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The Existential Anthropology of Anastasia Khoroshilova

This text, as the title suggests, proceeds on the assumption that the creative work of Anastasia Khoroshilova is deliberately the field work of a social anthropologist. All her work to date is devoted to the study of human beings in their real physical settings and as members, by force of social circumstance or geography, of a communality of some sort. Such are the ballet students of the dormitories of “Islanders” (2002-2005), the isolated country people of “Bezhin Lug” (2004-2005)¹ and the similarly isolated residents of an outlying Russian city (“Baltiysk”, 2005) and so are the members of the macro-community, the nation (“Russkiye” 2006-2007). In her newest work, “Uzkii Krug” (“The Narrow Circle”), Khoroshilova turns to a community bound by shared beliefs and the confessional solidarity. Social anthropology, it may be remembered, established itself as an independent discipline in the analysis of just such religious communities (Emile Durkheim, Robert Park, Max Weber, among others).

The identification of photography with social anthropology has a long tradition, dating back to the work of August Sander, a contemporary of Park, Weber and the other founders of contemporary sociology. Khoroshilova, in photographic series that carefully describe particular social groups, consciously or instinctively, follows the German master of objective photography (Khoroshilova’s schooling as an artist, incidentally, was in Germany). The language of her art derives directly from the Sander tradition, the objects of her photographs always more important than the subject. Her language, as she has said, is intentionally “unaesthetic” alien alike to “reportage with its edition-driven life”, to “portraiture with its exclusive interest in psychological nuance” and to “staged photographs, largely devoted to the illustration of concepts”².

However, a fundamental difference that arises from the changed character of the object sets Khoroshilova’s studies apart from that her predecessors’. Dearly 21st century society is radically different from the society of the 1920s and 1930s that Sander, in photographs, and Weber, in sociology, documented. The society of the first decades of the 20th century - the era of “heavy modernity” in the terminology of contemporary sociologists³ - was inherently hierarchical and divided into durable social niches and strata. And so Sander’s work presents types representative of particular social and anthropological categories, i.e., images close to what Weber called “ideal types”. Taken as a whole, the analysis of the then contemporary society offered by the classics of sociology sought to provide a structural description of the social body then taking shape in the process of rapid modernization.

Today that “heavy modernity” has been replaced by a “liquid” modernity, whose principal feature is a radical individualization that is antithetical to and destructive of strictly arranged social strata and unchanging identities. Thus, Khoroshilova’s “Baltiysk” series touches on the social effects of the de-industrialization felt by many industrial centres of the era of “heavy modernity”. “Russkiye”, in turn, puts before us the astonishing variety of identities that coexist in contemporary Russia, despite

¹ “Bezhin Meadow” is a tale written by Ivan Turgenev and an unfinished film directed by Sergei Eizenshtein (1937) focused on social transformations in the countryside in Soviet Union after forced collectivization.

² Here I am referring to the text Anastasia Khoroshilova wrote for this catalogue.

³ The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman introduced the terms “heavy modernity” and “liquid modernity” in his book “*Liquid Modernity*”, Polity Press, London, 2000.

the accepted image of its extreme social homogeneity.

