

Ryzyka: A Curated Conversation

Irina Oktyabrskaya and Valeriy Klamm
with
Craig Campbell and Vasilina Orlova

WRITING WITH LIGHT
PHOTOESSAYS FROM THE ARCHIVES
FIXED FORMAT RE-ISSUE

Writing with Light

Writing with Light was created to bolster the place of the photo-essay within international anthropological scholarship. This project originated as a collaboration between two journals: *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* and grew out of an initiative led by Michelle Stewart and Vivian Choi for the Cultural Anthropology website. The five-person curatorial collective at the helm of Writing with Light is committed to formal experimentation and it aims to animate an ongoing discussion around the significance of multimodal scholarship with an emphasis on the still image.

Multimodal scholarship changes what anthropologists can and should see as productive knowledge. Such projects compel anthropologists to begin rethinking our intellectual endeavors through an engagement with various media, addressing the particular affordances and insights that each form of scholarship offers. How, for example, does photography produce different types of knowledge than text or film? What criteria might we need to interrogate and evaluate each of these forms of multimodal scholarship? As part of a broader set of questions about the relationship between forms of scholarly work and knowledge production, we support the ongoing relevance of the photo-essay.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the journals *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* in this publishing endeavor. Cultural Anthropology has hosted the Photo-Essay project since its inception.

Writing with Light is in reverse alphabetical order: Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Photoessays From the Archives

When the Society for Cultural Anthropology relaunched its website in 2019, it was no longer able to continue support for the custom viewer that hosted the Writing with Light photo-essays on its previous site. At this point we learned a material lesson in the difficulty of sustaining multimedia digital publications over time.

In response to the challenge of preserving digital photo-essays we created the “Photoessays from the Archives: Fixed Format Re-issue” series to give a fixed visual layout for each of the photo-essays in a more stable format (PDF). With permission from the authors and from the publishers we re-present these photo-essays in this new format.

Photoessays from the Archives is an initiative led by the Writing with Light collective. Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Layout and design by Craig Campbell with the Writing with Light Collective

Ryzyka: A Curated Conversation

I walked into the director's office of the cultural center in the village of Severnoye—a settlement that was recently renovated with the support of a regional petroleum production company. Sergei Osipov, the owner of the office, was working on his laptop. I introduced myself and began a quick explanation of who I am, what I do, and why I was there: the typical story I tell about my photo project devoted to rural Russia.

Osipov interrupted: "Wait, don't rush, let me sing for you instead. I will sing you a lullaby that I sang to my son a long time ago . . ."

He sat down, closed his eyes—and filled the world with sound.

—Valeriy Klamm

The anthropologist Irina Oktyabrskaya and the photographer Valeriy Klamm have been working together for many years. Their base of operations is the Siberian city of Novosibirsk and their collaborative work, much of which is featured on Klamm's photo-blog, *Birthmarks on the Map*, is an ever-growing documentary archive of rural life in Siberia. Yet it is not an archive of everything; it is curated with an ethnographic attunement to questions of vitality, materiality, everyday life, and cultural particularity. Our goal in this publication is to share with an Anglophone audience this collaborative mode of visual ethnography, a synthetic register of visual representation born of the partnership between an anthropologist and a documentary photographer.

Since the 1980s, Irina Oktyabrskaya has undertaken anthropological studies of Turkic and Russian peoples in southern Siberia. She has written dozens of articles exploring processes of social change, cultural tradition, and interethnic relations.

In her collaboration with Valeriy Klamm, she brings her fieldwork and ethnographic experience to bear on the particularities of photographic documentation. In the accompanying statements on collaboration, Klamm and Oktyabrskaya discuss the process of working together, revealing details of fieldwork techniques and disciplinary goals.

