

Igor Mukhin *Mein Moskau* [My Moscow]

A book review by [Rosemarie Zens](#) for Russland HEUTE, 6 May 2013

Scenes from everyday life in the Russian capital between 1985 and 2010 are featured in more than 200 black-and-white photographs. Remarkably diverse and creative, says our critic.

Once in a while you do a double-take. I certainly did as I was leafing through Igor Mukhin's photo book entitled *Mein Moskau* [My Moscow], published last year by the Swiss Benteli Verlag. Why? Because I'd suddenly recognised some of his photographs. I had seen them once before at the exhibition of contemporary Russian photography at the Photo Biennale in Houston in 2012. The artist had been showing there alongside Boris Mikhailov, Valera and Natasha Cherakshin, and others as key exponents of a group of photographers of the 'transition phase'. We are talking about the period during which Soviet Russian society was beginning to open up after the relaxation of state censorship. It was also the time when unregulated capitalist growth was shaping up, and a mass culture was emerging.

Igor Mukhin, born in Moscow in 1969, is a freelance photographer and lecturer at the Rodchenko School of Photography. Thematically, the title of his book, *Mein Moskau*, is already highly indicative: inner participation and contemporary testimony. Snapshots of scenes from everyday life in the Russian capital are featured in more than 200 black-and-white photographs. The blend of press photography, anecdotal style and film stills certainly reflects the mood and the atmosphere of a time when individuals sought to assert themselves against the ebb and flow of disparate currents. Motif and composition complement each other in images that have a close affinity with classic street photography; they work at different levels, each resolved in masterly technical fashion.

On closer examination, the continual shift in perspective in the choice and the sequence of the photographs included in the book reveals discontinuities, traces of the forgotten and the illusory autonomy of the individual. It is an unrelentingly critical and unembellished gaze at one's own city: at concrete residential blocks towering over makeshift tarpaulin dwellings out of which a hand is captured reaching out towards the viewer. Or a person photographed stepping out of a container, both hands clutching a glass panel, their face barely visible, their contours outlined on the wall seemingly much larger than they are in reality. Or the five men emerging like characters in a play from a staggered stage backdrop, their faces blankly staring out into the emptiness. It is no coincidence that one of the photographs features a book of the playwright Samuel Beckett on the photographer's own desk, an artist's reference to the absurd, the meaninglessness, the weariness and hopelessness of it all.

In another photograph, the counterpart to the serene faces of young women with tired wide-open eyes and dismissive or salacious gestures is the anxiously fearful glance of a dog tied to a railing by its leash.

Rather than reinforce the 'western cliché' of 'quotidian life in Russia between booze and burial' (to paraphrase Zakhar Prilepin at the Berlin conference of the Akademie der Künste on 20.4.13 *Wohin stürmst du Russland* and the author of the Preface), the photographer shows a kinship to the city's inhabitants; he takes them seriously, whether through irony or criticism; he captures their disorientation, the chaos, and the desolate conditions in a time of pervasive neo-liberalism and regressive civilisation. It is the portrait of a lost and bewildered generation, passive or merely in search of a sense of belonging.

In these photographs one element capable of generating the forces needed for a turnaround and a new beginning is set out with a haunting self-representation as a reflection of an awareness that does not only respond to circumstances, but also depicts the individual in an unusual way, in both image composition and close-up, so much so that it lingers in the viewer's memory.

In Houston, Igor Mukhin's photographic oeuvre was adjudged to possess remarkable versatility and creativity. Certainly, the period between 1985 and 2010 is nothing if not multifaceted. And, indeed, as the country has progressed down the road from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Glasnost and Perestroika to Putin's 'controlled democracy', the phase characterised by a spirit of optimism has been replaced with disillusion. Since then, after an aesthetic of disintegration, the road now being sought is one that leads inwards, with metaphysical, religious, and often obscure themes. So let's hope that the artistic pretension of an artist such as Igor Mukhin, combined with a gaze that is both critical of society and sympathetic to its people, is preserved as an important aesthetic voice in Russian photography.