

Post-Soviet Visions

Image and identity in
the new Eastern Europe



Post-Soviet Visions

INTRODUCTION

Ekow Eshun

Post-Soviet Visions: image and identity in the new Eastern Europe is a group photography show exploring new visual representations of lifestyle and landscape in Eastern Europe. The exhibition gathers the work of a young generation of artists rising to prominence a quarter century after the end of communism.

The photographers in *Post-Soviet Visions* come from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Although the personal circumstances of these photographers may differ, they share a common past: either they themselves, or their parents, grew up in countries that once existed under communist rule. Today, they live within a globally-connected modern world where the borders of East and West are being erased by new technologies. But physical traces of the past can be seen in the tower blocks and Brutalist buildings that form the backdrop to many of their images.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and the end of its influence over its satellite states, the countries of the former Eastern Bloc have each forged their own paths. In portraits of teenagers in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, or skater kids in Georgia, *Post-Soviet Visions* captures new identities emerging across the region. Instead of old binaries of East vs West, socialist vs capitalist, the exhibition's photographers capture a generation shaped by issues that are personal rather than political: questions of sexuality, gender and cultural identity. Here, a new Eastern Europe emerges into view.



Distance, wonder and connection

Eastern Europe through
the eyes of a new generation

Anastasiia Fedorova



Images
p4-5: Jędrzej Frenek
p6: Masha Demianova

Every writer is sometimes tempted by the promises of the collective “we”. Collective identity has the power to make experiences more meaningful. It provides a feeling of belonging which we all subconsciously strive for. Everyone has several different identities which allow them to slip into a state of heightened collective awareness – be that related to gender, age, race, profession, location or background.

I have a few, but there is one collective “we” which turns up in my writing particularly often – the one which connects me with my peers in large cities across Eastern Europe; the generation born between the mid-80s and 90s somewhere in the grand post-communist world. Maybe I relate to their cultural sensibility and vision, or perhaps the act of witnessing historical transition is a bonding experience. Maybe, like all young people, I’m under the illusion that everything which has happened to me has significance as part of a bigger picture.

Shared memory is a curious thing, because it truly comes to power in the smallest details. I was recently looking through a British friend’s family photo album and couldn’t take my eyes off the furniture, clothes, supermarket bags and kitchenware – all the alien bits of material culture which looked to me as if it had come straight from a film set.

All of the private domestic photos I’ve been exposed to come from the post-Soviet space. Due to the standardisation of products and the scarcity of consumer goods, most of my peers grew up in the same settings: flower carpets, crystal glassware gathering dust in cabinets, large, identical schools in vast estates.

Thinking that someone has exactly the same memories as you evokes both humility and panic. We (here it goes) mostly come from families of engineers, scientists or workers, people whose life stories are akin to distant fairytales from an empire which aspired to conquer space and turn rivers against themselves. And although we belong to a long line of historical amnesiacs, somehow in the contemporary global context it doesn’t feel right to just dismiss this background simply as a past left to rest. The presence of a collective “we” means there is still something we share. We may share language and memory – often not out of choice – but the main question which subconsciously haunts my generation is

about something larger. Is there anything we share which lies in the future, not the past?

To start with, we look for the key in our surroundings, in the architecture of cities whose memories stretch back far further than our own. In the course of our lives, we walk miles through vast monumental spaces and imposing tower block estates, resting in the shadows of curved modernist buildings and megalomaniac monuments. The aesthetic of these locations has been widely commodified and exoticised, but they're much more than a backdrop – they shape the way we think, feel, breathe and remember. They also teach us how to move on. In this new world, the city is open to interpretation, invention and change. In their project *Wake Up Nights*, photographers Max von Gumpenberg and Patrick Bienert documented contemporary Kiev going through a subtle yet incredible

transformation. By following the city's burgeoning rave movement and a tightly-knit community of local creatives, they explored disused factories and river banks, graffiti-covered skateparks and hectic streets, idyllic countryside and the

intimacy of individual apartments in the early hours of the after-party.

