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simon roberts

Simon Roberts (1974) is a British documentary photographer, whose works are based on observing so-called social maps. He chooses his environments based on specifically-defined societal unrest or intensive activities. During his research he concentrates on creating image structures that capture intersections between people and the landscape. Despite the fact that themes of violence and aggression appear in many of his photo series, Roberts' interest tends toward the documentation of moments from everyday life or non-event instances that represent a deeper and generalised system of their functioning. His attempt to dig deeper into the crux of a problem and to come closer to individual persons is embodied also in the forms that he uses: this is a combination of direct portraits, video report footage, and filming (portrayals) of the environments in which these events take place.

The roots of his artist-researcher orientation can be found in the combination of university disciplines that Roberts studied – photography and social geography. This science, which explores relationships and mutual influences of man on his environment – the spatial clues that man leaves thereon and the consequences that the environment has on a person's mentality – is a relatively new study area in the Czech Republic. However, in the Anglo-Saxon world it has already made a name for itself. It is a certain means of a differently viewing the structure of states, their internal arrangement and the character of local residents.

Among Simon Roberts' works we can find numerous series from "exotic milieux": from Zimbabwe (*Last Lepers* – 2002, Rwanda (*Lest We Forget* – 2004), the Nevada desert (*Desert Blast* – 1999), from Israel and Palestine (*The Hudna* – 2003), but the artist tries to approach them neither as a visual tourist, nor as a creative reporter. Via photographic response he wants to seek out laws on the coexistence between man and his surroundings. During the development of his work Roberts moves across defined motifs and themes. Most often this is a certain reference to the past, which is still visible in the landscape and its inhabitants. These are sometimes very negative themes that he tries to soften through the construction and structure of his photographs. Roberts' photos show a sort of land memory: signs and indicators which remained on the surface as well as that which has been preserved in memories and fragments of the material past. In some collections he works with foreign image materials: he uses family slides, collected photos of persons killed in genocides and other illustrative, period photos.

During initial looks at Simon Roberts' photos we cannot escape the feeling of image and content cliché. Nonetheless, after deeper analysis of his works the motivations leading to the creation of the photographs and the correlation of these cycles becomes clear. Roberts pays special attention to Russia. He did shoots there many times before deciding to create a grand testimony characterising the Russian world. In addition to his most well-known series, *Motherland* (2004–5), he also created several smaller ones including, for example, *Living with Lenin* (2005–7), an exploration of the expansion of political monuments into everyday life, *Polar nights* (2005), snapshots of the landscape in the Arctic Circle during periods of perpetual darkness, or portraits of the Chechen president, *Ramzan Kadyrov* (2006).

Creating a documentary series on former East Bloc countries has its own pitfalls, not so different from classic images of Africa as the last spot on earth unmarked by civilisation, or Cuba – a living mausoleum to a Socialist regime, or Asia – a large Buddhist shrine. An artist from Great Britain, who decides to photograph Russia, has an even more difficult starting point. There are already a number of integral testimonies from the past two decades on the situation in the former Soviet Union: both

/man and his land/

from the points of view of the country's inhabitants as well as from those of visitors. Let's mention here the work of Boris Michailov, a Ukrainian photographer, who uses a very naturalist technique to expose the contradictions between his homeland and Russia and the disillusion of their residents. Karl de Keyzer, a member of Magnum Photos, offers in his photos a similar view, albeit from the other end of Europe. His publication, *Zona* (2003), documents the world of a Siberian prison. The collection, *Homo Sovieticus* (1989), concentrates on the symbolical-political character of the USSR environment. Both Dana Kyndrová (*Rusko/Russia*, 1987-present) and Karel Cudlín (*Ukrajina/Ukraine*, 1992-present) worked with the image techniques of poetisation and iconisation in their works.

Unfortunately photographs in the style of humanist documentaries – based on the phenomena of poverty, suffering and the collapse of political systems – have become an almost traditional view of the former Soviet republics. Roberts claims that he tried to remove the prejudices of the Russians themselves and the views of the country in Western eyes from his commentaries. His testimony is meant to be comprised of a combination of values accepted by the locals and also those that can be understood and seen by external observers of events. Yet despite an intensive effort to penetrate the mentality of a people whose culture is so different from that of the British, this subjective response cannot be considered an independent description of Russian identity.

