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Toward the History of Central European Photography

The history of Polish art has been crippled after Piotr Piotrowski's death. It is difficult to say if it was affected more by a lack of a debate, inaugurated by the author of *Znaczenia modernizmu* or by a lack of response to Piotrowski's research proposals. Especially intriguing among the many and varied study avenues left as Piotr Piotrowski's legacy to be developed by successive generations of researchers are the transgressions of the narrow national framework, the primary context for the discourse of the discipline. The question of the history of Central European photography emerged in private conversations accompanying the public debate on Piotr Piotrowski's book *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty*¹. The question of "photography in the shadow of Yalta" is the starting point of this text, an attempt to enter into a critical dialogue with Piotrowski's oeuvre. In his ground-breaking book, the author almost completely left out the subject of photography, treating the medium merely as a transparent, documentary record of art exhibitions and artistic activities. Piotrowski's texts, for all their "anti-photographic" approach, seem important for the topic, if only due to their indication of the constraints of the national historical and artistic narratives or the revision of the earlier relation between the peripheries and the centre.² Shifting attention to the margin, far more in-

» 1 P. Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, Reaktion Books, London 2009, (Polish edition *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989*, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2005. Grzegorz Borkowski, Izabela Kowalczyk, Adam Mazur, Luiza Nader, Bożenna Stokłosa, "Jalta" i cień awangardy. Dyskusja redakcyjna wokół książki Piotra Piotrowskiego "Awangarda w cieniu Jalty," in: "Obieg", <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/rozmowy/5705> [access: 5.02.2018].

» 2 A similar angle is adopted by scholars researching literature, culture and politics. "Central Europe helps to extend the scope of vision and transcend national borders. In this sense the past may be considered from a wider perspective; one should be brave enough to look beyond the familiar world. This confronts us with the challenge of the concept of Europe, both topical and elusive. It is the desire to limit questions solely to the central part of the continent that shows that we are still unable to define what Europe is and to accept its diversity", see

teresting from the universalist perspective of the centre, does not mean for Piotrowski a loss of a critical distance to the works and events described. On the contrary, when reading Piotrowski's book, the position of a witness, participant, and involved critic showed Central and Eastern Europe as a venue of a passionate debate about politics, freedom and contemporary art. It is in order to point out at the beginning that the relationships which are key for Piotrowski's approach, sometimes personal ones, between artists and communities from different countries of the Soviet Bloc, occurred also in the realm of photography³. It is hardly a matter of coincidence that a major role in the region was played by Polish *Fotografia*, edited by Zbigniew Dłubak and Urszula Czartoryska and Czechoslovak *Revue fotografie*, with Daniela Mrázková as editor-in-chief.⁴ Equally important were joint art projects and exhibitions of photographers from the Eastern Bloc, also outside the official art current.⁵ The topic of a shared history "in the shadow of Yalta" recurs in private conversations with the photographers who remember that time, such as Algirdas Šeškus, Romualdas Požerskis, Boris Mikhailov, Antanas Sutkus, Václav Macek, Pavel Banka, Vladimír Birgus, Viktor Kolař, Zsuzsa Uj, Dora Maurer, Geta Bratescu, Antanas Macijauskas, Roman Piatkovka, and Ulrich Wüst.

Although so far Central European photography "in the shadow of Yalta" has not been subject to separate studies, we can point out a series of curatorial and scholarly intuitions, which both addressed the details of the topic and presented it as a fragment of a larger whole.⁶ One of the more interesting angles on the subject at hand was adopted in the exhibition and the accompanying publication *In the Face of History. European Photographers in the 20th Century*, edited by Kate Bush and Mark Sladen.⁷

S. Škrabec, *Geografia wyobrażona. Koncepcja Europy Środkowej w XX wieku*, transl. Rozalya Sasor, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2013, p. 11.

