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Transitional Frames: From Normalisation to Democracy
Czech and Slovak Art Photography (1968-1998)

PAULA GORTÁZAR



Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled, 1982', from the series *Jižní Město* (South Town),
Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the development of art photography practices in Czechoslovakia throughout the Normalisation period (1968-1989) and the decade following the collapse of Communism in the country (1989-1998). Its aim is to analyse the relationship between the production of art photographs and the shifting socio-political context during these years, with the intention of understanding the different creative strategies applied by Czechoslovakian photographers to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the existing censorship under the communist rule, as well as their artistic evolution following the establishment of a democratic and capitalist system in 1989.

The project has been carried out from the perspective of the social history of art, which implies an analysis of artworks taking into account the presence of relevant social structures affecting its production, such as the different institutions and 'formations' operating during the studied period, the concrete biographical circumstances of each artist and their specific relations with power structures. The research has been developed using a variety of methods, including the collection of primary research material from various photographic archives and private collections, as well as twenty interviews with the main actors of the photography scene of the time. A latter semiotic analysis of photographs has served to disclose a range of 'coded messages' in their images, often revealing the hidden critical content of the work.

I would argue that the political context present during Normalisation years and its resulting social structures determined the development of art photography in Czechoslovakia at different levels, including not only its material production, content and style, but also the way these photographs were distributed and communicated through exhibitions and publications. This took place within a photography scene that was clearly divided into official and unofficial spheres of practice, but where 'inner migrations' constantly took place among those photographers who aimed to earn a living and communicate their work while simultaneously protecting their artistic autonomy. I would also argue that, although it would be very difficult to generalise the changes observed in their practice after 1989, it is possible to envisage certain tendencies among their work that suggest that the political transition that took place since 1989 produced different effects depending on the photographic style at stake.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is submitted to the Centre for Research and Education in Art and Media CREAM at the School of Media, Arts & Design, University of Westminster, in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted, and has not been previously submitted for this or any other awards.

Date _____

Signed _____

INTRODUCTION //

**AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND
HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

1. Thesis Aims, Objectives and Structure

This thesis examines the development of art photography practices in Czechoslovakia from the establishment of the 'Normalisation' period in 1968, until a decade after the collapse of its communist regime in 1989. Its aim is to understand the relationship between the photographic work and the shifting socio-political context in the country throughout this period. The emphasis of the thesis is primarily the last two decades before the fall of the Wall in 1989 and it intends to throw a light on to the different strategies used by Czechoslovakian art photographers to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the existing censorship under the communist rule. The study also looks at how the shift into a democratic and capitalist system in 1989 had affected the artistic production of these photographers.

The main research questions of the thesis can be framed as follows:

- I.* How did the context of art production present during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) affect the production of art photography practices in Czechoslovakia?
- II.* Is it possible to appreciate any changes in the work of these practitioners in the decade following collapse of Communism and the establishment of a democratic and capitalist system in Czechoslovakia (1989-1998)?

The project has been carried out from the perspective of the social history of art, which implies an analysis of artworks taking into account the presence of relevant social structures affecting its production. These include the different institutions and 'formations' operating in the country during the studied period, as well as concrete biographical circumstances of each artist, their specific relations with power structures and their individual position within the artistic scene of their country.

The research has been developed using a variety of methods, including the access to on-line and off-line archives, the collection of primary research material from photography collections and local libraries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and twenty interviews with the main actors of the art photography scene at the time, including photographers, artists, curators, historians and theoreticians. The information gathered through these methods has enabled a semiotic analysis of selected photographs, where depicted realities appear charged not only with a literal, perceptual connotation, but also with a range of 'coded messages' often revealing the hidden critical content of the work.

The rationale for the selection of individual photographers was firstly based on the nature of their work, that is; their practice had to be identifiable as ‘art photography’.¹ Secondly, in order to be selected, the photographer had to have produced a consistent body of work both during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) and throughout the decade following the establishment of a democratic system in 1989. Finally, since it was essential to obtain a first-person testimonial of their life/work experience, these photographers needed to be alive at the time the research was conducted and willing to meet during my field trips to the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Having fulfilled these three conditions, their inclusion in the final selection of photographers has been made taking into account their level of participation within the photography scene of the period of study. Finally – and this is probably the most subjective criteria of all – the artistic quality of their photographs has been decisive in identifying the potential interest that an analysis of their work would have in the construction of the art-historical narrative discussed in this thesis.

From the early stages of the research I soon became aware of the various terminological problems that could arise in the writing of the thesis. The shifting political map of Eastern Europe during the twentieth century together with the ideological conflicts developed throughout this period can turn the use of certain terms and concepts into a sensitive issue. The continuity in the use of words like ‘West’ or ‘East’ for example, has often been an object of critique in the post-89 era due to their ideological implications. In order to remain as historically precise as possible and offer a contextualised analysis of the specific meaning these terms carried in communist Czechoslovakia, linguistic issues will be discussed where they appear as an issue in the relevant chapters.

The structure of the thesis has been designed following both a temporal and conceptual logic. The text starts with an analysis of the existing literature in the history of Czechoslovakian photography, the theoretical background that framed the study and the research methods used throughout. It then moves on to discuss, from a photo-historical point of view, the different factors that have shaped the context of art production present during the period of the Normalisation in Czechoslovakia (1968-1989). In doing so, the discussion establishes the type of photographic practices developed during this period that have been considered as ‘art photographs’ and thus become the object of the research. Having established the main pillars of the study, the thesis moves on to analyse the development of art photography in four different categories: Social Documentary, Subjective Documentary, ‘Visualism’ and the use of photography within Conceptual Art practices. The order in which these categories are discussed responds to the level of representation carried by the photographs they deal with; starting from

¹ For a definition of art photography practices in the context of ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia see Chapter II of the present thesis

the most 'representational', social documentary, and followed by the rest according to their progressive conceptual character: subjective, 'visualist' and conceptual. Finally, the conclusion of the thesis specifies the different findings of the project and determines the contribution to knowledge achieved by this research.

The first chapter is dedicated to analysing the existing literature on the History of Czech and Slovak photography during the twentieth century and explaining the linguistic choices made in relation to the different idiomatic issues encountered. It then moves on to discuss the theoretical background that has guided the research process throughout. This includes the use of a 'horizontal' method in the writing history of art, the application of a social approach in the writing of such history and the use of story-telling strategies during different stages of the research. The last part of the chapter is focused on discussing the different research methods applied, including: the use of art databases; the collection of research material; the criteria applied in the selection of authors; the purpose of fieldwork carried out in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the aim and structure of interviews and the analytical strategies applied when studying the possible meaning of artworks.

The second chapter focuses on determining the meaning of 'art photography' in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia. It starts by exposing the origins of Czechoslovakian art photography in the country and the establishment of the different institutions through which the media operated during the twentieth century. This initial discussion allows to further investigate how the activity of photography institutions shifted due to the convulsive political changes the country underwent during the twentieth century. The chapter then concentrates in the analysis of the concrete functioning of the medium during the times of Normalisation (1968-1989). Censorship mechanisms are scrutinised alongside underground photography activities with the aim of clarifying what it really meant to work in the official – versus the unofficial – photography scene. All these discussions serve to establish an informed re-definition of the content of art photography practices during the last two decades of communist rule in the country.

Having established the common ground in relation to the contexts of art production during the Normalisation period in Czechoslovakia, the third chapter is dedicated to studying the development of social documentary photography since 1968 and its evolution after the democratisation of the country in 1989. Prior to the analysis of two selected case studies, the chapter introduces the origins of this concrete photographic practice in the late 1920s and its conceptual shifts until the establishment of the Normalisation period in 1968. This initial discussion enables a better understanding of the context in which the work of photographers Jaromir Čejka and Jano Rečo was produced. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analytical

comparison of the artistic and professional trajectories both photographers experienced in the decade following the democratisation of the country in 1989.

Chapter four concentrates on the development of a subjective view in documentary practices during the period of Normalisation (1969-1989). It starts by introducing the main lines of the different international movements that had shaped the notion of subjectivity in photography from the early twentieth century. Following this introduction, it focuses on analysing how these ideas were received, transformed and applied by avant-garde artists in Czechoslovakia. Finally, the chapter discusses the reception of subjective photographic principles in Czechoslovakian documentary practices from 1968 through a case study of the work of the photographer Vladimir Birgus.

Half way through the Normalisation period, in the early eighties, a fresh theoretical background for photography arrived in Czechoslovakia. Three photographers from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland developed during this decade a similar thesis in relation to a 'new', free vision of 'the real', with the aim of producing a contemplative reflection of their surrounding world through visual means. These were known as 'Visualism', 'Opsognomie' and 'Elementary Photography'. The fifth chapter is dedicated to analysing the content of each of these theories and their impact on Czechoslovakian photography practices from 1980.

The last chapter concentrates on the analysis of the role photography played in the development of Conceptual Art in Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation period (1969-1989). Given the isolation of Conceptual Art circles throughout these two decades, their specific motivations and differentiated contexts of art production, the development of conceptual photographic practices in the Czech and Slovak territories are discussed separately – and more concretely within the artistic circles of Prague and Bratislava. The chapter starts by introducing some of the formal and theoretical aspects that characterised an artwork as 'conceptual' in the USA during the 1960s and early 1970s. This discussion allows us to position Czechoslovakian Conceptual Art within a broader theoretical discourse, as well as to determine its distinctive attributes. Following this discussion, the chapter focuses on analysing the rise of Conceptualism during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1967) and the development of Conceptual Art practices in Prague and Bratislava since the establishment of the Normalisation period in 1968.

I would argue that, the socio-political context present during Normalisation years did indeed affect the production of art photography in Czechoslovakia at different levels. It not only determined the way it was materially produced, its content and style, but also the way it was communicated through exhibitions and publications, how it was written and spoken about, the way it was learnt in academia and amateur clubs, the organisation of 'photography workers' in the Union of Visual Artists, the way it was collected by public museums or the functioning rules

of its peculiar pseudo-art market. All this took place within a photography scene that was clearly divided into official and unofficial spaces for practice, but where 'inner migrations' constantly took place among art photographers, who aimed to earn a living while protecting their artistic autonomy. In this scenario a so-called 'Grey Zone' emerged; a mid-ground area standing in-between the public and the underground arena, where art photographs were exhibited and published through private activities that were then publically presented.

With regards to the shifts observed in the work of art photographers after the collapse of Communism, I would argue that, although it would be very difficult to generalise these changes, since the trajectories followed by each artist after 1989 depend very much on the particular circumstances of each photographer, it is possible to envisage certain tendencies among their practice that suggest that the political transition that took place since 1989 produced different effects depending on the photographic style at stake.

I would also suggest that despite the isolation of the cultural scene throughout the communist rule, the occasional – but rather influential – international artistic exchange that took place in Czechoslovakia during the period of Normalisation, together with the continuity of a strong photographic tradition that had been cultivated in the country throughout the first half of the twentieth century, enabled the development of art photography practices in ways that were just as innovative as the work produced simultaneously in Western Europe and USA. The study therefore allows for an integration of Czechoslovakian art photography into the 'global' history of photography, where the former might no longer be placed in the 'periphery' of such history, but running in a parallel line of significance with the photographic practices developed simultaneously in Western Europe and USA.

Before discussing the operating rules governing the context of art production where photographic practices operated during the period of study, it becomes essential to analyse the political history of Czechoslovakia during the twentieth century; from its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 up until the democratisation of the country in 1989 and its separation into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

Evolution of Czechoslovakia's Political Map (1917-1994)



Figure 0.1. Years 1917-1925, World War I. Source: BBC



Figure 0.2. Years 1938-1945, World War II. Source: BBC



Figure 0.3. Year 1945, End of World War II. Source: BBC



Figure 0.4. Years 1948-1989, Cold War. Source: BBC



Figure 0.5. Year 1989, Communism Collapses. Source BBC



Figure 0.6 Year 1993. Czechoslovakia splits into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Source BBC

2. Historical Context. The Convulsive Twentieth Century: From the first Czechoslovakian State to the independence of Slovakia (1918-1993)

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, constitutes one of the most significant chapters of a century marked by bloody territorial and ideological conflicts; a period pertinently referred to by historian Eric Hobsbawm as the ‘Age of Extremes’.² The consequences of these events not only resulted in a radical shift of political systems throughout the Eastern side of the continent, but also terminated with a prolonged control of East European territories since the early Sixteenth Century; governed firstly *de iure* by the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, and later *de facto* by the Nazi forces and the Soviet Power (figures 0.1 to 0.4).

2.1 From the First Czechoslovakian State to the End of Nazi Domination (1918-1945)

After the independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, the first Czechoslovakian state was proclaimed in October 1918. During the inter-war years, the country enjoyed a period of Democracy and economic growth that favoured a rapid development of the sciences and humanities. Those were also the ‘golden years’ of Czechoslovakian Modernism, which gave birth to some of the best-known works of avant-garde art. The country’s fate however was yet to suffer various dramatic episodes that would shift the direction of the cultural and economic developments achieved during this glorious period.³

Following the Nazi invasion of the country in 1939, the short-lived First Slovak State was proclaimed in March 1939. Meanwhile, the regions of Moravia and Bohemia became German Protectorates until the end of World War II. In 1945, the country was liberated thanks mainly to the efforts of Soviet troops – supported by the Czech and Slovak resistance – and the Allied forces, which helped liberate Southern Bohemia entering the country from the West. Two years before the liberalisation, Czech president in exile, Edvard Beneš, had secured the country’s independence after the War through the treaty signed in Moscow in December 1943 with Stalin. In the pact, the Soviet leader committed to abstain from interfering in the country’s internal affairs once the Nazi liberation had been completed.⁴

This commitment followed the lines of the agreement reached at the Yalta Conference in 1945, which set the foundations for West-East relations during the second half of the twentieth century. Signed between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, this pact established the independence

² This is the title Hobsbawm chose for his book on the World History of the twentieth century. See Hobsbawm. E., *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Abacus, 1995.

³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 57-77.

⁴ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 190-195.

of certain East European countries which, although they would be governed by communist regimes influenced in many aspects by Soviet rules, they could still preserve their country's sovereignty outside the borders of the Soviet Union. The list of countries that would thus remain outside the Soviet Union but inside the Eastern Bloc included: Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, East Germany and, until 1948, Yugoslavia too. In practice however, this was nothing like a *carte blanche* for national governments. Ultimately, these states ended up operating like a mini-replica of the Soviet government and even its leaders had to be approved by Stalin himself. In this scenario, brutal purges among their politicians guaranteed the silencing of nationalist voices and the dismantling of any attempts of communist experiments differing from the official Soviet-type system.⁵ It was only after Stalin's death in 1953 that the formal sovereign separation agreed at Yalta was progressively implemented.⁶

2.2 The Czechoslovakian National Route to Socialism (1945-1948)

In Czechoslovakia, the Kosice programme, driven by the former president in exile Beneš, served to re-establish the situation of the country after the War, including the recognition of Slovakia as a separate nation. Non-fascist parties were united in the National Front, which included the Czech and Slovak communist parties, the Social Democratic Party, the Czech National Social Party and the People's Party. Although all of them were aligned in some way or another with socialist principles, only a fraction of the members of the Communist Party sympathised with Soviet Stalinism. Instead, the great majority of the members of the National Front believed in a 'Czechoslovakian route' to Socialism; a socialist variant that was initially tolerated by Moscow in areas of the bilateral treaty of 'non-interference' signed in 1947. In practical terms, the Czechoslovakian route was designed as a 'socialising Democracy', but while the participation of different political parties guaranteed a democratic system, the new economic measures approved by decree, which included central economic planning and large nationalisations, had set up the route for a Czechoslovakian socialist state.⁷

2.3 From Democratic Socialism to Soviet Stalinism (1948-1954)

The limit of Soviet tolerance with the 'Czechoslovakian route to Socialism' was drawn after the country's government adhered the Marshall Plan – also known as 'the European Recovery Program' – that was set to start in 1948. The USA plan was designed as a four-year programme

⁵ Tismaneanu, V., 'Diabolical Pedagogy and the (Il)logic of Stalinism in Eastern Europe', In: Tismaneanu, V. (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009.

⁶ Kramer, M., 'Stalin, Soviet Policy, and the Consolidation of a Communist Bloc', In: Tismaneanu, V. (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009, p. 65.

⁷ Abrams, B., 'Hope Dies Lat: The Czechoslovak Route to Stalinism', In: Tismaneanu, V. (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009, pp. 343-350.

that would economically aid the recovery of the continent after the War and, while doing so, stop the spread of Communism in Western Europe. Having accepted their participation, the Czechoslovakian government was called for conversations to Moscow by Stalin himself, who saw such participation as a break of Soviet-Czechoslovakian friendship. Following this meeting, the Czechoslovakian government sent a telegram to Prague urging them to reverse their participation in the Marshall Plan. This decision is currently seen as the first shift from a 'socialist route' to a 'route to Stalinism'. A few months later, in a meeting with the communist leaders of nine different countries in 1947, the Soviets made it clear that the 'national road' policy that was being built in Czechoslovakia was no longer acceptable. The consequences of this meeting were immediate. Non-communist members of the government presented their resignation to President Beneš in February 1948, who had no choice but to temporarily hand the government over to the Czech Communist Party until new elections were celebrated the following May. With a large electoral support, the Communist Party won the elections and became the new democratically elected government under the lead of Klement Gottwald. This popular support gave them enough power to change the country's constitution and establish a system designed as a mixture of Western parliamentary system with Sovietism. Thus, the new communist government, despite the Soviet criticism to Czechoslovakian Socialism, still seemed happy to pursue a 'national route to Socialism'. These 'experimental' efforts however would soon be stopped again by the Soviets who, following Yugoslavia's expulsion at the February '1948 Cominform' meeting, reinforced their attitude against any type of national socialist experiment. In light of the consequences faced by Yugoslavia, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia understood that deep changes needed to be made in order to preserve its good relations with the Kremlin.⁸

One of the first measures was to 'clean' the party from possible opponents that could obstruct the country's 'route to Stalinism'. Thus, since the fall of 1948 and for the following nine months, nearly forty percent of the Party's members were expelled through a political purge. During those months, forced labour camps were built, intense censorship was established, Slovakia ceased to be an autonomous region and the trade with the Soviets was increased by nearly fifty per cent. Further measures included an increase in central planning, the complete collectivisation of agriculture, a reinforcement of penal law, a reform of the Army – that was to be trained in the 'Soviet style' – and an intense prosecution of 'possible opponents' from the Catholic Church. All these changes allowed the Stalinisation of Czechoslovakia to be rapidly completed by May 1949. But since the decision of 'Sovietisation' of the country was made in the international 'Cominform' meeting, the historical date for the establishment of a 'Soviet

⁸ Abrams, B., 'Hope Dies Lat: The Czechoslovak Route to Stalinism', In: Tismaneanu, V. (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009, pp. 350-359.

style' communist regime in the country has been historically set in February 1948.⁹ It is however important to understand that despite the evident international pressures, the 'Stalinisation' of Czechoslovakia was never imposed by force from Moscow. Instead, it should be understood as a progressive process of 'self-sovietisation' by the Czechoslovakian government, which was initially designed as a democratic socialism and later turned, with the support of the electorate, into a 'Soviet-style' communist regime.

Between 1948 and 1954, hard Stalinism operated in Czechoslovakia under the lead of president Gottwald. Political purges initiated in 1948 continued in search of all sorts of 'possible enemies' of Communism who were often sentenced to execution or sent to labour camps. To understand the level of terror generated during this period, it is important to note that the number of prisoners in 1954 rose above 150,000.¹⁰ In the cultural sphere, intensified censorship mechanisms ensured the protection of communist principles and new editors-in-chief were placed in charge of the country's media with the mission of disseminating the Party's propaganda through all possible forms of communication. The economic and social reforms established between 1948 and 1949 were fully implemented and the country's shift into a communist system was rapidly completed. This status quo remained untouched until Stalin's death in 1953, when several changes took place across all nations of the Eastern Bloc.¹¹

2.4 Stalin's Death and the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1953-1967)

Paradoxically, the Czechoslovakian president caught a cold at Stalin's funeral and died a few days later, in March 1953. He was succeeded by the also communist Antonín Zápotocký. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Khrushchev urged each socialist state to become more independent. The cohesion however would be guaranteed by regulated economic, military and ideological agreements, with the 'COMECON' (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) assuming the control of the economy in the Eastern Bloc by the mid-fifties. In order to stimulate political and economic progress, Khrushchev also understood the importance of equipping East European nations with leaders enjoying a high national popularity. Most revealing however was Khrushchev's speech of 1956 where he criticised Stalin's cult of personality and specifically condemned the purges that had mistakenly ended the life of hundreds of thousands of comrades across the Bloc. Following this speech, East European nations were forced to undergo a process of de-Stalinisation and follow specific reformist measures dictated from Moscow.¹²

⁹ Abrams, B., 'Hope Dies Lat: The Czechoslovak Route to Stalinism', In: Tismaneanu, V. (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009, pp. 350-361.

¹⁰ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 267.

¹¹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 268-280.

¹² Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 280-319.

In Czechoslovakia, the death of President Zápotocky in 1957 marked the beginning of the Thaw. Although most reforms would not arrive until 1963, Zápotocky's successor, Antonyn Novotný, was soon forced to introduced measures of relaxation after 1956. In 1961, he had to agree to the formation of a commission that would investigate the trials made during the purges of 1948-1954. In 1962, Stalin's largest sculpture in Europe was blown up in Prague, and in 1963, numerous Party members from the old guard were replaced. A new period of reforms had started and as censorship mechanisms were relaxed, journalists and intellectuals felt more confident to enquire about the weakness of the system. In this scenario, the adulation of the Soviet Union was relaxed and some American television programmes, like Dr. Kildare, were transmitted for the first time. It was now possible to challenge the censor in court and in general terms, a wider, open debate was also possible on certain issues. Further relaxations came in the form of the easing of religious prohibitions and a softening on the ban of travelling to the West. In the electoral sphere, changes allowed for a greater freedom in the nomination of candidates. The question however remained into what would now be the role of the Party once class differences had been effectively removed and the dictatorship of the proletariat had been completed. These questions, which were intensively debated by intellectuals, writers and students, would serve to formulate the reforms of 1968. But despite the relaxation granted by Novotný's government, strong groups of pressure formed by the Slovaks, the students and the journalist were, for different reasons, still discontented with what they considered 'weak' reforms. Finally, on the 5th of January of 1968, Novotný was removed as first secretary and replaced by the leader of the Slovak Communist Party, Alexander Dubcek.¹³

2.5 The Prague Spring of 1968

During the first few months of Dubcek's government, numerous demands were made by a variety of groups: the Slovaks aimed at the federalisation of the State and the Party, the writers and intellectuals continued to press for a full rehabilitation of purge victims, while the civil society required the identification of militia groups and the abolition of the secret police. In addition, there was a general agreement that all state and Party officials were to be accountable by law and that the accumulation of power needed to be regulated and restricted. In this scenario, Novotný had no choice but to resign as well as president of the Party in March 1968. His successor would be the communist reformist Ludvík Svoboda.¹⁴

In April 1968, the party published a new 'Action Plan' that recognised and designed Czechoslovakia's path towards a 'mature' Socialism, with the hope that the reforms would give a definite answer to the growing social demands. The changes introduced by Dubcek were

¹³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015 pp. 319-325.

¹⁴ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 326-328.

numerous and certainly radical in the context of Soviet Communism. The 'Action Plan' gave freedom to industrial and agricultural enterprises in finding - and thus regulating *de facto* - their own markets. It also called for equality in the economic relations with the Soviet Union and refused the 'advisory' role of the Soviets in national economic matters. The program guaranteed total freedom of speech, travel and association, and it ended with all sorts of arbitrary arrests. With regards to the political organisation, although no other Party was legalised, the role of the Communist Party was regarded as a 'renewable contract, which had constantly to be justified'.¹⁵ Political relations with the Slovaks were also re-defined. The Slovak National Council would now act as the legislative body for the region, while the Slovak Council's ministers would become the executive power in Bratislava. Further reforms involved the revitalisation of religious life and the legalisation of strike actions.¹⁶

2.6 The Soviet Invasion and the Establishment of a Normalisation Period (1968-1969)

The political and economic measures discussed seemed too radical for the conservatives and their allies of other Eastern nations. As a result, the relations between Czechoslovakia and other Eastern Bloc nations were severely damaged. In May 1968, Dubcek travelled to Moscow to seek financial credit and reaffirm his loyalty to the Soviets. The Kremlin however was far from satisfied with the changes made in their country and recriminated the Czechoslovakian president for removing old Soviet comrades from power. In response to the Soviet discontent and as measure of good faith, Dubcek proposed that Warsaw Pact manoeuvres should be held in his country. In the meantime, reforms continued in Czechoslovakia and one by one, the proposed measures of Dubcek's 'Action Plan' were approved by the National assembly. The turning point for the Soviets however arrived on the 27th June 1968, when, taking advantage of the absence of state censorship recently implemented, numerous Czechoslovakian newspapers published '2,000 Words' by Ludvík Vaculík, which called for a complete democratisation of the country and advised Czech and Slovaks to be ready to defend themselves from a Soviet invasion. The Soviet response was immediate. For the time being, they would delay the withdrawal of Red Army troops that were manoeuvring in Czechoslovakia.¹⁷

At a political level, what conservatives politicians around the Bloc most feared was a new socialist experiment that could compete with the rest of the world with their 'Soviet-style' Communism. In order to stop once and for all this growing risk led by Dubcek, conservatives from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the GDR and Moscow set up a meeting in Warsaw to discuss the Czechoslovakian situation, where they condemned and urged the reversal of the country's original communist system. Two days after, Dubcek replied through a letter

¹⁵ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 329

¹⁶ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 328-333

¹⁷ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 333-334

where he justified the reforms and refused to proceed with any externally imposed changes. After a tense meeting on the Czechoslovakian border with the Soviets in August 1968, and a second round of talks in Bratislava two days after, no peaceable solution was reached between the parties.¹⁸ The so-called 'Prague Spring' had its days numbered.

On the night of the 21st of August 1968, the Soviet troops entered Czechoslovakia accompanied by contingents of the GDR, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. The Czechs and Slovaks chose not to resist and the entire government was taken to Moscow. To their surprise, the Soviets found no replacement for Dubcek and his ministers and thus had no choice but to negotiate with the precursors of the 'Prague Spring'. In this scenario, Soviet threats raised the tone. Dubcek's government was to re-establish the old situation or be ready for Slovakia to be incorporated in the USSR, and for Bohemia and Moravia to become part of the Soviet administration. The outcome of these negotiations was the 'Moscow Protocol of 26th August', which banned all parties outside the National Front and any organisation violating socialist principles. The re-establishment of order in Czechoslovakia, understood as full-party domination, was thereafter called 'Normalisation'; a period that lasted until the triumph of the 'Velvet Revolution' and the establishment of Democracy in 1989.

In September of 1968, Dubcek and his government returned to Prague with no other choice than to implement the agreed measures in order to ensure the removal of foreign troops. His leadership however was not to last much longer. On the 17th April 1969, the Soviet defence minister arrived in Prague and replaced Dubcek as first secretary by Gustaáv Husák, who had recently become the president of the Slovak Communist Party. In May 1970, the Soviets made permanent the stay of their troops in Czechoslovakia. Dubcek was recalled and expelled from the Party.¹⁹ Normalisation was now completed, at least at a political level.

In the social and legislative arena, however, order still needed to be reinstated. The first 'Soviet-style' measure was an extensive purge. By 1974, 327,000 reformist and revisionist members were expelled from the Party, two thirds of the members of the Writer's Union lost their jobs, 900 university teachers were fired and twenty one academic institutions were closed. The security forces were also highly re-enforced and a new criminal law facilitated the prosecution of 'ideological enemies'. By 1971, all the reforms proclaimed in the 1960s had been dismantled. At an economic level, consumerism was favoured by the Soviets as a 'treat' to Husák to facilitate the re-establishment of communist order. Citizen's income was increased and the range of available products rose considerably.²⁰

¹⁸ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 334-336.

¹⁹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 336-337.

²⁰ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 346-347

But not all citizens could be so easily bought. Within large parts of the civil society, anti-Russianism grew and Communism was seen more than ever like a foreign imposition. A number of intellectuals including Jirí Hájek, Václav Havel and Jan Patočka, decided to remain active. In 1977, they formed the Citizens' Initiative and published the now legendary human rights document known as 'Charter 77'. Its aim was not to suggest a radical shift of the system, but simply to observe that individual civil rights guaranteed in the Czechoslovakian law were being respected. By 1980, around one thousand signatures had adhered to the initiative. The movement would later become the nexus between Czechoslovakian reformers and Western sympathisers.²¹

During the 1980s, the intimidating atmosphere remained in Czechoslovakia and the secret police stayed more vigilant than ever. Charter 77 persevered in their defence of Civil Rights and established contacts in the West with several subscribers. Some economic reforms however did occur during this decade. Husák started a plan to de-centralise the economy and by the time he resigned as General Secretary of the Party in 1987, the country was seeking Western credits and trading with capitalist countries. Husák's successor was Miloš Jakeš; one of the main organisers of the purges of 'Normalisation'.²²

2.7 The Velvet Revolution and the Final Collapse of Communism in 1989

In 1989, the demonstrations that took place in Prague during January and May – commonly known as the 'Velvet Revolution' – were harshly suppressed by the police who arrested hundreds of opponents, including thirteen 'Charter 77' activists. Husák's regime however seemed to be relaxing. On November of that same year, the ban on travel to the West was completely abolished. This led to the belief that the regime aimed to establish a reformed Communism in the Gorbachev style. This hope was reinforced by the conversations that took place in November 1989, when the government initiated discussions with the Civic Forum – precursors of Charter 77 – and its Slovak counterpart, Public Against Violence (PAV). Four days later, the entire government resigned. On the 26th November, a quarter of a million citizens were addressed at Wenceslas Square by Václav Havel, Alexander Dubček and Ladislav Adamec. The following day, further demonstrations occurred across the nation and a two-hour general strike was widely supported by industrial workers, which evidenced the will of the traditionally communist working class to contribute to the country's political change. In this scenario, the media lost the fear to broadcast and report freely the succession of events. In the meantime, the Soviet Union could no longer support the Party's status quo since Moscow was involved in their own reformative agenda. Besides, other Central and East European countries

²¹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 347-348

²² Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 284-385

like Hungary, Poland and the GDR, were also following their individual paths towards Democracy. Without international support, the conservatives could do little more than stare at their long-held power as it disappeared like old, wasted smoke. On the 28th of November, the Civic Forum and PAV were registered and organised a federal assembly to abolish the constitutional provisions that guaranteed the Party's leading role.²³ On the 10th December Husák resigned as president and on the 29th of that same month, one of the founders of the Civil Forum, Václav Havel, was elected president.²⁴

2.8 From a Federal Route Towards Capitalism to Slovakia's Independence (1990-1993)

Radical changes followed rapidly. On New Year's Day the president granted amnesty to 16,000 political prisoners. The following day the secret police was abolished. In March, a new set of measures was approved to guarantee the freedom of speech and association. The exiled were allowed and encouraged to return and a new reform guaranteed Slovakia's autonomy and equality with the Czechs. Czechoslovakia became the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. Reforms in the economic sphere moved towards de-centralisation and Capitalism and in June 1990, a general election finally gave full popular support to new leaders who won with a huge majority.²⁵

The democratisation of Czechoslovakia was celebrated by Western leaders who admitted the country as a full member of the Council of Europe in 1991. There was also a significant economic restructuring, with expropriated properties by the communists being returned and the sale of state businesses to private hands. Price controls were also lifted and the currency remained stable. What seemed more problematic was the new regulation of the federal structure of the country. The Slovaks saw the creation of the Federal Republic in March as the first step towards complete independence. They required their new federal constitution to have the same validity as the Czech. The question was initially to be debated through a public referendum but it seemed impossible to agree on what concrete questions should be asked. In the federal assembly held in June 1992, it became absolutely clear that Czech and Slovaks would never reach a satisfactory agreement on the functioning of the federation and that the only possible solution would be its dissolution. In July 1992, the Slovak parliament declared their Sovereignty and on the 25th November that same year the general assembly formally dissolved the federation. It was agreed that independence would take effect from the 1st January 1993.²⁶

²³ Schopflin, G., 'The End of Communism in Eastern Europe', *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 66, No1, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 397-399.

²⁵ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 439-440.

²⁶ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 430-441.

2.9 The Republic of Slovakia in the 1990s

In Slovakia, the anti-communist coalition PAV was dissolved in 1991 when the Slovak prime minister, Vladimir Meciar, founded the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (MDS). Three other parties were born after PAV's split: the Christian Democratic Party, the Civic Democratic Union and the Democratic Party. The leader of the Christian Democrats became the new president in May 1991, while Meciar remained as a key figure in the Slovak affairs. In May 1992, Meciar became prime minister again where he remained until the Party's split in February 1994. The new president, Jozef Moravcik, was convinced that a general election was key to strengthen their position. His mistake was clear and in the general elections of 1st October 1994, he lost the government in favour again of Meciar, who led a three-party office with the participation of MSD, the Slovak National Party and the Association of Workers of Slovakia. Despite ruling in reformist-times, Meciar was still a politician from the old authoritarian school and was threatening the press with punishment in case it dared to criticise him or his government. He also increased the control over the radio and television by naming his own administrators, and in 1994 he started a purge of opponents who were working in state positions. In 1996, he approved a subversion law that punished with prison anyone disseminating false information about the government abroad or who organised demonstrations that could endanger the stability and order of the country. All these measures resembled previous communist times. It was clear that the demands of the 'Velvet Revolution' would not be causing immediate effect in Slovakia and that only time could give space to new political generations to secure a true democratic change. Meanwhile, in the economic sphere, the Slovak industry before independence was weaker than the Czech. It was less developed and highly dependent on the Soviet market. Besides, in financial terms, it was also more dependent on the state and with the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, its funding was no longer secured. Despite all these difficulties, the Slovak economy proved to have a huge ability to recover and by the mid-1990s, its gross domestic product was already at 6.4 per cent.²⁷

2.10 The Czech Republic's Immediate Adaptation to Global Politics and the Consumer Market during the 1990s

In the Czech Republic, with Havel as president and Václav Klaus as Prime Minister, the relations with the international community flourished soon after the split from Slovakia and in 1993 the country became part of the United Nations (UN), the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). By 1995, it was also a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and in the following years

²⁷ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 453-454.

the country was ready to submit an application to become a full member of the European Union (EU). In the Political Arena, the Civic Forum dissolved into separate factions in 1991, consisting of the Civic Democratic Party (CDP) led by Klaus, The Czech Social Democratic Party (CSDP) and the Civic Movement (CM). The elections in June 1992 gave victory to the right-wing faction led by Klaus. In the economic realm, the transition towards a private market was rapidly implemented. In 1993, over half of the state's companies had passed into private hands, unemployment was kept to a minimum of 3.4 per cent and inflation had dropped below twenty per cent. By 1994, the process of privatisation was completed, industry was growing for the first time since 1989 and the Czech crown was made convertible. But beyond the international and economic success, the country faced several internal problems. Intense discussions were held with members of the Catholic Church who aimed at the recovery of their properties; something the government was not ready to agree on. A key political debate was also held in relation to the need of establishing a Senate and the inclusion of a second chamber was finally approved in 1995. The Constitution on the other hand called for a decentralisation of power, but the plan to divide the country into seventeen regions was finally rejected in 1993. But despite the arduous domestic matters, the rapid economic development and the international support the country was granted immediately after the triumph of the Velvet Revolution evidences the ability its politicians had to take immediate advantage of the new status quo.²⁸

Having established what the aims, objectives and structure of the research are, and discussed the political history of the country during the twentieth century, the thesis will now move on to analyse the existing literature in the history of Czechoslovakian photography, the theoretical background that has framed the study and the research methods used throughout the project.

²⁸ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 441-442.

CHAPTER 1 //

IN SEARCH OF

THE 'NORMALISED' PHOTOGRAPH

1. Introduction

The first part of this chapter is dedicated to analysing the existing literature on the History of Czech and Slovak photography during the twentieth century. I shall then explain the linguistic choices made in relation to the different idiomatic issues encountered and discuss the theoretical background that has guided the research process throughout. This includes the use of a 'horizontal' method in the analysis of the history of art, the application of a social approach in the writing of such history and the use of story-telling strategies during different stages of the research.¹ The last part of the chapter will focus on the different research methods used throughout, including the access to online and offline archives, the collection of primary research material through various photographic collections and specialised libraries in Prague and Bratislava, the criteria applied in the selection of authors, the aim and structure of interviews and the analytical strategies used when studying the possible meaning of artworks.

2. History of Czechoslovakian Photography: Existing Literature

With regards to the history of art photography in Eastern Europe during the communist period, no one has yet attempted to compile its individual histories into a single publication.² What we do find are some exhibitions produced since 1990 that have tried to identify common aspects of East European photography during communist times. Such is the case of a series of recent shows like *Behind Walls* (Noorderlicht Photofestival, 2008), which exhibited photographs produced in Eastern Europe before, during and after the fall of Berlin's Wall or *History, Memory, Identity*, an exhibition that opened in 2009 at Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena in Italy and brought together the work of twenty-nine photographers from eighteen East European countries.³ In addition, the exhibition *In The Face of History: European Photographers in the 20th Century* held at London's Barbican Centre in 2007, aimed to offer an overview of the photographic work produced across the continent after the First World War, including the work of several East European photographers like the Czech Jitka Hanzlová or the Hungarian Brassai.⁴ But beyond giving a general introduction of the contexts of art production in Eastern Europe and a brief explanation of the works exhibited, the texts in their

¹ The term 'horizontal', understood as a method of analysing and writing the history of art, was been used repeatedly by Polish historian Piotr Piotrowski. See for example Piotrowski, P. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009. A detailed explanation of this term and its application in the present thesis is discussed later in this chapter.

² The ambitious, three-volume project, *The History of European Photography*, is not exclusively dedicated to East European history of photography but it does include a brief dedicated chapter on the history of each of these countries during the communist period within a broader history of photography of the entire continent during the Twentieth Century. See Macek, V. (ed.), *The History of European Photography*, Volumes I, II and III, Bratislava: Fotofo, 2011, 2014 and 2016 respectively.

³ See exhibition catalogues, Noorderlicht Photography (eds.), *Behind Walls*, Groningen: Aurora Borealis, 2008 and Maggia, F., Fini, C., *Memory, History Identity*, Milan: Skira, 2009.

⁴ See exhibition catalogue, Bush., K., *In The Face of History: European Photographers in the 20th Century*. London: Black Dog, 2006.

accompanying catalogues do not go deeper into the analysis of the ‘histories’ of photography of Eastern European countries during the communist rule. They lack for example, a discussion on the concrete functioning of the underground photography scene in each country. Nor do they analyse the connections between art photographers and independent curators from East European countries that took place – though timidly – during the communist period.

For anyone willing to understand the history of Czech and Slovak photography as well as the ‘global’ history of Surrealism, the book *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia* by Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Michael Richardson and Ian Walker, constitutes an essential read.⁵ The publication makes justice to the - often neglected - work of some of the most important artists of the surrealist movement who developed their practice in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period like Jindřich Štyrský. The book focuses on surreal photographic practices produced through a ‘straight’ or documentary approach, rather than ‘constructed realities’ and collages that were also very popular among surrealist artists from Czechoslovakia. Although most significant works of surrealist photography in the country were produced from the beginning of the interwar period in 1918 until the establishment of a communist regime in 1948, the publication also examines the development of surrealism in the photographic work of younger photographers like Emila Medková, who alongside other members of the Czechoslovakian Surrealist Group, continued to produce surrealist photographs during the four decades of totalitarianism in the country (1948-1989). Given the importance and influence that surrealist photography had in the work of Czechoslovakian practitioners from the Normalisation period, especially for subjective documentary photographers and the so-called ‘Visualists’, the information provided by this unique publication has proved highly useful for the present research.

Within the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the writing of its recent history has often been done with the occasion of major photographic exhibitions produced from the 1990s onwards in Prague, Brno and Bratislava, and its large catalogues that compile extensive texts by curators and historians of photography. Thankfully, all those texts have been translated and published into English. Before the fall of the Wall, most of the texts available in Czechoslovakian magazines like *Revue Fotografie* or other official publications had to be approved by its ‘editors in chief’ who acted as grants of the socialist state.⁶ It is for this reason that, with the exception of a few essays written by curators Anna Fárová and Antonín Dufek, I decided to draw primarily on written sources produced after 1989, once communist censorship mechanisms had

⁵ Fijalkowski, F., Richardson, M., and Walker, I., *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia*, London: ASGATE, 2013

⁶ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 197.

disappeared.⁷ So far, the two key publications on the history of photography are the catalogues *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, written by Vladimír Birgus and Jan Mlčoch, and *Slovak Photography 1925-2000* by Aurel Hrabušický and Václav Macek.⁸ Despite sharing a very similar context of art production in those two regions, it seemed reasonable that following the separation of Czechoslovakia in 1993 into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, each country would attempt to produce – or re-write – its own history of photography focusing primarily on the works produced by authors born in either territory.

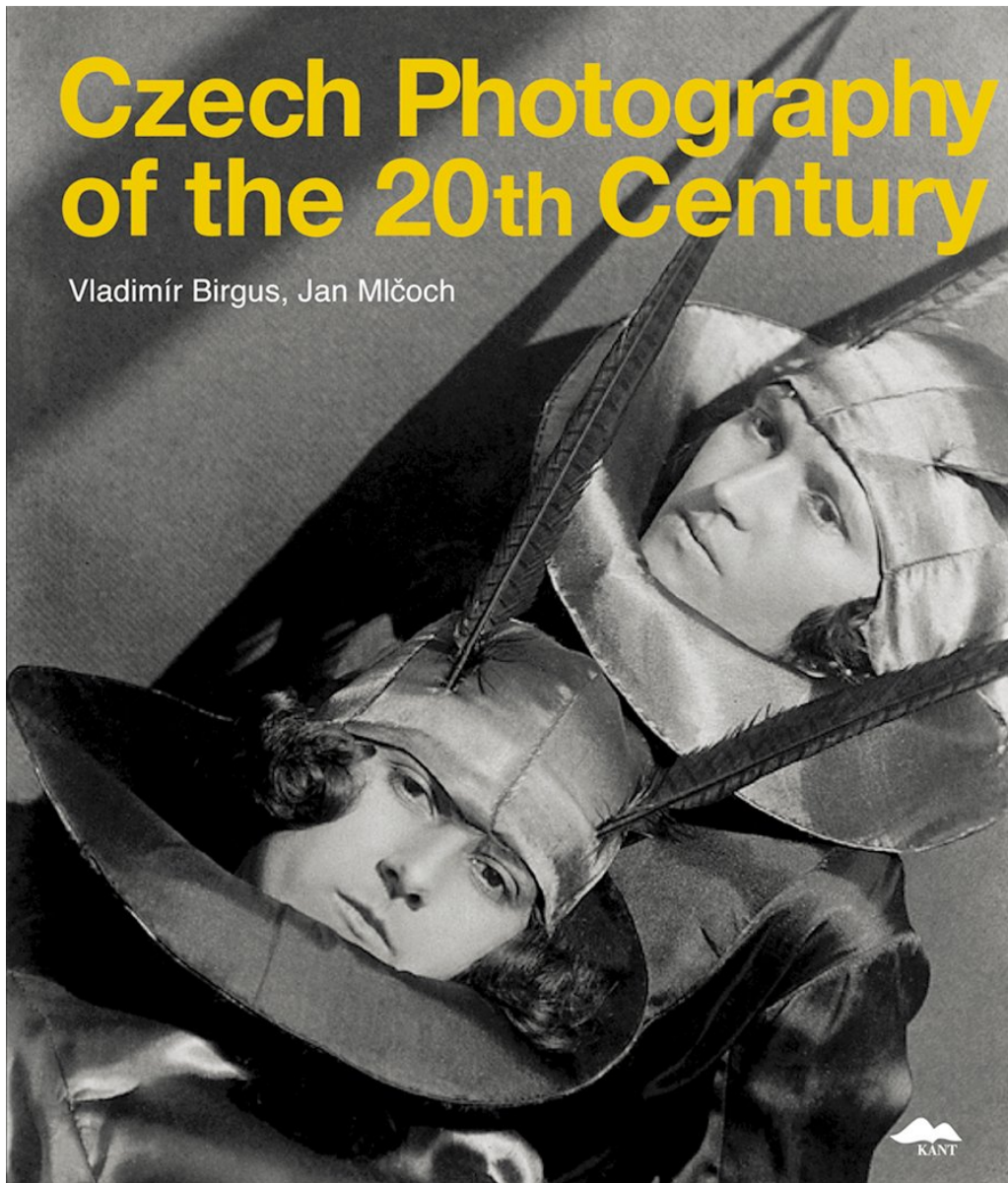


Figure 1.1. Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant, 2005, Book Cover.

⁷ For further information on the work of curators Anna Fárová and Antonín Duffek, see Chapter 2 of this thesis.

⁸ See Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant, 2005, and Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925 - 2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001.

Czech Photography of the 20th Century was published in collaboration with the Museum of Decorative arts in Prague, whose photographic collection holds the great majority of the photographs presented in the book (figure 1.1).⁹ A three-part exhibition of over 1,300 photographs was held in 2005 under the same name in the Museum of Decorative Arts, the City Gallery Prague and the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic in Germany (Bonn). Throughout the nearly four hundred pages of the publication, Birgus and Mlčoch present the history of Czech photography from the early Pictorialist movement (1910-1918) until the turn of the twenty first century. The texts are written and translated in a very accessible style for all those interested in the subject who might lack an a priori knowledge of the photographic history of the country. Although the authors do not embark on a deep analysis of the works, the publication offers a very detailed explanation of the varying contexts of art production that were present in the country throughout the different – and rather convulsive – historical episodes; from Czechoslovakia’s independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the establishment of Democracy and Capitalism in 1989. During each of those periods, the authors give specific details of the functioning of the photographic scene, including the presence of journals and periodicals, the activities of curators in public museums and underground galleries, the role of photography clubs and academies, the presence of art groups, the role of Artists’ Unions and the resulting development of photographic styles in the country throughout the twentieth century.

