

In the Gloomy Forest of Modern Photography

Irina Meleshkevich

On a first visit to a photography exhibition all one notices is an endless change of images. To someone accustomed to the picturesque depth of canvases, to the convention of colour and light in even the simplest landscape, photography appears to be a mere report on the infinite variety of life forms. It can seem just a series of unexpected views – of familiar cities such as Rome, Moscow or Sao Paulo or portraits taken for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* with beauties wearing chic clothes or nothing at all, weird creatures of both sexes, chanced upon in the streets by masters of photography. At times automobiles, road signs, teapots or similar kitchen utensils, and other belongings of civilised humanity, get into the picture by accident.

Actually, the genesis of this particular kind of activity should be attributed to the emergence of our surroundings on plates and paper. Ever since the invention of photography people have been finding the phenomenon so amazing that until a person who has picked up a camera goes through the whole process of enchantment and revelation (something photography has been experiencing over the past hundred years), he or she will not become a photo artist.

Photography was invented in the 1830s simultaneously in several countries and by people engaged in experiments. Among them were William Fox Talbot, Louis Daguerre, Nicéphore Niepce, but most of us remember only Daguerre's name, from the now obsolete "daguerreotype". Surprisingly, in the nineteenth century the potential of photography was explored for purely practical purposes: to improve imaging, to reduce the time of exposure, to see how artificial and combined light work, to discover the effects produced by various emulsions. Although they are long forgotten, early photographs unexpectedly reveal all the features of modern art photography: multiplicity of meaning, versatility, an acute sense of living here and now, a desire to turn a snapshot of a moment into a sign of eternity.

Immediately after the birth of photography, an artist named Paul Delaroche declared that painting was dead, though at the time that pronouncement had no impact on the new medium. On the contrary, painting itself has served as a secret model for numerous explorations into the area of photography. One of the first daguerreotypes, made by Daguerre himself, was modelled on the traditional canons of trompe l'oeil still life. With light from the window pouring prettily on tiny angels made of plaster, on a bottle in straw casing, everything stood out in sharp contrast and looked tangible.

An Open Door, shot by William Talbot in 1844, creates an impression, as one would expect, of a spontaneously captured rustic scene. However, it took a whole day to photograph it, and the session involved changing camera spots, hanging barn lanterns so as to emphasise details and to enhance the effect of an illusionist's trick:

the viewer's eye is submerged, as it were, into the darkness of the barn, and then comes back into the light. A professional painter of those days could easily create the same effect, using a brush and some paints.

Today some of the discoveries made by the nineteenth and twentieth century photographers still work amazingly well.

Roger Fenton's *The Royal Target* is the purest example of a conceptual vision and of an abstract point of view. The entire procedure of Queen Victoria's sporting session, with all the preparation and the rest, is kept out of the frame: a fragment of a wall and the target itself carry all the meanings of content and expression.

In 1909 when Marinetti in his "Futurist Manifesto" declared that movement was an aesthetic category, photographer and physiologist Etienne Marey was no longer among the living, and his photographs were about thirty years old. Thanks to his invention of the "photo-gun" (a way of recording movement), he was able to create a series of striking photographs, each showing the entire sequence of an action. Nowadays a similar effect can be produced by photographers with a motor drive fixed to the camera.

It was only in the 1920s that Man Ray, in a truly conscious manner, turned photography into art. Having begun with rayography, i.e. taking photographs without using a camera, simply by imprinting objects on light-sensitive paper, he not only derived part of his pseudonym from this technique, but also amazed his contemporaries with its simplicity. Man Ray was the inventor of "conceptual" photographs in which he combined seemingly incompatible subjects. One of the earliest photos of this kind was *The Gift*, which shows an iron with nails in its gliding surface. Another, the celebrated *Engre's Violin* (1924) combined the intensive explosion and aesthetisation of the banal, characteristic of dadaism, with the poetic quality of expressing the metaphor of another passion and calling of the painter in question. (Engre often put aside his brush in favor of a violin.)

As one unexpectedly gets immersed in modern photography, out of the endless flow of images one gradually begins to form an idea of some of its essential, though barely perceptible, characteristics. One such characteristic is the equivocal nature of often highly complicated photo constructions which go back to the traditions of Man Ray, and which have been transformed by the provocative and grotesque discoveries of Joel Peter Witkin. Joel Peter Witkin depicts man as a victim of a monstrous conjunction of gratuitous events and prohibitions, of sin, innocence, and fear. Another characteristic is in showing humans and their nature as something at times harmonious and beautiful, and at times tragically hopeless, without, however, intentionally trying to frighten the viewer with images of non-being.