Wake Up Nights is a tender love letter to the city.

The study of unique architectural settings is a central preoccupation for a new generation of Eastern Europe photographers. The visual narrative they construct goes much further than just documentation. It's not about capturing the existing space, but about contributing to the ever-shifting character of the environment. In her project *Disco Polo*, Paulina Korobkiewicz studies the urban aesthetics of eastern Poland after 1989, focusing on the peculiar signs of transition to global capitalism. Plastic palm trees transform streets into a globalist non-place. A patchwork of colourful advertising and pastel shades over tower block architecture illustrates the contemporary collision of influences from East and West. In photographing tower blocks, Jędrzej Franek infuses them with melancholy romanticism, carefully studying their shapes and patterns like objects rather than elements of the surrounding cityscape. In his work on Skopje's

brutalist architecture, *Beautiful Monster*, Michal Korta likens the city's main post office to a spaceship from a non-existent HG Wells novel; or a huge machine from a 1970s sci-fi novel. In all of these perspectives, there is a certain degree of distance, wonder and connection.

At the same time, some photographers give preference to broader artistic experiment, rather than a dominating sense of locality. Moscow-based photographer Masha Demianova incorporates cinematic influences and the iconography of classical art to create a completely dislocated visual space. Through her lens we travel to dark lakes and poppy-coloured fields; the inner space she shares with her subjects.

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Demianova is one of the pioneers of female gaze photography in Russia, challenging prevailing representations of female sexuality and desire.

This air of wandering into the unknown, an unsafe yet enchanting space, exists in the work of Demianova and several of her peers. On the path where the city meets the wilderness, they reconfigure their surroundings, choosing what to keep and what to cast away. Pavel Milyakov's artwork *Orehovo* is a witty example of this kind of manipulation, with Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* suddenly transported into a tower block estate. A multidisciplinary artist, Milyakov gained his reputation as experimental producer Buttechno and the founder of the Russian underground music community John's Kingdom. For Milyakov, the city is indeed a royal realm, with the moon hanging low over the tower blocks. The view, unique in its desolate romanticism, could be any city in the world. Ukrainian photographer Genia Volkov wanders even further, embarking on a mythical quest into dark woods surrounded by luminescent trees.

The dimension of space, however, is not the only theme which this new generation of image-makers explore in their work. Time is another preoccupation – and the future much more so than the past. Portraiture serves as a vector into unfolding global history and the rise of new national identities. Hassan Kurbanbaev's project *Tashkent Youth*

was partly inspired by the 25th anniversary of Uzbek independence, documenting a generation which had come to adulthood over the course of this past quarter century. For them, he points out, the Soviet Union is no more than distant history.

Born in 1997, Russian photographer Dima Komarov documents the youthful ecstasy and confusion of his peers and friends in St Petersburg, their restless searching and fooling around. Through his empathetic gaze, their values of freedom and inclusivity become apparent.

In her ongoing project *Bloom*, Ieva Raudsepa focuses on the first generation born in Latvia after the country regained its independence in the early 1990s. Combining portraiture with idyllic landscapes, *Bloom* captures a fleeting moment of youth and the radiant transparency of summer light. It also serves as a study into the narrative of Latvian national identity. The sense of belonging in all its complexity remains one of the central themes to Raudsepa's work.

Georgian photographer and director David Meskhi explores the growing pains which haunt both individuals and whole nations. His documentary *When Earth Seems To Be Light*, follows a gang of teenage skateboarders around Tbilisi. The film, co-directed with Salome Machaidze and Tamuna Karumidze, takes place amid ongoing demonstrations as Georgia's conservative government collides with an emergent liberal movement.

With their long hair and heavy-metal T-shirts, Tbilisi's skaters look no different from their Californian contemporaries – but their inner worlds and the issues they face couldn't be more different. In one key scene, the group skates around the grand structure of a never-completed hippodrome, derelict before it came into existence. Their harmless intervention serves as a telling commentary on the challenges faced by contemporary Georgian society.