Likewise, the catalogue *Slovak Photography (1925-2000)*, which was published in 2001 coinciding with the exhibition held that year at the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, contains a very detailed text describing the evolution of photographic styles in the Slovak territory from the mid-1920s onwards (figure 1.2).¹⁰ From early pictorial works up to the latest postmodernist trends, the book discusses the development of art photography practices, the role of the different institutions in which they operated and the artistic connections among national and international photographers throughout the different historical periods. It is important to note that unlike its Czech counterpart, the authors of this catalogue tend to expand slightly further into the analysis of some of the works presented, but given the large number of authors and photographs this study is often rather brief. Its writers however succeed in their attempt to connect the development of art photography with a simultaneous progress of other visual arts and a broader Slovak visual culture throughout the twentieth century. Its main weakness probably lies in the English translation, which is sometimes far from optimum and makes it difficult for the reader to follow the argument fluently.

⁹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant, 2005.

¹⁰ Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925 - 2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001.

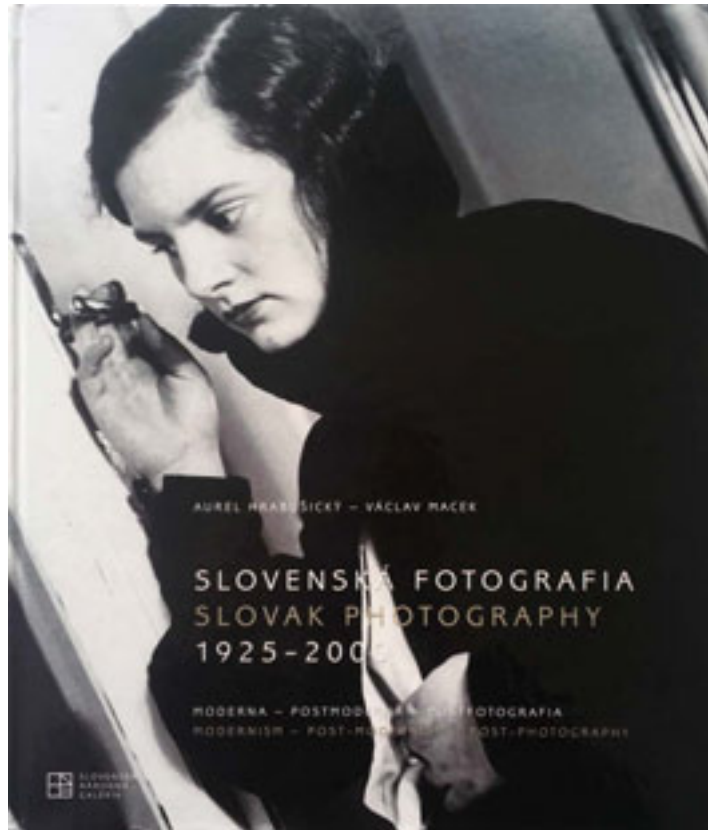


Figure 1.2. Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925-2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001, Book Cover.

Besides these two ‘grand’ compilations of the histories of Czech and Slovak photography in the twentieth century, there are also a number of more ‘modest’ texts on the topic worth mentioning, most of which were also produced from the 1990s onwards and included in different exhibition catalogues. A very well written historical text by the Czech historian Antonín Dufek is offered in the catalogue *Full Spectrum* from 2011; published on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno (figure 1.3).¹¹ The author’s historical recount goes back to the first daguerreotypes produced in Czechoslovakia between 1841 and 1842. From there on, the writer describes the different applications of the medium in Czechoslovakian visual culture and the stylistic evolution of art photography practices until the first decade of the twenty-first century. Although shorter than the texts included in previously discoursed catalogues, Dufek’s essay offers a valuable account of the photographic history of the country prior to 1900, when it was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This period, which is not covered by the other two catalogues, serves to identify additional authors and works disregarded by other writers.

¹¹ Dufek, A., *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: Kant, 2011.



Figure 1.3. Dufek, A., *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: Kant, 2011, Book Cover.

More specific texts can be found in numerous catalogues, which concentrate on concrete historical periods or the work of certain authors. Some of those smaller publications worth considering are: *Slovak Imaginative Photography 1981-1997* (1998); *Czech Photography of the 1990s* (1999); *The Photography of Identity* (2006) or *The Slovak New Wave* (2014).¹² Among those, given its relation to the topic of this thesis, the publication *The Third Side of The Wall*, produced in 2008 by the Moravian Gallery in Brno, deserves special consideration (figure 1.4).¹³ The catalogue presents the work of over a hundred photographers produced during the times of Normalisation (1968-1989), who managed to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the tough conditions for Czechoslovakian artists during these two decades. In his introductory essay, Antonín Dufek describes the different photographic styles and topics explored by those practitioners. Divided into five different categories, the curator identifies common aspects in their production and presents their stylistic similarities in order to offer an ‘organised’ narrative of the rather diverse photographic production of the country present throughout the Normalisation period; a time, as the thesis will demonstrate, when some of the most relevant

¹² See Macek, V., *Slovak Imaginative Photography 1981-1997*, Bratislava: Fotofo, 1998; Moucha, J., *The Photography of Identity*, exhibition catalogue, Prague House of Photography, Prague: Kant, 2006; Fiserová, L., Pospěch, T., *The Slovak New Wave*, Prague: Kant, 2014.

¹³ Dufek, A., *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

works of photography were produced despite the intensified repression established after the Soviet Invasion of 1968. Although both the catalogue and the exhibition only presented works which were part of the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno – thus leaving some important authors aside like the Slovak Ľubomír Ďurček – the project enabled a much needed articulation of the specific characteristics of Czechoslovakian photography during Normalisation times, which given its ‘peculiar’ context of art production, gave birth to some of the most innovative and complex works of art and photography in the country during the twentieth century.



Figure 1.4. Dufek, A., *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009, Book Cover.

Finally, the book *Anna Fárová and Photography* compiles the theoretical and curatorial work of this important critic.¹⁴ Her contribution as curator, theoretician, lecturer and director of the Photographic Collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (1970-1976), made her one of the most influential figures of the Czechoslovakian photography scene during the second half of the twentieth century. Published in Czech and English language, the book accounts for her merits of promoting art photography in her country and abroad, and gives very detailed information about the numerous official and underground exhibitions she curated from the mid-fifties, including the names of participating photographers, a directory of all the catalogues she edited and a long reference list of all her articles on photographic theory. Beyond narrating the life and work of such an interesting character, the authors have put together a much welcomed sourcebook of photography exhibitions and publications during the communist rule in Czechoslovakia, which for the purposes of this research, has also served as a very useful directory to identify the actors of the underground photography scene during the times of Normalisation (1969-1989).

The decision to publish all the discussed catalogues in English has most probably helped disseminate the history of Czech and Slovak photography around the world and promote the work of numerous photographers outside their country's borders. The information provided by its writers would certainly aid researchers to identify key authors, galleries, museums, publications, schools and curators, whose activities were decisive for the development of art photography in Czechoslovakia during communist times (1948-1989). However, most of the texts in these publications lack an in-depth analysis of photographs and the relation between the context of art production in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia and the meaning those photographs might carry. Besides, none of these publications has attempted to integrate the photographic styles developed in the country during the second half of the twentieth century with photographic movements that were taking place elsewhere outside the country's borders – and more specifically within the 'Western' photographic scene. It is for this reason that I came to the conclusion that the contribution of the present thesis should aim at these two key aspects, that is: to develop a contextualised analysis of art photography practices from the perspective of the social history of art, while offering a comparative account of art photography practices produced simultaneously in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia and the Western scene. In addition, the research studies the evolution of the work of selected photographers during the decade following the fall of Communism in 1989 and suggests how the changes in the political and economic sphere of the country might have influenced the artistic production of these practitioners beyond that date.

¹⁴ Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha, Langhans-PRO

3. How to Write a History of Czechoslovakian Art Photography?

An important part of the research process was to gain an understanding of the context of art production in Eastern Europe during the communist rule (1945-1989). At this initial stage of my study, I started to realise that most probably there had never been such a thing as an East European Art. This is simply because Eastern Europe does not exist. The concept merely responds to an imaginary geo-political space. Instead, this broad territory is formed by a highly heterogeneous group of countries that once happened to fall into the Eastern (imaginary) side of the Iron Curtain. Western Europe is thus identified with the US-allied section of the continent whereas the Eastern part was that of Soviet dominance.¹⁵ But in this last, politically constructed, group of countries, their cultural traditions and political systems differed substantially from one another. As a result, the art that emerged in each of these nations during communist times is as diverse as the contexts of art production that had shaped its development throughout that period.¹⁶

It is important to note however that as opposed to what some East European curators like the Polish Joanna Mytkowska claim, the split 'West' and 'East' was not solely a construction of the capitalised Western World.¹⁷ As argued by theoretician Jonathan Harris in his essay 'Spectacle, Social Transformation and Utopian Globalist Art', during Cold War years (1947-1991), the terms 'West' and 'East' were dependent on each other to achieve meaning at all: 'we are this because you are not that'.¹⁸ We might then argue that their ideological opposition served both the Western capitalist world and Eastern communist regimes to define their oppositional nature and defend their power supremacy. Besides, it was not only the East that was 'imagined'. The 'West' is also a fantasy born from within. As explained by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the abstract notion of 'community' is always imagined in any social group as larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact. This occurs because despite not knowing each other, in the minds of the members of these communities, they all believe to live in some sort of 'imaginary communion'.¹⁹ In this sense, the 'West' –namely the USA and Western Europe – was perceived by its citizens as the territory where free-market, Democracy and Civil Rights could be exercised. Likewise, the 'East' was envisaged by its ruling power as the example of the triumph of the proletarian revolution, where equality among all its workers guaranteed a balanced

¹⁵ Macel, C. and Mytkowska, J., 'Promises of the Past', in Macel, C. (ed.) *Promises of the Past, A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, Zurich: JRG Ringier, 2010. P.21, footnote 1.

¹⁶ See Pospizy, T. and Janevski, A. 'On Potential Histories, Discontinuity and Politics of Desire', in Macel, C. (ed.) *Promises of the Past, A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, Zurich: JRG Ringier, 2010. p.23.

¹⁷ Macel, C. and Mytkowska, J., 'Promises of the Past', p.21.

¹⁸ Harris, J. 'Spectacle, Social Transformation and Utopian Globalist Art', in *The Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution - 1919-2009*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 54.

¹⁹ Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso: London, 2006, pp. 6-7.

industrial progress that would benefit society as a whole. The ideological articulation of both systems thus granted the formation of these imaginary territorial communities. Simultaneously, the contra-system exemplified by *the other* – or rather *the opposite other* – allowed to deepen the fantasy of their own, superior communion. The perception of ‘homogeneity’ among the different cultures in the Eastern bloc is not only the result of a ‘Western’ geo-political imagination, but also of a common ‘Eastern’ ideological re-affirmation proclaimed tirelessly during the entire Cold War.

In any case, historically speaking and despite their common ideology, within that imaginary notion of Eastern Europe it is possible to identify two differentiated groups of countries: those which adhered to the Soviet Empire and those which, despite being controlled in several aspects by Soviet powers, were able to preserve their state sovereignty outside the borders of the Soviet Union thanks to the agreement reached in the Yalta Conference of 1945 (often called USSR’s ‘satellite states’).²⁰ Czechoslovakia for example was part of the latter.²¹ However, among the group of countries that remained outside Soviet borders, huge differences were also present within their artistic sphere, since the different governments of each of those nations regulated their own cultural policy for the functioning of their art system.²² Writing a common history of East European art during the communist period appears therefore a highly challenging task.

In his book *In the Shadow of Yalta*, Piotr Piotrowski’s, offers a geo-historical analysis of the artistic production of some East-Central European countries including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania and East Germany. His study discusses the tensions generated between the cultural sphere and the political context throughout most of the relevant historical moments: Stalin’s death, the Hungarian Revolution, The Prague Spring, etc.²³ Early in the introductory chapter, Piotrowski claims to be an art-historical revisionist hoping to move away from the omnipresent Western art canon that tends to universalise art movements. Instead, he aims to offer a deep reflection on the dynamics of the cultural life of each country, in order to understand the history of avant-garde art from East-Central Europe in its full complexity and national diversity.²⁴ The author carries out this mission by offering a study of specific artworks and analysing the strategies used by the authors to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the

²⁰ The list of countries that became part of the Soviet Union include: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Byelorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Kajikistan, Turkmenia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The countries which were part of the Eastern Bloc but preserved their sovereignty were: Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria and East Germany.

²¹ Tismaneanu. V, ‘Diabolical Pedagogy and the (I)logic of Stalinism in Eastern Europe’, In: Tismaneanu. V (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009.

²² Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 9

²³ Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta*, p. 7

²⁴ Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta*, pp. 7-10

existing censorship.²⁵ This method, claims the author, allows him to write a ‘horizontal’ history of art of the region, where the micro-histories of each territory are no longer defined by the centre – namely the West – and therefore placed in the periphery of a global history of art.²⁶

Interestingly, this uniformity of art canons from a Western perspective applied to the writing of new, peripheral art histories, seems to be taking place parallel to the standardisation of artistic production in the global art world. Julian Stallabrass argues that universalisation has affected the very art production since the rise of art biennales and their proliferation after the end of the Cold War. According to this theorist, although in appearance – and in theory – the globalisation of the art world aimed at reinforcing the diversity of artists and recognising the artistic value of hybrid artworks produced within a variety of political and social contexts, the resulting reality is rather the opposite. As Stallabrass explains, in order to succeed, the artwork presented to an international audience must connect with it by either speaking about international concerns or engaging it through some sort of possible identification, that is, by expressing their artistic message as the *other* but *not so different other*. As a consequence, what we find in the so-called global art world materialised through international biennales, is not so much a new celebration of diversity, but the birth of ‘new uniformities’ produced around the Globe. In this sense, claims the author, the new globalised art system ‘conforms to the liberal rhetoric that accompanies neoliberalism’; it has ‘transformed the art world to follow the model of corporate internationalism’, evidencing rather clearly a propagandistic function that promotes and protects neoliberal values.²⁷ It remains thus the question as to whether the ‘universalisation’ of art canons applied by Western authors in the writing the art histories of the so-called ‘peripheries’ might indeed be responding to a similar ideological programme that tends to ‘normalise’ diversity under the idea of a ‘global uniformity beneficial for all’. If this is possibly the case and one aims to preserve both the identity and veracity of a (not so global) history of art, it seems thus a crucial task to disseminate the specificity and diversity of such ‘peripheral’ art through a genuine, prejudice-free, writing of its histories.

²⁵ Piotrowski, P., ‘The Geography and History of Art in Eastern Europe’, in *In The Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 11-32.

²⁶ Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, p. 7

²⁷ Stallabrass, J., ‘New World Order’, in *Contemporary Art a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 19-48.

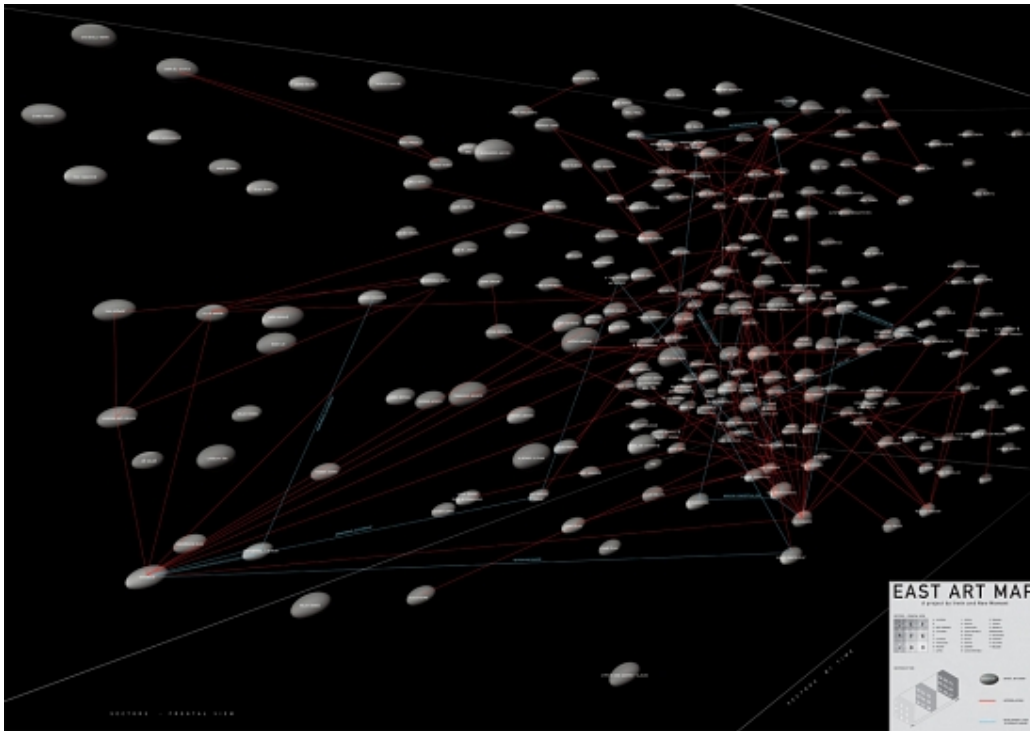


Figure 1.5. Irwin Group's *East Art Map* showing the connections between artists, movements, galleries, museums and publications developed in Eastern Europe during the communist period (1945-1989). The Map was printed as a poster and included as an appendix in their publication Irwin Group (ed.), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, London: Afterall Books, 2006.

In an attempt to recognise the diversity of contemporary East European Art practices, the Slovenian group of contemporary artists known as the 'Irwin Group', tried to unite and connect the 'histories of art' from the entire eastern Bloc during the communist period into a single publication, *East Art Map* (figure 1.5).²⁸ With the aim of producing an anthology of contemporary art practices in each nation and locating the links to build a comprehensive map of East European art, they commissioned art historians and curators from all over the region. Their mission was to point out the most influential artists, underground galleries, art collectives and independent publications, in order to join the dots between the limited artistic relations that took place at an international level, not just within the Eastern Bloc, but also with artists and curators from Western countries. Ultimately, the Irwin Group was interested in the comparison between the Eastern and Western contexts of art production and how they related to each other during the communist period. To achieve this objective, it seemed necessary to study concrete artistic contacts produced beyond East European borders. But as addressed by its editors in the introduction, the methodological freedom offered to its contributors resulted in the application of a rather heterogeneous selection criteria and a total lack of a systematic approach.²⁹ While some historians start with a brief introduction to the political tensions and the artistic reactions that emerged in each country, most of them offer a local art anthology and rarely point out any

²⁸ Irwin Group (ed.), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, London: Afterall Books, 2006.

²⁹ Irwin Group (ed.), *East Art Map*, p.13.

artistic collaboration beyond national borders. As a result, Irwin's Group ambitious project constitutes a mere collection of unconnected national maps. This weakness however, aims to be amended in the second part of the book, where twenty writers discuss a variety of questions directed to analysing not only specific links in the artistic scene of Eastern and Western Europe, but also frequently discuss issues in relation to the methodological problems faced by art historians aiming to write the history of art during the communist period in any of these nations.

As pointed out by Irwin Group member Borut Vogelnik in his essay 'Total Recall', the lack of transparent structures in those countries, capable of organising a referential system for the art-historical significant events, artists and artefacts, offers tremendous difficulties for historians and theoreticians.³⁰ What is usually present instead are a series of national systems based on a rationale adapted to local needs. Besides, on top of the 'official history of art', we find a parallel series of stories and legends about the functioning of the unofficial art scene during communist times. However, it is hardly possible to find written testimonies of the latter and when they exist, they are often incomplete and fragmented.³¹ Indeed, the experience of the present research has taught me that art historians can certainly find a great difficulty in accessing primary research material, including relevant works of art that did not make it into the post-Wall art scene, the documentation of the numerous unofficial exhibitions that have been acknowledged by its participants and other written sources on the theory of art produced at the time. In any case, what seems of most worry to art historians is the possibility of reaching an agreement on a methodological approach that could embrace the specificity and heterogeneity of the history of art in the region.

The seminar 'Art History on the Disciplinary Map in East Central Europe' which took place in Brno in 2010, dealt with the methodological problems of writing art history in Eastern Europe.³² According to its chronologist Daria Ghiu, the discussions that took place in the seminar proceeded from a perceived overall hegemonic presence of a Western method in the writing of Eastern art history.³³ In their paper '*The Challenge of the Post-National in East European Art History*', speakers Maja and Reuben Fowkes questioned whether it would ever be possible to integrate art made under socialism in the structures of a global art history.³⁴ As argued by Éva Forgács in her lecture *Art History's One Blind Spot in East-Central Europe: Terminology*, the

³⁰ The title of the essay seems to be making an ironic reference to the film 'Total Recall' from 1990 directed by Paul Verhoeven, where the main character has his memory erased and as a result loses his identity, Vogelnik, B., 'Total Recall' in Hlavajova, M. and Winder, J. (eds.) *Who if not We Should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This? 7 Episodes on Exchanging Europe*, Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004, p. 180.

³¹ Vogelnik, B., 'Total Recall', p.180.

³² The seminar 'Art History on the Disciplinary Map in East Central Europe', organised in cooperation with Masaryk University Brno and Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, took place in the Moravian Gallery in Brno, on the 18th-19th November 2010.

³³ Ghiu, D. 'Rewriting Art History in Eastern Europe', conference review, *Kunst Texte*, Issue 1, 2011

³⁴ Ghiu, D., 'Rewriting Art History in Eastern Europe', conference review, *Kunst Texte*, Issue 1, 2011, p. 2.

use of Western art canons in the absence of a 'valid terminology' leads to a subordinate condition, which impedes the existence of specific art in Eastern and Central Europe.³⁵ As a response to Forgacs' arguments and in order to offer an alternative to such subordination, Reuben Fowkes defends the possibility of integrating East European art through comparative accounts within existing canons, as long as this is done by challenging the 'narratives and assumptions that have structured dominant art historical accounts'.³⁶ In this sense, Fowkes' suggestion coincides with Piotrowski's idea of changing perspectives from a 'vertical' history of art into a 'horizontal' one, where the historian looks from the 'periphery' to the centre. This writing strategy could eventually allow the integration of East European art within a broader art-historical discourse, while maintaining its integrity and acknowledging its specificities.

In a similar debate, German theoretician Boris Groys provided a very interesting argument. In a group conversation with art historians in 2013 about the development of Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe, the problematic of integrating the art history of the region within the international recount was again deeply discussed. As argued by Groys, in order to validate any art movement occurred in the Eastern Bloc, it is essential to integrate it in a relevant discourse. As he explains, 'if you invent something to differentiate yourself from the West, you create the illusion of being exotic'.³⁷ It is in the interest of East European artists, he says, to have their work placed within the art movements that were simultaneously being produced in the West. As the author defends, 'exoticism' can quickly lose its attractive appeal while 'full integration' will most likely grant a long-lasting recognition.³⁸ This rather brave stance taken by Groys has the potential of being harshly criticised by other historians who fear a 'colonisation' of Eastern Art history by the omnipresent Western discourse. But Groys suggestion does not intend to simply bring a few names into Western Art history, eluding its own merits and specificities. On the contrary, the author believes that only after finding similarities with works produced in the West would the differences of East European art become interesting and appealing within a global art-historical discourse.³⁹

The research and writing methods proposed by Fowkes, Pitorowski and Groys seem both reasonable and useful in practical terms to construct a comprehensive history of art in any of the countries from the former Eastern Bloc. While one of the most important aspects that needs to be taken into account to truly understand the meaning of artworks is the specific contexts of art production that were present in each of those nations during the communist rule, it can also be

³⁵ Forgács, E., as paraphrased by Ghui, D. 'Rewriting Art History in Eastern Europe', conference review, *Kunst Texte*, Issue 1, 2011, p. 2.

³⁶ Fowkes, R., 'Introduction', *Third Text*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, January 2009, p. 4.

³⁷ Groys, B., in conversation with Badovinac, Z., Čufer, E. F., Harrison, C., Havránek, Vít, H., Piotrowski, P., and Stipančić, B., 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part II,' *E-Flux*, Issue 41, 2012, p. 5.

³⁸ Groys, B., 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part II,' p. 5.

³⁹ Groys, B., 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part II,' p. 5.

enlightening to attempt an integration of artworks within the different art movements that were developed in the West. This does not mean that the historian should be doing a straight ‘cut-and-paste’ process, taking an artwork out of its local context and placing it directly within an established Western art discourse. What historians should aim at instead is to build a parallel narrative, comparing the contexts present in both territories and exposing the similarities – if any – and differences in the meaning of art at a given moment in history. This simultaneous reflection, able to address the specificities of both Western and East European contexts and allow a comparative account of their resulting artistic production, constitutes a method of writing art history that would not only validate the whole range of practices developed in communist Eastern Europe but also enrich the entire history of art as a subject of study in a world where the ‘West and Rest’ dichotomy has long lost its *raison d’être*.

This debate around the problems of incorporating the history of art in Eastern Europe within a global (Western) historical account does not seem to worry very much the historians of photography from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. When reading through available texts on the subject, I have not come across a single concern on the matter. What I have found instead is that those historians went straight to the point, exposing the type of photographic practices that were developed in their countries and the ways in which the photography scene functioned under communist rule. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that the photographic tradition of many countries from Eastern Europe had nothing to envy that which was developed in Western Europe or USA. By the time Communism was established in 1948, Czechoslovakia enjoyed one of the richest photographic traditions in the world. The innovation of avant-garde photography developed in Prague during the 1920s and the 1930s was widely recognised outside the country’s borders and the contacts between the Czechoslovakian photographic scene and other leading nations on photography like France, the USA, Poland, Hungary or Russia was rather fluent.⁴⁰ As a result – and despite the country’s international isolation during communist times – art photography continued to develop in highly creative directions.⁴¹ It seems therefore reasonable that photography historians should find no need to incorporate the history of Czechoslovakian photography within the different photographic movements that took place in the West between 1948 and 1989. But the fact that these historians have not written such a comparative account does not mean that this type of exercise would lack interest. On the contrary, I believe that the incorporation of a parallel narrative, where both contexts of art production are discussed and the photographic works are scrutinised in search of certain similarities, would also aid the understanding for the existent differences in their practice. In this sense, I have thus attempted – when possible and useful – to incorporate this discussion

⁴⁰ See for example Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘New Photography, Constructivism, Functionalism and New Objectivity’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 59-67.

⁴¹ This is precisely one of the aspects that the present thesis aims to demonstrate.

throughout the thesis. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, despite the country's cultural isolation during the communist period there appear to be countless connections between the photographic works that were being produced in the West (especially in the USA) and Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation period (1968-1989). This exercise of comparing how different photographic styles were developed in separate territories has proved highly beneficial, not only to better understand the photographic production of Czechoslovakia, but especially to envisage a comprehensive picture of the possible variations in meaning and content that similar photographic styles may carry when developed in different contexts of art production. In fact, some of the most fascinating findings of this research are born out of the engagement in this type of discussion.

4. Linguistic Challenges

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, the choice of an appropriate terminology was one of the main problems encountered by art historians when attempting to write a history of art in any of the countries that belonged to the former Eastern Bloc. Most discussions on the matter however deal with the need of 're-writing' art canons that could eventually accommodate the specific realities of East European art into a global art-historical discourse. Some historians like Piotrowski have argued against the application of Western terminology when referring to art movements like 'modernism', which either carried a different meaning or were simply absent in the context of communist Eastern Europe. This method of adhering to Western art canons, explains Piotrowski, places East European Art in the periphery of a global history of art, looking always 'up' at the centre where 'Western' art stands.⁴² Others like Boris Groys however, opted for a more practical attitude and rejected the idea of re-inventing an entire new terminology. This theoretician believed that by adhering to the established Western narrative and offering a comparative account of artworks in search of their similarities, the art produced in Eastern Europe would gain full validity, while any manifest differences could enrich the art-historical debate within a broader art discourse. The opposite attitude of re-naming concepts, argues Groys, might turn East European artworks into exotic products susceptible to be quickly forgotten and ultimately neglected from the history of art.⁴³

While I agree with Groys in his practical attitude of integrating the 'histories' of East European art into existent broader narratives and debates, as I went deeper into my research I found that the problems of terminology do not stop in the 'naming' of those canons. On the contrary, as argued by Bojana Pejic in her essay 'The Dialectics of Normality', the complex problematic in

⁴² Piotrowski, P. 'The Geography and History of Art in Eastern Europe', in *The Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 11-32

⁴³ Groys, B. in conversation with Badovinac, Z., Čufer, E, Freire, Harrison, C, Havránek, Vít, H., Piotrowski, P., and Stipančić, B, 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part II,' *E-Flux Journal*, Issue 41, 2012, p. 5.

the application of certain terms in the writing of East European art history reaches a scope that extends beyond the naming of art canons and movements. For example, explains Pejic, the use of the adjective 'post-communist' in reference to the post-1989 period is not precise at all for citizens of the former Eastern Bloc, since they never referred to their political system as 'communist', but rather 'socialist'.⁴⁴ The use of the term 'post-Communism' however has been so widely used nowadays that it seems acceptable to continue referring to this historical period in this form. In any case, terminological debates vary from country to country, so in order to offer contextualised discussion of their meaning in communist Czechoslovakia, these issues will be discussed where they appear as an issue in the relevant chapters. For the time being, I will now establish a preliminary discussion of specific key terms that will repeatedly appear throughout the thesis.

Starting with the very object of this research, that is; 'art photography practices in Czechoslovakia' there are two essential terms whose meaning needs to be clarified. Firstly, the meaning of 'art photography', which could certainly be endlessly debated, must be only understood within the context of Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation period (1968-1989). Not an easy task. Certainly. In fact, I have dedicated the entire next chapter to scrutinise what concrete practices produced in the country would enter the realm of 'art' in photography and the reasons for such inclusion. For the time being however I shall specify that I have considered 'art photography' the works where the artist had aimed to preserve their artistic autonomy by abstaining to adhere to any official art discourse imposed by the Regime, despite whether they managed to enter the official art scene or not. As a consequence, the photography produced exclusively within the official realm in Czechoslovakia, that is, the great majority of press photographs, most of the images born out of public assignments (such as portraits of the Party's leaders) and any other works which strictly followed the principles of the 'socialist function of photography', have not been considered works of art in their strict sense and are therefore excluded from the present study.

Secondly, the geo-political term 'Czechoslovakia' has proved to be one of the most problematic linguistic issues to deal with. Strictly speaking, the territory known this way emerged after the region's independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and had continued to be named as such (with the exception of the period of Nazi occupation between 1939 and 1945, when the First Slovak State was briefly established) until the definite separation of the Slovak territory in 1993, when the states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia were proclaimed. Before that date, the territories of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia formed the Czechoslovakian state. With the separation of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Bohemia and Moravia

⁴⁴ See Pejic, B. 'The Dialectics of Normality' in Hlavajova, M. and Winder, J. (eds.) *Who If not We Should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This? 7 Episodes on Exchanging Europe*, Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004, p. 249.

remained part of the Czech Republic and the territories of Slovakia and a section of the Carpathian Ruthenia constituted the Slovak state.⁴⁵ Terminological problems in this arena often seem to respond to a national sensibility that tends to reject a historical inclusion of certain territories – namely Slovakia – into the historical, ‘artificially constructed’, Czechoslovakian state.⁴⁶ It has been my decision however to remain historically precise in the naming of those territories. Since the temporal scope of study covers the period from 1968 to 1998, and for most part of this period only the state of Czechoslovakia existed, I have used this geo-political term throughout except when referring to specific works of photography that were produced after 1993, when the country was finally separated into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, or where referring to a period that covers both the pre and post-split of the nation. As an exception, on few occasions, I make specific reference to the ‘Czech’ and ‘Slovak’ territory – or ‘land’ – before that date for purposes of clarification. This mainly occurs when, for very specific reasons, there is a need to point out the differences in the work or specific contexts of art production, that were present in each of those regions at a given time. That is the case for example of the development of Conceptual Art in Prague and Bratislava, which was produced in a similar context but whose content varies substantially from one another. Other than those few exceptions, political correctness in the choice of terms has been relegated throughout in favour of historical precision.

Beyond those two key terms, there are also a large series of concepts referred throughout the thesis whose meaning and application could be long-debated. In order to keep things simple and remain faithful to the narratives of photography that had already been established in both countries, I have decided to maintain the exact terminology as used by Czech and Slovak historians and theoreticians in their translated English texts. Such is the case for example of adjectives like ‘independent’ or ‘unofficial’, which in the concrete context of communist Czechoslovakia carry a very specific meaning. When applied however, the sense of those concepts is thoroughly explained. Likewise, the naming of certain photographic styles – like ‘social documentary’, ‘creative’, ‘imaginative’, ‘staged’, or ‘visualist’, which often correspond to similar photographic styles developed in the West, in the context of Czechoslovakia carry their very own conventions and must therefore be referred with the terms traditionally used in this territory. In any case, whenever appropriate and beneficial for the argument at stake, I have explained the similarities between specific Czechoslovakian photographic styles and movements, and their ‘Western’ counterparts.

⁴⁵ See Zeman, Z. *The Masaryks: The Making of Czechoslovakia*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1796.

⁴⁶ During my field trip to Slovakia, I noticed that absolutely no one used the term ‘Czechoslovakia’ even when they referred to the period where Slovakia and the Czech Republic were united into a single state. On the contrary, in my trip to Brno and Prague, artists and curators did not seem to have any problem in speaking about Czechoslovakia as a historical geo-political territory.

I am aware that these terminological choices are highly susceptible to criticism, but as controversial as language divergences might be, I was determined to avoid endless discussions on the correctness of 'naming' that would ultimately deviate attention away from the very object of this study. Overall, I do believe that the use of this terminological strategy has favoured my aim to integrate 'horizontally' the history of Czechoslovakian art photography into a broader art-historical discourse.

5. Social History of Photography and the 'Horizontal' Perspective.

If I am to write a 'horizontal' history of photography of Czechoslovakia, where the reading of images is done taking into account the specific context of art production present in the country and integrate such history within a global art-historical narrative, it seems that the application of a sociological research approach could be highly useful. As much as the differences between Capitalism and Communism, and Democracy and Totalitarianism, have been widely researched and discussed, historians should not fall into the error of assuming that the reader has some sort of *a priori* knowledge of the specific effects that those systems produced in the artistic scene of each nation. On the contrary, the concrete functioning rules of those scenes should be precisely stated and thoroughly explained in any valid historical narrative in order to offer a better understanding of the precise conditions where the artworks were produced. In this sense, an application of the principles of the social history of art as a framework of study shall allow us to analyse the factors that contributed to the production of artworks and to better understand the meaning of such works in relation to their specific local context. While doing so, the proposed strategy can also provide a means to integrate the artistic production of studied countries within a broader artistic and historical discourse.

Among the different texts written on the social history of art, Janet Wolff's book *The Social Production of Art* suggests an interesting research approach for art historians. According to the author, art – like the totality of human actions – is nothing but a social product.⁴⁷ Everything we do is directly affected by the presence of social structures. Whether we do it with a conformist or rebellious attitude, she explains, it is in both cases a result of belonging to (and interacting with) those structures.⁴⁸ The writer argues that any mystical notion of the artist as 'genius creator' can only lead to a void analysis of the history of art. Instead, explains Wolff, by replacing the idea of 'art creation' with that of 'art production', we would be able to acknowledge and integrate the social structures that enabled the very existence of such works of art. ⁴⁹ In sum, she explains, the study of the sociology of art involves the analysis of all 'levels'

⁴⁷ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, London: Macmillan Press, 1981, p. 1

⁴⁸ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, p. 9

⁴⁹ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, London: Macmillan Press, 1981p.138.

and factors that have contributed to the production of artworks.⁵⁰ This includes the economic and political context present when the work is produced, the nature of the social groups in which it originates, any relevant biographical circumstances of the artist and the presence of aesthetic codes and conventions ‘through which ideology is transformed and in which it is expressed’.⁵¹ Later on in her conclusions, Wolff states that the importance of the sociology of art, as opposed to art criticism and art history, is that it ‘enables us to see that artworks always encode values and ideology’.⁵² This, explains the writer, would only be possible when offering an integrative argument which analyses the social construction of art and culture, including the role played by all participating agents: authors, audiences, critics and theorists.⁵³

In 1981, the same year Wolffs’ book was released, Raymond Williams’ book *Culture* was also published.⁵⁴ In this publication the author defends the study of culture as a specific area of social studies. According to Williams, this sociological study places its interest on ‘all signifying systems’ of cultural production, that is, in the analysis of cultural institutions and formations, the relations between them, the very material means of production and the resulting cultural products and forms.⁵⁵ Throughout the book, the author discusses the different factors, institutions and formations that affect the production of cultural products, and briefly outlines the ways in which those elements have historically shaped, or could potentially modify, a given manifestation of culture. Those elements include schools, movements, academies, the market, publication systems, collections and collectors, patronage, exhibitions, societies or artist unions among many others. Overall Williams’ text serves as a kind of ‘inventory of potential formations’ that can aid the art historian to incorporate a study of the effects of any of the discussed factors in the artistic production of the territory of study.

In a similar line, T. J. Clark discusses the methods of writing about art from a sociological perspective in his essay ‘On the Social History of Art’.⁵⁶ Half way through the text the author questions whether we could discover through the particular context and historical circumstances of an individual artist the very meaning of his artistic production and style. To engage in this rather complex process, the author considers a series of factors, including the social structure present in his territory, the artist situation within the social group where he or she belongs, their opportunities and experiences within it, the nature and function of life-style around them, the

⁵⁰ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, 1981, p. 140.

⁵¹ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, p. 71.

⁵² Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, p. 143.

⁵³ Wolff, J., *The Social Production of Art*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ Williams, R., *Culture*, London: Fontana Press, 1981.

⁵⁵ Williams, R., *Culture*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Clark, T. J., ‘On the Social History of Art’, in Frascina, F., Harrison, C. (eds.) *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London: Paul Chapman, The Open University, 1983, pp. 249-258.

artistic ideas of the period or the works of art available to them at a given time.⁵⁷ But then the author correctly notices the risks of analysing such a dense material and warns against the possibility of ‘losing sight’ of the artwork that constitutes the main object of study. However, he defends, this danger might well be worth it since the proposed approach may end up disclosing unexpected aspects of the work which could lead to an entirely new understanding of its meaning.⁵⁸

In the field of photographic theory, an interesting example of research undertaken from a social perspective was developed by Barbara Rosenblum in her project *Photographers at Work: A Sociology of Photographic Styles*.⁵⁹ Her aim was to analyse the stylistic features of photographs produced in advertising, press and fine arts, and account for their peculiarities by focusing on the social organisation of their particular production.⁶⁰ Rosenblum’s research methods were based on direct observation of the photographers at work, as well as interviews with different actors with whom photographers interact as part of their activity.⁶¹ The results of her investigation suggested that style in photography is not a product of socio-historical forces or conventions. Instead, she argues, conventions are not homogeneous, they vary with contexts of production and each of those contexts generates a different style in photography. In this sense, Rosenblum argues that it is mainly the social arrangements surrounding the ‘making’ of the photograph that determine how a concrete photograph looks. Those arrangements include the organisation of labour, the functioning of the market, the use of technology, the client’s influence or the presence of institutional forces among others.⁶² Her study thus associates photographic style to its relationship with the social structures surrounding its production.

Among the different socio-historical approaches discussed, Rosenblum’s seemed to come closer to the research methods needed to understand the meaning of the artworks at stake in the present study. As she had suggested in her project, the circumstances surrounding the very production of photographs were also key to understand the reasons behind the stylistic choices made by Czech and Slovak practitioners between 1968 and 1998. Thus, prior to the study of the work of individual photographers, the entire next chapter has been dedicated to discussing the different factors that affected the production of art photography in communist Czechoslovakia since 1968. These include the presence of photography publications, galleries, museums and collections, the functioning rules of its rather peculiar art market, the incorporation of the subject of photography in academia, the role of amateur clubs, the organisation of artists’

⁵⁷ Clark, T. J., ‘On the Social History of Art’, in Frascina, F., Harrison, C. (eds.) *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London: Paul Chapman, The Open University, 1983, p. 255.

⁵⁸ Clark, T. J., ‘On the Social History of Art’, p. 256.

⁵⁹ Rosenblum, B., *Photographers at Work: A Sociology of Photographic Styles*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978.

⁶⁰ Rosenblum, B., ‘Style as a Social Process’, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, 1978, pp. 422-433.

⁶¹ Rosenblum, B., ‘Style as a Social Process’, pp. 423-424.

⁶² Rosenblum, B., ‘Style as a Social Process’, p. 423.

unions, the different curatorial activities and exhibitions that took place under the communist rule and the functioning of censorship mechanisms affecting photography. Later on, throughout the following chapters, the concrete biographical circumstances of the photographers, their specific relations with power structures and their connections with other artists from their country and abroad are added to the equation in order to offer a better understanding of the possible meanings their artwork may carry. Unlike Rosenblum's project however, the functioning mechanisms of these structures could not be researched through direct observation of the production process, but through the testimonies of those who witnessed the situation at the time the photographs were produced.

This method of writing art history from a sociological perspective appears as the most appropriate method not only to understand the specificities of Czechoslovakian photography, but also to offer a 'horizontal' account of its photographic history between 1968 and 1998. By studying the very specific circumstances of those photographers, I have been able to identify how despite the divergences present in the contexts of art production of Czechoslovakia and Western societies, and the apparent isolation of the country from the international art scene during four entire decades, we can still identify a series of similarities in the photographic production that was being simultaneously developed in both territories. This comparative account might well enable the integration of Czechoslovakian photography into a broader theoretical and historical discourse, where the latter is no longer placed on the periphery but running in a parallel line that has been temporarily neglected in art historical discourses emerged in the West.

6. Telling Stories, Proposing a History

If we agree that an understanding of the social structures that surround the production of artworks is key to offering an informed analysis of the meaning of such works, then the question arises as to how are we to obtain a reliable account of the functioning of those very social structures? .

In his essay 'The Story-Teller', Walter Benjamin reflects on the Works of Russian writer Nicolai Leskov (1831-1895), exposing the author's ability as a story-teller of his time.⁶³ While doing so, Benjamin analyses the nature of storytelling, the dangers and benefits of this art, and the reasons that have led to its progressive disappearance. According to Benjamin, the exchange of life experiences, which are the main object of stories, has fallen in value. The process of the decline of storytelling, he explains, emerged with the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. As opposed to the former, the novel is oblivious to oral tradition and often

⁶³ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller: Reflections of the Work of Nicolai Leskov (Book Review)', *Chicago Review*, Winter, 1963, Vol. 16, Issue 1, pp. 79-101.

replaces experience with fiction. Besides, recalls Benjamin, the novelist writes in isolation and the reader usually consumes the text in solitude. The storyteller instead, he argues, 'takes what he tells from experience', either his own or that reported by others and, in doing so, he creates a new experience for his listeners who are able to interact, both among themselves and with the storyteller, in real time throughout the exercise of 'telling'.⁶⁴

Benjamin then explains that following the appearance of Capitalism, the press took control over the accounts of events and communication became a synonym of information. The presence of 'global news', he says, turned the art of storytelling into a rarity; removing it in favour of the immediate dissemination of a detailed explanation of affairs.⁶⁵ As Benjamin points out, it is in this explanation that storytelling radically opposes 'information' as the object of communication. While it is essential for the latter to present any event with a great detail of 'corroborated' explanations, the storyteller relates events with substantial accuracy but leaves its listener space to make a free interpretation of things. Thus, the narrative proposed in storytelling is able to reach 'an amplitude that information lacks'. Besides, continues Benjamin, while information dies with the moment it was relevant, the success of storytelling lies in its ability to remain in the memory of the listener, who, having integrated the story into his own experience, is likely to repeat it one day and place it again into someone else's memory.⁶⁶

Later in the text, the writer explains how storytelling is, in itself, an artisan form of communication, which does not 'aim to convey the pure essence of the subject', like information or a report.⁶⁷ Instead, he argues, the story sinks into the experiences of the storyteller, emerging again into the world charged by its own referential traces. Thus, the subjectivity of the storyteller becomes part of the story, like fingerprints made with permanent ink. But as Benjamin argues, it is never the intention of the storyteller to hide their subjective view in the narrative of events. On the contrary, they tend to introduce their stories with an explanation of circumstances in which they became acquainted with the story. Thus, the tracks of those involved in the storytelling process are evident in the narrative of the story in every stage of its lifespan. This traceable subjectivity, which storytelling openly acknowledges, is totally absent in historical methodologies. While the historian would always claim an objective research attitude and a total factual accuracy of any historical description, the storyteller believes in the ability of his own experience to enrich the 'core' of the story that is being told.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller: Reflections of the Work of Nicolai Lescov (Book Review)', *Chicago Review*, Winter, 1963, Vol. 16, Issue 1, p.83.

⁶⁵ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller', p. 84.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller', p. 86.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller' p. 87.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, W., 'The Story-Teller' p. 87.

While Benjamin is by no means claiming that the art of storytelling can replace the role of the press or the activity of historians, his nostalgia for a 'lost humanist nature' of the art of storytelling becomes evident throughout the text. With regards to the object of the present research, I found Benjamin's analysis highly revealing. While I was committed to undertaking the research through the perspective of the social history of art, it became evident that both the recollection of information via personal testimonies and the latter narration of events would unavoidably involve a double exercise of storytelling. Firstly, since many of the actors of the 'story' I was willing to tell were still alive at the time this research took place, they all became potential storytellers of their own experiences. Secondly, once narrated, I would immediately become both the listener and the future teller of their individual testimonies. As much as I could wish to act impartially and remain oblivious to my subjective position, the recount of their stories could not escape my participation in the formation of arguments and my chosen direction in the interpretation of artworks, facts and events. Besides, as explained by Benjamin and as opposed to the reader of History, the listener of stories (the researcher in this case) is not isolated. On the contrary, he or she is always able to interact with the storyteller; at times asking for clarifications; at other times enquiring about certain details of the story that the teller might not have considered relevant. In doing so, the listener guides the storyteller into a narration of facts that might respond not so much as to what the teller was willing to disclose, but to what the listener is most interested in discovering.

