



Window, 3 Loaves of Bread
Poland 1988

Below:
Man Facing into a Corner
Poland 1989

1989 Democratic reform sweeps Communist Europe. Overnight, 150 million people climb into the petri dish of social, political and economic change. Ever eager to assist in the metamorphosis from lifelessness into lifestyle, Western rightists gloat at the collapse of the Marxist experiment and ready themselves for the pleasure of inoculating the fresh agar with little dabs of venture capital. Just as they told us all along, free enterprise is the grandest freedom of all.

Modern history is chopped into spicy news bites and served up in an electronic salad bowl of seamless consumerist fantasy. Mr. Smith watches his Watchman as Poor Ivan (a late sleeper) wakes from his Stalinist trance hungry and ready to boogie. Somehow it never dawns on Smith to ask, "Were you really sleeping all that time?" Media stereotypes, reinforcing some official Orwellian amnesia, laid that question to rest back in the '50s. Yet logic indicates the opposite. East bloc artists and intellectuals survived that long night with vision and humanity intact. Cradle-to-grave Stalinist austerity left them with too much time to kill...too many dreams to fill.

In 1989, before the collapse of Polish Communism, Daniel, a top student at the art academy, asked me about opportunities for artistic expression in America. I told him that most western artists eventually went to work in the advertising business. That was where the money was. "Impossible!" he challenged. But he was a global-village virgin, a Pepsi generation wallflower. A few months later, the "free" (but not commercial-free) press washed over the East bloc like a tidal wave. Surf's up, Comrade Dude! Swim or suck bubbles. The developers will be there in the morning.

Damn this fashionable cynicism.... It's just my world-class survival mechanism acting up.

Like many artists, I'm a little pink on the inside. But when I hit the streets I'm a true card-carrying consumer, bright green with envy and willing to die in debt for my right to shop. Still I must confess a certain nostalgia for Daniel's naiveté, for his commercial-free life. During travel through Communist Europe in 1986, '88 and '89, I photographed pedestrian traffic against the backdrop of store windows. In spite of media mythology these windows were far from empty. They were filled with the public art of despair, hope, pragmatism and a dignity much too quiet to make headlines.



WINDOWS THROUGH THE CURTAIN

Communist Europe

before the

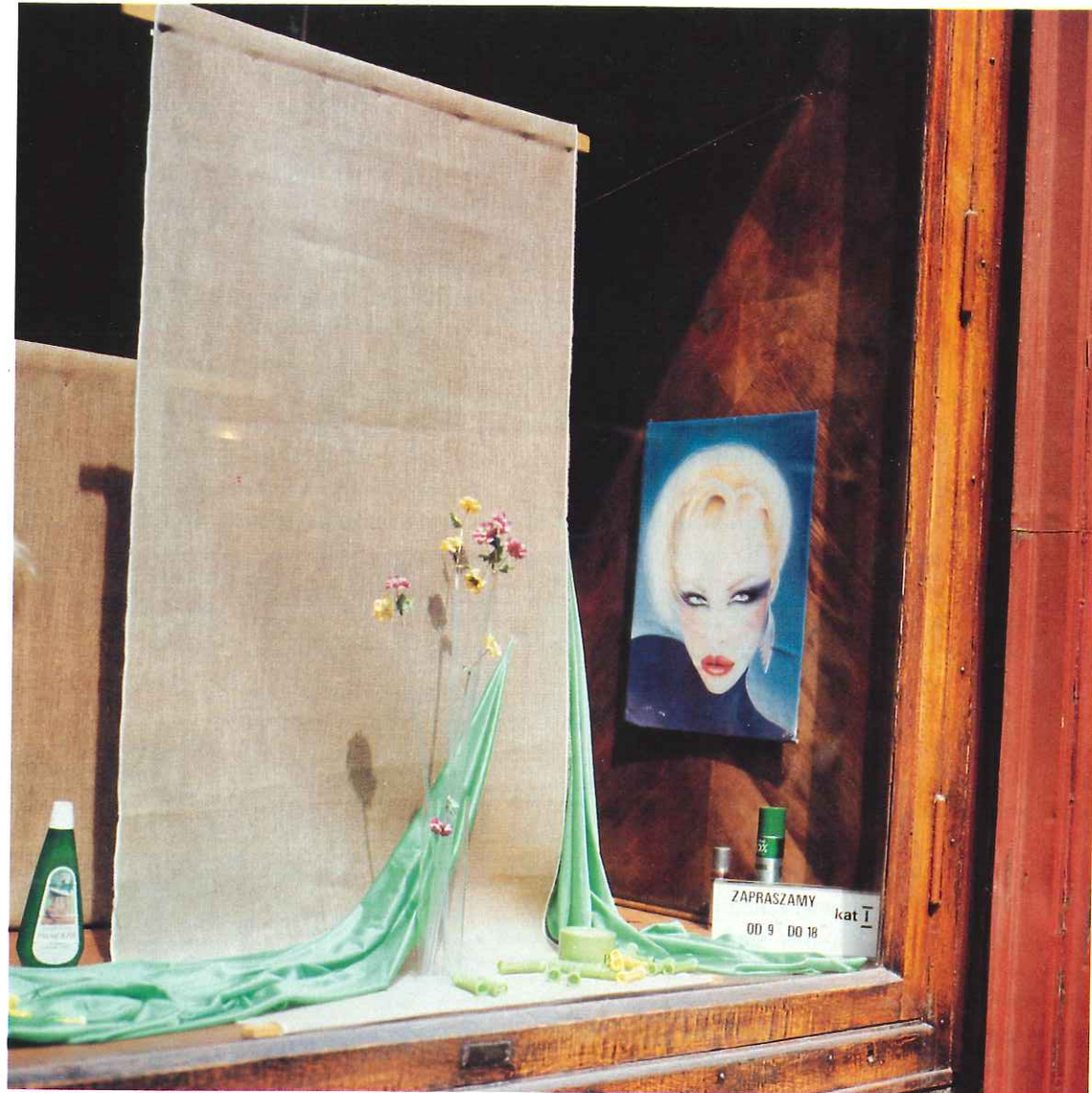
Fall of '89.