A transition to global modernity is indeed a challenge, not only economically and socially but also culturally. Even the language we use to discuss history is tainted by the heritage of imperialism. Former East, New East, Former West, Post-Soviet – none of these terms offer a liberation from the Cold War narrative.

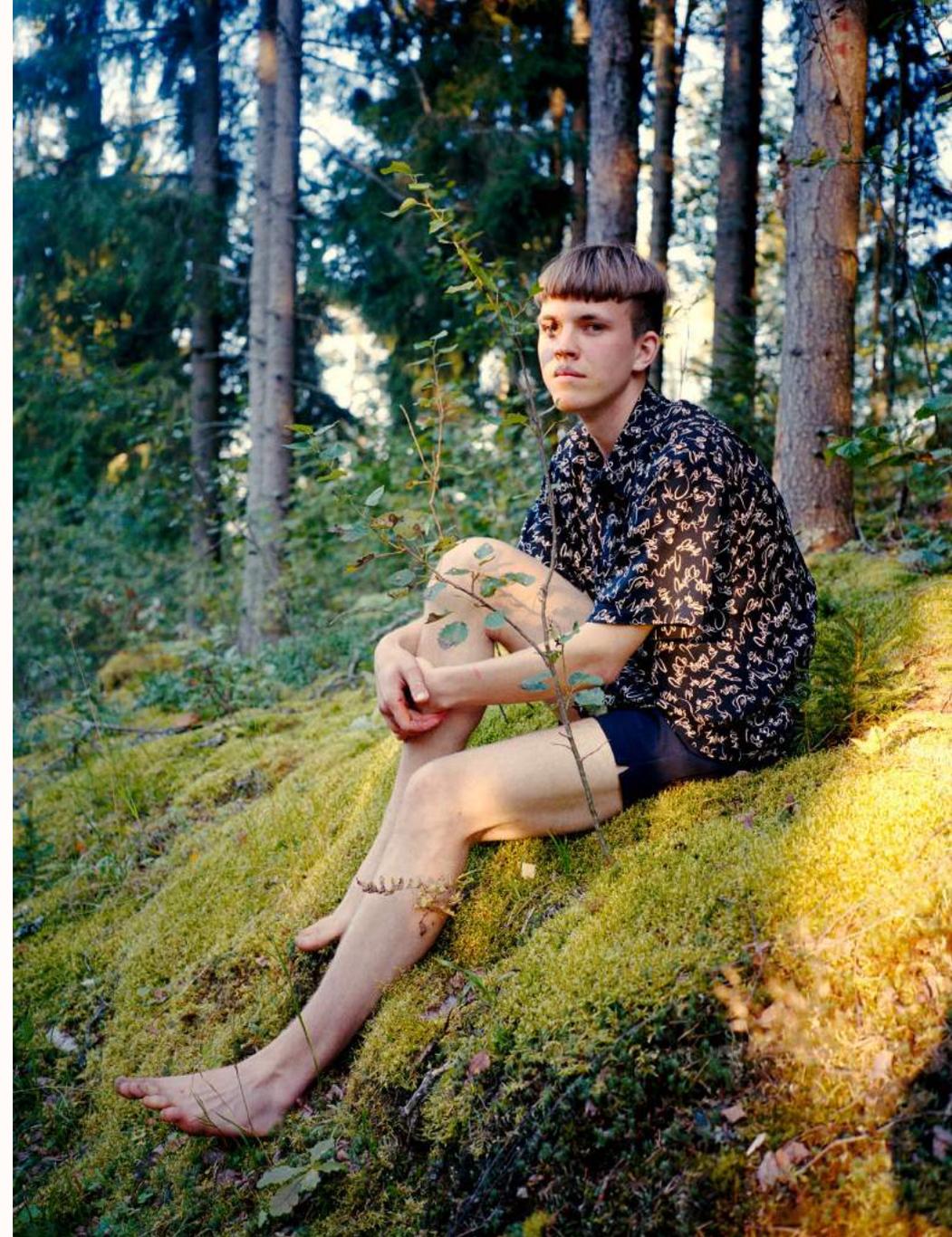
In recent years, the rise of the so-called post-Soviet aesthetic has turned a historical term into a trendy buzz word. In fashion, the height of its commodification was embodied in a red Vetements hoodie emblazoned with a hammer and sickle, as worn by Kim Kardashian. It isn't unusual for capitalism to break history down into easily-marketable symbols, but what this process often leaves behind is the people who had to live through real traumatic events.

