

# ECHO

KIRILL SAVCHENKOV

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*KIRILL SAVCHENKOV, still image from **Echo**, 2015, image courtesy of the artist.*

**Text: Anastasiia Fedorova**

An idyllic mountain landscape, weightless luminous clouds, a glowing computer-generated lake. The mountains are enormous and timeless. Perhaps we wouldn't know how enormous they are, if not for one detail: on a powdery grey slope there stands a tower block estate. A subtle gravitating point in the image, a row of high rises like this is common on the edges of large cities in post-Soviet countries. They are copies of real buildings in Yasenevo, the neighbourhood in the south of Moscow where Kirill Savchenkov lives.

The towering block is 22 storeys high and was designed in the early 1980s for mass production. It stands on one of the highest spots in Moscow, on a hill 255 metres above sea level. From the top floor, where Savchenkov used to climb up as a kid, one can observe the whole enormous city. The building has a rather soulless name - КОПЭ, an abbreviation which stands for 'Catalogue

Volume Plan Elements'. КОПЭ's design has proven to be particularly tough and resistant, and was often used as a barrier or a wall to divide the estates from neighbouring forests, or to separate two areas with different architectural styles. They were a bit like fortress walls for the typical late Soviet neighbourhood: school and kindergarten in the middle, high-rise housing estates around the outside.

The idea of this type of planning and of so-called dormitory suburbs emerged in 1961 as a consequence of Nikita Khrushchev's proposed solution for the housing problem, the fastest way to provide flats for the growing population of big cities, and for two millions political prisoners freed from the Gulags. The main aim was to unify and simplify city development: parts for housing units would be produced at factories so the buildings could be put together like model toy sets. A

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limited number of architectural designs was introduced to be endlessly replicated in fractal-like neighbourhoods with identical houses, identical schools, identical happy families in identical flats - the same way as in many cities across the Soviet Union.

The edges of Moscow make a circle of seemingly identical neighbourhoods: Yasenevo, Belyaev, Konkovo, Chertanovo, to name a few. The signature look defined by tower blocks likens them to the suburbs of Paris or Glasgow, just like their gritty reputation. But however similar these areas could be to certain places in the Western world, there is a significant difference which lies in their ideological foundation. These areas and buildings are a monument to the vanished empire, an architectural manifestation of Soviet utopian ideas. "The experience of living surrounded by late Soviet modernist architecture in Yasenevo is probably the main factor which has influenced me. All the monumental ideas standing behind the architectural project of the USSR are buried under the layers of new visual culture born in the beginning of the millennium," writes Savchenkov. The combination of personal memories, adolescent experiences and the ideological content of a failed utopia lies at the core of *Atlas* and *Anabasis* - projects exploring the remarkable space of the

post-Soviet dormitory suburb, an area at the edge of a large city easily recognisable for its signature landscape of identical tower blocks.

*Atlas*, which opens with a CGI visualisation of the landscape, is not about a real space: it is dedicated to the ideal Soviet suburbs of the 1980s which only existed as an idea but never as a real neighbourhood. It is constructed from some parts realised in different cities in the USSR: Kiev, Yalta, St Petersburg, Moscow. That's probably why Savchenkov chose to create the opening landscape from scratch. "My main inspiration was the Düsseldorf school of photography and 19th-century romantic paintings of the Hudson River School," he explains. "The artists of the Hudson River School painted only one place, the Hudson River valley, idealizing it into a utopian state. The Düsseldorf school of photography was very influenced by Romantic painting. The human is always small in their photos, the view is always above the landscape, a sort of a super-subjective gaze. Düsseldorf photographers also manipulate images, and with 3D visualisation I wanted to take it a step further, to overcome the act of taking a picture."

It was also a way of reversing the landscape and reflecting on the presence of tower blocks



Still images from a documentary on Yasenevo district "Жилой район Ясенево" ("The district Yasenevo") 1980.



KIRILL SAVCHENKOV, *Atlas*, installation view, 2014, image courtesy of the artist.

in the urban environment. Their towering vision, Savchenkov remembers, used to impress him even in early childhood. “High rises are a special part of this landscape, they’re like eternal mountains standing amongst forests, fields, huge wastelands,” he says. “You’re born and you die but they still stand, they get covered with snow in winter and reflect the sun in summer, giving a giant shadow during the sunset. The generation which built them is gone, another generation comes and changes them slightly. It’s not a homely landscape, the feeling of high rises as a home is completely erased.”

