

OWEN HATHERLEY

## Red Library

# The Art Books of Yevgeniy Fiks

*Moscow* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012)

*Communist Guide to New York City* (Common Books, 2017)

*Monument to Cold War Victory* (Cooper Union, 2018)

*Mother Tongue* (Pleshka Press, 2018)

*Dictionary of the Queer International* (PS Guelph, 2021)

*The Wayland Rudd Collection* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021)

A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE to the cruising sites of the Soviet capital; a compendium of maquettes of monuments to the United States' victory in the Cold War; dictionaries of international queer slang and Soviet gay argot; a comprehensive gazetteer, with an accompanying fold-out map, of 'Communist New York'; an archive of Soviet propaganda depictions of African-Americans. These, very approximately, are the subjects of the Russian artist Yevgeniy Fiks' art books over the past few years, most of them compact, heavily illustrated, and pocket-sized. They are all books about history, in a way, but they mark an attempt to understand the last century not through what actually happened, but through what could have — something to which art is much better suited than political commentary or narrative history. His work is a series of 'what ifs', where failed socialist projects of the past are made strange, and new relevance is found in apparently obsolete ideas.

Fiks was raised in the USSR, and has lived in New York since 1994. His work, though it is clearly informed by socialist politics and queer activism, isn't at all in the dissident tradition — no 'speaking truth to power' here. It's also much less cynical than the Sots Art (roughly, the Soviet equivalent of Pop Art) movement he has some links to — there is hope as well as humour in his work. His use of the socialist past of both his place of birth and his adoptive home is, in his words, based on 'a critical kind of nostalgia, whereby the work of memory becomes a tool for exposing and identifying the discrepancies of both the past and the present.' Particular obsessions are two American politico-moral panics — the 'Red Scares' of the 1910s and 1950s, and the 'Lavender Scare' that saw scores of LGBT Americans fired from government jobs in the fifties and early sixties.

The former lies beneath the *Communist Guide to New York City*. Based on a 2007 exhibition, this consists of small monochrome photographs of dozens of New York buildings, with captions informing the reader of their role in the suppressed history of American Communism, once a powerful force in the city. So we learn that John Reed or Jim Larkin lived here, Trotsky worked there, Langston Hughes' flat was here, the paper was printed and its shop front was there, and

so forth. The buildings themselves are mostly typical NYC tenements or offices, nothing purpose-built, nothing you would notice on its own — the Communist history of America's metropolis hides in plain sight. Along with these are essays on Oscar Niemeyer's glorious Communist Party headquarters in Paris, and a trenchant statement by Fiks against the 'denial of Soviet history', favouring finding the 'repressed histories' that were equally repressed in the old system itself.

This is developed in *Moscow*, with its extremely deadpan photographs of buildings that served as places where gay men met and had sex, in the capital of a country which was once a pioneer in LGBT rights after 1917, before Stalin implemented a ban in 1934, never repealed until after the USSR's collapse. With it is printed an extraordinarily brave and lucid letter by the Scottish gay Communist Harry Whyte to Stalin, protesting that law. Queer histories also motivate *Mother Tongue* and the *Dictionary of the Queer International*; both of them annotated glossaries of slang terms from LGBT life, Soviet in the first and global in the second. Fiks tries to elevate these into semi-official languages, in much the same manner as early Soviet writers and linguists created literary languages out of previously scorned 'dialects' like Yiddish and Kyrgyz. These books are often very funny, with a cute humour that also informs the preposterous *Monument to Cold War Victory*. This compiles the results of a contest organised by Fiks and the American curator Stamatina Gregory for the otherwise absent monument to the United States' defeat of the USSR, something otherwise expressed more by the pulling down of monuments. The best are wilfully absurd works of satire: Lisi Raskin's 'Henry Kissinger is the Skipper', in which Kissinger himself and a collection of Stalin statues sail around the world on the USS Harry S. Truman until its nuclear power stores are exhausted; or Dread Scott's monument of a classical colonnade, its steps etched with the name of each proxy war, which leads to a statue of Reagan made out of uranium 238.

Most of these books are peculiar, deadpan, and slightly dreamlike ways of seeing what was suppressed in each system. The most incendiary, though, is the Wayland Rudd Collection, published in October. Named

after an African-American actor who emigrated to the USSR, this combines an archive of Soviet poster and propaganda depictions of American racism and the Civil Rights struggle with critical essays on the many links between the Communist and black liberation movements, and the ways in which these images sometimes served to reinforce rather than dispel the stereotypes they were attacking. These works, sometimes vivid and inspiring, sometimes

outright embarrassing, are not useful for any official movement in either the USA or today's Russia. They're a reminder of the hopes that the USSR would be 'the world's first anti-racist state', of how a generation of Americans deeply believed in it, and how the inheritors of both struggles have misremembered their own history. In bringing these uncomfortable memories to light at a moment in which they're badly needed, it exemplifies the qualities of Fiks' work. ♦

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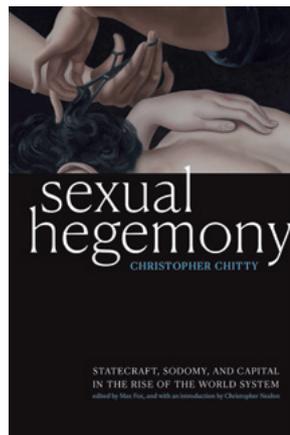
## Regulating the Night

The late Christopher Chitty's *Sexual Hegemony* is a landmark book on how capitalism created the modern heterosexual family.

FOR SOME on the left, a politics of sexuality is always 'identity politics'. This is, at least, a positive development on the not-so-distant past, when homosexuality was regarded by many as a 'bourgeois deviation'. According to the contemporary position, it's good that gay people now enjoy some legal protections and rights, and bad that they still suffer discrimination and harassment — but what has sexuality got to do with the real engine of social change, class struggle?

For Christopher Chitty, they were inextricably linked. In his posthumously published *Sexual Hegemony*, he produced a compelling thesis on the emergence of a homosexual subject in relation to the birth of capitalism, from the Florentine republics of the early Renaissance through the Low Countries, revolutionary France, and finally to New York City. Sexuality, Chitty argued, is not a timeless norm, but is constructed and restricted by patterns of labour and forms of social organisation.

Chitty's book begins with a study of how the Republic of Florence institutionalised sodomy by effectively monetising it, introducing an 'Office of the Night' that monitored and fined men engaging in the practice.



***Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System*, by Christopher Chitty (Duke University Press, 2020)**

Over its lifetime of around seventy years, the Office recorded over twelve thousand allegations. These figures reveal a rapidly changing sexual world. The shift from agrarian ways of life to urban living, with labour organised through guilds and apprenticeships, forced men into close quarters with strong power differentials. Chitty points out that this new labour force meant that public space was almost entirely male, with younger boys performing traditionally 'female' labour. This allowed a culture of intergenerational and interclass sodomy, and the 'Office of the Night' existed as much to regulate potential abuses, and hence to suppress class antagonisms, as it did to suppress sodomy for moral reasons.

Chitty expands his argument from the Mediterranean world, with its long history of same-sex desire, across Europe over the ensuing centuries, looking at how trading economies, with their infrastructure of itinerant labourers and artisanal economies, developed a culture of urban homosexuality that would come first to be recognised, then feared, by a developing bourgeoisie who began to identify the cultures around homosexuality with counterhegemonic cultures within the working class. These cultures were repressed not just through anti-sodomy statutes but through wider attacks on proletarian social and sexual dissent, and