



From the series *City of Shadows*, 1993

ALEXEY TITARENKO

For most of his life, Russian artist Alexey Titarenko has been photographing his native city, St. Petersburg. He began roaming the streets with his camera as a boy and continues to this day—witnessing and documenting his hometown both before and after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Titarenko's haunting and lyrical images of the city, in which he employs a variety of techniques, both in-camera and in the darkroom, often render its inhabitants unrecognizable and ghostlike. The resulting final prints, Titarenko says, act as metaphors for his emotions and reflect his love and respect of literature and music.

Interview by Russell Joslin

Translated from the Russian by Tatiana Nazarenko

RUSSELL JOSLIN: How did you first become interested in photography?

ALEXEY TITARENKO: In 1970, when I turned eight, I received an old Soviet Komsomolets camera, the one that exteriorly resembles a Yashica with two lenses, but is considerably more primitive, with an eyepiece focusing according to a scale. I became interested in photography and asked my mother to enroll me in the photography class at the local Palace of Culture. I liked this class so much that I became its most avid participant. I wanted to learn as quickly as possible how I could load the film and define the exposure according to the chart, as at that time I did not have an exposure meter. Neither film nor paper was provided in this class, and the cost of supplies was overwhelming for an eight-year-old student. I simply did not have this amount of money. Occasionally I asked the instructor for some film or paper, and sometimes other students gave me the remnants of their chemicals. However, finally I learned how to take and print pictures. No doubt, my first photographs were quite weak, but this fact did not bother me at all, since it was the process itself that fascinated me.

At that time, my family lived in an overcrowded communal apartment. The five of us: my parents, grandmother, my mother's sister (a student), and I, shared a 15 square meter room. I read a lot when I was a child. My parents taught me to read at the age of five to keep me from bothering them early in the morning. Apparently, reading fueled my imagination. After completing a book, I went roaming around the city. Reading, strolling and fantasizing were my favorite occupations. Understandably, St. Petersburg had also impacted my imagination by stimulating my admiration, my stimulus, and inspiration. It seemed that, with the help of the camera, I could grasp the city's state, its mood, as well as my personal emotions and feelings about it, and keep it focused. Sure enough, this fostered my interest in photography.

Since many of my readers have likely never been to St. Petersburg, how would you describe the city?

St. Petersburg is a Russian city built by foreigners: Italian, French, German, and Dutch people. It has more instances of Italian architecture than Rome itself. Its opera house is better than that of Milan.

It has the world's best classical ballet. The Hermitage Museum is bigger than the Louvre or the Metropolitan and holds a collection of Impressionist paintings that is superior to the French one. The city outnumbered Vienna in orchestras and musical groups, and its parks and palaces are more magnificent than the Versailles ensemble. The city has a reputation of being a "window onto Europe," a connecting link between Russia, which, in the past, was a noticeably Asian country, and Europe. The dwellers of St. Petersburg differ from the populace of other Russian places, and especially from Muscovites. They are Europeans in their spirit and possess strong democratic ideals and values. The St. Petersburg variant of the Russian language is considered to be a standard for pronunciation. The population of the city is around five million people. It takes two or two and a half hours to fly from St. Petersburg to London, and two and a half or three hours to fly to Paris.

The distance between St. Petersburg and Moscow, the capital city, can be covered by eight hours of traveling by train. It equals 500 miles.

How is St. Petersburg different now versus when it was called "Leningrad" during the Soviet regime?

The Soviet period was marked by the absence of advertisements and the shortage of retail stores. All signboards, posters, and advertising panels were uniform. (This is one of the themes elaborated in my series *Nomenklatura of Signs*.) They did not cover the architectural monuments, though. The beautiful architecture of the city created the impression that the 19th Century was still going on. Cars were scarce, and people commuted by trolleys, streetcars similar to those in San Francisco, and by subway.

Now, the city is crammed with cars that block sidewalks and thus look domineering in the photographs. We also have a huge number of various stores and ENORMOUSLY huge billboards, which entirely shield some buildings, including historical monuments that represent significant aesthetic value. These features damage the urban landscape and reduce its cultural worth. The city air is polluted by car emissions and streets are noisy. The car drivers are quite rude and often disrespect pedestrians' right of the way. They can easily knock

you over if you cross the intersection without extreme care.

There are many tramps and drunkards in the streets, as well as litter. Gateways and space between the buildings are used as public restrooms and always stink. Prostitution is widely spread and drugs are available practically everywhere. There are many homeless children. The average life expectancy for a city dweller is 57 years. In the past, Leningrad did not have these features. What is going on now is a real tragedy.