Besides, although the totality of findings that relate to the functioning of social structures surrounding the work should be appropriately disclosed in any valid research, a reading of the artworks must never be stated as final or the historian could act against the very purpose of art to let the work speak by itself in front of its ever-changing audience. In this sense, as opposed to the effects of offering mere 'information', the narration of history through storytelling would allow the reader to undertake their own final interpretative activity, both in relation to the experiences exposed and the artworks discussed by the researcher.

I am aware that this method of obtaining and disclosing information through storytelling, acknowledging the subjective position of the researcher, might appear highly unorthodox from the perspective of the history of art. However, the proposed approach might certainly add a great deal of a much needed 'humanist' touch in the analysis of artworks and their relation to their context of art production. After all, as expressed by Swiss art historian Beat Wyss, the researcher is continuously engaged in a dialectical exchange with its object of study, which turns art history into a virtual mirror of the subjectivity of the researcher.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Wyss, B., as paraphrased by Ghui, D.n in 'Rewriting Art History in Eastern Europe', conference review, *Kunst Texte*, Issue 1, 2011, p. 5.

7. Research Methods

The research has been carried out using a variety of methods, including access to online and offline archives, the collection of primary research material from several photography collections and local libraries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, interviews with photographers, artists, curators, historians and theoreticians in Prague and Bratislava, and a semiotic analysis of art photographs produced during the period of study (1968-1998). During the different stages of the research, the information obtained through each of these methods has served to shape and re-define with progressive precision my understanding of the subject. My study on the history of photography from the region through available literature, was deepened after accessing the extensive photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno. Similarly, the numerous interviews with different actors of the photography scene during the times of Normalisation allowed me to fill certain gaps in my understanding of the context of art production, while a later engagement with a semiotic analysis of selected photographs opened up a whole range of possible readings born out of the various creative strategies used by targeted authors to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the existing censorship. The methods used have thus complemented each other and allowed me to envisage a rather coherent picture of the field of study, which I aim to thoroughly discuss in the following chapters. But before I move on to analyse the development of art photography practices in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia, I shall explain in more detail the content and structure of each of these research methods.

7.1. *Identification of Field of Study*

The publications discussed at the beginning of this chapter have served as an initial source to gain an understanding of the functioning of the photographic scene during the Normalisation period (1969-1989). Throughout these readings I have been able to identify the most relevant art photographers, curators, critics, publications, art groups and collectives, photography schools, clubs and academies, periodicals, magazine editors, public collections, museums and the rules governing the institutions where art photography operated during this period. In addition to those catalogues, there are three key highly developed online databases that have complemented this initial identification. These include:

- *AB Art*; an extensive digitalised database produced by the Center for Contemporary Art in Prague, which compiles documents and information about Czech and Slovak art from the nineteenth century onwards.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ See <http://abart-full.artarchiv.cz/>, [accessed on repeated occasions between 2013 and 2017]

- *Central European Art Database (CEAD)*; a research project developed by the Olomouc Museum of Art, in the Czech Republic, which provides detailed information of artists, works and institutions operating in the dedicated geographic area since the end of World War II.⁷¹
- *Parallel Chronologies*, an archive of art exhibitions in Eastern Europe developed with the aim of enabling cross-national research and cooperation. This site presents an international network of professional activities, documents of exhibitions, events and art spaces, in order to create a common knowledge of the history of curatorial activities and artistic practices within the East-European art scene from the early twentieth century until the present.⁷²

In addition to these art databases, the online research platform *Former West* has served to allocate key debates on East European Art, including the methodological problems of writing its recent history, the controversial ways in which artworks produced in this region have been presented in ‘the West’ since 1989 and a suggestion of strategies for the integration of the art histories of East European countries into a broader art-historical discourse.⁷³ The project aims to shift from the idea of the ‘West’ to that of ‘former West’ in the field of art. By doing so, its participants believe that the ‘West’ would no longer be the one and only guarantor of art-historical narratives and, as a consequence, the art produced in Eastern Europe would cease to be presented as anecdotal or peripheral within the global historical discourse.

7.2 Selection of Photographers

Since one of the most important aspects of this research is the analysis of photographic works, the selection of photographers whose artistic production will be discussed in each case study was a deciding factor. The first selection criteria was based on the nature of their work, that is; their practice had to be identifiable as ‘art photography’.⁷⁴ Secondly, in order to be selected, the photographer had to have produced a consistent body of work both during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) and throughout the decade following the establishment of a democratic system in 1989. Finally, since it was essential to obtain a first-person testimonial of their life/work experience, these photographers needed to be alive at the time the research was conducted and willing to meet during my field trips to the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Having fulfilled these three conditions, their inclusion in the final selection of photographers has been made taking into account their level of participation within the photography scene of

⁷¹ See <http://cead.space/index.php> [accessed on repeated occasions between 2013 and 2017]

⁷² See <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/> [accessed on repeated occasions between 2013 and 2017]

⁷³ See <http://www.formerwest.org/Front> [accessed on repeated occasions between 2013 and 2017]

⁷⁴ For a definition of art photography practices in the context of ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia see Chapter II of the present thesis

the period of study. This includes their overall involvement in the different unofficial institutions and underground activities that took place during Normalisation, as well as their contribution to art photography debates that were taking place at the time throughout the country.

Finally – and this is probably the most subjective criteria of all – the artistic quality of their photographs has been decisive in identifying the potential interest that an analysis of their work would have in the construction of the art-historical narrative discussed in this thesis. In any case, it has been my aim to offer a most integrative and comprehensive picture of the heterogeneous photography tendencies that were present in Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1998, including social documentary photography, subjective documentary photography, ‘Visualism’ and the role of photography in Conceptual Art practices.

In addition and with the aim of offering a reasonable balance between the work produced both by Czech and Slovak practitioners, the thesis attempts to keep an equivalent weight in the number of selected photographers from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in relation to their overall contribution to the development of art photography in the region. Finally, I must admit that the works analysed might seem to break the notions of gender equality, since although ten per cent of interviewed photographers were women, none of them has been selected for the case studies. This does not mean that their work and testimonies are not mentioned and taken into account. On the contrary, there are repeated references to the work of female photographers throughout. However, considered as a whole, the artistic production of interviewed women photographers did not meet the selection criteria described above. In any case, if one considers the gender situation present in the Czechoslovakian photography scene during Normalisation, we will find that less than five per cent of its members were women, which means the present thesis is merely mirroring the existent situation at the time.⁷⁵

7.3 Field Work

The collection of primary research material was mainly done during two field trips in 2014 and 2016. I initially travelled to the Czech Republic and visited the cities of Prague and Brno. Two years after I went to Slovakia, where I remained in Bratislava during the whole stay. The main purpose of those trips was to interview selected subjects, including photographers, visual artists, historians, curators and theoreticians, and to identify a series of photographic works that could potentially be analysed in the thesis.

⁷⁵ To judge by the overall presence of woman photographers in Czechoslovakia during the times of Normalisation, I have taken into account the number of photographs present in the catalogues discussed in this chapter which were produced by female photographers. Such presence is always below five per cent..

In addition, I had the opportunity to access the photographic archive of the Moravian Gallery in Brno and visit numerous photography exhibitions that were taking place in the different galleries and museums of each city. Besides, I also had the chance to access the libraries at the Moravian Gallery in Brno and the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, as well as the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague, where I found dozens of relevant, out-of-print catalogues that would have been practically impossible to locate elsewhere. Apart from details of those publications and several other books acquired in local bookshops, I returned from each of those trips with numerous catalogues kindly donated by several interviewed subjects.

7.4 Interviews. Aim, Content and Structure

One of the methods used is based in the collection of first-hand testimonies from the different actors that were part of the art photography scene in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia (1969-1989). Following the interview process, details of all acquired information was put together and contrasted to build up a narrative of the functioning of the different spaces where photography operated during the period of study. The content of those testimonies is also used to guide a semiotic analysis of selected photographs, which has ultimately allowed a discussion of the effects of the context of art production in the development of art photography practices in the country

A total of twenty subjects were interviewed during my field trips. Out of those, sixteen of them were photographers or visual artists working with photography. The remaining four were art historians, curators and theoreticians. These interviews took place either at the artists’ studios or in the premises where historians and curators worked (figures 1.6 and 1.7). These settings allowed the subjects to share with me works and publications that were relevant to the study. In most cases I was able to document this material with a digital camera. The only exception was Polish curator and artist Jerzy Olek, who was interviewed via e-mail and posted a large amount of documents from exhibitions, events and other underground activities developed by the gallery he directed at the time in Warsaw.⁷⁶

All the interviews had a semi-structured design, which allowed the conversation to follow a different path depending on the specific interest each of them seemed to be raising. In case of the artists and photographers, there were a series of ten set questions, from which I intended to gather specific biographical information. Following their concrete responses, I would enquire further about details that appeared relevant in each case. Part of the interviews with artists and photographers included a section where they discussed their own works. For about thirty minutes, they were asked to talk about their practice, enabling an intense discussion between us

⁷⁶ Details of Jerzy Olek’s activities and his program on ‘Elementary Photography’ can be found in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

about the meaning their images might carry. A different questionnaire was used with historians and curators since the queries were mainly directed to finding out the functioning rules of certain institutions where art photography operated during the period of study.



Figure 1.6. Photographer Vladimír Židlický in his studio, Brno, Czech Republic, 13/11/2014, Portrait by Paula Gortázar.

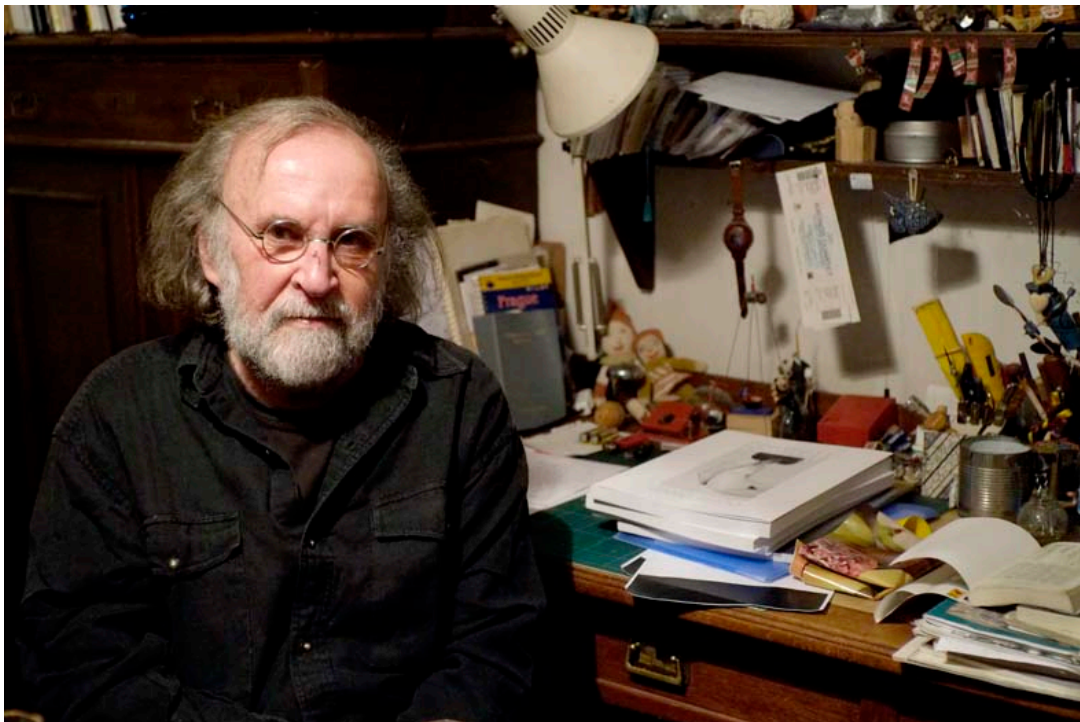


Figure 1.7. Photographer Jabo Rečo in his studio, Prague, Czech Republic, 12/11/2014, Portrait by Paula Gortázar.

The totality of those conversations has served to join the dots among the large amount of testimonials obtained. From early on I understood that I would be dealing with rather personal matters that could be often sensible to discuss. Besides, considering that each obtained version on the recount of events was given from an entirely personal perspective, the accumulation of testimonies has been key to find an objective balance among the different opinions gathered.

With the exception of three subjects whose level of English was proficient, an interpreter was used to provide simultaneous translation. All interviews were recorded to allow later access. A consent form was given to all participants who agreed to be quoted and have their work published in the present thesis. On a few occasions, further clarification of their testimonies has been requested via email. In those cases, the subjects have made use of their own interpreters in order to understand and reply to emailed questions in the English language.

7.5 Image Analysis

The great majority of works analysed have been obtained directly from the personal collection of their authors during studio visits. In addition, some images were acquired from the archive at the Moravian Gallery in Brno. Earlier works and other photographs whose authors were no longer alive have also been obtained from history books and other photography catalogues.

The study and analysis of photographs represents one of the most important aspects of this research. It is indeed from the reading of selected images that I have been able to discuss how the context of art production present in Czechoslovakia (1968-1998) has shaped the meaning carried by the studies of photographs. In order to undertake this rather complex analytical exercise, I have taken into account the author's personal circumstances at the time of production, alongside the overall situation of social structures governing the art photography scene throughout the different historical episodes of the studied period. This key information, obtained through a socio-historical research approach, has aided a semiotic analysis in the reading of selected photographs. In this sense, the signified meaning of each depicted element appears charged not only with that which is visually verifiable, but most importantly, with all 'coded' information on its surrounding circumstances that had been thoroughly gathered beforehand.

In sum, the research strategy applied throughout has aimed to offer a 'horizontal' history of Czech and Slovak art photography between 1968 and 1998 from the perspective of the social history of art. To reach this objective, the research methods have been mainly based in the collection of first-hand testimonies from the main actors operating in the Czechoslovakian photography scene during the period of study. During this process, story-telling techniques have operated at a double level. On the one hand, interviewed subjects became the 'tellers' of their

own life-experiences. On the other hand, while writing their stories, the author of this thesis became too the story-teller of their personal narratives. The accumulation of all the acquired information has served to guide a semiotic analysis of the photographs through several case studies. During this process, the personal circumstances of each author and the social factors surrounding the production of their images have enabled an informed interpretation of the meaning their work might carry. The findings obtained through the reading of images have ultimately served to better understand how the context of art production present in Czechoslovakia had shaped the development of art photography practices during the period of study. In addition, the study has also served to integrate 'horizontally' the photographic history of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia within a broader art-historical narrative of photography practices that had been simultaneously developed in the 'West'.

Having discussed the theoretical background and explained the research methods applied throughout, the next chapter will be dedicated to delimiting the meaning of 'art photography' practices in the context of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia (1968-1989). From there on, the following chapters are dedicated to analysing the work of selected photographers through various case studies, while discussing the context in which such works were produced. These core chapters have been divided into 'photographic categories' according to the style and topics explored by the authors. These include: Social Documentary Photography, Subjective Documentary Photography, 'Visualism' and Photography and Conceptual Art.

CHAPTER 2 //

THE AUTONOMOUS PHOTOGRAPH:

ART PHOTOGRAPHY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA



Figure 2.1. Jaromír Funke, 'Untitled', from the series *Time Persists*, 1932, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

1. Introduction

The primary objective of this thesis is to understand the relationship between the works produced by Czech and Slovak art photographers and the shifting context of art production present in their country between 1968 and 1998. Prior to the analysis of individual case studies, it is essential to establish and define the nature of the specific type of photographic practices the thesis will be dealing with. This chapter is therefore dedicated to defining what the term ‘art photography’ meant in the context of communist Czechoslovakia.

As a starting point, it is important to understand that for local art photographers working during communist times in the country, the fact their practice was or not considered ‘art’ seemed to lack importance. While their USA counterparts were witnessing the consolidation of photography’s art status through the opening of the legendary exhibition *Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955, Czechoslovakian photographers were focused in surviving the repression of a totalitarian regime and negotiating all sorts of creative strategies to guarantee the continuation of their photographic practice. In fact, according to Czech historian Vladimír Birgus, with the exception of conceptual artists, Czechoslovakian photographers did not call – or considered themselves - as ‘art photographers’, ‘fine art photographers’ or ‘artists’ (working with photography). Nor did the State ever consider photography as a form of ‘high art’.¹ But the fact that neither side considered photography a form of art does not mean that the debate around the functioning of *de facto* art photography practices at the time lacks interest. On the contrary, as I will explain through this chapter, it seems that the impossibility of photography to be identified as art in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia constitutes a key aspect to understand the conditions in which the media operated during this period. In any case, the attempt to evaluate and offer a definition of art photography practices *a posteriori*, from a non-Czech or Slovak perspective, carries several complexities.

The first problem is certainly a linguistic one, not only because the roots of Czech and Slovak languages are far too distant from English, but because the terminology applied to define photographic practices in Czechoslovakia differs substantially from that commonly used in the UK. Furthermore, the meaning of ‘art’ may shift when trying to identify work produced in different historical periods. As expressed repeatedly by a number of art historians from Eastern Europe like Piotr Piotrowski, in order to write the history of East European Art, it is essential to abandon ‘universal’ definitions provided by Western art canons and re-define key concepts according to the specificities and cultural context of each East European country. This, claims the author, would allow us to write a ‘horizontal’ History of Art in the region, where the micro-

¹ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

histories of each territory are no longer defined by the centre – namely the West – and therefore placed ‘vertically’ in the periphery of a global History of Art.²

It appears therefore essential to establish at this point an initial clarification in the present use of the term ‘art photography’ in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In this sense, we shall start by explaining that this is precisely the denomination currently chosen by most influential Czech and Slovak historians, including Antonín Dufek, Vladimír Birgus or Jan Mlčoch, when referring – in their translated texts in English – to the concrete photographic practices which are the object of the present research.³ A different terminology however, can also be found in other Czechoslovakian writings on photography, which identify such practices with ‘artistic photography’ – in Czech ‘*výtvarná fotografie*’.⁴ This term, initially used by Czechoslovakian amateur photographers in the late 1800s to differentiate commercial photography from that produced through a ‘unique artistic vision’, is sometimes used in the present days as a synonym of ‘creative photography’ with the aim of distinguishing contemporary practices from traditional documentary photography.⁵ Such differentiation however, which is currently disregarded by the main Czech and Slovak photo-historians, constitutes a narrow way of thinking about the subject, since documentary photography practices have indeed led the development of art photography in the region since the early twentieth century. Consequently, given that, on the one hand, the term ‘art photography’ is the most commonly used in the translated English version of recent Czech and Slovak literature, and on the other hand, that such a concept offers a greater inclusion of the different photography genres developed within its scope, it appears clear that this is also how we should refer to the practices at stake throughout the thesis.

In addition to Piotrowski’s advice, which relates to the use of specific, ‘local’ art concepts, a parallel suggestion is offered in the publication *Photography: Crisis of History*, edited by Joan Fontcuberta, where different authors review the methods traditionally used in the writing of a history of photography and highlight the presence of a multiplicity of micro-histories; each of which might reveal indeed a different story.⁶ In its introductory chapter, the editor highlights that:

² Piotrowski, P., ‘The Geography and History of Art in Eastern Europe’, in *The Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 11-32.

³ Some of the texts referred to here include: Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, Dufek, A., *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011 and Dufek, A., ‘The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography’, in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011.

⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Lyrical Tendencies, Surrealism, Art Informel and Staged Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 169.

⁵ When speaking about ‘traditional documentary photography’, I refer here to the photography movement which since its beginning in the early 1930s has often aimed to depict social realities avoiding an over-arrangement (or excessive intervention) in the photographed scene.

⁶ Fontcuberta, J., (ed.), *Photography: Crisis of History*, Barcelona: Actar, 2002.

Histories, like any other human product, are governed by conventions, beliefs and circumstances of time and place. The deconstruction of the historiographic discourse thus becomes an indispensable previous condition.⁷

If we are to define what art photography *was* in communist Czechoslovakia, we need therefore to understand the cultural, ideological and political conditions that shaped the idea of photography as art, conditions that vary substantially from those present in other parts of the world and which consequently attribute a different meaning to the terminology at stake. It is not my intention however, to compare here what art photography means in the West versus the East, since the complexity of such debate would probably take us to conclusions void of any practical use for the purpose of this research, but rather to establish what art photography meant in communist Czechoslovakia, that is: what was its nature, who were the actors and through which institutions did these concrete photographic practices manifest and operate between 1968 and 1989.

In order to achieve such a mission, the chapter starts by exposing the origins of Czechoslovakian art photography and the establishment of the different institutions through which the media operated during the twentieth century. This initial discussion allows us to further investigate how the activity of photography institutions shifted due to the convulsive political changes the country underwent during the twentieth century. I will then move on to analyse the concrete functioning of the medium during the times of Normalisation (1968-1989). Censorship mechanisms will be scrutinised alongside underground photography activities with the aim of clarifying what it really meant to work in the official – versus the unofficial – photography scene. Finally, the chapter concludes by offering an informed re-definition of the content of art photography during the last two decades of communist rule in the country.

2. Czechoslovakian Art Photography. The Origins (1889-1948)

2.1. Amateur Photography. From Pictorialism to 'New' (Modern) Photography

According to Czech photography historian and curator Antonín Dufek, the split between art and non-art photography in the Czechoslovakian territory took place in the late 1800s in the heart of amateur camera clubs.⁸ These amateur photographers were keen to defend a style that would differentiate them from 'business' photographers by every means possible.⁹ Art photography was meant to liberate itself from the seeming uniformity of mechanical procedure, that is, to

⁷ Fontcuberta, J., 'Revisiting the Histories of Photography', in Fontcuberta, J., (ed.), *Photography: Crisis of History*, Barcelona: Actar, 2002, p. 15.

⁸ Dufek, A., 'The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography', in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, p. 63.

⁹ These so-called business photographers Dufek refers to, earned a living by making mainly family portraits, *cartes de visite* or cabinet photographs for local businessmen.

avoid the mere ‘copying of reality’ and offer an ‘artistic seeing’ of the subject matter. Light, tonality and the use of soft focus became key aspects if one aimed to produce an ‘original’ photograph through a ‘unique’ vision (figure 2.2). Latter manipulations of oil, bromoil and gum prints, offered a painterly look that served as an additional argument for the acknowledgement of photography as art.¹⁰ In Czechoslovakia – as well as in other parts of Central Europe like Hungary, Austria or Poland – artistic photography was therefore a synonym of the international photography movement ‘Pictorialism’; a term derived from the thought of Henry Peach Robinson, British author of ‘Pictorial Effect in Photography’ (1869).¹¹ The concrete term ‘Pictorialism’ however, was not used in Czechoslovakia until the early 1920s, when the movement was indeed practically over. Until that date Czechoslovakian amateur photographers still referred to this practice as ‘artistic photography’. It was then thanks to Dahomír J. Růžička, a New York Doctor from Czech origin and a member of the Pictorial Photographers of America that the term ‘Pictorialism’ started to be commonly used in the country. In 1921, Růžička arrived in Prague and presented himself with an exhibition of his pictorial photographs alongside the work of other North American photographers like Doris Hulman and Edward Weston. His images belonged to the ‘Straight Photography’ movement, which in Czechoslovakia received the name of purist (modern) Pictorialism (figure 2.3).¹²



Figure 2.2. Jaroslav Feyfar, *Cherry Tree Lane near Mříčná*, 1907-10, Pigment Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

¹⁰ Dufek, A., ‘The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography’, in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, p. 64.

¹¹ Robinson, H. P., ‘Pictorial Effect in Photography’, Piper and Carter: London, 1869.

¹² Dufek, A., *Full Spectrum*, p. 67.

This 'new' Pictorialism, introduced by Růžička, changed the face of art photography in Czechoslovakia. He became a role model and teacher for many young photographers, including the great Jaromír Funke and Josef Sudek. Růžička introduced them to technical innovations in the use of silver gelatin, through which they could achieve outstanding results without further manipulation of the prints. Although the visual aspects of 'old' *Art Nouveau* Pictorialism, such as light, tonality and soft focus, were still present in the aesthetics of the photograph, by rejecting a manipulation of the print this new style aimed to concentrate in the 'origin', that is; in preserving the 'photographic truth' of the subject matter. But Růžička not only disseminated his technical and conceptual knowledge of the medium to young Czechoslovakian photographers, he also contributed widely to the promotion of art photography by sharing his know-how in the functioning of photographic salons.¹³ The photography exhibitions and amateur competitions that took place within these salons, together with the publication of numerous photographic journals by different camera clubs, such as 'Fotografický obzoev' – with a circulation of over 7,600 copies – placed amateur photographers at the centre of the development of photography in interwar Czechoslovakia. By 1932, the Association of Czechoslovakian Amateur Photographers had 5,500 registered members, distributed in over a hundred photography clubs.¹⁴



Figure 2.3.,Dahomír J. Růžička, *When we Were Little Boys (Boys by the Riverside)*, 1917, Platinum Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

¹³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Pictorialism to Modern Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 35.

¹⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p. 64.

2.2 'New Photography' and Modern Art Practices

By 1920, Pictorialism had been consolidated as the most influential photography movement in the country, but Czechoslovakian photographers were highly experimental and soon turned the medium into an important engine for the development of modern art. Visual artists interested in Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism found in photography an innovative material to explore visual language. Its technical possibilities allowed endless experimentation that seemed to serve modern art aspirations like no other medium.¹⁵ In 1923, soon after 'new' Pictorialism had arrived in Prague through Růžička, modern photographic practices engaged with 'New Photography' started to emerge. These photographers rejected romantic, spectral scenes developed by the pictorialist. Instead, they emphasised realism and precision in the depiction of the subject matter – often of industrial or technical nature.

The path to modern photography in Slovak lands was slower and less intense than the work produced in the rest of the country. According to photo-historian Václav Macek, it was not until the late 1920s that the modernist movement evolved slowly in this territory.¹⁶ As the historian explains, one of the main precursors of modernist photography in Bratislava was Jaromír Funke, who led the photography department at the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava between 1931 and 1935. One of his students, Miloš Dohnány, became one of the most important representatives of 'New Photography' in Bratislava (figure 2.4). Once Funke left the city, Dohnány continued his legacy teaching at YMCA Photo-club, where various photographers like Jaroslav Horák, Juraj Jurkovič or the celebrated Viliam Malík followed his modernist steps.¹⁷

Czechoslovakian New Photography developed in Slovakia was influenced by a rich mixture of photographic movements that were being developed at the time in different countries, including Russian Constructivism, German New Objectivity or American Straight Photography (figure 2.5). This was due in part to the arrival of German and Russian artists who had been exiled to Czechoslovakia during the interwar period, which promoted the development of an international artist network.¹⁸ The theories on 'New Vision' fostered by László Moholy-Nagy – a firm believer in the power of photography to improve our aesthetic sense – also had an important effect in the development of modern Czechoslovakian Photography. His work was shown in several solo exhibitions around the country and published by various magazines alongside the work of other Bauhaus photographers.¹⁹

¹⁵ Tausk, P. 'The Roots of Modern Photography in Czechoslovakia', in *History of Photography Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 3, Taylor and Francis, 1979, pp. 253-271.

¹⁶ Interview with art historian and curator Macek Václav, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 12/09/2016, Bratislava.

¹⁷ Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925-2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001, pp. 66-79.

¹⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the theoretical background of modern photography in Czechoslovakia, see 'The Development of a Subjective View in Czechoslovakian Photography' in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

¹⁹ See Moholy-Nagy, L., *Painting Photography and Film*, 1925, London: MIT Press, Reprint Edition 1987.



Figure 2.4. Miloš Dohnány, *Avion*, 1935, Gelatine Silver Print, Photographic Reproduction from Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925-2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001.



Figure 2.5. Jaromír Funke, *After the Carnival*, 1924, Gelatine Silver Print, Private Collection, Prague, Reproduction from the book, Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

2.3 Art Photography in the Visual Culture



Figure 2.6. Jaroslav Rössler, Advertising Photograph, 1931,
Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

The aesthetic principles of Czechoslovakian 'New Photography' had a huge impact in other aspects of visual culture. Its application was by no means restricted to *the arts*. Advertising and press photography took advantage of the possibilities of this innovative visual language. As a consequence, the separation between photography as art and other 'un-artistic' uses of the medium was not always clear. It was often the case that established art photographers, such as Josef Sudek or Jaroslav Rössler, would undertake commercial assignments (figure 2.6). The aesthetics of advertising photography were deeply discussed at a theoretical level and taught in the main art schools of the country.²⁰ Likewise, press photography was nourished with the artistic development of the medium, especially since the arrival of hand-held cameras in the 1920s, which although still distanced a lot from the compact cameras used by street photographers in the 1960s, thanks to their lighter weight and a wider aperture offered by modern lenses, made documentary photography a fast growing genre. Numerous magazines started to publish photo-essays that were often used to reveal the poor situation of peasants or the terrible working conditions of labourers; a style also known as 'Humanist Photojournalism' (figure 2.7). Some of these social photographers, who worked under the auspices of the Left Front; an anti-Nazi organisation which operated between 1929 and 1933, would later work for emerging communist leaders that used this visual evidence to claim a long-needed change of order.²¹

The extraordinary accumulation of favourable conditions present in Czechoslovakia in the first half of the twentieth century set the scenario for the proliferation of art photography. The proof of this is the astonishing number of art photographers that emerged from a relatively small territory. But the rapid development of photography across Czechoslovakia during the interwar period would soon suffer a profound discontinuity. Following the Nazi invasion of the country in 1939 and the establishment of the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the new government closed most Czechoslovakian periodicals and magazines, substituting them for various pro-Nazi publications filled with German propaganda. Some Jewish Czech photographers were sent to concentration camps while others, like the Czech Zdeněk Tmej, were deported to forced labour camps. For those photographers who remained in Czech and Slovak lands, there was not much choice but to devote themselves to depict mundane aspects of life.²²

²⁰ See Bloch, M. and Ambrosi, V., 'Photography in Advertising and Neuberts's Photogravure' Prague: V. Noubert a synové, 1933.

²¹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Documentary Photography and photojournalism Before 1918', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 23-37.

²² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, pp. 125-136.

The establishment of a communist system in 1948 after the liberation of the country by Soviet troops in 1945 did not improve the situation in the photography scene.²³ From there on, the medium underwent an enormous change that influenced the country's photographic production for the following decades.



Figure 2.7. Tibor Honty, 'Hounded', 1939, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

²³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 190-195.

3. Socialist Realism and the Social Function of Photography (1948-1957)



Figure 2.8. Oldřich Rakovec, *I Want to be Like Him!*, First half of the 1950s, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

The shift to a totalitarian communist regime in 1948 affected all aspects of public and private life. The triumph of the proletarian revolution was to become everyone's objective, and artistic practices would not escape such a fate. On the contrary, the visual arts turned into an essential tool through which to educate the masses on the principles and values of Communism, to transform their consciousness and ultimately change social reality.

Since the establishment of the new order in February 1948, the new Czechoslovakian government gradually nationalised printers, publishers and photographic studios, which were forced to be handed over to the state-run Photography Cooperative. Amateur photography clubs were dismantled and transferred to the Revolutionary Trade-union. Many periodicals were either closed down or put into the hands of new editors-in-chief carrying out ideological orders from the communist power. Censorship mechanisms were soon up and fully running. The authorities started to demand of photographers the application of Socialist Realism and the propaganda function of photography, which often consisted in the production of arranged *tableaux vivants* depicting the happy life of workers and enhancing the figure of the revolutionary hero (figure 2.8). This shift in the working conditions of photographers led to a break in the continuity of modern photography in Czechoslovakia. Those producing surreal, abstract or social documentary work began to be labelled *bourgeois* and were deeply criticised for being untruthful to the idea of reality as defined by the communist power.²⁴ Nudes, still life or anything that could give the impression being 'experimental' was banned from being published or exhibited. Photographers willing to earn a living with their images had to subdue themselves to their conception of 'photographic-workers' and join the Czechoslovakian Union of socialist Photography, the institution in charge of overseeing the correct application of Socialist Realism. But due in part to the friendly relations of photographer Josef Sudek with painters and sculptors, a separate photography section was soon established as well within the Centralised Union of Czechoslovakian Artists, which allowed them to work as freelancers and maintain a certain artistic independence in comparison to the members of the Union of Socialist Photography. The inclusion of some photographers in the Artist Union however was deeply criticised by many, including communist photography editor František Čihák, who understood that by being closer to the fine arts, these photographers would emphasise more the aesthetics of the photograph than its revolutionary content.²⁵ But despite the critics and constant difficulties encountered, the photography section within the Artist Union managed to remain open throughout the four decades of communist rule that followed.

²⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 149.

²⁵ Čihák, F., as quoted by Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p 152. Originally published in 'Fotografové vitvarnici', *Nová fotografie*, 1959, pp. 124-129,

In 1950, one of the most popular photography journals, 'Ceskoslovenska fotografie' (Czechoslovakian Photography), was inevitably shut down and replaced by the official 'Nová fotografie' (New Photography). As expressed in the 'Statement of Intent' published in the magazine's first issue, the publication aimed to 'confront workers in photography with the problems connected to contemporary events in society, our socialist-building projects, the needs of socio-political and cultural education and our efforts to maintain a lasting peace'.²⁶ The journal put therefore the main emphasis on the ideological element of photographs, while it exposed the reactionary nature of socially indifferent *bourgeois* photography. Two theory books on the subject were also published between 1951 and 1952: 'Socialistická Fotografie' (Socialist Photography) and 'Thema v Nové Fotografii' (Topics in New Photography).²⁷ But the strict ideological applications the former suggested were heavily criticised even by left-wing editor Lobomír Linhart, who in an article published in 1952 in 'Nová Fotografie', declared that the book constituted a total relapse and was 'almost inhuman towards everything that had been so far achieved in photography'.²⁸ For Linhart, 'Thema v Nové Fotografii' had indeed gone too far in establishing the aesthetic and methodological approach photographers should follow, leaving no space for personal creativity and reducing the meaning of photography solely to its ideological component.

The application of harsh Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakian photography however, had a very short sort life. In 1953, after the death of Stalin and his Czechoslovakian disciple, President Klement Gottwald, a moderate liberalisation of the art scene took place with the political lead of Antonín Zápotocký. Although socially-engaged topics were still predominant in exhibitions, periodicals and amateur competitions, the strict aesthetic rules from the previous period were relaxed and the range of possible subject matter was expanded. The so-called socialist photographers abandoned the treatment of great social topics and focused their attention on everyday poetics. Through a rather candid and optimistic gaze, these photographers depicted mundane moments of everyday life in the humanist spirit of the exhibition 'The Family of Man'; curated by Edward Steichen for the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1955 (figure 2.9). The American exhibition, which received a positive review in the Czechoslovakian press, was a clear influence for many Czechoslovakian photographers of the 'real-life'.²⁹

²⁶ 'Statement of Intent', *Nová Fotografie*, 1950, n 1, p. 1, as reproduced by Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 149.

²⁷ See *Socialistická fotografie*, Prague: Prace, 1951 and Doležal, F., *Thema v Nové Fotografii*, Prague: Osveta, 1952.

²⁸ Linhart, L., *Nova Fotografie, 1952, no. 11*, as quoted by Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p.151.

²⁹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p.152.



Figure 2.9. Milada Einhornová, from the book *Ricky's Adventures in the Big City*, Before 1958, Gelatine Silver Print, Private Collection, Prague, reproduction from the book Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

The greatest exponent of fine art photography developed during this period was probably Josef Sudek. His still lives produced throughout the 1950s acquired extraordinary recognition. The city of Prague was also a central topic for the artist. In fact, he was known as ‘the poet of Prague’. In 1959, he published *Panoramic Prague*; a book containing nearly three hundred panoramic photos of the city and its outskirts (figure 2.10). Sudek was one of the few photographers who were able to publish their work in a book form during communist times, something that favoured the dissemination of his photographs outside Czechoslovakian frontiers; ‘Panoramic Prague’ for instance, was also published in French, English and German. By the time of his death in 1976, Sudek had published the astonishing amount of sixteen books. Thanks to the success of his monograph, *Josef Sudek*, printed in 1956 with a ‘politically correct’ forward by Lubomír Linhart, a series of art photography books, *Umělecká fotografie*, were published by the official editorial SNKLHU (State Publisher of Literature, Music and Art).³⁰



Figure 2.10. Josef Sudek, Untitled, Undated, (Hradčany seen from the Strahov Monastery), Silver Gelatine Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

4. The Short Sweet Decade (1957-1967)

Three years after the death of Stalin in 1953, Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev gave his legendary ‘Secret Speech’, where he criticised Stalin’s cult of personality and specifically condemned the purges that had mistakenly ended with the life of hundreds of thousands of comrades across the Bloc. The new Soviet president introduced a slow political thaw in the Soviet Union, forcing East European nations to undergo a process of de-Stalinisation and follow specific reformist measures dictated from Moscow. In Czechoslovakia, a gradual political thaw was initiated since 1957 with President Antonyn Novotny. A new period of reforms soon started and as censorship mechanisms were relaxed, journalists, intellectuals and artists felt more confident to enquire about the weakness of the system. It was now possible to challenge the censor in court and in general terms, a wider, open debate was also possible on certain issues.³¹

³⁰ Linhart, L., *Josef Sudek: Fotografie*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1956.

³¹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 268-319.

4.1 Liberalisation of the Artistic Scene

From 1957, under the lead of President Antonín Novotný, the arts experienced a considerable liberalisation. A ‘cautious’ rehabilitation of Czechoslovakian avant-garde artists from the interwar period – whose work had been rejected by the Stalinists for being *bourgeois* and incomprehensible to the masses – took place during the following decade. Thanks to the ‘opening’ of the artistic scene, these artists had again the opportunity to show their work in public venues. Various exhibitions showing avant-garde art were produced in 1957 and 1958, including the ‘First State-wide Exhibition of Czechoslovakian Art Photography’ in Prague in 1957. The Czechoslovakian pavilion at Expo 58 in Brussels, which showed work from several art photographers like Jan Lucas or Alexander Paul, confirmed the return – at least for that decade – of Czechoslovakian artists to the international context. The experience of Expo 58 was of great importance for the development of photography during the following period, since the participating artists had the opportunity to increase their awareness of new photographic trends that were being developed outside their country’s frontiers.³²



Figure 2.11. Jan Saudek, *Czechoslovakia 1968*, 1968, Silver Gelatine Print, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

Thanks to the relaxation of the artistic repression between 1957 and 1968, several artists’ groups formed by amateur photographers emerged around the country, such as ‘DOFO’ Olomuc, the ‘Vox’ group in Brno or ‘Profil’ in Valašské Meziř. Avant-garde tendencies, like

³² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Lyrical Tendencies, Surrealism, Art Informel and Staged Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 173.

Abstract and Surrealist photography, were again widely explored during this period.³³ One of the most important Czechoslovakian photographers of this decade was Jan Saudek. His provocative staged images were an inspiration for the younger generation of Czechoslovakian photographers who explored the infinite possibilities of self-expression offered by this growing 'staged photography' trend (figure 2.11). In contrast to the candid and poetic staged scenes depicted by the pictorialists, these younger generation of photographers often applied irony and humour in their theatrical representations. This style achieved a prominent position during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) and it is still, to the present day, a signature of Czechoslovakian art photography, with artists like Miroslav Švolík or Tono Stano who have continued to develop this tradition.³⁴

4.2 Photography Publications under the Thaw

It was not just the work of photographers that enjoyed a great expansion during this period. The institutions through which photography operated had also benefitted from the new liberal cultural atmosphere of the 1960s. A number of new photography journals and periodicals started to publish art photography, such as the quarterly *Revue Fotografie*, folded in 1995, and the weekly periodical *Mladý svět*. While the former, directed by Daniela Mrázková, managed to publish a wide variety of photographic content that often distanced the lines of the state's artistic policy, the latter was directly controlled by the official Czechoslovakian Association of the Young; a circumstance that hindered the possibility of publishing any work that could be considered critical.³⁵ Within the publishing arena, several photography books showcasing the work of international practitioners were also printed during this period. After a meeting in Paris in 1956 with French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, curator Anna Fárová published a book with his work through the state publishing house SNKLHU. The book was widely distributed and hugely welcomed by documentary photographers. The publication of this book marked an important event in the History of Czechoslovakian photography, since from then on, the state-run editorial presented numerous books with the works of photographers from all over the world.³⁶ Simultaneously, books from Czechoslovakian documentary photographers were also being printed and distributed by the state, some of which – like *Hellas* (1958), *Naples* (1960) and *Athens* (1965), produced by Jan Lukas - were mainly published for the Western European market.³⁷ But unlike the books containing the work of international photographers,

³³ Dufek, A., 'The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography', in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, pp. 76-78.

³⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Minimalism to Postmodernism', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 254.

³⁵ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, pp. 197-198.

³⁶ Chuchma, J., 'Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha – PRO pp. 40-41.

³⁷ See Lukas, J., *Hellas*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1958, Lukas, J., *Naples*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1960 and Lukas, J., *Athens*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1964.

which offered a monograph of their artistic production, the publication of national photography was done – with the exception of Sudek’s monograph from 1956 – following a thematic approach. This strategy served somehow the state’s principles with regards to the practical uses of photography and their application to reflect on everyday life. Examples of these thematic publications include Vilém Heckel’s books on mountain climbing like *The Caucasus Expedition* (1965) or *Mountains and People* (1964) (figure 2.12).³⁸



Figure 2.12. Vilém Heckel, *The Caucasus Expedition*, 1962, Gelatine Silver Print, Collection of Eva and Helena Heckelová, Reproduction from the book Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

³⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 23-37; p.155. See Vilém Heckel’s publications in Heckel, V., *Expedice Kavkaz*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1965 and Heckel, V., *Hory a lidé*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1964

4.3 The Emergence of New Photography Galleries and the Establishment of Public Photographic Collections

The conception of photography as ‘art’ in Czechoslovakia was, without doubt, reinforced between 1957 and 1968. In December of 1957, Fotochema Galerie, the first art gallery in Europe which specialised in photography, opened its doors in Prague. The following year, a permanent photography exhibition, the Jaromír Funke Photography Section, *Kabinet*, was established in Brno House of Arts. The collection of photographs from this section served as an inspiration for what would later become the largest photographic collection of Czechoslovakia at the Moravian Gallery in Brno. This collection was established in 1962 under the chairmanship of photo historian Rudolf Skopek. During the first years, a National Biennale of Photography served as a basis for the gallery’s acquisitions. The show was free to enter by any amateur photographer. A maximum of two works could be acquired from each photographer at a price set unilaterally by the Moravian Gallery. Most photographers however donated unselected photographs too, which enabled the collection to grow at an astonishing speed. The last exhibition of this type was held in 1973, from there on, a permanent acquisition committee remained in charge of buying photographs; most of the times at a rather symbolic price.³⁹ In this regard the Moravian Gallery acted somehow as a substitute for the private art market; inexistent during communist times.

4.4 Dilo Shops: The Art Trade Monopoly under Communism

Apart from selling their work to the Moravian Gallery – and from 1970 to the collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague – art photographers also had the opportunity to offer their works through the state’s art sale monopoly Dilo (Works). These shops offered a selection of artworks produced by Czechoslovakian visual artists, including paintings, engravings or sculptures, but also a wide range of hand-crafted goods like jewellery or pottery. The ‘Dílo’ organisation was managed by the Czechoslovakian Fund of Visual Arts, established in 1954 and directed by the Central Union of Czechoslovakian Artists. This Fund guaranteed a centralised control of the production and distribution of artworks, as well as an effective supervision over the artist’s income. The selection of works sold at Dilo shops was made by an art board according both to their artistic quality and most importantly, to an ‘appropriate’ ideological content.⁴⁰ The price paid for those artworks however was very low and photographs were usually difficult to sell compared to paintings or ‘crafts’. Besides, not every photographer was allowed to offer their work for sale even if it complied with the Regime’s ideological

³⁹ Dufek, A., ‘Half a Century of The Moravian Gallery in Brno’, in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ Michl, J., *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art forms in Czechoslovakia*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, p. 37.

framework. In order to access the 'Dílo scheme' it was imperative to hold an artist freelance licence.⁴¹ Initially, this licence could only be obtained by members of the Central Union of Czechoslovakian Artists who had graduated in art from an academic institution. Later on, this requisite was no longer applicable and artists with a lower level of studies could register at the Fund by recommendation from a member of the Union.⁴²

4.5 Photography Arrives to the Academy

One of the most important impulses for Czechoslovakian art photography in the second half of the twentieth century arrived in 1960 with the introduction of a photography programme at FAMU (Film and Television School at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), which alongside the School of Visual Arts in Leipzig, were the only two academic institutions in the Eastern Bloc where photography could be studied at a graduate level.⁴³ The promoter of this programme was the Slovak photographer Ján Šmok, who despite being a member of the Communist Party, allowed a very free atmosphere for students to explore a wide range of photographic topics. One of his best pupils, Vladimír Birgus, recounts how the photography section within FAMU was a true 'island of freedom'. As he explains, on occasions, some students got into trouble for showing 'politically incorrect' photographs at their final degree show. When this occurred, Šmok would step forward to protect these students arguing that 'they were just young artists willing to experiment and whose work should not be taken as a serious offense to communist principles'.⁴⁴

Before photography started to be taught at FAMU, its learning usually occurred either through workshops at camera clubs or in the form of apprenticeships alongside professional photographers. On the practical side, the benefit of studying at FAMU was that the students could join the photography section at the Union of Czechoslovakian Artists and obtain a freelance licence. Such a licence allowed them to undertake public photography commissions, work for the press and sell their works through 'Dílo' shops.⁴⁵ Acquiring such a licence

⁴¹ The acquisition of photographs through the public collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno represented an exception to the general rule that required photographers to hold a freelance licence in order to sell their artwork to the state. Amateur photographers produced many of the photographs bought by this gallery. This was the case for example of Miroslav Machotka and Jaromír Čejka, whose work was acquired by the Museum during communist times despite none of them were members of the Central Union of Czechoslovakian Artists, nor were they registered in the Fund.

⁴² Michl, J., *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art Forms in Czechoslovakia*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, p. 38.

⁴³ 'Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst' is the original German name of the Leipzig School of Visual Arts.

