviet experiment, political repression, and trauma that pervades families and the nation. Through textured multiples, video, and alternative processes, I build a portal to memories that have been suppressed by the Soviet regime. In engaging with archives, I investigate the blind spots in history and contextualize the way the present and the future are reflected in the past.

Hidden histories.

In 2017, I toured Vladimir Lenin's Mausoleum, a prominent historical landmark and tourist attraction situated at the heart of Moscow's Red Square. For decades, the government has spent staggering sums to preserve the body of a leader who spearheaded the October Revolution and conceived the Gulags- a forced labor camp system in which millions of innocent people perished and were executed by the Soviet regime. Since Lenin's death in 1924, the Mausoleum had become the mental and emotional center of Russia, with the whole country decorating itself as the Great Bolshevik's giant burial site (Gessen 14). Growing up with this constructed nostalgia for the Soviet past, the Russian government silenced and buried one of the darkest chapters of its history. The grim reality of the Gulags was deliberately omitted from public discussions, leaving it to the state to build the past as it deemed appropriate. Following the tradition of an old Soviet saying "The future is certain; it is only the past that is unpredictable", generations of Russian families including mine have come to accept the history as we were told. This war on collective memory instilled Russia's cultural amnesia that extinguished democracy

and paved the way to fascism.

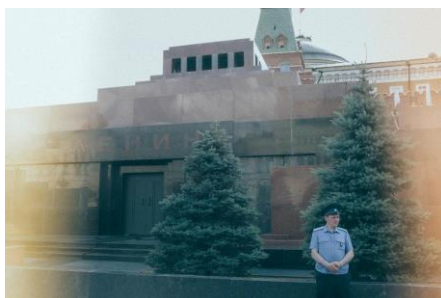


Figure 1. A police officer stands in front of Lenin's Mausoleum. Moscow, 2017.

Fractured Horizon.

The central focus of my research is collective memory and its instrumental role in manifesting cultural identity, history, and the future. Memory occurs in our consciousness and transcribes itself into the world. Its nature is elusive, impermanent and continually shapes our perceptions and experiences. From libraries, national monuments, textbooks to museums, what we choose to memorialize and preserve shepherds us into the future.

The writer, Julia Cameron says that “Before a wound can heal, it must be seen.” (Cameron 40). Throughout my work, I ask, are there ways to point to the memory that is still there, but no longer present or visible? Can the rubbles of our past be reclaimed as monuments of the present, illuminating a path towards a less violent future? In my practice, I engage with suppressed and overlooked archives and reimagine them as invaluable carriers of memories that have been hidden from public discourse. While I do not seek to recreate these historical records, I use them as a jump-off point to generate new imagery for my installations and highlight narratives that have been lost.

The taxonomy of layered textures and the act of remembrance are the foundations of my thesis show, *Fractured Horizon*. Much like the repressed memories of the Soviet Gulag system, my installation is an ephemeral, layered transmitter of histories that have been absent from the national archives and public view in Russia. The exhibit is laid out in three parts; a central cyanotype fabric pagoda suspended from a framework of oxidized steel, a single channel video projection and memorial wall with portraits of political prisoners that were murdered in the camps. The three pieces are in dialogue with each other, placing the fragility of human life and material embodiment at the forefront of the exhibit. In using sound, texture, movement, and

light, I showcase how a museum space can be transformed into a physical site of loss, absence, and mourning.

My principal concern is how tactile materials can transform the ephemera of repressed memories into tangible forms. In *Fractured Horizon*, I dismantle the prescribed narratives of the Soviet regime and point to the blind spots in history by immersing the viewers into a portal of history of Solovetsky island or Solovki. Solovki is an archipelago in the White Sea that has undergone several turbulent changes throughout history. Once a sanctuary for monks, it was transformed into the first Soviet forced labor camp, a mass extermination site, and then back again to a monastery. Solovetsky islands were the first Gulag and served as a precursor to thousands of camps that spawned all over the country following its construction. Today, it stands as a tourist site where the darker aspects of its past remain unspoken and surpassed. Ethan Kleinberg writes that past events arrive in the present through the works of the historian, “But there are other aspects of the past that haunt us, our archives, and the very history to which we cling.” (Kleinberg 9). The perpetuation of violence in our present is a result of dominant ideologies burying, erasing and forgetting certain truths within these archives. With the reality of our past hidden and obscured, our memory requires remapping and excavation. It is only through working through our past, we can understand our present.

