

BLOC PARTY

An exhibition in New York takes a nostalgic trip down Europe's path, writes Daniel Scheffler.

SNAPSHOT

WHAT: *Ostalgia* – an exhibition featuring the works of 56 artists from 20 countries in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Republics, and Western Europe.

WHERE: New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince St, Lower East Side, New York. Until September 25 (newmuseum.org)

NEED TO KNOW: The exhibition takes its title from the German word *ostalgie*, a term coined in the 1990s to describe a sense of longing for the era before the collapse of the Communist Bloc.

DON'T MISS : The towering sculptures by Thomas Schütte (2005, pictured below) of three grotesque male figures wrapped in blankets.



FINDING NEW art in New York is like finding sand on the beach. It's a certainty. But understanding how the art affects the viewer is where the sea level rises. One sure to create a stir is *Ostalgia* at the New Museum.

The exhibition disseminates across the museum's five floors and slathers its resonant force into every inch of space. The harrowing imagery, non-chronological nature and vibrant metaphors are undemanding emblems of the recent past. The art stems from Russia and the former Eastern European Soviet Bloc countries and represents, with poignant relevancy, that

time is rather forgotten than saluted. Using deeply personal and wrecking storytelling, the exhibition's 50 artists seem to speak in unison about the desire for reshaping relationships.

Ostalgia is a combination of the German words *ost* (east) and *nostalgie* (nostalgia). Here it is about the longing for the past, of East Germany and life in former Communist countries of Eastern Europe.

The history lessons here comprise of the before and after periods, which removed the many emblems of Communist rule. Products disappeared from depots, replaced with western items. However, nostalgia for the past, the desire to cling to what was familiar continued to be prevalent. Many places still indulge this notion and provide artifacts to prompt memories of another time: foodstuffs such as Vita Cola (with its herb secret recipe mix), state television programmes and Trabant cars.



In the flesh: The *Ostalgia* exhibition includes photographs by Nikolay Bakharev who took portraits, like the one above, of bathers on Russian beaches in defiance of an official ban on bared flesh.

Even the clubbing in together of Germans wanting to save 'Ossie Crosswalk Man' (the well-remembered illuminated fedora-wearing man on a crosswalk) shows how clinging to the past and wanting to comprehend the past is pertinent to even middle Europe.

The idea of non-conformity during the period is a major theme in the exhibition. Andrei Monastyrski, the founder of collaborative group Collective Actions, was a thorn in the communist censors' sides: he was notorious for waving banners around Moscow with absurdist phrases that slightly taunted, but were never treacherous. In a recreation of his 1977 work *Slogan*, the New Museum has allocated Monastyrski a portion of Governor's Island facing the Statue of Liberty; for the exhibition, an immense banner has been installed that reads: "I Do Not Complain About Anything and I Almost Like It Here, Although I Have Never Been Here Before

and Know Nothing About This Place."

Similarly, photography wasn't considered an art form during communist rule, and many took advantage of this through invisible forms of rebellion. It made it possible for Helga Paris to shoot portraits of female factory workers in East Berlin, for Nikolay Bakharev to photograph bathers on Russian beaches, and for Boris Mikhailov to produce a detailed document of communist life through bleak images of poverty.

With black-and-white portraits depicting a non-individual fake happiness and subversive artworks that hint but never

harm, the adverse value structure is felt strongly at the show. The desperate need to control the past and the future with the dichotomy of wanting to live under the reign of oppression and fighting the tyrant oppressor is prevalent throughout the work. Every artist jubilates this rise and fall of emotion.

Ostalgia is considerate of the roles played by individuals and artists who occupied Socialist countries. Acting as prophets and often seen as lepers, the artists' petition against and for the Big Brother-like force of government are acknowledged and celebrated. Some themes include the tender conviction that art has the faculty to transform anything, an infatuation with language (both Cyrillic and English derivatives), the artistic form of the body especially in the nude, the destruction of history portrayed by fragmented structures and an overemotional diary discharge of cultural and individual agitation. ■