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The Specific Characteristics of the Creativity of Alexander Chekmenev in the Concept of the Development of Social Documentary as a Significant Part of Contemporary Ukrainian Art Photography

Abstract

Social documentary photography is one of the key genres that Ukrainian artists use for creating a series of works presented in the form of a photo book or as an independent project. Among the most prominent representatives of this direction, Alexander Chekmenev and the members of Kharkov School of Photography (Boris Mikhailov, Evgeny Pavlov, Mikhail Pedan, etc.) should be singled out. It is notable that despite the fact that their works have common issues, the similar choice of the method and general stylistics, there are a number of significant differences. With the transfer of individual facial features, Aleksander Chekmenov seeks to reveal the psychology of the person being portrayed and elevate a person in the eyes of others, while representatives of the Kharkov school of photography use sharp, satirical language with the active inclusion of various manipulations of the image. On the basis of the art history analysis of a number of well - known projects by Alexander Chekmenev, certain regularities in the strategy of creating a social documentary project in his works have been identified.

Key words

Humanist Photography.
Kharkiv School of Photography.
Photo Books. Photo Projects.
Photojournalism. Postmodernism.
Social Documentary Photography.

Introduction

Since the end of the 19th century, photography has become a form of influence on public opinion. A striking example of how documentary photography can lead to qualitative changes and reforms in society is the series of works by Lewis Hine, made in the 1918 by order of the National Child Labor Committee, which conducted the first campaign against child labour in the history of the United States¹. The photographer also touched on issues of the difficult life of the working class and emigrants in America. The subsequent development of documentary photography and its recognition as fine art led to its division into several genres (street photography, social landscape, etc.). Despite the continuous renewal of the sphere of media and digital technologies, development of post-processing, introduction of artificial intelligence, general overload of the visual content, appearance and distribution of the conceptual, abstract, commercial and staged photography, documentary photography remains one of the main genres of photography, which can be presented as an independent form of art, document, archive and as a mean of communication with the public. It functions as memory, evidence, narrative, and a tool for

social activism². The relevance of this genre can be seen in the growing number of international exhibitions, festivals, competitions and other events devoted to it. At the beginning of its emergence and development, Ukrainian social photography was focused on depicting reality through the subjective view of the photographer, achieving a comprehensive critique of the Soviet regime. The artists proceeding in this direction experimented with form, technique and processes variously. In general, they followed Western examples of contemporary conceptual projects, using post-modernist strategies and deconstructing the values and traditions of classical art with a deliberately “direct” photography. They raised important social problems of mass impoverishment and loss of moral values of ordinary citizens of the Soviet and post-Soviet spaces. Their work revealed aspects of reality through a naturalistic depiction of the life of the lower class using postmodern aesthetics, methods of paradox and grotesque. A researcher of fine art photography, Tatiana Pavlova, characterized this phenomenon as “*a powerful stream of existential feeling determined the ‘want of truth’, which was to become the driving force of photography in the last moments of the Soviet*

Union’s existence”³. The ideas they prominently promulgated aroused the interest of the foreign public, and Ukrainian documentary social photography established itself on the international art scene as a unique artistic phenomenon. Constantly evolving, documentary photo projects received new forms of representation – photo books, which allowed photography to move beyond the museums and galleries and appear in bookstores and at book festivals⁴. Among various photographic associations, the Kharkiv school of photography became particularly influential and significant due to its provocative, extraordinary, revolutionary, and scandalous methods of depicting post-Soviet reality. Later on, individual artists with similar strategies appeared, who also garnered international recognition. One of the most famed is Alexander Chekmenev, whose approach to documentary photography, however, is fundamentally different from the Kharkov school. Chekmenev’s works were exhibited in the Netherlands, Germany, Latvia, France, America, Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia. But if the works of representatives of the Kharkov school of photography have been extensively researched

1 SMITH-SHANK, D. L.: Lewis Hine and His Photo Stories: Visual Culture and Social Reform. In *Art Education*, 2003, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 33-37.

2 BOGRE, M.: *Documentary Photography Reconsidered: History, Theory and Practice*. London, New York : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 264.