Text and

photographs by

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Window, Gaudy Portrait
Poland 1988



Top left:
Blind Fiddle Player
Poland 1988



Top right:
Woman with Grape Vines
Bulgaria 1989

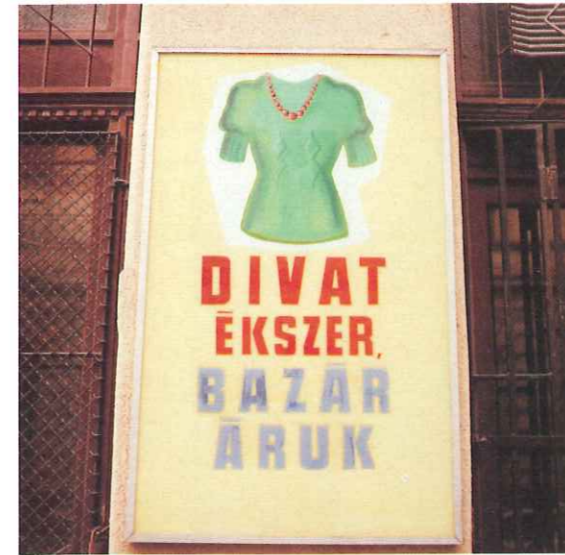
Lower left:
Man in Black Suit, Coal Pile
Poland 1988

