

The Trans-Siberian Photo Project

Elly Clarke

As a first-time Trans-Siberian train traveler, I was interested in finding out who was on the train, apart from fellow conference goers. I wanted to know where my co-passengers were headed, for what reasons and how they felt about their journey. Despite being the longest train journey in the world, I was aware of how fleeting any experience or encounter I would have within three countries over a period of less than ten days would be. I wanted to understand a little more of the places we were passing through than I could get by looking out of the train windows and interact with people I would not normally have had the chance to meet.

My method was to communicate with passengers at all points along the way, using Russian and Chinese-translated cue cards listing questions I wanted to ask about people's journeys, and a letter, explaining my project in full. The Trans-Siberian Photo Project had two parts. The first was the conversation, which, with permission, I videotaped. The second was a photo project, whereby each passenger I spoke to was given a disposable camera and a form to list details of the photographs they would take – date, place, time, title – and a request for these photos to be taken in a way that reflects their journey or experience of travel. I asked them to take their pictures from the day we met until the day they reached their final destination. From there, the camera would be posted back to me in the UK. All this was explained in the letter and interviews began only once all this had been clearly understood and agreed.

I gave out ten cameras in total: five to Russians, four to Mongolians (including one to the National Ice Skating Team of Mongolia). The only Chinese person I could persuade to take part was the train's conductor. Conductor 119, as he is known, was happy to take the photos but did not want to be interviewed and neither did he fill in the form. Despite having a fluent Chinese speaker with me at the time, and inviting almost every Chinese passenger on the train to participate, on the whole, as far as Chinese passengers were concerned, I found that my project was met with suspicion and unease. This was a cultural contrast to the Russian passengers, who welcomed me into their cabins, and, with their offers of food and drink, made it sometimes actually quite difficult to get away.

Conductor 119 may have been reluctant to be interviewed, but I find his photographs at once beautiful, and interesting. As a conductor, he knows this route better than any passenger and his pictures may be said to reflect this. One of the fifteen pictures he took

shows a train approaching in the opposite direction, quite late in the evening. This did not happen often, so to be ready to take a picture of it at the precise time he did would have taken some forward thinking.

Another set of photographs comes from three Mongolian passengers who were travelling from Ulaan Baatar to Guangzho via Beijing, for part holiday, part business. When asked whether they enjoyed travelling by train they answered: "Outside you have vast landscapes, which broaden your horizon. Inside you have the space to take a walk."

I am still waiting for most of the cameras to make their way back to me and I do not know how many will make it. Those I have received have not been titled and the interviews I have on tape are yet to be fully translated. There is still work to do and the language barrier does indeed present quite a challenge. As with all participatory projects, the process (getting there) is often as interesting as the end result (destination).

The Trans-Siberian Photo Project was based on a model of another project I did in 2004 in the East London Council-owned apartment building where I live. In *The Broadway House Photo Project*,¹ I circulated a single disposable camera around my building, asking residents to take three photographs from and within their flats, (one looking North, one looking South and a third picture of what they wanted inside their homes) and to give their pictures titles. One in five flats in the building took part. The project culminated in an exhibition at a gallery five minutes' walk away, where my neighbours got to see their photographs for the first time, as well as to meet each other, also in many cases for the first time, despite several having lived in Broadway House for more than twenty years.

Through my work, I am interested in finding alternative ways of capturing particular aspects of life and lives that are not normally given a great deal of exposure.

1 See www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-1-125-1016.jsp, or www.opendemocracy.net/arts-photography/article_1016.jsp

Participants in The Trans-Siberian Photo Project

Video stills from part of my interviews where I ask 'Have you got anything of particular interest or importance to show me?'