Solovki.

“An Archive Survives Only If It Is Being Used” - Masha Gessen

Given the history of the land, I appropriate archival images from books by Russian historian Yuri Brodsky's "Solovki", and Polish photographer Tomacz Kizny's "Gulag." Kizny's and Brodsky's research and extensive visits to former Gulag sites have produced few accessible and available archives that document the Soviet forced labor prison system. In examining these images, I am concerned with the power structures of photographic archives and their role in shaping our collective memory and history. I argue that photography is the mirror of society, and those who control the image, control everything. Norman Davies writes, "Given the cloak of secrecy that surrounded the Gulag for so long, an extensive photographic record is not something to readily expect." (Kizny 8). The censorship of these photographic archives in Russia, allowed the state to obscure its legacies of imperialism and bury one of the darkest crimes in human history.

Brodsky's and Kizny's books provide a comprehensive timeline of the camp systems, while capturing the haunting landscapes that served as the backdrop for the horrors that took place there. I deliberately chose images of the Gulag landscape and prisoners to underline my interest in uncovering difficult histories that have been hidden in Russia.



Figure 2. Photograph of Sekirnaya Gora, a site of executions from Yuri

Brodsky's book "Solovki". This image was rephotographed, fragmented and was used to generate fabric cyanotype shrouds in the central tapestry of my installation.



Figure 3. Cyanotype test on fabric of Gulag prisoners.

The original image was taken by Tomacz Kizny from his book GULAG.

My inability to revisit the former Gulag sites encouraged me to use the traction of materials to immerse the viewer into the looming shadow of Solovetsky Island's tragic past. In creating the layers of my central fabric structure, the forceful brushstrokes in Anselm Keiffer's paintings inspired my subdued color palette and abstraction of the archival imagery. Binh Danh's series 'Remnants of the Vietnam and American War' impacted me to use the earth and water of Sekirnaya Gora as a repository of memory.

Sekirnaya Gora is a 71-meter hill on the Solovetsky islands. A light-house chapel situated at the top of this hill was used as a place of peace and prayer for Orthodox monks. However, under Soviet rule, it was converted into a punishment cell and site where thousands of people were murdered. Gulag wardens used the steepness of the slope to kill prisoners and roll their bodies down into a massive grave pit. In an interview, Yuri Brodsky says, "Sekirnaya Gora is a place that is soaked in blood to a depth of several meters. Today it is a popular place for wedding parties and the air is often full of shouts for the newlyweds to share a kiss. Someone bought some snowmobiles and visitors can ride down the hill from that place. I don't blame these people. They don't know what happened there. There are no memorial tablets. Across from the

altar, near a viewing point, there are some stone remains in the ground, where there was once an image of a star in a circle there. That is where the Chekisty, Soviet secret police, shot the prisoners (Coalson, Vasilyeva 2). In 2018, a group of Orthodox activists asked the Antiterrorism Center of the Interior Ministry to investigate Brodsky's book, accusing it of hate and "insulted religious feelings" by documenting the use of the monastery as a prison." (Coalson, Vasilyeva 1). Aleksandr Cherkasov, executive director of the Memorial foundation in Moscow, says the charge against Brodsky's book is one of the repression tactics currently used by Putin's regime that stands in Russia's way of coming to terms with the truth of its past. Although the history of these horrors has been silenced, the memories of the persecutions remain etched into the fabric of the land.

Blue as a searchlight.

