

Face to Face with the Islanders
By Stefano Pezzato (2006)

In the early 90es when the Soviet Union was disintegrating, Anastasia Khoroshilova was a teenager. It was at that time, that she decided to devote herself to photography and move to Germany to study and to begin a career as an artist.

Her remove, both in terms of age and location, from her subject contributed to the generation of cultural as well as aesthetic reflections on her way of photographing the „new Russian reality“ in the early years of this century. The distance from the politics and ideology of the country, the lack direct involvement in the historic period of economic and social transformation, encouraged a lucid, measured approach, free of the prejudices or emotional valency typical of those who are personally caught up in the immediacy of action and experience.

The young Russians photographed by Khoroshilova in the surroundings (Rooms, corridors, gyms) or against neutral backgrounds (anonymous interiors, gardens) are automatically transposed to a general level of abstraction that is characteristic of photography. The „meetings“ Khoroshilova set up, on her trips to Russia during and after her years studying at Duisburg-Essen University, and described by the artist in „Notes on the Way (2006), have documentary objectivity: the essential characteristics of samples of subjects in spontaneous poses that are never pre-established facing the camera.

The influence of this style can be seen in German sociological and serial photography (From August Sander to Thomas Ruff) and has a precedent in the series of adolescence photographed on the beach by Rineke Dijkstra. (Beaches, 1992-1996) in an equally direct and natural manner that is inversely proportional to the mystery of the individual histories.

Khoroshilova portraits are immediately recognizable on account of the uniform: trainee dancers at the State Academy of Choreography (2003), young fighters at the gym Smabo-70 (2005) or young women in military uniform of 9,5%plus (2005). They are members of institutions / symbols that echo a recent past glorious achievement, success and power, now reduced to the role of Islanders, whose individual life begins where their collective identity ends: their identity is inexorably fixed, as in photography, in the present. Not knowing anything about the personal lives, nor what their future holds, they appear to us to be clinging to the certainty of belonging, to the protection of the group and of history.

In this regard 9,5%plus is emblematic: in the Russian army almost one and every ten enlisted is a woman; so many decide to wear military uniform, something that has traditionally been a male prerogative. In the search for new social identity, or for possible financial security, these women compete in a male world, in a hierarchy where they are judged according to the position they have reached rather than what they are, women above all.

In the portraits of the last series Toys (2006) uniform is flanked by the presence of toys or games which reveal the simple child-like side of the subjects. The playful dimension

on which the portraits draw, without the photographer suggesting as much, is the only possibility that the subjects possess to construct an identity, to be themselves.

If they appear as impenetrable as their glance, anomalous, socially isolated, it is because they inhabit a world (colleges, institutions, barracks), inaccessible to anyone who does not have a special entry permit.

Roland Barthes wrote on photography that „Glance appears to be withheld by something internal. The poor little boy holding a new born puppy while his cheek rests on it (Kertesz, 1928), looks at the camera with sad, jealous, frightened eyes: such pathetic, heart rending thoughtfulness! In fact he is not looking at anything; he „withholds“ his love and fear: this is what glance is“.

In the private relationship with the subject of her photographs, Khoroshilova records the person in front of her lens without passing judgment of any kind or resorting to lyricism or sentimentality. It is rather that her photographs tend to reveal the paradox that the subject of her portraits coincides with the „function“ or the place in which they are set, but behind this lies hidden great humanity suffused with emotions, needs, desires, fears, suffering and hope. There is no evidence of all this in the photography, only a latent evocation.

Her subjects do not represent the protagonists of Russian society, but neither can they be considered „the victims“ of a system that separates them from the masses or „the heroes“ to whom the destiny of the country is entrusted. They rather take on the value of single polarities between which Khoroshilova attempts to take a stand: in the imagination of the artist both on the one hand the young people such as she was before going to study abroad and, on the other, young women as she is now looking the „others“ in the face, embody that which these people have been and which today they have become, or at least try to be.

Once again, as Barthes states, photography „creates the inconceivable confusion between realities („That which has been“ and truth („That is exactly it!“).