The focal point of strong documentary photography is first and foremost the offering of a new view of the known and of lesser known things and sites that creates a certain tension between reality and the internal experience. The difference between image reporting and art is primarily in its content. On one hand it is difficult to find rules for establishing boundaries, and on the other hand aestheticisation should not suppress the message. Otherwise stated, the creative form should support content. With photographs and film the scale of image possibilities is more levelled (graduated) than with other media. It is necessary to carefully consider the mean of using these technical images and this both with regard to their most democratic usage and to their most marked stereotypes in portrayal.

Simon Roberts speaks of parallels between photographing the East and exotic lands in the eyes of Western Europeans and the colonial tendencies of the new-age world. The feeling of supremacy and power that the photos taken here evoke stems from the combination of their immanent attributes as recording material or the contemporary consumer system, in which the photos fill the symbolic function of a weapon, which is a means of forced acquisition of virtual plunder. Thanks to the photographed object the viewer gains a feeling of ownership of the portrayed image (Sontag¹). Travelling has become image tourism; a hunt for image-evidence of our presence.

The social movement taking place in the areas mentioned plays itself out both internally and externally. Nonetheless each of them fulfils in most cases a different function. Moving from the West to less-developed countries tends to be a hobby, an attractive way to pass one's free time, or eventually an attempt to show the evil in the world, which is raging somewhere not far from us. An opposite move is the fulfilled escape, the search for better existential conditions, the uneasy path to a new life. Isolation, impermeability and poverty make post-Soviet countries a visual attraction as relayed by many reporters and artists. In his book, *Photography/Fotografie*² André Rouillé distinguishes between humanist photography, which we know as a strong, post-war tendency toward photographic documentary containing a strong, moralising subtext, and humanitarian photography, which is an



Tanya Yurevna and friend, Birobidzhan, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004

artistic take on powerlessness and suffering. Its message is at the core non-constructive. It tends rather to contribute to overall scepticism.

Simon Roberts' work traverses several genres from staged portraits to landscape photography. His largest published series so far, *Motherland* - homeland in translation, develops from a strong feeling of Russian pride in one's origins and from a land, whose specific optimism, which exists despite social and political problems that Russia has to deal with. In his photos we rarely find the common, everyday life that the artist is trying to discover. Rather we see remainders of the Soviet aesthetic, symbols of a national self-awareness or romantic shots of landscapes. The photographer expresses the country's contradictory nature through connecting strong gestures and looks in persons posed in portraits with the misery of the environment in which they exist.

Roberts chose a different approach for his largest series so far, *We English*, 2007–2008, in which contrary to his Russian essay he focuses on his home country, specifically on how the British spend their leisure time. This includes landscape photos, in which the viewer gets lost due to his own minuteness. He is seemingly a negligible part of a larger space and yet he plays a no less important role. The main theme of his collection is the human sample that man creates through his social stratification in sport or through other means of entertainment. The photos draw on Dutch landscape painting from the 17th century: there is no single note of criticism of consumer or political systems, as is commonly done in describing the theme of leisure time in contemporary works. *We English* is the photographer's subjective look at his countrymen. In the visual media that he used for this collection, he emphasises that which interested him most from the very start of his artistic career: earth, man and beauty.

Simon Roberts' photography can be divided into two categories; nonetheless, the boundaries are very vague. One emphasises landscape, where man is the impulse that gives it a specific character (for example, the series: *We English* (2005-present), *Polar Nights* (2005), *Winter Blast* (2002), *Russian Riviera* (2002)) and the second concentrates rather on the internal structure of cultural-political relationships in society, which are of course again closely tied to a specific place, whether

materially or through activities (*Living with Lenin* (2005–7), *Ramzan Kadyrov* (2006), *Islamic Extremist* (2004), *Boxing Boys* (2003), *Patriot Games* (2001), *Our Roads* (2000)).

Roberts takes notice of indicators, fragments of that which the human past has left at a particular site, and examining this problem even despite its political subtext is first and foremost about investigating the genus loci. *Motherland* is a series through which it is possible to move in the direction of the past by deciphering stories that the artist inserted into the photos. We look at portraits of common people, but focus on their style of clothing, on their gestures and the background opening up behind them. Through this we can read the characteristic level of psycho-social behaviour.

The Russian desire for luxury and the corresponding impossibility to fulfil these aspirations can be considered risible. And there is a large number of photo series on the country that work with this very basic visual joke. In the prologue to his publication, *Motherland*, Roberts speaks of his desire to portray Russia as a country full of optimism and beauty, i.e. not as an environment marred by socialism and poverty.

In his documentary Roberts combined a romanticising exhibit of photos with realistic portraits. The fairy-tale-like images on one hand contradict the attempt to show real life. Nonetheless, in some scenes this poetic level evokes a feeling of Russian monumentality and a desire to believe in big ideals. Creating an essay on Russian identity is a more than difficult task, and it is not clear whether photography, i.e. seemingly real images, has the possibility to capture its essence.