⁴⁴ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁴⁵ Being a freelance worker in communist Czechoslovakia was a privilege that most employees could have never dreamed of. The reason for such concession lays in the fact that the 'right to work' for every citizen was understood as an unavoidable 'work duty'. After the age of fifteen, unless a person was a registered student or a married woman, being unemployed constituted a serious criminal offence punishable with prison. Regular police checks controlled citizens' employment cards, stamped with the details of their current employer. Since most artists would be constantly changing their work placement, this rare freelance licence guaranteed their inclusion in the legal side of

however was not automatically guaranteed after graduation. A purposely-convened panel formed by members of the Communist Party and the Central Union of Czechoslovakian Artists were in charge of making the final decision on the individual's convenience of becoming a freelancer. Such decision was taken through an oral examination – or rather interview – with the student. The process was designed to evaluate the photographer's intentions to subdue themselves to socialist principles. Despite whether they did or did not truly intend to follow such principles, most had no difficulties in showing an 'obedient attitude' in front of the panel.⁴⁶ After all, this type of cynical behaviour was a common place during communist times.⁴⁷

According to one of the school's students, photographer and historian Vladimír Birgus, on the artistic side the photography programme at FAMU served as a powerful platform for discussion and a source of collective inspiration. The quality of its teaching programme, the prestige of its lecturers and the space for artistic experimentation guaranteed by the head of the department, offered an optimal scenario for artistic innovation. The students were introduced to the work of international photographers from the Magnum Agency, such as Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson or Ian Berry, and the New York School, like Robert Frank or William Klein. Photography historians and curators like the legendary Anna Fárová, alongside dozens of art photographers, taught their lessons in a freethinking environment.⁴⁸ In this scenario, it appeared clear that if photography was to become an academic subject it should have a theoretical background of its own. Such a mission was undertaken by Šmok, who articulated his idea of *Angelmatics*, a theory of content-based action that subscribed to semiotics.⁴⁹ Certain international theories, including texts by Susan Sontag – whose writings on photography became very popular – were also discussed at FAMU. With the creation of a separate Still Photography Department in 1975, promoted again by Šmok, the school's photography programme gained an even greater independence.⁵⁰

The opportunity of receiving such a high quality education at FAMU was greatly valued among the numerous amateur photographers in the country and other parts of the Eastern Bloc, something that made the admission process extremely selective. Only ten students would access

communist labour law. See Michl, J., *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art forms in Czechoslovakia*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ An exception to such an 'obedient' attitude was held by photographer Jaromír Čejka, who during his final exam told the panel that he refused to 'prostitute' his artwork by becoming a member of the Union. His freelance licence was of course denied and he never had the possibility of undertaking any public assignment. Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁴⁷ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, 17/11/2014.

⁴⁸ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁴⁹ According to photo-historian and curator Antonín Dufek, this theory constituted an amalgamation of modern theoretical movements, which mainly presented a summary of the type of situations photographers could find themselves in. See Dufek, A., 'The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography', in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, p. 51.

⁵⁰ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/11/2014.

the programme each academic year, many of which would later return to FAMU as lectures. Such a competitive selection process allowed Šmok to recruit the best photographic talent in the country.⁵¹ The community of art photographers who emerged from this school and the consistent level of artistic quality their work achieved, can only be compared to the extraordinary generation of art students who emerged from the German Bauhaus school – though FAMU will unfortunately always be less known in the global History of Art. With very few exceptions, like the case of Miroslav Machotka who was a completely self-taught practitioner, the majority of established Czechoslovakian art photographers who produced work from the 1960s onwards attended the photography programme at FAMU.⁵² Following the Revolution of 1989, five new graduate schools of photography were established in the Czech Republic and two more in Slovakia.

5. Art Photography under Normalisation (1968-1989)

The cultural situation during the last two decades of Communism in Czechoslovakia was marked by the Normalisation period. Following the invasion of the country by Soviet troops in August 1968, the so-called Normalisation was established in the country through the Moscow protocol and was carried out by long-term Communist Party leader Gustáv Husák. The attempts of reformism known as the ‘The Prague Spring’ (January – August, 1968), led by Czechoslovakian president Alexander Dubček, were revoked and full Party domination was re-established. Reformist leaders were progressively removed through a new wave of purges, censorship was strictly imposed and Soviet powers started to directly supervise the security apparatus. This rigid *status quo* continued for nearly twenty years until Husák’s resignation in 1987.⁵³ Under such restrictive conditions, the government ‘pacified’ the public sphere that became inaccessible to artists who were perceived as experimental and the repression of art dissidents turned especially tough during this period.⁵⁴

5.1 The Emergence of New Photographic Styles

In this scenario, amateur photographers were sought to fight tirelessly to preserve their artistic autonomy. But the harsh oppression also provoked a tension that in many ways stimulated artistic creativity. As expressed by photo historian Antonín Dufek, taking photographs constituted the true and only space of freedom for art photographers during the times of

⁵¹ Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

⁵² Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

⁵³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 336-341.

⁵⁴ Mazzone, M., ‘Drawing Conceptual Lessons from 1968’, in *Third Text*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, January 2009, pp.79-84.

Normalisation.⁵⁵ Some of them confronted the system producing work that was clearly critical with the regime. Others instead took photographs which were not regarded as dangerous and enjoyed a certain tolerance in its communication process, while a few decided to keep their work completely secret. One way or another, art photography produced since 1968 opened an alternative window to the regime's official – and utterly unrealistic – vision of the country.



Figure 2.13. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled', 1970, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Czechoslovakian documentary photography produced during this period achieved the highest status of its history. Since 1968, Husák's regime offered a picture of a false 'normalised' society, which provoked an expansive search for veracity. As a consequence, the documentary activity was no longer a way of celebrating the poetics of real life, but a means of investigating the true social reality (figure 2.13). Photographers like Jaromír Čejka working in this arena abandoned the 'decisive moment' style that seemed to take reality out of context. Instead, they developed a deeper story-telling approach in the form of visual essays.⁵⁶ This 'matured' documentary approach committed to depicting the 'true' state of society, became known as Social Documentary Photography.

⁵⁵ Dufek, A., 'Retrospect', in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

⁵⁶ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 197-248.

An 'evolution' of traditional documentary practices was being pursued by a number of photographers aiming to render the photograph subjective. Moving away from the descriptive approach embraced by nonconformist social documentary photographers, practitioners like Vladimír Birgus or Viktor Kólar explored their social concerns in a less explicit way, from a rather existential point of view. They applied an elaborate visual language in their photographs that was often impossible to decode by the authorities. Their approach in the treatment of social topics through the use of complex visual metaphors allowed them to produce highly expressive documentary work while avoiding a direct confrontation with the official power (figure 2.14).



Figure 2.14. Vladimír Birgus, *Provence*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Half way through the Normalisation period, in the early eighties, a fresh theoretical background for photography arrived in Czechoslovakia. Three photographers from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland developed during this decade a similar thesis in relation to a 'new', free vision of 'the real', with the aim of producing a contemplative reflection of their surrounding world through visual means. These were known as 'Visualism', 'Opsognomie' and 'Elementary Photography' (figure 2.15).



Figure 2.15. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Since the late 1960s, photography had started to play a decisive role in the development of Conceptual Art. Happenings and performance events were often recorded through photographs in a collaborative work between the artists and the photographer. At times, these photographs were strictly records of the staged event. On other occasions, the performers deliberately created a piece with the intention of turning the image into the final artwork (figure 2.16). The quality of these photographs was frequently disregarded in favour of the action it recorded, which often occurred briefly and secretly in isolated spaces. What ultimately mattered was the event taking place in front of the lens and the photographers' artistic ability was usually pushed into the background of the creative process.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Conceptual, Land, Body, Action and Performance Art', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 241-245.

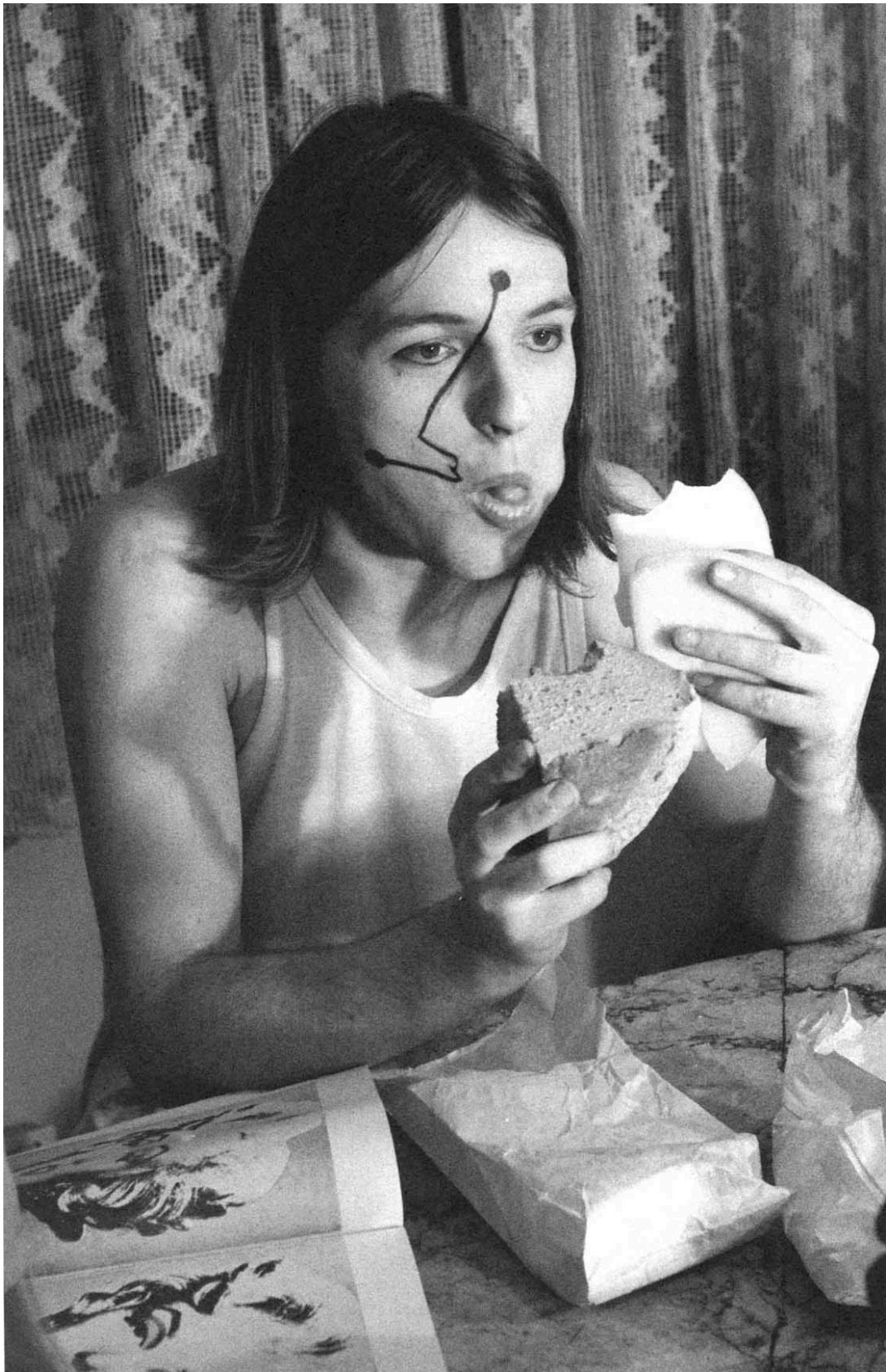


Figure 2.16. Jan Sagl, 'Preparatory for Bird Feast', 1969, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

5.2 *Censorship Mechanisms Affecting Photography under Normalisation*

It is evident that in order for censorship mechanisms to be activated there needs to be an actor ready to be censored. It appears clear that by vanishing certain content the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia reinforced their ideological principles – and thus its totalitarian power. Censored works served on the one hand to materialise a categorisation of conducts that constituted an anti-revolutionary behaviour. On the other hand, by labelling such works as subversive and attributing to their authors a threatening action towards the correct functioning of the socialist state, the power reinforced its presence as a guarantor of permanent peace. But this possibility of subversion – in so far it acknowledges as well the existence of a potential space of freedom – also allowed the actors of the art photography scene to negotiate the exercise of such freedom, while it motivated the construction a complex web of strategies to protect it.

5.2.1 Publishing Photographs

The absence of a centralised censorship organisation in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia was replaced by a series of focalised censorship mechanisms that were activated case by case by the different ‘actors in charge’. When it came to publishing images, the decision was made by the editors-in-chief of each publication, most of whom were members of the Communist Party. Their level of tolerance depended mainly on the nature of the publication; press photography for instance was a lot more restricted than art photography shown in photography journals like *Revue Fotografie*. This was probably because the first – with its illustrations of the ‘good news’ of the Czechoslovakian society – was directed to the masses, whereas the object of the second was art photography and its public was therefore far more reduced and specialised. *Czechoslovenska Fotografie*, another photography journal distributed at the time, was far more conservative in the selection of published works. Both of these journals were distributed as well in the Slovak territory, while the periodical *Výtvarnictvo – fotografie - film* published in Bratislava was rarely seen in Czech lands.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 197.

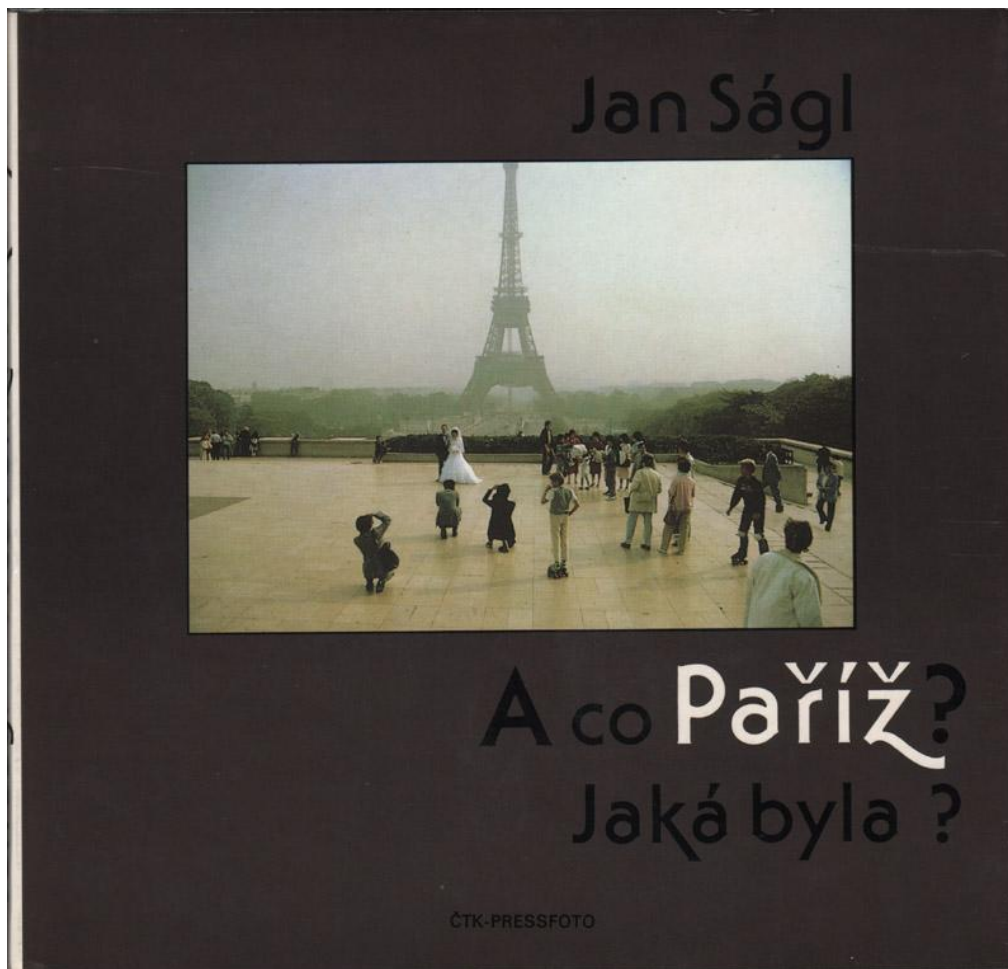


Figure 2.17. Jan SágI, *What about Paris? What was it like?*,
Book Cover, 1987, Courtesy of the Artist.

Meanwhile, the printing and distribution of art books was still in hands of the state publishing house SNKLHU – since 1966 called ‘Odeon’. Throughout the two decades of Normalisation, the editorial continued publishing work by international authors. This house also published a few books by Czechoslovakian photographers in the last years before the Velvet Revolution (1989), like Dagmar Hachová’s monograph in 1984. Another editorial, ‘Pressfoto’, which concentrated on tourist photo books of Czechoslovakia, also published some art photography during this period, but with very few exceptions, like Jiří Všeťečka’s *Pražský chodec (A Prague Flanêur, 1978)* or Jan SágI’s book of Paris *A co Paříž? Jaká byla? (What about Paris? What was it like?, 1987)*, the publication of Czechoslovakian books on art photography was very rare under Normalisation (figure 2.17).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Lyrical Tendencies, Surrealism, Art Informel and Staged Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 169.

5.2.2 The Role of the Centralised Union of Czechoslovakian Artists and the Emergence of New Independent Artists' Groups

The censorship apparatus operating at the Centralised Union of Czechoslovakian artists was led in first instance by its director and the members of the board, all of whom belonged to the Communist Party. However, as Vladimír Birgus explains, each of the Union's sections enjoyed a different level of tolerance.⁶⁰ While restrictions in painting were quite tough, the photography section enjoyed a much more liberal atmosphere. This represented a huge advantage, since each section was in charge of distributing its own grants, scholarships and work stays at the Fund (an equivalent to artistic residencies).⁶¹



Figure 2.18. Petr Klimpl, 'Mental Hospital Kroměříž, 1982', from the series *Collage*, Reproduction from the book Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

From 1968, groups of artists were banned within the Union of Czechoslovakian Artists. Nonetheless and despite the fact that leaving the Union meant losing their freelance licence – and with it any chance of working on public commissions – several groups of photographers were established throughout the Normalisation period. The most important ones were probably 'Dokument' and 'Oči' (Eyes). The first, formed in 1977 by Valdimír Birgus, Josef Pokorný and Petr Klimpl, produced an interesting documentary project, *The Productive Age*, through a style defined as 'indecisive moments', where the photographs were taken with collaborating subjects

⁶⁰ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁶¹ Michl, J., *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art forms in Czechoslovakia*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, pp. 37-38.

who often looked straight to the camera (figure 2.18).⁶² The Oči group, established the same year at the University of Transport in Žilina, Slovakia, brought together nearly twenty photographers from around the country like Karel Slach, Joseph Bohunovsky or Bohumil Kotas. Through their *Manifesto of the Mundane*, everyday life became the centre of their interest. The group even managed to publish the periodical *Dioptrie*, using very primitive printing equipment.⁶³ These types of activities were extremely dangerous in those years, since the oppression turned especially tough after a series of intellectuals signed and circulated the politically critical manifesto ‘Charter 77’.⁶⁴

5.2.3 Teaching and Learning Photography in ‘Normalised’ Czechoslovakia

With regards to the academic sphere, it has been discussed how thanks to the lead of Ján Šmok, the photography programme at FAMU constituted an ‘island of freedom’ compared for example with the cinematography department at the same school.⁶⁵ But for those lecturers who were not members of the Communist Party, a salary reduction of fifty percent was applied in all the school’s departments, something that forced many of its teachers to find a second job in order to make ends meet.⁶⁶ With regards to camera clubs, the situation was also relatively free. During this period, it was mainly technique that was being taught within these clubs with not much emphasis on style – although some lecturers from FAMU would teach photography theory at some local amateur clubs from time to time. The various competitions and exhibitions organised by these organisations were usually out of the state’s security spotlight. Finally, art photography could also be learned at the Institute of Art Photography within the Association of Czech Photographers.⁶⁷ Given the ‘independent’ nature of the institute, its teachers also enjoyed a certain level of freedom in their lectures. Although the course did not have an academic status – and therefore the students could not join the Artist Union after completing their studies – it enjoyed a high prestige among the art photography circle, with many important photographers

⁶² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 203.

⁶³ Dufek, A., ‘Documentary Photography Alternatives: Critical and Sociological Documentary Photographs’, in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

⁶⁴ In 1977, a number of intellectuals formed the Citizen’s Initiative and published the now legendary Human Rights document known as ‘Charter 77’. Its aim was not to suggest a radical shift of the system, but simply to observe that individual civil rights guaranteed in the Czechoslovakian law were being respected. By 1980, around one thousand signatures had adhered to the initiative. The movement would later become the nexus between Czechoslovakian reformers and Western sympathisers. See Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 347-348.

⁶⁵ The term ‘island of freedom’ was used by ex-student and lecturer Vladimír Birgus, when explaining the environment of freedom governing the photography department at FAMU during Normalisation. Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁶ Such was the case for example of photographer and photo-historian Vladimír Birgus, who while teaching at FAMU refused to become a member of the Communist Party and started to take official tourist picture-postcards to complement his salary reduction. Interview with Vladimír Birgus, Prague, 17/11/2014.

⁶⁷ The Association of Czech photographers was funded by photographers Jaromír Funke, Josef Sudek and Adolf Schneeberger in 1924 after being spelt from the Czech Camera Club. Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/11/2014.

coming out of its classrooms, such as the Slovaks Ivan Kováč or Helena Šišková.⁶⁸ In 1990 however and thanks to the leadership of Vladimír Birgus, the Institute acquired its long-deserved academic status as it was incorporated in the Silesian University of Opava.

5.2.4 Curating Art Photography since 1968. The work of Anna Fárová and Antonín Dufek

The difficulties for publishing, exhibiting and selling artworks in the officially sanctioned sphere stimulated the activity of independent curators and underground galleries. One of the most important figures in the Czechoslovakian art photography scene of the second half of the twentieth century was without doubt photo-historian and curator Anna Fárová (1928 – 2010). Born in Paris of Czechoslovakian parents, she returned to Prague in the late 1930s, where she graduated in Art History and Aesthetics from Prague University. Thanks to Fárová, the work of many international photographers, such as Cartier Bresson, William Klein or Robert Frank among many others, was disseminated in Czechoslovakia through the publication of dozens of articles and books. But the curator also made great efforts to publish and show the work of Czechoslovakian photographers abroad, including Josef Sudek's – with whom she had a long professional relationship – and Magnum photographer Josef Koudelka, who became her protégé in 1961 (figure 2.19). As a photography critic and curator, Anna Fárová probably had no rivals in her country. From 1962 she organised an average of three photography exhibitions per year both with national and international works. Sometimes these were done in official sites like Kabinet gallery, in the Brno House of Arts, while smaller exhibitions were also held in underground venues at peripheral art centres, foyers of cinemas or small theatres.⁶⁹

In 1970, Fárová was appointed curator of photography at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague with the aim of establishing a public photography collection. That same year she started teaching at FAMU – from where she voluntarily resigned in 1976, just before signing the controversial Human Rights appeal 'Charter 77', which aimed to observe that individual civil rights guaranteed in the Czechoslovakian law were being respected.⁷⁰ Her adherence to this document resulted in Fárová's immediate expulsion from the Museum. The redundancy letter explained that the curator 'by identifying with the slanderous campaign called 'Charter 77', which aimed against the constitutional foundations of the social state system of Czechoslovakia, had failed to carry out the social mission of the Museum and therefore should leave without any notice period in order to avoid further disruption in the working atmosphere of the whole

⁶⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 203.

⁶⁹ See Anna Fárová's biography in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha, Langhans-PRO.

⁷⁰ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 347-348.

team'.⁷¹ As a consequence Fárová vanished completely from the State-sanctioned scene. She was banned from organising public exhibitions or publishing articles under her name. However, she was, surprisingly, still permitted to publish and exhibit abroad; that same year for example, she organised two exhibitions in the UK with Sudek's work, one at The Photographers' Gallery in London and another at the Royal Photographic society in Birmingham.⁷²



Figure 2.19. Josef Koudelka, *Strážnice, Moravia, 1965*, Magnum Photos, Paris.

Her most important contribution during the last tough decade of communist rule was probably her activity as an underground photography curator in Czechoslovakia. These shows motivated photographers who would otherwise never have had the possibility of exhibiting their work in the public circuit. We could say that thanks to Fárová's efforts, the art photography scene in Czechoslovakia was in part 're-normalised'. Between 1978 and 1989, she prepared a series of exhibitions that could be divided into three different cycles. The first cycle was formed by numerous solo shows of social documentary photographers. They were presented in two rounds of nine separate exhibitions in the entrance hall of the cinema club Činoherní klub, where each photographer had the opportunity to show their work for two weeks. In 1981, a culmination of these exhibitions, 9+9, was held in the dilapidated halls of the former abbey at Plasy in west

⁷¹ Text of Fárová's redundancy letter from The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, dated 18 January 1977, as quoted by Chuchma, J., 'Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha – PRO Langhans, p.44.

⁷² See a full exhibition list by Anna Fárová at Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha, Langhans– PRO pp. 88-125.

Bohemia.⁷³ The exhibition caught international attention and even Cartier-Bresson attended the opening. These documentary photographs – some of which were highly critical with the regime – evoked, as Fárová explained in the exhibition catalogue, ‘the feeling of the country where we live, somewhere between Kafka-like metaphysics and Hašek-like absurd slapstick...in the midst of a sense of non-communication, fragmentation and search for one’s own identity’.⁷⁴ Surprisingly, although they were ignored by the local press, the show and its preceding eighteen exhibitions at Činoherní klub were not taken down by the state.

The second cycle of these exhibitions is constituted by the *11* show, which was held in the Fotochema halls in Prague. It grouped the work of eleven younger photographers – born after 1960 – whose work belonged to a particular photography genre known in Czechoslovakia as Staged Photography. These photographers moved away from social or political demands present in the *9+9* exhibition, something that some of those documentarians did not quiet alienate with (figure 2.20).

The final exhibition called *37*, took place in 1989 at in the Junior klub at Chmelnice in Prague. The show brought together authors from the previous two exhibitions plus twelve newcomers who followed either the documentary trend of *Platsy* or the post-modern style of *11*. This exhibition evidenced the social and political tension present in the days previous to the Velvet Revolution, where artists took a step forward breaking one taboo after another. At the *37* show, freedom of expression was manifested in its extreme; photographs of the police interviewing suspects were arranged alongside images of young naked bodies. It became clear that Czechoslovakia was about to suffer a dramatic change.⁷⁵

⁷³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 204.

⁷⁴ Fárová, A., ‘9 & 9’, Exhibition catalogue, Prague: private edition, 1981 as quoted by Chuchma, J., ‘Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography’, in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha, Langhans– PRO p. 51.

⁷⁵ Chuchma, J., ‘Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography’, in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha, Langhans– PRO pp. 51-52.

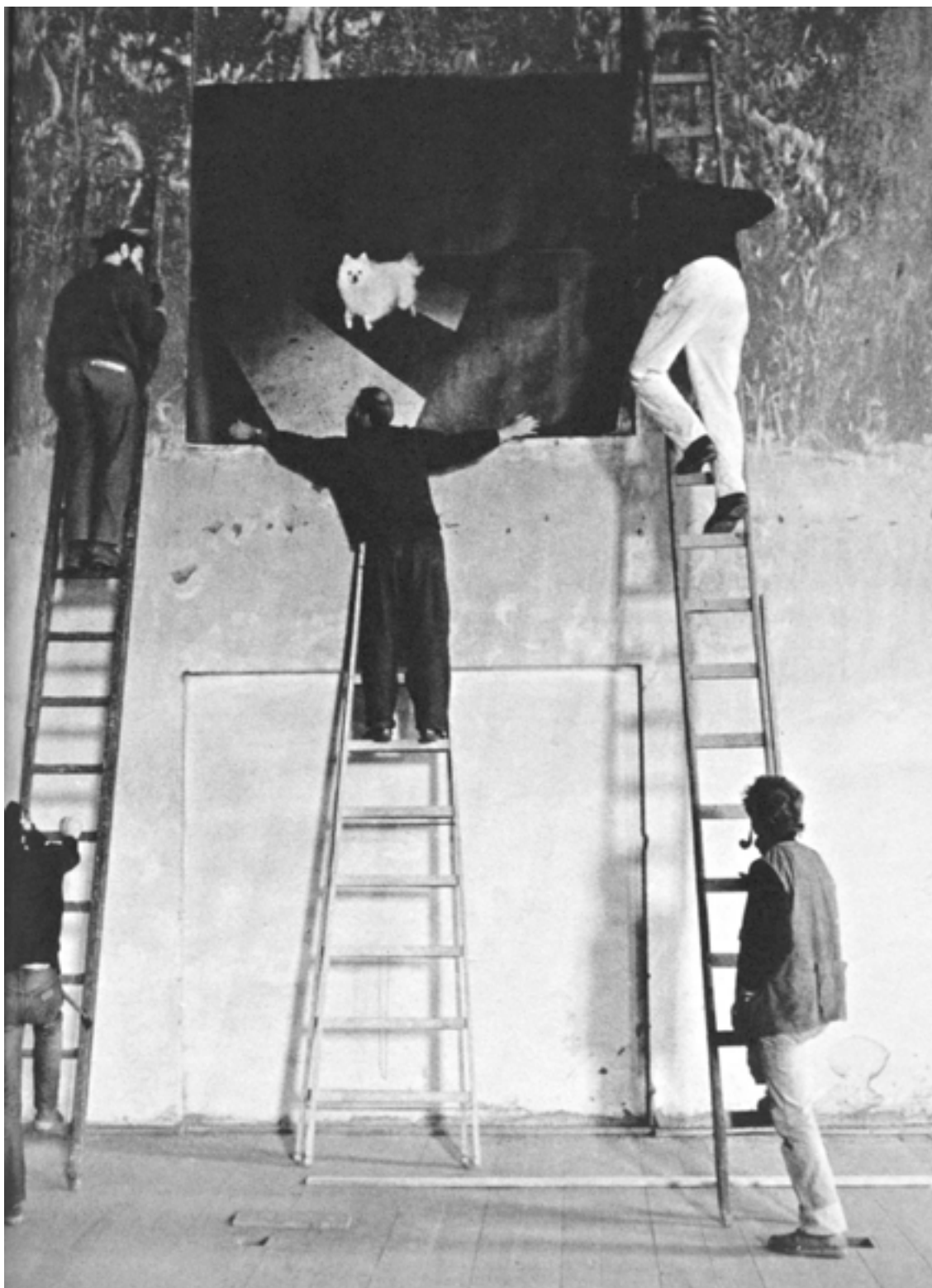


Figure 2.20. Installation of the '9+9' exhibition at Platsy, curated by Anna Fárová, 1981, Reproduction from the book Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie, Praha Langhans- PRO.

Another curator whose work was decisive in the dissemination of Czechoslovakian art photography was art historian Professor Antonín Dufek (Brno, 1943), who until the present day has organised over two hundred photography exhibitions – including the ones he co-curated – and published more than three hundred articles on art and photography. Dufek was appointed director of the photographic collection at the Moravian Gallery in Brno in 1968. Since he was never a member of the Communist Party, nor did he have any official political participation outside his artistic activities, the content of the photographs selected for the collection – as well as the works included in the Museum’s exhibitions – did not encounter ideological constraints.⁷⁶ During the times of Normalisation, Dufek organised numerous photography shows around the country, including several official exhibitions at the Moravian Gallery, but also a number of underground shows at the Fotochema halls or Galerie 4 in Cheb. He also published hundreds of articles in Slovak, Czech and international journals and edited dozens of photography books on Czechoslovakian photography from the twentieth century. Thanks to Dufek the work of many photographers was also known outside the limits of the Czechoslovakian borders. During the last decade of Normalisation, he managed to organise a series of exhibitions in Wien (1984), Frankfurt (1984) Rotterdam (1988) and London (1985).⁷⁷ The show held in the British capital was hosted by the Photographers’ Gallery under the name ‘27 Contemporary Czechoslovakian Photographers’. For the participating artists, this exhibition constituted a very important opportunity to showcase their work in what was probably already Europe’s art capital. Besides, there were all given the chance to travel to the UK – something that in 1985 remained a privilege for the great majority of Czechoslovakian citizens.

A few days before the opening however, the censorship apparatus manifested itself and attempted to boycott the show by destroying the catalogue. The reason apparently laid in the inclusion of the works of Jindřich Štreit, who was imprisoned for ten months after documenting and exhibiting photographs of the Czechoslovakian general elections of 1981. The authorities however did not arrive in time to destroy the publication and the opening of the exhibition – where the catalogue was finally for sale – proved a huge success. The former ambassador of Czechoslovakia – who also attended the private view at The Photographers’ Gallery –turned this situation to an advantage as he commented on the ‘evident freedom present in his country that allowed all sorts of photographic expression to these photographers’.⁷⁸

The work of Anna Fárová and Antonín Dufek are key to understanding the proliferation of art photography during the times of Normalisation. Their contribution to the developmet of the two

⁷⁶ Interview with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno.

⁷⁷ For a full list of Dufek’s exhibitions and publications see his complete biography in his online profile at the website of The Moravian Gallery, Brno <http://www.moravska-galerie.cz/moravska-galerie/o-galerii/veda-a-vyzkum/odborne-zivotopisy-kuratoru-mg/dufek.aspx>

⁷⁸ Interview with Antonín Dufek, 13/11/2014.

photography collections in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague and the Moravian Gallery in Brno was crucial not only for its preservation and archival mission, but also for the stimulus it offered to art photographers who would otherwise never have sold their work in the non-existent art market of the time. Thanks to both of them, the inclusion of photographs in public collections shifted from a 'pictorialist system' of amateur competitions into a discretionary selection by the Museum's acquisition committee. In addition, their role as independent curators in national and international contexts, their contribution as writers on the history and theory of photography, alongside their efforts to disseminate international works in Czechoslovakia, conferred the art photography scene with a truly stimulating atmosphere, despite the difficulties present during the Normalisation years.

It is important to note that in Slovak lands the situation was rather different. To begin with, the National Gallery in Bratislava did not start collecting photography until 1990. According to photo-historian Václav Macek, this can be explained because on the one hand, there was not an influential figure like Fárová or Dufek fighting for the status of art photography like there was in Prague or Brno. On the other hand, explains Václav, the selection board at the National Gallery was very conservative and narrow minded, so even if such figures had existed it would have been impossible for them to succeed. As a result, art photography could not be found in any official venue or as part of the public art collection in Bratislava. What we could find instead was a series of underground venues showing art photography, like Profil Gallery, directed by Ludovit Hlavac, or the numerous unofficial exhibitions that took place at the foyers of the Institute of Mathematics of the Slovak Academy of Science. In addition, the circle of conceptual artists working with photography and formed by Rudolf Sikora, Jullious Koller or Vladimir Kordos, prepared multiple exhibitions in their studios and apartments. In these cases, only fellow artists and close friends would visit the show.⁷⁹

5.2.5 Exhibiting Photographs under Normalisation

One might be rather surprised to find out how the underground exhibitions curated by Fárová and Dufek took place without much hassle from the authorities. According to photo-historian and photographer Vladimír Birgus, compared to other areas of the arts such as cinematography or literature, the state's security apparatus was not as afraid of the medium's insurgent possibilities. In other words, the Regime believed that photography's ability to turn into a subversive weapon was relatively limited.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Interview with art historian and curator Macek Václav, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 12/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁸⁰ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

The reasons for such a conception of the medium by the totalitarian regime are quite diverse. On the one hand, photography lacked the explicit power of the written word, which meant its visual message had to be decoded; something that was not often easily achieved by the authorities. To keep the message as vague as possible, photographers rarely wrote about their own work and the curators organising underground shows abstained from writing politically about it, usually offering scant information about the exhibition's topic.⁸¹ On the other hand, at this point the Regime still did not conceive of photography as a form of 'high art'. After all those years, photography was somehow considered either a hobby or a 'mechanical' profession consisting in visually reproducing a 'chosen' reality. The proof of this was the fact that the photography section within the Union of Czechoslovakian Artists was part of the Applied Arts Department and therefore separated – and differentiated – from other, 'more expressive' visual arts like painting or sculpture.⁸²

Besides, the photographic camera was a commodity widely used within the family environment. Soviet and German cameras could be acquired from the centralised state cooperative 'Interkamera' in order to take family photographs. Fuji's film was also easily accessible and professional photography labs could be found in most cities.⁸³ There was then, of course, a reasonable possibility that a member of the family would become fond of photography and perhaps join a local photo-club. Here they would learn different photographic techniques and styles in order to produce an 'artistic' photograph. With some training, these hobbyists could possibly show their work in amateur exhibitions and even end up pursuing a professional photography career. As a result of the popularity of the medium within the family and amateur environment, taking photographs and exhibiting them was a common practice in communist Czechoslovakia, and it was only through publishing work or selling it through the state art-trader 'Dílo' that censorship mechanisms were usually activated. But of course, this 'taking' of the photograph and 'exhibiting' the print had some very clear limits. For instance, the authorities did not welcome documentary photographs showing what the state considered to be a 'pessimistic' view of communist society.⁸⁴ When declared as such, they had to be removed before the exhibition opening even if they were taken and shown in a purely amateur environment with no aim of being published. The case of Czech photographer Jindřich Štreit is

⁸¹ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁸² Chuchma, J., 'Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie ,Praha Langhans– PRO p. 47.

⁸³ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/11/2014.

⁸⁴ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

an example of how dangerous it could be to exhibit critical photographs (figure 2.21).⁸⁵ But it was not only these type of photographs that were under the spotlight. The censors also carefully watched the documentation of conceptual works such as happenings and performances. Photographers working in this arena, like the Czech Jan SágI, were extremely cautious and usually kept their work in secret, completely hidden from the public scene.⁸⁶



Figure 2.21. Jindřich Štreit, *Sovinec*, 1980, Reproduction from the book Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

But beyond the discussed examples, the reality was that compared to the censorship wall that photographers encountered when it came to selling and publishing their photographs or participating in public photographic commissions, the exhibition activity outside the publicly sanctioned sphere during the years of Normalisation remained relatively fluid, as long as both the curator and the exhibitors either abstained from including works with political content or were sharp enough to carefully code the critical message their photographs might have carried.⁸⁷

5.3 Official v Unofficial Attitudes. The Middle Ground defined by 'The Grey Zone'

Immediately after the fall of Berlin's wall in 1989, art history and criticism turned its attention to the artistic production that had been produced in the Eastern Bloc for the last forty years. Dozens of museums and galleries in Western Europe and North America held exhibitions showcasing unofficial art from the ex-Soviet hemisphere. This trend however did not last very

⁸⁵ Štreit was imprisoned for ten months after documenting and exhibiting photographs of the Czechoslovakian general elections of 1981. Interview with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno.

⁸⁶ Interview with photographer Jan SágI, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Alena Saglova, 16/11/2014, Prague.

⁸⁷ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

long, and as had happened before with other 'exotic' art movements, East European art from communist times lost its hype very soon in the mid-1990s.⁸⁸

From the beginning, it was clear that the West lacked the information to truly understand the cultural products emerging from such diverse territory. As Alexander Tolnay (Director of the Municipal Gallery of Esslingen 1976-1991) pointed out in an article in 1992, Western curators and critics were looking at things in a purely political way; applying pre-conceived ideological constructions while completely ignoring the cultural diversity of Eastern Europe. According to Tolnay, in order to be able to contextualise the authentic situation of these artists, the West had to move away from a simplistic separation between the so-called official and unofficial art practices. In this sense, it became essential to gain an understanding of the frequent 'inner-migration' between the official art sphere and underground cultures that took place during communist times in each country of the former Eastern Bloc.⁸⁹

To make it even more confusing, there was a huge terminological misunderstanding. The use of adjectives like 'dissident' or 'non-conformist', seemed to imply that underground artists were openly against the established system and for that reason they were prosecuted by the authorities. While this was true for some, many of them did not communicate any explicit ideological position through their work. The use of the term 'unofficial' becomes therefore more appropriate, but we still need to avoid an oversimplification of the scene by dividing artists' attitudes into 'in-favour' and 'against'.⁹⁰

The exhibition curated in 2009 by Antonín Dufek at the Moravian Gallery in Brno offered a fantastically informed reflection of the complexities governing the photography scene during the last two decades of communist rule in the country.⁹¹ Under the plausible exhibition title 'The Third Side of the Wall', the show aimed to avoid the traditionally used dichotomy of 'pro' and 'contra', and presented art photography produced under the times of Normalisation as a complex negotiation in the photographers' search for their own identity and, overall, for the preservation of their self-respect.⁹² This constant negotiation is key to understanding how the actors in the Czechoslovakian photography scene (artists, curators, teachers or even certain even editors-in-chief) operated during this period. The establishment of public photography

⁸⁸ Gupta, S., 'Conceptualising the Art of Communist Times', *Third Text*, Vol. 24, Issue 5, September 2010, pp. 571-582.

⁸⁹ Tolnay, A., 'East/West Artistic Exchange in a Changing Europe', *Kunst & Museumjournaal*, Volume 2, Issue 4, 1992, p. 33.

⁹⁰ Gupta, S., 'Conceptualising the Art of Communist Times', p.573.

⁹¹ The Exhibition 'Třetí strana zdi Fotografie v Československu 1969-1988 ze sbírky Moravské galerie v Brně' ('The Third Side of the Wall'. Photography in Czechoslovakia 1969-1988 from the Collection of the Moravian Gallery, Brno) curated by Antonín Dufek and Marek Pokorný, was held in the Moravian Gallery in Brno from 14/11/2008 to 15/02/2009.

⁹² Dufek, A., 'Photographic Alternatives', in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

collections by Antonín Dufek and Anna Fárová – none of whom were suspicious of communist ideals – is a great example of how certain individuals protected artistic subjectivity by the promotion of ‘free’ art photography within the officially sanctioned scene.

As Dufek explains in the forward of the exhibition catalogue *The Third Side of the Wall*, above the thematic and stylistic diversity of the photographs exhibited, what these artists had in common was that they were all ultimately ‘seekers of alternatives’.⁹³ But the fact they looked for an alternative existence does not mean that they isolated themselves by constantly rejecting the established rules of the game. Most art photographers had no choice but to participate as well in the official cultural structure one way or the other. To start with, the great majority of them accepted the fact that they were to join the officially controlled Artists’ Union if they wanted to undertake freelance work. In order to make ends meet, a number of photographers combined their private photographic practice with occasional work in public commissions. Such was the case for example of Jan Ságl or Vladimír Birgus, who for a few years took official tourist photographs in the form of ‘optimistic picture-postcards’. Others went even further and even illustrated public reports with their images, like the case of Jano Rečo, who on repeated occasions worked for the Minister of Health depicting the living conditions of interns in various welfare institutions.⁹⁴ A few practitioners however, such as Jaromír Čejka or Miroslav Machotka, preferred not to take part in any public activity and rejected becoming members of the Union. These photographers decided to rather hold a completely different profession in order to keep their photographic practice ‘untouched’ by officialism.⁹⁵

On the other hand, with regards to the content of the photographers’ work, we can also observe how negotiation processes took place in relation to the topics explored. The fact that art photography was mainly produced outside the public sphere did not mean that its content was always politically or socially critical. Instead, what these photographers searched for was often an alternative path of self-expression through the subordination to artistic goals. They turned their attention into the exploration of the very photographic medium and its ability to re-create their inner view of the world. And although we could argue that by rejecting to achieve the so-called ‘socialist function of photography’ such a choice constituted a ‘non-conformist’ political attitude in itself, the reality was often a lot more complex when it came to protecting one’s subjectivity while simultaneously surviving the totalitarian State.

⁹³ Dufek, A. ‘Photographic Alternatives’, 2009

⁹⁴ Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

⁹⁵ Interviews with photographers Jaromír Čejka or Miroslav Machotka, 17/11/2014 and 20/11/2014 respectively, Trans. Nikola Krutilová, Prague,



Figure 2.22. Front Cover from 'Sílu dává strana' (The Party Gives Us Strength), 1982.

The presence of a 'double meaning' or 'double speak' in the photographic message of the images produced by these photographers was quite frequent. One of the best examples was the publication 'Sílu dává strana' (The Party Gives us Strength) in 1982, which published a collection of photographs of official mass demonstrations taken by a series of critical documentary photographers (figure 2.22).⁹⁶ Despite the photographs' ironic content, which aimed to depict the absurdity of 'fake' communist demonstrations where most attendants were often pushed by their employers to parade, the editors-in-chief of the official publication understood that such images – with their 'true' record of the events – were instead praising the Regime. Although some might think that the participating photographers held a completely cynical position by allowing a misuse of their otherwise critical work, it is also true that their attitude can be easily understood, not only because 'everyone needed to earn a living', but

⁹⁶ *Sílu nám dává strana: Kapitoli z dějin Mládežnického a Dělnického Československu*, Prague and Bratislava: Mladá fronta and Smena, 1928

because their photographs depicting the resigned gaze of the attendants ultimately made it to the public scene just as they had shot them and thus carrying as well their intended critical message.⁹⁷

All the discussed strategies allowed a so-called 'Grey Zone' to function during the Normalisation period. This term, used repeatedly by art historians and curators in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since the late 1970s, makes reference to the space standing in-between the official and underground art scenes that operated simultaneously in Czechoslovakia from 1968 to 1989. This 'zone' covers a range of strategic activities through which numerous artists and curators attempted to preserve a 'normal functioning' of artistic production in the repressive atmosphere of the time.⁹⁸

On the one hand, the 'Grey Zone' operating within the public sphere was formed by a few micro-spaces where the conditions for the dissemination of photographs allowed certain practitioners to enter the official realm without compromising their artistic autonomy. As discussed throughout the chapter, these exceptional conditions were present in a small number of places, like the public photographic collections directed by Fárová and Dufek, but their existence was never-the-less highly significant for the development of art photography during Normalisation. On the other hand, the so-called 'Grey Zone' of the underground photography scene was formed by the numerous unofficial exhibitions, which were privately organised but publicly presented, and where - precautions being made - virtually any citizen could enjoy the works on display. We could argue that it is mainly thanks to the existence of this 'Grey Zone' and the invaluable efforts made by its precursors to protect it that art photography practices managed to stay alive and progress during the period of Normalisation.