3 PAVLOVA, T.: *Avanguard Red and Green. From “Blow Theory” to “Kontakt”*. [online]. [2023-09-12]. Available at: <<http://www.vasa-project.com/gallery/ukraine-2/tatiana-2-essay.php>>.

4 SAFRONOVA, A. V., MIKHAILOVA, R. D.: Modern Photobook as a Design Object: Systematization by Way of Submitting Content. In *Art and Design*, 2020, No. 2, pp. 92-103. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.30857/2617-0272.2020.2.8>>.

among the scientific community, in popular science books and internet publications, the analysis of Chekmenev's work has not been adequately addressed in scientific papers and has received a wide investigation only on the internet and in art magazines. The purpose of this research is through an art history analysis to reveal the peculiarities and main features of Ukrainian social documentary photo projects.

1 The State of Research

Many works by foreign researchers, including such leading art theorists as Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, analyzed the influence of photography on society and undertook an examination of its role as a document and archive. Among recent works, it is worth mentioning "Between photography and document" by Andre Rouille, where a comprehensive historical overview of photography as a cultural phenomenon, a visual medium, and an art technique is given⁵.

Oleksandr Rodchenko, one of the founders of constructivism, the founder of design and advertising in the USSR, and one of the representatives of The New Vision movement, emphasized the importance of photography as an independent genre. He defined

that it is the most accurate tool for conveying visual information and the most effective method of influencing public opinion in comparison with other forms of art.

Ukrainian independent scientific opinion on this issue began to develop only at the end of the 20th century due to the late development of independent photographic practice in Ukraine at the institutional level. Currently, extensive translation, analysis and further original research of foreign archives and theories are taking place. At the same time, new institutions, such as the Kharkiv Museum of Photography (2008), M17 (2010) are being created. The studies of Ukrainian photographic heritage, research in the field of photography, reviews of fine art photo projects, and Ukrainian photo books are publicly accessible on the website of the following museum – Moksop (<https://moksop.org>). Contemporary art museums and galleries are emerging, in which photography occupies a significant place (for instance, Pinchuk Art Center (2006), Mystetskyi Arsenal (2005), Izolyatsia (2014)). In addition to archiving, conducting lectures, workshops and discussions, funding of young artists is also carried out. Currently, these institutions operate libraries and archives, which contribute to the development of Ukrainian scientific art thought and the spread of knowledge about Ukrainian photographic art and creates its theoretical base. However, it should be noted that Ukrainian photography theory is

still in its initial stages. The most researched subjects include the phenomena of the Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk schools of photography (the works of Tetiana Pavlova), investigation of news and journalistic photography (B. I. Cherniakov) and partly the general history of Ukrainian art photography in the context of the global development of art (Viktoria Myronenko, Oleksandr Lyapin). Lesya Smyrnaya made a great contribution to the awareness of trends in fine Ukrainian visual art in her work "A Century of Nonconformism in Ukrainian Visual Art" (2019), in which certain attention is also paid to photographic art.

2 Materials and Methods

Sources for the study include fine art photo books by Ukrainian authors, which were recognized in Ukrainian and international festivals of photo books; interviews, materials about Alexander Chekmenev, the Kharkiv School of Photography, fine art photography in general, and photojournalism from various resources that includes articles, interviews and research. In order to determine the role and place of the photobook in a number of media spaces, the author conducted a retrospective analysis of scientific works devoted to an analysis of the features of the language of photography and photojournalism and their transformation as a message of communication and display of social problems.

5 See: ROUILLE, A.: *La Photographie. Entre Document et Art Contemporain*. Paris : Gallimard, 2005.

3 Creativity of the Photo Artist Alexander Chekmenev

Alexander Chekmenev began to master the profession of a photographer in 1988, at a local photo studio in Lugansk. In 1997 he moved to Kyiv, where he now lives. A huge part of his creative legacy are the unique archives of life in Ukraine from the 1990s that reveal the complexity and injustice of the social, economical and political situation. A series of his works have been acquired by prominent museums such as the Ludwig Museum, Germany; Pompidou Center, France; MOKSOP Museum, Kharkiv; the Mystetskyi Arsenal Museum, Kyiv, Ukraine; etc.

