

Starie Novosti (Old News)

Anastasia Khoroshilova's installation *Starie Novosti (Old News)* is currently to be seen in Venice at the historic Zenobiana Library, built in 1777 by Tommaso del Temanza. In stark contrast to the fresco painted in subdued pastel colours on the ceiling of the plush loggia, you find nine photo light boxes (100 x 80 x 15 cm) formally reminiscent of both skyscraper architecture and military or expedition cases. Moreover, the international designations visible on them give the works "obviously" brought and deposited here the transport character of a temporary temporality.

Nearly life-size portraits of women, in richly contrasting colours, show mothers from the town of Beslan in the Caucasus who lost their children during the tragic hostage-taking at the school in North Ossetia (Russian Federation) in September 2004.

The photographs date from 2010, when the artist sought out residents of Beslan to investigate how the memory of this human catastrophe was lost and to highlight its collective transience. Objects with panels which can be opened and closed like winged altarpieces, simultaneously show small television monitors with news clips from the now forgotten hostage drama, which shocked the world from 1 to 3 September 2004.

For this Russian artist, who lives in Germany, *Starie novosti* is a critical examination of “the theme of temporariness, pliability, and the frailty of a society’s collective memory, even the memory of the fate of thousands, millions, of people. In many cases, human compassion and empathy prove very short-lived, so much so that ‘individuals’ feel society has betrayed them when the fact of a tragedy is forgotten so quickly.”¹ In her work, Khoroshilova scrutinizes the mechanisms of real events, how the media deals with them, their transience, and the personal standpoint of the survivors.

Dynamics of real-time

This Moscow-born artist, who originally wanted to study photojournalism, combines a variety of media in her installation: film documentation and portraits and also object architecture. TV monitors transmit the news: Terrorists, mainly Chechen and Ingushetian, had chosen 1 September 2004 to storm the school; this was the start of the new school year when entire families traditionally accompanied their children to Middle School No. 1. More than 1,127 children and adults were held there, in their power, for three whole days. This state of emergency plunged the little town into the full glare of the global news broadcasts. Hour by hour, on its

¹In conversation with the artist.

screens, the world followed a drama beyond imagination: the release of Chechen rebels in prison was demanded in exchange for the lives of mothers and children. The underlying political background is the disintegration of the previously supreme authority of the Soviet Republic into new states and the struggle for independence of some of the republics in the Caucasus.

Like a crime serial, the intensity of the moving images left the world breathless. Every development was recorded: the statements of the then Russian president Vladimir Putin; the helpless fathers with shotguns beside the highly-armed Russian security forces which had encircled the school building. After three days of high tension the drama had escalated so much that the Russian counter terrorism forces, the ALFA and Wypel units, ultimately stormed the building, but with the death of 331 hostages, according to official figures. The world found itself confronted with the traumatic images of a bloodbath: dead mothers and children, countless people severely injured and the chaos of lynch law. The massacre became a landmark among catastrophes, going well beyond all those previously imaginable. After all the international interest taken in these traumatic events, the media suddenly fell silent on the subject of the dead and the mourning before lapsing into the nothingness of forgetfulness.

Ethnographic photography

In 2005, Anastasia Khoroshilova had just completed her studies under Jörg Sasse at the renowned Folkwang School in Essen. When she heard that some of the child hostages were coming to Germany with their parents to recuperate at Bad Tölz in Bavaria, she went to spend a week with the survivors. However, as she reported, nobody was able to talk about the catastrophe. The children did play, but they seemed to have been turned to stone. So she asked their parents' permission to take their photographs. For this series, *Out of Context*, the children were put into their Sunday best, sometimes even their national costume. In this new self-depiction, however, there is an evident discrepancy between the new environment – a landscape of unspoiled mountains and meadows – and the person in the self-presentation, bewildered and helpless at the prospect of possible self-discovery.

This interest in social groups is anchored in Khoroshilova's own history. After perestroika, her parents sent her to a boarding school in northern Germany when she was only fifteen years old. Here she came to know a quite different school system where opinions were openly expressed, and at the same time became familiar with the isolation of boarding-school life. With this change and her voluntary exile, she developed her insight into the Others, the minorities. The name

of the school newspaper, *Insulaner*, later inspired her major work *Islanders* (2002—2005), in which she shows “the ambivalence between individuality and group membership, freedom and tradition, by which people and their surroundings influence each other, both positively and negatively.”²

Furthermore, for her series *Russkie* (2007), she travelled through rural Russia from west to east, “a world far removed from the excitement of the media, fast mass consumption and virtual network hysteria,” in order to get into a conversation with the inhabitants.³ Through respectful dialogue, she asked the people themselves to give their own views on post-Soviet history. In contrast to the global concept of “Russians” she wanted to set the subjects of the portraits against the backdrop of their local and individual identity, in their socio-cultural environment, surrounded by their everyday objects and as part of an ethnicity.

