With everyone’s imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world

Work in progress

An essay by Pavel Fiorentino

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Some sort of introduction
In 1997 Danish-born artist Per Kirkeby said in a conversation with German-born writer Heinz-Norbert Jocks: “Every artist knows that a picture is only interesting when it cannot be grasped in linguistic terms. For this reason I also do not understand why art publications become ever thicker in size.”\(^1\) Although the reference to “every artist” may not be so unconditional, I, as an artist whose practice involves visual tools, tend to agree with the statement. Therefore, what is this assignment about? The word essay derives from the French essayer – “to try”, “to attempt”. So what is it that I, a student at a leading Swedish art school who is about to graduate, am supposed to try to deliver in this text? Obviously, I was given a formal brief, outlining what this text should contain and how long it should be. I will happily follow those guidelines, but I think it is also important to define my own motivation for taking part in this exercise. Being slightly sceptical about the idea that art should be explained and requires a text in order to exist, I feel that the main benefit of writing in this case is a reflection on the working process, articulation and documentation of my thoughts, reasons and even feelings that are always around this exciting business and in fact often become a part of it.

The project I am to present at the degree show in Stockholm this month is finalised to a certain degree, but should be seen as a work in progress from a more general perspective. The presentation form I have decided on allows me to demonstrate only a part of the material collected (there is a reason for this, which I will come back to), but I feel that it is important to touch on different points in this text – even though some of them might not be reflected in the actual exhibition piece. In other words, this essay is an attempt to follow the trajectory of an artwork over a period covering the two years of the Art in the Public Realm Master’s degree, the trajectory which – as Sweden-born artist and Konstfack professor Magnus Bärtås has fairly pointed out when writing on artistic practice – is meandering.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Magnus Bärtås, You Told Me, p. 70, Gothenburg: Art Monitor, 2010.
**An actual introduction**  
The following text has been put together for the catalogue of the forthcoming exhibition:

“This work started with questions about nostalgia, and then continued as an investigation into the notions of the gaze and the poetic image. Employing simple tools in the form of photographic and sonic evidence, this project also reflects on nostalgia’s emotional relatives such as melancholy and even boredom – “the root of all evil – the despairing refusal to be oneself” (Søren Kierkegaard), a taboo and a sign of failure in the Experience Economy driven society.

The work stems from personal reflections on the abandoned countryside estates (“usad’ba” in Russian) in the Moscow area, built primarily between the 18th and early 20th centuries. These either permanent or summer residences of wealthy Russian families were appropriated by the Soviet State after the 1917 revolution. They were often converted into hospitals or recreational facilities and many were eventually left to dilapidate.”

**So where did it all start?**  
I discovered these buildings while writing the guidebook *Around Moscow*, which was commissioned by a Moscow-based publishing house, *Afisha*, in 2005. Living in Moscow and working as a journalist at that time, I was given an assignment to pick and describe places around the city that were worth a short visit during a weekend trip. This was my first encounter with these grand old buildings. A so-called “usad’ba” would normally comprise the main country house or mansion and outbuildings as well as the supporting farmland and woods surrounding the gardens and the grounds of the property.

Today, more than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, these buildings – or sometimes only their remaining fragments – are still there and they represent a part of Russia’s history that the Bolsheviks and their successors, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, were trying to discard as a part of the new policy. Often standing in the middle of the woods, with no road leading up to them, they can be seen as ruins: architectural corpses by some, or as a symbol of Russia’s Golden Age by others.
My first approach to this subject was a piece of journalistic research for the *Around Moscow* guide book, which later extended into a project I started while taking the Bachelor’s *Editorial Photography* course at the University of Brighton, UK. At that time my main interest was the meaning of photography, the potential of photographic representation as well as opportunities offered by this medium. This interest in photography is still there; however, within Konstfack’s *Art in the Public Realm* Master’s course I have decided to go further.