Chekmenev's projects and photo books are narrowly focused and address specific problems (the life of miners, emigrants, patients in psychiatric facilities, the process of "passportization" in the 90s). Along with this, Alexander also creates series related to the current situation in the country, covering the recent events in Ukraine and their consequences. His stylistic decision is more in line with classic Western social documentary projects but at the same time, his photographs have a clear humanistic orientation and "subjective" view, that conveys the empathic, positive attitude of the author to the subjects. Donald Weber, Canadian documentary photographer, the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships claims that Chekmenev is the best photographer on the post-soviet space and sees his work as a

manifestation of humanity⁶.

Thus, despite the frequent mention of his name in the same breath as the photographers of the Kharkov school (Evgeny Pavlov, Boris Mikhailov, Mikhail Pedan, etc.), owing to the common issues, nationality, and a documentary approach to photography, their artistic methods differ significantly. Chekmenev tries to understand and interact with his models, showing their character, emotions and often elevates them arousing a deep feeling of sympathy, while the artists of the Kharkov school create "naturalistic", "unaesthetic" images of the life of the working class and marginalized groups of society (unprotected people who do not have a fixed place of residence), which shock and evoke such emotions as disgust, rejection and horror. Hence, they used photography as a "stroke". The work had to act on the viewer instantly, like an unexpected blow⁷.

Examples of such a difference in strategies can be found in the photo books "Lilies" by Alexander Chekmenev and "Alcoholic Psychosis" (1983) by Evgeny Pavlov. Both photo projects are dedicated

to people in a psychiatric clinic, were made under similar conditions with natural lighting in black and white, and have the same form of story representation, that continues the tradition of photo typology founded by the Becher school, and subsequently adopted by conceptual artists.

The photographs taken by Chekmenev are characterized by a single central composition with the main character (patient). A characteristic feature of all images in the project is the use of lilies, that works as a contrast to the environment and a metaphor for purity. The style of the photographs brings it together with the phenomena of "New Documents" in American photography (exhibition of Frank, Winogrand, Arbus, Friedlander established the new aesthetic of photography in 1967) that is characterized by the extreme subjectivity of their use of the camera and yet their deep concern for / interest in their subjects⁸.

In particular, his works are related to the art heritage of Diana Arbus, whose main subject also included marginalized members of society displayed with deep sympathy and sentimentality. As Matthew Weinstein⁹ states Diana was one

6 SAFONOV, E.: *Alexander Chekmenev: I'm Interested in Collecting Pieces of the Past*. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://birdinflight.com/en/inspiration/experience/alexander-chekmenev-im-interested-in-collecting-pieces-of-the-past.html>>.

7 AKAGE, A., NAUDET J.-J.: *From Ukraine. The First Story: Archives by Alexander Glyadyelov*. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://loieldelaphotographie.com/en/from-ukraine-the-first-story-an-archive-by-alexander-glyadyelov-ui/>>.

8 KEMPF, J.: Garry Winogrand & Friends. In *Transatlantica*, 2014, No. 2. [online]. [2023-04-15]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.7215>>.

9 WEINSTEIN, M.: Love and Hate. In *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2007, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 341-343.

great humanist in contemporary art which makes her akin to Alexander.

The series “Alcoholic psychosis” of Evgeniy Pavlov is characterized by highly contrasted images taken from unusual perspectives, with a

wide angle lens. Due to his method, he deliberately deforms the body and anatomical features of a sick person in order to maximize the horror and to shock the viewer. The general composition and the objects shown in the pictures emphasize the

insignificance of life and enhance the dramatic effect. The ideological subtext of the photo series can be found in the words of the author: “We live in a country of victorious surrealism”¹⁰.



Figure 1: A. Chekmenev. “Lilies”, 2020. Format: 20x24 cm. 120 pages 100 photos.

Source: “Lilies” by Alexander Chekmenev. [online]. [2023-04-18]. Available at: <<https://moksop.org/en/product/lilii-oleksandra-chekmenova/>>.



Figure 2: Evgeniy Pavlov. Kharkiv school of photography. “Alcoholic psychosis”, 1983.