- » 3 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda...*, op.cit., p. 9-36.
- » 4 P. Bąkowski, A. Ciastoń, *Miesięcznik "Fotografia" 1953-1974*, a book accompanying the exhibition under the same title (10 November 2017 - 29 January 2018), Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław, Wrocław 2018; Karolina Ziębińska-Lewandowska, *Między dokumentalnością a eksperymentem. Krytyka fotograficzna w Polsce w latach 1946-1989*, Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, Fundacja Nowych Działań Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2014; Eva Pluharřová-Grigienė, Daniela Mrázková and *Revue fotografie*, in: "In the Darkroom", <http://inthedarkroom.org/daniela-mrzkov-and-revue-fotografie> [access: 5.02.2018]
- » 5 J. Pátek, *Ve stopách legendy: Okolnosti, instituce, osobní vztahy, teoretické koncepce*, in: Jan Svoboda: *Nejsem fotograf*, exhibition cat., eds. Rostoslav Koryčánek, Jiří Pátek, 20 November 2015 – 21 January 2016, Moravská galerie v Brně, Brno 2015, p. 26-35.
- » 6 E.g. an international conference in the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw: *Odkrywanie "peryferii"*. *Historie fotografii w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* (31 May - 1 June 2016) and a conference *Shaping Identities, Challenging Borders. Photographic Histories in Central and Eastern Europe*, Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, Praha (9-11 May 2017).
- » 7 K. Bush, M. Sladen (eds.), *In the Face of History. European Photographers in the 20th*

While the works and texts concentrate on 20th-century photography and history, over half of the examples concern precisely the cold war period. In other words, it is “the shadow of Yalta” that preposterously determines the intimate and inimical relation between photography and European history throughout the 20th century. In the chapter East and West: Cold War 1945-1989, classical Western photographs, mainly documentary, were juxtaposed with Boris Mikhailov, Viktor Kolař, Michael Schmidt, and Inta Ruka.⁸ For Bush and Sladen it is moreover crucial to highlight the autonomous nature of photography vis-à-vis both art and history. Interestingly, the curators stress the parallel between a historian and a photographer, who combine in their work subjective elements yet aim at arriving at an objective, deliberately construed narrative.⁹ Ties with history, both grand history related to the totalitarianisms and major events of the 20th century, and personal, or microhistory, is what – apart from the technical and aesthetic aspect – helps single out photography which is crucial from the point of view of the present. The interfaces of photography and history, stressed by the curators of the Barbican Art Gallery in London brings to mind Hayden White’s notion of “historiophoty”.¹⁰ The author of *Metahistory* wanted to capture the uniqueness of the historical process via a close contact of a scholar with a film. A question arises if photography, too, can be a medium which is a useful artefact in historical studies? If so, we had better speak not about “historiophoty”, but about “historiophotography”. It seems that only photography offers the profound integration of the visual message (an artistic documentary) with politics and events that map out the lives of communities. In the *Face of History* does not concern relations between artists and communities, but it seems that the curators deliberately chose the artists whose biographies abound in tense upheavals (apart from the already mentioned artists, other chapters of the book mention e.g. André Kertész, Brassai, Jitka Hanzlová, and Henryk Ross). Furthermore, there are many artists impacted by the cold war and by being in the shadow of history. A case in point is Josef Sudek, whose pictures were published in the chapter dedicated to World War II.¹¹ Sudek lost his right arm fighting in the military ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the Italian front in World War I. He got interested in photography in

Century, Black Dog Publishing, Barbican Art Gallery, London 2006. The exhibition curated by the editors of the book was held in the Barbican Art Gallery on 13 October 2006 – 28 January 2007.

» 8 K. Bush, M. Sladen (ed.), op.cit., p. 102-190.

» 9 K. Bush, M. Sladen (ed.), op.cit., p. 11-13.

» 10 H. White, *Historiografia i historiografia*, [in:] *idem, Przeszłość praktyczna*, ed. E. Domańska, transl. J. Burzyński, A. Czarnacka, T. Dobrogoszcz, E. Domańska, E. Kledzik et al., Universitas, Kraków 2014, p. 255-266.

