

(*Matrix*, shown at the Museum of Installation in 1998) and he hung by his knees in *Drop II*, 1999. These acts, planned and performed in his studio on apparatuses that he builds, suggest that von Weiler wants to make the stakes of making art high, wants to use an extreme experience to show to himself and the audience that there is effort involved. In this he recalls works by other artists like Matthew Barney's *Blind Perineum*, Lucy Gunning's *Climbing Around My Room* and, in the masochistic vein, various early performances by Chris Burden, like his 1971 *Five Day Locker Piece*.

Von Weiler states that his foundations are with sculpture, and a regard to the facture of his installation supports this. The proportions of weight and volume in space and his attention to materials and surfaces are immaculate and careful. The only light in the three rooms comes in through the windows. What first appeared to be a crumpled and flattened piece of paper for the video screen is a rectangular box made of Gyprock, plastered and buffed to a fine sheen, its mottled surface giving the video a slight texture. This slab, slightly narrower than the width of the room, is attached to the ceiling at a diagonal, one side heading towards the back right corner, covering the window from view but not blocking the light. In fact, you can walk around the back of it, and here you discover another place, a wedge of space, sculpturally formed. Even the bed in the video is a piece of sculpture. Von Weiler's multiple interests in video, performance, and this kind of highly refined sculpture aligns him with two other artists: Bruce Nauman and Robert Morris. Both are integral to the understanding of Minimalism, but their work is much more varied and extensive than this association might imply. Von Weiler's slab has the same space-defining effect as one of Morris' grey-painted boxes from 1963. And the video recalls similar filmed performances by Nauman, like *Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk around the Studio*, 1968. What von Weiler has in common with these two artists is an interest in investigating space, both social and physical, and thereby expanding the limitations of sculpture. What is different and significant about von Weiler's projects is his devotion to the chthonic rather than the ultra-male concerns of the two others. Animus replaces polemic in the interest of finding meaning in the history of places and objects. Von Weiler's ultimate excavation seems to be himself. ■

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## ■ Boris Mikhailov

**The Photographers' Gallery** London April 7 to May 21

There is no point discussing Mikhailov's photographs in terms of the evils and defects of post-Soviet life. This is wise advice from critic Victor Tupitsyn regarding an

artist referred to as 'the piper of disaster'. Ukrainian Boris Mikhailov has been a photographer since 1968, when he was officially requested to make an educational film – despite his training as a technical engineer – about the factory in which he worked. Soon afterwards, the KGB discovered that Mikhailov had also turned his camera on his wife to take nude photographs of her; accused of pornography, Mikhailov subsequently lost his job. Since then he has devoted himself entirely to this imposed yet forbidden activity, photography. For 30 years Mikhailov has produced an immense and varied body of work, including the 'Red Series', 1968-75, portraits with the public symbols of the Soviet era as incidental background; 'Luriki', 1971-85, hand-coloured found photographs; and 'Unfinished Dissertation', 1984, black and white pictures surrounded by the artist's notes. The key series here, 'Case Histories', 1998, perhaps Mikhailov's most accomplished to date, are portraits of the *bomzhes*, or the homeless of his native city of Kharkov, in various states of unhealth and undress.

Tupitsyn's suggestion that we resist the temptation of reducing this work to mere social documentary or *voyeuristic travel-guide* is a good point of departure. Mikhailov's life work is a complex and singular account of a man concentrating on the impossible and ethically irresolvable task of positioning art within a beaten and defeated society. As Westerners, unfamiliar with the vast complexities of both pre and post-Soviet reality, we are left to behold Mikhailov's staggering body of photography with the gnawing awareness that behind it lies an immense social/cultural history, unknowable and unimaginable to us. Even with the 'Case Histories', his most aesthetically satisfying work, large colour photographs verging on the cinematographic, we probably should admit from the outset that we are doomed to understanding almost nothing of its real contextual significance. Like the *bomzhes* themselves, sifting through the garbage, we gather up bits of information as clues in the pitiful attempt to understand Mikhailov's remarkable imagery.

Clue no 1, an anecdote from Ilya Kabakov: once again Moscow-based artist Kabakov translates for the West his homeland's strange, suicidal mix of humour and terror, humanity and inhumanity. Kabakov explains that whereas in the West we are accustomed to a generally settled universe punctuated by localised spaces of danger – say, a walk at night through Central Park or through a gang-ridden council estate – in Russia, the occupation of social space is inverted. There is an overall, constant state of panic interrupted by occasional safety zones: the bomb shelter, or the friend's apartment. In this light, Mikhailov's voluminous body of work presents a perversely calm picture of this relentless landscape of panic. The sense of danger and imminent death, of flesh rotting while still alive on human bones, runs throughout Mikhailov's portraits, not just the scarred *bomzhes* but even the laughing passers-by in the background, or the pretty girls posing in

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**Boris Mikhailov**  
From 'Case History'  
1998



the grass of his earlier pictures. Anton Chekhov, in his short story *The Journey*, wrote the bizarrely tautological line, 'Before dying my grandmother had been alive' – an apt description of Mikhailov's subjects, who seem to exist only in so far as they have yet to succumb finally to their tiresome companion, death.

Clue no 2, a short history of the Ukraine: 'People born in the Ukraine at the beginning of the century experienced the First World War and German occupation, followed by civil war, mass killings and widespread starvation by the time they were in their twenties. If they survived, they would have faced the imposition of Soviet rule, the ruthless anti-kulag and collectivisation drives, mass starvation and Stalinist terror. If they were still alive by 1941, they would have survived the most ruthless war of the century, forced labour, starvation and the "anti-partisan" shootings of the second German occupation [...] By 1944, many of those still alive would have been sent to Germany as slave labour. Those who remained faced war, the reimposition of Soviet rule, terror and possibly being sent to the gulag. Anyone who survived until old age would have suffered the consequences of Chernobyl' (cited by curator Jeremy Millar, from Clive Ponting's *Progress and Barbarism*).

Clue no 3, the Soviet family photograph: theorist Pierre Bourdieu has famously analysed the ordinary use of household photography as 'solemnising and immortalising family events'. Yet in the Soviet Union, home photography was for many years off-limits and very few family photographs exist; for this reason critic Viktor Misiano has described Mikhailov and subsequent genera-

tions of photo-based artists as 'photographers without photography'. Mikhailov chooses to shoot the *bomzhes* when they are still fresh to the group, as yet not hardened beyond recognition – as one photographs newborns recently arrived in the family. This would position Mikhailov not as outside observer but as the documentarist embedded within the family itself. It is as if, after generations of unphotographed family life, when the country could finally turn the camera to 'solemnising and immortalising' its members, the survivors smiling before it are revealed as a degraded, godless group, more like a pack of wild dogs than a human family.

When Mikhailov likens his photographic methods to the improvisational techniques of jazz musicians, we sense just how far out of date he is, still living in the Pollock era, still recovering from the debris of Modernism. Perhaps in today's Western contemporary art there is a resurgence of interest in Modernism and its ideologies, and in this context, against all odds, the former Soviet Union, with its obsolete and mortal connection to the early 20th Century, will have a strange currency in the art of the new century. But this may be a typically western attempt to draw some instance of redemption from this genuinely shocking place. If we were simply to look at the images, at the shreds of humanity deformed and animal-like in their nakedness, without any clues to buffer our experience, the shame in Mikhailov's pictures would be almost too painful to bear. ■

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