

Case History

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I'll start with a confession. Sometimes I have a feeling as if I had been run over by an ideological car and the words, like jumping frogs, are breaking free out of my mouth, independent of me: developed socialism, evils of capitalism, vast is my native country, unity and contradiction, great experiment.

Since the beginning of the century, Russia has constantly attracted attention because of social cataclysms. Of course, it's not entirely so. Let's admit that it is not the Russian situation itself, but the fact that a "world" experiment took place there, based on the German philosophy by Karl Marx—the building of socialism. Now the experiment seems to be finished and we are probably witnessing its completion. And we'll consider that as a photographer I "documented" periods of that experiment. This book belongs to one of the latest periods of that "great" experiment.

After the brown and blue series I was going to create a pink one, which would probably have corresponded to the revival of new life, like during a sunrise, when the light is evenly covering the whole surface.

Returning home after one year I saw the opposite. Devastation had stopped. The city had acquired an almost modern European centre. Much had been restored. Life became more beautiful and active, outwardly (with a lot of foreign advertisements) — simply a shining wrapper. But I was shocked by the big number of homeless (before they had not been there). The rich and the homeless—the new classes of the new society—this was, as we had been taught, one of the features of capitalism.

"Welcome to Russian capitalism!" (Sorry, again it broke free.)

For myself I call this situation of the country a "zero" state, because besides the creation of the new classes, there is no advancement from point "zero." The dynamics of the processes became relatively constant. The internal energy of the society is not directed to future creation. In any case, the perceived activity is not enough to survive. (The amount of people is being reduced.) And because now nothing is created, but each individual somehow personally faces changes, I got interested in man and his new surroundings. In addition, I got the feeling that the processes in society have reached the next level of concentration.

I try not to photograph sensation. On the other

hand, I try to take photos of what really increased a lot. I only try to find unique things in this great number.

I have missed the moments with "new Russians." There was a time when they were not yet aware of their wealth and their position, as if they had remained "normal" people. It was possible to take photos in their environment—they were open. And very soon they started to shoot at each other and surround themselves with bodyguards.

Then came a time when it was possible to start writing a book about the other main feature of the time—poverty. The best way to depict it is to take photos of the homeless. And this "chance" (to take a picture of the homeless) could occur, as it seemed to me, only during a short moment.

First, these were the people who had recently lost their homes. According to their position they were already the *bomzhes* ("bomzh" = the homeless without any social support), according to outlook they were simply the people who got into trouble. Now they are becoming the *bomzhes* with their own class psychology and "clan" features. For me it was very important that I took their photos when they were still like "normal" people. I made a book about the people who got into trouble but didn't manage to harden so far.

Their feeling of social oppression and helplessness shocked me. I watched a scene, when a young strong man doing exercises, suddenly, out of the blue, kicked a *bomzh* passing him by chance. The other screamed. It seemed to me that I even heard the crunch of his bones. Nobody paid any attention, neither the people standing around nor the militiaman who was not far away.

When I was first working on the book, I suddenly felt that many people were going to die at that place. And the *bomzhes* had to die in the first rank, like heroes—as if their lives protected the others' lives. And I took the pictures displaying naked people with their things in hands like people going to gas chambers. They agreed to pose for a so-called historical theme. They agreed that their photos would be published in magazines for others to learn about their lives.

Accidentally, for myself, I started to take pictures of the people with a criminal past, just to do this theme. Maybe their criminal aesthetic with its "readiness" for death and perception of its inevitability helped me to explain the situation of *The Requiem*. (In addition, in a strange way, it coincides with the general criminal situation of the society.)

Changing the borders of the former Soviet Union, establishing new states—all this together drove many, it seems to me, to lose their identification with the place of their birth. In this situation “art consciousness” loses the flavor of historicism. The “fading out” of the historical process probably turns it into a non-perspective for the artists who treat the current reality as something already known, referring to it like to the past. That’s why I feel a strong sense of responsibility working on this book.

