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UKRAINIAN PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 1990S: FROM PARADIGM SHIFT TO THE NEW VISUAL STATEMENT*

Abstract

In 1991, the once powerful USSR ceased to exist, and Ukraine, as a former part of the USSR, gained independence after almost seventy years of totalitarianism. It was a paradigm shift, on the basis of which new Ukrainian art was created. All of the processes that occurred in Ukrainian photography during the post-perestroika period have taken place within the conditions of gradual liberation from ideological pressure and in a situation of transition from one historical era to another. In the 1990s, Ukrainian photography developed in two directions. Representatives of the first direction embodied postmodern principles in their work, while the second direction focused exclusively on acute social issues, showing general concern, anxiety, sadness during the difficult period of the 1990s. This new generation of photographers was one of the first whose work clearly reflected changes in the artist's worldview in relation to the conditions of the new historical era.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1980s, a series of irreversible social processes resulted in rapid transformations in collective thought and ideology in Ukrainian society. The era of *perestroika*, which began in the late 1980s, constituted a real ideological revolution. The year 1989 was decisive and was marked by a number of important events that influenced the further course of history.¹ An understanding of the Ukrainian situation during this transition period would be incomplete if analysed separately from the broader European context. A number of changes affected collective worldviews, including local Ukrainian events such as the anticipation of the collapse of the USSR, mass strikes of miners, the return of the Crimean Tatars to their historical homeland in the Crimea, and the birth of the Student Fraternity in Lviv,² as well as events that took place in Eastern Europe: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and so on. Ultimately, there was a final liberation from the system that attempted to manage the cultural processes of the country.

In the wake of these vast transformations, Ukraine no longer suffered from censorship and government control of cultural production. State institutions,

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1 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012), 7–11.

2 This was an influential opposition youth union during the era of *perestroika*, which was founded in Lviv on May 25, 1989, and united various student fraternities.

such as the Union of Artists of the USSR,³ which existed as instruments of ideological control over artists, lost their status and power. From Western Europe, new, previously unknown information about worldwide artistic phenomena arrived unimpeded. For the first time, many artists had the opportunity for short trips to the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. By the early 1990s, the experience of Western art had already begun to influence Soviet consciousness.

In the field of photography, during the 1990s Ukrainian photographers repeatedly had the opportunity to travel abroad for presentations in mainly group photo exhibitions. For example, Ukrainian photographer Viktor Marushchenko participated in the exhibition *100 Photographers of Eastern Europe* in Lausanne (1990), and exhibited as part of the *Days of Kyiv* in Toulouse in 1993. Such travel contributed to the accumulation of experience in creating exhibition projects of a certain level and provided opportunities to see the previously unknown state of development of modern photography in Western Europe.

In addition to liberation from the ideological pressures of the previous era, several significant factors influenced the formation of a new visual language, including collective memory of local cataclysms, the trauma inflicted on art by totalitarianism, and the emergence of nonconformism from the underground and its institutionalization. Most important were the clearly expressed differences in visual language from the various regions of Ukraine and the conditional division of the Ukrainian cultural landscape, into the West, Centre and East.⁴ In what follows, the article considers the prerequisites that formed the new Ukrainian photography in detail. To understand the features of the new visual language in photography after 1989, we analyse some of the most striking examples of creativity on the art of several Ukrainian photographers. First are the artists who belong to the so-called Ukrainian New Wave: Mykola Trokh, Oleksandr Druganov, an Oleksandr Lyapin. The works of these three photographers vividly represented the new tendencies in post-modern photography in Ukraine. Moreover, they were the first to turn photography into the main tool for their visual expression. The artworks analysed in this article were among the main exhibits of new Ukrainian art of the 1990s and influenced the development of Ukrainian photography. The second current in Ukrainian photography is represented by documentary photographers. The article discusses the Poglyad group as the only photographic community

3 The Artist's Union of the USSR was the official state Union of artists and art critics that existed since 1931 and was the body of ideological control of creative activity of artists. According to Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "the unions quickly became the primary institutional means of asserting an unprecedented state monopoly over the arts." Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "Perestroika and the Soviet Creative Unions," in *New Perspectives on Russian and Soviet Artistic Culture. Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies*, ed. John O. Norman (Harrogate: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 132.

