

Boris Mikhailov Says: "A simple question, a simple answer".

Arja Hyytiäinen — *Why Photography?*

Boris — Photography is complex. I started making cinema for the factory I worked in, but soon I understood that it is difficult to communicate with cinema since you need a special place to show it. Photography deals better with communication and attention; it is immediate and makes a discussion more interesting. Secondly, what is important is social activity. Because a photographer is not only a big artist who is making something in his studio, it must take place in the street. This is what is important for me.

— *How important is the social context in the work for you?*

— It is important but not only the social part; it's a play between the social and aesthetical. I believe that everyone finds the right approach when you look at your pictures; picture can tell what is the way for an artist. Picture is a father; it tells me. The social context in Soviet Union was important due to the lack of information. TV, magazines, all media was telling only about the good information, nothing about the shadow side. It was important to do something that was real and that is why the social context became more important for me, perhaps nowadays, when more detailed information exists, it is not so important for an artist, but if you all the time feel pain you will have to continue telling about it...

— *You once said, "I think the West has too many distractions that can be a hindrance to work."*

— Yes, real distractions. The life here is different, the West for me has many levels of life, a good, middle and bad level. And our country was the same. It has changed a bit now. But before it was possible to find a line about how the middle life looks. But here it is difficult to define the middle level of life because the rich people dress looking like beggars and the beggars they have a good suit. I don't understand this. There are many destroyed places and when a place is destroyed people go away. It is difficult to talk about...but if a place is broken, the life is bad. It changes life and it is difficult to find out what is real.

— *How has life in your country changed since the time of your 'Salt Lake City' project?*

— It hasn't changed a lot but there are differences. Everything became more beautiful but less real. Perhaps in Kiev things are better, more reconstructed and new buildings... but in Kharkov, my city, there are just the old buildings and many advertisements about funny life, about the beautiful life. It is only advertisements. The center became cleaner and the fashion changed but many things are the same as before, as for the visual feeling...



Boris Mikhailov - Summer 2006, photo by Arja Hyytiäinen

— *You opened a lot of eyes with 'Case History'...work like it has not been done before in the Ukraine. Is it difficult to touch on the social questions in your country?*

— Yes, but not everything, in a place which isn't rich it is not that difficult. But the people are not so open anymore for pictures. This has happened everywhere in the West too. Some kind of paralyzing that has changed the mind. If photography is free, it means that the people are free too. If photography is not allowed then the people are not free. Who is prohibiting photography I'm not sure. People take pictures only in private. And this kind of freedom reminds me a little bit of the former Soviet Union. What is private now, really private? In former times when people saw a camera they said, "oooo! Take a picture of me!" and now, "go away!" Photographing is more limited now.

— *Do you respect this rule of asking?*

— Sometimes. In the West you have to respect. Sometimes I take these pictures without asking and it isn't so successful. I feel uncomfortable all the time. For a short time it is possible but if it is for a longer time, the feeling gets worse and you need to ask something. But it changes the mood, if you photograph without asking the circumstances do not change but when you ask there is a change, the truth disappears, everything is about truth. Maybe this is too much talked about, but something does happen.

— *Ilya Kabakov (a well known Russian artist) attempted to introduce a subjective idea in an objective environment with the aim of revealing something of the objective environment while doing so. This was often achieved by using text with photographs and images. Was Ilya Kabakov a very important person for you?*

— Yes. One of the important artist. — *And the method?*

— Yes, I think it is successful.

— *Did he influence or change your work at all?*

— It is not about changing the work but giving it something more. It isn't possible to change a work because reality is reality.

— *What do you mean by reality?*

— What is reality, when you take a picture it is about reality. This is not my idea; it is about the subject. Using text together with photography gives something new in the formalistic way. In our country Ilya Kabakov was the one using text with anonymous, social images. He was the first one who worked like that. Photography has all the time something similar to first love, first snow... because very often photography must be together with text...it is a tradition but it is possible to find a poetic way. This is very easy, but nobody is doing that in Russia. Only I am.

Reality is a structure in my mind. Reality plus something between me and the physical reality, this is the artist's way...but the photographers reality is physical.

— *What are the important questions for you in life?*

— Survivor.

— *What is your driving force? What makes you go out and take the pictures? What makes you continue?*

— Not wanting to be dead. — *Have you ever thought about not wanting to take a picture?*

— Now, for example it's not clear to me if I don't know what is important... for me it's about **IMAGES!** — *You do not know what is important... for me it's about IMAGES!*

— *Now the place for me is different. I have to communicate with the world.*

— *Does the fact that you are in Berlin change the work because it is the same here about life and people. It is the same everywhere and I try only to find a new form. I take pictures in Russia and here at the same time. I try to find out what is Germany. Now I need to change my work. It must change.*

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