The concept of social maps is the basis on which Simon Roberts will build his further photographic series. Places, as do people, have their histories and this is an inexhaustible topic for artistic works. It is necessary to see and realise what from our ancestors has remained in us. Similarly, it is necessary to respect original processes taking place here on earth. Let's hope that art will help in this respect.

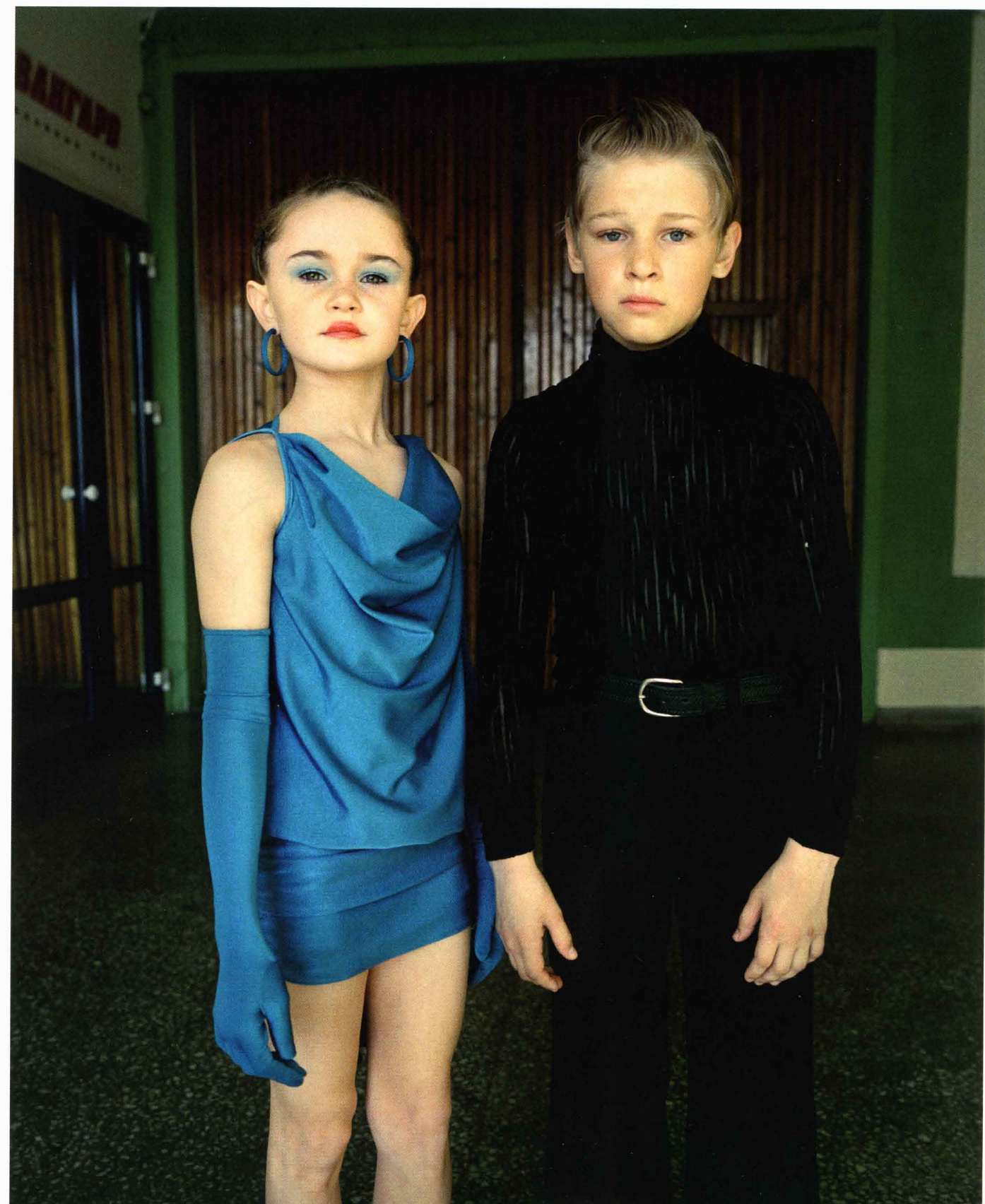
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¹ Susan Sontag, On Photography, New York, 2005, pg. 2.

² André Rouillé, Fotografia, Krakow 2007, pg. 169.