» 11 K. Bush, M. Sladen (ed.), op.cit., p. 68-75.

a veterans' hospital, already in an independent Czechoslovakia. He began his most significant series during the Nazi German occupation and finished them in the Stalinist era.

Interestingly, Piotr Piotrowski, too, in his *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty* invokes the history of the region from the time of the war and the time between the world conflicts. This avenue of interpretation is implied by extensive literature on pre-war avant-garde and examples of major exhibitions related to the subject, most notably *Europa, Europa* by Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus.¹² However, possibly in the name of coherence of his own studies, Piotrowski rejects perspectives that relate to the entire 20th century.¹³ As he observes, "The absolute nature of the divisions adopted in Yalta and its application to the pre-Yalta period seems debatable. There are few historical arguments to support talking about the Europe before World War II in terms of East-West, which division started to apply only after Yalta".¹⁴ As if this were not enough, the Poznań-based art historian cruelly undermines Stanisławski and Brockhaus' initiative, calling it an "opportunist curatorial assumption due to the political situation in which *Europa, Europa* was held, i.e. the end of the cold war".¹⁵ From the present perspective, also in the context of studies not only on avant-garde art but primarily literature, it seems that the relations between artists and art communities during the Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe had not been so intense had it not been for a profound rooting in the past. Even if the East-West division is a result of the Yalta agreement (conscious of the fact, however, that the shadow of Soviet communist had been cast on Europe a quarter of a century before), the Central European identity seems far more sustainable and intriguing than the geopolitical dialectics imposed by Stalin.¹⁶ In the context of the debate initiated by Milan Kundera in 1984, key for the identity of the region, it seems that already during the Soviet domination, the category of Central Europe was used to define the then geopolitical reality and its consequences for culture.¹⁷ Perhaps this is the reason for the shift taking place in studies inspired by Piotrowski's research approach, signalled by

» 12 C. Brockhaus, R. Stanisławski (ed.), *Europa, Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, exhibition cat. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn 1994. The exhibition was held between 27 May and 16 October 1994.

» 13 P. Piotrowski, p. 19-22.

» 14 *Ibidem*.

» 15 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

» 16 See S. Škrabec

» 17 M. Kundera, *Zachód porwany albo tragedia Europy Środkowej*, in: F. Bondy, J. Kis, M. Kundera, G. Nivat, L. Szaruga, A. Zagajewski, *Zachód porwany. Eseje i polemika*, Wydawnictwo oświatowe BiS, Wrocław 1984, p. 3-20.

the very title of Klara Kemp-Welch's monograph *Antipolitics in Central European Art*¹⁸. Whatever we say about the dynamics of the discourse on art avant-garde, in the context of Central European photography we are faced with significant questions about the functioning of this sub-field of culture production before and after the period described by Piotrowski.¹⁹ As *In the Face of History* implies, also in photography we deal with a diffusion between historical eras, currents and artistic attitudes. The separation of the entire area and historical era by the iron curtain seems enticingly purist yet at variance with historical reality²⁰.

Of prime significance for the development of the historical discourse on Central European photography is also the publication *History of European Photography 1900-2000*, along with successive six volumes with debates and conferences²¹. Presenting in separate chapters the history of photography of countries of contemporary Europe from Albania and Bulgaria through Iceland, Norway to Russia and Ukraine, the book seems the most intriguing when it describes previously marginal narratives instead of those well-recognised ones, like the French or British. At the same time, due to the connection with general history, it was the chapters dedicated to the states of Central Europe that are not only more engaging thanks to the new and often ghastly iconography, but also calling for the highest possible attention and effort not to lose track of the histories of the protagonists and of the identity of the places – stopovers on their path. The work of a team lead by Václav Macek, gathered around the Central European House of Photography in Bratislava (also known under the historical names of the German Pressburg and Hungarian Pozsony) provokes uncomfortable questions about the identity of the photographers so important for Poland as e.g. Jan Bułhak. Familiarising oneself with the history of Belorussian, Lithuanian and Russian photography, a prudent reader will meet the same author, whose name was written in a different manner, as was his place of birth and work.²² Born as a subject of the Russian Empire, in today's Belarus, the Polish nobleman devoted his best years to taking photographs of Lithuania, in particular of Vilnius, which

» 18 K. Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956-1989*, I. B. Tauris, London-New York 2014.