Source: SHEBETKO, A.: *Евгений Павлов: «Жизнь круче самых богатых фантазий»*. Evgeniy Pavlov: “Life is Cooler than the Richest Fantasies”. [online]. [2023-04-18]. Available at: <<https://birdinflight.com/ru/portret/20161018-eugeniy-pavlov-interview-harkovskaya-shkola-photographiyi.html>>.

On the whole, the works of the Kharkiv School of Photography are inclined towards conceptual art and post-modernist methods, widely

covering the public and private life of a “Soviet” or “post-Soviet” citizens and forbidden subjects including nudity, smoking, drinking, and illness, etc.¹¹.

Often they also use additional photo-manipulation and post-processing (collage, colouring, combining different images, references to classical works. “Blatarî vîspoda” (1989) involves multiple heterogeneous cultural codes, “Mythologies” (1988), is organized around specific myths. “1 × 7” (1988) references the history

¹⁰ SHEBETKO, A.: *Евгений Павлов: «Жизнь круче самых богатых фантазий»*. Evgeniy Pavlov: “Life is Cooler than the Richest Fantasies”. [online]. [2023-04-18]. Available at: <<https://birdinflight.com/ru/portret/20161018-eugeniy-pavlov-interview-harkovskaya-shkola-photographiyi.html>>.

¹¹ LOZHKINA, A.: *Жестокый диагноз от Бориса Михайлова. Severe Diagnosis from Boris Mikhailov*. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2011/07/30/82416/>>.

of art, while the documentary and naturalistic character of the pictures and the clearly expressed social implication are preserved. It can be confirmed that the power of such photographs as document then rests not in their 'objectivity' but in the relationship between referential signs and social-aesthetic forms, however it still can help alert the public to "the truth of what is happening" under certain circumstances¹².

Among his other programmatic works, the photo books "Passport" and "Ukrainian Photography" should

also be mentioned.

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Alexander Chekmenev's photo book "Passport", consists of a portrait series made in 1994-1995 in Luhansk during the process of "passportisation". A. Chekmenev, attracted by social workers, found himself in the homes of Luhansk residents, where he recorded the people of the mid-90s who were physically unable to leave the house and who could not use photo

services due to lack of funds. It was mainly elderly and sick people. The photo book "Passport" is a phototypology of the classic type with a minimalist graphic and polygraphic solution. The series presents 2 photographs: The first revealed how the finished photos in passports looked. The second included uncropped images, that show a complete picture of the apartment and condition in which the models lived. The small white canvas, which social service workers held, behind added a dramatic effect¹³.



Figure 3: A. Chekmenev. "Passport", 2014. Format: 20x24 cm. 120 pages 100 photos.

Source: Alexander Chekmenev. *Passport*. [online]. [2023-05-13]. Available at: <<https://www.alexanderchekmenev.com/projects/passport/>>.

The book makes a heavy impression primarily due to its simple and frank picture of reality. Clear colour images, lack of post-processing and general plans made with 35mm lens are typical methods of creating a documentary photo, which tends to reproduce the effect of a deliberately careless "amateur" photo. The series have a clearly expressed social subtext and at the same time act as a unique document

of a passing era and time.

The photobook "Ukrainian Photography" was launched by the Artbuk publishing house in 2008. Album consists of a series of Ukrainian black and white photography 1993 - 2007. The publication presents several cycles of documentary black and white photography dedicated to ordinary Ukrainian people: those who fought

during the Second World War; those who are treated in a hospital; those who live in the open air or underground, those who go to work every day, live in a village, gather berries, catch fishes.

One of the author's most dramatic books is the photo book "Donbass", which gives a complete picture of the life of miners, their hard and dangerous work. It should be

¹² RAY, L.: Social Theory, Photography and the Visual Aesthetic of Cultural Modernity. In *Cultural Sociology*, 2020, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 139-159.

¹³ See: SAFRONOVA, A.: Features of the Author's Ukrainian Photobook as an Object of Art Design. In *Knowledge, Education, Law, Management*, 2020, Vol. 4, No. 5, pp. 65-71.



Figure 4: A. Chekmenev. "Ukrainian Photography", 2008. Format: 20x24 cm. 120 pages 100 photos.

