

COMMUNIST HISTORY, UNCLASSIFIED

COMMUNIST GUIDE TO NEW YORK CITY

BY YEVGENIY FIKS

COMMON ROOM 2

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In our receding political culture, any attempt to point out the alternative paths of history may be tagged as nostalgic. It is hard, however, to notice a melancholic reverie in “Communist Guide to New York City,” a photographic project by Moscow-born, New York City-based artist Yevgeniy Fiks. The exhibition tackles the Communist movement in the United States using the technique of frontal laconic photography practiced largely in the political “department” of conceptual art of the 1970s (works by Hans Haake and Martha Rosler come to mind). Fiks’s 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 a post-Soviet background. They rather deal with the political psyche of the United States, which is shaped by the lack of historical memory and longing for the strong political movements that the country experienced in the past.

The “Guide” consists of more than seventy 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 1940s and ‘50s. Since the time of the second “Red Scare,” which culminated in the infamous trial of the Rosenbergs and their subsequent execution at Sing Sing prison in New York, Communists’ activities and their influence in American political life has fallen into near obscurity, though myths about Leon Trotsky dining on the Lower East Side and “red diaper babies” have continued to circulate. Based on scrupulous research, “Communist Guide to New York City” outlines the city with a history that is literally invisible, for the buildings on the photographs feature little of Communist aesthetics. This presents (involuntarily) a stark contrast to the photographic series “Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922–32” by Richard Pare (1977), which focuses on Soviet architecture built in the period when socialist construction in the USSR was especially intense and the architecture materialized the functionality of the Communist rule.¹ Marxism and class issues in U.S. are notable only in a few murals of the 1930s by Works Projects Administration painters, and surprisingly, in the building of the socialist Jewish *Daily Forward* newspaper, erected in 1912 and decorated by a bas relief of Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, and workers’ unions leaders—a landmark that still evokes a bitter memory of class struggles and hopes of the past.

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

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

This refusal to classify American political history is noticeable in Fiks’s 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 maps with the Communist sites marked on them, but leaves it up to the viewer to decide in what sequence the images should be viewed when unpacking the fragmented, unmarked, delirious, political landscape of New York City.

It is obvious, however, that Fiks’s foray into the American “built environment” is driven not by the pure fascination with it, but by his reflections on world history marked by the failure of a particular political system. Moreover, his work talks not only about

a past Communist utopia, but most significantly, about the fate of utopian thought at the beginning of the twenty-first century, through representational shifts traditionally practiced in conceptual art. The laconic photographs of “Communist Guide to New York City” evoke Martha Rosler’s 1974–75 series “The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems,” which refuses to depict the homeless on the Bowery as a cultural cliché of Imperialism tending to show victims as a spectacle. The absence of Communist representation and aesthetics in Fiks’s photographs could be seen akin to the absence of the homeless in 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” (like images of Ché 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.

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NOTES 1. The exhibition “Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922–32” by Richard Pare at the Museum of Modern Art, July–October 2007. 2. Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Picador, 1977), 66.

ABOVE

23 West 26th Street CPUSA headquarters circa 1960s (2005–2006) by Yevgeniy Fiks; from the series “Communist Guide for New York City”