» 19 C. Brockhaus, R. Stanisławski (ed.), *Europa, Europa...*

» 20 See T. Garton Ash, *Czy istnieje Europa Środkowa?*, [in:] id.,

» 21 V. Macek (ed.), *The History of European Photography 1900-1938*, two volumes, *Central European House of Photography, FOTOFO, Eyes On*, Bratislava-Vienna 2010; id. (ed.), *The History of European Photography 1939-1969*, two volumes, *Central European House of Photography, FOTOFO, Eyes On*, Bratislava-Vienna 2014; id. (ed.), *The History of European Photography 1970-2000*, two volumes, *Central European House of Photography, FOTOFO, Eyes On*, Bratislava-Vienna 2016.

» 22 *Ibidem*.

in the first half of the 20th century was under Russian, Prussian, Polish, Nazi German, Soviet, and Lithuanian rule.²³ Commonly considered the “father” of Polish art photography, Bułhak is one of the many examples of dilemmas of identity and of Central European multiplicity in unity. Similarly, fundamental problems establishing who is who in the History of European Photography concerned such well-known photographers as e.g. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Martin Munkačsi (appearing as protagonists of the Hungarian and German chapters, and implicitly also of the US one), Władysław Bednarczyk (Poland and Ukraine), Francois Kollar (Czechoslovakia and France), and Robert Capa (Hungary, France, Spain, and again the United States).²⁴ Rigid division lines of national borders once more, this time in chapters of a multi-volume book, divided the lives and art of individual artists, obscuring rather than shedding light on history. The work of Macek’s team is as problematic as it is inspiring; it provides answers to the question: “Can one break free from the burden which makes eminent, cosmopolitan and inherently Central European photographers retrospectively subject to ‘nationalisation’?”. This is especially acute with respect to Central European Jews, prosecuted by anti-Semitic nationalist regimes, regarded after their death as foundations of national and historical narrative.²⁵

Fundamental for reflection on pre-war Central European photography are Matthew S. Witkovsky’s exhibition and book *Foto. Modernity in Central Europe 1918-1945*. The monograph is dedicated to broadly construed modernity between World War I and World War II. However, Witkovsky’s studies, rooted in the era of the houses of Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov, finish by opening up to the Yalta order.²⁶ Although Witkovsky’s exhibition never made it to the continent, the book gives an account of the close and common artistic relations between Central European photographers. From the perspective of a US scholar, it is only natural to include in the historical narrative eminent photographers of

» 23 M. Margarita, N. Agnè, *Camera obscura. Lietuvos fotografijos istorija 1839-1945*, Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, Vilnius 2016, p. 200-297.

» 24 V. Macek, *The History of European Photography 1900-1938*.

» 25 E. Hungarian *Photography in the Twentieth Century*. Brassai, Capa, Kertész, Moholy-Nagy, Munkácsi, exhibition cat., eds. Peter Baka, Colin Ford, George Szirtes, Royal Academy of Arts, 30 June - 2 October 2011, London 2011, p. 168.