4 More about the specifics of the Kharkov school of photography: Tatiana Pavlova, "Kharkiv School of Photography: Soviet Censorship to New Aesthetics 1970–1980s. Late 1960s to 1980s – The Vremya Group's Time," *Vasa Project*, accessed August 30, 2022, <http://www.vasa-project.com/gallery/ukraine-1/tatiana-essay.php>.

in Ukraine that foregrounded the importance of documentary photography. Particular attention is devoted to artists such as Yuri Nesterov, Alexander Chekmenev and their projects, which clearly demonstrate the renewal of a visual language in documentary photography in Ukraine in the 1990s and, consequently, the transformation of political views.

PREREQUISITES FOR THE FORMATION OF NEW UKRAINIAN PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER 1989

Changes and transformations in Ukrainian photography of the transition era had several important prerequisites. Photography in Ukraine had its own history, distinct from the global history of photography. This is due to the fact that, as part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, like all the republics of the USSR, was isolated from global cultural processes and was in a cultural vacuum. Therefore, the first development in photography after 1989 was an active expansion of content. Photographers turned to material that was previously “taboo”, and affirmed a radical rejection of the principles of Soviet photography.

Several movements that gradually changed the consciousness of artists led up to this time of cultural transition.⁵ It was well known that there were two artistic currents in Ukraine: the official subsidized and state-sanctioned art on behalf of the Union of Artists, and the unofficial line which was later called a nonconformism.⁶ By the end of the 1980s the unofficial line had already participated in semiformal apartment exhibitions and prohibited showings. Nonconformism was a phenomenon of social status,⁷ and, above all, a moral position. Ukrainian nonconformist artists denied any norms that were binding on Soviet society, highlighting their own vision as opposition to common opinion.

In 1989, official photography still existed, its adherents were represented in the main periodicals of the country, and their work continued to serve the needs of propaganda and the demonstrative aims of such official magazines. But unofficial photography had already emerged from the underground, and began to attract attention: the first exhibitions opened, while new photographic publications appeared.

The transition era fundamentally changed Ukrainian photography. Beginning from opposition to the stereotypes of Soviet art, unofficial photography wanted to defend its right to its own vision, visual expression and self-expression. The border between Soviet-era photography and the new

5 For more about Ukrainian art history during this period, see Halyna Sklyarenko, *Українські художники: з відлиги до незалежності* [Ukrainian Artists: From the Thaw to Independence] (Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2018).

6 Victor Sydorenko, “Ukrainian Nonconformism Role in Preserving the Foundations of Free Creativity,” *Suchasne Mystetstvo*, no. 12 (2016): 229–39.

7 For more on this topic, see Glib Vysheslavsky, “Нонконформізм: андеграунд та неофіційне мистецтво” [Nonconformism: Underground and Unofficial Art], *Khudozhnia kultura. Aktualni problemy*, no. 3 (2006): 171–198; Lesya Smyrna, *Століття нонконформізму в українському візуальному мистецтві* [The Century of Nonconformism in Ukrainian Visual Art] (Kyiv: ФЕНІКС, 2017).

photography of the independence era was marked, especially by an increased element of personalism. Forbidden topics no longer existed. Exposing the true picture of real life became very common. The aim of the photography of the 1990s was to transmit a state of anxiety, concern, and sometimes even despair. All of this was inherent in the sense of the time of transition. This was the essential principle of photography from the late 1980s and early 1990s that separated it from the photographic practice of the previous period, and established a certain historical boundary in relation to the style of the past.

In the late 1980s, art groups such as New Ukrainian Wave were formed. Such groups represented a progressive conception of a new visual language, as well as an appeal for new forms of art. For Ukrainian artists of the 1990s, it was natural to abandon the presuppositions and bases of the past. Artists turned to self-irony and scepticism. A special feature of this phenomenon throughout the former USSR was excessive politicization – having arisen after socialist realism, new Ukrainian art tried to break away from the totally ideologized base by anti-totalitarian methods.

Kyiv was the centre for the powerful New Ukrainian Wave art movement. Quite soon, two directions of photography took shape. From the beginning of the 1990s, the difference between the two was quite obvious. Representatives of the first tendency of new Ukrainian photography existed along with and were directly influenced by the artists of the New Wave. They conducted their exhibition activities together. Photographers of the second photographic movement, by contrast, existed on their own or were affiliated with the Poglyad photographic community. As a result, two separate movements of photography formed in Kyiv in the 1990s: postmodern and social-documentary.