Georgian photographer Grigor Devejiev is one artist using the visual language of this trend in order to subvert it. By casting people of diverse ages, appearances and social backgrounds for his *Social Realism* project, he highlights lingering inequality in Georgian society. Meanwhile photographer Armen Parsadanov uses his *Nutshell* series to paint a portrait of Kiev's contemporary creative scene, cutting through the myths and misconceptions of the city created by the media after the 2014 revolution.

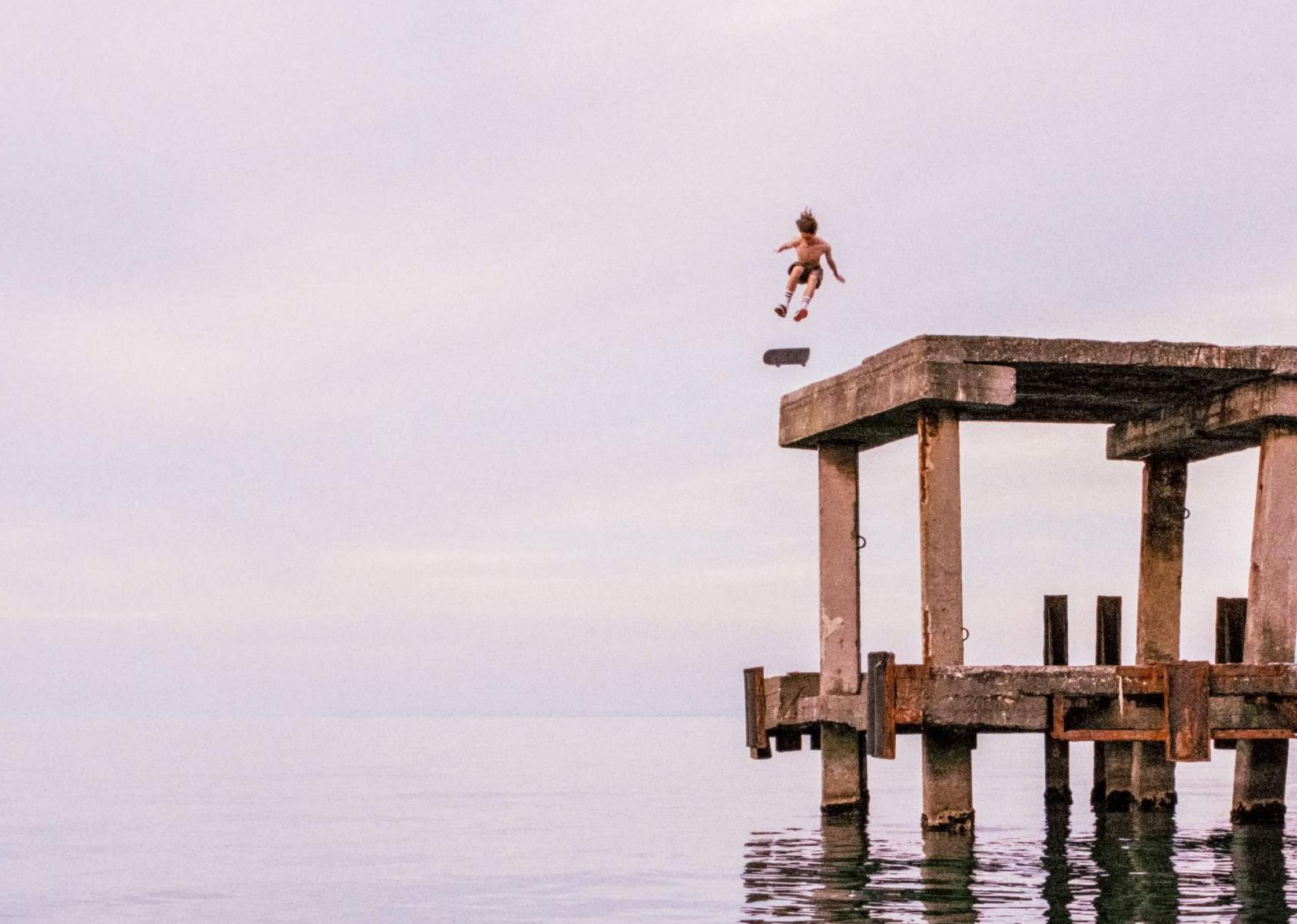
Since 1989, Eastern Europe has continuously played the role of the inner exotic other, familiar enough to be recognisable and strange enough to be amusing. The appeal of "poor but sexy" is perhaps one effect of this phantom division which continues to persevere. There is no East without West, and there is no periphery without a centre. But the new generation of Eastern European image-makers works in a space increasingly free from the Western gaze.