6. Re-defining the Meaning of Art Photography in 'Normalised' Czechoslovakia

The meaning of 'art photography', just like the meaning of 'art', has been continually shifting since the invention of the medium in the early 1800s. As Professor David Bate explains 'the history of the impact of photography on art is also the history of the impact of art on photography', with different identifiable stages since its invention.⁹⁹ From Pictorialism to Modernism, Conceptual Art and Post-modernism, debates around what characteristics should a photograph carry to enter the realm of 'art' have been constantly mutating. As theorist and artist Lucy Soutter expressed, the question remains into whether the satisfaction comes primarily from visual pleasure or by the way an image communicates and informs its conceptual message

⁹⁷ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 199.

⁹⁸ Morganová, P. 'Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries', in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, pp. 23-25.

⁹⁹ Bate, D., *Photography: The Key Concepts*, New York: Berg, 2009, p. 145

through its visual elements.¹⁰⁰ From a post-modernist perspective, this question seems no longer relevant. Likewise, any debates around the possibility of photography to become 'art' have long lost its *raison d'être*. In any case, an understanding of the context into which a photograph operates as art remains a crucial aspect when it comes to analysing the development of the medium in a specific place and at a concrete time in history.

In the context of communist Czechoslovakia, the question of the autonomy of art seems crucial. This autonomy however must not be understood in a modernist sense; as an art that avoids society or that is separated from it.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, the autonomy of art photography practices in the Czechoslovakian context meant precisely an engagement with society. This engagement was both critical and autonomous in its ideology, as it constantly fought to avoid the state's official policy on the arts.

Following this idea, a rather simple but often generalised conception of the content of art photography in communist Czechoslovakia, has been to identify art photography with practices that took place strictly within the unofficial art scene, in the belief that anything produced under the umbrella of the totalitarian state would be tainted with mere propaganda and thus relegated from any sort of autonomous artistic expression on behalf of the photographer. Throughout this chapter however, it has been discussed how photographs produced initially in the underground realm managed to enter the public sphere. This migration sometimes occurred through their inclusion in public collections at The Moravian Gallery and the Museum of Decorative Arts. At other times they succeeded in being published in official photography journals thanks to the astuteness of open-minded editors-in-chief like Daniela Mrázcová, the director of *Revue Fotografie*, who was a great tactician when it came to include high quality photographs, despite their deviation from the state's policy on the arts. On several occasions, certain photographs carrying a critical message also made it into the public realm through the official press due to their ability of carrying a double coding in their photographic message. Finally, we have seen how a number of photographers like Jano Reč ů managed to undertake public commissions while preserving their artistic ethos. It has been discussed how the different actors of the Czechoslovakian photography scene, including artists, writers, curators and teachers, had constantly negotiated the exercise of their personal freedom within the totalitarian regime in order to protect their subjectivity and consolidate a certain self-respect for their own work. Under the repressive environment of Husáck's Regime, this could only be achieved through a juggling attitude. Sometimes by daring to break the rules. Often by being ready to obediently follow them if the circumstances required it.

¹⁰⁰ Soutter, L. *Why Art photography*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 3

¹⁰¹ Bate, D., *Photography: The Key Concepts*, p. 130

Ultimately and for the sake of this discussion, the present chapter should conclude by establishing that, what art photography practices from the Normalisation period had in common, despite whether they were produced inside or outside the officially sanctioned sphere, was their ability to preserve the photographer's artistic autonomy - understood as a critical engagement with society through visual means - while distancing their practice from the 'social function of photography' imposed by the state. As a consequence, the photography produced exclusively within the official realm, that is, the great majority of press photographs, most of the images born out of public assignments (such as portraits of the Party's leaders) and any other works which strictly followed the principles of the socialist function of photography, will not be considered works of art in their authentic sense and shall be therefore rejected from the present study.

The following chapters will hence be dedicated to analysing the work of Czechoslovakian art photographers produced throughout the times of Normalisation in the 1970s and 1980s, the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the establishment of a democratic, capitalist system in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s, the sovereign separation of the country into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993 and up until the turn of the new millennium. With the aim of acknowledging the contribution of this generation of photographers and understanding the ways in which their work evolved throughout the different historical events, the present chapter has set up the common ground through the analysis of the contexts of art production in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia. From here on, in order to analyse the work of these photographers, the following chapters are dedicated to studying – case by case – their particular art production, working conditions, artistic influences, personal motivations and the type of relationship each developed with the official powers. The proposed individualised approach aims to enable a latter analytical comparison between the different case studies, throughout which certain patterns in their artistic trajectories might eventually be glimpsed. With the aim of offering a reasonable balance between the work produced both by Czech and Slovak practitioners, the thesis attempts to keep an equivalent weight in the number of selected photographers from each country in relation their overall contribution to the development of art photography in the region.

In order to provide this research with a malleable coherence and literary logic, the work of photographers that are part of each case study has been organised into four different categories, coinciding with the denomination these practices received in their own country. These are: Social Documentary Photography; Subjective Documentary Photography; 'Visualism' and Photography in Conceptual Art.

CHAPTER 3 //

**DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY
AS PROOF**



Figure 3.1. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *The House of Disabled Children*, 1978, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

1. Introduction

Having established the common ground in relation to the contexts of art production during the Normalisation period in Czechoslovakia, the present chapter will now study the development of social documentary photography since 1968 and its evolution after the democratisation of the country in 1989. My aim is to analyse how documentary photographers negotiated creative strategies to preserve their artistic autonomy despite the existing censorship of the Normalisation period. I would argue that, beyond the traditionally conceived division of 'official and unofficial' photographs, some practitioners managed to work somewhere in between these spheres in order to earn a living, while simultaneously preserving a sphere of autonomy in their artistic production.

The chapter starts by introducing the origins of documentary photography in Czechoslovakia in the late 1920s and its conceptual shifts until the establishment of the Normalisation period in 1968. Following this discussion, I will analyse the work of two documentary photographers who developed their practice throughout the years of Normalisation: Jaromir Čejka and Jano Rečo. I shall do so by taking into account their individual relation with the official powers as well as with the art photography community of the time. Finally, and in order to understand in what manner did the change of regime affect their artistic production from 1989 onwards, the chapter will conclude with an analytical comparison of the artistic and professional trajectories of both photographers during the last decade of the century.

2. The Roots of Social Documentary Photography in Czechoslovakia (1929-1948)

Although the first documentary photographs known in Czechoslovakia were taken as early as 1890 by Bruner-Dvořák, the specific roots of social documentary photography emerged four decades later with the work produced by leftist photojournalists of the interwar period after the Great Depression. These photographers initially worked under the auspices of the anti-Nazi organisation Left Front (Levá Fronta), which was founded in 1929 and slowly fell under the control of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. The work produced by these social documentary photographers aimed to condemn class struggle and raise the consciousness of a variety of social problems of the interwar period, which had worsened after the Great Depression due to what they considered to be the irreversible decline of Capitalism.¹

¹ Dufek, A., 'The Photographic Collection of The Moravian Gallery in Brno and History of Photography', in *Full Spectrum*, Exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, pp. 74-75.



Figure 3.2. Karel Kašpařík, *Slave (The Capitalist of Labour)*, 1935, Gelatine Silver Print, Moravian Gallery in Brno.

Many of these artists found inspiration in Russian formalist principles. According to photography historian Vladimír Birgus, the Czechoslovakian marxist theorist Lubomír Linhart – founder of the ‘Left Front’ – was an admirer of Soviet Avant-garde photography and a personal friend of Rodchenko.² It is not surprising therefore to find similarities between Rodchenko’s work and the photographs produced by many Czechoslovakian photojournalists working under the lead of Linhart, such as Karel Kašpařík. These practitioners often applied the aesthetics of ‘New Photography’ with the use of diagonal compositions that seemed to better express the instability of the system and the need for a new change of order (figure 3.2). The works were usually presented in the form of photo-essays accompanied by a paired text in the Communist Press and other leftist illustrated publications such as *Svět Práce* (The World of Work) or *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers’ Illustrated Journal). In 1931, the Party held its first exhibition of a series of socially committed photography shows, the *Proletarian Housing*, which showcased the poor living conditions of Czechoslovakian workers and the unemployed.³

An essential part of the ‘Left Front’ were the Foto-film groups, directed in Prague by theorist Lubomír Linhart and in Brno by architect František Kalivoda.⁴ In an article written by Linhart, which later became *de facto* the group’s manifesto, the theorist expressed how ‘for us photography is an important social agent, touching deeply on political, economic artistic and cultural problems’. In Bratislava, the counterpart organisation of the Left Front’s Foto-film group was Sociofoto, formed in 1934.⁵ According to photo-historian Vladimír Birgus, the numerous exhibitions, books and dozens of magazines showcasing critical documentary photographs in Czechoslovakia, turned the country into one of the most important centres for the development of social documentary photography of the interwar period.⁶

² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Social Documentary Photography and the Beginnings of Modern Photojournalism’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 85.

³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, pp. 81-95.

⁴ Mlčoch, J. ‘The History of Czech Photography’ in Václav, M. (ed.), *The History of European Photography 1900-1938*, Vol 1, Bratislava: FOTOFO and The Central European House of Photography, 2011 p. 148.

⁵ Hrabušický, A. and Václav, M., *Slovak Photography 1925-2000*, Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2001, pp- 40-47.

⁶ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p. 86.



Figure 3.3. Zdeněk Tmej, *The Bergkeller, Wroclaw, 1943*, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts Prague

The occupation of Czechoslovakia by Hitler's troops in 1939 marked the end of the social documentary movement developed in the last two decades. After the establishment of the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the new government closed most Czechoslovakian periodicals and magazines, substituting them for various pro-Nazi publications. These journals mainly published candid images of peoples and places, actors, animals or sports. In 1941, with the proclamation of Reinhardt Heydrich as the new Reich, the Nazi regime turned even more oppressive and the official press was filled with German propaganda pictures and photographs with anti-Semitic content. In this scenario, some Jewish Czech photographers were sent to concentrations camps in Austria and Germany. A few of them, like Rudolf Kohn, never returned. Others were deported to forced labour camps, such as the Czech Zdeněk Tmej, who was sent to work at a railway construction in Wroclaw and took the opportunity to produce an extraordinary project on the inhuman effects of forced hard labour (figure 3.3). For those photographers who remained in Czechoslovakia, there was not much choice but to be devoted to mundane aspects of life and 'apolitical' subject matter.⁷

⁷ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Photojournalism and Documentary Photography During and After World War II', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 125-136



Figure 3.4. Svatopluk Sova, *German Woman Paving the Streets of Prague, Prague, May 1945*, Gelatine Silver Print, Private Collection, Prague, reproduction from exhibition catalogue, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

The Prague Uprising against the Germans in May 1945 was greatly documented by many Czechoslovakian photographers like Karel Ludwing, Václav Chochola and Svatopluk Sova, some of whom managed to publish their visual testimonials in the international press (figure 3.4).⁸ Following the end of the Second World War, the short period between 1945 and the Soviet take over in 1948 was of relative freedom for social documentary photographers, but soon after the arrival of Communism, the content of socially committed photography would once again suffer a dramatic interpretation of its operating principles.

3. From Socially Committed Photography to the Socialist Function of the Medium

After the Soviet takeover in 1945, and the establishment of a Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the work of social documentary photographers was substituted in the officially controlled press by propaganda images in the style of Socialist Realism.⁹ These photographs depicted a ‘dreamed reality’ of the socialist state, enhancing the role of the revolutionary hero and most productive, happiest workers (figure 3.5). Socially committed photography, as the Party understood it, meant now applying the socialist function of the media

⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Photojournalism and Documentary Photography During and After World War II’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 125-136

⁹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 190-195.

to educate the masses in the principles and values of Communism. The aesthetics of Socialist Realism however, did not last very long in Czechoslovakia and was soon replaced by a type of photojournalism known in the country as ‘Humanist Photography’ (figure 3.6). These candid, optimistic images focused on the poetics of everyday life, exposing an unrealistic vision of human existence under the totalitarian system. Outside the press, some documentary photographers also took thematic pictures of sports, landscapes or travel photography that were published by the state publishing house SNKLHU. And although some photographers like Josef Sudek managed to continue their independent photography practice despite the publishing limitations of the time, it was not until the slow political thaw introduced by President Antonín Novotný, in 1957, that social documentary photography re-emerged.¹⁰ Throughout the 1960s, photographers like Viktor Kolář, Josef Koudelka or Dagmar Hochová, rekindled the role of photography as a critical tool against the State’s oppression (figure 3.7) Although their photographs had no chance to make it into the public realm in Czechoslovakia, they were sometimes shown in underground galleries in Prague or Brno.



Figure 3.5. Unknown photographer, *Come and Join us (or May Day in Czechoslovakia)*, First Half of the Fifties, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

¹⁰ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 149-168.



Figure 3.6. Erich Einhorn, *Za Maněží (Playpen)*, 1958, Gelatine Silver Print, Private Collection, Prague.



Figure 3.7. Josef Koudelka, 'Untitled, Jarabina, Slovakia, 1963,' from the series *Gypsies*, Gelatine Silver Print, Magnum Photos, Paris.

4. Photography in the Search for Veracity (1968-1989)

With the arrival of Soviet troops once again to the Czechoslovakian capital in 1968, the attempts of liberal reforms cultivated during the Prague Spring were frustrated and harsh totalitarian repression was re-imposed.¹¹ By the lead of new President Gustáv Husák, a period of so-called ‘Normalisation’ was introduced and turned into an inescapable *status quo* only a few would dare to criticise.¹² In this scenario the public sphere was ‘pacified’ and repression turned again especially hard towards dissent attitudes.

With regards to the photography scene however, the existing tension became a source of inspiration for many practitioners who found in their artistic production an escape through which to cultivate a personal realm of freedom and satisfy their need for self-expression. This did not constitute an easy mission since the difficulties imposed by the censorship apparatus made it practically impossible for unofficial photography to enter the public realm through publications or exhibitions in official venues. However, the astute negotiations between the official and unofficial photography scene undertaken by its actors – practitioners, curators and editors-in-chief – enabled the functioning of a complex collaborative network that motivated an astonishing development of art photography during the times of Normalisation.



Figure 3.8. Jindřich Štreit, ‘Arnoltice’, from the *Villages* series, 1983, Gelatine Silver Print, Reproduction from exhibition Catalogue, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005.

¹¹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 326-328.

¹² Two hundred and forty-two intellectuals however did publicly confront such a *status quo* with their adherence to the ‘Charter 77’ document; an appeal that condemned the violation of civil and human rights by the Czechoslovakian government during the period of Normalisation. The circulation of this document constituted a crime and most of their signatures – including photography curator Anna Fárová – suffered the consequences of the state’s repression in different forms.

For its part, social documentary photography produced during this period achieved the greatest quality and intensity in the history of Czech and Slovak photography. These practitioners aimed to depict the real circumstances of the country's inhabitants in response to the misleading – and idealised – vision of society that the communist regime had been exposing. Their images move away from the 'decisive moment' approach developed by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and followed by the so-called 'humanist photographers' during the 1950s in Czechoslovakia. Instead, most of them produced long-term projects in order to offer a comprehensive visual testimony of the situation. One of the greatest examples of this visual in-depth study of society is present in the work of Jindřich Štreit, who documented life in Czechoslovakian villages for over a decade (figure 3.8). The extensive effort needed to document some of their projects gave birth to numerous collaborations between documentary photographers, like the 'Žižkov' project, to which over ten photographers, including the Slovak Jano Rečo, contributed in the documentation of the neighbourhood's re-development. But apart from punctual collaborations, permanent groups were also founded during this period. Despite the fact that artists' groups were banned from the Centralised Union of Czechoslovakian Artists – which meant group members would automatically lose their freelance licence – a couple of social documentary groups were very active since the mid-1970s, most important of which were probably 'Oči' (Eyes), which operated between 1977 and 1981, and 'Dokument', established in 1977.¹³

A key element for the development of this photographic genre was the Film and TV Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) School, where photography had been taught as an academic subject since 1960. Numerous documentary seminars were also organised in this institution between 1975 and 1980. The main lecturing figure of social documentary photography was Pavel Štecha (1944-2004), who after graduating from FAMU in 1971 became a teacher of the school until 1994 (figure 3.9). Since most established practitioners studied at FAMU, Štecha's role as a lecturer had an immense sphere of influence in the development of social documentary photography under Normalisation. Interviewed photographers for the present research have greatly praised his pedagogical approach and most agree that their work would have never achieved its status without the motivation that Štecha projected in his students.¹⁴

¹³ Dufek, A., 'Documentary Photography Alternatives: Critical and Sociological Documentary Photographs', in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

¹⁴ Interview with photographers Jano Rečo, 12/11/2014 and Jaromír Čejka, 17/11/ 2014, Trans. Nikola Krutilová, Prague,



Figure 3.9. Pavel Štecha, *Otava*, 1978, Gelatine Silver print, Moravian Gallery in Brno.

The artistic influence for these photographers came mainly from the Magnum Agency – though some like Vladimír Birgus were also inspired by the work produced by photographers from the New York School.¹⁵ Thanks to the efforts of curator and writer Anna Fárová, the works of several international photographers were published by the official editorial SNKLHU and shown in public exhibitions.¹⁶ This curator also enabled the inclusion of social documentary photographs in the photographic collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. As a director of the collection, she established that the final projects of graduates from FAMU would be acquired every year by the Museum; something that guaranteed the preservation of important documentary projects while it motivated students who would otherwise never have had the chance to sell their photographs to private collectors.¹⁷ For his part, Antonín Dufek also contributed to the archive of social documentary photographs through their inclusion in the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno.¹⁸

¹⁵ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 152.

¹⁶ Chuchma, J., 'Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha, Langhans– PRO, 2006, p. 51-52.

¹⁷ See a full exhibition list by Anna Fárová at Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha Langhans– PRO, 2006, p. 88-125.

¹⁸ For a full list of Dufek's exhibitions and publications see his complete biography in his online profile at the website of The Moravian Gallery, Brno <http://www.moravska-galerie.cz/moravska-galerie/o-galerii/veda-a-vyzkum/odborne-zivotopisy-kuratoru-mg/dufek.aspx>

Although these photographers had very little chance of showing their work in public exhibitions or publishing them in the official press, a number of underground shows of social documentary photography took place during this period. Some of the most significant were probably the series of eighteen solo shows in the entrance hall of ‘Činoherní Klub’ in Prague, plus a final cumulative one, ‘9+9’ in a former abbey at Plasy, all of which were curated by Fárová (figure 3.10).¹⁹ In addition, certain critical photographs managed to enter the public scene through their inclusion in official journals due to photography’s ability to carry a double code or meaning in its message.²⁰ Other photographers like Jano Rečo even managed to include their practice as visual evidence in public photography commissions. One way or the other, the efforts undertaken by social documentary photographers in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia to offer an alternative response to the government’s idealised social reality, allowed the rise of an invaluable visual testimony of the country’s social circumstances of the time.



Figure 3.10. Unknown Photographer, Anna Fárová with participating photographers from the exhibition 9+9 at Plasy, Czech Republic, 1981, Reproduction from Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha, Langhans– PRO, 2006.

¹⁹ Fárová, A., as quoted by Chuchma, J., ‘Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography’, in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha, Langhans– PRO, 2006, p. 51. Originally published in Fárová, A. (ed.), ‘9 & 9’, Exhibition catalogue, Prague: Private Edition, 1981

²⁰ The presence of a ‘double meaning, in the photographic message of the images produced by these photographers was quite frequent. One of the best examples is the publication ‘Sílu dává strana’ (The Party Gives us Strength) in 1982, which published a collection of photographs of official mass demonstrations taken by a series of critical documentary photographers. See *Sílu nám dává strana: Kapitoli z dějin Mládežnického a Dělnického Československu*, Prague and Bratislava: Maldá fronta and Smena, 1928

In order to offer a more detailed analysis of documentary photography practices produced during the days of Czechoslovakian Normalisation, I will now move on to discuss the work and artistic trajectories of Czech photographer Jaromír Čejka and the Slovak Jano Rečo.

5. Jaromír Čejka: Concrete Records

Jaromír Čejka's long-term project *Jižní Město* (South Town) remains, to the present day, a hidden gem among the vast amount of work produced by Czechoslovakian documentary photographers during the 70s and the 80s. But despite its high artistic and anthropological value, different circumstances left the artist practically isolated from the rather small photography scene of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia. The recent publication of his book *Jižní Město* (2015), following a solo exhibition at Opava's Cultural Center in September 2014, has finally done justice to the visual legacy of one of the most talented Czech photographers of the second half of the twentieth century, who rigorously documented the country's urban life under the period of Normalisation (1968-1989).²¹

Born in the town of Miroslav in 1947, Čejka undertook his secondary education in the High School of Electrical Engineering. After completing his studies, he held a variety of jobs such as driver, lightning electrician or cameraman. The Soviet invasion of the Czech Republic in 1968 had a tremendous effect on him. In an interview with the author in 2014, he explained how at the age of twenty-one, the repressive situation established with the purpose of 'normalising' the communist state aggravated his depression and he had to be hospitalised in a psychiatric hospital. As he explains:

Everything I admired disappeared after the Prague Spring. Many of the books, films, radio broadcasts, magazines and journals I used to enjoy as a teenager were banished by the censors. This caused me an unbearable feeling of emptiness in life.²²

His growing desolation kept him at home away from his friends and family to the point he had to seek medical help. And it was then, in the darkness of his sorrow, that Jaromír Čejka met his greatest ally: a photographic camera.²³

²¹ Čejka, J., *Jižní Město*, Praha: Positif, 2015

²² The Prague Spring is the name given to the reformist period led by Alexander Dubček (January - August 1968) until Soviet troops invaded the country in order to re-establish Soviet communist principles. Dubček's aim was to democratise socialism and expand citizens' rights and freedoms. See Crampton R.J., 'The consolidation of the Dubcek Regime: January to April 1968' in *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp.326-328.

²³ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

The photographer recounts how, soon after that episode, watching Antonioni's 'Blow Up' film opened his eyes to a world of excitement, filled with hope and positive thoughts. The camera pushed him to get back in contact with the outside world. It became an inseparable shield that guaranteed a feeling of safety, while allowing him to scrutinise the social situation of his country and deal with its painful status quo. Enchanted by the personality of the 'Blow Up' protagonist, he first experimented taking a series of portraits of various friends and family members but soon turned his interest to documentary photography.²⁴ In 1969, he started photographing the traces that the Prague Spring had left behind around the capital city. Unlike some of his colleagues – such as Dana Kyndrová or Karel Kulim – who captured the horrors of violent physical confrontations between Czechoslovakian citizens and the Soviet military forces, Čejka records the oppressive atmosphere of the aftermath filled with apathy, resignation, anxiety and fear. He becomes an investigator of the crime, capturing the empty gestures of its witnesses and the numerous clues left by its perpetrators in the form of bullet holes and peeled walls, which he visually collects throughout the vast crime scene (figures 3.11 and 3.12). At this early state of his creative career, Čejka already demonstrates a very particular ability as a storyteller through the use of an alternative timeline in the recounting of events. The specific date of each image becomes irrelevant to the story, as if the photographs could only achieve their enigmatic meaning when read as a series of carefully connected, but apparently timeless, clues.



Figures 3.11 and 3.12. both Jaromír Čejka, *Untitled, Prague, 1971*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

²⁴ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.



Figure 3.13. Jaromír Čejka, *Untitled*, 1971, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

In 1971, Čejka became a distant student of the Institute of Creative Photography at the Union of Czechoslovakian Artists.²⁵ During four years, he expanded his knowledge of different photographic techniques and darkroom practices, while he shared his passion for the medium with fellow amateur photographers from the Union.²⁶ Throughout this period he photographed a variety of topics with a rather candid approach. Children, celebrations and playful scenes appear often in his work. The anguish experienced after the Soviet invasion loses its former dominant presence, which he seems to substitute for frequent instants of joy and hope (figure 3.13). It was also during this period that he met acclaimed photography curator Antonín Dufek, who soon anticipated Čejka's potential and invited him to participate in two collective exhibitions in Brno.²⁷

Following an arduous application process, Čejka was accepted at FAMU academy in 1976 by the hand of Pavel Štecha, from whom he claims to have learned everything about documentary photography.²⁸ Štecha introduced him to the work of various North American photographers

²⁵ Thanks to the lead of historian and photographer Vladimír Birgus, The Institute of Creative Photography achieved in 1990 an academic status as it became part of the Silesian University of Opava.

²⁶ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

²⁷ The first exhibition, *Czechoslovakian Photography 1971-1972*, was curated by Antonín Dufek at the Moravian Gallery, Brno in 1972. The second one, *Cycles and Serials*, was also organised by Dufek at Brno's House of Art that same year.

²⁸ Entering FAMU Academy of Film was extremely challenging at that time. Only ten students were accepted every year. Considering the fact that this was one of the only two photography courses within the Eastern Bloc that held an undergraduate status and the growing popularity photography enjoyed in the region, the chances of entering the institution were very limited. As a consequence, the creative level of selected students was already outstanding from

and he was especially fascinated by Robert Frank's project *The Americans*.²⁹ Towards the third year of the course, Čejka took the first pictures at Jižní Město; a large housing development built on the periphery of Prague. This would be the beginning of his long-lasting, love-hate relationship with the suburbs of the capital city. During the first stages of the project, Jaromír focused on childhood and the experience of being raised in this newly built residential area. His images confront innocent childhood games with a monstrous landscape of unfinished buildings, obscure concrete corridors or vast and arid communal areas. Using a wide-angle lens from an upward perspective, Čejka appears especially fascinated by the endless imagination of these children. He deliberately makes their bodies fall out of scale. We could argue that despite the magnitude of such a colossal, desolated background, their empowered oversized figures might well represent the hope of an alternative future; opening somehow a window to optimism and faith (figure 3.14). In the confined space of these 'housing solutions', these children engage in adventures of all kinds: a barren hill becomes a brave ascent, a brick easily turns into their hero's mask and industrial pipes make the best secret tunnels to Alice's Wonderland. But even children despair at times and a loud, echoing yell unbridles the waste ground, resembling the most memorable of Edvard Munch's scenes (figure 3.15).³⁰



Figure 3.14. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled, 1980', from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

the first year. [Interview with photographer Miroslav Švolík conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague]

²⁹ According to photo-historian and curator Antonín Dufek, Pavel Štecha (1944-2004) was the central figure of sociologically-orientated documentary photography during the seventies. He was a very influential and inspirational teacher at FAMU, where he lectured between 1975 and 1994. Thanks to his resourcefulness two exchange programmes were established in the mid-1980s with Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and Fachschule in Munich. See Dufek, A., 'Introduction', in Štecha, P., *In our Country, 1968-1990, Pavel Štecha Fotografie*. Trans. Paton, D., Prague: Studio JB, 2001.

³⁰ I am referring here to the work of the Norwegian, post-impressionist artist, Edvard Munch (1863-1944), *The Scream*, created through four different versions as paintings and pastels between 1893 and 1910.



Figure 3.15. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled, 1980', from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artists

When the photographer showed Pavel Štecha the first prints of the series, his teacher immediately anticipated its potential relevance. He advised his student to turn the work into a long-term project, avoiding the depiction of randomly captured scenes in the form of pleasurable ‘decisive moments’.³¹ And so he did. For over two decades, Čejka documented the everyday life in the housing estate, constantly returning to the same places and applying a very rigorous strategy that could well conform to the standards of research practices in the social sciences. His methodology is that of non-participatory observation, which guarantees the validity of acquired social data while offering the viewer a space for interior discussion on the possible meanings of the photograph. Such an exceptionally devoted routine can only be found in the work of two other Czech photographers: Viktor Kolář and his life-long documentary project on the industrial city of Ostrava and Jiri Hanke’s series *Views from the Window of my Flat*, shot for twenty years from the bedroom of his apartment in Prague.³²



Figure 3.16. Jaromír Čejka, ‘Untitled, 1982’, from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

As Jiří Siostrzonek explains in the introduction of Čejka’s book *Jižní Město*, the situation of this sub-urban town represented to the closest perfection his vision of the oppressive communist state. Since the late seventies, thousands of young Czechoslovakian families had been forced to move to the settlement despite the unfinished condition of most buildings – some of which, as his images proved throughout the years, were never totally completed. No family roots

³¹ Siostrzonek, J. ‘Introduction’ in Čejka, J., *Jižní Město*, Praha: Positif, 2014, p. 35

³² See Kolář, V, *Ostrava*, Prague: Kladenská Kant, 2011 and Hanke, J., *Views from the Window of my Flat*, Prague: Kant, 2014

connected these new inhabitants to the place. Coming from different intellectual backgrounds – from shop keepers and cleaners to university teachers and doctors – it was not very frequent to share interests or motivations between neighbours and the lack of socialising spaces such as restaurants, pubs or cultural centres, made it difficult for causal encounters to occur. Weddings, funerals and other important rituals took place outside the territory of the settlement.³³ The housing estate acted merely as a dormitory city. The same scene played on a loop every passing day as workers marched in and out for work in subdued silence. In many cases, their workplaces had also been allocated without their consultation.³⁴ Although some aspects of these living conditions could sound familiar if we compare them to the modern suburban areas of current Western cities, there is an insurmountable difference between the two. In the latter, any inhabitant can freely aspire to modify their situation or emit a public complaint in case any of their rights feels under attack. In Jižní Město, for what was worth it, most looked down and marched on a subdued, silent loop (figure 3.16).

But for Čejka it was also the very physical features of the place that visually represented the communist power. The socialistic experiment was evident in the aesthetics of both the exterior and interiors of the aligned constructions. Despite being new, they looked and smelled old. Decay was evident in every corner. Each flat was decorated with the exact same furniture. Austerity, order and ‘equality’ ruled its entire design. Announcement boards were used to publicise all kinds of socialist activities undertaken by the community, while some not so joyful messages pointed publicly to disobedient neighbours whose exemplary punishment – agreed ‘voluntarily’ by other neighbours through weekly house committees – ensured the dissuasion of further anti-social’ behaviours.³⁵

Motivated by the idea of providing visual evidence for such a situation, Jaromír Čejka meticulously captures all possible marks and signs of its existence. Using a certain irony, he records official messages from the government but also numerous writings and graffiti spread around by its inhabitants (figure 3.17). For him these anonymous expressions evidenced the citizens’ need to share their thoughts and communicate their ideas in the public sphere.³⁶

³³ Siostrzonek, J. ‘Introduction’, in Čejka, J., *Jižní Město*, Praha: Positif, 2014, p. 41

³⁴ Siostrzonek, J. *Jižní Město*, p. 41

³⁵ Siostrzonek, J. *Jižní Město*, p. 43

³⁶ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.



Figure 3.17. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled 1982', from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Later on in the development of his project, he decided to include adults in the frame, but unlike his initial work with children, their inclusion appears as if it were merely accessory to the landscape. In most cases they are depicted from a far distance. Deprived of their subjectivity, their presence appears less significant. We often find them trying to overcome the numerous obstacles left in the vast arid ground between buildings. These adults jump, push and climb through hills and fences, just like they bypass the system each passing day (figures 3.18 and 3.19). The representation of adult existence seems a lot less optimistic compared to his earlier photographs of childhood. There is no longer a trace of hope and human dignity appears constantly at stake. But perhaps it is only the author who evolves at this point, returning to a period of pessimism similar to that which followed the dark years after the Soviet Invasion of 1968.



Figure 3.18. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled, 1980', from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 3.19. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled' 1982, from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

It is important to point out that as much as some may read his images as an evident critique against the regime and its way of ‘organising’ social life, Čejka never received any pressures from the security apparatus to discontinue his work.³⁷ Through all those years he was able to photograph the area with total freedom of movement and was never punished for showing the project in both official and alternative venues. There is of course an explanation for this rather atypical situation. On the one hand, during the first stages of the project, Čejka was a student at FAMU and enjoyed therefore the protection of an official educational establishment. On the other hand, his *Jižní Město* series belonged to a group of documentary projects produced during this period that could eventually stretch the subjective nature of photography to the point where two opposite interpretations were attributed to the same work. In this regard, it was probably more comfortable – and politically profitable – for the regime to understand Čejka’s work as an artistic way of praising the ‘outstanding’ living conditions provided to Czechoslovakian people through these housing states. We could then argue that, ultimately, it was also possible to read in his photographs a certain ‘happiness’ of children playing around communal areas of this modern social housing; a ‘cleverly designed’ socialistic settlement that guaranteed ‘equal’ opportunities for all workers to live with their families in ‘decent’ homes. It all depended on the eyes of the recipient.³⁸ The ability of the photographic message to carry a double coding reached its greatest potential in documentary practices produced under the period of Normalisation. But the ‘doble-code’ effect could also work in the opposite direction. This was the case of Čejka’s fellow photographer Zdenek Lhoták, who in 1985 took pictures of young soldiers performing on muddy fields during a communist parade (figure 3.20).³⁹ Although the images represented the humiliation of human dignity – which gave the artist international renown as a non-conformist photographer – some fellow Czechoslovakian practitioners expressed their suspicion about Lhoták’s intention to praise Husák’s regime through the apparent political enthusiasm expressed by those young brigades.⁴⁰

³⁷ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

³⁸ Siostrzonek, J. ‘Introduction’ in Čejka, J., *Jižní Město*, Praha: Positif, 2014, p. 24.

³⁹ See complete Lhotak’s ‘Spartakiada’ series at his website <http://www.lhotak.com/SpartakiadaEn.html>

⁴⁰ Birgus, V. and Jan, M, ‘From Socialist realism to Humanist Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 199.



Figure 3.20. Zdenek Lhoták, 'Untitled', from the series *Spartakiada (Brigades)*, 1985, Gelatine Silver Print, Archive of Zdenek Lhoták

Another example of a dual interpretation of Čejka's intention occurred in 1981. Just before completing his undergraduate studies, the photographer found himself involved in a nasty incident due again to an opposite reading of his ideas. In this case it was not his visual work but his written opinion that had put him into a delicate position.⁴¹ That year, the Union of Czech Artists organised an exhibition at Na Újezdě Gallery in Prague titled *Fotografie 81*. Jaromír Čejka attended the opening and was extremely disappointed to find only conceptual photography with (what he thought to be) a questionable artistic quality. Driven by a young passionate impulse, he decided to write an article criticising the selection criteria applied by the Union for participating in the show and after contacting few publications, *Tvorba* magazine acceded to publish it.⁴² This was a popular official magazine of the time and the editor-in-chief was of course more than happy to print an article by an independent Czechoslovakian artist who was willing to criticise the art world. But Čejka's naivety at that moment prevented him from anticipating the obvious, terrible consequences this disloyal act could produce in his future career. Many fellow photographers had their work shown at the gallery and publishing such an article in the pages of a propagandistic magazine went beyond their reasonable understanding. Although Čejka never meant to question the quality of any specific work but rather the uninformed selection criteria used by the Union's judging panel, the publication of this article

⁴¹ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁴² Čejka, J. 'Fotografie 81', *Tvorba*, Issue 45, p. 16, 1981 Prague.

left him practically isolated in many aspects from the photography scene in Czechoslovakia until the present day. Only curator Antonín Dufek met him from time to time, gave him artistic feedback and helped him exhibit his photographs at few venues in Czechoslovakia and abroad, including a collective show in 1985 at The Photographers' Gallery in London.⁴³ But despite Dufek's efforts to promote Čejka's images, that article took its toll and his outstanding documentary work remains nowadays relatively unknown in his home country.⁴⁴ In this scenario and away from every photography circle, his passion was all Čejka had left to enjoy his complicated existence during the eighties. At this point however, things were about to get even more difficult for the artist as he was denied the licence to work as a freelance photographer.

During communist times, studying at FAMU academy meant more than an opportunity to learn photography at an undergraduate level; holding its official diploma was the only possible way to join the Union of Czech Artists and become a licensed freelance photographer.⁴⁵ On a final interview at FAMU after his graduation, Čejka was asked about his future plans to become a professional photographer, to which he replied that he was 'by no means willing to prostitute his artwork'. As a consequence, the committee took his response as a very serious offence and his permit was negated.⁴⁶ In light of the situation, Čejka decided to find an alternative profession that would cover his basic needs and allow him to pursue his independent photography practice. For the next twenty years he combined a variety of jobs with his true artistic passion.⁴⁷ Throughout the times of revolution, transition and the long-awaited Democracy, he persisted in the documentation of the urban landscape. One could say that his body of work on the suburban town of Jižní Město constitutes an authentic social-diagnosis of Czechoslovakian historical events in a purely visual form.

⁴³ 27 *Czechoslovakian Contemporary Photographers*, curated by Antonín Dufek, The Photographers' Gallery, London, 1985. This controversial exhibition showed for the first time the work of non-conformist Czechoslovakian photographers in the 'West'. When the Czechoslovakian ambassador in London, Dr. Miroslav Houšteký found out that Jindřich Štreit's images – for which he had been imprisoned in Czechoslovakia – would be included in the exhibition, he tried unsuccessfully to stop the publication of the accompanying catalogue. At the opening however he seemed to have changed his opinion about the political consequences of the show as he told Dufek that 'the exhibition might actually help Western citizens understand that Czechoslovakia is in fact a free country, which allows artists to photograph and express themselves without restrictions' [Interview with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno].

⁴⁴ Note this is the photographer's version of the case, which may differ from that of the artists affected by the article in question [Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague].

⁴⁵ Being unemployed in the Czechoslovakia during communist times constituted a crime. Working as a freelancer was only possible in the 'creative industry' after becoming a member of the Czech Artists Union, for which you needed an official art qualification [Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague].

⁴⁶ See Michl, J., *Institutional Framework Around Successful Art Forms in Czechoslovakia*, Prague: Open Society Institute, 1999, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁷ Interview with Jaromír Čejka, 17/11/2014.



Figure 3.21. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled, 1982', from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

As the time for a political change approached, Čejka progressively eliminates human presence from his images. He starts photographing a variety of found still life in the periphery of the city from a closer-up position. Using the ironic approach previously seen in his series of the Soviet Invasion from 1971 (figures 3.11 and 3.12), he suggests some sort of encrypted message through an object's fragments and his carefully cropped scenes of the building's interiors. The claustrophobic composition resulting from the vanishing sections of a car, a concrete wall and one of the housing blocks, could well speak about the struggle of late Communism to ensure a basic level of citizens' well-being (figure 3.21). Like other photographers from his generation such as Miroslav Machotka – whose work would be discussed in the next chapter – Čejka's images from this period follow the steps of his predecessor Jan Svoboda.⁴⁸ These photographers often searched for traces of modern civilisation in roads, pavements, concrete walls or motorways, but instead of attributing such imagery a metaphorical meaning, they pointed clearly at the subject in conflict; that is, to the consequences of a thoughtless urban development which characterised big Czechoslovakian cities at that time.⁴⁹



Figure 3.22. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled' 1984, from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁴⁸ Jan Svoboda, (1934 – 1990) was the first Czech photographer to claim that he was not a photographer but an artist. His innovative use of the medium together with his non-conformist attitude gained him a huge recognition both in Czechoslovakia – where he influenced the work of several photographers from the 'younger generation' – and outside the Eastern Bloc. See Dufek, A. 'Alternatives within the Medium', in *The Third Side of the Wall*, Exhibition Catalogue, Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: Kant, 2008.

⁴⁹ Birgus, V. and Jan, M. 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 252-253.

When looking at the last images from his project *Jižní Město*, produced during the last few years before the collapse of Communism in 1989, we might observe at a first glance that not much changed in style when comparing them to earlier photographs; where he deliberately eliminated human presence and focused on the various objects, walls and other still-life spread around the housing estate. On a closer analysis however, we may see how he is actually turning his interest towards the mega-structures of these constructions (figure 3.22). Shooting from further back, isolated objects do not catch his attention anymore. He is no longer cropping the scene in search of concrete information, but rather confronting it in its totality. As if he felt the need to judge the situation from a cautious distance. As if after two decades of observation, he was finally trying to understand ‘the whole picture’. Čejka observes now the residential landscape from a distance, depicting the decadent state of the building’s exteriors. Human beings and their traces are no longer present and all that is left is the worn outer case of the previous personal histories explored in the project. We could also understand this visual move towards the edge of *Jižní Město* as a final series of farewell shots, after which the author saw the project completed.

Following the events of 1989, Čejka turned – according to his own words – into a ‘sceptical optimist’.⁵⁰ Although he admits to have felt enthusiastic about the political changes that were to come, he was also suspicious of those in charge of implementing such changes, since many of the authorities that ruled the country in communist times also took part in the democratic transition. ‘The system perhaps was different’ – he explains – ‘but the people were the same. We were all the same’.⁵¹ And with such a mistrustful attitude towards the future he continued exploring different social and political aspects of his home country. In the early nineties, he documented the process of Slovakia’s independence from the Czech Republic through a series of images of civil mass demonstrations in Bratislava. During this period, he also took pictures of the new cultural vibe that was taking place in the country. His photograph of Michael Jackson’s figure standing on the former pedestal for Stalin’s statue constitutes a great example of post-communist humour towards the country’s recent past and its willingness to modernise – or perhaps ‘Westernise’ – its long-isolated culture (figure 3.23).

⁵⁰ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁵¹ Interview with Jaromír Čejka, 17/11/2014



Figure 3.23. Jaromír Čejka, *Michael Jackson's Figure Stands on Stalin's Statue Pedestal, Prague, 1996*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Soon after the Velvet Revolution, Čejka travelled on two occasions to Israel. As for many Czechoslovakian photographers, one of the favourable changes the Revolution brought came in the form of a passport that was finally allowing citizens to leave the country at their will.⁵² During his first trip to Jerusalem in 1993 he photographed a series of religious scenes alongside some landscapes of the sacred city. But with a couple of exceptions, the work produced in Jerusalem does not achieve the strength of the documentary work previously produced in his home country. One of these special cases is his photograph of a black dog in Néguev desert, which inevitably recalls Koudelka's iconic picture from 1987 (figure 3.24).

Later on in 1994, the photographer travelled again to Israel, where he photographed Tel Aviv after one of the multiple bombing episodes the city suffered during those years. Despite the documentary potential content offered by the city's state of war, this series of photographs lacked again the depth Čejka had proved to be able to achieve as a visual storyteller in the past. The few photographs he took in Tel Aviv – most of them for the first time in colour – are void of the exquisite composition we were used to seeing in his previous works. Besides, the subject matter appears too randomly chosen and disconnected from each other, which makes it difficult for the viewer to achieve a sense of narrative in Čejka's account of events (figure 3.25). All this distances his new work a lot from his project *Jižní Město*, where the visual narrative flows easily from one photograph to the next, enabling the individual signifiers of each picture to fulfil the gaps the following image might have.

⁵² Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.



Figure 3.24. Jaromír Čejka, *Néguev Desert, Israel, 1993*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

It was not until the late 1990s that Čejka produced his most important work to date since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, capturing what curator Antonín Dufek has called the ‘tracks and traces’ of urban development in the Czech Republic.⁵³ The establishment of the new political and economic system in 1989 allowed Čejka to obtain the freelance license he was denied after his graduation.⁵⁴ As an artist, he had always worked independently and once he was finally able to charge for his services, he always made sure the commission was in a moral line with his artistic interests.⁵⁵ Since the early nineties, he had started collaborating with architect Ivan Plicka and social ecologist Bohuslav Blazek. The association emerged out of a mutual interest on the topic; while Blazek and Plicka aimed to document the state of Czech urban development and its impact through territorial planning studies, the photographer was interested in capturing the visual testimonies that the silent products of civilisation had left behind.⁵⁶ Through his *Tracks and Traces* series, Čejka demonstrates once again his unique ability to balance his preoccupation for the content of each scene with an objective and rational approach that validates the photograph as a sociological document (figure 3.26).

⁵³ Dukek, A. ‘Jaromír Čejka’, in *Stopy. Tracks and Traces*, Exhibition Catalogue, Moravian Gallery, Brno, 2003, p. 6

⁵⁴ During communist times working for the estate was the norm. Being unemployed was illegal and only artists - or rather ‘craftsmen’ - could eventually obtain a freelance licence if a purposely nominated committee approved such a request. With regards to photographers, the only possible way to obtain such licence was to become a graduate from FAMU. Čejka however was denied this opportunity after having a serious argument with the panel during his final graduation interview, where he declared that working as a professional photographer for the regime would mean a ‘prostitution’ of his work. The panel took his words as a very serious offence and his licence was rejected. After democracy was established in 1989 and the work market was liberalised, obtaining such a licence was no longer an issue and all those willing to become self-employed could do so following a simple administrative procedure. For further reference and information see Chapter 1 of this thesis on the role of the Union of Czech Artists.

⁵⁵ Dukek, A. *Stopy. Tracks and Traces*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Dukek, A. *Stopy. Tracks and Traces*, p. 6.



Figure, 3.25. Jaromír Čejka, 'Untitled', from the series *Tel Aviv after the Bombing*, 1994, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

The revolution of 1989 also gave Čejka the opportunity to publish some freelance work in different printed media. During the 1990s, he collaborated with a series of Czech periodicals like *Lidové Noviny*, *Fórum*, *Přítomnost* and *Prostor*, and documented some medical procedures for a scientific journal. But when asked about how the political change affected his situation as an artist, Čejka recounts how, although he was professionally commissioned for different projects, with regards to his independent practice, he was still isolated from the mainstream photography world. The efforts made by Antonín Dufek to promote his work during the eighties did not bear many fruits throughout the following decade. Even for acclaimed curator Anna Farová, who had an extensive knowledge of the development of contemporary Czech photography, Čejka remained a total unknown.⁵⁷ The photographer had to wait for another decade before his luck changed in this respect. In 1999, he was finally invited to participate in a collective exhibition at the Moravian Gallery in Brno and later in 2003, his work *Tracks and Traces* was presented in a solo show at the same venue, curated by his good friend Antonín Dufek.⁵⁸ These were the first of a long series of late-arrived recognitions that have recently culminated with the publication of his book *Jižní Město* (2015).⁵⁹



Figure 3.26. Jaromír Čejka, ‘Silnice Brno – Mikulov’, from the series *Tracks and Traces*, 1997, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁵⁷ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁵⁸ The first of this show is *We 1948 – 1989*, curated by Antonín Dufek for The Moravian Gallery in Brno in 1999, the second, *Stopy 1980 – 1999*, was also curated by Antonín Dufek for The Moravian Gallery in Brno in 2003.

⁵⁹ Čejka, J., *Jižní Město*, Praha: Positif, 2015.