I have received many questions connected with legitimizing my work and the ethical problems related to it. I think I have mentioned why I do this kind of work. As to the ethical question, I have to say that I am not to blame. But very often, when I took pictures, I was ashamed. And in general, it is hard to speak about morality, when one is wearing long fur coats, while the others don’t change their sewn and mended shoes for months, while a creditor is more often killed than he is returned money to . . .

When I made the previous books, I didn’t have the impression that I did something wrong. As I took pictures, I did not get into contact with those whose photos I made, so everything seemed natural. And at that time the main feeling was the sense of communal unity, though it was coming to an end.

Now this community doesn’t exist anymore. And it turned out that I got in one social class and the *bomzhes* in another. And while before the sense of social justice was aimed at the possible future improvement of all, now the questions “why” and “what for” should be answered, because you are busy with the problems of others. And particularly, at this moment (at the loss of historicism) the book can cause doubts (considering that to search for nuances in the life of well-to-do people seems to be more natural).

On the one hand, for myself personally, I understood that taking pictures of poverty was my professional and civil duty. On the other hand, I accept traditional clichés about “not using others’ grief.” But what does “others’ grief” mean? And how must a photographer behave?

In the history of photography of our country we don’t have photos of the famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, when several million people died and corpses were lying around in the streets. We don’t have photos of the war, because journalists were forbidden to take pictures of sorrow threatening the moral spirit of the Soviet people; we don’t have non-“lacquered” pictures of enterprises, nor pictures of street events, except demonstrations. The entire photography history is “dusted.” And we have the impression that each person with a camera is a “spy.”

The three main rules which somehow indirectly regulated the development of photography were:

1. “On spying activity”: It was forbidden to take photos from higher than the 2nd floor, the areas of railways, stations, military objects, at enterprises, near enterprises, at any organisation, without special permission.
2. “On biased collecting of information”: This law touched the moral elements of taking photos. It was forbidden to take photos which brought into disrepute the Soviet power, the Soviet way of life.
3. “The law on pornography”: Photographing any naked body could become the reason for accusation. Actually at all our art exhibitions, until 1986, pieces depicting naked bodies by modern photographers or artists could not be displayed. Only museums contained such pictures by Old Masters.

Having these laws and their consequences in my memory, I was aware that I was not allowed to let it happen once again that some periods of life would be erased.

I’d like to tell an episode. A man was lying in the street with his head on the road in frosty weather. It was night. Everybody was passing by. I came up to him, took his photo. A woman turned around and shouted: “Why are you taking a photo of him? Do you have nothing to do?” I asked her to help me raise him, but she went away. Of course, I lifted him up and helped him home. And frankly speaking I was very happy that he didn’t even get ill (I saw him the next day). But what did the shout of a woman, directed at me, mean? Let him better die, then the photo would be published? She was passing by as if not noticing and not willing to see it either outside on the street or in newspapers. There is nothing bad.

Independently someone’s glance selects what this person needs. My acquaintances, after having seen my photos, said: “Now we see these people outside, while we haven’t noticed them before.”

In a book by the Japanese writer Kobe-Abe, *Person-as-box*, a man put a box on his head in order not to be seen by others. *Bomzhes* whom one doesn’t want to notice put on clothes—their boxes—due to the evil destiny. And that has somehow crossed them out of life. This book is not about them (or rather not only about them), though metaphysically, having made them visible, it is as if it restores their rights for life.

It seems to me that my personal uncertainty (it is not clear where I live—in Kharkov or somewhere in the West, where I work, etc.), my instability in society, on the formal level, has transformed the obscurity of borders between documentary and scenery within the framework of the documentary. Different vibrations of this documentary depend on the so-called “non-ethical impulse” which has the task to check the local “ethical” by means of different sorts of “ethical” already accepted in other places (cultures). For example,

I send a “non-ethical impulse” (I tell the model to undress). This impulse meets with life, excites it (when the model agrees) or doesn’t excite it (when the model refuses), and it is as if life deforms, as if the suggestion to accept the level of the “non-ethical impulse” is always ethical to me. (Let it be so.) That means that I never gave them tasks, which would have been strange for the models.