» 26 M.S. Witkovsky, *Foto. Modernity in Central Europe 1918-1945*, exhibition cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington 2007. The exhibition, curated by Witkovsky, was on between 10 June - 3 September 2007. Later also at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (12 October 2007 - 13 January 2008), The Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee (9 February - 4 May 2008), The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Liverpool (7 June- 31 August 2008). More on the impact of Witkovsky’s proposed re-writing of the geography of photography in the region in: Adam Mazur, *Historie fotografii w Polsce 1839-2009*, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski w Warszawie, Fundacja Sztuk Wizualnych, Warszawa-Kraków 2009, p. 56-61.

the era who transcend, literally and figuratively, national borders. These are e.g. André Kertész, Brassai, Mojżesz Worobiejczyk, Roman Vishniac, John Heartfield, and El Lissitzky. The broadly construed idea of modernity binds the historical narrative, is a subject of reflection and pursuits of artists often espousing divergent views on art (and politics).

What, then, is Central European photography? Where did it originate? What is its unique history? If it has not previously operated as an autonomous historical narrative of Central European photography, it does not mean that the individual images, authors and archives were left to their own devices. Usually, the value and fate of these photographs were decided upon somewhere else. Reflecting on the state of research on the topic, one should mention the canonical texts on the history of world (i.e. Western) photography. In the process of writing the history of world (i.e. Western) photography, started in the 1920s, the photography of Central and Eastern Europe supplements, confirms and when necessary is a counterpoint for the principal narrative line. In the dominant English and French texts on the topic, from Beaumont Newhall²⁷ and Helmut Gernsheim²⁸ through Michel Frizot²⁹ to Walter Guadagnini³⁰, Juliet Hacking³¹ and Mary Warren Marien³², one can find indications of Soviet photography (usually constructivist, less often of socialist realism) and German photography from the time of the Weimar Republic (Bauhaus and Neue Sachlichkeit). Interestingly, this model, slightly supplemented as a gesture of good will towards the local reader, is reiterated by German historians such as Boris von Brauchitsch³³, Bernd Stiegler and Felix Thürlemann³⁴, Wolfgang Kemp³⁵ and Russians Valery Ctigneyev, Alexandr Lipkov³⁶ and

» 27 B. Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012.

» 28 H. Gernsheim, *Origins of Photography*, Thames and Hudson, London 1982; *id.*, *The Rise of Photography 1850-1880. The Age of Collodion*, Thames and Hudson, London 1988; Alison and Helmut Gernsheim, *The History of Photography from the Camera Obscura to the Beginning of the Modern Era*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, St. Louis, San Francisco 1969.

» 29 M. Frizot (ed.), *A New History of Photography*, Könemann, Köln 1998.

» 30 W. Guadagnini (ed.), *Photography, four volumes*, SKIRA, Milano 2010-2013.

» 31 J. Hacking (ed.), *Photography the Whole Story*, Thames and Hudson, London 2012.

» 32 M. W. Marien, *Photography. A Cultural History*, Laurence King Publishing, London 2002.

» 33 B. von Brauchitsch, *Mała historia fotografii*, transl. J. Koźbial and B. Tarnas, Wydawnictwo CYKLADY, Warszawa 2004.

» 34 B. Stiegler, F. Thürlemann, *Meisterwerke der Fotografie*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2016.

» 35 W. Kemp, *Historia fotografii. Od Daguerre'a do Gursky'ego*, transl. M. Bryl, Universitas, Kraków 2014.

» 36 Валерий Стигнеев, Александр Липков, *Мир Фотографии*, Planeta, Moscow 1988.

Polish scholars, like Lech Lechowicz³⁷. There is an acute lack in this narrative of 19th-century photography from the region and the experience of communism and post-communist transformation. The absence of Central European photography from before World War I may be accounted for by an abrupt end of the empires ruling in the region. When the French and English scholars consolidated and described the canon of photography, there were no superpowers forming the core of Central European politics, i.e. Prussian Second Reich, Tsarist Russia or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Actually, there was nothing to write about any longer and detailed studies on the histories of states and nations, which emerged after the dissolution of the old order, were to develop some time later. The process was additionally slowed down by the outbreak of World War II, the defeat of Germany and the cold war. The photography from before 1918 was in part taken over by national historiographies, stressing the singularity and exceptionality rather than the shared experience of 19th-century Central Europe.³⁸ This national model is used by present-day texts, with the leading example of the aforementioned six-volume history of European photography, written in the 2010s by Václav Macek.³⁹ However, the narrative, commencing in the year 1900, is from the start told in national chapters adjusted to the geopolitical order of the 2010s and while the times of tsars and emperors are mentioned, these periods are not addressed at length.⁴⁰

