BORIS MIKHAILOV: UKRAINIAN DIARY

10 October 2023 > 28 January 2024
Palazzo Esposizioni Rome
curated by Laurie Hurwitz in collaboration with Boris and Vita Mikhailov

Palazzo Esposizioni Rome presents the most important retrospective to date dedicated in Italy to the Ukrainian artist **Boris Mikhailov** (Kharkiv, 1938), curated by **Laurie Hurwitz**, in collaboration with **Boris** and **Vita Mikhailov**. The exhibition is promoted by the Department of Culture of Rome Capital and the Azienda Speciale Palaexpo, produced by the Azienda Speciale Palaexpo and organised in collaboration with the **Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris**.

The exhibition at Palazzo Esposizioni, the result of a cultural policy that increases international collaborations between institutions, ideally continues that of the Maison Européen de la photographie de Paris curated by **Laurie Hurwitz,** in collaboration with **Boris** and **Vita Mikhailov**, expanding it with a section dedicated to the work done by Mikhailov in Rome.

Today considered one of the most influential contemporary artists from Eastern Europe, Mikhailov has conceived, in more than fifty years, a body of experimental photographic work that explores social and political subjects. Since the 1960s, he has been committed to documenting the tumultuous changes in Ukraine linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disastrous consequences of its dissolution.

Over the years, his pioneering research has included documentary photography, conceptual work, painting and performance. Conceived in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition brings together more than 800 images from the most important historical series to the most recent work.

Mikhailov has mostly articulated his work in series, which vary enormously in terms of technique, format and approach. The exhibition brings together the images selected from about twenty series made between 1965 and the 2000s.

Mikhailov has challenged every categorisation by unravelling the established visual codes. He has created fruitful connections between photographs and texts, and between different images, often composing them in superimpositions and diptychs on which he has intervened with blurs, cut-outs or hand-colouring that accentuate their ironic, poetic or nostalgic character. He has created these images to the point of theorising the concept of "bad" photography: images deliberately conceived in low contrast, blurry, full of visible flaws, or on poor-quality paper, in order to subvert the glorified imagery of social realism and glossy photography.

The series produced while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union aim to question collective memory and reflect the societal contradictions that existed at the time. In *Yesterday's Sandwich*, made from 1965 onwards, the artist shows a dual reality, ambiguous and poetic, juxtaposing beauty and ugliness. In *Red* (1968–1975), he underlines the omnipresence of the colour red, evoking the pervasive presence of the communist regime and the way it introduced itself into individual consciousness and collective memory. The series *Luriki* (1971–1985) and *Sots Art* (1975–1986) are a cynical reflection on the way propaganda images artificially idealise reality. The underside of the proselytised utopia is also revealed in *Salt Lake* (1986), images of bathers taken clandestinely on the shore of a lake in southern Ukraine.

Mikhailov also frequently uses humour as a weapon of subversion, a means of resistance to oppression and a potential stimulus to emancipation. This is the case in the series of provocative self-portraits *I am not I* (1992) and *National Hero* (1992), in which, more so than a direct criticism of society, he uses self-criticism and irony.

Other series created during and after the collapse of the USSR bear witness to the failure of both communism and capitalism in Ukraine and shed light on the origins of war: from *By the ground* (1991) and *At Dusk* (1993) to *Case History* (1997–1998); while in the emblematic series *Case History* there is a devastating portrayal of the disenfranchised in Kharkiv, left homeless by the new capitalist society.

Through his uncompromising approach to controversial subjects, Boris Mikhailov demonstrates the subversive power of art. For more than half a century, he has been bearing witness to the grip of the Soviet system on his country, constructing a complex and powerful photographic narrative of Ukraine's contemporary history that, in the light of current events, is all the more poignant and enlightening.

The exhibition is accompanied by the book *Boris Mikhailov 1965–2022*, Mörel / MEP, London-Paris 2023 (English language) and the bilingual publication (Italian and English), *Saggi e Note. Essays and Notes*, Mörel, London 2023, with texts by the artist and Simon Baker, director of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP) in Paris, Laurie Hurwitz, Leigh Ledare.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Salt Lake, 1986

"I went to a place in southern Ukraine that I'd often heard about from my father, who grew up nearby", says the artist, "lakes where, after the revolution, in the 1920s and 1930s, people bathed naked, believing the warm, salty water had healing properties. I saw crowds beside an old factory, washing themselves by the factory pipes and smearing themselves with mud. I must have photographed everything in two, three hours.