Christina Z. Anderson writes that, "Blue is the most popular color which carries both positive and negative connotations. It is linked to depression in the term of "feeling blue", to the woeful music "The Blues"; it is linked to death at least since Shakespeare's time when to 'burn blue' was an omen of death, evil spirits or the devil himself. Today, it's linked probably with tranquility tinged with a bit of melancholy" (Anderson 3). Blue reminded me of water at dusk, the color of our dreams and memories that are present but difficult to recall. It was simultaneously a color of stillness, peace, and mourning. For me, this blue became a searchlight and a way to process the unspoken past of Russia's history and cultural trauma. Blue was a way to memorialize, grieve, and heal.

I began by working with cyanotypes in Fall of 2021 as I was drawn to the process's non-toxicity and ability to produce large scale prints on a variety of materials in mystical deep Prussian hues. The process was discovered in 1842 by Sir John Herschel and initially used to copy notes and architectural plans. Christopher James defines Cyanotype as, "Iron-based, non-silver photographic method that provides permanent images in a vast array of elegant blue values. The color is a result of reaction of ferrous ions from the photo reduction of ferric ammonium citrate in combination with potassium ferricyanide". (James 164). The process is stable but will fade over time when exposed to light for extended periods.

The cyanotype installations by Galina Manikova and Jillian Marie Browning propelled me to move my work to a larger scale. I started by rephotographing archival images in Brodsky's and Kizny's books. The images were digitally enlarged, zoomed in and assembled into negatives that I printed on photographic paper. Using resists, I intentionally mutated the emulsion of the causing warps, streaks, and gaps in the imagery. After scanning these prints, I converted them into 8-foot film negatives that I used for producing fabric cyanotypes. The elements of water and light became symbolic in my work as I was drawn to how they unveiled previously concealed truths and revived omitted narratives.

My first large fabric cyanotype was made in October of 2022. In the fall, the UV index was rapidly weakening, resulting in oblong shadows that hovered over the fabric. As time went on, registration became increasingly fainter, with prints requiring longer exposure. In preparing each piece, the-washing, kneading, coating, and wringing of the fabric is a repetition, a beat, a rhythmic meditation. Each fabric shroud was coated and submerged in liquid emulsion and hung

to dry away from light for several hours. The exposure times vary from 45 minutes to several hours, depending on the season, and UV index.

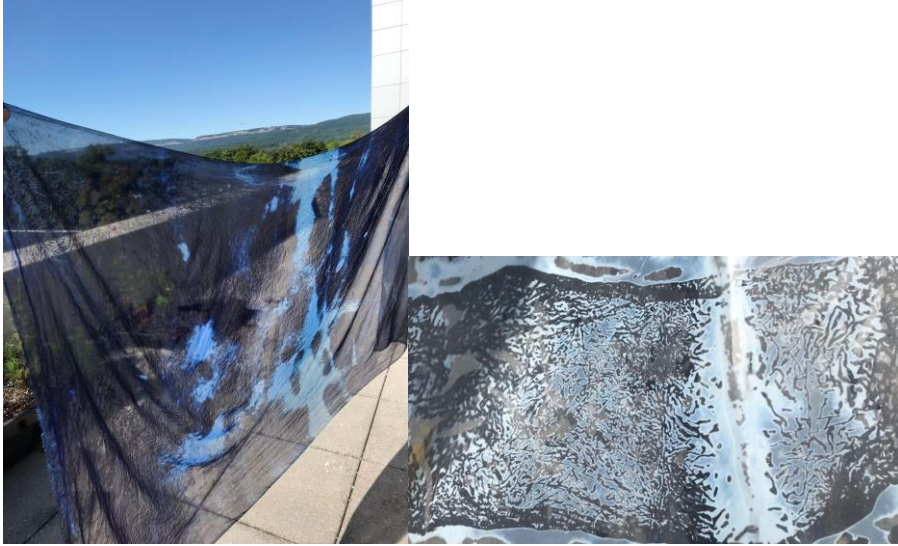


Figure 4 First

large scale cyanotype print, Fall 2022 Figure 5. Cyanotype during frost and snow, February 2023

One day, unexpected snowfall caused the fabric and negatives to freeze causing severe tears in the fiber and a chemical reaction. The result of these blue bleeds conveyed how photographic evidence and memory is often fragmented, transformed, and altered. Chance chemical mutations, distortions and textures became paths to exhibit the absence and the pollution of the archive. Through the process of wet cyanotypes water and snow were used simultaneously to expose and fix the image onto the fabric. Through this process, I point to how history and memory are not static and often bury certain realities and experiences.