**The trajectory starts meandering**

One of the ideas that were born in my reflections as well as discussions with my tutors and fellow students was an attempt to examine what these buildings mean for Russians today. Having decided to follow this route, I used the following method. After researching an estate and finding out when it was built, how it developed over time, who it belonged to and what happened to it after the revolution, I made a trip to each place, taking a new companion with me every time. Starting with friends, I moved on to taking people with whom I didn’t have personal connections, or where such connections were insignificant. Once on the site, I gave my companions a short tour around the property, showing the remaining structures or their traces and explaining what they

were. I tried to give the participants all relevant information about the places, their history and character, so that they could have a picture of how the estates looked in the past, when they were inhabited. A day or two later I contacted these people and asked each of them the same set of questions: “Imagine that we have now moved 50 years into the future and you are the owner of the place you have been to. What would you do with it? What would it look like? What is daily life like there? How do you see yourself in those surroundings?”

These fairly short – 5–10 minutes long – interviews obviously differ from each other as they refer not only to different sites with their own history, but also reflect a personal history of each interviewee.³ At that time I thought that these snapshots of the individuals’ imaginary future could form the material I was looking for and could work with. Using the old houses as a portal to imagination, as a tool to trigger fantasies, my intention was to extract the stories that would eventually get assembled into a jigsaw puzzle revealing how a number of people from the country I was born in see their future, the past and the present. At that point I thought that that was the best method to build a multi-faceted collection of encounters that reflected on my personal motivation as a starting point. Having been born in Soviet Russia and having witnessed the collapse

³ See some examples of the interviews in Appendix I, p. 15.
of the Soviet Union and the birth and development of the new country, I felt it was a way to see and document how these turbulent times have affected the way people around me think and dream, and what they aspire to.


Collecting dreams and fantasies and making them the basis of their work is a method often employed by contemporary artists. American-born Susan Hiller often makes use of stories that can be seen as quite surreal. In her work Witness, 2000, hundreds of small speakers were suspended from the ceiling, each one playing a personal account of the sighting of a UFO.⁵ The artist pointed out a certain intimacy in her work: "Listening to these people whispering in your ears is like being a priest in a confessional."⁶ I find Hiller’s practice a perfect blend of a delicate, almost intimate material (reflections on a particular subject) and a straightforward way of presenting it (people's words being

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⁶ Ibid.
reproduced as they were spoken). This is the balance I’m looking for in my own practice.

The main issue I have with this part of the material now is its limited scope. With four interviews having been put in text form and translated into English with the help of a professional, and a couple still to be processed, I have come to the conclusion that there is insufficient material to achieve what I am trying to do. My feeling is that carrying out more interviews, and defining more precisely how I select my companions and what kind of questions I ask them, will help to elaborate this method and explore an important part of this work. For now I have decided to focus on that part of the material I am satisfied with.

**Test exhibition**

In January 2012 I organised an exhibition, *Memories of the Future, work in progress*, in one of Konstfack’s project rooms, which was an opportunity to try combining the photographic evidence – a shot of the main house at the Pushchino-na-Nare estate – with the sonic type: ambient sound that was recorded on the same site on the same day. The image was presented in a lightbox suspended from above; the sound was played through a four-speaker surround system, also suspended in the air.

By placing these elements in a dark room (the walls were covered with some black fabric to absorb the sound and – partially – light) my intention was to somehow reproduce the act of me going to one of the sites. The soundtrack contained some voice memos I made in Russian when walking around the estate, with the translated subtitles being projected onto the wall – therefore the viewer/listener could follow my steps in their imagination whilst being focused on the glowing image in the dark. I also tried to implement the interviews by inserting various “sound events” in the soundtrack – all of them were illustrating the stories about the imaginary future my companions shared with me after exploring the past and present of the site they visited (hence the title of the show).

Being present at the show on all four days of its run gave me an opportunity to collect feedback from the visitors – students at Konstfack, some teachers, and several people
Memories of the Future, work in progress. Installation view. Artist’s photograph.

from outside the school. The main conclusion I came to after analysing my impression of this installation was that the inserted sounds didn’t function in the way I hoped – instead of giving an idea of a possible future scenario for the place, they sounded more like unnecessary additions.