Speaking to your life as an artist, what did the collapse of the USSR mean to you personally, and to other artists?

The collapse of the Soviet Union has dramatically changed my life as an artist for the better. In the past, one was not allowed to work as an independent artist, or writer, or poet. It was just prohibited. Those who attempted to remain independent from the state, Josef Brodsky for instance, were sentenced to imprisonment. Only state unions of creative personalities were allowed, such as the Union of Artists, the Union of Writers, or the Union of Composers. In order to obtain the "right" to paint, to write poetry, or to compose music, one had to obtain membership in these organizations. However, in order to be accepted as a member, one had to glorify the Soviet regime and the Communist party in your works. For me, this was unacceptable.

Therefore, I have to admit that I witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union with delight and relief. At the very beginning, life became easier. I could work FREELY on my creative projects—*Nomenklatura of Signs* and *The City of Shadows* among them—and receive some financial support from various granting institutions, similar to artists in other democratic countries. I believe that this same feeling of joy and relief was experienced by other artists, with the exception of those who collaborated with the regime and glorified it.

As a place, what does St. Petersburg mean to you on a personal level, and why do you feel you are so compelled to photograph it?

Through the prism of this city and through the images of its dwellers, I attempt to express my thoughts and sentiments about Russia and about

people in general. In this sense, St. Petersburg serves as a tool. Using it as a camera, one can create visual metaphors that symbolically communicate emotional experiences. I was born and raised in this city. Here I received my education, and, therefore, for me personally, this city means the whole world.

You've mentioned a few of your different series. Let's talk about each of them, starting with *Nomenklatura of Signs* (1986-1991).

I would like to comment briefly on my general idea. For the 73 years of their existence, the ruling party elite enjoyed particular privileges and engendered the power of Soviet nomenclature with the image

and likeness of themselves, [thus becoming] another type of nomenclature—a nomenclature of signs. This means that people and everyday practices were replaced by special visual signs. Consequently, the portrayal of real Soviet life became a criminal offense, punishable by being sentenced to serving a term at the labor camp, GULAG, or even by execution.

The series *Nomenklatura of Signs* was created at the crossroad of two different epochs, the totalitarian regime and Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. It balances between the tragedy and mockery, and consists of collages produced by the imposition / overlapping of several negatives, tra-

ditional photographs, individual objects, and installations. In 1991, I added a brief narrative as a concluding fragment to this series.

In 2000, the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel in Luxemburg, together with the society "Friends of *The Family of Man*," commissioned me to produce an audiovisual presentation entitled *Nomenklatura of Signs*. This slide show, accompanied by Dmitri Shostakovich's music, was shown in Clerveaux castle in Luxemburg as a part of the annual performance series in commemoration of Edward Steichen and his exhibition *The Family of Man*. The Boston Museum of Fine Art in the USA also holds several works belonging to this series.



From the series *Nomenklatura of Signs*, 1987-1989

Your series *The City of Shadows* followed *Nomenklatura of Signs*. How did the transformation occur from one series to the next?

The idea of *The City of Shadows* emerged quite unexpectedly and quite naturally during the collapse [of the Soviet Union] in the fall of 1991. I mean that the concept itself stemmed from my impressions nourished by the everyday reality. At that period, I continued to work on my series *Nomenklatura of Signs*. Suddenly, at some point I realized that I was struggling with emptiness and that my creative impulses—initially absolutely sincere—were running the risk of contemplating upon ideas no longer valid. This happened because the

Soviet people, all these human beings deprived of their individuality and turned into “signs” by a criminal regime, began transforming from smiling and happy-looking “signs” into wandering shadows, even though rejecting the role of a “sign” could result in the loss of life. The year of 1992 was approaching...

Will you explain further what was going on at that time?

In order to comprehend what happened in this particular year, imagine that the bank where you keep all your assets suddenly declared bankruptcy. It is not that bad, you think; since the banks are in-

sured, you will receive your money back. And now imagine that the insurance company also filed for bankruptcy. You are left without your money. Perhaps this is still not the worse scenario, you keep thinking, as long as there are some friends capable of giving you a helping hand. And now imagine that ALL the banks in the USA declared bankruptcy. And in the same way, all the insurance companies also filed for bankruptcy. All your savings are gone, and your acquaintances and friends are in the same position. Well, you might have a chance to survive by selling your real estate for some cash that you will keep at home and spend cautiously in the hope that eventually better times will come. And now



From the series *Time Standing Still*, 1998

imagine that this cash, which is your sole source of livelihood, is depreciated / devaluated 1000 times, and your \$1000 becomes just a dollar. And soon all your money is nonfunctioning. This is happening to everyone at the same time and thus nobody can come to rescue you. If you are not young you might die fairly soon. This collapse of the USA delights other countries. Well, this story is an invention, and yet approximately the same scenario occurred in Russia.