In my family, like many others, there was always a great air of mystery and resistance in remembering the past. This cultural silencing underscored the importance of uncovering voices and narratives that were beyond the barriers of public discourse, Masha Gessen writes that "Civil society cannot do its own memory work without the state." But the Russian state would

apparently prefer to do the memory work without civil society “(Gessen 6) .Part of my methodology consisted of oral history reports with my relatives. Like many others in Russia, my grandmother found out about the Gulags from Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s 1973 book “Gulag Archipelago”. Still, its publication was banned throughout the Soviet Union and was shared in secret via smuggled xerox copies that were passed in between households. The lack of public acknowledgement and documentation of Gulag gave power to the state to manipulate the truth and distort history.

Living Memories.

Fractured Horizon is a central overhanging 8-foot pagoda of gauze, silk, and cotton cyanotypes suspended from a network of oxidized steel. The framework has been welded in a geometric grid of 2-foot squares bearing a resemblance to a cage or a fence. The steel has been deliberately stripped of oils, leaving it prone to corrosion and oxidation, mimicking fragmentation of memory. The grid blends into the museum ceiling, requiring closer look and hints at the invisibility of Gulag’s violent history. Mary Katherine Coffey says that in the writing of history, “Words are all we have, and they’re never enough” (Coffey 3). The materiality of tangible objects brings invisible records to the forefront of the viewers’ experience. The steel is intentionally used to allude to the vast pool of slave labor and the exploitation of Gulag prisoners used for infrastructure development throughout the Soviet Union.



Figure 6. *Fractured Horizon*, Cyanotype print on silk, gauze and cotton , suspended from oxidized steel, Viktorsha Uliyanova ,2023