At the turn of the new century, Jaromír Čejka progressively abandoned his artistic practice and started to work under commission for the Czech News Agency. At present, he lives in the outskirts of Prague and is currently photographing the project 'High-rise Housing Estates in the Czech Republic' for the Museum of Decorative Arts.⁶⁰ His work on Jižní Město will probably remain as one of the most sociologically relevant photography projects produced during the period of Normalisation in Czechoslovakia.

6. Jano Rečo: Official Frames

After completing two years of military service in the Czechoslovakian Army, Jano Rečo (Sečovská Polianka, Slovakia, 1948) moved to Prague in 1968, where he started working as a lab technician at the Czechoslovakian National Television (ČST). It was during his days at ČST that Rečo learnt most of the technical aspects of the photographic medium. Two years after in 1971, he was accepted at FAMU, where he started his undergraduate studies in photography.⁶¹

During his days at the academy, Rečo showed a great interest in documentary photography; a curiosity awakened by celebrated Czech documentarian Pavel Štecha, who was lecturing at FAMU at the time. One of Rečo's most appealing works produced during this period is the series *Automat Koruna* from 1975, where he portrayed middle aged citizens from Prague eating at a modest canteen in Wenceslas Square.⁶² Every year, Štecha asked his students to produce an illustrated book about this iconic square.⁶³ In this early work, Rečo already demonstrates his talent as an observer of the human condition. He chose to portray the social reality of the time through one of the most primitive relations, that of men and nourishment (figure 3.27). Using a mid-distance telephoto lens, he isolates the sitters as they intensively satiate their appetite. The atmosphere in the canteen differs substantially from what we would expect to find in a similar Western establishment. There is nothing appealing about the food on offer. Most clients consume their order alone, in silence, and many remain standing as they feed. Rečo depicts a basic necessity being satisfied, evidencing the gap between a Western consumer attitude towards food and that of Czechoslovakian citizens.

⁶⁰ Full information about the project can be found at <http://panelaci.cz/>.

⁶¹ Practically without exception, all established Czech and Slovak photographers from Rečo's generation studied at FAMU, many of whom, including Rečo, worked as lecturers later in their careers. The only other University offering a graduate photography course in the Eastern Bloc was in Leipzig.

⁶² See complete *Automat Koruna* series in Rečo, J., *Moje školní Práce, FAMU 1973-1977*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2010.

⁶³ Dufek, A., 'Introduction' in *In our Country, 1968-1990, Pavel Štecha Fotografie*. Trans. Paton. D, Prague: Studio JB, 2001.

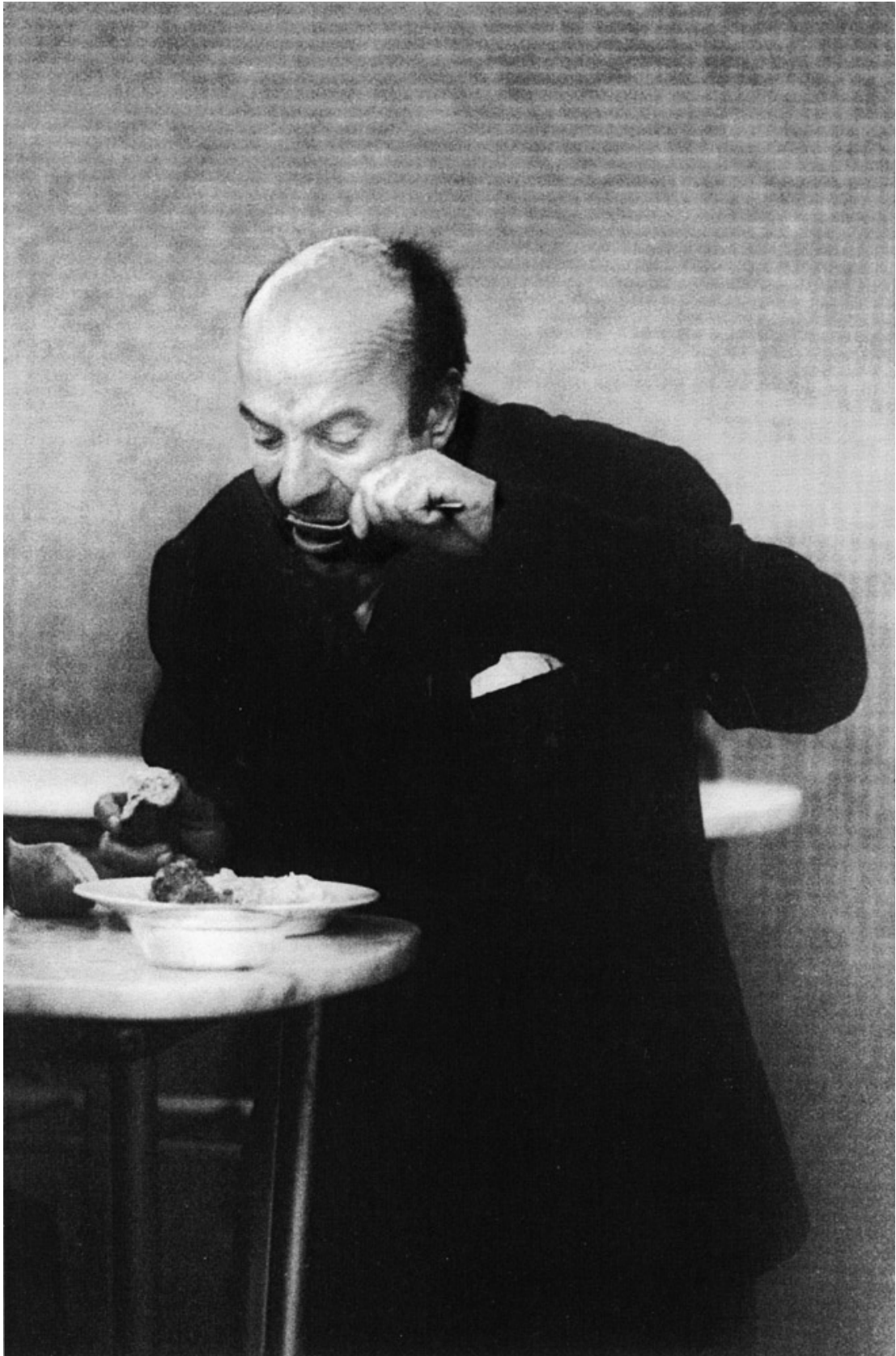


Figure 3.27. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Automat Koruma*, 1975, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

One of the most significant events in Rečo's career occurred in 1977, when circumstances led him to meet the Czechoslovakian Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Dr. Emiliano Hamernik. That year, the minister gave him permission to take photographs inside the premises of the ministry, where Rečo produced his final degree project. He was given the rare opportunity to wander freely inside the building, attend meetings and portray workers at all levels of the ministry's hierarchy, from the caretaker to the secretaries, the counsellors and even the minister himself. This opportunity was extremely unusual at a time where the secrecy of political debates was the norm. The work produced however was totally private; none of these photographs were ever published or used for any official purpose. As the photographer recounts, the resulting images were by no means directed to serve the state's interest but to produce art for the sake of art, or rather photography for the sake of photography.⁶⁴ Rečo used his fine humanist eye to glimpse the emotional phenomena despite the coldness of the building and the boredom of the everyday work inside its walls (figure 3.28). He managed to open an indiscrete window into the Party's decision-making realm and although his photographs do not constitute a critique against the system, the imagery offers an alternative view to the official and calculated communist portraits of civil workers posing rigorously in front of the lens.⁶⁵



Figure 3.28. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Ministerstvo*, 1977, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁶⁴ Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁵ Since 1948, the Communist Party started to apply norms of Socialist Realism to photography. The schematic and staged images served the State's apparatus to 'educate' society by representing what the 'new' social order was meant to look like. Photomontages and airbrushing techniques were a common practice that fitted perfectly the propaganda uses of the media. The harsh application of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia had however a very short life. The timid political thaw introduced in 1957, which allowed a certain liberalisation of the arts scene, also had its effect in the photography arena. The range of possible topics was expanded and the strict aesthetic rules that characterise Socialist Realism were relaxed. See Birgus, V. and Jan, M, 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 150

One might wonder how could the minister have agreed to such a risky, compromising proposal. According to the author, the politician owed nothing to Rečo but sympathised openly with his artistic aspirations. The photographer explains how ‘the minister was a normal man. A communist. Yes. But a very normal man. His son worked as a cameraman and perhaps that made him aware of the needs of the creative process and thus allowed me to move freely in order to produce relevant work’.⁶⁶ But there are however, two additional explanations for the minister’s favour. Firstly, as Vladimir Birgus comments in a recent interview, during the period of Normalisation the state seemed surprisingly relaxed when it came to tolerate a certain realm of artistic expression in the photography scene.⁶⁷ Documentary photography for example was not perceived by the security apparatus as a form of ‘high art’ and despite the difficulties of publishing such work in official journals, many underground exhibitions took place without much trouble around the whole country during the 70s and the 80s.⁶⁸ The limit however was rather clear. Photographers should avoid representing a ‘pessimistic view of society’.⁶⁹ Naturally, on the one hand, this boundary made it difficult for practitioners to offer a truthful portrait of everyday life in the country. On the other hand, it also encouraged photographers to use all sorts of creative strategies directed to ‘code’ the meaning of their photographs.

In this regard, the minister probably did not feel any threat by Rečo’s proposal since perhaps all he expected was a ‘mere reproduction’ of the everyday scenes encountered in the ministry’s offices. One way or the other, the truth is that the artist’s work does not seem to reveal any obscure aspect about the ministry’s activity. As the author states, he was interested in exploring social aspects that could be extrapolated to all types of ‘office work’, with its boredoms, endless meetings and long hours at static work places.⁷⁰ ‘That is how I saw office life then but also how I see it today’, explains the artist.⁷¹ But of course these were not any offices. It was the heart of the State’s apparatus that was being portrayed during the times of Normalisation. Rečo had recorded the very concrete gestures of those in charge of establishing limitations and imposing them by force to millions of Czechoslovakian citizens, who could do nothing and understood little about day-to-day politics. Perhaps neither the minister nor Jano Rečo were aware at the time of the relevance of this undergraduate student’s work, but the resulting series has contributed in a rather unique way to the unofficial visual history of the Czech Communist Party.

⁶⁶ Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁷ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁸ As argued by Antonín Dufek in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Third Side of the Wall*, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, 2009, the fact that Jindřich Štreit remained in custody for several months and was later suspended evidences the fact that genuine documentary photography was not taken as a mere ‘reproduction’ of reality but as a form of protest.

⁶⁹ Interview with Jano Rečo, 12/11/2014.

⁷⁰ Interview with Jano Rečo, 12/11/2014.

⁷¹ See Rečo, J., *Moje školní Práce, FAMU 1973-1977*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2010, p. 63.



Figure 3.29. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Ministerstvo*, 1977, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

It is impossible to disregard however, the sexual – or rather sexist – content that some of these images carry (figure 3.29). Through a low positioning of the camera angle in the image above for example, the photographer deliberately depicts the secretary's legs, while depriving her of her subjectivity as the typewriter machine covers her upper body. Although it is true that the Proletarian Revolution empowered women to work in some industries traditionally dominated by male workers, when it came to leading roles, such 'equality' remained absent. The entire communist government of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia was formed by male politicians and only secretarial positions – or low administrative jobs – were usually held by women. As it is often the case in current Western cultures, Czechoslovakia's inequality at work at the time was an evident symptom of a sexist society from which visual culture could not escape. In this case, by positioning the camera below the table it was clear that the photograph Rečo took would carry an evident sexist connotation. I am inclined to think however that such signifier was completely disregarded by the photographer, since he had previously demonstrated his commitment to fight for gender equality at work through his practice. In his earlier project *Účtárna* (Accounting) from 1976, he dignified the activity of female public workers in an accounting office (figure 3.30). The series depicts the tireless everyday work of these women, without whom none of the decisions made by their male superiors could have been put into practice. It could thus be possible to argue that, beyond the apparently sexist content of the above photograph, Rečo might have wanted to point at the efficiency of a woman working behind her type writer as opposed to the laid-back, useless attitude, of his male colleague.



Figure 3.30. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Účtárna*, 1976, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

A different reason why Mr. Hamernik might have given permission to Rečo to undertake his project in the Ministry was because he was also hoping to contract his services for a public commission. Soon after completing his studies, Rečo was asked to produce a project on the living conditions inside the House of Disabled Children in Prague. In 1978, the photographer accepted the minister's offer and started photographing the establishment in order to provide visual evidence of the everyday life in the institution. This would be the first of a series of public assignments that Rečo would undertake during the eighties.

According to the photographer, Mr. Hamernik needed the government to increase the public budget for this type of institution and his images were directed to soften the hearts of the Party's leaders. The request was undoubtedly a very sensible one. The artist spent his days quietly observing the children, learning from their strength and from those who assisted them. The resulting photographs are filled with tenderness; that of the infants and their carers (figure 3.31). As depicted by Rečo, the institution seemed to provide an unbeatable service; doctors, physiotherapists, nurses and teachers took care of those boys and girls providing everything they needed to have a complete life despite their physical limitations. As Rečo explains, until that moment, the life inside the walls of these type of institutions was somehow hidden from the public realm, as if it were too painful to be shared. But the exhibition, which took place in Prague, proved to be a great success and over a hundred entries were written in the visitor's book where many citizens manifested their satisfaction to learn more about this reality.⁷²

⁷² Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.



Figure 3.31. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *The House of Disabled Children*, 1978, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Considering the circumstances that surround Rečo's photographs and his rather candid view on the topic, one could predictably attribute a propagandistic nature to this work, but things are usually not so simple when they take place under 'Big Brother's rule'. As explained by Czech photo-historian and curator Antonín Dufek in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *The Third Side of the Wall*, we could be easily tempted to classify artists working under the Normalisation regime as either collaborators or dissidents, but this simple categorisation is only applicable to a few of them.⁷³ Instead, claims Dufek, most artists were ultimately 'seekers of alternatives', constantly in need of exploring all available paths in order to preserve their self-respect, which could only be achieved through the development of an autonomous artistic expression.⁷⁴ The route through which each of them found the way to cultivate their subjectivity does not always comply with the polarity 'for-or-against' but with a rather complex combination of extreme circumstances that most photographers – just like the majority of Czechoslovakian citizens - were somehow forced to assume both in their private and professional life. In this regard, Rečo knew very well where he stood. He was not a communist and had never complied with communist ideas.⁷⁵ He was a passionate documentary photographer searching for human stories in the style of the great 'Magnum' photographers, whose work he had learnt about during his days at the academy. Having completed his degree at FAMU, he had now the chance to work as a freelancer and during those days, the State was the

⁷³ Dufek, A., 'Introduction', in *The Third Side of the Wall*, Prague: KANT, 2009.

⁷⁴ Dufek, A., *The Third Side of the Wall*, 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

only employer that could possibly hire him. Rečo accepted Mr. Hamernik's job proposal and took it as an unrepeatable opportunity to explore the human condition developed under extreme circumstances. As he explains in the introduction of the publication:

During my work on the topic an astonishing world opened up in front of me; the world of human pain and suffering but also of a resolution not to give up, to overcome ill fortune and live, the world of those who need to be taken care of but also the world of those who provide this care with dedication. And it was exactly here, under these conditions, where all the essential values of human life are constantly challenged, that I clearly saw the value of concepts such as human mutuality, consideration, moral responsibility and respect of one human being for another. It was exactly here that I could see with my own eyes what real humanity is, what a human being is and where the meaning of our life lies.⁷⁶

But the photographer did not seek exclusively for loving scenes or situations where the children seemed to smile and enjoy their time in the institution. Some of the images lack this candid view (figure 3.32). After all, Rečo was hired for his sensibility, for his artistic talent to see deeper into his subjects; something extremely rare for a public commission assigned during communist times. The norm was usually the opposite. Photographers working for the State knew very well the aesthetic rules of the game. A very concrete typology of productive workers and farmers was usually presented smiling, surrounded by children and communist symbols. Any possible subjectivity of the sitter was consumed by the generalisation of idealistic communist individuals. Holiday scenes, public celebrations or sports competitions were the perfect situations to present the victory of the Party's ideas.⁷⁷

But what the minister needed to portray differed completely from this type of event and he soon detected Rečo's aptitude to provide the sort of imagery he was after. The value of these photographs however went beyond the ministry's need to increase the institution's budget. Rečo captured the universal magnitude of human strength in such a way that the context of the assignment becomes secondary when the work is presented outside of it. Of course, Mr Hamernik made good use of the results, but that does not mean the photographer intentionally contributed to the propaganda purposes of the State. We could say that both had benefit from each other in this collaboration.

⁷⁶ Rečo, J., 'Introduction' in *From the Home of Disabled Children*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2008.

⁷⁷ See Birgus, V. and Jan, M., 'From Socialist realism to Humanist Photography' in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Praha: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 150.



Figure 3.32. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *The House of Disabled Children*, 1978, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Throughout the eighties, Rečo continued working for the Ministry, photographing other welfare institutions, while simultaneously dedicating time to personal documentary projects around the country.⁷⁸ Among the numerous series produced during this period, his work on alcoholics from 1989 deserves special attention (figure 3.33).⁷⁹ Having suffered this addiction himself, Rečo empathises with his subjects at a bar in the Czech village of Luby, as he captures with intense transparency their gestures of emptiness, euphoria or desperation. Drinkers of all ages share disjoined attitudes in the otherwise loneliness of their addiction. His interest in the consequences of alcoholism and its perceptible traces in the human gaze continued throughout his career until 2007. In 2005, he photographed a series of individuals posing in front of a wall in their way to a local pub in the Hájek. Each holding a different level of poisoning in their blood, they present themselves to Rečo's camera, which tries to capture whatever dignity might remain.⁸⁰ The last chapter of this theme was shot a year later inside the pub. Here the close-up headshots of drunken customers against direct flashlight have a less benevolent tone. This aesthetic approach allows him to represent their high levels of euphoria; as their lit-up isolated gestures against the dark background hinder the viewer's possibility to look elsewhere within the frame. Their gaze evidences a soaring inebriation, which together with the slovenly physical aspect of the sitters, not only might cause a sense of distress but even provoke a commiserate feeling in the viewer.



Figure 3.33. Jano Rečo, *Restaurant, Village of Luby near Cheb, 1989*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁷⁸ Another important assignment commissioned by the minister was to portray the life of residents in care homes for the elderly. Rečo was again left free to offer his own personal view on the everyday situation of the patients. For over two years he visited several care houses in Bohemia. The resulting work was finally published in a book for in 1996. See Rečo, J., *The Seniors Home*, Prague: Köcher & Köcher, 1996. Among the personal work Rečo produced during the seventies and the eighties is worth mentioning his portraits of children at birthday parties (1979), swimmers in Vyzlovka (1985) and the ironworkers from Kladno (1984). All can be found in his recently published book *Portraits*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2014

⁷⁹ See more works of this series in Rečo, J., *Portraits*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2014, pp. 55 – 71.

⁸⁰ Rečo, J., *My z hospody v Hájku*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2012.



Figure 3.34. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Youngsters' Party in the Village of Smolnice*, 1979, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Another series worth mentioning is his work on birthday parties produced in 1979, where children are photographed right after the celebration terminates (figure 3.34).⁸¹ Wearing party proms, they stand lonely with a melancholic gesture in the middle of an empty room covered with confetti. Their gaze seems almost lost. Solitude, dejection and a sense of negligence fill the entire aftermath scene, while neither the photographer, nor any other adult comes to the rescue of their recently lost joy. Their gestures of frustration make them appear strangely older, as if they had speedily matured by an unexpected distress. The artist seems to enjoy the juxtaposition of the children's innocence and the reality ahead, applying at times a certain cruelty in his attitude, as if asking 'Well, what did you expect?'. Most likely however, it is his own expectations that are placed at stake, which the photographer questions – and seems to resolve – proposing a rather pessimistic course of events.

In 1989, the Velvet Revolution finally saw its triumph and Rečo was never asked to provide his photographic services to the State again. But neither commercial photography nor photojournalism attracted him as a way to earn a living in the new capitalist system. According to the photographer, the work he undertook during communist times for the minister was part of his personal creative work, but working under the orders of new 'creative directors' from advertising agencies or perusing photo-essays around the world filled with sensationalist content in the style of 'World Press Photo' was something he was not ready to submit to. As he explains, he would rather cover his basic needs doing mechanical work elsewhere and dedicate his free time to personal photography work.⁸² In 1993, he started working as an officer for the National Heritage Institute in Prague. When asked about what had changed for him after the Revolution, Rečo explains how, at a professional level, it was the end of his career as a freelance photographer, since he was not interested in the opportunities available under the new system, but at a personal level, in 1989, a massive change arrived in the form of a passport.⁸³

A couple of years before the Velvet Revolution, Jano Rečo met Yuko; a Japanese tourist guide who would later become his wife. Yuko inspired him a great interest for Japanese culture and Rečo started to travel to her country every two years. Most of the time he went alone for a couple of months and toured the country by bicycle. Sleeping in a tent and eating mainly canned fish, Rečo discovered Japanese lands and photographed compulsively its urban and natural landscape. This wide body of work – shot for the first time in colour – explores a variety of themes which include human intervention in the natural landscape, the endless accumulation of useless objects by Japanese citizens or some rather poetic abstractions of the built environment. A large selection of these photographs were grouped in a self-published book in 2010, which

⁸¹ See more works of this series in Rečo, J., *Portraits*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2014, pp. 14 - 19

⁸² Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.

⁸³ Interview with Jano Rečo, 12/11/2014

was re-edited in 2014 with further work from more recent trips. But Rečo's work produced after the Velvet Revolution differs to such an extent from his previous documentary practice that is hard to even try to compare both artistic periods.

After shooting a short set of images with a classic – and rather ordinary – street photography approach in the streets of Tokyo, he soon started to use colour film and abandoned his interest for the direct depiction of human subjects (figure 3.35). Instead, it was the traces and consequences of their actions that grasped his attention. Objects and landscapes were now the centre of his work (figure 3.36). But not only the topic changed. His working method had also evolved from a traditional form of story-telling to an open narrative where practically everything deserved to be photographed and, although he still conserved a fine eye for composition, the 'mood' of these new images distanced from the exceptional sensibility he repeatedly demonstrated in the work produced during the 70s and 80s (figure 3.37). Using the camera like an automatic weapon, he appears to have shot in Japan hundreds of scenes without much consideration, as if everything was such a novelty for him that he could not help to record it no matter its relevance. And perhaps that was precisely his weakness; having lived in Czechoslovakia his entire life with no possibility to travel abroad, the world outside these borders was far too wide and diverse to be carefully considered in each shot. Like a newly trained amateur, Rečo travelled to Japan and was naively captivated by the infinite contrasts with his homeland. But while his reaction as an artist who travels away from home for the first time – and to such a distant place – is perfectly understandable, it appears rather surprising that following several visits to the country the dynamics of producing new work in Japan did not vary from his first visit.

The latter editing process did not help him either to discern the quality of this work. Over a hundred and fifty images are indistinctly spread throughout his book *Photos from Japan*, and the few photographs that could eventually catch our attention, cannot help to get lost in the vast publication. As Rečo himself seems to admit, during all these trips he was never sure what he was looking for. In the book's introduction, he states:

I have been several times to Japan. Each time I spent several weeks biking around... I was neither a tourist, nor an explorer. Japan is a civilized industrial country, which had been thoroughly explored long ago. But maybe not completely, maybe not for everyone. Maybe I was looking for something else. Maybe...⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Rečo, J., 'Introduction' in *Photos from Japan*, Prague: Jano Rečo, 2014



Figure 3.35. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Out in the Streets*, Tokyo, 2002 – 2003, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 3.36. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Photos from Japan*, 2014, Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 3.37. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Photos from Japan*, 2014, Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

According to Czech photo-historian Professor Vladimír Birgus, the case of Jano Rečo would be a clear example of the artistic transition experienced by some social documentary photographers after the Velvet Revolution. Having devoted their work to the communication of their country's social reality, many photographers 'lost the topic' after 1989 and with it, they seemed to have temporarily lost their source of inspiration. As Birgus explains, it took a while for most of them to re-position their practice under the new system. Many photographers started to look for appealing documentary themes outside Czech borders. Some started to work as photojournalists, producing photo-essays for international press agencies, while others like Dana Kyndrová, continued working independently and focused their attention in foreign regions where different forms of social struggle remained present. There were also few photographers, such as Viktor Kolář, who preserved a deep interest in documenting their country's situation and successfully continued to depict the everyday life of Czech citizens throughout the economic and political changes the country underwent during the 1990s. For many others however, it was the time to move away from their previous documentary practice and, like Jano Rečo, they started to experiment with different techniques and concepts.⁸⁵ In any case, looking back now at the evolution experienced by each of them after twenty-five years, it is clear that the degree of success achieved through their individual artistic transition differs substantially from one another.

Jano Rečo currently lives in Prague with his wife Yuko, where he runs a workshop for vintage bicycles while he continues to produce new photography work. Some of his photographs are part of The Moravian Gallery Photographic Collection in Brno, The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, The Museum of Art in Olomouc and The Slovak National Gallery. His work has been exhibited in individual and collective exhibitions in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the UK. Rečo has recently devoted himself to the publication of his body of work in eleven different books funded entirely by himself. But while the legacy of the work produced in Czechoslovakia before 1989 constitutes without doubt a valuable contribution to the unofficial visual history of the country, it is arguable whether his new work from Japan would add anything to his fairly earned reputation as a social documentarian in the times of Normalisation.

⁸⁵ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

7. Conclusions.

The case studies analysed in this chapter offer two very different situations of documentary photographers working under the period of Normalisation. Although both photographers shared a starting point in their careers by graduating from FAMU academy, their later professional paths differ substantially from one another. While Jano Rečo managed to earn a living working in public commissions for the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Jaromír Čejka lost the opportunity of undertaking any kind of freelance work after the conflict at his final interview at FAMU. Both of them however were able to preserve their artistic subjectivity through different strategies during the Normalisation years.

In the case of Rečo, we have seen how he was able to maintain his artistic ethos despite the fact that a considerable amount of his work was produced for public purposes. His privileged situation was of course certainly rare but it does demonstrate that some of the photography works produced for the state under Communism could indeed preserve their artistic autonomy. A proof to this is that the art photography scene in the country – or at least part of their actors – did consider Rečo's documentary practice as a form of art photography – and therefore a 'free' artistic practice. In fact, a number of photographs produced in those public assignments became part of the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, and thus included in the realm of art photography practices. We must admit however, that many individuals working in the underground had probably seen with suspicion his activity as a photographer of the Minister, since other than showing his work on a number of occasions within the scope of the Moravian Gallery in Brno and a couple of official shows organised by the Centralised Union of Czech Artists, his photographs were never exhibited in the unofficial realm.

The photographer Jaromír Čejka was in a more isolated situation. On the one hand, he was since his graduation, denied any opportunity to work as a professional photographer. On the other, after the publication of his article in the official *Tvorba* magazine in 1981 – where the photographer questioned the artistic quality of the works exhibited at *Fotografie 81* – Čejka was left completely excluded from the underground photography world.⁸⁶ It is certainly a paradox that both the official and unofficial photography scenes considered him some sort of 'traitor' for different reasons. As a consequence, his capability to 'negotiate' his artistic existence between both spheres was annulled and the artist had no choice but to develop his practice in a total private space, where practically no one was aware of his photographic production. Like Rečo's, his work was only shown on a few occasions by Antonín Dufek and was never part of any underground exhibition. In an interview with the photographer he admits that Fárová probably

⁸⁶ Čejka, J. 'Fotografie 81', in *Tvorba*, Issue 45, p. 16, 1981 Prague.

did not even know he existed.⁸⁷ But although we cannot be certain of whether she knew the photographer's work now that the curator is no longer alive, considering that the circle of art photographers in Czechoslovakia was rather closed, it is difficult to believe that she was not aware of Čejka's practice, which suggests that Fárová might have took as well his controversial article as a betrayal towards fellow art photographers.

With regards to the artistic trajectories followed by these practitioners, after the country's democratisation in 1989, they both seem to have something in common. The two of them took the opportunity to travel abroad, where they produced new work. These new projects however seem to lack of the artistic quality – or rather the sociological depth – demonstrated in their previous work produced during the days of Normalisation. As pointed out by photo-historian and photographer Vladimír Birgus, a common problem observed in social documentary practices after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 is that many of these practitioners seemed to have 'lost the topic' and with it, the source of inspiration present during communist times. Some of them – explains the historian – took a while to produce high quality work again while others never quite did.⁸⁸ Jaromír Čejka however did seem to have found the path of creativity again in the late 1990s with his series *Tracks and Traces*, although the social relevance of his post-1989 photographs can still not be compared to his work on the sub-urban town of Jižní Město.

On the professional side, we see how after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Rečo rejected the idea of continuing to work as a freelancer since, as he explains, he did not want to submit to the orders of creative directors or press agencies. Čejka instead, who in times of Normalisation rejected working as a freelance photographer because he 'did not want to prostitute his work', obtained this licence after the change of regime in order to work in several collaborative projects of scientific and environmental nature.

If there was something practically impossible for art photographers under Normalisation, it was to have their work published by the official editorial house SNKLHU. It is probably for this reason that publishing their work in a book format constituted one of the most important missions for these two photographers after the Revolution – and as we will see, for most of the practitioners whose work is analysed in the following chapters. In this regard, Jaromír Čejka has finally been able to present a publication with his most important project to date, *Jižní Město*, by the Czech editorial house Positiff. For his part, Jano Rečo has published the astonishing amount of eleven books funded entirely by himself. Their efforts for preserving their entire artistic production in a book format could well mean that both rely on the archival function of the

⁸⁷ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁸⁸ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

printed media to guarantee a continuation of their legacy. But for this legacy to remain alive, it seems fundamental to address the problem that, although at present none of these photographers are considered truly influential practitioners in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, their contribution to the unofficial visual history of Czechoslovakia needs to achieve the dissemination it deserves once the discrepancies with the former art photography scene of the 1970s and 1980s have completely lost their *raison d'être*. Only after their home countries recognise their significant role as visual storytellers, might the global History of Photography acknowledge as well as the relevance of their photographic practice. As it is often the case however, time shall probably put things into place.

Having discussed the development of social documentary practices in Czechoslovakia, the next chapter will be dedicated to analysing the rise of a subjective view in Czechoslovakian photography and the application of 'subjective principles' in documentary practices during the Normalisation period (1968-1989).

CHAPTER 4 //

'SUBJECTIVITY' AS CODED FREEDOM



Figure 4. 1. Vladimir Birgus, *Riga*, 1982, Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to study the use of a 'subjective' view in Czechoslovakian photography from the early 1920s and its development through documentary practices during the period of 'Normalisation' (1968-1989). My intention is to analyse how are we to understand the notion of 'subjective' in Czechoslovakian documentary photography and its significance during the communist rule. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate, on the one hand, that despite the country's political and cultural isolation between 1948 and 1989, the photographic scene in Czechoslovakia did not remain completely hermetic to the theoretical developments of the medium outside its borders and that, due in part to the international contacts developed during the first half of the century, its photographic history during this period had indeed run, in many aspects, parallel to that experienced in other countries both inside and outside the Eastern Bloc. On the other hand, I will argue that, just like it had occurred in Russia, Germany and the United States, the principles of 'subjectivity' in photography also aided Czechoslovakian photographers to express their reactions against the established power; a reaction that, thanks to the attributes of this 'subjective view', was able to remain 'under-cover' through the use of a coded visual language in the photograph.

Firstly, I will start by introducing the main lines of the different international movements that had shaped the notion of 'subjectivity' in photography from the early twentieth century; including Russian 'Constructivism', German 'New Objectivity', French 'Surrealism' and American 'Straight photography'. Following this introduction, I shall analyse how these ideas were received, transformed and articulated by avant-garde artists in Czechoslovakia and discuss the relation between these movements and the theoretical art background that was simultaneously being developed in the country since the early 1920s by members of the 'Prague School' like Jan Mukařovský, the photographer and writer Karel Teige and the theorist Lubomír Linhart.

Secondly, I will move to discuss the use of subjective photographic principles in the documentary work produced by photographers from the so-called New School since the late 1950s and its influence on certain members of the Czechoslovakian photography scene from the early 1970s onwards.

Finally, I would analyse how was 'subjectivity' concretely articulated in Czechoslovakian documentary photography from 1968 through a case study on the work of Czech photographer Vladimír Birgus, whose *oeuvre* constitutes one of the most evident and plausible examples of Czechoslovakian subjective photography from the 'Normalisation' period.

2. The Origins of a Subjective View

The very term ‘subjective photography’ was coined by German photographer Dr. Otto Steinert in 1951 for the *International Exhibition in Modern Photography*.¹ He was appointed the main organiser of the show by the School of Arts and Crafts of Saarbrücken – where he had taught photography since 1948.² Following this commission, Steinert advertised the exhibition to potential contributors with the motto ‘subjective photography’, which was opposed to utilitarian and documentary photography and emphasised ‘succinctly and clearly the creative impulse of the individual photographer’.³ Above all, the photograph had to be free of concrete applications and demonstrate the photographer’s conscious artistic process.⁴

Alongside the work of different photographers from Western Europe grouped by country, he exhibited a number of photographs from the 1920s by Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray and Herbert Bayer. In a rather contradictory statement, Steinert explains in his introductory text that his idea of a subjective view meant no ‘resuscitation’ of the ‘New Objectivism’ of the 1920s.⁵ Steinert argues that New Objectivity put the emphasis on the object, which served the photographer to test with scientifically-designed techniques and their different creative possibilities for the object’s representation.⁶ This creative component – he explained – remained the basis of subjective photography. However – argues Steinert – a new, second component constitutes the actual subjective aspect, that is; a personal transformation of reality.⁷

The arguments given by Steinert that attempt to differentiate a specific type of ‘subjective photography’ from the practices of ‘New Objectivity’ do not seem to clarify what their differences might be in practice. The selection of images for the exhibition then makes his thesis even more diffuse. It is clear that the pairs of photographs presented in the catalogue were mainly combined due to their formal properties rather than their content. Their resembling form somehow suggests a similarity of meaning. Such choices seem to contradict his emphasis on the individual – irreparable – subjective view (figure 4.2). Besides, I would argue that this ‘personal’ transformation of reality, this so-called ‘subjective view’ had long been cultivated in Russia since the early twentieth century, even before the development of German ‘New Objectivity’, through Rodchenko’s photographic ‘Formalism’.

¹ *International Exhibition of Modern Photography*, curated by Otto Steinert, School of Arts and Crafts of Saarbrücken, Germany, July 1951

² Eskildsen, ‘Subjektive Fotografie: A program of Non-functionalized Photography in Post-war Germany’, in *Subjektive Fotografie. Images of the 1950s*, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 1984, p. 7

³ Steinert, O., ‘What this Book is About’, in *Subjektive Fotografie*, Bonn: Bruder Auer Verlag, 1952, p. 26

⁴ Steinert, O., *Subjektive Fotografie*, p. 26

⁵ Steinert, O., *Subjektive Fotografie*, p. 26

⁶ Steinert, O., *Subjektive Fotografie*, p. 26

⁷ Steinert, O., *Subjektive Fotografie*, p. 26

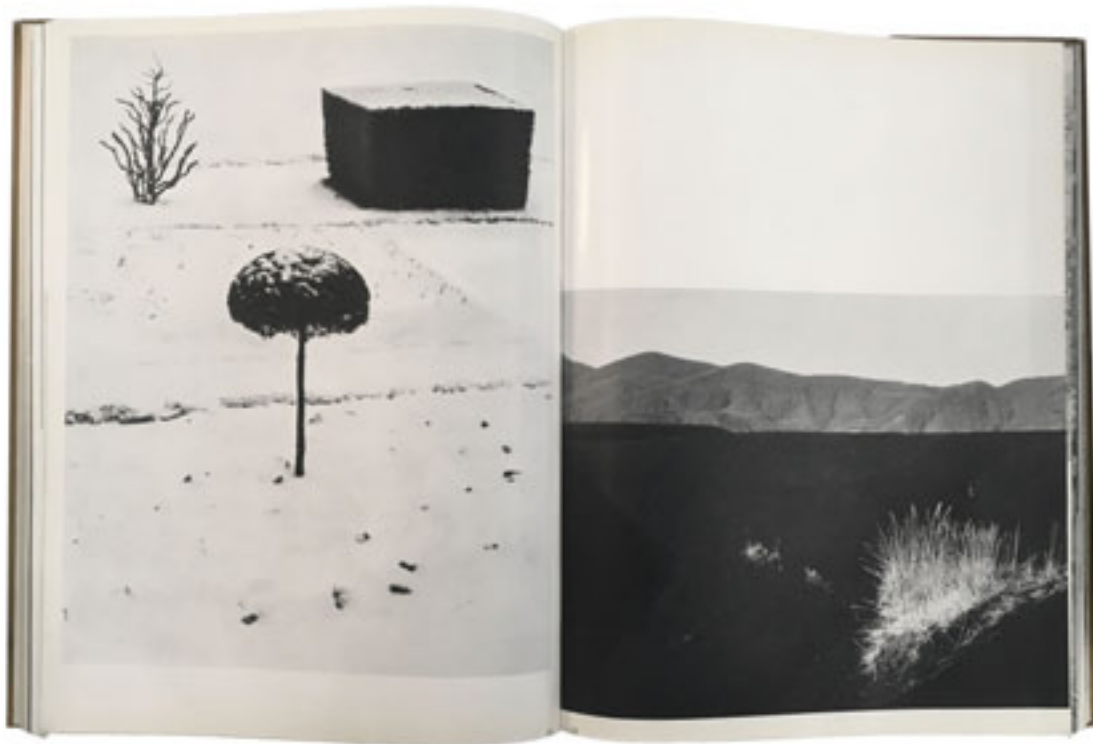


Figure 4.2. Double page from the book *Subjektive Fotografie* Bonn: Bruder Auer Verlag, 1952. (Left page) Meinardus Woldringh, *Bäumchen im Schnee*, Undated. (Right page) Rune Hassner, *Untitled*, Undated

In Russia, the theoretical roots of a subjective attitude in the production of art meaning can be traced back to Russian Formalism. One of its precursors, the scholar Viktor Shklovsky, developed the notion of ‘estrangement’ or ‘de-familiarisation’ of reality in his essay ‘Art as Device’ (1917).⁸ Although his thesis was conceived for literary purposes, his treatment of prose and poetry as a visual language enables the application of his theory in the realm of visual arts. According to Shklovsky, the everyday perception of objects on an unconscious level translates into ‘automatism’ that prevents the viewer from sensing those objects. ‘Gradually’, he argues, ‘under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away’.⁹ In order to ‘feel’ the presence of reality, to ‘return sensation to our limbs’, the device of art must complicate the perceptual process by ‘estranging’ the objects it refers to, making such a process ‘long and laborious’.¹⁰ ‘The purpose of the literary image’, explains Shklovsky, is to ‘lead us to a vision of the object rather than a mere recognition’.¹¹ We might then argue that it is in this creative process of estrangement that the subjective contribution of the author to perception succeeds as an artistic expression.

⁸ Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, in *Theory of Prose*, translated by Sher, B., Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991. Originally published in Moscow in 1925, pp. 1-14

⁹ Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, p. 5

¹⁰ Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, p. 6

¹¹ Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, p. 10

Alexander Rodchenko was probably the most significant exponent of this 'Russian Formalism'. In his aim to renew the perception of society, Rodchenko's work exemplified the idea of the 'de-familiarisation' process proclaimed by Shklovsky. The 'estrangement' was achieved through 'unusual' viewpoints, close-up cropping and diagonal compositions. As Rodchenko explained in a letter to his colleague Boris Kushner, the use of those creative techniques aimed at the analysis of working society through a 'new', revolutionary aesthetic (figure 4.3).¹² Productivism on the other hand also appears as a key aspect in Rodchenko's work. His entire *oeuvre* contains specific formal elements that leave no doubt about the technical device in use; the use of bird's and worm's eye view or the application of oblique and unfamiliar perspectives, all contribute to manifest the presence of the photographic camera as a means of production. For Rodchenko however, the camera was not a merely 'technologically sophisticated' window. In her essay 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains that Rodchenko's inclusion in some of his images, such as *Chauffeur-Karelia* from 1933, implies a rejection of the notion of photography as something 'transparent or neutral'.¹³ A subjective depiction of reality was thus clearly being pursued. As Victor Burgin argues in his essay 'Photography, Fantasy, Fiction', leftist formalism asserted that 'what people believe about the object might be changed by the way it is represented'.¹⁴ In another essay, 'Looking at Photographs', Burgin explains that the choice of perspective and composition implies the use of a specific 'look'. This 'look', argues the author, is formed by a series of conscious and unconscious processes that take place in the intellectual realm of the photographer. The resulting photograph is then unavoidably charged with ideology.¹⁵ Therefore, the subject is never objectively depicted but dressed with a representational aura able to shape its (visual) existence within the photographic print. As he observes:

The structure of representation, the eye and the base which captures it, is intimately implicated in the reproduction of ideology (we speak of a 'point of view', a 'frame of mind').¹⁶

Representational choices thus turn each photograph inevitably subjective. For Rodchenko, the selection of an appropriate (new) 'view' put photography at the service of the proletarian revolution. But it is clear that his work came to signify a lot more than mere propaganda. As I will now discuss, his aesthetic imprint can be traced throughout the development of Modernist photography in Western and Eastern Europe.

¹² See correspondence between Rodchenko and Kushner where Rodchenko makes a defence of his new revolutionary aesthetic, cited in Burgin, V., 'Photography, Fantasy, Fiction', in *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 177-179

¹³ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 58

¹⁴ Burgin, V., 'Photography, Phantasy, Fiction', in *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 186

¹⁵ See Burgin, V., 'Looking at Photographs', in *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 142-153

¹⁶ Burgin, V., 'Modernism in the Work of Art', in *The End of Art Theory*, London: MacMillan, 1986, p. 16



Figure 4.3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pioneer with a Trumpet*, 1930, Gelatine Silver Print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund

Following Lenin's death in 1924, and after a three year-long power debate, Stalin became the new leader of the Soviet Union in April 1928.¹⁷ From this date, hard Stalinism was progressively established and by the mid-1930s, Russian avant-garde tendencies were levelled bourgeois and anti-revolutionary.¹⁸ From there on, the principles of Socialist Realism were to serve the socialist state in the triumph of the proletarian revolution throughout the Soviet Union. In 1936, Rodchenko agreed to participate in this movement as he declared himself 'willing to abandon purely formal solutions for a photographic language that could more fully serve the exigencies of Socialist Realism'.¹⁹ But by the time Russian Formalism was criticised by Stalin, the style of Russian Formalist photography had already crossed the German border and spread around several countries within the Eastern Bloc – including Czechoslovakia.²⁰

In Weimar Germany, the principles of formalist photography were theorised and taught in the 1920s and 1930s mainly by Hungarian artist in exile Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. According to Solomon-Godeau, while both Rodchenko and Moholy defended the power of 'camera vision' to break the classical system of visual representation, Moholy's embracing of photography – unlike Rodchenko – did not proclaim a superior status of any specific use or context of photographic production.²¹ Productivist and Social ends embraced by the Russian photographer were displaced in favour of a much broader application of the medium in Moholy's conception of photography. His programme, 'New Vision', born out of the book project *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), proclaimed that camera vision would revolutionise and modernise human perception.²² This visual revolution however had little to do with empowering the proletariat by representing them through a new aesthetic. Instead, as exemplified for example in his iconic photograph of Berlin's radio tower, he was convinced of the 'supreme' role of photography in modern life and believed that camera vision would aid humans in recognising and improving the world (figure 4.4).²³ According to Solomon-Godeau 'formalism for Moholy signified above all the absolute primacy of the material'.²⁴ As the writer explains, Moholy – like Rodchenko – in keeping with avant-garde trends rejected any notion of subjectivity of the photograph.²⁵ But in order to understand such a strong rejection of the photographer's

¹⁷ Viola, L., 'Stalinism and the 1930s', in Gleason, A., (ed.), *A Companion to Russian History*, Oxford: Backwell, 2009, pp. 368-387

¹⁸ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 60

¹⁹ Rodchenko, A., quoted by Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 60

²⁰ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed', p. 60

²¹ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed', p. 73

²² See See Moholy-Nagy, L., *Painting Photography, Film*, 1925, London: MIT Press, Reprint Edition 1987

²³ Witkovsky, M., S., 'Starting Points', in *Foto Modernity in East Central Europe*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2007, pp. 15-16

²⁴ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed', p. 71

²⁵ Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed' p. 71

subjectivity, we must remember how Moholy and Rodchenko aimed to distance photography from the previous 'Pictorialist' style. In his book *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy writes:

In the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to the beginning of objective vision. Everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms before he can arrive at any subjective position. This will abolish that pictorial and imaginative association pattern which has remained un superseded for centuries and which has been stamped upon our vision by great individual painters.²⁶

Both Russian Photographic Formalism and Moholy's 'New Vision' rejected the idea of assimilating photography with painting and aimed to confer on the medium a total autonomy. For them, the photographic camera was a new technology, capable of serving modern society in completely new ways. There was no need whatsoever to compete with painting because the role of the painter in modern life was completely different – and less important – than that of the photographer. Since painting was conceived of as a highly subjective form of representation, then rendering the photograph objective and allowing the image to refer to itself, seemed key to achieve the autonomy of the medium they both longed for. But like Rodchenko's work, Moholy's subjective approach to reality in his photographic work is inescapable. While it is true that his images lack the 'imaginative' qualities pursued by pictorialists – with the use of blur and soft focus – his thought-through compositions of urban spaces, portraits, photograms and photomontages revealed his carefully conceived aesthetic decisions. As much as he claimed to have objectively recorded the modern world, subjective creative choices were constantly being made in his work.

