

Interpretations

Alexey Titarenko: Nomenklatura of Signs

George Slade

You may want to brush up on your Russian language, idioms and socio-cultural history before diving into the work of Alexey Titarenko. The photographer utilizes some deeply coded symbolism in his work. The title, for instance. *Nomenklatura* looks like nomenclature, and the two concepts are related. But they are cousins, not siblings; nuance is critical here and throughout Titarenko's images. (*Nomenklatura of Signs* is the title of both this series and a book about the work published by Damiani in 2019.)

Shadowy, looming, undistinguished

architecture fills these frames. There are also faces looking upwards, behind us, beyond the horizon, which can be read as an optimistic Soviet trope. Citizens are looking to the future, though the promises and goals may be simply



Alexei Titarenko in the darkroom.

pie in the sky.

As a *New York Times* reviewer described *Nomenklatura of Signs* in June 2013, the series, produced over three years in the 1980s, "uses montaged Soviet insignia and architectural details [and] feels perfectly in keeping with that period's craze for semiotics and post-structuralism."

Flash back to those heady tomes as part of your recommended reading, and take in a few of the following references as well. Not to put the "further research" cart before the horse, necessarily, but comprehending the density of Titarenko's influences provides backstory essential to grasping his rich assortment of meanings.

For context germane to the photographer, review Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1973 book *The Gulag Archipelago* (especially chapter 2, "The History of Our Sewage Disposal System"), Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Yevgeny Yevtushenko's threnodic poem "Babi Yar" and the stories of Thomas Mann. Listen to Dmitri Shostakovich's second cello concerto and his 13th Symphony while you're at it; Babi Yar, the location outside Kyiv (Lithuania) of a Nazi massacre of Jews, is embedded in the latter, with Yevtushenko's words intoned by a doleful, insistent men's chorus.

While Titarenko asserts that literature has



Meat, fish, 1988



Leningrad-wood-paper-construction-supply-distribution forms, 1988

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had the most salient influence on him, he also watched a lot of films as a young man, and "traces" from movies like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (1987) have filtered into his imagery. The last, in particular, was made concurrent with the political zeitgeist that permeates Titarenko's *Nomenklatura* series.

The net result of all of this Russian vernacular is, gratifyingly, a narrative with visual, literary and chronological scope. There are third, even fourth dimensions to this series. With all of these scene-setters in your head, we can now proceed to a consideration of the photographs.

As you may have inferred, reading is critical to these works. For those of you whose Russian or Cyrillic decoding is a bit rusty, the texts in these images merit translation. "Observe cleanliness," for one. An ominous-looking sign, apparently fixed to four windows and supported by a defoliated tree, is simply an advertisement for construction supply forms. (Other images in the *Nomenklatura* series take their titles from signs reading: "strengthen the world through labor" and "economize electric-

ity," banal civic encouragement toward a robust Russian state. Titarenko refers to these as "slogans of colossal dimensions.")