ParisPhoto-2004, a major forum of photography, presented the works of celebrated photo artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as William Talbot, Michael Ackerman, Cartier Bresson and Helmut Newton. In this context modern photography appears strikingly realistic, poetic, and reflexive. A great many of the photos show moments, captured as if by chance, of trivial events, something akin

to “neo-realism” which is again beginning to come into vogue. Shots of subway stations, urban and rural scenes, workers in quarries, children of all ages: these are not reporters’ photos, but attempts at seeing the beauty and the multifaceted complexity of the world as it really is. There is an astounding number of landscapes whose images amaze the viewer with their aesthetic quality, with the power of the personal, emotional experience of artists. Thanks to its wide scope and variety of genres (from documentary to art photography), ParisPhoto in 2004 has become the main forum of the art of photography, having presented for the experts’ judgment a realm that is live and dynamic, as recorded by the photo camera.

The FIAK, an international fair which is also held in Paris, has always been more radical. Traditionally perceived as an event serving to demonstrate experiments in all arts, this fair also pays tribute to photography. Here too, realism unexpectedly dominates. A brilliant series of portraits by Jean-Baptiste Hiinge (Artparis1), impressions of Africa by Alfredo Jaare, the simplicity of *Revelations of Mysteries* by Karen Knorr, and many other works clearly stand out from the overall multitude of photographs in which the body angle and the collision merely serve to produce a shocking effect.

Incidentally, this trend was most evidenced in the galleries from China, Czech Republic and Russia, showing artists from current or former socialist countries. One example is Natalia Edenmont whose exhibition “Still Life” has recently been shown with much ado at the Aidan Gallery in Moscow.

Born in Yalta, Natalia Edenmont now permanently resides in Sweden. She is attracted to heaps of pretty objects mixed with parts of freshly killed rabbits, mice, and cats. Her aspiration of turning the act of killing live creatures with her own hands into an arrangement in the style of a fashion magazine, betrays an attempt at gaining recognition at the cost of any scandal. Sadly, the author is trying to turn a perversion into an artistic event. As newspapers reported, “the artist” maintains that the whole operation should be completed in no more than fifteen minutes, because otherwise “the eyes of the animals tend to glass over, and the effect of living nature and freshness is lost”.

In the area of contemporary art photography in Moscow there are plenty of artists whose names used to be associated with shaping ultra avant-garde art in Russia. Gradually, however, performances, actions, and conceptualism became a thing of the past, and artists threw themselves into a world of illusions, so rich in possibilities to manipulate. Now the artists have created an image of aggressive romanticism in Russian photography. Their art is permeated with the spirit of mystical pantheism of Kaspar David Friedrich and, at the same time, with the cold academicism of the Nasareans who sang praises to gods and heroes. Except that the gods of nowadays are horrifyingly pitiless and much too young to know anything about humanity.

In the cycle of photos entitled “The King of the Forest”, by the AES Group (Arzamasova, Evzovich, Sviatski and Fridkes), crowds of neatly dressed children with angelic faces and a cold look in their eyes, resembling the poor Kai punished by the Snow Queen, roam the snow-covered tops of unidentified mountains,

descend onto the plains of Hindustan, patrol the vast spaces of Middle Russia, carrying awesome killer-weapons which, it seems, they have wrought out of the hands of Schwarzenegger's heroes.

A planet of unseen beauty is populated by an ever growing number of monsters, be they kids on punitive missions or birds of paradise with heads of rats or, by contrast, some bloodthirsty predators with heads of the beautiful hoopoe bird, as in Olga Tobreluts' *The Bestiary*. Everything exudes the novel idea of the impending end of the world.

The past season culminated in an exhibition of a photo project by Arsen Savadov, entitled "The City of the Dead". All the subjects are dead people, apparently on lease from a morgue, who display the consequences of anatomists' work on them. With the humanism of a necrophiliac, Savadov sets up scenes of innocent tea parties, of communal kitchens inhabited by corpses.

Again, the radical artists do not stop at the accomplishments of their patriarch Witkin. They go further. Their photos are not products of virtual manipulations, but truly filthy work which leaves no room for hoping that the limits of art and the limits of actions will remain uncrossed.

Of course, the Russian photography scene is not limited to its gloomy periphery, and there are many contemporary artists working in this field. One of them is Valeri Kuprianov. In his series "The Middle Russian Antiquity" and "Descriptions" he turns to culture and archaeology, consciously seeking a cultural identification. Sergei Bratkov's works are always tough (*The Police Station*). They hover on the brink of being provocatively shocking, yet poignantly show various sides of real life. Boris Saveliev has rediscovered light and shadow, as well as the poetry of simplicity, in his series "Space out of Time". In Aleksei Kalmykov's "Collection of Continuous Experiments" nude female bodies are freely combined with unique landscapes which are like still lives, shot with an antiquated camera on old glass negatives. The difference between the live and the inanimate is either obliterated or woven into a single artistic fabric.