We still live in a world ruled by local stereotypes. It could be post-Soviet Eastern Europe, the crisis-ridden Mediterranean south or American white trash – the tropes of locality are still very much present in contemporary image-making. Notwithstanding their limitations, these categories can become empowering with enough critical thinking. We might opt to stick with them out of choice. Today, the artistic movement across the post-Soviet space is defined by much more than just locality or a working through of historical trauma – it represents the emergence of a whole new language.

Since 1989, Eastern Europe has continuously played the role of the inner exotic other























Masha Demianova, b. 1988, Moscow, Russia

Moscow-based photographer Masha Demianova studied journalism and creative writing at the University of Journalism and Literature in Moscow before turning to photography. She has taken photographs for a range of well-known publications including *L'Officiel*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Afisha Magazine*, *Look At Me* and *Port* and has recently shown work at Bushwick Open Studios and the Czech Center in New York as well as the D Museum in Seoul, South Korea.

Grigor Devejiev, b. 1984, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, Georgia

Grigor Devejiev is a photographer with over a decade of experience working in fashion; he attended the Tbilisi Academy of Design and is now the creative director of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tbilisi. His atmospheric, somewhat gritty, bold editorials have attracted the attention of many international fashion magazines, including *i-D* and *Metal*. His recent shows include *Talisman*, a collaboration with Simon Machabeli at Tumanishvili Theatre (2017), and *Social Realism*, a collaboration with Georgian Designers in (2017).

Jędrzej Franek, b. 1990, Poznan, Poland

Architectural photographer Jędrzej Franek is the executive editor for online architecture and culture magazine *Stacja Poznan* and Project Manager for Poznan Design Festival. His work has been shown internationally in Tokyo and Miami at the EyeEm World Tour and Grupa Mobilni. His show *Archigrafia* opens at Baltin Hotel in Mielenko, Poland, in February 2018.

Dima Komarov, b. 1997, Yoshkar-Ola, Mari El Republic, Russia

St Petersburg-based Dima Komarov is a self-taught photographer whose work has been shown in publications such as *Sicky Mang* and *Coeval Magazine*. This will be the artist's first major exhibition.

Paulina Korobkiewicz, b. 1993, Suwalki, Poland

London-based photographer Paulina Korobkiewicz gained a first-class honours degree in fine art photography from Camberwell College of Arts and in 2017 was shortlisted for the Belfast Photo Festival Open Submission. She was the winner of the Camberwell Book Prize 2016, and has been nominated for the Magnum Photos Graduate Photographers Award 2017, the Bar Tur Photobook Award 2015, and the Creative Review and JCDecaux Talent Spotting Guide 2015.

Michal Korta, b. 1975, Bochnia, Poland

Polish photographer Michal Korta studied German philology and photography at Jagiellonian University in Krakow and photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. As well as working as a photography lecturer in Poland and Switzerland, Michal collaborates with the press, advertising agencies, and international cultural institutions. His personal projects explore identity, identification and coincidence, with significant projects including *Former Russian Republics* (2006), *Kazakh Dismounted* (2010), *Balkan Playground* (2014), *Beautiful Monster* (2014/2015) and *The Shadow Line* (2016).