²⁶ Moholy-Nagy, L., as quoted by Burgin, V. in 'Modernism in the Work of Art', in *The End of Art Theory*, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 8



Figure 4.4. Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Radio Tower Berlin*, 1928, Gelatine Silver Print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund

In Weimar Germany, three years after the publication of *Painting, Photography, Film*, Albert Renger-Patzch published his book *The World is Beautiful* (1928).²⁷ The publication applied for the first time the term ‘New Objectivity’ in reference to modernist photographic practices.²⁸ From there on, Avant-garde photography tendencies in Germany would indistinctly be referred to as either ‘New Objectivity’ or ‘New Vision’.²⁹ As explained in the preface of *The World is Beautiful* by Carl Georg Heise, Renger-Patzch’s photographs of machinery and architecture reveal that it is possible to regard such products ‘as no less beautiful than nature or a work of art’.³⁰ It appears evident that the work of Renger-Patzch and other photographers from the ‘New Objectivity’ and ‘New Vision’ movements transformed the principles of Russian formalism and applied them to very different ends from Rodchenko’s productivism. By bringing perceptual ‘estrangement’ to the very physical qualities of the object – with clarity and detail of its ‘technological perfection’ – the focus of de-familiarisation was moved towards an exaltation of the product’s modernity. We could then argue that photographers from the ‘New Objectivity’ made a rather deviated application of Shklovsky’s theories. While for the latter the strategies of de-familiarisation aimed to stop automatic perception and ‘enlighten’ the public with a new – genuine – sense of represented objects, the first developed such a strategy in order to achieve a ‘better appreciation’ of the subject (product) by the viewer (consumer).

We might now contrast this history with the development of a ‘subjective’ photographic view in the USA. In doing so, I would argue that, irrespective of their diverse context of art production and the different ways in which those photographers formulated their practices, both Russian and German photographic formalism as well as American ‘Straight Photography’ share numerous attributes. My ultimate aim however would be to demonstrate how, despite their country’s isolation under the communist rule, Czechoslovakian photography produced during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) drew from all the photographic movements discussed in this chapter.

In the USA, the development of photographic subjectivity was born out of the aesthetics of ‘straight photography’; a term coined in the USA by Sadakichi Hartmann as early as 1904.³¹ Adherents to the West Coast photographic movement like Paul Strand or Edward Weston would then explore the notion of ‘straight’ or ‘pure’ photography from the early 1930s. An official

²⁷ Witkovsky, M., S., ‘Starting Points’, in *Foto Modernity in East Central Europe*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2007, p15, originally published in Renger-Patzch, A., *The World is Beautiful*, Munich: Kurt Wolf Verlag, 1928

²⁸ The term ‘New Objectivity’ was coined by art Critic Gustav Hartlaub in 1925 to describe developments in German painting. The use Renger-Patzch made of such term thus mutated its meaning when applied to photography. See Witkovsky, M., S., *Foto Modernity in East Central Europe*, p.15

²⁹ Witkovsky, M., S., *Foto Modernity in East Central Europe*, p.15

³⁰ Heise, C., G., as quoted by Solomon-Godeau, A., ‘The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style’, in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 64

³¹ See Hartmann, S., ‘A Plea for Straight Photography’, in *American Amateur Photographer*, No. 16, March 1904, pp. 101-109

artistic collaboration between these photographers gave birth to the f/64 group in San Francisco. In their manifesto – presented in their first exhibition in 1932 – the group emphasised its will to consolidate artistic photography as a valid art form, for which it was essential to distance their practice from traditional Pictorialism.³² The aesthetic lines endorsed by its group members were characterised by the use of sharp focus and abstract compositions of nature, underlying the unusual geometric structure of depicted objects. This exhaustive examination of their surrounding world from the individual perspective of each photographer is precisely where subjective photography manifests itself; making the ‘common’ extraordinary as a result of the observer’s creative sensibility, who – by thoughtful technical means – enables the production of original, personal views of reality (figure 4.5). But unlike avant-garde photography practices from Russia and the Bauhaus, in American ‘straight photography’ it was the role of the photographer – not technology – that was celebrated as the main source of original creation. As Weston observed: ‘man is the actual medium of expression – not the tool he elects to use as a means’.³³

The attempt to introduce Russian Formalism in the USA came by the hand of Moholy-Nagy, who from 1937 taught at the Design Institute of Chicago.³⁴ Though the structure of the curriculum mimicked that of the Bauhaus, what remained of the German formalist programme was mainly its stylistic conception. According to Solomon-Godeau, the nature of teaching had less to do with the functionality of creativity in the industrial age than with the notions of the artist-photographer producing ‘personal’ work for a peer audience. After the death of Moholy-Nagy in 1946 and the arrival of Harry Callahan to the Institute, the remaining attempts of Moholy to abandon the subjective view came to an end. Callahan’s personal work had more in common with West Coast photographers than it did with the Bauhaus conception of the medium. Not surprisingly, this translated into a different pedagogical strategy from that pursued by his predecessor. Although the experimental learning approach remained present throughout his ten year of teaching at the Chicago Institute of Design, the functionality of Russian formalist principles was, from 1951, buried in favour of a personal, subjective vision. A different type of formalism – which became the signature to the Institute during the 1950s and 1960s – was thus derived from Callahan’s pedagogical work. The main idea of this ‘new’ photographic formalism

³² Rosenblum, N., Heyman, T., (ed.) *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography*, exhibition catalogue, Oakland Museum, 1992, p. 35

³³ Weston, E., as quoted by Solomon-Godeau, A., ‘Photography after Art Photography’, in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 109

³⁴ Martison, D., ‘Notes on American Photography of the 50s’, in *Subjektive Fotografie. Images of the 1950s*, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 1984, p. 145

was the use of material and formal properties of the medium to create art photographs that conveyed an expression of a 'privileged subjectivity'.³⁵



Figure 4.5. Edward Weston, *Shell*, 1927, Gelatine Silver Print, Museum of Modern Art New York

³⁵ See Solomon-Godeau, A., 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', in *Photography at the Dock*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. 74-84

I have argued how Formalism – in its Russian and German versions – applied a subjective approach to photography, even if it rejected the idea of a ‘personal vision’. The ideological purposes in the applications of formalist principles however differed from one another. While for the Russians productivity and the proletarian revolution were at the core of their photographic work, German ‘New Objectivity’ aimed for the ‘camera vision’ to contribute to the progress of modern life. Both however rejected the idea of applying a personal – subjective – view to the photograph. This was in part due to their intention of distancing avant-garde photography from pictorial practices, which they considered highly subjective in their representation. American formalism instead followed a very different path. Though non-subjective formalist principles were introduced by Moholy-Nagy at the Chicago Institute of Design, what remained of formalism after Harry Callahan’s arrival to the Institute were merely stylistic notions of the Bauhaus formalist version. The so-called American formalist photographers in Chicago actively embraced subjectivity from the 1950s onwards. Twenty years earlier, the rejection of pictorialist practices in the USA was also pursued through different strategies. Instead of defending the idea of photography’s objectivity, American ‘straight photography’ was aware of the unavoidable subjective attitude implied in ‘picture-making’. For them, it was precisely this individual perspective of reality – in its clarity of detail – that demonstrated photography’s autonomy from the other arts. Such autonomy would ultimately equate the medium with other ‘high’ artistic practices like painting.

I started the discussion by introducing Steinert’s notion of subjective photography since he was indeed the first to apply the terminology at stake. I did, however, doubt the novelty of his conception of a ‘subjective view’. As explained above, formalist photographers had long been using – though often without awareness – the principles of subjectivity similar to those defended by Steinert. It is evident as well that even before the arrival of modern photography, pictorialist practices were already charged by the so-called ‘personal’ and ‘transformative’ view of reality. But in order to better understand the efforts of Steinert to define the so-called ‘subjective photographic view’, we must remember that by the time his catalogue was published in 1951, German society probably still felt the scars of National Socialism; a collectivistic ideology which suppressed the individual in favour of the community and pushed each citizen to achieve a supreme – externally imposed – cause. Steinert’s ‘new’ subjective photography then focused on human experience and the freedom of choice – away from utilitarian or collective purposes.

From the introductory text in the *Subjektive Fotografie* exhibition catalogue, we can also observe how it was the product of a crisis; a conflict between humanity and technology in a dehumanised environment, where the demand for ‘creatively guided techniques’ was becoming more insistent.³⁶ As he explains:

...this broad nexus photographic movement is to be seen as helping the individual man in securing his right to creative activity, not in defiance of techniques but with all the assistance they can give. ‘Subjective photography’ means humanised, individualised photography and implies the handling of a camera in order to win from the single object the views expressive of its character.³⁷

What seems to be at stake therefore is not so much a rejection – or defence – of subjective photography principles, but rather the intention of each of these movements to grant the photographer the role of ‘creator’ and legitimise the use of the camera as a valid artistic tool. Most significant however are the contexts of art production in which these debates took place. As I have explained, the strategies used by the precursors of each of these movements to acknowledge the ‘position’ of the photographer were shaped by the concrete historical circumstances in which they were conceived. It is precisely here, in the construction of the historical photographic discourses, that formal debates of the medium become exciting subjects of study.

I will now analyse how the idea of a ‘subjective view’ was received, transformed and articulated by avant-garde photographers in Czechoslovakia during the 1920s and 1930s. This analysis will lead me to discuss how are we to understand the use of ‘subjectivity’ in art photography practices produced in the country during the communist period (1948-1989).

3. The Rising of a Subjective View in Czechoslovakian Photography

The favourable economic and political conditions present in the First Czechoslovakian State after the First World War, together with the multi-cultural artistic scene present in the country of the interwar years (1918-1938), favoured the innovation of all cultural areas, including art, design, architecture and literature.³⁸ After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1919, the contact with Austrian artists became less frequent and Czechoslovakian artists started to turn their attention to Avant-garde movements that were being developed elsewhere in Europe. During this period, and until the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazi forces in

³⁶ Steinert, O., ‘What this Book is About’, in *Subjektive Fotografie*, Bonn: Bruder Auer Verlag, 1952, p. 26

³⁷ Steinert, O., *Subjektive Fotografie*, p. 26

³⁸ During the Inter-war period three million Germans and a large community of Hungarians, Jews and Ruthenians lived in the Czechoslovakian territory. Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Poetism and the beginning of Abstract Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 45

1938, members of the Czech art scene maintained strong contacts with fellow artists from Russia and other parts of Europe.³⁹ As a result, the rise of a subjective view in Czechoslovakian photography drew from a combination of international art movements including Russian Constructivism, German New Objectivity and French Surrealism. The development of Avant-garde tendencies in the country however, was also the product of the art theories developed by members of the 'Prague School' like Jan Mukařovský. Photographer and writer Karel Teige played a crucial role as well in stylistic aspects of the medium since the mid-1920s, while Czechoslovakian theorist Lubomír Linhart was key in the development of socially committed photography from the early 1930s.

With regards to international tendencies, some left-leaning Czechoslovakian artists found inspiration in Russian formalist principles. The use of a bird's-eye view, diagonals and selective cropping is evident in the work of photographers like Jiří Lehovec. Rodchenko's ideas in relation to a 'new revolutionary aesthetic' are present in the work of many photojournalists of the time who worked under the auspices of the 'Left Front'.⁴⁰ This organisation (in Czech 'Levá fronta') was led by Marxist Theorist Lubomír Linhart. In his manifesto of 1934, Linhart states the organisation's aim to 'give our photography a new, healthy, socially meaningful content'. According to photography historian Vladimír Birgus, Linhart was an admirer of Soviet Avant-garde photography and personal friend of Rodchenko.⁴¹ It is not surprising therefore to find similarities between Rodchenko's work and the photographs produced by many Czechoslovakian photojournalists working under the leadership of Linhart. Clear examples can be found for instance in the series *Sand Shovelers* (1936) by Vladimír Hnízdo (figure 4.6). His close-up shots of workers, together with cropped diagonal compositions and a low-angle view have a very similar style to many of the Russian artist's photographs like *Pioneer with a Trumpet* (1930) (figure 4.3).

According to photo-historian Vladimír Birgus, Bauhaus constructivism also had an enormous influence on many Czechoslovakian artists. During the 1920s, and until the Soviet occupation of the country in 1948, the exchange of knowledge between the German school and Czechoslovakian practitioners was very strong. Several Czechoslovakian photographers, like Jindřich Koch, studied in Weimar and photographs from Bauhaus students were often published in Czechoslovakian Avant-garde magazines like 'Telehor'. In 1929, Czech artist and theoretician Karel Teige was invited to Germany to give a series of lectures on the sociology of art. Fluid contacts were also maintained with Moholy-Nagy, who had several solo exhibitions in

³⁹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Poetism and the beginning of Abstract Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 45

⁴⁰ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p. 45

⁴¹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p. 85

Czechoslovakia. Birgus also argues that beyond the artistic influence, the teaching style of the German school was also followed in the schools of Arts and Crafts of Bratislava and Brno.⁴²



Figure 4.6. Vladimír Hnizdo, 'Hands which Cannot Close into a Fist Because of Calluses', from the series *Sand Shovelers*, 1936. Gelatine Silver Print. Private collection, Prague.

Another source of inspiration during the inter-war period was France. Attracted by surrealist tendencies that were being developed in the Francophone territory, numerous Czechoslovakian artists travelled to the country repeatedly – some of whom like painter František Kupka remained there permanently. Similarly, French artists and writers often visited Czechoslovakia and established close contacts with some artistic circles in Prague. Above all, Man Ray was probably the most influential. In 1923, his photograms *Les Champs Délicieux* were shown for the first time at 'The Modern Bazaar' in Prague.⁴³ The works of Eugène Atget also caused a great impact on the development of early Czechoslovakian surrealist photography. This can be perceived in the series *Reflections, 1929* by Jaromír Funke, where the artist juxtaposes reflective glass images of different objects in the same photograph. By the mid-1930s, Surrealism became one of the strongest tendencies in Czechoslovakian Avant-garde art, due in part to impulse of

⁴² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'New Photography: Constructivism, Functionalism and New Objectivity', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 59

⁴³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Poetism and the beginning of Abstract Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 46

members from of the 'Ra' Group, 'Skupina Surrealistu v CSR' (The Group of Surrealist in the Czechoslovakian Republic) and the 'Skupina 42' (42 Group). From that moment and until the establishment of the communist regime in 1948, Prague would become one of the international capitals of Surrealism.⁴⁴

The theoretical art background in Czechoslovakia drew mainly from the thesis of the 'Prague School' – also known as 'The Prague Linguistic Circle'. The work produced by its members during the 1930s opened the field of semiotics in art and is considered to be both a continuation and reassessment of Russian formalist theories.⁴⁵ The creative use of the sign was deeply studied and envisaged as the producer of artistic meaning. One of its most influential fellows, Jan Mukařovský, insisted on the importance of acknowledging the semiotic nature of art in order to offer a meaningful interpretation of the artwork. In his essay 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', the author denies the identification of the work of art exclusively with a subjective state – neither that of the creator or the perceivers. Firstly, he argues, the work of art constitutes an autonomous sign created by the artist, which – by nature – makes reference to a second reality.⁴⁶ This referred reality, explains Mukařovský, is formed by the context of social phenomena (philosophy, politics, economics, etc.). Secondly, he continues, the work of art functions merely as an external signifier; as an intermediary between the artist and the community capable of a meaningful interpretation of the artefact. But as the author observes, beyond the autonomous function of the sign, there is also an informational function. In representational arts (painting, photography, sculpture) the subject of the work refers to a distinct existence (event, place, person). Through this quality, argues Mukařovský, the work of art resembles purely informational signs. Its informational specificity however lays in the fact that the relationship between the work of art and the signified does not have existential value. This makes it impossible to postulate its documentary authenticity 'insofar as the work is to be held as a product of art'.⁴⁷ Both semiotic functions – the autonomous and the informational – coexist in representational arts and constitute the 'dialectical antinomies of the evolution of these arts'.⁴⁸ As a consequence, argues the author, and in order to understand the evolution of art, theorists must conceive its structure as an autonomous entity in a constant dialectical relationship with the evolution of other domains of culture.⁴⁹ Mukařovský's programmatic essay thus reveals the importance of identifying artistic practices as a social phenomena. We

⁴⁴ See Fijalkowski, F., Richardson, M., and Walker, I., *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia*, London: ASGATE, 2013

⁴⁵ Matejka, L., 'Preface', in *Semiotics of Art. Prague School Contributors*, Cambridge: MIT, 1976

⁴⁶ Mukařovský, J., 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', in *Semiotics of Art. Prague School Contributors*, Cambridge: MIT, 1976 pp. 3-9

⁴⁷ Mukařovský, J., 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', p. 9

⁴⁸ Mukařovský, J., 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', in *Semiotics of Art. Prague School Contributors*, Cambridge: MIT, 1976 p. 9

⁴⁹ Mukařovský, J., 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', p. 9

could argue that from his point of view, there is no such thing as ‘History of Art’ but rather a ‘Social History of Art’. For him, the study of the evolution of these arts can never be done in isolation but taking into account its dynamic relationship with the culture of a given society. In this sense, his thesis comes closer to the functionalist principles of ‘New Objectivity’ and Russian formalist photography, insofar as the work of art is conceived as a product to serve the society of its time.

The heterogeneous range of Avant-garde photography practices in Czechoslovakia received the name ‘New Photography’. An integral part of this movement was the activity of the Devětsil association, founded in 1920 by artist and theorist Karel Teige. The first Avant-garde practices developed by this group were picture-poems with a constructivist style, which in Czechoslovakia received the name of ‘Poetism’. Some artists from the association working with photography would later become interested in abstract photography.⁵⁰ Such was the case of Jaroslav Rösler, whose photomontages of basic geometric figures were often produced by the abstraction of light and casted shadows. By 1922, the principles of German ‘New Objectivity’ were already embraced by Devětsil members through the acknowledgement of the ‘supremacy’ of the photographic machine, which was able to offer a precise representation of modern life. They emphasised realism and precision while experimenting with closer distances and unusual perspectives.⁵¹ Exercises of ‘New Photography’ however – unlike the work of their German counterparts – allowed space for the subjective role of ‘image makers’. In 1922, Teige wrote:

The Beauty of Photography, like the beauty of technology, derives from simple and absolute perfection and the contingency of its application. Photography’s beauty is the same as the beauty of an aeroplane or ocean liner or electric bulb. It is the work of both the machine and of the human hand, the mind, and – if you like – the human heart.⁵²

Alongside the technological attributes of the ‘machine’, Teige states a clear acknowledgement of the mind and soul (human heart) as source of creativity. In similar terms, photographer Jaromír Funke seems to have anticipated the notion of a ‘subjective view’ in very similar terms to those proclaimed a decade afterwards by the German photographer and curator Otto Steinert. Funke, who explored the entire repertoire of Czechoslovakian Avant-garde tendencies in photography – including Abstraction, New Objectivity and Surrealism – wrote in an article in 1940:

⁵⁰ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Poetism and the beginning of Abstract Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 48

⁵¹ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p. 59

⁵² Teige, K., as quoted by Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘New Photography: Constructivism, Functionalism and New Objectivity’ in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 59

The selection is subject only to the free decision of the photographer, who – through composition, lighting, technical finesse, exposure, the awaiting of favourable conditions, knowledge and experience – can imbue even an unpretentious, inconspicuous subject with unusual, even dazzling form, so that it becomes something very interesting and new. A new photographic reality is thus formed which makes use of the subject only as pretext for photographic expression.⁵³

Funke's conception of photography seems to come closer to the practices of American 'Straight Photography' than to German's 'New Objectivity'. By stating that the subject is merely a 'pretext' for expression, he leaves behind the whole range of principles pursued by the German school with regards to the 'beauty of modern life'. The photograph for him is ultimately a product of self-expression and it is the subjective creative process that gives photography its supremacy as a representational medium. This subjective embracement of the photograph can be clearly observed in his work, where the 'importance' of depicted subjects is abandoned by means of cropping and extremely short close-ups. Instead, a new reality is composed within the frame, where solid material and light carry equal weight (figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7. Jaromír Funke, *Talíře (Plates)*, 1923–24. Gelatine Silver Print, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁵³ Funke, J., 'From the Photogram to Emotion' in *Photography in the Modern Era*, translated by Suzanne Pastor, New York: MET Museum and Aperture, 1989, Originally published in Czech language in 'Od fotogramu k emoci', in *Fotografický obzor*, Prague 48, 1940, N 11, pp. 121-123

Following the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi forces in 1938 and the establishment of the Czech Protectorate in 1939, surrealist photography and other avant-garde practices were condemned as ‘degenerate’. As Vladimír Birgus explains however, many of these artists managed to dodge the invader’s oppressive attitude and continued to develop their work often ‘illicitly’.⁵⁴ After the liberation of the country in 1945 by Soviet troops – supported by the Czech and Slovak resistance – the country enjoyed a brief period of Democracy that would last for three short years.⁵⁵ But straight after the Soviet occupation of Czech and Slovak territories and the establishment of a communist regime in 1948, the development of creative photography suffered a deep discontinuity and the authorities started to demand the application of principles of Socialist Realism at the service of the communist state. Consequently, avant-garde photography was labelled ‘bourgeois’ and banned from being exhibited or published. From there on, and until the fall of the Wall in 1989, the artistic and cultural sphere would remain practically isolated from Western tendencies and only timid contacts would take place at an international level with other countries from the eastern side of the Bloc.⁵⁶ As a result, the development of photography followed a very particular path in the modulation of concepts, which differed substantially – both in time and form – from the development of the medium in the opposite side of the Iron curtain. In 1957 however, a slow liberalisation of the artistic scene took place under the lead of Czechoslovakian president, Antonín Novotný. During the timid thaw that lasted one entire decade until the Soviet invasion of 1968, a period of expansion and experimentation took place in all artistic areas.⁵⁷ In this scenario, photographer Jan Svoboda started to develop a highly elaborate body of self-reflective photographs. Influenced by Josef Sudek – whom Svoboda knew personally – he represents one of the greatest exponent of Czechoslovakian art photography and was of enormous influence for younger photographers in the times of Normalisation (1969-1989).⁵⁸

According to Czech curator and photography historian Pavel Vančát, Svoboda was the first Czechoslovakian photographer to position his work in the realm of visual arts. In 1964, he was invited by painters and sculptors to join the Máj group.⁵⁹ An obvious explosion of creativity and innovation can be perceived in his work after that date. His photographs gradually became more minimalistic and contemplative (figure 4.8). Following perhaps previous modernist tendencies, the images started to refer more to the medium itself, examining its very physical properties. He eliminated distracting frames and *passé-partouts* in order to bring the attention to the very

⁵⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Surrealism to Glamour Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p.137

⁵⁵ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 235-239

⁵⁶ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, p.149

⁵⁷ See ‘The Short Sweet Decade (1957-1967)’ in the second chapter of this thesis.

⁵⁸ Vančát, P., ‘Jan Svoboda: Images of Photography’, in *Jan Svoboda: I’m not a Photographer*, exhibition catalogue, the Moravian Gallery in Brno, 2015, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Vančát, P., ‘Jan Svoboda: Images of Photography’, p. 10.

‘photograph-object’.⁶⁰ The installation process was probably conceived by the author as important as the very ‘taking’ of the photograph. Each of these new three-dimensional, photograph-objects is thus presented as a unique work of art. In an interview given to Petr Balajka in 1989 for the magazine *Czechoslovenska Fotografie*, Svoboda stated:

I am concerned with realism. When one sees some of one’s own work as a means of expressing oneself, then it always contains something that has been taken away from reality...The only thing that I can justifiably make a statement on is my own world. Except that it is not only about me, but also about the world that I am part of, see, experience, feel. Talking about myself actually depends on this splendid world that I live in.⁶¹

Unlike the great majority of Czechoslovakian practitioners from the time, Svoboda was highly concerned with the intellectual aspect of his work. While the existentialist principles of subjective photography are evident in Svoboda’s conception of the image, we might also find certain connections with Karl Pawek’s reflections on photography and its relation to phenomenology. In his book *Totale Photographie*, published in 1960, Pawek emphasises the importance of the unique identity of the object – and its factual presence – to determine our experience of the world.⁶² According to Pawek, ‘what photography does is that it renders appreciative availability of the factual by visual means’.⁶³ Svoboda’s quote however raises more doubts than clarifications about the meaning of his work. It is not clear if he depicted his own (psychological) world or whether his work is an expression of the social reality he inhabits. Looking at his photographs, I am inclined to think that it is somehow a combination of both; while it was probably used to express his inner psychological state, that state must have certainly been affected by the social reality to which he pertained. In this sense, we might argue that Svoboda made an elaborate use of ‘subjectivity’ in his photographs, as he is able to link an ‘apparent’ psychological state with a ‘hidden’ critique on the state of society.

⁶⁰ Vančát, P., ‘Jan Svoboda: Images of Photography’, in *Jan Svoboda: I’m not a Photographer*, exhibition catalogue, the Moravian Gallery in Brno, 2015, p. 11.

⁶¹ Svoboda, J., quoted by Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Minimalism to Postmodernism’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 250. The interview was originally published in *Czechoslovenska Fotografie*. It was made by Petr Balajka in Svoboda’s fiftieth birthday in 1989.

⁶² Pawek, K. *Totale Photographie*, Freiburg: Walter-Verlag, 1960

⁶³ Pawel, K. Quoted by Schmalriede, M., ‘Subjektive Fotografie and its Relation to the Twenties’, in *Subjektive Fotografie. Images of the 1950s*, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 1984, p. 27

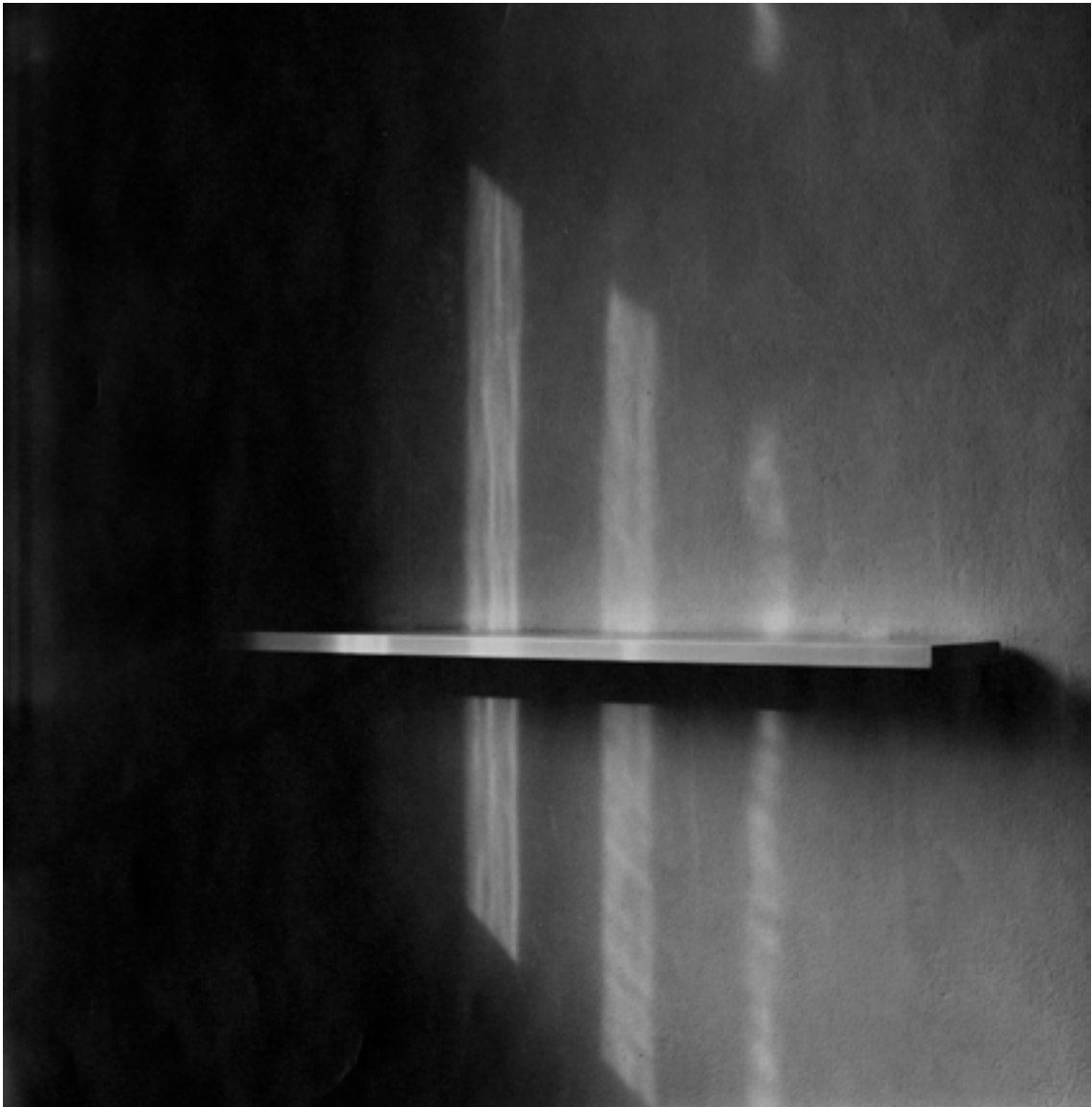


Figure 4.8. Jan Svoboda, *Picture that will not Return*, 1971. Gelatine Silver Print, The Moravian Gallery in Brno

Further examples of ‘subjectivity’ in Czechoslovakian photography can be found in the work of other photographers from the sixties exploring surrealist ideas like Emila Medková and Vilém Reichmann.⁶⁴ These practitioners often depicted decaying urban structures, such as rubbish dumps, peeling walls, abandoned objects and graffiti. Combining various elements within the frame through ‘miraculous encounters’, they attribute a figurative meaning to the photograph in the style of abstract surrealism.

The arrival of Soviet troops in Prague, in August 1968, put an end to the attempts of liberal reforms pursued during the previous decade. Full party domination was reinstated and reformist leaders were progressively removed through numerous purges. In April 1969, the transition to the so-called ‘Normalisation’ was completed with the lead of President Gustáv Husák.⁶⁵ During the first few months, censorship practices were aggravated in order to ‘pacify’ the public sphere. In this repressive scenario – controlled by thousands of anonymous watchdogs – Czechoslovakian photographers fought to preserve their artistic autonomy through different means.⁶⁶ Among the different photographic genres explored during this period, documentary practices played an essential role in the documentation of reality; depicting an alternative version from that exposed by official sources. The repressive situation however also favoured the development of subjective documentary practices. The photographers approaching this style moved away from descriptive representations of society. Instead of presenting the subject as a ‘document’, depicted realities often seem auxiliary to the formation of photographic meaning. As a result, the process of decoding their images became a rather difficult task. But compared to the popularity of social documentary photography, the subjective approach was pursued by a reduced number of practitioners, many of whom were influenced by the subjective photography work that was being produced in the USA since the late 1950s.

4. The Application of Subjective principles in Documentary Practices by USA Photographers and its Influence in Czechoslovakian Photography since 1968

In 1955, the Museum of Modern Art of New York hosted the polemical exhibition *Family of Man* curated by Edward Steichen. The show became the most widely visited photography exhibition in the USA until that moment.⁶⁷ In a certain way, the exhibition endorsed Steichen’s thesis that photography could well be turned into a vehicle for the mutual understanding of nations. *Family of Man* aimed to represent a protest against recent wars and relax the anxieties

⁶⁴ See See Fijalkowski, F., Richardson, M., and Walker, I., ‘Objective Poetry: Post-War Czech Surrealist photography and the Everyday’, in *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia*, London: ASGATE, 2013, pp. 89-102

⁶⁵ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 326-344

⁶⁶ Dufek, A., ‘Retrospect’, in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009

⁶⁷ Martison, D., ‘Notes on American Photography of the 50s’, in *Subjektive Fotografie. Images of the 1950s*, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 1984, p145

created by the nuclear threat of the Cold War. By visually demonstrating the ‘commonality of man’ around the globe and dignifying its universal existence, the exhibition intended to recover the hope in humanism. In addition, the show aimed to defend the conception of artistic photography as a valid art form that genuinely belonged to ‘the museum’.⁶⁸

But while Steichen’s exhibition certainly empowered photography with an art status, it never the less arose various fronts of controversy. On the one hand, many participating photographers reacted to the exhibition’s presentation as a themed show, which topic – and underlying concept – they had never explicitly adhered. On the other hand, a number of photographers like William Klein and Robert Frank, responded to what they considered to be an unrealistic view of human existence and started to produce street-photography scenes exploring the ‘real’ anxieties of post-war America.⁶⁹ It is important to understand that by the time the exhibition the *Family of Man* opened in New York, American citizens were living in highly unsettling political times. Having recovered from the trauma of the Second World War, USA troops committed to fight the Korean War in 1950. Besides, the ‘spy paranoia’ of the Cold War led to the prosecution of all sorts of professionals who could be suspicious of adhering to communist ideals. In this scenario, the work produced by Frank and Klein in the mid-fifties becomes essential to understand the reasons behind the development of subjective principles in American documentary photography.

The Swiss, German-speaking Robert Frank, rejected Steichen’s sentimental vision of photography, the photo-essay style used by *Life* magazine as well as Cartier-Bresson’s lack of personal involvement in his decisive shots. Instead, he aimed to knock down the myth of the beauty of photography exploited in the *Family of Man*, follow only his intuition when it came to picture story-telling and allow his subjects to objectively render his authorship.⁷⁰ His book, *The Americans*, from 1958 reached the height of his artistic statement.⁷¹ Thanks to the financial support of a Guggenheim fellowship, he travelled the country and portrayed a wide spectrum of American society of the time, offering a critical look to issues of racism, alienation or political scepticism. The resulting images not only evidence Frank’s personal social concerns, but most importantly invite the members of such a society to reflect upon the humanist crisis acknowledged through the subject’s disruptive gazes (figure 4.9). After several rejections in his adoptive land, the book was published in Paris in 1958. The publication received mostly negative criticism from both the press and fellow photographers. For American reviewers, Frank was an outsider who had come to offer a highly pessimistic and untruthful view of their

⁶⁸ Martison, D., ‘Notes on American Photography of the 50s’, in *Subjektive Fotografie. Images of the 1950s*, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 1984, p145

⁶⁹ Martison, D., ‘Notes on American Photography of the 50s’, p144

⁷⁰ Mortenson, E. ‘The Ghost of Humanism: Rethinking the Subjective Turn in Postwar American Photography’, in *History of Photography*, Vol 38, No 4, 2014, p. 422

⁷¹ Frank, R. *Les Americans* (The Americans), Delpeire: Paris, 1958

otherwise consecrated American dream. For some of his colleagues, the apparently careless aesthetic of his images – which contravened most accepted standards of photography – was simply unacceptable.⁷²



Figure 4.9. Robert Frank, *Trolley, New Orleans, 1955*. Gelatine Silver Print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Also making a deliberate use of an apparently careless technique, William Klein's book *Life is Good and Good for you in New York* from 1956, examines the state of American society through a series of street photographs laid out in the tabloid style of the *Daily News*.⁷³ His highly contrasted images depict a wide range of subjects living in the city, from homeless children to multimillionaires. Exposure time is often used to add extreme ambiguity to its subjects. Deformed, entranced kids or grotesque caricatures of rich women serve the author to represent the state of anxiety and distress of post-war America (figure 4.10). The ambiguity resulting from his extreme technical choices invites the viewer to complete the 'formation' of his unreadable images. Clues of anguish are offered to guide the photograph's interpretation; a subjective reading that – considering the visual information provided by Klein – could rarely achieve a happy ending, no matter how optimistic the viewer's imagination might be. Like Frank, his documentary approach differs completely from the descriptivist style of classic picture-essays of the time. Instead, the subjectivity of the viewer becomes essential to complete the final meaning of photographs.

⁷² Mortenson, E. 'The Ghost of Humanism: Rethinking the Subjective Turn in Postwar American Photography', in *History of Photography*, Vol 38, No 4, 2014, pp. 423-424

⁷³ Klein, W., *Life is Good and Good for you in New York*, Paris: Éditions de Seutil, 1956



Figure 4.10. William Klein, *Dance in Brooklyn, New York, 1954-1955*, Gelatine Silver Print, Polka Gallery, Paris

Fellow members of the so-called New York School of photography shared Frank and Klein's approach towards reportage. This rather loose group was formed by photographers who positioned their documentary work in the realm of the subjective; distancing their practice from graphic photojournalism and permeating their subjects with their inner state of mind. Some of its members include Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson or Helen Levit. The extensive photographic practice of its adherents was very influential both inside and outside the USA borders. In Czechoslovakia however – and due again to the country's artistic isolation – the impact of the works developed by members of the New York School was rather limited.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it evidently marked the work of several Czechoslovakian practitioners during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989).

Unlike the work of Magnum photographers – which was repeatedly shown in communist Czechoslovakia thanks to the efforts of curator Anna Fárová – the photographs produced by members of the New York School were very little known in the country.⁷⁵ It is not a coincidence that many photographers developing their documentary practice through the

⁷⁴ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p152

⁷⁵ Among the various exhibitions showcasing the work of Western photographers during communist times in Czechoslovakia, Anna Fárová organised two collective Exhibitions showcasing the work of photographers from the Magnum Agency. The first one, *Magnum*, opened at Obecní dům in Prague in November of 1965 and travelled to Dům umění, Brno the following month. The second one, *Magnum 3: Bruce Davidson, Burnt Glinn, Dennis Stock*, opened at GalériaProfil in Bratislava in 1972. 'Exhibitions and Catalogues by Anna Fárová' in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha – PRO Langhans, pp. 89-125

subjective approach typical of the New York school had either lived in exile – such as Viktor Kolář or Josef Koudelka – or abroad for different reasons like Vladimír Birgus. But since no culture can remain completely hermetic, having managed to cross national borders, influences and ideas started to flow around the country. Robert Frank's book, *The Americans*, for example, was studied in the 1970s at FAMU school and photographers like Jaromír Čejka have admitted how his images caused a tremendous effect on him, since he 'suddenly realised the potential power of apparently simple photographs'.⁷⁶ But if the development of subjective documentary practices in the United States grew out of a rejection of the official, 'idealised' representation of post-war American society, the rise of a subjective approach in Czechoslovakia during the period of Normalisation (1969-1989) constitutes a response to an entirely different context.

While the vast majority of documentary photographs produced in the country during this period responded to a socially committed action with the purpose of evidencing the state of an exhausted – hopeless – society, some photographers started to mirror their intrinsic concerns within the frame. Depicted social realities were no longer at the centre of the photographic message but rather served the photographer as a vehicle for their individual reflections. The traditional system of visual codes gave place to a world where depicted signifiers and their apparent signified meanings inhabited separate dimensions. Such ambivalence was both infinite and highly practical, as it allowed the formation of individual visual languages hardly impossible to decode by the watchful authorities of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia. The range of possible – open-ended – meanings found in these photographs might also respond to a need of 'covering up' their disconformities with the regime. In this sense, the use of a coded visual language turned into one of the greatest weapons for some practitioners, since it allowed them to skip censorship mechanisms while preserving their artistic autonomy.

In his essay 'The Photographic Message', Barthes explains this ability of a photograph to offer multiple readings through what he calls 'the photographic paradox'.⁷⁷ On the one hand, he argues, a photograph constitutes an image without a code. It presents an 'analogue' of reality which by its intrinsic nature seems to offer a final 'denoted' message; a 'message which totally exhausts its mode of existence'.⁷⁸ On the other hand however, the photographic message is always connoted. This process of connotation occurs both at the levels of production and

⁷⁶ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague. Although his documentary approach fits more comfortably in the category of 'Social Documentary Photography' analysed in the previous chapter, one can certainly see in his work certain traces of Robert Frank's conception of the social function of photography with regards to the ability of the image to bounce back a reflective response from the photographer to the viewer.

⁷⁷ See Barthes, R., 'The Photographic Message', in *Image, Music, Text*. Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1977, pp. 15-31

⁷⁸ Barthes, R., *Image, Music, Text*, p. 18

reception.⁷⁹ Firstly, he explains, the representational choices made by the photographer – such as the pose, composition, edition or latter manipulation of the print – charge the image with a series of connoted meanings that ‘re-shape’ its apparently denoted message.⁸⁰ Secondly, during the process of communication, the reader’s particular ‘knowledge’ of the coding system and his ‘cultural situation’ plays a final role in the connotation process. According to Barthes, the reading of the photograph by an individual will depend on their ability to grasp three different levels of connotative systems: the perceptive, the cognitive and the ideological.

The perceptive connotation would be the first to arrive in the reading process though the internal verbalisation of the denoted message. Perceptive connotation thus coincides with the categories of language. Following this perceptive process, the ‘cognitive’ connotation is achieved by means of an understanding of the cultural contexts that direct the reading of depicted objects. If presented for example with an image of a group of people dressed in white with a red handkerchief around their neck, a Spanish reader will immediately understand that this was taken at the bull racing festival in Pamplona. Anyone who ignores this festival would hence be left with the initial perceptual connotation; ‘a group of people dressed in white with a red handkerchief around their neck’. But beyond the perceptual and cognitive, the ideological connotation plays a definite role in the reading process. This is certainly the most complex of all three, since - as Barthes explains – it requires the emergence of a ‘highly elaborated signifier’.⁸¹ To reach the ideological signification the reader needs to handle and combine both perceptual and cognitive connotation systems, which once added up and put in common in a given society, could eventually constitute an ideology. This ideological connotation might procure opposite readings of an image when presented to different cultures. The photograph of the Spanish bull racers for example will most probably constitute an exaltation of the figure of the ‘racer hero’ when found in Spanish newspapers. In England, the same image will most certainly raise questions of animal cruelty.

But going back to the coded visual language of subjective documentary practices in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia, we could argue that those photographers made an astute use of the connotative possibilities of the photograph to disguise its reading for the authorities. While the perceptual connotation of their work might have been accessible to reach, the censors lacked the necessary ‘cultural knowledge’ to understand any ‘cognitive’ connotation of depicted elements. Through a process of a rather elaborated ‘estrangement’ – in Shklovsky’s sense –

⁷⁹ Barthes, R., ‘The Photographic Message’, in Heath, S. (ed. And trans.) *Image, Music, Text*, New York: Hill, 1977, p. 19

⁸⁰ See Barthes explanation of the different connotation procedures in Barthes, R., ‘The Photographic Message’, pp. 20-25

⁸¹ Barthes, R., ‘The Photographic Message’, p. 29

these authors hindered the ‘analogical plenitude’ of the photograph.⁸² Thereafter, without the appropriate ‘cognitive’ tools, the censor officials were left with a simple denotative message. As a result, the ideological content within their work was hardly possible to be perceived in the eyes of the authorities.



Figure 4. 11. Viktor Kolář, ‘Untitled’, from the series *Ostrava*, 1984. Gelatine Silver Print, Moravian Gallery, Brno

The symbolic visual metaphors found in Viktor Kolář’s images from Ostrava after his return from exile in Canada in 1973 are a clear example of this type of attitude. During the 70s and the 80s, after twenty years of totalitarian dictatorship, Kolář captures the destructive homogenisation of the faces he encounters.⁸³ At a first glance however, his images do not represent an explicit critique against the communist rule, since the ‘pessimistic’ view feared by the censors is not easily readable within the frame. By means of composition and juxtaposition, Kolář divides his images in several layers – or scenes – which disclose additional levels of meaning, incorporating a feeling of social tension (figure 4. 11). Moving away from the descriptive document, Kolář incorporates a sense of ambiguity that would led him to become one of the most important representatives of the so-called subjective documentary movement in Czechoslovakia. Further successful attempts to render the photograph subjective can be found in the works of Bohdan Holomíček, Pavel Jasanský or Bořek Sousedík among others. From all these practitioners, the photographs of Vladimír Birgus deserve special consideration.

⁸² Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Sher, B., Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991. Originally published in Moscow in 1925, pp. 1-14.

⁸³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p156.

5. Vladimír Birgus: In Search of the Grey Matter

The case of Vladimír Birgus constitutes an extraordinary example of a human's ability to overcome some of the toughest barriers through perseverance and tenacity. While his acclaimed photographs offer an innovative approach to documentary practices, his tireless effort as a writer and curator to disseminate the rich photographic tradition of his country has given exposure to the work of dozens of practitioners both inside and outside Czech and Slovak boundaries. This all-around contribution has turned him into one of the most influential figures of the Czech photography scene since the late seventies.

Born in Fridek-Mistekín in 1954, Birgus soon proved to be a photography prodigy. At the age of ten he attended afternoon lessons at the photo club of his primary school with amateur photographer Rudolf Jarnot (b.1934). After practising with a family camera – a Flexaret – for just over a year, Birgus won his first award in a national photographic competition for children.⁸⁴ The prize consisted of the opportunity to travel to Prague and participate in a variety of photography activities and seminars for children. There he met historian of photography Rudolf Skopec and photographer Karel Hátek; two encounters that meant a great impulse for the development of Birgus' early passion.⁸⁵

In 1971, the artist had his first solo show at Galerie v podloubí in Olomuc, a small but very active gallery where he would also initiate his career as a curator organising a series of underground exhibitions.⁸⁶ Although the gallery officially belonged to the District Committee of the Socialist Youth Organisation, the exhibition programme was independently designed and they were able to exhibit works that could have never been shown elsewhere at the time.⁸⁷ These exhibitions – to which hundreds attended – usually ran without problems and only on some occasions few specific works had to be put down following official orders. To keep things running in this rather comfortable manner, Birgus and his fellow curators took care in the use of exhibition titles and abstained from writing politically about the shows they organised.⁸⁸

During the late sixties and early seventies, young Birgus started to experiment with staged photography inspired by the 'New Wave' of 1960s Czech cinema.⁸⁹ As we can observe in his series *Leaving*, the photographer applies absurd humour alongside coded symbols to reflect on his country's political situation (figure 4. 12). In the first photograph, the subject starts his

⁸⁴ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁸⁵ Bielešová, Š., 'Photographer', in *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: Kant, 2014, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Bielešová, Š., *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, p. 9

⁸⁷ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014

⁸⁸ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014

⁸⁹ Bielešová, Š., *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, p. 9. See also Fiserová, L., Pospěch, T., *The Slovak New Wave*, Prague: Kant, 2014.

performance standing trapped against a corner as he stares daringly at the observer. In the following image, a cloth covers his mouth preventing him from speaking, but the man stays firm, using his sight to persist in his oppositional attitude. The cloth eventually covers his entire head and his gaze is annulled. The possibility to express has totally vanished. And then a jacket politely hanged – perhaps as a sign of dignity – is all that remains of his fleeting existence. In the meantime, on a closer inspection, the reticulation of the chemical emulsion produces a worm-like pattern, inviting the viewer to determine the role of these insects in the course of events.