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NEW UKRAINIAN WAVE AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The generation of artists known as the *New Ukrainian Wave* became one of the first whose work clearly reflected changes in the artist's worldview in the new historical era.⁸ In the late 1980s, the artists of the New Ukrainian Wave settled in Kyiv on Paris Commune Street. Among the inhabitants of the Paris Commune Squat was the photographer Mykola Trokh. Elements of quotation, irony, cynicism, play as a process, and, of course, references to motifs of rigid eroticism – Trokh inherited all of these characteristics from the artists of the New Ukrainian Wave and embodied them in his photography. In the 1990s, he focused on subjectivism, in terrible and painful ways.

Trokh's photos of the Paris Commune Squat have a number of features that explain their conceptual content: privacy, informality, and an emphasis on the idea of an infinite bacchanalia, obligatory for Trokh. In particular, his photography involved visual experiments with the body. For Trokh, the

⁸ Glib Vysheslavsky, *Contemporary art Ukraine – від андеграунду до мейнстріму* [Contemporary Art of Ukraine – From Underground to Mainstream] (Kyiv: MARI, 2020).



Fig. 1. Mykola Trokh, *Golden Carp*, 1993, gelatin silver print, hand-coloring, private collection.

most important principle is the symbolism of nudity, the experience of an act that borders on pornography. The body, for Trokh, is an object with which he carries out various manipulations. Rather than bringing to the fore the beauty and plasticity of the body, he sometimes focuses on the ugliness of physicality. He tried to portray something that can outrage, cause mental discomfort and despair. The representation of the naked body in Trokh's photography (*Achtung Baby*, 1992; *Golden Carp*, 1993 (fig. 1), etc.) was associated with the trauma of forbidding the demonstration of explicit sexuality in Soviet art and the aggressive censorship of nudity.⁹

Another representative of the Paris Commune Squat was Oleksandr Druganov¹⁰ – an artist with a fairly wide range of creative activities. Fragmentary thinking inspired Druganov's first photo exhibition, part of the collective project *Shtil* (The Calm) in March 1992. The first photo shows a girl sitting looking at the sky, conventionally named *The Angel*. Games with double meanings occur in other works of the project. The next photograph shows a plaster figure without a head thrown to the ground, called *You Are Like a White Rose Bud* (fig. 2). At the same time, it can either totally confuse the viewer, or provoke certain associations, which in each case are as subjective as possible.

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Fig. 2. Oleksandr Druganov, *You are like a White Rose Bud*, 1992, gelatin silver print, private collection.

⁹ The archive (negatives and photographs) of Mykola Trokh was partially lost after his death. Some of these works are currently preserved in private collections in Ukraine.

¹⁰ Most works by Oleksandr Druganov belong to private collections.

The most important project in Kyiv during the 1990s was a series of photographs by Oleksandr Lyapin called *Ukrainskyi Likuvalnyk* (Ukrainian Medical Book), which was presented as part of the collective exhibition *Vision Art* (1996). The project was curated by Oleksandr Lyapin and a member of the Paris Commune Squat, Oleksandr Klymenko. It was attended by both artists and photographers. The curators positioned their project as an exhibition of New Nonconformism. The *Ukrainian Medical Book* demonstrated a completely new form and concept of photography. These were depressive, hard-hitting photographs, the texts of which were ancient Ukrainian incantations – oral texts that accompanied magical actions, ancient verbal Ukrainian magic.¹¹ On the one hand, the series had a critical sociopolitical subtext, while, on the other, it was absurd.

The basis of the series *Ukrainian Medical Book* are naive photos. Here, for example, is a wedding photo depicting bride and groom sitting in a chair in the usual interior of the Soviet era. Lyapin draws fangs and yellow pupils on them and writes in the lower part of the photo: “When whirlwind is strong or there is a blizzard, then the devils are celebrating the wedding” (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Oleksandr Lyapin, *Ukrainskyi Likuvalnyk* (Ukrainian Medical Book), 1995, gelatin silver print, hand-coloring, private collection.

¹¹ Iryna Borysiuk, “Замовляння в системі архаїчних магичних практик: структурно-семіотичний аналіз” [Incantations in the System of Archaic Magical Practices: Structural-Semiotic Analysis], *Naukovi pratsi. Filo-sofii*, no. 257 (2015): 71.