Lower right:
Marlboro Lady
Poland 1986

Woman at Kaviaren Orient
Czechoslovakia 1989



Top left:
Divat Ekszer, Bazar Aruk
Hungary 1988

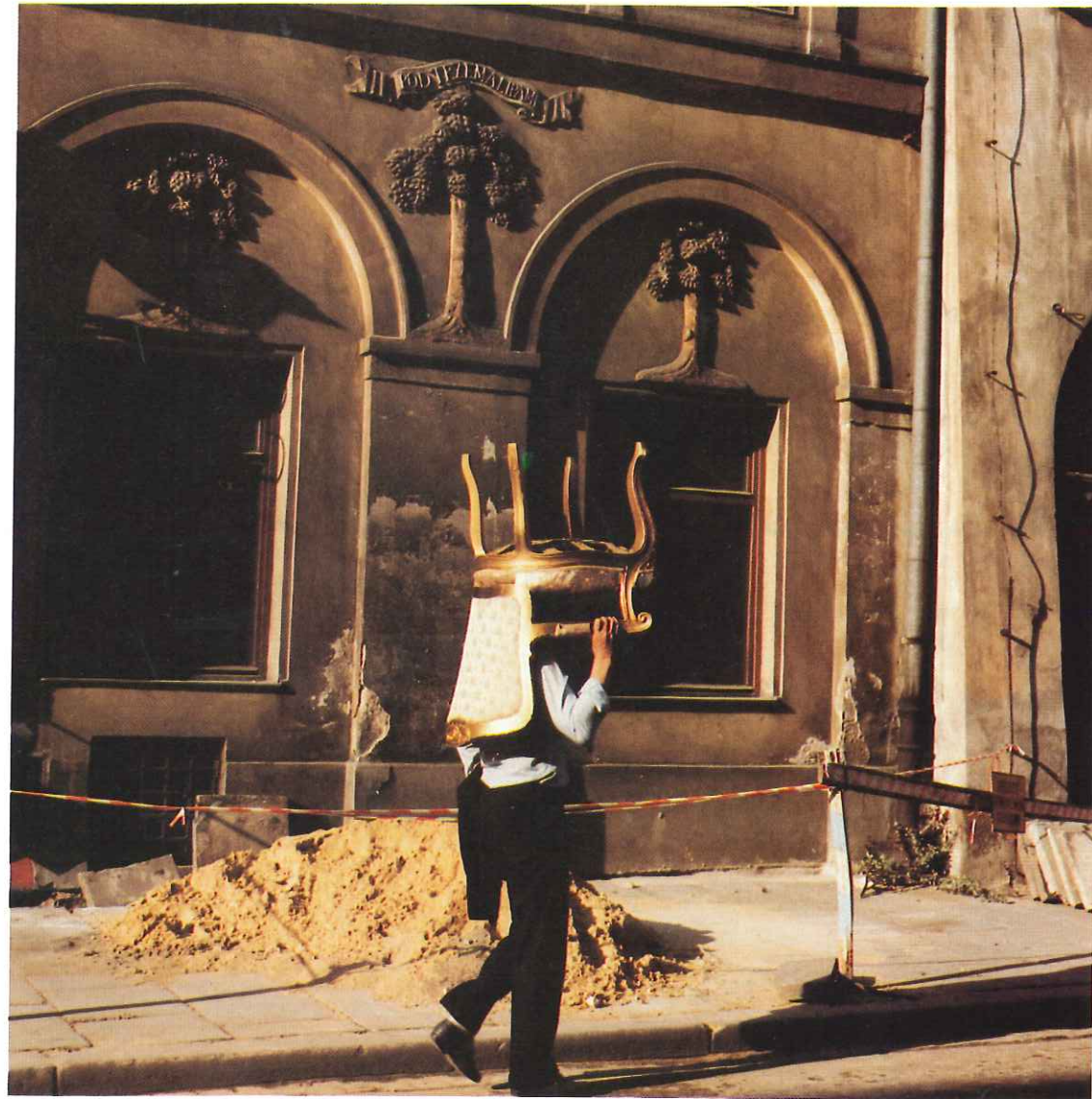


Top right:
Chocolate Shop Window
Bulgaria 1989

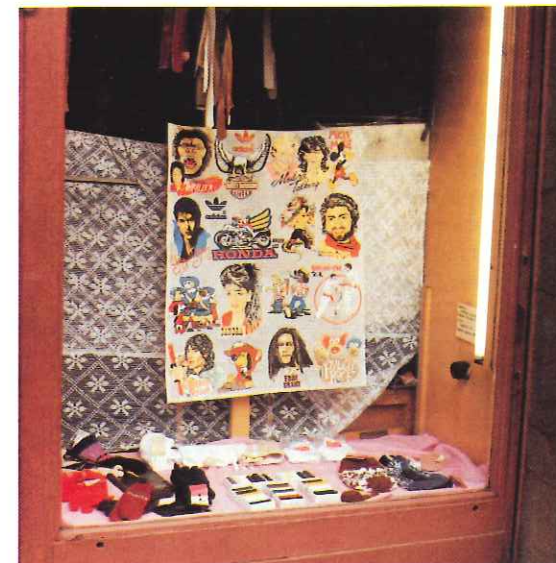
Bottom left:
Upholstery Shop
Poland 1986

Bottom right:
Cake in Bakery Window
Poland 1989

Man Carrying Guild Chair
Poland 1988



Top left:
Styl Window
Czechoslovakia 1988



Top right:
Anti-Smoking Window
Poland 1988

Lower left:
Western Pop Icons in Window
Poland 1986

Lower right:
Pedicure Window # 1
Czechoslovakia 1988