As editors and presenters of this work, we note that our engagement with Klamm and Oktyabrskaya coordinates the four of us as a group of people with very different academic backgrounds; it unfolds from the cooperative search for a shared ground and grammar. In this photo-essay we are introduced to scenes of rural life in Siberia organized around seasonal festivals. The images, for some, will undoubtedly raise questions about contemporary constructions and performances of folk traditions. While the village of Bergul, which is at the heart of this photo-essay, is rather unique, many of the scenes will be familiar to people who have studied or visited rural Siberian villages. The anthropologist Rachel Olson (2004, 9) notes that a Russian national folk revival "began in the 1960s and 70s as a reaction against the propagandistic 'fakelore' of Stalin's era. At that time both writers and scholars approached peasant culture as an important source of sincerity and authenticity." While recognizing these histories, it is also clear that the scene in Bergul doesn't easily fit the binary typologies of authenticity and inauthenticity. The remnants of Soviet and post-Soviet infrastructures abound, interacting unevenly with emerging ways of being, celebrating, and expressing.

Several key themes emerge from the entanglement of cultural expression and ordinary rural life documented in this photo-essay. One of these themes is the indeterminate relationship between official culture, on the one hand, and decentralized practice and performances, on the other. The boundaries between activities organized through state-sponsored institutions, churches, and kin groups are examined visually rather than through expository writing. The House of Culture [Dom Kul'tura; cultural center] figures prominently as a legacy of cultural expression that was officially sanctioned and supported during the Soviet era. The history and changing role of these institutions has been explored recently (Donahoe and Habeck 2011), albeit without great attention to agency and self-conscious subjecthood in the late post-Soviet era. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004, 58) reminds us, "people are not only objects of cultural preservation but also subjects. They are not

only cultural carriers and transmitters . . . but also agents in the heritage enterprise itself.” In the work of Oktyabrskaya and Klamm, there is no feverish obsession with cultural authenticity. Instead, we see a commitment to explore photographically the multitudinous entanglements of cultural expression in one village. An attunement to cultural difference and documentary particularity is at the heart of this project.

The reader should not confuse the intellectual work of this photo-essay with the romantic language of popular ethnic nationalism or with the amateur folklorist, who seeks only to classify ethnic performances and material culture. Refusing to apply an overarching interpretive frame allows the vitality of the ordinary world to rustle and animate familiar anthropological concerns like ritual, performance, and kinship. *Rzyka*, for example, is a local term that operates as both the title of this photo-essay and a primary example of reported speech. The ethnographer and photographer use the term to organize their observations on key elements of collective identity in this village. They also express a deep concern for reaching beyond a strictly academic audience with this photo-essay. In our discussions with Klamm and Oktyabrskaya, they articulated a desire to avoid academic jargon, positioning their work on the border of photo-documentary and visual anthropology.

In our framing of this photo-essay, we let our conceptual approach revolve around affect rather than historical meaning. We are interested in situating the reader in the midst of a carefully assembled collection. We want to invite her to navigate an assemblage that renders multiple superimposed stories of life, that neither subordinates the rich complexity of the world made visible through photography to a single hermeneutic goal nor abdicates the role of critical description. Historical frames are hinted at, but are ultimately secondary to a visually rich narrative of everyday life that punctures through the social orchestrations of annual festivals and holidays. In addition to its focus on affect, the photo-essay composes a kind of story that refuses any attempts to extract form from content: neither is available for perception, as it were, without the other element.

An authors’ statement and individual statements of collaboration appear below, after the images and essay text.

Craig Campbell and Vasilina Orlova



The Osipov brothers, Vladimir and Sergey, on the main street of Bergul. Vladimir (left), the younger one, works here as a tractor driver and lives in the house that was built by their parents. October 7, 2012.



Sergey Osipov at the local House of Culture in Bergul. Sergey worked here as a director for many years before moving to the village of Severnoye, the administrative center of the Severnoye district. October 7, 2012.



Relics of the Osipov family: the old icon that was brought by their ancestors from Vitebsk province, with photos of their parents and their aunt Anna Belova. In Soviet times, Anna was in charge of the izbachital'nya (a very small local library; literally, a "library shack"). She founded the first Siberian folk group here, which became very famous. October 6, 2012.



At the celebration of Elders' Day in Bergul's House of Culture. October 7, 2012.



