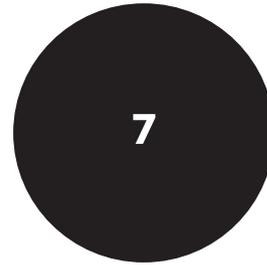




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*The Kharkiv Photography School.  
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## The Kharkiv Photography School

### The 'Shilo' Group (V. Krasnoshchok, S. Lebedynskyy, V. Trykoz)

One topic, which inevitably comes up in every consideration of Kharkiv photography, is the theme of brutality and provocation. Today it is the 'Shilo' group – founded in 2010 and consisting of Vladyslav Krasnoshchok, Sergiy Lebedynskyy and Vadym Trykoz – who, as the descendants of the Kharkiv School, represent its most progressive edge. The unique project *Finished Dissertation* is the most acute realization of this point. By

no means can this work be understood as an act of 'trolling' Boris Mikhailov's masterpiece of the 1980s by young hipster photographers. The encroachment onto the sacred cow of the Kharkiv photography school is not devoid of lofty sentiments. *Finished Dissertation* has its own teleology. In order to understand why Shilo decided to position its telos in one of the hallmark 'books' by Mikhailov, we need to gain some insight into its origin.

The samizdat – underground publishing in the USSR – was a common practice of Soviet marginal groups in the 1970's and 1980's. There were years when one would receive multiple home-made books, amongst them wonderful examples of Kiev decadence, books ornamented with markings of the author's tears and cigarette burns. But even compared to them the Kharkiv samizdat publications stood out – take for example the productions like the books by local surrealist brothers A. and B. Meshchan. The true picture of the artistic processes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was unavailable in the realm of the Eastern bloc, as was the history of the artist book. That is perhaps why the new phenomenon of the *livre d'artiste* – discovered by Ilya Kabakov and later by Kabakov's close friend from the 1970's, Boris Mikhailov – becomes clear to us only today. This also sheds new light on the contemporary return of the genre.



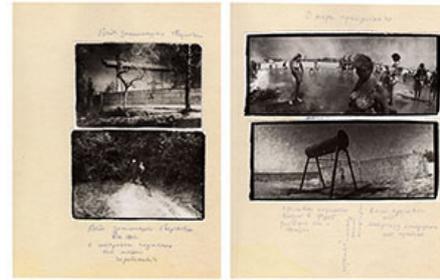
Shilo Group, *Finished Dissertation*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists

In 1985, when Mikhailov had just finished his *Unfinished Dissertation* and my husband brought it home, we perceived it completely differently. The work was a stack of loose sheets of paper with photos glued to them, the sides covered in Boris' handwriting. I must say that the book did not surprise us as it does today. In the everydayness of a nonconformist community, in its stolen kingdom of freedom all that was perceived naturally,

albeit with delight. That book, like everything we were dealing with at that time, was seen as an instance of a particular type of work – work that we all carried out as best we could, but which Boris excelled at. Owing to its title, the ghost of that sickly-serious genre – the contemporary discourse of Soviet science – appeared over the book like an angel with a sword. This was not a joke or a prank as we would understand it today, because by naming his opus a 'dissertation', albeit an unfinished one, Mikhailov was throwing down the gage. It didn't matter that it was projected into the environment of the 'outcasts' of the 'Time' (Время) group, to which Mikhailov belonged, a group excluded from the Soviet mainstream. With the end of the period of mute resistance, of clandestine presentations of the work only to the most reliable people, the entrance of the photographs into the public space began; long discussions about this type of photographic practice ensued.

*Unfinished Dissertation* wasn't Mikhailov's first 'book with commentaries' but the one titled 'dissertation' – it can thus be examined as a theoretical document whose dispersed textuality contains in itself the manifesto of the Kharkiv underground. In the inverted world of that subculture it could have probably qualified for an academic degree. In these books (*Unfinished Dissertation* and the earlier *Crimean Snobbery* and *Viscosity*), in addition to expressing the laws of a new aesthetic, Mikhailov announced to the whole world things that people prefer not to display. The paradox lies here: this most public message is intimately addressed to you personally.

*Finished Dissertation*, the new Kharkiv 'book' is also a manifesto, containing a symmetrical gesture to that of Mikhailov. Today, when every significant photographic project is conceived as an exhibition, "The Collective Monograph" by Lebedynskyy, Krasnoshchok and Trykoz brings us back not only to Mikhailov's original object, but also to the days when pieces like that would literally be passed



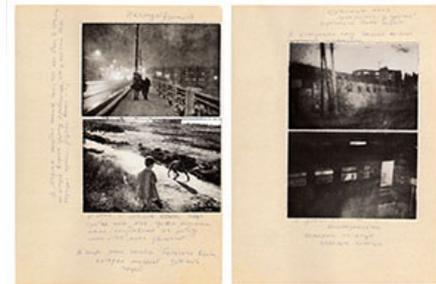
Shilo Group, *Finished Dissertation*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists

from hand to hand – both a retro response and an existential adventure of the ‘eternal return’ type.