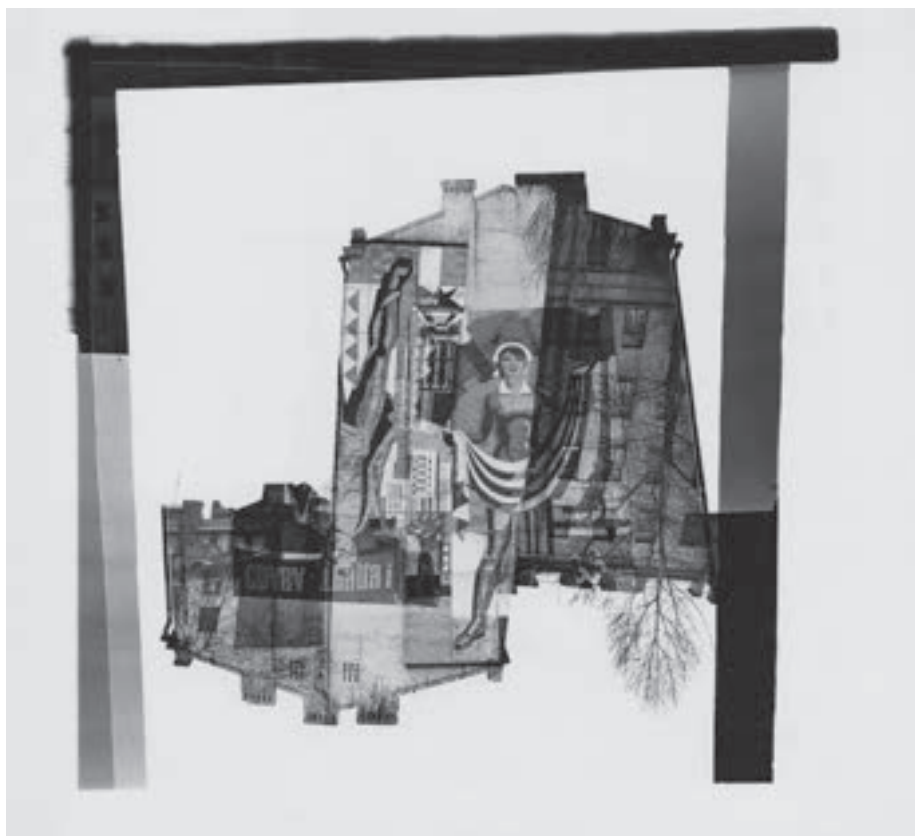
Some of the most mundane street signs in the portfolio, featuring T shapes and numbers providing locations of storm drains, are quotidian yet trenchant analogues to the cited Solzhenitsyn passage. When Titarenko's photographs zoom in on them, as in *Backyard with plaques*, their utilitarian notations assume a very dark cast. A Russian never quite knew when or where they might disappear into the subterranean worlds of the gulag.

These are layered works, both conceptually and literally. Titarenko prints through multiple negatives, creating overlaid façades that press meaning into a single plane. He also uses brushed-on sepia toning to create grey-yellow highlights in the photographs, a nuance that is lost in these monochromatic reproductions.

One might formally liken the final results to the insubstantial shallowness of the Potemkin village, all surface and no substance. This symbolism was what the photographer sought to capture as he developed the *Nomenklatura*. "Above all," he asserts, "this series was conceived as a reflex against the stupidity and absurdity of the Soviet regime: a personal reaction to the strange or even supernatural manifestations of the system."

One unusual device Titarenko employs in his book is the story of Simeon Petrov. The fictional artist, described as a "miracle-working luminary" and "the outstanding creator of the art of the Nomenclature of Signs, the supreme artist of our province," is profiled by an "unsightly and humble follower, who desires to remain in obscurity." (Also known as Alexey Titarenko.) Apparently, Petrov was "an authoritarian leader [who] proclaims the essential esthetics of totalitarian art" and who created all the work we see here and in the book. The essay twists and trips on itself, utilizing language that might be called Orwellian Newspeak in an attempt to generate an ideal Soviet leader who was also a lifelong fighter of racial and social prejudice. Here's a sample of the text, in which the artist was subject to criticism about a series of decorative panels:

"Petrov easily destroyed his numbskull opponents by pointing out that the concept of 'strictness of form' was one he had intro-



Female worker (version 4), 1987–1989



Observe cleanliness, 1987

"Above all, this series was conceived as a reflex against the stupidity and absurdity of the Soviet regime: a personal reaction to the strange or even supernatural manifestations of the system."

duced himself and had modified prior to exhibiting the aforementioned panels and pictures. The hapless upstarts were dispatched posthaste to the countryside to be given fresh explications. And the awkward incident was soon forgotten."