We arrived in Bergul on Elders' Day, as the Wisdom Festival was ending. There were no signs, but the elders and their support group at the House of Culture were unexpectedly very cheerful. While the Verkh-Tarskoe oilfield is located near Bergul, here in the village a different kind of energy was in full swing. October 7, 2012.



The Osipovs are Old Believers. Despite the prohibition against worship in the Soviet era, their father kept his faith. He remained a soldier for the duration of the Fatherland War (World War II). The youngest son treasures his father's honors. October 7, 2012.



Kids waiting for the Christmas show at the House of Culture. January 6, 2014.



On Christmas night, villagers greet the carol singers. These guests bring happiness and prosperity to the homes they visit. January 6, 2014.



Carolers walk down the street on the night before Russian Orthodox Christmas. "Let's stay at home, it's too cold," says one. The reply: "But last year we did, even though it was about forty below. We won't take the kids with us. But as for ourselves, we must go, because ten houses of neighbors are waiting." Following the traditions of Christmas Eve, the workers at the House of Culture turn into carol singers. January 6, 2014.



Alexey Starkov in his house in Bergul, presenting a gallery of portraits he drew himself. In 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved, his mother also fell ill. Alexey, a high-ranking electrical engineer, left his job in Minsk to return to his native village. "There was no more obligation to the country," he said, "only to my kin." He cared for his paralyzed mother for five years until her death, and never left home again. June 22, 2013.



On the eve of Holy Trinity Day, Bergul residents and their kin from remote and neighboring places are gathering at the graves of their relatives to tidy the plots and lay out offerings. A lament about those who have recently passed away could be heard: the loneliness of mourning near a newly constructed plot-fence. Somewhere, people were quietly and solemnly commemorating their parents with the support of kinsfolk, as has been customary since long ago. June 22, 2013.



At the Bergul cemetery, on the eve of Holy Trinity Day. June 22, 2013.



Offerings at the parents' grave in the Bergul cemetery on the eve of Holy Trinity Day. June 22, 2013.



Meeting with kin at the Bergul cemetery on the eve of Holy Trinity Day. June 22, 2013.



Valentina Ryabtchikova in her kitchen. In the families of Old Believers, descendants preserve traditional recipes as well as traditional words. Valentina regaled us with an explanation of the word *ryzyka*; the dictionary defines it as risk, boldness, or force. A bit like attitude. She shifts easily from talk to song. We ask, "why it so?" and she answers, "It comes from nature, from God. This is my *ryzyka* . . . my departed granny Lushka used to say to me: 'Hey, you heretic, demonic offspring! But I love you for your *ryzyka* . . .' Or she would tell me: 'You, keep your *ryzyka* inside you.' June 22, 2013.



The Orthodox Feast of the Holy Trinity (Pentecost) is the time of the descent of the Holy Spirit, when the elders, being full of sadness and hope, are thinking of the past and the future. Here, members of the folklore ensemble Lenok adorn themselves in wreaths of birch branches, nearby on the banks of the Tara River. June 23, 2013.



A few decades ago, the village of Platonovka was situated on a wide meadow not far from Bergul. There were eighty homesteads with vegetable gardens surrounded by fields, an animal farm, a milk processing shop, a smithy, barns, and workshops for pottery. During the period of farm consolidation in the Soviet era, Platonovka, like many other villages deemed obsolete by state planners, was abandoned. Valentina Ryabtchikova has lived in the village of Severnoye for a long time and is rarely able to visit her native village. June 23, 2013.



The children's folklore group Lenok was formed in Bergul a few years ago. On Holy Trinity Day, kids play old games. Here, they throw wreaths into the water and wonder about the future. 2013.

