

Philosophy of Photography

Volume 1 Number 1

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PHOTOWORKS

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Sergei Podgorkov's Leningrad photographs

During the 1950–1980s Soviet photography was strictly regulated. The only legitimate subjects for photographs were positive aspects of socialist living: the building of communism, heroes of industry, award-winning collective farms and the recreational activities of law abiding and happy citizens. According to the official position, there were no negative aspects of socialism and photographs that attempted to show that such aspects did exist were seen as anti-Soviet propaganda and severely punished.

Sergei Podgorkov is a typical representative of Leningrad's photographic underground. He worked as a photographer in Soviet institutions. He was fired from a newspaper for lack of 'ideological sensitivity' in his photographs. He was a member of the city's most famous photographic club *Zerkao* (mirror), and exhibited in its group shows, but he was only allowed to show his 'lyrical landscapes'. None of his socially engaged photographs were published until the period of perestroika. In a typical

encounter from the Soviet era, a party official told him: 'I like this photograph, but not the three men drinking vodka. Take them out and we will publish the picture'. Podgorkov refused to crop his photograph.

Podgorkov's 1970–1980 photographs could be seen simply as photo-reportage, but they could easily have led to his arrest or committal to a mental asylum. From the point of view of official propaganda of the period his actions were considered 'ideological sabotage': to seek out and photograph the insane, the destitute, the disabled and alcoholics, and to display their images in the city of Lenin – in the country of victorious socialist revolution – was beyond the pale.

And yet, the social photography of Sergei Podgorkov evidences an era by showing painfully familiar scenes from a not very distant past: the legless beggar counting pennies outside a shop; teenagers in school uniforms smoking a fag; the classic scene of three men drinking vodka in a doorway; the body of a drunk lying on the ground next to a beer stall; everyday commuters on the streets of Leningrad.

All of this is so painfully familiar and real that one cannot help but admire the piercing vision of the artist. The most remarkable aspect of these photographs is the precision with which they capture the atmosphere of that time: the hopelessness of the dilapidated city, the desperation and poverty of the last days of a dying empire.

Beyond the bravery and the courage of the author, who was able to see and to document the conditions of that life, one has to recognize his ability to capture the exact moment at which everyday life acquires clear and rare individuality.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, Apraksin Dvor, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Belle, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, beer stall, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Insane, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, Malodetskosselskii_avenue, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, morning song, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, wine shop, 1970s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, Petrovskaya, 1980s.



Sergei Podgorkov, Leningrad, washer of beer glasses, 1970s.



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Edited by James Elkins

ISBN 9781841503073

Paperback | £17.95 | \$25

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