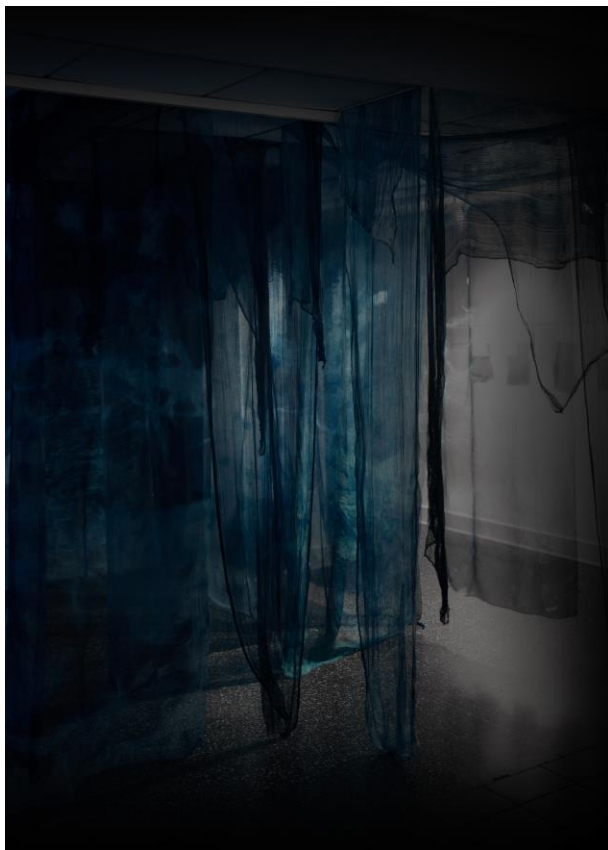


Figure 7. *Fractured Horizon*, Detail, Viktorsha Uliyanova ,2023



Figure 8. *Fractured Horizon*, Detail, Viktorsha Uliyanova ,2023

As visitors approach the installation, an audio loop plays a distant cawing of crows, wind static, and human footsteps. The navigation of bodies through the space airs the fabrics sluggishly, resembling a slow tidal wave or a deep exhalation. The immersive nature of Ann Hamilton's elegant installations and visual seduction in Shimon Attie's work propelled me to use texture, sound, and movement to engage the viewer's participation. Beneath abstracted blue layers, human silhouettes are slightly visible, making them present, yet out of focus. As one enters the pagoda, it becomes impossible to not be confronted with their presence. The haunting large-scale paintings of human bodies on bedsheets in Ewa Kurylyk's work, inspired me to use the fabric's thread count and folding to transform and reveal new narratives. The deliberate bookmarking of the prisoners beneath layers of *Sekirnaya Gora* acknowledges the loss of human

lives within the land of Solovetsky islands. Jan Cott writes, “Fabric takes on traces of human existence. It is the cloth which, after centuries of closeness with the human body acquires new existential and ritual dimensions and becomes a medium for tracing the passing of the artist’s and of our own time”. (Cott 111) My installation conveys the secrecy of violent histories in Russia and uses cloth as a symbol for remembering and honoring thousands who were killed under the Soviet regime.

Moving Memories.

Golosa is an interactive memorial that consists of two thin oxidized steel bars supporting loosely hung portraits of Gulag prisoners. The portraits are displayed eight in a row with a top sheet deliberately concealing their faces. Christian Boltanski’s melancholic installations compelled me to use the potency of a portrait as a metaphor for unraveling human tragedy and allude to loss. I chose abaca paper for its resilient nature and translucency. The fibers resemble scar tissue and appear ghostlike, swaying in ripples as visitors walk by. The interweaving of paper movement, light, and sound transforms the photographs of prisoners into living altars. In lifting the top sheet, viewers unveil previously obscured face and acknowledge loss of a human life.



Figure 9. *Golosa*, Portraits on handmade paper, Viktorsha Uliyanova, 2023



Figure 10. *Golosa*, Portraits on handmade paper. Viktorsha Uliyanova. 2023.