Authors' Statement

Severnny district is located about six hundred kilometers away from the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. The district is on the edge of the Great Vasyugan Mire, the largest swamp in the northern hemisphere, which is today a site of oil and gas extraction. Migrants from different parts of the Russian Empire settled these lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among these settlers were Russian descendants of the Old Believers, a sect who traveled to the frontiers of the state, escaping persecution after they split from the Orthodox Church in the mid-1600s. Some were living on the border of Belarus for more than two centuries, they were surrounded by Belarusians, whose culture had a strong impact on them. The Old Believers who ended up in the northern regions of Novosibirsk borrowed much from that culture, including cuisine and clothing. They also adopted Belarusian words into their language. Yet older beliefs, customs, songs, and ways of singing were also preserved. This hybridized set of cultural traditions is what they brought to Siberia.

The exiled settlers established several villages. One of them, Bergul, is culturally active and full of musicians. Because of their relative isolation and strong sense of community, these villages preserved many traditions and even became a kind of mecca for Russian folklorists in search of rapidly disappearing songs, singing styles, and rituals. Before the folk revival movement in the Soviet Union, a folklore ensemble was created in Bergul. The ensemble gained notoriety at the end of the 1960s, and in the 1970s they recorded one of the earliest folk albums in the Soviet Union. Ancient songs define the relationship of the inhabitants of this district with the past, with the culture of their ancestors. The old Russian songs in Bergul are unique and precious to the people who live here. They raise their children on these songs.

Today, around five hundred people of all ages live in this village. There is a secondary school, a kindergarten, a cultural center, and a museum. And yet, it's not quite a usual Siberian village. We have come here a few times and, step by step, the story of a kind of Slavic cultural vitality began to unfold for us. It is a story about a people who are very dynamic and flexible inside, who easily shift from talk to song and from tears to laughter: a special passion and energy that has been fostered in this cultural milieu. In our research we noticed the use of an old word: *ryzyka*, which means risk, passion,

courage, vitality, or life force (maybe even attitude). One part of *ryzyka* manifests as one's desire to be outspoken. It is much like stubbornness or strongheadedness.

The photographic documentary of the village of Bergul is a story that has taken three years to tell. The story is based on a Russian Orthodox calendar of festivals, but has another dimension, too; it is about lived history, about a fidelity to memory and to place. It's about life as a song.

Statements on Collaboration

Methodological Fusion in Siberian Social Science

Is what I am doing in the context of collaboration with Valeriy Klamm and his photo-blog *Birthmarks on the Map* visual anthropology? Strictly speaking, no. In my fieldwork practice, I do not use the entire complex of visual anthropology methods as they are interpreted by American, Canadian, German, or other schools of visual anthropology.

I first came to work with professional photographers in preparing for and conducting a photographic expedition, and then again in the organization of the exhibition "People at the Border" in 2002. The route of the expedition passed through the border areas of southern Siberia, where I have worked since I was a student.

For me the language of the scholar is words, concepts, logic. The photographer's language is composition, lighting, angle, image, and so on. Working with Valeriy Klamm, I learned this foreign language, although my native language remains textual. The opportunity to combine images and words is the main result of working with a photographer.

As an ethnographer I am oriented towards data. During the shooting process I always have concerns that data is lost, leaving only a picture that will not possess the necessary qualitative and quantitative information. Like many field researchers, I am anxiously attentive to technology and details—to cultural difference. The ethnographer in the field is possibly too concerned about ethnography, about documenting culture by following conventional channels defined by professional standards and approaches. In comparison to the depth of images that can be provided by professional photographers—who have escaped such channels (or didn't even enter them)—our practice looks sometimes like a preoccupation with difference.

But the paradox is that by departing from a strict interpretation of ethnography, the photographer brings the human closer to himself. In my experience, photography and ethnography as a result of collaboration become more interesting. A balance of data and images escapes exoticism but preserves the details of everyday life; photographed subjects lose their sense of being an archetype, a sense on which documentary photography usually insists so avidly.

The universal core of humanity has no individual identity; it is multifaceted. But in cases like ours, what is common to all humans finds specificity in the identity of real subjects. In that context, my work with a professional photographer is visual anthropology in the most humanistic sense of the term.