It seemed to be the quintessence of the life of an average person in the Soviet context. Despite the atrocious, polluted, inhumane environment, the people were relaxed, calm, happy. It seemed so strange that people would seek out such a situation, such an impossible place, but there they

were: families, old men, and women lying down like odalisques or Greek statues." The artist later toned these photographs sepia, like photos from another era. "There was a kind of an interplay there, an amalgamation between old and new. Old, because it was something my father had seen, and at the same time a reality that still existed, like a photographic game with postmodernism. An outworking of an idea I'd previously explored: we're there yet not there. It's both today and a long time ago."

Case History, 1997-1998
A few years after the collapse of communism, Mikhailov saw that in his hometown of Kharkiv, not only had a new ruling elite of millionaires emerged, but a considerable part of the population had also been plunged into poverty, and the number of homeless people had swollen dramatically.

"After an absence of about a year spent in Germany on a stipend, I returned to Ukraine. Something had changed. Kharkiv had become more beautiful, people were richer, cars abounded. Then I noticed shadows passing in the streets; homeless people, more and more numerous. I was shocked. I had the idea of making a requiem dedicated to these men and women who were dying, of photographing them as if they were going to the gas chamber. In their defenceless nakedness, I discovered an even worse reality, marked by the wounds on their bodies."

He made a series of 400 raw, deeply felt portraits that intentionally transgressed the codes of the photojournalism – he paid his subjects, and he and his wife often brought them home to feed them and give them a bath in exchange for posing, often in ways that evoke a *Pietà* or *The Descent from the Cross.* "I saw it as my social responsibility to photograph these people," says the artist.

***Green*, 1991-1993**
This monumental triptych of hand-coloured silver prints shows a world tragically falling apart, a decaying scrapyard in a sickly, overgrown landscape; with on the right, a figure attempting vainly to reactivate a decrepit tractor. "The colour for me is like a swamp... like moss on the past Soviet life," says the artist. Created just after the dissolution of the USSR, Mikhailov proposes a metaphor for societal deterioration.
Unlike his fellow photographers, who sought technical perfection, Mikhailov felt that glossy, impeccably crafted photographs were incapable of reflecting the existing social conditions he saw around him – "lousy photography for a lousy reality." On poor-quality paper, he made prints that were deliberately low-contrast, blurry and full of visible flaws, a way of subverting the glorified imagery of social realism. Here, he furthers the concept, using stains and dripping paint on the thin, creased paper as if embodying the worn, impoverished lives he saw around him.

At Dusk, 1993
Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mikhailov wandered the streets of Kharkiv with a swing-lens camera that took in a 120-degree panoramic view. Holding it at hip height, he guided

the viewer's gaze downward, as if to bring us closer to the experience of destitute figures queuing for food or lying in the street.

The prints were hand-painted in cobalt blue, the colour of twilight, alluding to Ukraine's transition to independence. The haunting blue colour is also intimately linked to traumatic memories from the artist's childhood. When World War II broke out, his father enlisted as a Red Army officer and left home; his mother, who was Jewish, fled with three-year-old Boris to Kirov in one of the last trains out of Kharkiv, just before the Nazis entered the city. He remembers being awakened by the wailing of air-raid sirens in the middle of the night: "Blue for me is the colour of the blockade, hunger and the war.... I can still remember the bombings, the howling sirens and the searchlights in the wonderful, dark-blue sky. Blue, blue, light blue..."

Red, 1965-1978
Bridging documentary and conceptual art, *Red* brings together more than 70 images taken in Kharkiv in the late 1960s and 1970s, all containing the colour red – a powerful symbol of the revolution and the Soviet empire, showing the extent to which everyday life was had been pervaded by communist ideology. The photographs are hung in a loose, disorganised grid, drawing visitors into a complex, disjointed vision.

"The word 'red' in Russian has the same root as the word for beauty. It also means the Revolution and evokes blood and the red flag. Everyone associates red with Communism. But few people know that red permeated all our lives.