The northern city of St. Petersburg is known for its summer "white nights" and its short, dark winter days lasting for just a few hours. In the winter of 1991-1992, one cold and gloomy day, I strolled sadly down a street which used to be packed with people, which used to be full of joyful vibrancy and dynamism. It was poorly lit; evening was settling in. There was not a single car visible. The depressing and strange quietness was interrupted by the sounds of banging grocery store and bakery doors, stores in which the shelves were absolutely empty. I saw people on the verge of insanity, in confusion: unattractively dressed men and women with eyes full of sorrow and desperation, tottering on their routine dreary routes with their last ounce of strength, in search of some food which could prolong their lives and the lives of their families. They looked like shadows, undernourished and worn out. Nothing like that had occurred since World War II, when the Nazis blockaded the city. My impressions as well as my emotional state were enormously powerful and long lasting. I felt an intense desire to articulate these sufferings and grieving, to visualize them through my photographs, to awaken empathy and love for my native city's inhabitants, people who have been constantly victimized and ruined during the course of the 20th Century.

More than anything, I wanted to convey my "people-shadows" metaphor as accurately as possible. This metaphor became the core of both my new vision and new series. I placed my Hasselblad camera near the entrance to the Vasilevostrovskaja subway station, where the shopping district was located. The events occurring there were imposed on my already mentioned impressions, as were sensations stirred by Shostakovich's music, and his 13th Symphony in particular, with its movement called "At the Store." A crowd of people flowing near the subway station formed a sort of human sea, providing me with a feeling of non-reality, a phantasmagoria; these people were like shadows from the underworld, a world visited by Aeneas, Virgil's character. It was a place where time had come to a standstill. This perception of time stopped convinced me that it could also be stopped by means of a camera shutter. I already knew how to achieve this effect, as in my childhood I often took pictures by trying the long exposure process in the dusk and evening, and later, when attending the university at the end of the 1970's and beginning of the



From the series *Time Standing Still*, 1998



From the series *Time Standing Still*, 1999



San Marco 1



From the series *Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg*, 1997

1980's, I studied this technique of 19th Century French photography.

I began taking pictures every day. When several good pictures were accumulated, I started grouping them with the intention of following a certain narrative line. This process helps me to make decisions regarding further subjects to be captured. At that time, I was also applying for various grants to support my needs for supplies and bare physical survival. I received substantial help from the Soros Foundation and its Center for Contemporary Art.

That is the story behind *The City of Shadows*. As a rule, Shostakovich's 2nd Cello Concerto and his 13th Symphony accompany the exhibit of this series.

Yes, I've read your photographs are inspired by your love of music, and of literature too. Aside from Shostakovich, who are some other influences?

I like good classical music in general, whether it is Bach, Sibelius, Beethoven, Bruckner, Mahler or Shnittke, a Soviet post-war composer. Good music is like a good book. As far as the books are concerned, Dostoevsky's story "White Nights" and his novel *Crime and Punishment* undoubtedly were the key texts for my resourcefulness when I worked on [my series] *Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg*. I also like other works by Dostoevsky, as well as works by Gogol and other classics of Russian literature: Pushkin, of course. Marcel Proust also had a significant influence on my creativity, as did other 20th Century writers: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Tomas Mann, Josef Brodsky and Boris Pasternak; it is impossible to name them all.

Are there any photographers or visual artists that you consider important influences on you and your photographs?

Photography is a young art that is poorly invested in, as compared to cinematography, for instance. It does not have much mass media attention either, and photographers do not enjoy the same social status as filmmakers, musicians or show business celebrities. For this reason, young talented people seek the realization of their potential in other kinds of art, where they can establish themselves easier and faster. Sometimes, photography recruits the losers who were not able to distinguish themselves in other spheres of creativity. The combination of these factors makes photography less attractive than other artistic pursuits, such as music, movie making, or literature. That is why the works of other photographers did not really impact me. Speaking about other artistic influences, I have to admit that my collages from the series *Nomenklatura of Signs* echoed the early 20th Century photomontage compositions produced by the Dadaists and Aleksandr Rodchenko. At least partially, they were also influenced by Kashmir Malevich's paintings.