I was interested in the borders of the new morality which would suit the new borders of survival. But the main point is that I myself was tested by the “non-ethical impulse”—and could you yourself do what you are not willing to do? Can you communicate again with *bomzhes*, after having got lice from them, can you shake their hands greeting them while your acquaintances are passing by, etc.? Yes, I had to be the first person to lose my respectability.

I go on speaking “scientifically-like,” as it were. One could say I took photos by the method of “posing for little money.” I told people: “I want to take your picture, you are interesting to me, I can give you a little money for that.” (But it was always more than one is paid at the Art Institute for posing.) Such a way of work resulted in the following:

- 1— The work was not very tiresome.
- 2— Quick finishing of the work.
- 3— Doubtful street acquaintances could be easily rejected if the suggestion seemed unnatural and aggressive.

The people didn’t have a choice: either you pose or you vanish. They were not scared of any boss. They didn’t do it under compulsion. I photographed usually on their territory. When I took photos at my place, either immediately or later, they could take revenge.

That’s why they didn’t do what they didn’t want to do. This situation from my point of view doesn’t violate life. While posing a man tries to be different: beautiful, strong, etc. Here the models didn’t perform in such a theatre. At least, they were given the role of “who they are in reality.” And presenting themselves, they didn’t pose, and it was like “life itself.” And the stasis of the pictures reflects the submissiveness of the models.

I asked my friends what they could advise about shooting photos. One said: “Give them money and let them beat each other.”

One more episode. I asked a *bomzh* to bring a lady to take a photo of both of them. He refused saying that it was not good. I took his photos, but he was alone.

I took a long time making this book. Often I stood by my house and many *bomzhes* approached me, knowing my intentions. I felt very often ashamed that I didn’t use them and that I didn’t pay them.

Manipulating with money is somehow a new way of legal relations in all areas of the former USSR. And

by this book I wanted to transmit the feeling in that place and how people can be openly manipulated. In order to give this flavor of time I wanted to copy or perform the same relations which exist in society between a model and myself.

I don’t know exactly why, but after *The Requiem*, the idea stuck in my mind to go on taking photos of the naked. Maybe I was driven by the old complex connected with the ban on photographing the naked, which was now connected with the notion of “nakedness of life itself.” People got undressed, naked and took away the barrier of their dirty, ponging clothes, built between them and others. I was interested in what would happen to a face when a body gets undressed. But sometimes they, simply as people of the “new” morality, exposed their “values.” When naked, they stood like people.

Coming back to the terminology “sense of life itself.” I should like to give the following metaphor. Something is lying, wrapped in something, for example, in a raincoat. I touch it, the raincoat unfolds and one can see a baby there.

No, I don’t want to spy on those whom nobody would like to see. My touch-request helps the model himself or the situation itself to say— “Here I am.”

Now it is important for me to say how the West came to the East and why I used colour photos. Previously I used a toner that made a photo look like old, I received a reflection, which corresponded to the sense of disaster and war—the blue and the brown series. The colour “express-photo” became for me the thing which mostly correlated with the new time. In each corner a photo-centre—“Agfa”, “Konica”, “Fuji”—was opened. The appearance of Western technology made a colour album photo the thing that connects the rich and the poor. Both the rich and the poor wanted to have colour photographs and there was only one distinction: The rich could afford them, the poor couldn’t. The colour photo became an image of the new life. And the poor having a beautiful photo can state: “Now we also live nicely.”

It suddenly came to my mind that these colour photos are more like rash on the ill body. At the end I again have to refer to the old terminology of the “evils of capitalism.”

I suddenly got the image of a slightly mad journalist in international affairs, a specialist in defining the “evils.” Returning to the motherland from his long business trips abroad, out of habit, he goes on to search out the “evils.” This is a research of the post-Soviet space made by the old Soviet method. The circle is closed. And the experiment?

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