Swiss Souvenir (and Russian Milk)



A bandaged arm



A pilots watch that has flown 1000 hours



A Ukrainian Costume



Jesus



Austrian holiday snaps

Asja and Lilra and their pictures



Asja and Lilra on their way home from a two-week holiday in Switzerland and Austria



Conductor 119 and his photos



Mongolian passengers and their pictures

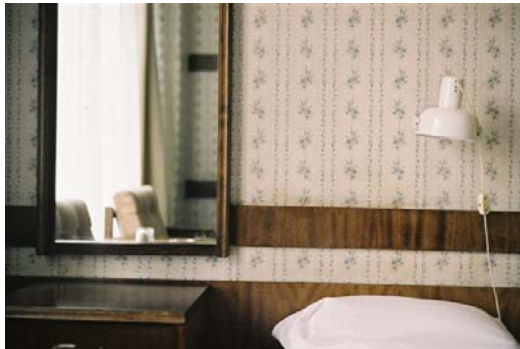




“Outside you have vast landscapes, which broaden your horizon. Inside you have the space to take a walk.”

The Trans-Siberian Ebay Project

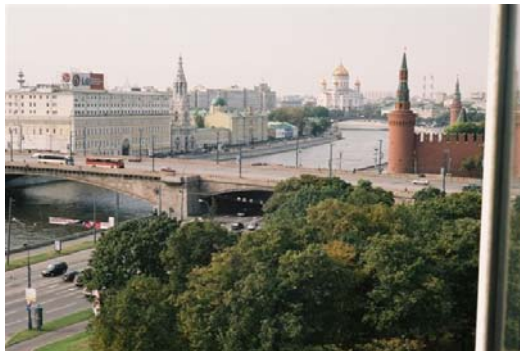
Without funding, I could not take part in the Trans-Siberian conference. My application to the Arts Council was rejected on the ground of my project providing not enough public benefit, and I was not eligible to apply to any academic funding schemes, as I am not an academic. Finding myself between stools in this way forced me to think of alternative ways to raise money. I decided to sell unique one-off photos I hadn't yet taken onboard the Trans-Siberian train, via ebay. I committed to taking two photos a day for the duration of the conference: one in the morning, another at night. As far as possible these photos would be taken at 10am and 4pm. I named each un-taken photograph according to the date and time they would be taken. For example: 110905AM (the first photo taken on Day 1 of the conference, in Moscow) and 200905PM (the last day of the conference, and the final picture in the series – taken in Beijing.) I sold all twenty photographs and raised a total of about £450. It was interesting taking photographs so systematically like this, especially knowing they had already been purchased by a particular person. It was as though they bought a second of my time and whatever happened to be before my lens at that time was what they received in the post two months later. I would like thank everybody who has helped to fund my conference participation.



110905AM, Hotel Rossia, Room 7292, 10.20am



110905PM, View from Conference Room in Hotel Rossia, 4.20pm



120905AM, View From Room 6043, Hotel Rossia, 11.45am



120905PM, Moscow Train Station, 4.00pm



130905AM, View from Train at Balesino, 9.15am

Opposite: 130905PM, Between Perm and Swerdlowsk Pass, 4.00pm



140905AM, Between Tatarskaja and Barabinsk, 10.30am



140905PM, Roundabout, Novosibirsk, 4.30pm Novo time



159095AM, Akademgorodok, 10.30am



150905PM, Novosibirsk, 4.00pm



160905AM, Near Krasnojarsk Pass, 10.20pm



160905PM, Chinese Conductor's Cabin Carriage 9, 4.30pm
Novo time + 1 hour



170905AM, Near Lake Bakal, 9.00am local (Novo time +2)



170905PM, Untitled, 4pm



180905AM, 2 hours from Ulaan Baatar, 10am



180905PM, Sajin-Sanda, Mongolia, 4pm local time



190905AM, First glimpse of China, 10am, Beijing time



190905PM, From bus on way to hotel from train station,
Beijing, 4pm



200905AM, View from Room 701, Unisplendour Hotel, 11.11am

Opposite: 200905PM, Tsinghua University and Bike, 5pm



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the author & artist

Elly Clarke is an artist based in London. She is interested in the impact of mobility upon sense of self – both when alone and as part of a community – and in the technologies that mediate such experiences and interactions. Although largely lens-based, the focus of Clarke's work lies as much on the process of production as the images created from it. Equally important is the context within which a particular project is made, and/or shown. Elly Clarke has a Masters in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins and a First Class Degree in History of Art from Leeds and has since worked on several projects in collaboration with the Centre for Mobility Research at Lancaster University.² She is also currently part of a video show that is touring to the United States, Canada, New Zealand and the UK.

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² <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/cemore>