There is a range of themes Kirill Savchenkov keeps coming back to in his artistic exploration of the suburbs: privacy and the anonymity of the space, the fictional dimension of our memory, how places and buildings change with time transformed by human presence. His two-part project *Anabasis* touches upon all of those. The exhibition part of the project took place in the former Hanoi cinema

in the south-west of Moscow. The whole building was transformed into an experience of Yasenevo - not the real district but the image in the narrator’s head. The artworks included a portrait of an adolescent boy resembling advertising, mirrors, glow-sticks and a flat-screen TV featuring a landscape from Mars. There were also audio guides broadcasting the author’s performance on one channel and an audio track of the 1980 documentary about Yasenevo in the other. The audio performance transmitted the experience of living in the neighbourhood, reconstructing personal stories and childhood dreams. Archive materials merged with personal memories.

The second part of *Anabasis*, the performance *Anabasis Excursion*, dealt with the real space of the neighbourhood. The performance was essentially a guided tour through Yasenevo and its humble landmarks: a technogenic lake, a school, a department store, a small forest. “When you look at a Moscow suburban district,

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it's impenetrable for you," says Savchenkov. "But when people moved through it with a storyteller, the space stopped being anonymous and opened up." *Anabasis Excursion* contains a direct link to the appropriation of Moscow suburbs by the previous notable generation of artists – the Moscow conceptualists. In the 1970s poet and artist Dmitry Prigov conducted a series of tours in Belyaev where he lived, filling the previously anonymous space with anecdotes and poems. Prigov used to constantly come back to the area in his poetry, and was even known as the Duke of Belyaev.

Belyaev, the next district north of Savchenkov's Yasenevo, was also the place where one of the most significant collisions of art and the state happened, now known as the Bulldozer exhibition. On the 15th of September 1974 an unofficial art show held by Moscow conceptualist artists on

a vacant lot in the Belyaev urban forest was forcefully broken-up by a large police force using bulldozers and water cannons. Photos of paintings crushed by bulldozers made it into the largest international media titles forcing the establishment to change their mind about contemporary art. The unremarkable wasteland in a sleeping district will forever remain a symbol of a struggle for freedom, a fascinating story of how a patch of green designed to be used for sport and recreation was re-appropriated by artists.

If in the past artists had to take it back from the authorities, today we see another kind of re-appropriation - taking the suburbs back from the abyss, from boredom and mundanity. Attempts to relate to the late-Soviet cityscape, to explore the ideological ruins, are partly rooted in collective memory. A huge number of people grew up with exactly the same picture: high rises, tin garages,



KIRILL SAVCHENKOV, *Anabasis excursion*, 2013, image courtesy of the artist.

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patches of grass, identical schools. However boring those places seemed in childhood, in the globalised world they suddenly became unique. This landscape is part of the post-Soviet identity, something which unites all of us, the kids of a failed utopia. Whenever we go - to Hong Kong, Marseille or Berlin - looking at a high rise we always feel something of an unknown origin, some nostalgia and some sorrow.

Echo, the artwork Savchenkov created especially for SVILOVA, is linked to both of his previous suburban projects - Atlas and Anabasis. Echo channels his complex approach to the landscape, to his generation's fragmentary identity, to memory and concept or narrative. He juxtaposes the perfect landscape with rough stories which lie behind the tower blocks, with sudden dissonant sounds, with something touchingly personal, one's heartrending and tender encounter with art.

The green spaces in between the high rises are now overgrown, so the suburban landscape

sometimes looks like a strange dystopian jungle. The lifespan of the blocks is limited to as much as 50 years, but that was the choice of those who came before us. I hope that stepping into this territory means that inside there is a seed of mistrust for any ideology - as sooner or later it will simply turn to dust. The estate Kirill Savchenkov places on top of the 3D-generated mountain was meant, among other things, to protect the neighbourhood from strong winds. In actuality, sometimes when you pass one of these buildings, the wind is so strong that it's physically difficult to walk. "Sometimes it's so hard, it's like a storm in the mountains. You even have to stop to gather strength and then keep going," recalls Savchenkov. The space he explores has a complex effect on its inhabitants - physical, emotional, conceptual. It also has a ruthless brutalist beauty. It's joyful and it's cold, it's the wind storming in between two buildings, and the sudden feeling of a vast emptiness in your chest.



KIRILL SAVCHENKOV, *Atlas*, detail of installation, 2014, image courtesy of the artist.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

[Anastasiia Fedorova](#) is a London-based writer and curator. She writes about photography, fashion and contemporary visual culture for various publications including Dazed & Confused, 032c, SHOWstudio, The Guardian, ZOO Magazine and The Calvert Journal.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

[Kirill Savchenkov](#) is a Moscow-based artist working on a topic of post-Soviet suburbs and exploring contemporary culture, psychology and experience of the suburban habitat. Before turning to art and studying at the Rodchenko Art School in Moscow, he obtained a degree in radio physics. He works with image, text and performance.

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