The absence of photographs from the time of Soviet domination in the region in classical texts about the subject can be explained by the iron curtain. Whole two decades elapsed since the collapse of the Soviet Union before an exhibition *In the Face of History* was possible and before the holdings of the Museum of Modern Art in New York or TATE Modern in London began to include photographs taken in Central Europe after 1945.⁴¹ In the 2010s, the neo-avant-garde of the Eastern Bloc and even

» 37 L. Lechowicz, *Historia fotografii. Część I / 1839-1939*, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna im. L. Schillera, Łódź 2012.

» 38 E.g. history of Austrian photography: Timm Starl, Otto Hochreiter, *Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich*. Verein zur Verarbeitung der Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich, Bad Ischl 1983; Anton Holzer, *Fotografie in Österreich. Geschichte-Entwicklungen-Protagonisten 1890-1955*, Metroverlag, Wien 2013.

» 39 V. Macek.

» 40 The same is true of the Third Reich. The lack of consistence on the part of the editors is evident in their addition of a chapter about the GDR.

» 41 Q. Bajac, L. Gallun, R. Marcoci, S.H. Meister (ed.), *Photography at MoMA 1960-Now*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2015; Quentin Bajac, Lucy Gallun, Roxana Marcoci, Sarah Hermanson Meister (ed.), *Photography at MoMA 1920-1960*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2015; Quentin Bajac, Lucy Gallun, Roxana Marcoci, Sarah Hermanson Meister (ed.), *Photography at MoMA 1839-1920*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2017; Ute Eskildsen (ed.), *Street & Studio. An Urban History of Photography*, książka towarzysząca wystawie at Tate Modern, London (22 May – 31 August 2008) and the Folkwang Essen Museum (11 October

photographs from the German Democratic Republic were greatly fashionable⁴². One could expect that the post-communist transformation, usually discussed in such texts with Boris Mikhailov as an example, will soon be addressed by scholars from London, Paris and New York. An absence of an institutionalised and subjective history of photography of the region was replaced by personal, informal contacts, in time with the creation of national stories, which sped up the process of translating and co-opting selected peripheral photographs. A case in point is the activity of Czech historians, curators, art dealers, and photographers. The introduction of successive names and archives teams, from Frantisek Drtikol through Josef Sudek and Jaromir Funke, into the commercial world and museum collections has its price of de-contextualisation. Perhaps the core task of the history of Central European photography is, then, the return to the original context of the pictures, “famous for being famous”.

Another question concerning the history of Central European photography is its geographical scope. Few detailed analyses, including Matthew Witkovsky’s book, supplemented by research on art and partly inclusive of photography, encompass an area bounded in the north by the Baltic Sea, in the south by the Turkish and Greek borderline, spanning the area from the Black Sea to the Adriatic, in the West is it delineated by the Rhine and in the East by the line connecting Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Yalta⁴³. Under this approach, Switzerland, a centre for itself, is only a point of reference and a place of repose. Finland,⁴⁴ Georgia and even Kurdistan⁴⁵ are totally outside the scope of interest of photography scholars, even if these countries are mentioned in relevant literature. Under this geographic approach, Central Europe as seen by researchers such as Simona Škrabec, is framed by Russia and Germany, without which comprehension of the dynamics of the region seems impossible.⁴⁶ As in studies on the literature and art, Central Europe proves a blurred notion, a state of the mind rather than a geopolitical concrete.⁴⁷ This is a place of contact, of overlaps between the East and the West, a cultural point of reference and

2008 – 11 January 2009), Tate Publishing, London 2008.