Source: Олександр Чекменюв. *Чорно-біла фотографія*. [online]. [2023-05-13]. Available at: <<https://yagallery.com/publishing/oleksandr-chekmenev-chorno-bila-fotografiya>>.

emphasized that in an effort to create a project as documentary and be as socially truthful as possible, Aleksander lived in almost the same conditions as the miners, taking part in all their public events. The project contains photos of

genre scenes and almost intimate portraits of residents, taken directly at their place of work (mines) and in their homes. Despite the gloomy nature of the photographs, the emphasized contrast, the dark colour scheme, the photobook is

permeated with humanism and frank sympathy for the models, who every day have to overcome a number of unfavourable and even dangerous working conditions in Ukrainian mines.

According to Linfield, such kinds of



Figure 5: A. Chekmenev. "Donbass", 2011. Format: 20x24 cm. 120 pages 100 photos.

Source: Alexander Chekmenev *Donbass*. [online]. [2023-05-13]. Available at: <<https://www.kehrerverlag.com/en/alexander-chekmenev-donbass-978-3-86828-185-9>>.

photography, which directly show the life of the people, is an ethically and politically necessary act that connects us to our modern history of violence and probes the human

capacity for cruelty¹⁴. Among Chekmenev's latest photo projects, it is worth noting "Deleted"

(portraits of the homeless) (2020), "Citizens of Kyiv" (2022), "Faces of war" (2022-2023), in which the author again turns to colour photography. Social projects of recent years are distinguished by their precise composition and are remarkable for their

14 LINFIELD, S.: *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago : Chicago University Press, 2010, p. 342.

artistic performance, and greatly impress. In terms of their colour and compositional solution, these works go back to the traditions of classical Spanish painting and the movement of “caravagism”, which is characterized by hard light, low

key, dark backgrounds without further details, where the main attention is focused on the face of the person being portrayed. As a result, Chekmenov continues the tradition of subjective documentary photography, “humanistic” portraits

and, through the medium of photography, shows social and political problems and his attitude to documented events, raising awareness of the problem at the international level.



Figure 6: A. Chekmenev. “Deleted”, 2020.

Source: *Deleted 2018-2020*. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<http://www.alexanderchekmenov.com/projects/homeless/>>.



Figure 7: A. Chekmenev. “Citizens of Kyiv”, 2022.

Source: *Citizens of Kyiv*. [online]. [2023-03-17]. Available at: <<https://foto-fest.com/en/alexander-chekmenov-en/>>.

Conclusion

Documentary photo projects take considerable time to create and are basically accompanied by short text blocks or signatures. They have greater influence over the people than a simple press photo series

or photojournalism, because they work with subjects rather than with events. In addition, photo series and photo stories create bigger effects than single photography because they expand the opportunities of research and give a more complete picture of the problem. Finished

projects are shown in exhibitions, in the form of photobooks or via internet resources about art and photography. Currently, the works of Ukrainian photo artists are highly valued on the European market, and despite their common features, it is possible to trace the differences in

approaches to the implementation of social documentary projects, Ukrainian photo books follow the European art trends in many respects, while constant referencing the Soviet past and post-Soviet life is a characteristic of Ukrainian photography.

The conducted art analysis of Chekmenev's work allowed us to identify a number of features that reflect his creative methods and approaches. Among these, it is necessary to note the photobooks "Donbass" (2011), "Passport" (2017), "Lily" (2020) and projects "Deleted" (2019), "The Ukrainian citizens" (2022), "The face of war" (2023). Through the aesthetics of contemporary art, Chekmenev documentally and ruthlessly depicts reality by escalating the dramatics with deliberately imperfect composition and image processing (underexposed image, graininess, sometimes incorrect framing). At the same time he tries to exalt, to monumentalize the images of his personages, to evoke sympathy from the viewer. His works have a pronounced humanist character, in contrast to the work by artists of the Kharkov school, who reveal the eternal social problems of the Soviet and post-Soviet space, using typical methods of postmodernist including grotesque, hyperbolization and paradox, citation, as well as extreme forms of naturalness in order to shock the viewer. Therefore, Chekmenev continues the aesthetics of classical social documentary photography by creating projects in which the

reportage stylistic and staged portrait is combined.

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