From the series *Time Standing Still*, 1998



From the series *Time Standing Still*, 1998

Following your series *The City of Shadows*, you produced your next series, *Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg* in 1995-1997...

By 1995, the situation in St. Petersburg had improved and stabilized. The city restored those romantic traits of its appearance which always attracted poets and writers. Tourists began visiting the city again.

Once, I came across a book, which for some reason slipped my attention in the past. It was Fyodor Dostoevsky's early stories... I opened the book at random; the story—"White Nights"—captivated me so fully that I kept reading it over and over again. Dostoevsky seemed to have read my thoughts. Deeply inspired by this piece, I decided to make a new series of photographs based on the story. For the epigraph, I took the following citation from the story:

*There are, Nastenka, though you may not know it, strange nooks in Petersburg. It seems as though the same sun that shines for all Petersburg people does not peep into those spots, but some other different, new one, as if bespoken expressly for those nooks, and it throws a different light on everything. In these corners, dear Nastenka, a quite a different life is lived, quite unlike the life that is surging round us. But such as perhaps exists in some unknown realm, not among us in our serious, overserious, time. Well, that life is a mixture of something purely fantastic, feverently ideal, with something (alas! Nastenka) dingily prosaic and ordinary, not to say incredibly vulgar... Listen Nastenka. Let me tell you that in these corners live strange people—dreamers.**

Yet another source of my inspiration was Brahms's Violin Concerto.

Understandably, I had yet to devise how to realize my principal idea, that is, the image of the sun. As it eventually turned out, these yellowish and the reddish tinges can be attained by the application of some sepia toning. Moreover, for enhancing the romantic environment, I decided to reduce the picture contrast. In order to make the sunbeams physically visible, I began moving the camera slightly along its trajectory during the exposure time. By the way, this technique also allowed me to further reduce the picture contrast, which is too great in winter.

The Soros Foundation has supported this project of mine as well.

Do you believe your photographs are an accurate portrayal of how you think and feel about St. Petersburg? Or do the photographic effects you use—toning, contrast, blurring/movement, etc., convey a new creation that isn't necessarily representative of your impressions or your daily reality of the city?

* Translated from Russian by Constance Garnett, in: Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *White Nights*. London: Heinemann, 1970, p. 15.

As you pointed out, all the technical effects I employ in my work are used to produce an accurate portrayal of my feelings and thoughts about my city. Nevertheless, by a "shot" I do not mean the negative, but rather the original silver print which I print by myself. I print all my pictures with my own hands, as it is the *print* that I consider to be the final and complete work. It is sufficient to glance at my pictures to see this. Prints considerably differ from negatives. If you want to convey a certain mood or a certain weather—whether it is sunny or gloomy—or the time of the day—whether it is afternoon or evening—you have to achieve all these nuances at the time of printing. Sometimes when I print, I try to highlight certain details of the picture by employing partial whitening or by exposing paper to light prior to printing on it. This helps to focus the viewer's attention on the most important details rather than have it dispersed all over the picture. Recently, the joint French and German TV channel ARTE produced a 30-minute film entitled *Art et la Maniere: Alexey Titarenko* showing how I work on the realization of my concepts in the darkroom.

Black-and-white photography is quite a special kind of art. It is known that, in earlier times, com-

posers performed their works by themselves, and only later was the musical performance transformed into a different kind of creative practice. The same is true about picture printing. Unfortunately, not only does traditional black-and-white silver printing discontinue its development, but it is also a time-consuming process that is gradually degrading and vanishing from the orbit of photography.

What do you dislike most or find the most difficult about the photographic process?

When, as a child of eight, I took the camera and began shooting for the first time, I found out that hearing comments made about my photography by people in the street was the most challenging aspect of the process. From the very beginning of my career, I treated the photographic process as a deeply personal act, an act of self-expression. Hence, such interference was very unpleasant to me, the way it would be unpleasant to hear a stranger commenting in a mocking manner on my love letter to a woman. The most difficult experience in my professional life has been—and still is—to take pictures while surrounded by crude and vulgar people, like alcoholics, swindlers of all sorts or

other degraded personalities, who are typically loafing around subway stations, markets and other overcrowded places. In my photography, I use long exposures and for this reason I have to set my camera on a tripod, thus remaining for a while at the same place. This obviously attracts public attention to me.

What aspects of your life as a photographer do you like the most?