Demonstrations and parades are an important part of this series. It's a place where one of the main images of Soviet propaganda – the face of happy Soviet life, sure about its future – was being created. They became absolutely kitsch and vulgar, not a carnival but some kind of Soviet crusade. I sometimes felt I was surrounded by a herd of cynics, victims and fools, followed by people wearing red ribbons as if they were policemen. As if the regime were using people's wish to celebrate for its own purposes. And it was important for me to photograph them in such a way that one could tell the 'Soviet' from the 'human'."

Berdyansk, Beach, Sunday, 11 am to 1 pm, 1981
"These photographs were part of my efforts to challenge the ideal. The hero had become fat, obese. He took vacations. He got naked. This 'disrobing' of the hero introduced something important into my work.
At this time, I saw a man in Berdyansk who was an average person, but sort of outside the pressure of ideology, as if the regime didn't have power over him. He was just the way he was, busy with his everyday activities. Deeply rooted Soviet traits suddenly revealed themselves: there he is, standing at the seafront, his arm simply outstretched in front of him... and all of a sudden, we see the pose of a Soviet leader," says the artist.

The artist toned his silver prints with sepia, thus imbuing the pictures with a sense of nostalgia: "This photo reminded me of images taken in America at the time of the Great Depression fifty years earlier. When a modern image looks like one from long ago, it seems to ask us where we are now. I call this phenomenon 'parallel photo-historical association'".

I Am Not I, 1992

In these provocative, dramatically-lit images, the naked artist plays the role of anti-hero in burlesque, self-deprecating self-portraits that mock the traditional masculine stereotype idealised by the recently fallen Soviet regime. At times recalling Buster Keaton or pantomime artist Marcel Marceau, he exposes his aging, vulnerable body, donning a curly black wig, brandishing a sword or artificial phallus or holding an enema bag. "Trying on the icons of Western mass culture, like Rambo," he says, he assumed pseudo-athletic or contemplative poses that sometimes call to mind works by Rodin or Caravaggio. "The country was changing. If in the Soviet era we knew who the heroes were, now the very idea of a hero had been trashed. So, there could only be an anti-hero."

National Hero, 1992

Dressed in Soviet military garb but replacing the Soviet insignia replaced with traditional Ukrainian embroidery, Mikhailov created a seemingly simple self-portrait that has a troubling ambiguity, in which the face's delicate beauty, with its bright blue eyes and sherbet-pink background challenge classic images of masculinity.

"Starting in the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was in the process of disintegration, and in 1991 the dissolution was complete: it fell apart into fifteen independent national republics, which at first retained much of the same inertia. I thought a new country should have a new national hero, and I made a series of self-portraits, dressed in outfits decorated with Ukrainian ornamentation, as if I were developing new state symbols, but also painting on the photo as if looking back to the context of Soviet censorship, making fun of the way Soviet propaganda prettified banal situations."

Dance, 1978

Dance captures light-hearted moments of open-air dancing in Kharkiv. These scenes reflect Mikhailov's interest in photographing ordinary subjects. "Dance isn't a description of anything specifically Soviet. It's about a group of people who could easily be from anywhere; people who have a sort of generic uniqueness, who fit a global, humanist view of life," he says. "Frequently, the images show women dancing together, as if preparing subconsciously for war, when the men would be sent away again".

Series of Four, early 1980s

This series arose by chance: due to a shortage of photographic paper, Mikhailov printed four small-format, black-and-white pictures on the same sheet, as if creating a single image. "I wanted to make contact prints but had no small-format paper, so I fitted four images onto the same sheet. I noticed that I rather liked the effect when all four photographs were taken from one place—it created a kind of compression of space".

In this series, the accident is conceptualised. Multiple viewpoints become a metaphor for a complex reality, an ambiguous, fragmented view of a world in constant flux, contradicting the one-sidedness of Soviet ideology, The cinematic effect of the presentation also invites viewers to look for unexpected connections between the images. Taken in winter while wandering around the barren suburbs of Kharkiv, these "bad" images, crooked, sloppily printed and full of flaws, depict a series of non-events, and characterise a life of repetition and boredom.