» 42 Documenta 14 in 2017 included e.g. S. Iveković, A. Šeškus and U. Wüst.

» 43 M. Witkovsky.

» 44 Z. Szczerek, *Międzymorze. Podróże przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę Środkową*, Agora, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Warszawa-Wołowiec 2017.

» 45 The states were in the area defined as Central Europe by Italian curators, see History, Memory, Identity. Contemporary Photography from Eastern Europe, ed. Filippo Maggia in collaboration with Claudia Fini and Francesca Lazzarini, catalogue of an exhibition in the former Sant’Agostino Hospital in Modena, 13 December 2009 – 14 March 2010, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, Skira Editore, Modena-Milano 2009.

» 46 S. Škrabec, *Geografia wyobrażona*, p. 34-35.

» 47 *Ibidem*, p. 116-118.

the photographic Centre. Translating reflection on the limits of reflection, in photography we can freely move between the Rheine photographed by Andreas Gursky and a salty lake in eastern Ukraine photographed by Boris Mikhailov, we can meet three peasants from Westerwald by August Sander and a blind violinist from André Kertész's picture, the musician walking down the road of Abony, an extensive village rather than a town south of Budapest. We can have a look at Prague by the camera eye of Andreas Groll, regard Vilnius through the lens of Jan Bulhak, watch revolution-ravaged Saint Petersburg, and finally look at Moscow as seen by the lens of Alexandr Rodchenko, Zagreb of Sanjia Iveković, Vienna by Ernst Haas, and Slovak province documented by Martin Kollar. Even if we are uncertain about what Central Europe is, we can clearly see it in the photographs.

The photographs representative for Central Europe include those by Roman Vishniac, a Russian Jew, who fled to Berlin for fear of the Bolsheviks and to New York fearing the Nazis. The 1936 photograph *From Slonim the roads are leading everywhere in the world* depicts a wooden signpost photographed against the backdrop of a wooden fence. The composition axis is a straight wooden pole installed before a whitewashed wall. At roughly two-thirds of the height of the post, there are rectangular planks pointing sharply in three directions. The planks feature names of towns and the distance to them ("VILNIUS 200 km", "NOVOGRODEK 72 km", "BIAŁYSTOK 153 km", "LUBISZYCE 43 km", "DERECHIN 34 km", "BIAŁYSTOK 153 km" "PRUZHANA 50 km", "SIEŃKOWSZCZYŻNA 15 km").⁴⁸ Seven signposts pointing to different sides of the photograph make up a compact, rhythmical and poetic whole. At the same time the text visible on the light background of the wooden fence looks like written on a piece of paper. The graphic composition is completed by a fragment of a building behind the fence, a window frame on its left-hand side, in the upper section. A fragment of a tree, its foliage thick and dark, can be seen upper right. The characteristic shape of the window and the light wall of the building, decorated with lesenes, makes it easily identifiable as the Grand (Main) Synagogue in Slonim, built in the period 1635-1647. The scant composition of the photograph is completed by a shadow visible in the lower section. dazzling sunlight reduces the signpost to a simple shape resembling a Latin cross. In this simple manner Vishniac describes in his photograph the life of a Jewish community, the centre of Europe and at the same time the world's navel.

On the other hand, unique for European photography is its singular distance from the time and place of the photograph itself, from the

» 48 M. Benton, *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, DelMonico Books, *International Center of Photography*, Prestel, Munich, London, New York 2015, p. 10.