I photograph my inner vision of reality refracted through my individual, very personal, and very subjective perception. In this sense, I am an artist rather than a photographer. I use the photographic process for self-expression in the manner a writer uses language, which also serves other people. I feel truly delighted and selflessly content when I succeed in visualizing, and thus making perceptible for others, the deepest movements of my soul, my personal sensations, and emotions evoked by this or that event or life experience. It is this aspect of photography which I appreciate most of all!

In the late 90's, you produced your series *Time Standing Still*. Will you tell me a little bit about that one?



Gondolas

Eventually, the situation in 1990's Russia normalized and improved somewhat. Then, again, the natural flow of things was abruptly interrupted. On August 17, 1998, Russia experienced the collapse of its financial system and the dramatic quintuple devaluation of Russian ruble within several days.

Similar to the previous times of instability, and the 1991-1992 situation in particular, this event caused numerous human tragedies. Once more people were thrown back to the past, to the awful conditions of existence. They again had to struggle for survival, and again the time seemed to stand still, as though we had returned to the beginning of 1991. I took my camera and tripod and went picture taking. The photographs shot during these tragic days from 1998 through 1999, and partially in 2000, initiated my new series.

Thinking of each of your series, what do you feel distinguishes one from the other?

Every human being, and an artist especially, possesses some ideas which he would like to communicate by means of various languages, whether visual, musical, or verbal. Perhaps this aspiration contains the essence of creativity and of art.

These ideas constitute the core of an artist and his individuality. They are inseparable from him until his very last days and he keeps exploring them in every series, in every work.

As far as the stylistic differences are concerned, the series *Nomenklatura of Signs* differs as radically from the subsequent ones as the Soviet Union differed from the period of "capitalist construction" of the 1990's. This is normal. However, the three other series differ mostly by slight nuances. These differences often occur not at the level of individual photographs, even though there are differences there, but in the series themselves, as independent creations.

Earlier you spoke of metaphors in relationship to your *City of Shadows* series, and I've also read where you have described your work as "metaphorical photography." Can you explain this idea further?

I believe that a picture without a metaphor is merely a document. Art's objective is to portray the inner emotional response to the events occurring in the external world, and to make it visible to other people. You know, we all have this unique and very personal world inside. The metaphor can be exclusively visual or it can be literal when text is used alongside with other techniques and effects, [such as]: long exposures, compositional control of subjects within the picture, juxtaposition of various objects embodied in the picture, etc.

The metaphor can be good and not so good. However, if it is missing, nothing else exists.

What are you currently working on and what direction do you see your work going in the future?

At present, I am working on a project for an exhibition dedicated to Dmitri Shostakovich. His music strongly inspired my creativity. I would like to produce the entire exhibition emphasizing the connection between his music and my photographs.

The second theme is linked to Cuba. In my understanding, contemporary Cuba is going through the same turning point that the Soviet Union passed through in 1990. The end of Fidel Castro's totalitarian regime is inevitable. However, one must not forget that this country is populated by human beings, people like you and me. With this series, I would like to draw attention to Cuban commoners and the conditions of their life. In 2003, I was able to visit Cuba where I began shooting pictures for my series about the country. I have some interesting pictures. I would like to go there again at the end of this year.

Aside from Cuba, do you ever photograph extensively in places other than St. Petersburg? If so, where?

I took pictures in Ukraine, in Kiev in particular, in Byelorussia (Grodno), as well as in Venice, Paris, and Havana, Cuba. In 2004, APEX Fine Art Gallery showed my "Venice-Paris" exhibit.

What has being a photographer brought to your life?

As a novice photographer, constantly commissioned to take pictures so as to earn my living, I felt terribly bored and tired, as if I had been wasting my life without any meaningful purpose. I even felt somewhat guilty, perhaps the same feeling that talented but lazy people might experience, killing time in night-clubs or casinos, regularly deferring their creative projects "until tomorrow." Perhaps this boredom was the most important lesson I learned as an ordinary photographer. I mean not so much the boredom itself (it is a joke, of course), but the comprehension that every work should be approached in a creative manner, that a person ought to be creative in using acquired professional skills for self-expression. This way you will experience the joy of creativity and learn through this medium the meaning of life.

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Alexey Titarenko's photographs are courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery (24 West 57th Street #503, New York, NY 10019), who will feature his works in the exhibition "Northern Light: Pentti Sammallahti - Alexey Titarenko / Helsinki - St. Petersburg", February 11 - March 25, 2006. A 26-minute documentary about Titarenko will be viewed during the show. For more information about the artist contact the gallery at 212-315-2211 or nailya@mindspring.com.

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