Luriki, 1971 - 1985
After losing his job as an engineer, Mikhailov eked out a living as a commercial photographer; working on the black market, he enlarged, retouched and hand-coloured snapshots of weddings, newborns or family members who had died during the war. In what is considered the first use of found material in contemporary Soviet photography, Mikhailov then appropriated these photos for his own practice. Often using kitsch colours, he made them more "beautiful", he says, staying within the law while simultaneously mocking the way Soviet propaganda glorified mundane events. "As an average person, I could understand an average life, and this helped me reimagine and reuse materials I had collected to create a series of Soviet-style painted portraits, trying to imitate popular taste. *Luriki* exposed the iconography of the Soviet way of life. Together, the images were like a Soviet family album, a collection of surreal, ridiculous situations. They made people smile, amused by the irony, but from my point of view, they were subversive".

Sots Art, 1975-86
Mikhailov took photographs depicting sanctioned socialist imagery (parades, students in military training, young people doing gymnastics...), then subverted them by hand-colouring them in garish hues that reflected his disillusionment with Soviet ideals. "This introduced a sense of irony, showing what was absurd, even grotesque about our life, beautiful and kitsch at the same time," he says. "The challenge was to make an image that would not be openly anti-Soviet, that would only hint at anti-Sovietness. Instead of being openly critical – which could land you in jail – you had to find a subtle way to photograph subjects that were not forbidden or 'bad' but that actually became beautiful".

The title of this series refers to a movement created in 1972 by the Moscow-born duo Komar and Melamid that deconstructs Socialist Realism and blends it with elements of Dada and Pop art. "This kind of infantilism, of hand-colouring photographs the way young children do, was like all Soviet dissident photography, a way to compromise and undermine the images that were bearing down on us from television and movie screens, from everywhere".

Yesterday's Sandwich, late 1960s- late 1970s

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"Self-taught and rather careless, one day I accidentally did something that would have been taboo for a professional photographer: I inadvertently threw a bunch of slides onto the bed, and two of them stuck together. Fascinated by the resulting image—a totally new, metaphoric image—I started superimposing one slide on top of another like a sandwich. I continued experimenting, randomly substituting other slides and obtaining new combinations that reflected the dualism and contradictions of Soviet society.

This was a period of hidden meanings and coded messages in all genres. Given the scarcity of real news, everyone was on the lookout for the smallest piece of new information, hoping to uncover a secret or read something between the lines. Encryption was the only way to explore forbidden subjects such as politics, religion, nudity. The *Sandwich* series went against the tenets of official art. And like all unofficial work, it concealed within it many coded allusions".

In the early 1970s, Mikhailov set the slideshow to music from Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), which for the artist evokes an "exaggeration of beauty" and "paradise lost".

Viscidity, 1982
In the early 1980s, Mikhailov combined text and image in a conceptual way, creating a new kind of artist's book that would become a cult object: he carelessly pasted his photographs onto pieces of paper, then scribbled thoughts – banal, poetic or philosophical – in the margins. His fragmentary thoughts were not meant as captions, nor as an illustration or elucidation of the photos; they were often utterly unrelated to them and intended to be equally important, a composite reflection on the social stagnation of the Soviet Union.

"Viscidity is the period in which the country lived then – a peaceful, quiet, featureless, dull life, a time of deep political stagnation, a frozen day-to-dayness. There was neither catharsis nor nostalgia, just grey, everyday life. Nothing was happening, and nothing was at all interesting. My photographs don't offer anything new: they are old, monotonous. No one wants anything like that. Something compelled me to write: the internal tension of hopelessness. This tension unites these lousy photographs with these lousy texts and describes the viscidity of the surrounding life.

There's no beauty here, only unchanging ordinariness and timelessness," he wrote. "My desire to take a beautiful picture of a trail of snow just led me back to some garbage cans".

By the Ground, 1991
When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Mikhailov took to the streets with his panoramic camera hung low around his waist. While this format is conventionally used for sweeping vistas and beautiful landscapes, he captured bleak street scenes that reminded him of Maxim Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* (1901–1902), which depicts the extreme poverty of Russia's lower class. "I realised we had reached these depths, that they were our own. Things were beginning to fall apart. The country was breaking up. The streets were overflowing with poverty. Streets reflect social processes like a mirror. I wanted to take photos of it all: to shoot and shoot and shoot life at ground level."

