

# Rob Hornstra: *101 Billionaires* Reviewed by Melanie Manchot



'What happened in the ruins of the ex-Soviet empire is unique,' says Boris Mikhailov of the post-Communist condition, in recordings from his seminal project of 1999, *Case History*. Russia, the land and its culture, both mythic and real, has both attracted and repelled a number of photographers and filmmakers, resulting in documentaries such as Luc Delahaye's *Winterreise*, Martin Parr's *Luxury Russia* as well as Chantal Akerman's elegiac film, *D'Est*.

Developed in collaboration with two writers, Hans Loos and Arnold van Bruggen, Rob Hornstra's book *101 Billionaires* sets out to depict the flipside of Russia's ostentatious new wealth, its high point neatly captured in the proud announcement by the Russian business paper *Finans*, in early 2008, that the country is home to 101 billionaires. One year later, Hornstra's second edition has been published – the crisis edition, and that number has been slashed to 49. The loss of more than 50 percent of Russia's supposed billionaires to the global economic downturn is of little concern to the people who are the subject of Hornstra's photographs, locked in a struggle with the same old chronic problems.

Rob Hornstra has an ongoing fascination and relationship with Russia, which started in 2004 with his first book, *Communism & Cowgirls*, and stretches into the future with his current Sochi Project. Far from disaster tourism, these projects reflect a documentary approach based on long-term engagement and a search for a deeper understanding of his subjects.

## Beginnings and endings

The book starts with a statue of Lenin and finishes with a huge decorated Christmas tree, symbolising not only an extended period of festivities but also the rampant consumerism that now has a firm grip on this enormous country. Ideologies and systems of belief thus bracket the book, conveyed in symbols that become strangely potent, particularly for their implied failure.

There are evocations of the past throughout *101 Billionaires*, both nostalgic and critical, which collide with hopes, aspirations and desires for the future. Photography is married to the past, and this book points both back and forwards, away from a present that is often painful and dark, leaden like the Siberian winter skies that hang low over many of the lives we encounter here.

Money – or, mostly, the lack of it and the need to procure it – shapes the lives of the people who offer up their stories to writer and photographer. Money, alcohol, drugs, prostitution. And sometimes death. All recorded through Hornstra's calmly striking visual language and the elliptical narratives and observations. Both languages, visual and textual, avoid sensationalism – and are the stronger for it.

There is a real dialogue here between photographs and narratives, neither dominating, but developed alongside each other, on a shared journey. At its most poignant, the relationship between image and text

creates tensions, spaces for us as viewers to move, through the implications of the specific, to the general. If lives look like this, what do they tell us about the society in which they are lived? If personal stories speak of chronic despair, what larger histories are they embedded in? Throughout the book there is an oscillation between the individual, their story, and the wider social and collective situation of this vast culture. Hence the portraits neither claim a privileged understanding of the subject nor are individuals reduced to clichés, or made to stand in for stereotypes.

The work portrays an acute awareness of the histories of documentary photography. It does not so much challenge documentary, either as a style or a mode, but rather affirms its potential to function as a poignant practice to record and analyse, and to criticise social situations which are too easily ignored.

Hornstra's practice spans the traditional genre of landscape, still life, and portraiture, and it is precisely through their placing within the layout that the book establishes its dynamics. There are moments of extreme density offset by visual pauses, often in the form of landscapes, their tonal range defined by a limited palette.

These considerations of layout and editing support the book's visual rhythm; some of Hornstra's double spreads are both precise and poetic in how they allow for meaning to resonate. Take the image of the two blonde





strippers next to that of two birds in a rural natural history museum. The text relating to the pigeons explains that 'Taking photographs with a flash is not permitted. The feathers might fall out'.

A keen understanding of the surreal and absurd qualities of life pervades the book. Yet there is also humour and a deep sense of humanity. The book's last chapter, 'Lyubov's children', gives a snapshot of a Siberian couple's life with their 19 adopted children. The group portrait in their living room, neatly reflecting an earlier portrait of the family on the wall behind them, speaks in equal measure of tenacity and vulnerability, and pays tribute to the survival of the individual within a failed system.

#### **Beginnings and endings, same but different**

The two editions of the book are identical in many respects: the same 101 images appear in the same sequences. Some of the texts have been modified to reflect current events, but most remain in their original form. Just like the lives portrayed, the core remains the same.

Yet physically this second – crisis – edition has some crucial differences: smaller, squatter, thicker; maybe the colours are marginally less saturated. There are no gatefolds, which in the first edition provide a smart way to integrate the narratives without the book becoming text-heavy. The font is smaller. The changes are a necessary economy, but they reflect a conceptual rigour in that they embody the tightening of Russia's belt within

the formal structure of the book itself.

Whichever edition you may come across, the images and texts in *101 Billionaires* pose important questions, both about the situations they depict and about the place of documentary practice in our contemporary societies. ■

**Melanie Manchot is an artist living in London. Her recent work, *Celebration*, was exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery earlier this year.**

*101 Billionaires* by Rob Hornstra  
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