Hassan Kurbanbaev, b. 1982, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Hassan Kurbanbaev attended the Tashkent State University of Arts. His work explores social and youth issues through film and photography. He has also worked as a journalist for a number of radio stations in Tashkent, promoting contemporary electronic music. *Post-Soviet Visions* is the artist's first major exhibition.

David Meskhi, b. 1979, Tbilisi, Georgia

Berlin-based photographer David Meskhi gained a degree in photography from Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film University, Tbilisi in 2005. After this he worked commercially as a photographer for a number of major Georgian cultural magazines. Several of his artworks are now part of the collection at the Georgian House of Photography. He co-directed the multi-award winning documentary *When the Earth Seems to Be Light*, which is based on his photographs of young Georgian skaters. From 2017 he has been represented by Galerie für Moderne Fotografie, Berlin.

Pavel Milyakov, b. 1988, Moscow, Russia

Moscow-based Pavel Milyakov studied at Graphic Design at Stroganov Academy and at Moscow Film School. He writes electronic music inspired by the remote corners of Moscow's Orekhovo-Borisovo district under the name Buttechno. He is also the creator of the artwork *Orehovo*, a manipulated image of Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* with artificially built-in high-rises standing in for the natural landscape.

Armen Parsadanov, b. 1982, Baku, Azerbaijan

Photographer Armen Parsadanov has lived and worked in Kiev since 2013. His work featured in a 2016 exhibition in collaboration with Masha Reva and Port Creative Hub and the 2017 One Day Project, I-Zone. He has been published in *Vogue UA*, *Vogue.com*, *L'Officiel UA*, *i-D*, *Dazed & Confused* and *Fisheye Magazine*.

Ieva Raudsepa, b. 1992, Riga, Latvia

Los Angeles-based photographer Ieva Raudsepa holds a BA in philosophy from the University of Latvia and University of Helsinki and is currently enrolled as an MFA candidate at the California Institute of the Arts. Her work has been exhibited and featured internationally, with publications including *i-D*, *YET*, *Latvian Photography Yearbook* and *FK Magazine*. Her series *Cruise* was shown as part of the *Mixtape* exhibition curated by Aaron Schuman at Riga Photomonth 2016, while the book dummy was shortlisted for the Unseen Dummy Award in 2016. Ieva is currently a MFA candidate at the California Institute of the Arts.

Genia Volkov, b. 1981, Simferopol, Crimea

Genia Volkov attended the Institute of Journalism in Kiev and is part of the Join The Cool collective. His work seeks to reclaim the term "documentary photography" by questioning whether our desire to document our lives turns us into images. His work has been exhibited at the International Summer School of Photography in Latvia and Seentax Services in Ukraine, and published in *Purple Fashion* magazine and *Bird In Flight*.

Max von Gumpenberg and Patrick Bienert, b. 1984 and 1980, Munich, Germany

Photographers Max von Gumpenberg and Patrick Bienert are based between Germany and New York and have worked together since 2007. Their work, which explores the concepts of culture and identity, is grounded in street and documentary photography. Their editorial commissions have been published in *AnOther Magazine*, *Dazed & Confused*, *Man About Town*, *Modern Matter*, *Pop*, *Re-Edition*, *Purple* and *Vogue Italia*. Max and Patrick have also created catalogues and campaigns for Givenchy, Hussein Chalayan, Kostas Murkudis, Lanvin, Maryam Nassir Zadeh, Valentino and Victoria Beckham.

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Calvert 22 Foundation celebrates the culture and creativity of the New East – Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia and Central Asia – enriching perceptions of the region and furthering international understanding.

Calvert 22 Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation committed to dialogue and discovery, to the development of international creative networks, and to the role of learning and education as the basis for knowledge sharing and institutional exchange.

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