He toned the silver prints brown, evoking dirt and dust while imbuing the pictures with a sense of nostalgia: "I 'aged' the pictures by toning them with sepia, embedding the photos in layers of time to trigger parallel, photo-historical associations, to show that photography has become as illusory as existence itself."

Black Archive, 1968-1979
Black Archive documents everyday life in Kharkiv, often revealing the disparity between outside and inside. At the time, anyone making photos on the street could be taken for a spy. In the public space, images taken clandestinely capture solitary pedestrians, often from behind and at odd angles, while the private sphere is seen as a space of liberty, as in joyful shots of naked women proudly showing off their curves.
The series also introduces Mikhailov's concept of "bad photography" – of intentionally making small, sloppily printed images, often blurry and low-contrast, full of defects – as a metaphor and a tool for social critique.

Studies of Rome, **2002**
This is the first exhibition of Boris Mikhailov's work in Rome in more than twenty years: in 2002, he participated in the first edition of FotoGrafia - Festival Internazionale di Roma founded by Marco Delogu, in which he showed his work with Nan Goldin at the MACRO. Especially for this exhibition, the artist created a composition using snapshots from his archives taken during that trip to Rome.

Rome, the "Open City, " can't be photographed… it's withstood the millions of shots that have already been taken of it. *Is it possible to capture the atmosphere of the city by responding to your feelings, your intuitions, your contemplations? You can follow to someone from behind, hoping they lead you somewhere; but it can be like climbing a mountain, when you see only the feet of the person in front of you, and can't see anything else.*
All roads lead to Rome! One might say that the spirit of Rome came to me through Italian cinema, and my real encounter with the city began when I met a real Roman, Gigi Giannuzzi. And the first time we came to the city in 2002, we explored Rome together with Gigi.
I filmed a great deal there, but for a long time I put this material aside, because I thought the city had not given itself to me; even so, I used some of these pictures, and still do. Brought together on the waves of memory, this series comes from my Rome archives. Thanks to the new composition I imagined for this exhibition, it has taken on a new meaning for me.
The city has its own accents: a sculpture gallery filled with Roman horses; the divine light of Caravaggio's paintings in the gloom of a church; the desolation of the beach at night with shadows of a tragic memory.... Sometimes it felt as if we were in a film: ...on the way to Ostia, Gigi, avoiding traffic, driving onto the pavement.... in Rome, an encounter with a real Argentine tango, serious, deep, without dancing. A multitude of small pictures that seem to be about nothing: walking, standing, sitting, looking, a flow of sensory sensations. For me, these small, banal images, often repeated, are justified by their future possible compositional connections. And in this display case, from these small, seemingly unimportant images, I create spots of various groups: night, beach, street, church, house... which I view as if from above*... And everything, as if on pillars, linked to

several images from the series "Temptation of Death" (2019), as a reminder of death—*memento mori…*
But the breath of the composition is about *life*, time and place; breath is life! And *breath* comes from the interaction of large and small works, of groups, connecting lines, the holes in-between them.... And if, as Buñuel warned, there is no truth, this is the truth of my perception of this city, linked to history, religion and cinema.
Gigi's words come from the back of my mind: "Bob, what do you want?" And the pictures float out from the depths of my memory: the irrepressible Gigi ...the church where for the first time in my life I was struck deeply by a group of people quietly standing in a circle, in the centre a hand placed on the head of someone suffering... and names come floating out Gigi, Guido, Cristiana, Stefania, Marco…For me, coming from such a different world, so many things seemed important! Perhaps these moments aren't Rome but the feeling they gave me. And as you can see, it's a methodology.
Rome is *la grande Bellezza*, and a great mystery! Both are incomprehensible, but many have tried and will try to do so. I'm grateful to the past that I didn't have time to say thank you, and I'm grateful to the present that I can do it now: "To the Eternal City, to everyone I've followed, thank you for helping me find the links between the Rome I know and the one I have!"

I dedicate this work to the memory of Gigi Giannuzzi, who was born here and stayed here forever.