Petrov seems superhuman in his qualities. He was, in fact, considered by some as an alien, or a one-time inhabitant of "another dimension." He embodies the dense contradictions of Russian life, and Titarenko's account masterfully summons the paradoxical quality of Russian leadership. There are so many mixed messages in the text, so many nuances to the narrative. "Discussions reached a pitch of such bitter intensity and so divided our small society that legions of specialists from all different fields of knowledge were drawn into studying the matter." Imagine art having this potential!

We commonly understand nomenclature as a system of specialized signs and symbols. Nomenclatura is a Soviet phenomenon addressing what in American culture of the 1960s might be referred to as "the Establishment"—that is, the power brokers and gate-

keepers who influence decision-making and socio-economic ascendancy. As Jean-Jacques Marie states in one of the book's essays, the nomenclatura was a "gigantic bureaucratic layer of parasites, thieves, corrupt people, and charlatans busy trying to pull the wool over everyone's eyes."

This is older work, made in a time in which Russia was on the brink of becoming a global power. Titarenko acknowledges that the work had to change as the Soviet Union broke into pieces.

"When the Soviet Union began collapsing, then everything changed, of course, including the way I was making art. The basis of my world changed, and my art had to change as well. I finished using Soviet symbolism with the fall of the Soviet Union."

When Titarenko was younger, a Leningrad-based photography club called Zerkalo (Mirror) was the place where the artist became acquainted with older photographers and a host of other creatives. Titarenko joined the club in 1978 and began to move away from traditional straight photography. Zerkalo also became the setting in which Titarenko had his first brushes with Russia's repressive totalitarian state; he eventually served time in prison and was fortunate that his mandatory military service commuted his sentence.

With time, his hometown evolved into a city with increasingly darker backgrounds. "By the mid-1990s," the photographer states, "St. Petersburg was perceived more as a capital of organized crime than as a cultural center. I was depleted and disappointed." He developed what he refers to as a "survival instinct," a compulsion "to search for things that could bring some sort of moral respite, if only briefly." Towards the end of the 1990s, the national currency collapsed. "The ruble became mere paper in just a few days." The signs were gelling; it was time to decamp.

After having been a regular visitor to New York City since 2000, Titarenko took up residence in the city in 2008; he now lives in Harlem. In contrast to his years in St. Petersburg, New York feels like a "happy city," and his professional life has revolved around Nailya Alexander Gallery, which represents him and has served as a meeting place for artists, critics and curators—his 21st century Zerkalo/Mirror hub.

New York has echoes of his hometown.



One mask, two faces, 1986–1988



Irina Ivanova Patseva, senior storekeeper, 1986



Windows with discus thrower, 1986–1988

instagram.com/alexey_titarenko_photo.
 Titarenko's other books include *The City is a Novel* (Damiani, 2015), *Alexey Titarenko: Photographs* (Nailya Alexander, 2003), *City of Shadows* (ART TEMA, 2001), *Alexei Titarenko* (Galerie Municipale du Chateau d'Eau, 2000), and *Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg* (Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1996). Our thanks to Nailya Alexander Gallery in New York (nailyaalexandergallery.com) for their assistance in producing this feature.

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"My studio is on the ground floor, windows facing the street, the sidewalk. I see more of 'real life' of New York, the life that you don't see in the media, a bit of a mix of everything. But on the other side Harlem is extremely beautiful, and its 19th and early 20th century buildings and churches, along with ordinary, very nice and cheerful people living here (we always say 'good morning'), remind me of St. Petersburg. Sunrises in Harlem especially during winter are really amazing!"

Titarenko describes a perfect day as one during which "I'm able to create something beautiful, either during the work in my studio/darkroom or while taking pictures on the street." Thoughts of waste-disposal systems, military service and potential imprisonment must be pretty far from his mind these days. Well, at least the last two.

Addendum

Images copyright Alexey Titarenko. You can view examples from his numerous bodies of work at alexeytitarenko.com and



Backyard with plaques, 1986



Male worker (version 4), 1987-1989