My task in photographic research is to organize the work so that the photographer dissolves into the environment, becoming almost invisible. This allows his lens to come as close as possible to his subject, to achieve harmony and, ultimately, to reproduce the effect of photo vérité. To achieve this, you need to engage verbally with your subjects. However, even this is not enough. Working with photographers, I have noticed a particular phenomenon: a talented one, like Valeriy Klamm, is able to elicit stories. I've seen it many times. Perhaps we are talking about a special kind of empathy that is enhanced by the camera lens. This is the basis of a humane and professional dialogue.

Our collaborative portfolio contains more than a dozen multimedia works (combining video and still images). It is focused on the people of Siberia, as the keepers of ethnic

traditions, memory, and culture, and as the producers of ordinary life—creating their own worlds and generating their own being. One of our latest videos, our fifteenth, was made in December 2015 for a project called “The Birth of Felt.” It describes an Altai woman who is an artist-feltmaker. On the one hand, it tells a story about the authentic and modern production of artistic felt; on the other hand, this project is about the production of the person and the master herself.

The results of our collaboration in the context of the photo-blog Birthmarks on the Map are a few dozen stories including pictures and texts with anthropological themes. They are a kind of nonacademic or public humanities, where pictures and words do not illustrate, but complement one another. The style, which is most often an essay, is defined by Valeriy Klamm as fotoliterature. In my view, it is applied visual anthropology.

The visual format is important because it places the work of the anthropologist in a public venue where interactivity occurs, which is rare in the life of a social scientist. Movies and phototexts placed on our blog are also viewed by the subjects themselves. These posts are very much enjoyed by those who appear in them and by their networks of friends and family. This is a critical result of the collaboration between the ethnographer and photographer.

Irina Oktyabrskaya

Ethnophotographer and Photoethnographer

During the development of the photo-blog Birthmarks on the Map, the intersection of social science and photographic aesthetics generated a unique collaboration, the advantages of which are obvious. Other photographers work with various questions associated with ethnicity, but in the case of my partnership with Irina Oktyabrskaya and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, we have the opportunity to achieve a higher caliber of work.

Even before I started professionally triggering the shutter release on cameras, as a

project manager I headed a series of large international photo expeditions through Siberia: "People at the Border" (2002), "Yenisey: River of History—Stories of the River" (2003), "M52. Chuysky Highway" (2005).¹ From the very beginning these projects relied on academic involvement; Irina Oktyabrskaya, as an ethnographer, consulted on the details. Serious preparatory research and anthropological fieldwork gave the photographs additional depth. Even at that point, we began to form the understanding that we were exploring general humanist questions marked by ethnic difference.

Anthropology in photographic projects sends us off to another time—maybe to another era, into the eternity of the human species. Instead of reporting the surface, which can be seen in a short trip or vacation, something more profound emerges. Ethnographers and anthropologists are, above all, skilled field workers who are shaped by their studies in the university. On the one hand, they have specific research methods; on the other, they have the experience of human existence through immersion in a different environment. Anthropologists have the experience of peering at people in the contemporary moment with a thousand years of history behind them. A deep focus on being unites anthropologist and photographer.

Ethnographic subjects are appreciated by any photographer. Photographers are fascinated with rich images, which are more difficult to find in familiar cities: colorful costumes, rituals, a different way of life, a different universe. But as photographers, they do not appreciate the full range of ideas and they often pursue well-known topics: shamans, nomadic herders of the North, etc. An ethnographer partner can offer untrodden paths, not yet trampled by photographers, allowing one to move beyond the visual reproduction of superficial difference.

I'm spoiled by such a partnership. For to be a photographer is still essentially a singular existence. One person must consolidate many different skills: research during the preparatory stage, the technical realization of shooting, the navigation of challenging communications with photographic subjects. Ethnographers and anthropologists take a substantial part of the preparatory work upon themselves, but in a way that does not interfere with my own project. While I build my own route by focusing on what is encountered, right out of the gate there is a sense of a more or less considered direction. In our case, my interaction with an anthropologist takes

place at all stages of the process: designation of the subject, preparation for the expedition, field shooting, editing and postproduction. Everything, from research to results, is negotiated between the participants in this duet.