B.M., August 2023

Boris Mikhailov a dissident artist
A key figure of the Kharkiv School of Photography (KSOP)
In 1971, Boris Mikhailov was one of eight photographers who established the Vremya group in Kharkiv, an experimental non-conformist art collective that is considered the core of the Kharkiv School of Photography. The group's members (Boris Mikhailov, Evgeniy Pavlov, Jury Rupin, Anatoliy Makiyenko, Oleg Malyovany, Oleksandr Sitnichenko, Oleksandr Suprun, and Gennadiy Tubalev), thus formalised an underground movement sparked in an informal photo club in the 1960s, to create a visual tool for cultural resistance. Although the name Vremya (Time) sounds banal, it was a call for revolution – a statement of defiance against a painful system from the past. They called their artistic objective the "blow theory", to produce works whose impact would strike the viewer hard and fast. Boris Mikhailov, who emerged as their informal leader, was the driving force for much of their shared aesthetic.
Vremya developed a diverse but recognizable photographic language that frequently depicted nudes and an unseemly Soviet reality. Persecuted by the party's ideological watchdogs, routinely searched by the KGB, its only public exhibition of their works, held in Kharkiv in 1983, shut down on opening day, the Vremya collective dissolved in the 1980s. The group nevertheless formed the basis for the school established a few years later.
The group's influence was far-reaching and continues to be deeply felt throughout Ukraine; a second and third wave of younger artists are still inspired by their ideas today. Boris Mikhailov continues to be a beloved mentor for many of them. In 2018, the Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography was also founded through the initiative of Sergiy Lebedynskyy, a member of the Shilo Group, in close collaboration with Boris and Vita Mikhailov.

Biography

Trained as an engineer, Boris Mikhailov (born in Kharkiv in 1938) is a self-taught photographer. In the mid-1960s, his superiors provided him with a camera to make a short film about the state-owned factory where he was employed. He also used it to take nude pictures of his wife and developed them in the factory darkroom. During a raid, the KGB found the photos, and he was fired on the spot. Hurt and angry, he determined to take up the camera full-time.

At the time, artists whose work did not conform to the official USSR aesthetic risked arrest, interrogation, even imprisonment. Unflattering images of daily life (people who were poor, ill, drunk) were forbidden. Nudes were regarded as pornographic, a criminal offense. Taking photographs of railway stations could lead to suspicion of being a spy.

Under constant surveillance, Mikhailov was frequently followed and harassed, his cameras broken and his rolls of film destroyed. He eked out a living taking part-time jobs or making photos on the black market, in parallel creating a body of personal, experimental work by turns poetic, playful and uncompromising, in reaction against idealised images of Soviet life. He showed his work in "dissident kitchens", clandestine exhibitions organised among friends in their flats.

In the early 1970s, with a small group of friends, he also established a collective of experimental, non-conformist photographers that would later become the core of the Kharkiv School of Photography. Mikhailov emerged as their informal leader and became the driving force for much of their aesthetic The group's influence continues to be deeply felt throughout Ukraine; a second and third wave of younger artists are still inspired by their ideas today. Boris Mikhailov is a beloved mentor for many of them.

In work often marked by irony and self-mockery, Boris Mikhailov plays with a wide range of imagery to bear witness, in uncompromising terms, to the harsh social realities of his time. The interplay of these haunting images—beautiful and ugly, disturbing and poignant, brutal and tender—has given rise to a compelling and unique view of history that resonates today more than ever before.

One of the most important figures on the international art scene, he has received many prestigious awards, among them the 2015 Goslar Kaiserring Award, the Citibank Private Bank Photography Prize (now the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Award) in 2001 and the Hasselblad Award in 2000. He represented Ukraine at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and again in 2017. His work has been exhibited in major international venues, including the Tate Modern in London, MoMA in New York and more recently, the Berlinische Galerie and C/O Berlin in Berlin, the Pinchuk Art Center in Kyiv, the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Baden Baden and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris. In 2021, his slideshow installation *Temptation of Death* (2017-2019) was awarded the Shevchenko National Prize, the first official recognition of Mikhailov's work in Ukraine.

Boris Mikhailov lives and works between Kharkiv and Berlin with his wife, Vita.