In "The Narrow Circle", her latest work, Khoroshilova turns to yet another extremely symptomatic phenomenon of "liquid modernity", the confessional group. In the view of social researchers, the contemporary individual assailed by the liquid changeability of identities may seek refuge in confessional and other similarly closed and strictly ordered groups. Thus, Khoroshilova turns her attention in this work to a specifically Jewish community, that is, to a confession distinguished by the extreme codification by which the members live. At the same time, Khoroshilova's work has taught us that the society she presents in "Narrow Circle" - pupils of Moscow's Jewish religious schools - will not lend itself to social generalities or lead smoothly to a Weberian "ideal type". Unlike traditional sects, such as were scrupulously described by sociologists of the Chicago School in the period 1920-1940, the members of contemporary religious communities are highly individual. And while it is clear that the persons shown in Khoroshilova's new work recognize themselves as members of their confessional communality - all the boys freely wear yarmulkes to cover their heads, as rule requires - it is no less evident in the way these adolescents dress and otherwise identify themselves that all the members recognize themselves as parts of other communalities and youthful subcultures. It is in this sense that the figures of "The Narrow Circle" differ radically from the people of "A Vanished World" of Roman Vishniak, photographer of Eastern European Jewry on the eve of the Holocaust. Thus, while Weber in his great studies of religions was able to draw a universal social and even economic typology from the variety of confessional cultures, the confessional identification of such individuals today exists in dialogue with other identities and enters with those other identities in unique combinations. Contemporary confessional communalities, thus, are not carryovers from the past but result from a deliberate regression back toward fundamentalist values: they are as much symptoms of modernity as the internet and cell phone.

Yet this or any other social diagnosis, as such, is not the starting point for Khoroshilova's work. As an analyst of society, she puts such preliminary assumptions aside. Her conclusions are the result of her work. Proof of this can be found in the artistic language that Khoroshilova uses and that, as mentioned, derives from the tradition of objective photography, a language that tries to impose nothing on the object and to present it without bias. Yet there is a subjective element in the work of Sander and the other great figures of objective photography: the object of the picture is poeticized, and the social fact romanticized. Much the same thing occurs in the work of the older generation of anthropologists: even the structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss could not resist giving his famous study of South American Indians the emotive title, "Tristes Tropiques". Contrarily, Khoroshilova consciously seeks a deepening of the objectivity of the photographic result: she seeks to eliminate all emotional intentionality from her images, to let them appear as they would to an ordinary, disinterested observer. Her work, without exception, stands on the application in pure form of basic photographic principles - stationary frontal shots; a balance between the human figures, or figures, at the centre of the frame with the background; even lighting, and a direct, expressionless look of model into lens. This is a kind of "zero-level photography" (to paraphrase Roland Barthes), free of all evident artistry, i.e., tricks with focus or light, dramatic storytelling, conceptually staged scenes and so on. This is a photography in which great professional skill combines with the artlessness of the amateur.

Khoroshilova's strategies closely resemble those of the new generation of anthropologists and derive from Hegel's famed assertion that "nothing is more abstract (and, accordingly, "highly theoretical") than our ordinary perceptions". Like a contemporary anthropologist, Khoroshilova knows that, in recording the "visible exterior" of social reality, she (like all analysts) has a monopoly on differentiation, i.e., she has the power to impose something of herself on the object. In

constructing her work on the undisguised basics of the language of photography, she seeks to avoid what sociologists have termed “cognitive violence” and do all in her power to let the object show itself as it actually is.

Such a method, whether wielded by a photographer or a professional researcher, constitute a programmatic response to the conditions of “liquid modernity”, which have, first, essentially changed the object of study and, secondly, forced the researcher to rethink his ethical position. If in the first half of the 20th century the language of objective photography was used to produce an objective taxonomy of modern society, that task has now become more complicated: the objects of study now stand as complexes of identities, description of which demands great delicacy. “Zero-level photography” is a product of contemporary social and anthropological conditions, which are in such flux and are as yet so sketchily perceived as to suggest that all contemporary methods, and in particular the most elaborated, have lost their efficacy.

In the 1990s, the new realities of a globalized world gave birth to the theory (or rather the ideology) of multiculturalism. With the very best intentions, multiculturalism has called for respectful acceptance of the Other and his different identity. The values implicit in this view were the motivating force in the 1990s of whole trends in art and social studies. But the ideology of multiculturalism has had its critics, who have seen in its declared compassion for the Other a new form of abasement, a new version of representing its own “I” as the dominant and dominating identity. This is the ethical reason for keeping the image of the Other neutral. And Khoroshilova has done all she could to allow our emotional responses to the figures of “The Narrow Circle”, as for those of “Bezhin Lug”, “Baltiysk” and her other series, to occur with no evident manipulation.