The social scientist proposes a theme that will usually anticipate several vectors: for example, the Altai Kazakhs, Germans of Siberia, traditional crafts of the Altai, or funeral rituals of the Russian Old Believers. We go, with prior arrangements and an approximate understanding of who we will meet and how we will undertake our work. There is a route and there are key events in the shooting schedule. But a lot is resolved on the spot, under conditions of improvisation. Along these paths are revealing subjects and stories. Like a limitless garden of forking paths, one story leads to the next one.

Fascinating details of everyday life are discovered in dialogue with the photographic subject, as a result of a well-planned ethnographic endeavor. Both ethnographers and photographers are trained for communication in the field: how to turn yourself from stranger into someone more like a family member. When you come to a new place and start to work with new people or communities, you know how to melt walls, how to sincerely become like a brother or sister.

More often than not we are near one another in the field. The ethnographer, focused on a larger picture, sometimes suggests angles to the photographer, who is carried away and has lost the breadth of vision. The ethnographer, as the photographer's assistant, acts as a kind of prompter: an additional set of eyes and ears. Such a tandem workflow allows me to see more broadly and to more accurately work out a scene that will probably never be repeated. The stakes are very high; traditions disappear and documenting them can be very important.

Photographs have the capacity to undermine clichés. In working with social scientists, the challenge for the photographer with regard to the original project is to offer unexpected approaches to the topic. This yields revealing and surprising results, challenges original expectations, and ultimately reveals deep human meaning.

The challenge for any creative work is found in professional habits, in the tacit assumptions of disciplinary knowledge, in the excess of certitude established at

the beginning. But after many years of work with a professional ethnographer, one begins to understand the internal logic of the culture to which he or she is oriented. Then, too, the photographically educated ethnographer understands the language of images and appreciates the need for improvisation, the need to delve deeper into the emotional narrative beyond which hides some kind of human authenticity.

My collaboration with Irina Oktyabrskaya takes place at all stages of photographic practice. The ethnographer grows through the photographer and vice versa. This kind of work requires synergy and compromise. Sometimes the resulting visual sequences do not require supporting text, and sometimes the text of the anthropologist acts as an extension to the photography. Joint publications differ from journalism. Perhaps temporal depth and the absence of immediacy add extra dimensions, one of which is time. Anthropology is working with eternity; it's not just about today, not only about the current moment. It has an orientation toward the depth of human life. While our work may at times seem to have the qualities of photographic fictions, they are nonetheless documentary.

The final results are synthetic: the framing text of the ethnographer accompanied by photographs, which are not illustrations to the text. In addition to this, the photographer's captions sometimes include the words of subjects or even feature audio and video. This is a special form developed as multimedia photo vérité/direct cinema/kinopravda. They do not have authoritative texts: only authentic sound, photographs, and video.

I do not know what term can be used for this emerging ethno-photo partnership: visual essays, scientific poetry, photo-literature, ethno-photo parables? Through the vision of the ethnographer, the product offers an absolute document, a multilayered cabbage that grows in the garden of our partnership.

Valeriy Klamm

Note

1. M52 is the Russian demarcation of the ancient road, known as Chuysky Trakt, which stretches for 953 kilometers and goes through the region of Novosibirsk, Altai Krai, and the Altai Republic. In its contemporary incarnation, the road was constructed by forced labor of the villagers living nearby as well as gulag inmates, with scarce resources and a high rate of injuries and mortality. Chuysky Trakt is a subject of prison folklore, and also of songs, cinema, and literary works.

References

Donahoe, Brian, and Joachim Otto Habeck, eds. 2011. *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self, and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*. New York: Berghahn.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2004. "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production." *Museum International* 56, nos. 1–2: 52–65.

Olson, Laura J. 2004. *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*. New York: Routledge.

writing with light | photo-essays



This peer-reviewed photoessay was originally published as:

Oktyabrskaya, Irina, Valeriy Klammer, Craig Campbell, and Vasilina Orlova. 2016. "Rzyka: A Curated Conversation." Writing with Light, Cultural Anthropology website, November 19. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/rzyka-a-curated-conversation>