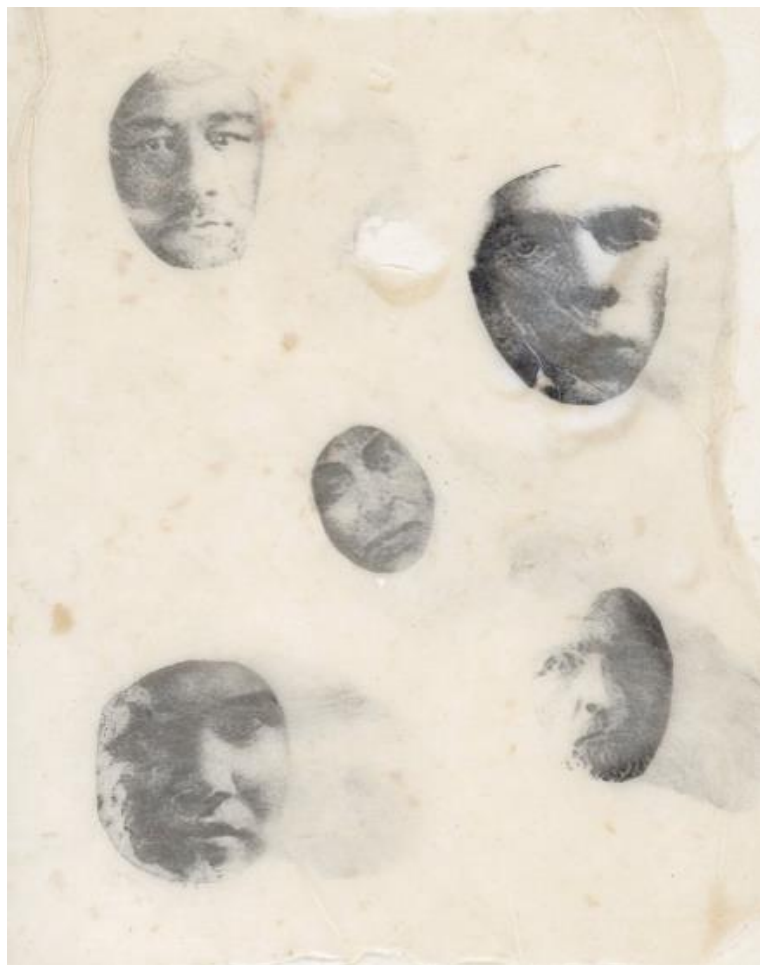


Figure 11. *Golosa*, Portraits on handmade paper, Viktorsha Uliyanova, 2023.



Figure 12. *Golosa*, Portraits on handmade paper, Viktorsha Uliyanova, 2023

Sandarmokh .



Figure 13. *Sandarmokh*, Single channel video, Viktorsha Uliyanova 2023



Figure 14. *Sandarmokh*, Single channel video, Viktorsha Uliyanova 2023

Sandarmokh is a four-minute-long video projection of a Karelian forest where thousands of prisoners from Solovetsky islands were executed by Stalin's secret police. The video conveys a slow emergence of trees with commemorative plaques bearing portraits and names of the victims. For research, the online memorial project Map of Memory, video work by Ukrainian artist Dana Kavelina prompted me to reimagine the forest as a large-scale video monument. The New York Times reports that, "During the period 1937-1938, described as the "Great Terror," the officials estimate the execution of around 700,000 people, who were deemed disloyal to

Stalin”. (Higgins 1) According to the Karelian government's Center of Historical and Cultural Research over 60 nationalities were among the victims executed and buried at Sandarmokh.

In 1997, Yuri Dmitriev, a Gulag historian led a research expedition to uncover these secret burial sites and to help victims’ families to find their missing relatives. Dmitriev worked alongside Memorial, an association that documents political repressions in the USSR and in present-day Russia. Together, Dmitriev and Memorial discovered thousands of human remains in the Sandarmokh forest. However, Dmitriev and Memorial’s excavation of this dark chapter in Russia’s history has caused a backlash from Putin’s regime.

In March 2022, a month following Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Yuri Dmitriev was sentenced to 15 years in a penal colony due to politically motivated charges of “child pornography”. His supporters say that “he is being punished for uncovering mass graves from the Stalin-era and are using this harsh sentencing to silence voices the Russian authorities do not like “(Higgins 1). The news of Dmitriev’s sentencing followed Putin shutting down Memorial and its archives, classifying it a “foreign agent”. Radio Free Liberty defines the “foreign agent” law as a strategic tool to shutter civil society and media groups in Russia. Its initial legislation in 2012 launched by targeting NGOs and human rights groups. (Radio Free Liberty/RL) This repression tactic has since tremendously expanded to target media organizations, individual journalists, YouTube vloggers, and anyone who receives funding outside of Russia and voices a political opinion unfavorable to the Kremlin. With dozens of journalists killed, opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny and Gulag historian Yuri Dmitriev arrested and exiled to the penal colonies, there is no denying that the Gulags never ceased to exist.

Since coming to power, Putin's regime has waged a memory war to bury the violent history of what happened and continues to unfold in Russia today. This continuous assault on freedom of speech and humanity is at the center of my work and research. Tragically, Russia's remembrance of its history has been extensively distorted, ushering the country into a new wave of dictatorship. The reappearance of Stalin monuments following Putin's invasion in Ukraine signals the country sinking deeper into cultural amnesia prompting state's manipulation of collective memory. Putin's rehabilitation of the Soviet dictator, "Promotes the idea that, like Stalin in 1945, Putin is the one who will lead the country to victory. The World War II victory is the last unifying denominator, the last trump card of Russian propaganda" (Boutsko 1).