The next photo was taken at a rally. Lyapin paints all three faces in blue and green, and adds eyes and horns. He does the same with the image on the banner, which is held by men. The next caption says: “Demons are born and live, they do not die. They are eaten by wolves, shot by hunters, burned by the sun, killed by lightning. Love is ruining them.” In another photo, Lyapin cites the text of a spell against melancholy.

Ukrainian Medical Book was at that time one of the most successful examples of post-*perestroika* art. Absurdity and social problems, the remnants of the Soviet era and the spontaneity of ancient spells – all of this and more are intertwined in it quite naturally. Against the background of the overall project *Vision Art*, Lyapin’s exposition stood out due to its radical post-Soviet statement. *Ukrainian Medical Book* was nothing more or less than an illustration of the painful era of the 1990s. Subsequently, the project was exhibited in galleries in Holland, Brazil and France.

DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT IN UKRAINIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Ukrainian photography could not follow the path of Western and global photography because its development took place under historical conditions related to the Soviet period. Even liberation from ideological pressure, transformations of artistic consciousness, and historical, social and cultural changes could not completely break a certain dependence on the photographic art of the Soviet era. The 1990s were marked by an emphasis on subjects considered taboo, with social issues at the forefront. Although the photography of the early 1990s was forced to build on the aesthetics of the Soviet era, at the same time it tried to abandon it. The boundary between Soviet-era photography and the era of independence is defined by an acute element of subjectivism, as well as critique and representation of previously prohibited subjects. In this way, the new artistic worldview is affirmed. This aspect is unique to photography in the early 1990s.

In 1987, the first photographic association whose members focused their creative work exclusively on documentary photography was established in Kyiv. The association took the name Poglyad (The Gaze),¹² and its activity affirmed the representation of life as it actually is. Poglyad completely rejected staged shooting and excessive lyricism. Its photographers sought to reflect reality as frankly as possible, without embellishing it, to analyse reality and, above all, to “reveal it”. As a photography group, Poglyad turned out to be very in tune with the mood of the time. The photography of the early 1990s exhibited, first of all, anxiety, sadness and the general mood of the problematic era of transition from the socialist model of society to the new model. In this regard, Poglyad as a photographic association had great significance. It inspired the specific photographic language of artists including Oleksandr Glyadelov, Rita

¹² *Poglyad* is an association of documentary photographers that was founded in Kyiv in 1987.

Fig. 4. Yuri Nesterov, photograph from the series *Dear Our Foretime*, 1992, gelatin silver print, Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography.



Ostrovskaya, Oleksandr Lyapin, Yuri Nesterov, Yuri Kosin and a number of other Kyiv documentary photographers.