Khoroshilova’s particular understanding of her human subjects is revealed in the relationship between the figures and background in her pictures and in her sense of the meaning of the categories of figure and background. In her photographs, they are invariably in balance. The background, itself informative, is never obscured by the figures at the centre of the image. Thus, in “The Narrow Circle” we encounter typical Russian school interiors, marked, however, by innumerable traces left by the individuals that have occupied them (notes on walls, worn spots in the parquet, cracks and breaks in the plaster and so on). Marc Augé, one of the greatest contemporary anthropologists, has called such humanly affected spaces “places” (*lieu*) to set them apart from “non-places” (*non-lieu*), the standardized, sterile environments of our globalized present. Interestingly, the photographs of Andreas Gursky, the “singer of the non-lieu” and another representative of contemporary objective photography, never include human figures and, if human presence is hinted at, it is the presence of the anonymous crowds of the globalized world. Khoroshilova is concerned with another aspect of the contemporary, the areas of authentic human life.

Such vital spaces arise - anthropologists have shown - from a specific form of communality, which the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “habitus”. The term has a direct relation to Khoroshilova’s work, because it stresses both the social determinism of a given way of life and the active role played in the creation and transformation of the society by each individual member. This is the basis of the consistent appearance and centrality of human figures in her pictures. Thus, for example, unlike Thomas Ruff (another representative of German objective photography of the 1980s), Khoroshilova never shows her subjects abstracted from their habitus. Yet, unlike, for example, the Finnish photographer Esko Männikö, her human figures never blend into the surrounding material environment, i.e., they are never mere products of the habitus. In this sense, Khoroshilova is not a romantic seeking the Other in a metaphysical subject, nor an ethnographer assuming the Other as an exotic opposite inaccessible to true dialogue. Rather, as an anthropologist, she seeks a real Other made interesting because he embodies Other experience.

Finally, the gaze of the model, invariably directed at the viewer, is a principal element in

Khoroshilova's work. At the same time, because we know how photographs are made, we know that the model is looking specifically at the photographer, i.e., looking at the creator of the work who is looking at the model. In other words, all Khoroshilova's work is built on the encounter of gazes, one of which, while remaining "outside the frame", remains part of the work. All her work is essentially devoted to an encounter of this kind that presupposes a history: the photographer's entry into the "narrow circle", the working out of individual and group relationships and the willing, unforced pose, the result of the mutual trust of photographer and model, and, finally, the direct looking into each other's eyes. That every work of hers is the product of such a meeting also shows how her work differs from "reportage", a form in which the photographer does not establish a relationship with the model but merely "catches it unaware", and from portraiture, where the photographer does have a relationship with the model but it is a professional, not an ordinary human, relationship.

The encounter, as a category, was also crucial for many artists and group projects in the 1990s, giving rise specifically to the fashionable concept of "relational aesthetics"⁴. The term refers to group procedural projects that accord aesthetic status to the social interaction of the artists. In essence, the reference is to the aestheticization of the practices of new communalities and, thus, to that which we have described as characteristic of the "liquid modernity" that interests researchers, including Khoroshilova. But what makes clear how Khoroshilova's work differs from "relational aesthetics" is not so much her disinclination to create communalities but rather to analyze them, as it is her preference to remain alone. This leads her away from encounters with the "likeminded", with whom to live companionably through dark times, but drives her to encounters with Others in order to understand herself in these dark times⁵.

However, the encounter with the Other is not simple. The gaze fixed on us by the figures in Khoroshilova's pictures - even when these are attractive teens or bucolic Russian peasant women - evokes an emotional reaction in us, a reciprocating spiritual tension, as any direct meeting of eyes does. A meeting of eyes, whether of the face (or the Face) of the Other, is always a metaphysical and universal event, as Levinas has said.