In my work, I argue that a society that doesn't remember its past is at risk of repeating the same mistakes. When we forget, we cannot move forward and rebuild. Forest Benjamin writes that the process of public memory is crucial during the political changes that follow post-totalitarian transitions. He says, "A successful transition from totalitarianism to democracy requires a public discussion about how a society remembers its recent past, including how the previous regime repressed civil society through fear, silence and violence. Public memory is the cultural spaces and processes through which a society learns and negotiates myths about its past. In working through those processes, dominant cultural understandings of national identity and the "people" are formed." (Benjamin 358). The preservation of our past reshapes the present and future. An assault on our collective memory and imagination is an assault against humanity.

Hope Dies Last .

Russia's authoritarianism is a direct consequence of the country's war on memory, artistic expression, and intellectual freedom. In her text, “Potential History”, Ariella Azoulay, writes that artwork and documents are not merely what we have been socialized to see. Contrarily, they “Constitute part of the material worlds out of which people’s rights are made manifest” (Azoulay 19). The archive and historical artifacts mirror the socio-political interest of communities that they exist in. Sergei Kruk explains that in the Soviet Union, “Art was intended as a vehicle of education, which had to influence and persuade the masses in a ‘defined direction’”(Kruk 28). Monuments took on the form of sculptures, frescoes, mosaics in public buildings and metro stations and were the logical consequence of Leninist philosophy. More and more, propaganda replaced art and extinguished free thought.

In today’s Russia, not much has changed from the history of the repressive Soviet past. The Moscow subway stations are still littered with bronze monuments, depicting proud proletariats, soldiers, historical war figures usually always surrounded by a gilded wreath of the hammer and sickle. Public transportation is a space where citizens gather and depart daily, securing it as a point for ingraining an ideological system. In his book, “Soviet Bus Stops”, Photographer Christopher Herwig documents transport hubs that used art to provoke collective amnesia and ingrain patriotism. He says that public spaces were creations that were intended to change



people’s consciousness.(Herwig 9).

Figure 15.

Copyright, Christopher Herwig

Similarly, Russian history and collective memory have become products of the cultural and educational institutions that constructed them. In February 2023, the general director of Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery was removed from her position, "Following a complaint that the museum does not reflect Vladimir Putin's "traditional values" for Russia. Among the values outlined in Putin's decree are "human rights," "patriotism," "service to the Fatherland," "family," "justice," and "historical memory" (Dafoe 2). Putin appointed the daughter of a top military official with no art background as the new head of the museum. A month later, Marina Loshak, another longtime director of a cultural institution, the Pushkin State Museum, resigned amidst Russia's wartime tactics and artistic repression. Loshak was replaced by a former member of a pro-Kremlin youth movement whose nationalist values were to, "Force artists and galleries to conform with the Kremlin's increasingly conservative vision for the country". (Ebel 1) Loshak's departure from her post and the inscription of her daughter and nephew into the Russian government's list of 'foreign agents' is another indication of the pervasive shadow of totalitarianism and memory control that casts over Russia today.

Tesar Marek argues that no archive, museum or educational institution is neutral, as human agency and personal ideologies are at stake (Marek 11). Like memory, the museum is an active and fluid space that can be activated through thought-provoking and socially-engaged work. I believe that we, as artists, can change perceptions and reshape how history is remembered, recorded, and archived through these cultural and educational systems of power.

Amidst the backdrop of Russia's ongoing invasion in Ukraine, memory war, and growing political repressions, I am compelled by a sense of urgency to produce work that highlights omitted histories and honors voices that have been lost or hidden. While I wouldn't consider myself a political activist, I do believe in the collective power of hope, imagination, and

active remembrance. If war is a deep black void that only kills, destroys, and devastates, then the opposite of war is light, birth, and creation. Through creation, we as artists can lead our society out of the darkness and into the light, towards the truth. Through restoring our consciousness, we can mend the roots of remembrance and nurture our scars. In remembering, we may not always achieve immediate peace, but we can grieve, heal, and move into a future less bruised by violence.

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