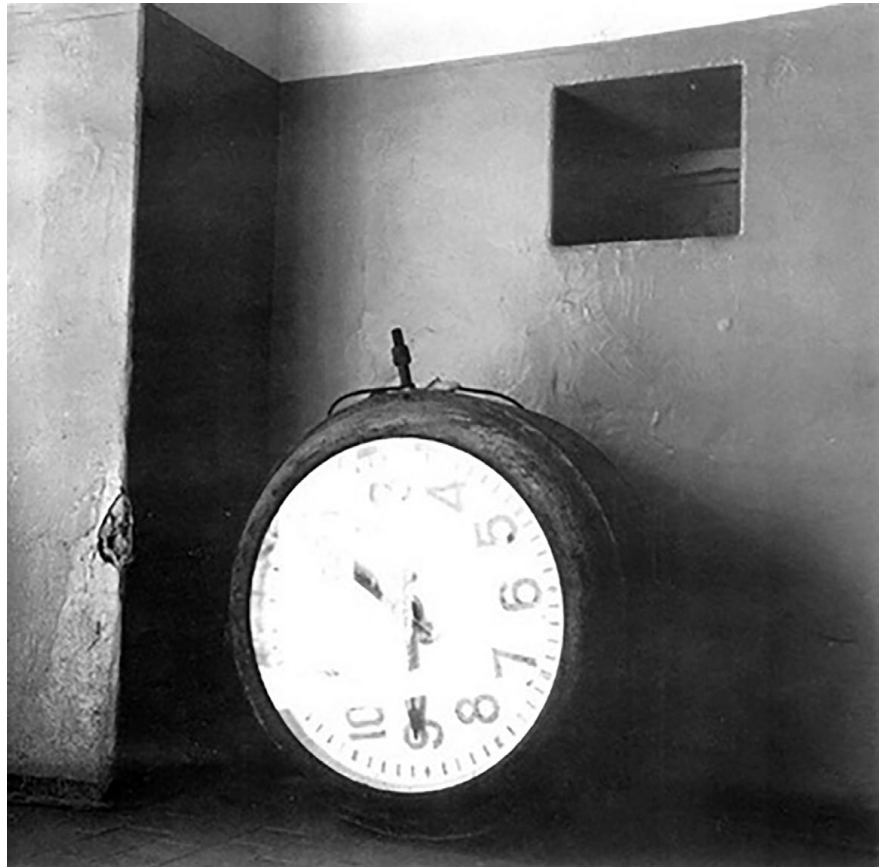
In addition to the activities of Poglyad, the development of documentary photography in Kyiv was also affected by the Ukrainian Press Foto competition. In fact, these two powerful impulses led to the formation of a certain current of photography in Kyiv, which Oleksandr Lyapin subsequently designated as “the Kiev school of free creative documentary photography.”¹³ The artists who exclusively practiced the documentary method in the 1990s include several of the most significant photographers of the time. In the early 1990s, Yuri Nesterov presented his vision of documentary photography. Lacking a professional education, Nesterov spent the 1980s actively engaged in self-improvement, studying foreign literature on photography. His first significant presentation took place in 1996 in the *Fotografiya Revyu* (Photography Review) magazine. Oleksandr Lyapin, the publisher, gave him several pages, printing the series *Dear Our Foretime*.¹⁴

The title of the photo series turns out to be, if not a mockery, then a rather vicious irony, because what you see in the pictures is far from a lyrical pastoral. The location for the shooting was the Shterovskaya hydroelectric power

¹³ Oleksandr Lyapin, *Александр Чекменев. Черно-белая фотография* [Oleksandr Chekmeniov. Black and White Photography] (Kyiv: Artbook, 2008), 24.

¹⁴ Oleksandr Lyapin “Луганськ – місто фотогенічне” [Luhansk is a Photogenic City], *Fotografiya Revyu*, no. 1 (1996): 18–25.

Fig. 5. Yuri Nesterov, photograph from the series *Dear Our Foretime*, 1992, gelatin silver print, Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography.



station, where Nesterov captured what remains from the Soviet era. These are fragments of a past life, most clearly seen in the images of the station's environment. Nesterov divided the photo series into two constituent parts. The first is intended to depict the environment without human presence, to show the hydroelectric power station in its powerful and at the same time frightening architecture. The second part presents photographs of station employees (**fig. 4**). This strange, dirty place with blocked (fortified) exits is a representation of the Soviet era and its past, as Nesterov notes in the series title. But this idea resonates most powerfully in the central photograph of the series, which shows an inverted clock of gigantic size, taken from nowhere and left standing on the floor as unnecessary (**fig. 5**).

Another representative of the documentary photography of the 1990s was Alexander Chekmenev, who worked as a photojournalist for various media in Kyiv at the time. In 1995, Chekmenev received a state commission to take portraits of incapacitated retired persons and seriously ill people for new Ukrainian passports. To do this, the photographer had to shoot his models directly in their own apartments. He was helped by random people who had to maintain a white backdrop for the photographs. He writes about this experience:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became necessary in the newly independent Ukraine to replace old Soviet passports with

the new Ukrainian ones. There was a rush to accomplish this in the shortest possible time. All Ukrainians had to get a new passport within a year. In 1994, the social services of Luhansk, a town in southeast of Ukraine, started offering photographers a job of shooting passport photos in homes of the elderly and ill citizens, who could not pay a photographer on their own. I was one of the photographers commissioned by the social services to go door to door during this national passport campaign. This is how I ended up in the homes of these people, along with the social workers whose job was to provide free medicine and groceries. When I saw how people were living out the final years of their lives, it had made a very strong impression on me.¹⁵

