

Book excerpt, from Monika Schwärzler, *At Face Value and Beyond  
Photographic Constructions of Reality*, Transcript Verlag, 2016

### **The Digitally Constructed Parapraxis**

In 1995, Lev Manovich created his “Digital” or “Constructivist Snapshots.” Manovich, born in Moscow in 1960, had studied architecture there, later going to America, where he has pursued his internationally acclaimed academic and artistic career. The catalyst for creating the constructed snapshots was a request  
by

Natalie Bookchin to show her some snapshots of his former life in the Soviet Union. Manovich could not fulfill this wish, however, as there had been no snapshot culture in the USSR. Hardly anyone owned a camera, nor was there any arrangement stipulating that all events of private life be constantly documented. To take photos, one went to a studio or borrowed a camera from an amateur photographer friend (Bookchin & Manovich, 1996). So because he had nothing from his younger days that Bookchin might have identified as “snapshots”, Manovich decided to re-enact some with the aid of digital technologies. (Fig. 5)

This evolved into an art project on which Natalie Bookchin acted as co-author. Her cooperation was required because only she, a representative of a culture of instant photography, could know what a “snapshot” usually looks like, what its purpose was, and what its preferred motifs were. In one of these attempts – the work consists of three parts – to satisfy an American woman’s expectations of a snapshot and, at the same time, to create a quasi-authentic document of his youth, Manovich constructed a scene at a Moscow subway station. This retrospective snapshot consists of a photograph of the subway architecture, clear in terms of perspective, but nevertheless tilted, and the blurred, only partially visible head of a young man blended in at the bottom left of the picture.

The question in our context is: what did Bookchin want to see when she put her request to her colleague and friend? She certainly did not want any official, authorized photos, but rather photos that she could scan for evidence of everyday situations and which would reveal something of “real” life, photos that would contain more than those who took them intended. She wanted to see blind spots, overexposed by the camera, relying on the photographic preconscious, indiscriminately receptive within its mechanical and chemical limits. That was her personal wish. The interesting thing is how Bookchin and Manovich proceeded as artists. What they constructed on the computer was the photographic mishap, the rule violation, as it were, of a successful photo. They presented the shaking, blurring and tilting, leaving the picture’s structure in terms of perspective as is, like the signifier of a different order. Their digital simulation of a loss of control expresses something of the old hope that things will appear in photos if we let them.



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Natalie Bookchin & Lev Manovich, *Constructivist Snapshot*  
1995 (from a Three-Part Series), Ektacolor Print

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