Other important observations I had and that were confirmed by the visitors’ comments were that the piece was slow, melancholic and even “boring”, creating a feeling of frustration – the viewers/listeners had to follow my wanderings, which didn’t succeed in finding anything. At the same time the piece was meditative and “provoked fantasies”.

**Where I am now**

“Old George Orwell got it backward. Big Brother isn’t watching. He’s singing and dancing. He’s pulling rabbits out of a hat. Big Brother’s busy holding your attention every moment you’re awake. He’s making sure you’re always distracted. He’s making sure you’re fully absorbed. He’s making sure your imagination withers. Until it’s as useful as your appendix. He’s making sure your attention is always filled. And this being
fed, it’s worse than being watched. With the world always filling you, no one has to worry about what’s in your mind. With everyone’s imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world.”

This passage from the *Lullaby* novel of American-born writer Chuck Palahniuk comes to my mind when I think of what’s been happening in Russia lately. The sense of liberation and new opportunities that was glimpsed for a very short moment after the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by the feelings of frustration – caused by growing corruption, social injustice and the establishment of a new authoritarian regime – as well as uncertainty about the country’s future. One of the most obvious and easiest ways to deal with these issues was to follow an escapist route – this is why the culture of consumerism has had such an immense boost in Russia. This can work as a good anaesthetic in the short term, but doesn’t solve the problem. The gaping void is still there. And this becomes so obvious to me when I visit the abandoned estates – the point where an enormously rich history and a present full of frustrations meet. It is the perfect place to think about how these layers meet and, if one is in the mood, probably to reflect on the country’s vague future. Nostalgia, this “denial of the painful present... a golden age thinking – the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one is living in – a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present” is one of the feelings that get activated by that space – and I dare to hope that my work transmits this sensation to the audience.

I am not a big fan of defining an exact meaning of art works – including my own. Neither am I a supporter of one-liners describing an artist’s credo. However, I find it useful to think about possible interpretations of art (again, including my own). Hence the following question: how does this project connect to an audience with a completely different background – let’s say, Swedish people who don’t have the trauma people from Russia and most Eastern European countries have got from two world wars and the consequent changes of regimes, beliefs, values, history? I would like to think that nostalgia and her emotional relatives such as melancholy and boredom are the links to any spectator. Boredom is something that both Russian and the European countries’

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economies are definitely taking into consideration and zealously fight with on behalf of their citizens. But what happens if an individual decides to withdraw from this structure, what if a person gets to the point when he or she doesn’t want to be constantly entertained? And what if this person is an artist who consciously brings this boredom into their work, respecting the audience, but trying to reach their hearts and minds with this rather unpopular and unconventional tool?

**Artistic context**

I do not find it easy to name artists that I can relate to as my work can be seen from a number of perspectives. One of the art practitioners who often works “along the borders between documentary and fiction” is Danish-born Joachim Koester. In his 2003

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project *The Kant Walks* he created a photo sequence tracing the daily promenades taken by the famous philosopher in his native Königsberg (later annexed to the Soviet Union and renamed Kaliningrad). In his brilliant attempt to intertwine different stories – some of them personal (Koester describing his meeting with a Soviet professor who helped him to draw the maps) and some referring to the photographic evidence of an actual place (finding traces of the German structures in the middle of the Soviet-period city) – the artist sheds light onto so-called “blind spots”: “sites that, normally overlooked, might still provide insights”. Koester’s practice and writing helped me with understanding my own project – in fact, the discarded country houses can be seen as another example of the blind spots. His projects – like *The Kant Walks* – also demonstrated how historical accounts of an actual place can be combined with a personal encounter of the same location and turned into a work of art.

There are a good number of artists whose work deals in various ways with the ideas of a house, the house as a home and as a domestic space. Reflecting on such artworks as Rachel Whiteread’s *Ghost*, 1990 and *House*, 1993, Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, 1948, as well as a photographic “interpretation of the interrupted urban landscape” by Robert Polidori, helped me to refine the idea of my own work.