This multi-authored book also brings us back a different Kharkiv trend – anonymity (Mikhailov's "Luriks," E. Pavlov and V. Shaposhnikov's "Third Author," Mikhailov, S. Solonsky and S. Bratkov's "GBR".) Superimposing their photographs onto those of Mikhailov, actively introducing their own motives and using every opportunity to develop the theme of intertextuality, they actually rupture the information space of Mikhailov's *Unfinished*

*Dissertation*, despite the democratic disposition of the whole project. The sense of the enunciations as well as their tone has changed; the conversation with the reader/viewer is now loud, conducted in a raised tone of voice. The photos and the texts compete in outtalking each other. The density of colour has increased; the book has become darker, pleasantly heavier and engorged with silver. The velvety ‘shagginess’ of the colour texture, which became the hallmark of the three ‘Shilos’ – Krasnoshchok, Lebedynskyy and Trykoz – substantially contributes to that. Everything in Mikhailov's works that had a faint touch of comic demonism, clothed in the delicate sfumato of an underexposed photo-print, has gained strength and power thereby achieving the effect of a reportage from the darkest depths of Mordor in the coloring of the post-Soviet landscape. What should be noted is that the two-volume book includes co-authored projects, such as *Timoshenko's Escape*, *UPA Hände Hoch* and *Night*, as well as individual works – *Arabat* by Lebedynskyy and *Bolnichka* by Krasnoshchok, surrounded by photos documenting the lives of the authors and their close ones.

It is worth mentioning that Western critics pointed to vagueness as a characteristic of Kharkiv photography, registering the increased concentration of “blind spots” as a device that stood in opposition to the ‘aesthetics of transparency’ (V. Tupitsyn) of the official regime. Were we to summarize the meaning of these observations, we would see that they all gravitate toward the recognition of ‘blur’ as a distinctive visual quality of the work of the ‘Shilo’ bunch. At the same time we shouldn't forget about depth-of-field, securely



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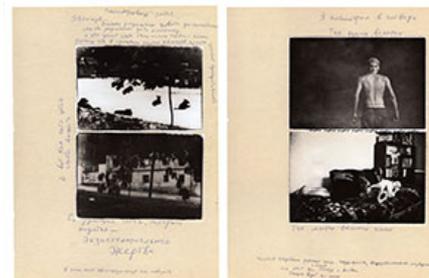
Shilo Group, *Finished Dissertation*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists

buried in the midst of it. The key to understanding the Kharkiv School lies in both attributes of symbolic exchange, where 'shilo' transforms into 'blur' ('milo') without excess<sup>1</sup>. The new generation has remained loyal to dualism. In the period of the 'Time' group it was anger and rage, canned inside, that turned into idiotic muttering when set free: behind the visual or verbal 'noise' there was always hidden an acute statement. It was like the draping of covers – the 'dance of the seven veils' performed backwards – when Malevanny laid an abundance of veils of color over a black-and-white photo, or when Mikhailov and Pavlov did their 'overlays' (of a slide over a slide). And finally, one more diffusing layer was added – a verbal one – in Mikhailov's 'photos with letters', later repeated by V. Kochetov and partly by S. Bratkov. In Krasnoshchok, Lebedynskyy and Trykoz's *Finished Dissertation* all that is hardcore is outside. It is an armor concealing a white and fragrant kernel, nurtured by a new generation of Kharkiv wild creatures.

I learned about 'Shilo' from my husband, just at the time when they had already conceived the project and were visiting their elderly friends and discussing the problem in the 'family circle'. No laughing matter. It would be reasonable to note that when you are aiming at such a target it is easy to miss, but they proved their competence. Moreover, the group openly declares their love of Mikhailov's charisma. Not only in certain formal

techniques did they come very close to him, but also in the courage to be themselves, here and now. The difference is that 'Shilo' belongs to the 'remake generation'. The fear of the state and the KGB has been replaced by a 'game of fear', which was shaped into a political ballet like *Tymoshenko's Escape* or a history ballet like *UPA Hände Hoch*. Not without the use of gender charm, by developing an image of gangsters and musketeers who every now and then intimidate simple UPA fighters, and by approaching the eternal male archetype with the critical number of three, 'Shilo' have easily won the hearts of many, including those of their fathers.

The term 'Kharkiv School' appeared as early as the period of the 'Time' group, but then, in spite of all my efforts to fill it with academic sense (I remember my first Moscow lecture, in the gallery On Kashirka in 1989) – it was more of a figure of speech. Today, however, bearing in mind the change of generations and scenery against the backdrop of which 'Shilo' asserted themselves, we can say after all that,



Shilo Group, *Finished Dissertation*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists

yes, there is a Kharkiv school of photography. 'Shilo' were crucial in the final establishment, the constitution of the school as a phenomenon – until their emergence there were no authors who would be conscious of the tradition of Kharkiv photography and their place in it. Undoubtedly, the project of the 'Shilo' group is an homage to Mikhailov as well as to the whole Kharkiv culture and science, with its cleansing 'water' and 'soap'. On the other hand, *Finished Dissertation* is a brilliant attempt at finally mixing and buddying everybody up and once again kneading the great dough of Kharkiv photography. And this is largely because a Kharkiv product like Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation* is an 'open work' – tending towards infinity and as such in principle impossible to complete.

## Footnotes

1 The Ukrainian expression 'міняти шило на мило' (literally: 'to exchange an awl for soap') means to bargain one trouble for another or to trade bad for worse. The words 'шило' ('shilo', meaning an 'awl' in Ukrainian) and 'мило' ('milo', meaning 'soap' in Ukrainian, which also may have a meaning of 'blur' in photography) together create a pun in the sentence