

# POSTMASTERS

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## **ENGINEERS OF THE SOUL** **Инженеры человеческих душ** **人类灵魂的工程师**

a show about communism and artists' relationship to power

**Chto Delat? (What is to be Done?)**

**Yevgeniy Fiks**

**Rainer Ganahl**

**Lu Xiangyou**

**Yuri Shalamoff**

**Wang Jianwei**

This time it's personal.

For better or worse Tamas Banovich and I are children of Communism, having grown up in Hungary and Poland respectively. We have always wanted to organize an exhibition that brings together Communism's past, present, and future and shows artists' ongoing relationships to power and ideology as they negotiate the treacherous zones of propaganda and dissent.

The moment seems right. With growing political extremism at both ends of the spectrum, Communism is on our collective radar. Since the fall of the Soviet block in the early nineties, we have thought of Communism as the past, yet there are millions of people who are still living under communist regimes and many more who live with its consequences and legacies.

"Engineers of the Soul" is a cross generational show of artists from Russia and China and a citizen of the world, Rainer Ganahl.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the emerging communist system recognized the power and usefulness of the arts to disseminate the new ideology. Lenin assigned a central role to the creative avant-garde; artists and intellectuals were granted a privileged position within the social order—as long as they obeyed, of course.

The phrase "Engineers of the Soul" was originally used by Stalin during his meeting with the Soviet writers: "The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks.... And therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul." (Joseph Stalin, Speech at home of Maxim Gorky, 26 October 1932). It was then taken up by Andrei Zhdanov and developed into the idea of 'Socialist realism.' The term is still used extensively in the People's Republic of China to refer to the teaching profession.

## THE PAST

Two groups of historical photographs by **Lu Xiangyou** and **Yuri Shalamoff** form a symmetrical base for the exhibition. The trenches of propaganda were always located in the media (newspapers and film); photographers were deployed at the front lines of war and peace to deliver a message through their images. The photographs in the show are the real deal—rare, authentic documents, representing the leaders of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Both photographers are unique documentarists operating in close proximity to the "party elite" (an oxymoron if there ever was one!) from the era of "humanization" of the leaders.

Both Yuri Shalamoff and Lu Xiangyou were thrown into the whirlwind of history at a young age. Yuri, a teenage veteran of Second World War, started his career in Leningrad (St Petersburg) and by 1960 worked for the Soviet daily Komsomolskaya Pravda. His photographs became the public image of the leaders of the regime, symbols of the state's power, and the official chronicle of history (or the chronicle of official history). These were modern times: successive air-brushings of out-of-favor-politicians were replaced with the daily barrage of carefully manicured information delivered via the image. Most of Shalamoff's negatives were confiscated by the KGB when he immigrated to the US in 1974. The ones that survived are poignant documents of this time.

Lu Xiangyou, who died in 2007, was born into an illiterate peasant family in 1928. By the age of 20 he was an important war correspondent for the People's Liberation Army and, a few years later, the photographer for the People's Daily and Chinese News Service. He was assigned as the official photographer of Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and later Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun. The images you see in the show ARE the true representation of the times. In Mr. Lu's pictures, the transition from the cult of personality into the era of 'humanized' collective leadership is apparent, particularly in the shifting representations of Mao, Deng, and others.

## THE PRESENT (THREE VERSIONS)

**Yevgeniy Fiks** is deeply involved in researching communist threads present in our contemporary environment. One of Communism's achievements was to make the absurd seem normal. Every year on February 16, the birthday of the "Dear Leader" of North Korea Kim Jong Il, there is a "Kimjongilia Festival" dedicated to a specially bred red begonia that flowers on this important day. According to North Korean sources, the flower symbolizes wisdom, love, justice, and peace. Fiks's series of paintings of Kimjongilia celebrate the flower itself to focus attention on the extreme manifestations of the personal cult.

Addressing the repression of history of the Left, Fiks will present a one time lecture/performance "Communist Tour of MoMA (the off-site lecture)" at Postmasters on November 20<sup>th</sup>, at 6.30 pm. Yevgeniy will guide us through the revered temple of bourgeois art and paint the rooms pink. Fiks augments the MoMA tour-map with a layer revealing a historical aspect not usually represented on museum tours: the influence of Marxist ideology on progressive artists of the early twentieth century and their communist affiliations. Does it change our view of these works? Should it?

**Wang Jianwei** is a conceptual and performance artist known for his large-scale multimedia installations and videos. Wang's recent project, "Hostage," plugs into contemporary Chinese reality with a grand staged spectacle rooted in Chinese SocReal opera. In the choreographed, almost silent performance, the video unfolds a story of harmonious, isolated community— a perfect mechanism suddenly being shaken and destroyed by progress. We don't know where it will end or what will replace it – the question is not answered. The camera alternately surveils the "walled" community and acts as the eye of a narrator/referee intent not to miss the nuances of the action.

"The Tower: a Songspiel" is the latest in a series of "songspiels"—Brechtian musical theater video projects—by **Chto Delat? (What is to be Done?)**, an artists collective based in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The singing video performance – a sort of "spectacle of the people for the people" wrestles with the reality of contemporary, post-communist Russia. It tells the story of a bitter wrangling over the energy giant Gasprom's plan to build a skyscraper into the otherwise carefully managed horizontal cityscape of St. Petersburg. The actors representing the powerful—the businessman, the Mafioso, the politician, the orthodox priest, the art dealer, and the favorite artist— are in a dialogue with the choir of ordinary people. Meant to be a straightforward, painfully accurate representation of the contemporary Russian condition, it sometimes sounds surprisingly familiar to – say - our Ground Zero saga? The script is based on research into public documents and media material about the actual ongoing debate.

## THE FUTURE

The tenets of communist doctrine and Diamat- (dialectic materialism) are not widely understood today. In the US the word Communism is used almost as loosely as Nazism. People's ignorance is exploited as the word is used as an insult or to instill fear. **Rainer Ganahl's** video "I Hate You Karl Marx" projects the current China-phobia into the future. It is 2045, Berlin.... Berlin, China. The strangely endearing rant of a young Chinese-speaking German woman directed at a statue of Marx induces a nervous smile: you want to laugh but you don't want to appear nervous and scared. It even makes Rainer nervous.

Enjoy the show.  
Magdalena Sawon and Tamas Banovich

<http://www.wangjianwei.com/>  
<http://www.chtodelat.org/>  
<http://yevgeniyfiks.com/>  
<http://www.ganahl.info/>  
[www.shalamoffoto.com](http://www.shalamoffoto.com).

Postmasters Gallery located at 459 West 19th Street between 9 and 10 Avenues is open Tuesday through Saturday 11 – 6  
Please contact Magdalena Sawon or Paulina Bebecka with questions and image requests [postmasters@thing.net](mailto:postmasters@thing.net)  
**[www.postmastersart.com](http://www.postmastersart.com)**