**Theoretical context**

Some of the key notions my work deals with are poetic image, poetic imagination and the poetics of space. All three were thoroughly studied and described by Gaston Bachelard, a 20th-century French philosopher and a major contributor to the fields of poetics and the philosophy of science. His accurate writings on the meaning of domestic space helped me understand the directions for possible interpretations of it and what “the relation of a new poetic image to an archetype lying dormant in the depths of the unconscious” is. I tend to believe that the objects I have chosen as a starting point for

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my project (old abandoned houses) function as “a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining”.14

Bachelard’s observations also helped me to identify certain conditions in which the daydreams and fantasies are born and develop. One of the crucial features here is a certain degree of impossibility for having a clear vision and, as a consequence, providing a clear description of the desired object:

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home... Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts – serious, sad thoughts – and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.15

And last but not least, Bachelard’s examination of a poetic image demonstrates that it’s not an echo of the past, but the present that is conclusive for the poetical which I am dealing with: “The poetic act has no past: at least, no recent past through which to trace its incubation and expression.”16

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**Some observations on presentation**

The idea I have chosen for the degree show is to build a black box divided into two sections by a diagonal wall. On each side of the wall there is a wallpaper with a print of a house. This way of presenting the images refers to the fragility of their subject: the wall erected for the exhibition will be destroyed together with the wallpaper right after it. Both sections of this black box are equipped with simple sound systems playing the sound that I recorded during my walk at the corresponding site. English subtitles are played on the screens installed inside to help the audience to follow my wanderings.

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16 Ibid.
A reasonable question: why not employ the genre of a video portrait to document the subject? First, choosing a photograph helps one to get a notion of gaze involved in the work (an important part of it relies on my reflections in relation to how we look at the images) as well as to reveal the status of this image “migrating between different regions of the world”\textsuperscript{17} – by presenting it in Sweden and in Russia emotions and thoughts are triggered differently. Second, showing a static image alongside a dynamic sound recording associated with this image creates the gap, the space that the audience is invited to fill in with their own reflections on the chosen still. Third, this combination provokes a sense of frustration and boredom – the notions that I see as a part of my work.

And a very short note on the actual images: by choosing the front elevation, building the photographs symmetrically, striving for maximum sharpness and detailed elaboration, I aim to follow the transparent approach I have been keen on in this work.

\textsuperscript{17} This aspect gets attention in the work of German-born artist Hito Steyerl. Life in Film: Hito Steyerl, published in Frieze magazine, issue 114, April 2008, quote from an online version of the article: www.frieze.com/issue/article/hito_steyerl/ (retrieved 6 May 2012).
**Keeping it short: conclusion**

Taking this assignment as an opportunity to reflect on my ongoing project, I made an attempt to describe how my interest in the abandoned countryside estates in the Moscow area developed into observations on nostalgia, melancholy and boredom and how these can be elaborated into artistic work. I tried to look at the subject from various perspectives that I believe are relevant to my practice including those within artistic and theoretical contexts. As my project is in the development stage and constantly changing following the rules and principles of my own working process as well as the critical observations of my tutors and peer students, it might be difficult to make any definite conclusions at this stage, although I definitely saw this exercise as useful.
Appendix I: Andrei, 30, and Tatiana, 58, talk about Pushchino-na-Nare

*Pushchino-na-Nare estate, main building, May 2011. Artist’s photograph.*

Andrei

-Andrei, we are being transported 50 years into the future, you are the owner of this place; all of this, it is yours. What would you do with it?

-It would be cool to try to restore all of this. Because if one were to buy a plot of land in an open field, it would make more sense to build a modern villa there. But to build here, you need to make use of that which came with the land.

-Would you look for the original architectural plans, hire an architect?

-Yes. Though perhaps there is a way of conserving the ruins – cleaning them up and putting a fence around them, so that the mansion would stop falling apart further, and then one can use it for its heritage: give conducted tours. A new residential house could be built in a different place, but in the grounds of the estate.