During these difficult visits to the apartments of sick, helpless and lonely people, Chekmenev, using a second camera, recorded shocking material about the realities of the conditions in which these desperate people were forced to exist. In addition to the passport portraits, Chekmenev made additional photos in which apparently absurd and scary details were visible. Although the centre of these photographs are the people who look directly into the lens, the main subject is their environment, the background that Chekmenev tries to capture as completely as possible. We see poverty, fully formed from the remains of the previous epoch, beds with dirty linen, faded plush rugs, portraits of Lenin, and somewhere near the bed, a red coffin cover. Chekmenev continues his quest to capture the painful moments of the 1990s. That is why his characters are most often people from the street, residents of provincial towns: marginal individuals who drop out of the system of normal life. Chekmenev's subjects are vagabonds and alcoholics, or simply people who did not find a place for themselves in a time of radical changes. He met all of them right on the street. Due to the fact that they didn't refuse to pose in front of the camera, Chekmenev's shots are full of sincerity.

With a frank accent on the social exacerbation and the unsightly sides of society in the post-*perestroika* period, Chekmenev's photo series of the 1990s are deeply humanistic. It is this heightened humanistic feature that makes his photographs exceptional. He always separates the person, always puts them at the forefront, and bases almost all of his series of photographs on the human image. In an article for the photobook *Alexander Chekmenev. Black and White Photography*, Oleksandr Lyapin notes: "Chekmenev is a sculptor. He erects monuments to everyone he saw, to whom he dedicated one hundred twenty-five or even one thousandth of a second of the life of his camera. He takes portraits so monumental and plastic that it is difficult for me to call them only photography."¹⁶ While Yuri Nesterov always looked for elements of post-Soviet

15 For more about the project, see Alexander Chekmenev, *Passport* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2016).

16 Lyapin, *Александр Чекменев*, 24.

absurdity, the aesthetics of disintegration in the material of reality, Chekmenev chose compulsory attention to a person as the main element of his work, and his purposeful search for an expressive “human type” makes him almost the only humanist among his colleagues.

CONCLUSION

The 1990s laid the foundation for the further advancement of the art of photography in Ukraine. This period witnessed the formation and development of the creative language of those artists whose activities came to personify the photography of the 1990s. In this difficult period, photo clubs united amateurs and professionals, which also led to interconnections between photographers of different generations. There was a gradual development of exhibition activities, as photography entered the exhibition space in a variety of forms. In Kyiv, two lines of development of photography existed in parallel. The first current of work was associated with photographers who worked under the influence of the New Ukrainian Wave and represented postmodern trends in photography. The second current consisted of photographers who introduced reporting as the main creative method and focused on subjectively portraying acute social topics.

Representatives of the first current of Ukrainian photography in the 1990s expressed postmodern principles in their artwork that determined a variety of features: deep subjectivism, the aestheticization of death, citationality, the play of contexts and contents, an appeal to the subconscious, cynicism and self-irony. In the context of post-modernism, the works of Mykola Trokh are preeminent due to their irony, use of quotation, fragmentation and accentuation of political connotations that were characteristic of the former Soviet Republics. Oleksandr Druganov's photography – in particular the *Shtil* series – also illustrates the post-modern notion of a plurality of views and concepts. Finally, the work of Oleksandr Lyapin in the series *Ukrainian Medical Book* reflected the dominant aesthetic trends of the 1990s in the language of photography with its characteristic absurdity in relation to social issues,

The second current of the Ukrainian photography of the 1990s is exemplified by the work of Yuri Nesterov. His series *Dear Our Foretime* has become a sort of symbol of the transitory age, in which people living the new country are shown, even as the circumstances and context of their existence remained Soviet. *Passport* by Alexander Chekmenev is another key work in this second current, in which the sociopolitical context is brought into focus, demonstrating a new visual language for Ukrainian photography. By exploring this aspect of Ukrainian photography in the 1990s, one can conclude that artists, as a rule, focused exclusively on acute social issues, reflecting the general concern, anxiety and sadness of the difficult period of the 1990s. But at the same time, each of the photographers pioneered their own language,

and together they exhibited differences that distinguish them from another. Furthermore, it should also be pointed out that documentary photography assumed a dominant position and remained so in the 2000s. In summary, it can be argued that the 1990s laid the foundation for the further transformation of photography in Ukraine. This period witnessed the development of the creative language of many photographers, and their activities are now considered to be the embodiment of Ukrainian photography in the 1990s.