Sasha and Galina Namakonova, Sakhalin Island, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004



Nikita and Rufina, Omsk, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2005



Zhenya and his pregnant fiancée Mia, Yakutsk, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004



Identical twins, Magadan, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2004
Meat market, Pyatigorsk, Northern Caucasus, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2005



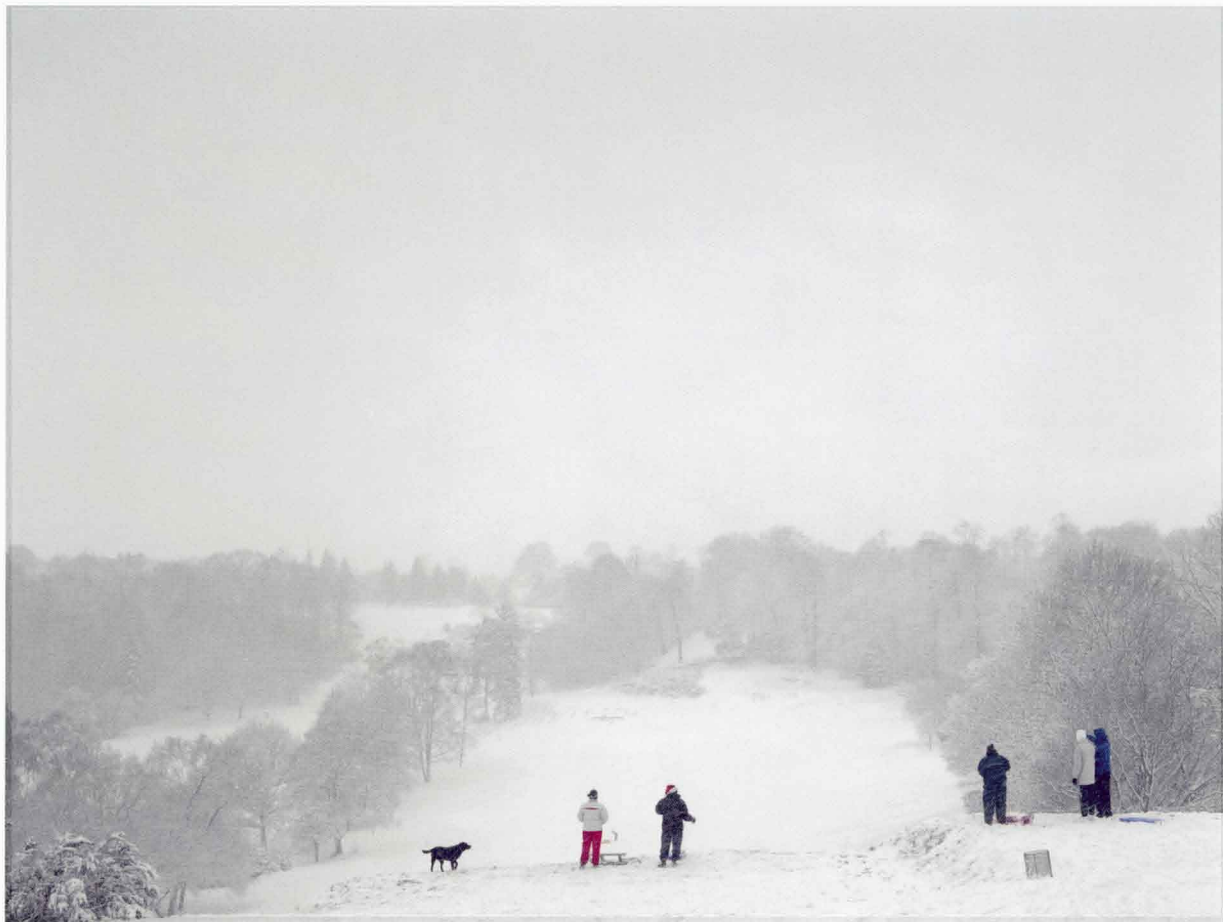


Afanasy Nikitin cruise ship, Volga River, Russia, from the series Motherland, 2005

Untitled 1, Magadan, Russia, from the series Polyarnye Nochi, 2005



Watching a Ground Bomb, Arizona, from the series Winter Blast, 2002



Tandridge Golf Course, Oxted, Surrey, 2nd April, from the series We English, 2008

Cotswold Water Park, Shornecote, Gloucestershire, 11th May, from the series We English, 2008



Camel Estuary, Padstow, Cornwall, 27th September, from the series We English, 2007

Holkham National Nature Reserve, Norfolk, 18th February 2008