Khoroshilova had already devoted part of her dissertation to ethnographic photography. In the political context of the re-awakening multi-ethnic state, this historic social tradition of multiculturalism takes on a new value. Its continuity and power of identification are something the artist has always sought, her mode of

² *Auf Augenhöhe (At eye level)*, Lothar Altringer in *RUSSKIE*, Anastasia Khoroshilova, Eikon Verlag, Vienna, 2008, pp. 239-240.

³ “Russkie. Über ein Projekt von Anastasia Khoroshilova,” (Russkie. About a project by Anastasia Khoroshilova), Dr. Thomas Elsen in: *RUSSKIE*, Anastasia Khoroshilova, Eikon Verlag, Vienna, 2008, pp. 6-7.

procedure being that of a visual anthropologist.⁴

The survivors at a standstill

Years after the bloody hostage drama of Beslan, the bereaved criticised the failure to reappraise and investigate the tragedy, the political and religious background of which remains obscure. As a result, in 2010, the artist sought out the residents of the city of Beslan to investigate the loss of the memory of this still unsolved drama and its collective temporariness. Almost every family had lost one of its members. She spoke to the mothers, some of whom made their revelations to the camera dutifully, some in thankfulness. They put themselves into the picture to call a halt to the forgetting of the past.

“I should like to draw attention to ‘collective awareness’, to call to mind the inner scars which the process of recording tragic history leaves on fellow human-beings. This work, for me, is an opportunity to investigate the mechanisms of memory; of collective memory and individual memory. What causes the phenomenon of an individual’s ‘exclusion’, in this case of the victims of the Beslan tragedy?”⁵

⁴Viktor Misiano, *The Existential Anthropology of Anastasia Khoroshilova*, “The Narrow Circle, Anastasia Khoroshilova,” *Contrasto*, Rome, 2008.

⁵ In conversation with the artist.

Collision of different planes of time

Khoroshilova's installation functions like a montage: here, the informative matter-of-factness of the media images with their immediate impact, corresponding to the present; there, the image as a means of coming to terms with the past, like a "strange weave of space and time" (Walter Benjamin).⁶ It is in this sense that the artist would like to do justice to what always gets forgotten.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II, I. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1977b, p. 57 (own translation).

Walter Benjamin wrote: “the eternal is, in any case, rather the frill on a dress than an idea.”⁷ And here we discover what is special. Something that cannot be grasped bears witness to something that cannot be depicted, expressed here only in the detail of a clenched-up hand.

The artist as an interlocutor enables these people to gain a new dignity and sense of their own worth, through this non-verbal visual communication. It is these very interactions between the artist and the person’s standpoint today which come across to the viewer, the women here seem to speak to the viewer – because they know that at last they have someone to speak to. For, history is the subject of an imaginary construct, social as well as cultural, as is also human fate.

In this respect, Khoroshilova focuses less on the traumatic image than on the portraits of women whose present is a struggle with the past to find a future. Her use of images, both from everyday culture and the world of the media on the one hand and the pictorial work created by the artist on the other, to this extent points to a variety of discontinuous times: the state of emergency, the experience of history, and “the moment when the person remembering recaptures and does justice to the past.”⁸ The very thinking in images allows this shift of perspective.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1, *Das Passagen-Werk*, *Aufzeichnungen und Materialien*, N: *Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*, Frankfurt/M. 2005 [N 3, 2], p. 578 (own translation).

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, pp. 269—277, Neudruck in: Gerhart Hauptmann / Hrsg. von H. J. ... In: *Poetica* 4 (1971) (own translation).

A work of art as memorial

The installation with the military cases, and even travel trunks, is reminiscent of sleeping quarters in a Russian metropolis. Each box can be folded shut again like a chapter. The subjects of the portraits, all at once bearing their burden of a fate beyond description speak directly and emotionally to the viewer. It is precisely through this artistic presentation and the dialogue that it makes possible that, however, the process of working through the past can again be set in motion.

Khoroshilova's interdisciplinary work with the world of images marks the differences in views and position; here, the image of the bombed-out school as a black hole in time, and there the wonderfully beautiful landscape of mountains and meadows. The Caucasus had been the holiday resort for the entire Soviet Union, also for Lermontov and Pushkin, a place where the women counted among the loveliest of Russia. Since this tragedy, however, the landscape of the Caucasus has lost its face; it no longer stands for beauty but for many terrorist attacks and daily assaults, known and unknown. This disjunction from the now alien environment also characterises Khoroshilova's portraits, those of the homeless in their own homeland.