photographer's homeland; the artist is in constant motion, leaving and returning. As in the case of the literature and art, Central Europe is a state of mind more than a topographic area, a postcard from Yalta limited as to time and space by the totalitarian regime. In one of its multiple versions, the history of Central European photography could just as well start in a Parisian café in 1936. On an autumn morning, Gyula Halasz meets Teodora Marković over coffee in the Cafe des Deux Magots. Halasz, or Brassai popular among the Bohemians, a native of the city of Brashov in (Romanian Braşov, Hungarian Brassó, German Kronstadt), learned photography in Paris from another Hungarian emigrant, André Kertész. He often shares the darkroom and the photographic studio with a daughter of a Croatian architect, known to the general public under the pseudonym of Dora Maar. Brought up in Buenos Aires, Maar is a photographer and surrealist, a lover of Pablo Picasso. Together, Brassai and Maar visit Picasso, who produces from the kitchen cabinet the manuscript of *Ubu Roi* offered to him by Alfred Jarry. Picasso knows the text of the play by heart, so it is hard to tell when he reads and when he recites from memory, mincing "shit" under his breath". Picasso's drawings are a variation based on Jarry's sketches. Dora Maar's idea seems more original. Maar wants to take a picture of *Ubu*, the model being an armadillo of barely a few days. Judging by the shape of its snout, the oval skull and the sharp paws, this is a nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*). The powerful lateral light is cast on the left-hand side of the animal, making *Ubu*'s portrait more expressive and clearly setting it off the dark backdrop. *Ubu* looks as if he was asleep. He seems innocent and helpless. Delicate, foreign and surrealist, it is an excellent guide to and patron of the story set in Poland, or nowhere. Those gathered in Pablo Picasso's Parisian apartment regard Central Europe as remote and unreal, full of small states with unpronounceable funny names. In all those Ruritania and Cekanias, creatures like *Ubu* can pursue their vaulting ambitions by hook or by crook. The absurd drama is set far away, in Poland, but could just as well take place in any other country in Central Europe, in Marković's native Croatia or Halasz's Hungary. Gradually, the events taking place in far-away, peripheral lands, gain momentum and cast a shadow over the very centre. The photograph by Dora Maar, connected with the literature and art of the time and with the history of the region, stresses the need for interdisciplinary studies in Central Europe photography. With no recourse to the literature concerning other realms of culture, as well as geopolitics and history of the region, photography will remain solely a collection of anecdotes, a counterpoint for the dominant narrative, spun for generations from Newhall and Gernsheim through Frizot and Warren Marien. Scholars dealing with photography, apart from dispersed specialist ar-

ticles, have at their disposal volumes of texts, conference proceedings, research programs, and university seminars dedicated to the debate of the limits, history and identity of this Europe from the middle ages through to contemporary time.⁴⁹ The multiple perspectives help not only to continue the never-ending debate about Central Europe, but, more importantly, ward off the spectre of a sentimental (or resentful) Central European essentialism and historical determinism. Milan Kundera, who inspired one of the most significant debates on the identity of the region, sees Central Europe as a phenomenon, a phantasm and a fiction.⁵⁰ We can safely add one more alliterating word: photography. ●

- » 49 T.G. Ash, *The Puzzle of Central Europe*, in: "The New York Review of Books", 18 March 1999, p. 19-23; *id.*, *Pomimo i wbrew. Eseje o Europie Środkowej*, transl. A. Husarska, Polonia, London 1990; O. Halecki, *Historia Europy – jej granice i podziały*, transl. J.M. Kłoczowski, *Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 2000; M. Hroch, *Małe narody Europy. Perspektywa historyczna*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 2003; C. Lord (ed.), *Central Europe: Core of Periphery*, Copenhagen 2000; S. Škrabec, *Geografia wyobrażona*; J. Szűcs, *Trzy Europy*, transl. J.M. Kłoczowski, *Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 1995.
- » 50 C. Salmon, M. Kundera, *Rozmowa o sztuce kompozycji*, [in:] M. Kundera, *Sztuka powieści. Esej*, transl. M. Bieńczyk, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2004, p. 65-86; see also B. Szymankiewicz, *Istotność świętości, czyli Milana Kundery pożegnanie/a z Europą Środkową*, [in:] "Niewinni Czarodzieje", <http://niewinni-czarodzieje.pl/istotnosc-swietosci-czyli-milana-kundery-pozegnaniea-z-europa-srodkowa> [access: 9.02.2018]