And so, if it were my house, it would be white with a huge terrace – the fountains, moreover, would be totally unnecessary.
-Would you cover them with earth?

- No, I would turn them into a swimming pool – wide, rectangular. And let there be servants, so that it would be a real lordly life.

-Would you live there alone in this house?

- Most likely with the family. On the one hand, this estate would be built as an ancestral nest, to move all the relatives here. On the other hand, I am not sure that in 50 years such an approach – doing everything for the family – would still be appropriate. Considering today’s cosmopolitism and globalisation, it is possible that none of this would have any meaning.

It would be good if there was a room for my daughter or other relatives in this house, for when they come to visit me. But most likely I would live here alone or else with my life partner.

- Wouldn’t it boring to be alone in such a house?

- It all depends on the person: some people are always bored. I don’t have such a problem. And this house, fully restored to its splendour, white and shining like an egg, is a perfect way to anticipate old age.

Tatiana

- Tatiana, we are being transported 50 years into the future, it is 2061. You are the owner of this property. You can do with it whatever you want: you have the money and the rights. What would you do in that case? What would this place be like in your custody?

- I would create an ethnographic museum there, “A Russian Estate of the 17th century.” Visitors would be greeted by people dressed in costumes from that era, with manners from that era; they might be, perhaps, actors, though not famous ones. The estate would consist of a few halls. In order to give an idea of what Russian estates of that time were like, there needs to be a parlour for receiving guests, as well as a study for the owner. Someone would sit in the study, as if he were the owner of the estate, minding his own business, so that people would get the idea.
-Would it be in the same format as the Skansen museum?

-Yes, exactly! There would be a parlour for receiving guests, a dance hall... And since people would be hungry after being on the road, I would seat them at the table, which would be set with dishes from that century, as well as tablecloths, napkins and silverware. The guests would be served with Russian specialities from that era. In the summertime there would surely be mushrooms, and so mushroom dishes... And since there is a river nearby, and most likely it was full of fish at that time, there would be fish dishes, a real Russian *ukha* [a traditional Russian fish broth]. Tea would be served from a samovar, of course... In August there would be *medovukha* [a kind of mead] – it is not supposed to be an alcoholic drink, it is a great thirst quencher and very good for you, as it is made out of honey.

After their supper, the guests would move to the sitting room, where it would be possible to rest, get to know one another, and share impressions. Afterwards I would take them to the park. In the summer I would place the benches near the fountains, in case people just wanted to sit there and talk, or for the elderly. Most likely the river used to be wider than it is now; perhaps I would arrange to have boats, so that young people could go boating. For the elderly I would have carriages. In the summer there would be open carriages; I would take people down the lane to see the sights. In the winter there would also be open carriages, and for those interested in going for a ride, I would cover them with sheepskin, furs or hides.

In all the buildings I would recreate the interiors in the style of that time. There would a dance hall in the main house as well as a music room. I guess the servants would have lived in an annex, which I would recreate to show how simple people lived, the butlers and the cooks, and what the kitchen looked like then.

-Do I understand you correctly that there would be an entrance fee for visiting this estate?

-Yes, but the entrance fee would be quite democratic. Clearly one needs to pay the gardeners and the cooks, and for the maintenance of the river and the stables. I don’t know what kind of money there would be then, but if it were today, the cost would be
no more than 150-200 roubles. Otherwise if there were no entrance fee, there would be a totally different attitude towards the estate.

- Would you live there as well?

- No, it would be purely a museum. I would have a house built for me in the village nearby.

I would restore the estate in exactly the same manner as it was, without adding anything to it. I would restore the house and annexes, clear the lanes, restore the fountains.

- Would you make an appearance at the estate? If so, in what capacity?

- In the capacity of hostess. I would meet and greet people with the words, “Welcome, dear guests. What are your wishes? Everyone should share a meal after the road, take a rest, and then, whatever you wish. Either go for a ride in the carriage, or to the fountain, or go boating.”

And sometimes, to see how it all looks from a different standpoint, I would visit the estate as a guest.
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