

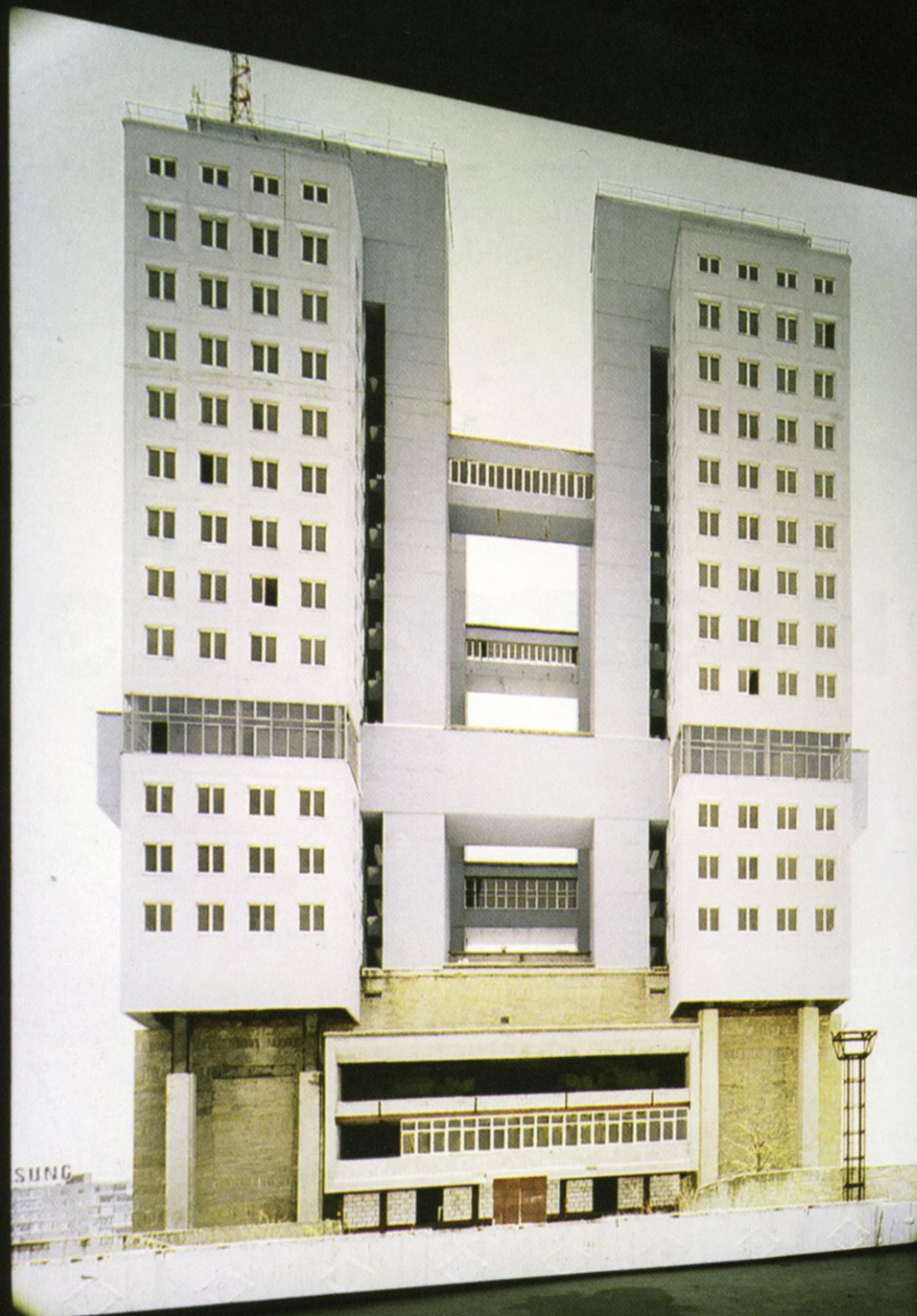
A photograph of a vast, dense forest of evergreen trees covering a hillside. The trees are a vibrant green, and the forest extends to the top of the hill, which is partially shrouded in a light mist or fog. The word "FICTIONAL" is printed in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image, centered horizontally. The overall scene is serene and naturalistic.

FICTIONAL

“For me, artists have enormous potential to change the way we live” (Marcus Coates).
NICOLA BOZZI investigates how contemporary artists engage with the idea of utopias,
whether past or future, modernist, socialist or pure sci-fi.

HISTORIES





There is an advantage in approaching a place with virgin eyes. The pull of the future demands change, and stripping a location of its past requires the ability to imagine what might come next. There is an excitement about failed utopias that does not merely derive from cultural interest and their cynical exploitation by real-estate cycles.

A genuine emotional investment in the material forms of larger-than-life, at times other-worldly human projects is emerging in works that remain far apart in terms of commitment and motivation. All seem concerned with space and its historical burden—or, alternatively, its historical potential.





BORDERS

The historical transformation of post-Communist countries is extremely important to Dutch photographer Elian Somers. In her complex project *Border Theories* (2009–13), presented as a series of photo installations, she approaches three far-off locations redolent of Stalinist Russia: Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan. '*Border Theories* investigates the construction of an architectural utopia, but also the construction of history and identity,' she explains.

Kaliningrad was built on the ruins of the Prussian Königsberg. Between 1943 and 1945, in order to reclaim the original Slavic soil from seven centuries of German occupation, Stalin 'liberated' the city, replacing the Germans with Soviet pioneers. 'The city had to become the embodiment of pre-war Russian history, a reconstruction of Moscow with Moscow skyscrapers, ring roads and medieval monuments.'

But the tide has now turned. 'Today, Putin is starting to re-Germanize these Russified territories, rebuilding the Königsberg Altstadt and turning the House of Soviets back into Königsberg Castle.' Somers's photos linger on architectural details, but green forests and foggy skies bleed in from every direction. 'For me, natural landscapes like the Sakhalin taiga and the Birobidzhan wetlands primarily represent Stalin's urbanizing ambitions and the inherent impossibility of constructing a city in such harsh areas.'

Border Theories is characterized by subtle and non-intrusive aesthetics. It draws you in while subtly raising questions rooted in contemporaneity. 'Why was the Socialist Volkspalast in Berlin demolished to make room for the new "old" Prussian Berlin Castle in early 2000? And what does a certain kind of architectural re-Japanizing of the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk mean? Putin refuses to sign the Japanese-Russian peace treaty, and the island of Sakhalin has never changed from being a closed military area.'

Intrigued by contemporary geopolitics—Putin's own border theories have recently been applied to Crimea—the artist sees her role as that of a critical commentator: 'I hope my installations can be perceived as critical tools for understanding and figuring out the present and the future.'