Two essentials of Khoroshilova's work flow from this. First, the 16 gazes directed at us by members of this singular group, this "narrow circle" of individuals who, besides their group membership, preserve their individual identities, that is, never merge as a generalized "ideal type", constitute an encounter with Another universality, the universality of Another community, and the personal universality of the 16 Others. Discovery of the universality of the Other is what multiculturalism does not do.

Second, the encounter as event is also Khoroshilova's own experience of the revelation of her own universality. Yet this knowledge cannot, in this "liquid" time, be "once and for all": in this "liquid" epoch, it must constantly be acquired anew, encounter to encounter, study to study. Thus, Khoroshilova's work relies on yet one more delicate balancing act - between the photographer's capacity to identify herself with an alien world and, simultaneously, to maintain toward that alien world her scholarly and existential distance. This is the principal way in which her work is distinct from that of artists who identify with a single communality and devote themselves to its description - whether the bacchanalian groupings of "relational aesthetics" or the painfully vulnerable and doomed marginals of Nan Goldin. In our scattered time, this rejection of one's own universality to

⁴ See Nicholas Bourriaud *«Esthétique relationnelle»*, Les Presses du Reel, Paris, 1998

⁵ I tried to analyze the treatment of personal identity in Anastasia Khoroshilova's work in my essay *Nastja Khoroshilova: Figure in an Interior* [Nastja Khoroshilova: figura in un interno], in "Islanders" (exhibition catalogue), Hilger Contemporary, Vienna, 2004, pages 1-2.

accept the universality of one particular community amounts to a personal defeat. It is a failure both scholarly or scientific and ethical, for only the ability to keep one's distance makes it possible for the analyst to reveal the Other. Khoroshilova's openness to this existential dilemma is not exclusively a factor of her personal work but again recognise it-self in the anthropological science in its branch named existential anthropology.

In conclusion, I would look at Khoroshilova's work in the framework of the again lively debate between those who favor a return to a social and political engagement and those who defend the autonomy of art. Obviously, although Khoroshilova's return to an autonomous art springs from the need to overcome the "relational aesthetics" of the 1990s, an aesthetic deeply antithetical to her, her work hardly amounts to a defense of the self-sufficiency of art. Her existential anthropology, by its very method, rejects aestheticization of any kind and is open to external, "profane, empirical - political and social – realities"⁶, that is, to exactly what the new partisans of social engagement call for. But let us be quite precise about where Khoroshilova stands.

Rejection of a conformist acceptance of the status quo often involves the resources of fantasy and the imagined. I refer here to those implicitly critical utopias that offer the possibility of an alternative way of life.

The special quality of Khoroshilova's work is that, as an anthropological researcher, she cannot allow herself to be swayed by the imagined: to the maximum extent, her work is in the present. Working with what is present, she is barred from putting before us any sort of experimental social relationships. Her role is to subject social relationships to observation and analysis. This is why she can have no place in groups made up of partisans of resistance, for these groups might well become objects of her study.

Khoroshilova's strategy of resistance is to eschew fixed ideological positions of any kind in order to show reality as it is, for which purpose she rejects all assumptions and thus the dictation of ideology. Thus, in an era when it was modish to bewail "the Russia we have lost", she gave us, in "Bezhin Lug", that is, "Russia as it is"⁷. Now she shows us Judaism's (and, by extension, any communality's) universality at a time when the streets are rife with the rhetoric of a "Russia rising from its knees". As always, however, her diagnosis is the result of her study, not its underlying presumption.

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⁶ See Aleksej Penzin, *V zashchitu gruboj mysli* [Defending the Simple Thought], Mosca, «Chudozhestvennyj zhurnal» [Moscow Art Magazine], 67, p. 13. I am referring to the Russian text, although Khoroshilova probably is not acquainted with it.

⁷ See my essay «*The Russia That We Have Not Lost*», in «*Anastasia Khoroshilova. Bezhin Meadow*», Trefoil Publishing House, Moscow, 2005.