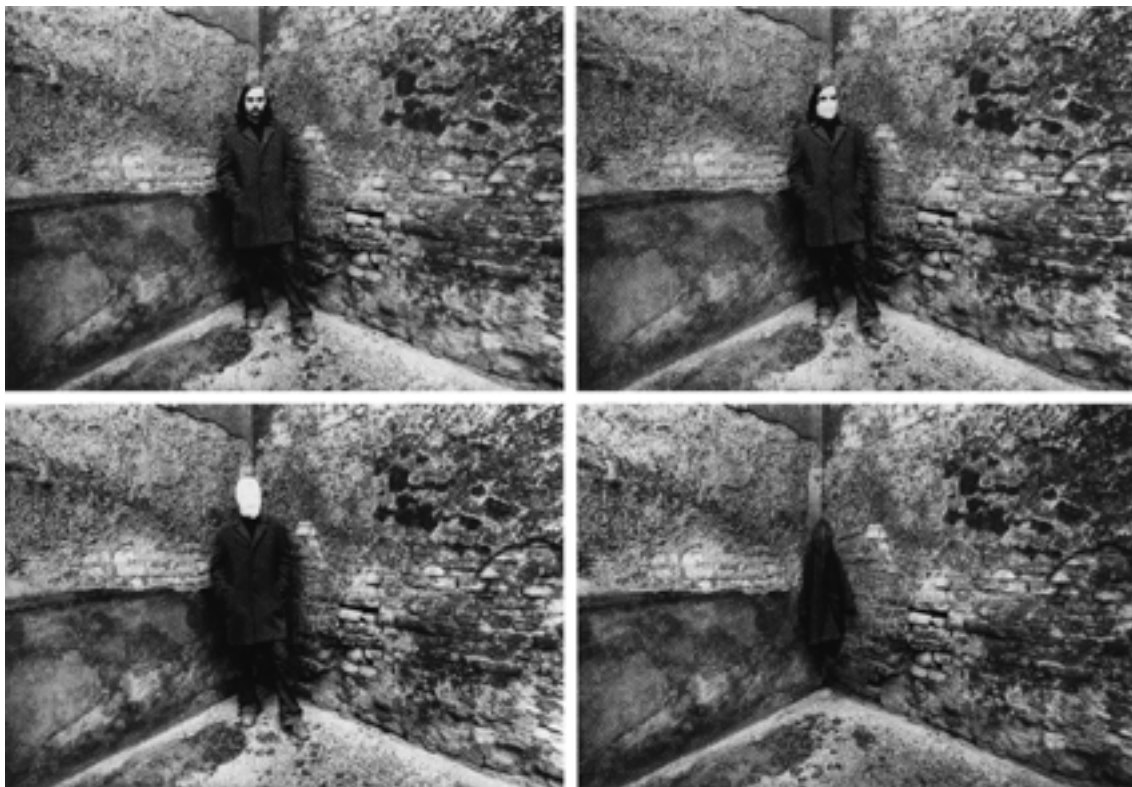


Figure 4. 12. Vladimír Birgus, *Leaving 1-4*, 1972. Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

Following few other experimental works of staged photography, Birgus soon turned his attention to documentary practices.⁹⁰ For his generation of independent photographers working during the times of Normalisation – who were constantly bombarded with the staged propaganda reportage typical of the time – the influence came mostly from humanist photojournalism that was being developed at Magnum Agency.⁹¹ For Birgus however, the inspiration arrived mainly from the ‘New York School’, with the work of photographers like William Klein and Robert Frank.⁹² The fact that the regime did not see an obvious threat in

⁹⁰ Other series of staged photography produced during this period include *Counterpoint* (1972 – 1974); a set of close-up photographs confronting a man’s black skin to a white woman’s body. The work was exhibited at Galerie mladých in Brno in 1976. See Šlachtová, A, *Vladimír Birgus – Fotografie*, Brno: Galerie mladých, 1976

⁹¹ Bielešzová, Š, ‘Photographer’, in *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: Kant, 2014, p. 10

⁹² Pospěch, T., *Vladimír Birgus: Something Unspeakable*, Prague: KANT, 2003.

social documentary photography produced abroad was very beneficial for young Czechoslovakian photographers at a time where any foreign information was scrutinised to the maximum detail before crossing national frontiers. The work of Magnum photographers like Cartier-Bresson was often exhibited in Czechoslovakia and many practitioners became fascinated with the social empathy achieved through his close, decisive shots.⁹³

Throughout the 1970s, while the artist was studying a degree in Literature, Theatre and Film in Olomouc, he worked simultaneously on his personal documentary work.⁹⁴ Initially Birgus focused his attention on public life. He explored the relation between the individual and the omnipresent State's power, which he searched through gestures of apathy and discontent during the numerous national celebrations organised by the Communist Party.⁹⁵ It was a period when enforcement authorities would often question the reasons of your activity and remove your film out of the camera if your 'apolitical' artistic intention was not convincing enough.⁹⁶ Birgus explored the progressive decline of Communism through the gazes of hundreds of men and women forced to attend to these events carrying the same heavy banners of mass murderers – like the bloody Czechoslovakian ex-president Klement Gottwalf – and repeating the now-meaningless slogans about the power of workers, whose monotonous, constrained existence, had never come near the long-promised aspirations made by the Party (figures 4. 13 and 4. 14).⁹⁷ In a reality where the spoken and written word was tirelessly monitored by thousands of anonymous watchdogs, Birgus found in the silence, boredom and weariness of the attendees' faces a powerful testimony of the Regime's fatigue and its decadence.

⁹³ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁹⁴ In 1977, Václav Birgus founded the 'Dokument' group with his friends Petr Klimpl and Josef Pokorný. The group collaborated until the late seventies in the production of a series of socially engaged documentary projects with the aim of recording and communicating marginal topics that would have never been covered by official photojournalism. Their most important project was *Productive Age*, which focuses on the life stories of middle-aged individuals who were socially struggling.

⁹⁵ During the period between 1974 and 1978, Birgus was also a distant student at FAMU academy, where he would later become a Professor and lecturer for over twenty-five years between 1978 and 2005.

⁹⁶ Bielešová, Š, 'Photographer', in *Václav Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: Kant, 2014, p. 10.

⁹⁷ Klement Gottwald (1896-1953) was the Communist Czechoslovakian Prime Minister between 1946 and 1948 and President of Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1953.



Figures 4. 13 and 4.14. Vladimír Birgus, *Prague*, 1978. Gelatine Silver Prints, Courtesy of the Artist.

Among Birgus' talents, his most practical ability was probably his sharp astuteness. In a period where most aspects of private and public life were regulated by law, where taking the lead of one's future was usually out of hand, he often found the smart way around it to reach his goals. And one of his most important goals had always been to travel abroad as often as possible.⁹⁸ During his student years at University, he visited various cities in Western Europe and the Eastern Bloc working as a volunteer through the 'International Work Camp' programme.⁹⁹ Later on, as a curator, he managed to travel abroad on repeated occasions thanks to the help of his foreign friends who would open a bank account under his name in the country where he meant to travel.¹⁰⁰ These mechanisms – which probably sound a lot simpler than what they really meant for most Czechoslovakian citizens – allowed him to enrich his artistic work and expand his professional network in Europe throughout the eighties.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

⁹⁹ This was an international volunteering programme where youngsters from different countries in the Eastern Bloc had the chance to travel both to Western and East European cities in order to undertake voluntary work at farms, construction sites or social institutions in exchange for their travel expenses. See interview with Vladimír Birgus by Bielešová, Š., 'Photographer', in *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: Kant, 2014, p. 158.

¹⁰⁰ During the times of Normalisation, one of the ways of obtaining a visa to travel outside the Eastern Bloc was to prove that you had a bank account under your name in the destination country. Interview with Vladimír Birgus, Prague, 17/10/2014.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014.



Figure 4. 15. Vladimír Birgus, 'London', from the series *Sleepers*, 1976, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

The first of these trips took place when he turned eighteen in 1972. That summer Birgus joined a volunteering programme and travelled to Belgium, where he worked in a home for mentally impaired children.¹⁰² A few years later in 1975, he went to Britain for the first time and undertook further volunteer work taking care of immigrant children from India and Pakistan.¹⁰³ In 1976, during a second trip to the United Kingdom, he shot his series *Sleepers* depicting scenes from Bradford and London's East End (figure 4. 15). The project constitutes a clear shift in his visual narrative. In this series, Birgus seems to abandon his interest for immediacy and the presence of the sitter becomes now accessory to his intentions: it acquires a universal character that allows him to treat global, existential themes.

This turn from humanistic reportage to subjective documentary, from the locally concrete to the generally applicable, does not occur at a random moment in his career. On the contrary, it becomes evident that he was deeply affected by his experiences aboard. While most of his colleagues were focused on recording the struggles of Czechoslovakian society during the times of 'Normalisation', Birgus witnessed how certain human dilemmas occurred worldwide, no matter what the ruling system was. He had the power to go beyond time and space and show us the world of loneliness and strangeness we were all part of, regardless of its geographic region or the period of history to which each of us belonged. In fact, the date and place used by the artist to caption his photographs seems less relevant to understand his work. This extraordinary ability to overcome the specificities of the present using a time-based medium like photography has allowed the artist to achieve a long-lasting recognition. While Czechoslovakian social documentary photography from the time of Normalisation soon lost its international appeal after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the currency of Birgus' work produced during that period proves the success of his unusual documentary method.

As he continued to travel frequently throughout the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe during the eighties, the photographer progressively developed a rather sophisticated use of irony and his photographs become more and more complex. Despite the immediacy of the shot, Birgus manages to thoroughly charge every element of the photograph with a symbolic meaning (figures 4. 16). The calculated and deconstructed compositions of his images become central to the work. Each scene is built of different layers, but unlike the hierarchy applied in classic *tableaux vivants*, all planes carry here a similar weight – even if the elements within them appear randomly cropped out. The same could be said about human and static beings: both are attributed equal prominence. People often appear covering their gaze, facing us backwards or too distant from the camera to offer any relevant gesture. What does seem to matter the most is

¹⁰² Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

¹⁰³ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014

the geometric relation between the different forms and the delicate balance among their volumes (figure 4. 17). It is precisely here, in the tensions between the few minimal, but carefully chosen, elements, that the scene becomes highly psychological. The characters, deprived from their subjectivity, are relegated from reality and placed under a secondary dimension where only Birgus – and his grey matter – belong. He seems to trigger precisely that point of the viewer’s consciousness that can make us deeply affected by the oddness of his parallel, phantasmagorical world.



Figure 4.16. Vladimir Birgus, *Leningrad*, 1982. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 4. 17. Vladimir Birgus, *Provence*, 1980. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

In the 1980s, the photographer makes the pioneering choice of introducing colour in his scenes, moving away from the mainstream of documentary work that was being developed in his country. Inspired by photographer William Eggleston and the paintings of Edward Hopper, Francis Bacon and Eric Fischl, Birgus introduces a rather ‘alien’ chromatic universe to his images.¹⁰⁴ The intense shades of yellow, red and green are not treated as mere properties of the structures; they coexist in equal relevance with the forms and volumes of objects depicted (figure 4.18). This chromatic experience removes every trace of narrative from his work, it dominates the image, setting up the psychological mood of each scene from an abstract perspective. The different tonalities immerse the sitters in a world filled with confusion and disorientation, which pushes them further away from reality and leaves the viewer wondering about the ‘probability’ of such a visual effect.



Figure 4. 18. Vladimír Birgus, *Kyrgyzstan*, 1981. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

¹⁰⁴ Bielešová. Š, ‘Photographer’. in *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: Kant, 2014, p. 13

Although the ‘taking’ of the photograph is still pursued through a ‘reportage’ strategy, the author does not leave anything to chance. Every single element of the picture constitutes an essential part in the construction of his symbolic language. This speed in visualising the potential metaphorical meaning of the scenes he depicts becomes even more meritorious when colour is added to the shot. In a matter of seconds, the author devises a precise, unrepeatable balance among the elements in the frame, which despite the apparent banality of depicted events, enables the appearance of a rather unfamiliar atmosphere filled with anguish and distress.

The uncanny perception is achieved by means of a recurrent opposition that is present in three main variants. Firstly, he exercises a constant confrontation between neutral subjects and garish backgrounds. Coloured areas – be it landscapes, walls or pieces of furniture – appear oversized, imposing their presence and eccentric mood over weak, monochromatic human figures. Secondly, we could argue that the author applies a ‘bipolar’ treatment of the sitters by giving them an apparent relevance through their intentional placement inside the picture, while simultaneously relegating them from their subjectivity. Anonymous and lonely, they stand in uncoordinated peace, looking elsewhere outside the frame and even blinking or closing their eyes as if rejecting our direct contact (figure 4. 19). Finally, the photographer seems to enjoy the frequent juxtaposition between light and shadows; sometimes even his own silhouette is present in the frame. These dark areas often serve as a compositional tool, dividing the image into segments in the style of avant-garde Constructivism. But they can also operate as reminders of the inaccessibility of Birgus’ metaphorical message. They are ultimately false clues; in the lack of projecting objects, these cast shadows turn into uncompleted signifiers of uncertain existence outside the proposed stage.



Figure 4. 19. Vladimír Birgus, *Berlin*, 1993. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

The ‘optical unconscious’ described by Walter Benjamin in his essay ‘A Short History of Photography’ comes to mind when looking at Birgus’ work. According to Benjamin, while it is possible to describe the way someone walks, it is impossible to say anything about the fraction of a second when a person is about to take the first step. It is the photographic technology – with its various aids – that can make the viewer ‘aware for the first time the optical unconscious’.¹⁰⁵ As Benjamin observes:

It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one that addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that, instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness, there appears one which is affected unconsciously.¹⁰⁶

From the 1980s onwards, Birgus seems to make a constant search for the ‘optical unconscious’ in Benjamin’s sense. The reader might have a feeling that something ‘very relevant’ is just about to be put in motion right after Birgus freezes the scene. Then of course what follows is just a guess. What is most interesting however is the tension arisen through the visibility of this ‘optical unconscious’. The uncertainty of the subjects’ future actions moves the scene into a grey zone that escapes our rational control. The ‘logics’ of temporal narrative are constantly being put at stake. It is as if breath needed to be held, then released before moving into his next photograph before holding it again. Of course, Birgus is not the first to search for this ‘optical unconscious’. From Edward Muybridge in late nineteenth century to Harold E. Edgerton in the 1950s, numerous photographers have explored the ability of the camera to observe reality beyond the possibilities of the human eye.¹⁰⁷ But while the visual result of ultra-fast exposure has long been deemed and no longer constitutes a novelty, Birgus’ photographs – and his search for the ‘unconscious’ temporal space – still awakens an intense captivation and intrigue.

From the mid-nineties onwards, Birgus seems to completely abandon the use of black and white in his photographs. Although colour photography gained enormous popularity in Western countries during the 1990s, in Czechoslovakia the great majority of art photographers still used exclusively black and white film. During this period Birgus’ photographs progressively become more contemplative, focusing on open spaces where minimal events take place timidly in the edges of the frame (figures 4.20 and 4.21). The previous dynamism gives way to a suggestive stillness, which emphasises the sense of lowliness carried by contemporary men and women.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin, W., ‘A Short History of Photography’, trans. Stanley Mitchell, in *Screen*, Vol. 13 (1), 1978, p. 7. Originally published in *The Literarische Welt*, 1931

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, W., ‘A Short History of Photography’, p. 7

¹⁰⁷ Edward Muybridge (1830-1904) was an English photographer who conducted a series of pioneering photographic experiments on motion. Among his most famous works, he took a series of pictures of a running horse using twelve different cameras. The resulting photographs demonstrated that there was a moment when the horse’s legs were all simultaneously in the air. Harold E. Edgerton (1903-1990) was Professor in electrical engineering and a photographer from the USA who used flash light to capture extremely fast moving objects at the speed of ten microseconds. Some of his most iconic images include *Bullet through Apple*, 1964.

The palate of colours is kept to the essential and the tones appear now completely detached from the real world. It is hardly possible to detect any connection with the ‘veracity’ of the scene that is indeed occurring right in front of him, following its own rhythm, unaware of its inescapable corruption in the photographer’s hands.



Figure 4. 20. Vladimír Birgus, *Hallein, Austria, 1998*. Chromogenic Print Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 4. 21. Vladimír Birgus, *Miami, 2012*. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

The artistic evolution of Vladimir Birgus' work seems both coherent and challenging. His integrity in the treatment of existential themes throughout the decades, together with an innovative approach in the study of sociological themes and the meticulous construction of a sophisticated system of visual codes to communicate complex philosophical issues, have allowed him to achieve a clearly identifiable style and placed him at the top of the Czech photography scene. He has constantly tried to push photographic boundaries, elevating his style to a universal realm where time and space become inseparable companions of his thoughts. Often transpiring in metropolitan settings, he is able to conceive highly elaborated tensions, which are perceived both among human beings and in confrontation with the ambiguous structures surrounding them. In this sense, his work certainly complies with the ideas of 'subjective documentary' as developed by Frank and Klein.¹⁰⁸ The document as such – understood as a specific reality that is being recorded – seems to lose its representational qualities and we are in charge of resolving a complex existential challenge where very few clues are rationally presented. The viewer however should see no need in answering the artist's question. After all, the unbearable uncertainty of human existence is not meant to be resolved so promptly from our worldly realm.

Despite the universal character of his work, we must not forget that Birgus was a Czechoslovakian citizen subdued to the laws of the Communist Party for over forty years of his life. For a very long period, Birgus was forced to 'bite his tongue' in order guarantee his limited possibilities of personal and professional development.¹⁰⁹ He soon found out the point where state boundaries became insurmountable but was usually able to detect an alternative route to reach his objectives. This exhausting exercise of containment, especially at a younger age, must have meant a great deal of effort to the artist, which he somehow managed to safely release through the cleverly-designed communication codes applied in his photographs. Looking at his work, we might find indeed a series of remainders of this unbalanced relation between men and the omnipresent State's power. The progressive loss of subjectivity, the anonymity and loneliness attributed to the sitters inhabiting deeply disturbing atmospheres, their confusion, anguish and the sense of distress caused by their inescapable submission to ever threatening surroundings, must represent to a certain extent the author's state of mind during the period of Normalisation.

¹⁰⁸ One of his students, Dr. Tomas Pospěch, repeatedly refers to Birgus' practice as 'subjective documentary' throughout the introductory text of the photographers' monograph *Vladimír Birgus: Something Unspeakable*, Prague: KANT, 2003.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

According to the artist, the establishment of Democracy after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 did not cause a radical influence on his work or professional life.¹¹⁰ I have discussed how his images became somehow calmer in the nineties, but there is a clear continuity in the topics explored after that date. Like for many Czechoslovakian citizens, the opening of frontiers was one of the most beneficial concessions achieved after the Revolution. Although the artist had managed to travel from time to time during communist times, he was now able to tour freely around the world without further explanation. His triple condition of artist, university professor and curator, have given him numerous opportunities to travel abroad. Throughout his trips and until the present day, the photographer has continued expanding his body of work, exposing his ever-lasting existential dilemmas while constantly refining the aesthetic qualities of his photographs (figure 4. 22).



Figure 4. 22. Vladimír Birgus, *Miami Beach*, 2012. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Vladimir Birgus currently lives and works in Prague. He is the director of the Creative Institute of Photography at the Silesian University of Opava and the author of a vast number of texts on contemporary Czech and Slovak photography. His work as a curator has led to the international recognition of numerous Czech photographers. Among the dozens of exhibitions organized by Birgus, the show 'Czech Photography of the Twentieth Century' – and its large accompanying catalogue – constitutes his most complete review of the rich variety of

¹¹⁰ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vadimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

photographic works produced in his country during the last Century.¹¹¹ His personal photographic work has been exhibited internationally since 1971 and is part of many private and public collections in various institutions, including The International Centre of Photography in New York.

6. Conclusions

It appears rather clear from the previous discussion that the notion of a subjective view in photography predates Steinert's concept of 'Subjektive Fotografie' by at least four decades. Although we could argue that a subjective approach dates back to pictorialist practices, we might agree that as a 'modern' notion, it was Russian photographic formalism that started to put strong emphasis on the way reality was depicted. German 'New Objectivity' would then absorb the main formalist principles and transform its application from 'the social' to 'the industrial'. In the USA, 'Straight Photography' practices openly embraced the idea of a subjective authorship capable of rendering the medium autonomous from other arts. All these developments were received in Czechoslovakia by adherents of the 'New Photography' movement from the mid-1920s. The heterogeneous range of Avant-garde photographic practices emerged in the country during this period were – as explained – the result of a combination of international influences and national contributions. From the previous discussions however, we might agree that the definition of the very term 'subjective' is less relevant than an understanding of the contextual dynamics that contributed to the conception of the role of the photographer in each given movement. Indeed, it has long been accepted that the act of photographing could never be objective – not even for scientific uses of the medium like microscopic photography. What remains of interest, therefore, is the study of the different artistic attitudes towards the production of photographic meaning in a concrete cultural setting.

In Czechoslovakia, following the establishment of a communist regime in 1948, the prohibition to exhibit in Western Europe prevented artists from having their work shown in international exhibitions outside the Bloc. It is evident however that the artistic isolation pursued by communist authorities could not stop *per se* the development of artistic movements once and for all. This was due in part to the fact that cultural isolation was never completely hermetic. As explained in the second chapter of this thesis, a number of photography books by West European and American photographers managed to make it into the Czechoslovakian scene.¹¹² Besides, thanks to the efforts of curator Anna Fárová, a few exhibitions showcasing the works of Magnum photographers opened in the country during the period of Normalisation (1968-

¹¹¹ See Bielešová, Š, 'Writer and Curator' and 'Teacher', in *Vladimír Birgus, Photographs 1972 – 2014*, Prague: KANT, 2014, p. 15 – 31

¹¹² See 'Publishing Photographs under Normalisation' in Chapter 2 of this thesis

1989).¹¹³ On the other hand – as I will discuss in the following chapter – due to the ‘relaxed’ attitude of Polish communist authorities, Poland acted in many aspects as a substitute for ‘the West’; as a platform for open theoretical discussions and international artistic exchange.¹¹⁴ All these ‘leaks’ in the cultural sphere of the Iron Curtain enabled the permeability of Czechoslovakian art photography with contemporary ideas developed outside the state-controlled artistic sphere. This timid – but certainly existent – international artistic exchange, together with the continuity of a strong Czechoslovakian photographic tradition that had been cultivated during the first half of the twentieth century, enabled the development of art photography practices in the country in ways that were just as innovative as the work that was being produced by some ‘Western’ photographers at the time.

In this scenario, a number of photographers producing documentary work during the period of Normalisation (1968-1989) found in the application of subjective principles a great ally to ‘safely’ preserve their artistic autonomy. While many of these photographers were aware of the subjective documentary work produced in the USA by members of the New York school, their motivation in the application of such a style differed substantially from their American counterparts. During this period, communist authorities would constantly censor documentary photographs that – according to their understanding – depicted Czechoslovakian society through a ‘pessimistic’ gaze. Moving away from the descriptive approach embraced by nonconformist social documentary photographers, practitioners like Vladimír Birgus or Viktor Kólar explored their social concerns in a less explicit way, from a rather existential point of view. They applied an elaborated visual language in their photographs that was often impossible to decode by the authorities. Their approach in the treatment of social topics through the use of complex visual metaphors allowed them to reflect on social and political matters while avoiding direct confrontation with the official power.

The political changes following the Velvet Revolution of 1989 do not seem to have caused substantial effects in the content of Birgus’ work. Unlike social documentary photographers who developed their practice in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia, Birgus’ photographs do not seem to suffer the discontinuity observed in the works produced by the former after the change of the country’s political and economic system. Looking at the images he produced after the collapse of the Czechoslovakian totalitarian regime, it is clear that the need of questioning one’s own existence through ‘the visual’ remained unaltered. Although he experienced – like every other Czechoslovakian citizen – a major expansion of his civil rights with the establishment of a democratic system, the topics explored in his photographs after 1989 kept the currency of the

¹¹³ See ‘Curating Art Photography since 1968. The work of Anna Fárová and Antonín Dufek’ in the second Chapter of this thesis

¹¹⁴ Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 286

past decades. After that date, the questions suggested in his work are represented as well through a similar aesthetic to that used during the times of Normalisation. The timid variants observed in his images with the passing of time seem to respond not so much to the changes of the context of art production in former Czechoslovakia but rather to a 'natural' evolution of the artist as a human being, whose experience of the world is constantly building up and shaping the configuration of the 'shot' yet to be taken. In such experience of course, the political changes his country underwent after 1989 must constitute an important chapter. However, looking at his 'post-wall' images and listening to his recounting of events, the process of democratisation in Czechoslovakia after 1989 and the establishment of a capitalist system does not seem to have altered the core of his 'artistic search'.

The work produced by these subjective documentary photographers would set the basis for a photographic style developed in Czechoslovakia from the early 1980s and known as 'Visualism'. The next chapter will study the different theories that shaped the content of this 'new' photographic style – including German 'Visualism', Czechoslovakian 'Opsognomie' and Polish 'Elementary photography'. In addition, the work Miroslav Machotka will be analysed through a case study to better understand how the 'visualist' conception of photography was developed in Czechoslovakia.

CHAPTER 5 //

**TOWARDS AN EMANCIPATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION:
'VISUALISM', 'OPSOGNOMIE',
AND 'ELEMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY'.**



Figure 5.1. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1987, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

1. Introduction

Having discussed the roots and development of subjective photography in Czechoslovakia, and in order to better understand the discursive practices of photography developed in the country during the ‘Normalisation’ period, I will now focus on the analysis of a photographic style developed in the 1980s, commonly known as ‘Visualism’, which theoretical background has been little analysed by Czech and Slovak historians and totally ignored by international literature.

Half way through the ‘Normalisation’ period, in the early 1980s, a fresh theoretical background for photography arrived in Czechoslovakia. Three photographers from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland developed during this decade a similar thesis in relation to a ‘new’, free vision of ‘the real’, with the aim of producing a contemplative reflection of their surrounding world through visual means. This chapter is dedicated to analysing the content of each of these theories and their impact in Czechoslovakian practices from 1980 onwards.

I start by considering the first theoretician to articulate his theory under the concept of ‘Visualism’ in 1980, the photographer and writer Andreas Müller-Pohle, from the former Federal Republic of Germany. Following this analysis, I will introduce the Czechoslovakian concept of ‘Opsognomie’, published by photographer Bořek Sousedík a few months after Müller-Pohle’s, and the third and last theory, ‘Elementary Photography’, developed in 1984 by the Polish photographer Jerzy Olek. I will then move on to discuss how the three different theories were received in Czechoslovakia and analyse their impact in the photographic work produced in the country from the 1980s onwards. In doing so, I would argue that despite the widely-used term ‘Visualism’ in Czech and Slovak literature, it was Olek’s programme on ‘Elementary Photography’ that caused the greatest impact on the work of Czechoslovakian photographers.

Finally, the chapter includes an in-depth case study on the work of Czech ‘visualist’ photographer Miroslav Machotka. A close analysis of his photographs will enable a discussion of the concrete, aesthetic-ideological meaning, of the so-called ‘visualist’ style. As I will argue, the rise of this photographic style, which has its roots in the development of a ‘subjective view’ during the 1920s and the 1930s, evidences a turning point in Czechoslovakian photography during the 1980s, as it progressively moved from a ‘representative’ function of the medium into a pseudo-conceptualist practice.

2. Visualism

In 1980, German artist and theoretician Andreas Müller-Pohle published the article ‘Visualism’ in the newly launched *European Photography* magazine – which he founded in 1979 and still

directs today. In his text, Müller-Pohle articulated his concept of a ‘free vision’ – detached from a conventionally imposed visual rhetoric and essential for any photographer aiming to ‘truly’ understand the ‘genuine nature’ of our visual world.¹ According to the author, traditional documentary photographers describe reality from a – voluntarily accepted – system of given codes, providing a mere inventory of the world. ‘Visualism’ instead, explains Müller-Pohle, embraces all possibilities of representation, leaving behind external categories in order to achieve a genuine search for ‘the visual’. The ‘visualist’ method thus consists in abstracting reality, evidencing a contradiction between genuine (free) perception and the conscious (imposed) understanding of such reality. Overall, the author clarifies, ‘Visualism’ aims to rediscover the original essence of a visual world in which meaning has been progressively corrupted by subsequent layers of externally imposed connotations. In other words, what Müller-Pohle means is that: the perception achieved by the photographer’s eye can only be free when emerging from an autonomous brain; functioning in the absence of any artificial limits to its representational choices of the visual.²

But since the limits of free perception have not yet found a path to be effectively removed from the conscious realm, Müller-Pohle’s contribution to photographic theory may appear as a simple utopia. In effect, the possibility of looking at the world through a brain that mirrors the neurological state of its very conception has yet to be proved scientifically. Exercises in this direction – which had been already widely explored by surrealist photographers – might constitute interesting attempts in the search for such a utopia, but shall unavoidably remain charged with the photographer’s web of acquired experiences. After all, as Goethe reminded us, ‘one sees only what one knows’.³ Similarly, in his essay ‘Seeing Sense’ Victor Burgin observes:

We cannot choose what we know, and neither can we choose what part of our dormant knowledge will be awakened by the stimulus of an image, reciprocally reactivated and reinforced by it. Regardless of how much we may strain to maintain a 'disinterested' aesthetic mode of apprehension, an appreciation of the 'purely visual' when we look at an image is instantly and irreversibly integrated and collated with the intricate psychic network of our knowledge.⁴

While Müller-Pohle’s theory of ‘Visualism’ radically opposes Burgin’s views on the possibilities of free perception, his theory does have clear analogies with Viktor Shklovsky’s

¹ See Müller-Pohle, A., ‘Visualism’, in *European Photography*, No3, 1980, pp. 4-10

² Müller-Pohle, A., *European Photography*, pp. 4-10

³ Proverb used by Goethe, J., W., ‘Introduction to the Propyläen’, in *Prefaces and Prologues*. Vol. XXXIX. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/39/ Originally published in ‘Introduction’, *The Propyläen*, Berlin: Verlag, Vol.1, 1798-1801

⁴ Victor Burgin, ‘Seeing Sense’, in *The End of Art Theory*, London: MacMillan, 1986, p. 64

thesis explained in his essay 'Art as Device' from 1917.⁵ For the Russian formalist, every day perception of the objects translates into an automatism – or 'habituation' – that prevents us from sensing such objects.⁶ In a similar way, Müller-Pohle explains that every day perception reduces the process to simple formulas, where the meaning of an object is no longer deduced 'independently' by the viewer but imposed by an existing external rhetoric (ideology). To resolve this situation and achieve a – free – genuine perception, Shklovsky suggests the application of a 'de-familiarization' or 'estrangement' process in the representation of reality, leading to a 'vision of the object rather than a mere recognition'.⁷ In similar terms, Müller-Pohle explains how genuine perception is achieved by means of abstraction. This, he argues, is possible thanks to the technology of the camera; capable of achieving a 'neutral' perception of reality by abstracting its 'genuine' meaning from externally imposed connotations. But while Shklovsky plausibly envisaged his 'estrangement' process as a highly elaborated artistic effort that must emerge from the author, Müller-Pohle seems naïvely to imply that 'camera vision' could somehow remain entirely autonomous from the photographer's intellectual realm and the connotations of depicted subjects. In this sense, the 'abstraction' process Müller-Pohle refers to comes closer to Moholy-Nagy's ideas from the 1920s and his conception of the photograph as an 'objective' product of a modern technology.⁸

It does seem however that Müller-Pohle was aware of the similarities of his thesis with Russian Formalism. In his article on 'Visualism', he acknowledges this resemblance, referring to formalist practices as 'old Visualism'. 'Modern Visualism', he explains, is mainly concerned with the ability of photography to demonstrate a contradiction between the (genuine) reality of things and the idealised understanding of such a reality. This contradiction manifests itself in the photograph by a process of alienation. According to Müller-Pohle, Russian Formalism aimed for a 'structural alienation', achieved by means of unusual viewpoints, close-up shots, oblique views, etc. But what these formalist abstractions accomplished, he explains, was only some sort of peculiar representation. After all, he argues, they were still faithful images of our visual world, incapable of explaining the meaning of reality. 'Modern Visualism' on the contrary aims at a 'partial alienation', which instead of constantly altering the usual structural order of the image, includes a series of elements in the organisation of the photograph that interfere with a 'smooth' interpretation. This interference would ultimately impede an externally 'imposed' perception, since it constitutes a 'breaking-through' process that shall evidence existential contradictions between the 'authentic' depicted reality and its 'commonly' attributed meaning. In addition, as the author explains, Russian Formalism imposed concrete viewpoints, narrowing

⁵ Shklovsky, V., 'Art as device', in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Sher, B., Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991. Originally published in Moscow in 1925, pp. 1-14

⁶ Shklovsky, V., Shklovsky, V., 'Art as Device', p. 5

⁷ Shklovsky, V., 'Art as Device', p. 10

⁸ See Moholy-Nagy, L., *Painting Photography, Film*, 1925, London: MIT Press, Reprint Edition 1987

the choice of the photographer in their visual search for the truth. ‘Visualism’ instead, argues Müller-Pohle, leaves the choice of perspective and other formal qualities – whether typical or unusual – always open to each photographer.⁹ After this extremely brief explanation, Müller-Pohle makes no further reference to any theoretical background of Russian formalist photography. Neither does he clarify in practical terms how exactly can that ‘partial alienation’ be achieved. It might therefore be useful at this point to look at the photographic work the author was producing when his programme on ‘Visualism’ was published for the first time in 1980.

In his series, ‘Transformance’ (1979-1982), Müller-Pohle took 10,000 photographs while in motion and without looking through the viewfinder. The resulting images were then edited down by the photographer, who selected only twenty-nine for the final series. The chosen black and white images depict a range of subjects with motion blur which are practically impossible to read. In some cases, we can see what looks like human silhouettes (figure 5.2). Other photographs seem to show fragments of objects shot ‘on the move’, while the vast majority of them leave little clues about the reality standing in front of the lens.¹⁰ According to the author, ‘the neologism Transformance (transforma-tion/performance) designates the active but optically impassive intervention in the space-time-continuum’.¹¹

In the introductory text of the project, Müller-Pohle explains his aim to leave the resulting photographs to chance; ‘caught between movement and photographic fixing’.¹² In an essay by Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser included in the book, the writer further explains Müller-Pohle’s intentions to ‘free’ the camera from the photographer’s aesthetic choices in order to demonstrate that most circulating images of our time, the so-called ‘normal (in a way ‘documentary’) photographs, attempt to hide their ‘artificiality’, their programmed nature, and pretend that it is the world itself which is represented on their surfaces’. Instead – argues Flusser – ‘Müller-Pohle’s photographs don’t partake of this delusion’, ‘they don’t show the world; they show that the world is nothing but the raw material of which pictures are made’.¹³

⁹ Müller-Pohle, A. ‘Visualism’, in *European Photography*, No3, 1980, p. 8

¹⁰ See entire series in the artist’s website <http://muellerpohle.net/projects/transformance/>

¹¹ Müller-Pohle, ‘Introduction’, *Transformance* (1979-1982), artists’ personal website <http://muellerpohle.net/projects/transformance/> [accessed on the 20/07/2016]

¹² Müller-Pohle, *Transformance* (1979-1982)

¹³ See Flusser, V. ‘Transformance’, in Müller-Pohle, A., *Transformance*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1983



Figure 5. 2. Andreas Müller-Pohle, *Transformance 3590*, 1980. Gelatine Silver Print, From the exhibition catalogue *Transformance*, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wrocław, 1986. This exhibition by Müller-Pohle in Olek's Gallery constitutes one of the multiple collaborations they would have throughout the 1980s around the ideas of 'Elementary Photography' and 'Visualism'

I have previously mentioned that Müller-Pohle's notion of 'Visualism' might appear rather naïve, in so far as it defended that 'camera vision' could eventually become autonomous, as if the camera had indeed some sort of artificial subjectivity. His article however gave no instructions for achieving such a purpose. From his practical exercise in 'Transformance', it might be deduced that he pretended to render the camera 'free' by walking around and shooting randomly thousands of pictures without looking through the viewfinder. He then attributes the 'chance' of resulting images to some sort of 'loose' attitude when it came to press the shutter. He also used the large number of frames obtained as an argument for his lack of interference in 'image-making'. We are then meant to believe that the camera somehow took by itself 10,000 pictures. This is all apparently being done to demonstrate that every-day images in circulation are charged by a 'hidden' ideology, but that we could actually get rid of such ideology and depict 'raw' realities if we allow the camera to be 'free' from the photographer's agenda. But let me now analyse the different subjective choices the photographer made during the production process. First of all, Müller-Pohle made the decision to take 10,000 images while moving and without looking through the viewfinder. This was done with the intention of making a statement about the relation 'eye (brain) – camera'. Secondly, for every single frame he took he chose a precise moment to press the shutter release, but even if his eyes would have been closed – something he does not state – choices were evidently made when selecting the places he would walk around and photograph. Third and finally, in the editing process, the photographer selected a reduced number of images – for undisclosed reasons – to be part of the final series. Although the resulting visual effect of the process might be different than that obtained through a

conventional ('controlled') use of the camera (i.e. presence of motion blur, large unfocused areas or recurrent abstractions), it is evident that his previously conceived creative decisions made up the final product in no different way from the 'every-day', subjective images, he intended to criticise.

While Müller-Pohle's artistic intention is perfectly legitimate, it also raises doubts about its contribution to the theory – and practice – of photography. But beyond the – now outdated – debate about the possible 'neutrality' of photography, what is probably most significant is the context in which Müller-Pohle's theory was envisaged. 'Visualism' aimed to serve as a critic towards a 'society of information' based to a great extent on commissioned images. Besides, at the time the author wrote his theory in 1980, consumer culture was progressing at high speed in Western countries. Contemporary social roles had long been effectively established through mass media imagery and the idyllic western lifestyle was spread tirelessly by billions of photographs that were difficult to escape on a daily basis. We could argue that Müller-Pohle's practical and theoretical work was the result of a vindication for authenticity; a response to an overdose of imagery charged with capitalist ideology. In this sense, it is difficult to understand the reasons why the term 'Visualism' has been so widely used to refer to the practice of some Czechoslovakian art photographers from the 1980s.¹⁴ It is hard to believe that these photographers could have been motivated by a rejection of 'capitalist imagery', since these types of photographs were simply absent from mass-media in their country at the time. What we might consider instead is a rejection of Socialist Realism (the flip side of advertising) and the 'objects' of its vision. As we will see later however, the photographers producing this type of work in Czechoslovakia drew also from another two related theories that were being developed around the same time in Ostrava and Warsaw.

3. Opsognomie

A few months after the publication of Müller-Pohle's article on 'Visualism', Czechoslovakian photographer and lecturer Bořek Sousedík revealed his theory of 'Opsognomie' in the catalogue for the show *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, which included the works of his students from the People's Conservatory of Ostrava.¹⁵ Despite Sousedík's unawareness of 'Visualism' theory at that point, his thesis on 'Opsognomie' shared many of its defining points.¹⁶ Like Müller-Pohle, Sousedík emphasised the power of photography to

¹⁴ In a recent exhibition at the Moravian Gallery in Brno under the title *The Third Side of the Wall* for example, the curator included a specific section of 'visualist' photography produced in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.¹⁴ Some of the photographers whose work was shown under this section include Štěpán Grygar, Miroslav Machotka, Pavel Šešulka and Otaka Matušek. Similarly, in the text 'Czech and Slovak Photography of the 1980s and the 1990s', Tomáš Pospěch analyses the work of the so-called 'visualist' photographers under the epigraph 'Visualism'.

¹⁵ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografie, 1980

¹⁶ Pospěch, T., 'Visualism and its Notion of Photography as Photography', in *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones*, n13, 2012, p. 39

achieve a genuine perception of reality, as it is able to make the unknown (invisible) visible through photographic means. For Sousedík however, as opposed to Müller-Pohle, it is the role of the photographer's intellectual process – not that of the 'autonomous' camera – that is understood as the key element of the process.¹⁷



Figure 5. 3. Bořek Sousedík, 'Untilled', *Klimkovice*, 1981. Gelatine Silver Print. From the collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic.

The term 'Opsognomie' is formed by the conjunction of the ancient Greek concepts 'Opsis' (vision) and 'Gnóme' (ability of knowing). According to this theory, the photograph must evidence an individual experience obtained through an active dialogue between the pure visual and the mental realm of the photographer. The images should also be the product of spontaneity (because late perception loses meaning) and constitute 'inevitable choices' (because certain reality becomes inevitably significant). Above all, the photographer must loosen the need of referring in his photographs to the depicted subject. What is important for Sousedík is the personal momentum; the mood of perception at a given time, which moves the photographer to 'inevitably' take the picture. As a result, the meeting of the right perceptive moment with a

¹⁷ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

chosen reality enables the miraculous appearance of nature's unknown attributes within the photographic frame.¹⁸ But in order to better understand the practical applications of this theory, it would be helpful to analyse the kind of photographic work Sousedík produced during that time.

Like some of Müller-Pohle's 'visualist' images, Sousedík's photographs often depict human silhouettes in motion (figure 5.3). This might be part of his aim to render the shot as spontaneous as possible, which leaves no time to adjust the camera's shutter speed.¹⁹ Although depicted subjects might appear similar to those represented in social documentary photographs, it will be difficult to attribute a documentary nature to his work. On the one hand, the descriptive attributes of documentary photography can barely be appreciated; it is hardly possible to identify the subjects or devise the precise nature of its settings. On the other hand, as I have previously argued, Sousedík's conception of photography put an emphasis on the individual experience of the photographer rather than the 'social experience' of depicted subjects. His work seems to be especially concerned with variables of time and its equilibrium within a concise space. Fragile, volatile actions take place in the edges of the frame, while the stillness of accompanying elements governs the majority of the photograph's territory. His search for 'nature's unknown attributes' – as he claimed – results at times in the representation of a delusional world charged with a certain macabre mood. Moving subjects are often about to enter threatening spaces, produced by means of cast shadows, cropped structures or spectral landscapes. A tense confrontation between animated and unanimated subjects might put the reader on hold, fearing the outcome of such a premonitory scene. We could argue that in many ways Sousedík's *oeuvre* comes closer to subjective documentary practices. The use of motion blur and high contrast, as well as Sousedík's evident preference for dark scenes, resembles the work produced by USA photographer William Klein for his project *Life is Good and Good for you in New York* from 1956.²⁰ Children on the other hand are the frequent owners of his human silhouettes (figure 5.4). This reference to (ephemeral) childhood might constitute a plea for innocence in the interpretation of our visual world. But overall Sousedík's work constitutes a search for 'the possible'; for the visual alternatives that might open up once the photographer gets rid of the need to describe reality. As a result, high levels of intrigue, tension and fear are often born out of the visually unknown, which can leave the reader an unsettling feeling for the subject's dubious fate.

¹⁸ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

¹⁹ When the shutter speed is left unadjusted it might randomly lead to a long exposure time, which can make moving objects appear blurred in the photograph due to their motion. The blurred effect produced by moving subjects in the image is known as 'motion blur'.

²⁰ Klein, W., *Life is Good and Good for you in New York* Paris: Éditions de Seutil, 1956. For an analysis of Klein's book see the section on Subjective Documentary Photography in the USA in Chapter IV of this thesis.

‘Opsognomie’ came to celebrate the importance of the photographer’s individual – and irreparable – experience in the production process. According to the author, it is the photographer’s ‘knowing’ that is capable of raising nature’s authentic attributes within the photographic frame.²² This claim for subjectivity, for an acknowledgement of creative freedom, arrived at a moment of growing despair in the Czechoslovakian photography scene, which had long been frozen into a *status quo* of artistic obsolescence.

I now turn to discuss the third and last concept ‘Elementary Photography’, which I would argue had the greatest impact in the work produced by ‘visualist’ photographers in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.

4. ‘Elementary Photography’

Most influential on Czechoslovakian photography among the programmes analysed in this chapter was probably the theory ‘Elementary Photography’, developed by Polish artist Jerzy Olek since 1984. Raised in the avant-garde tradition, Olek claims to have been highly influenced by German ‘New Objectivity’ and American ‘Straight Photography’. From the seventies onwards he became interested in the tradition of Japanese puristic aesthetics and American minimalist concepts developed by Donald Judd, Robert Morris or Sol LeWitt during the sixties.²³ The different terms used by Olek to define his conception of the medium evidence his determination to reformulate the autonomy of the photograph. The expressions ‘pure photography’, ‘photography within photography’ or ‘photographic photography’ appear repeatedly in his texts:

Pure photographic photography, photography of the eye and the camera, photography sublimating its own capabilities and technical limitations, i.e. photography whose message is conveyed by the nature of the medium, in short ‘photography in photography’, is what I call elementary.²⁴

In his manifesto of 1984, he emphasises the need to reach a self-referential identity of the photographic image. To achieve such a mission, explains the author, ‘one must look not through photography but into photography’.²⁵ According to Olek, although the photograph is initially inspired by form, it detaches from it after its depiction and becomes an autonomous entity. What had previously been an object, he argues, ‘turns into a sign in the photograph; a separate

²² Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

²³ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

²⁴ Olek, J., ‘Minimal, Visual, Elementary’, in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p75. The original text is dated in 1988

²⁵ Olek, J., ‘Within-Photography’, in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p67, The original text is dated in 1984

symbol which reflects the viewer's deepest self-consciousness'.²⁶ Practices of Elementary Photography, explains the author, must therefore be directed to explore which ways of 'making' lead to complete the autonomy of the photograph from the depicted object.²⁷

The essay 'Being-not-being' from 1986 deepens his 'elementarist' theory. Here Olek explains his ideas through a didactic tone. The author starts by defining what the camera 'does' in the photographic action. According to him, the camera is merely a mechanical instrument that transmits 'towards the object and back, the photographer's way of seeing the world'.²⁸ This instrument, continues Olek, allows us to choose a particular fragment of a reality that otherwise surrounds us in every possible direction. The photographer himself constitutes then a second instrument, only that in this case we are talking about an 'instrument of cognition'; who tries to connect his own spirituality with 'sensual' aspects present in the visual world. The photograph becomes then a very useful vehicle of communication, he explains, as it enables a reflection of the photographer's mystical experience into the objectified image, thus turning 'the unspeakable' readable through visual means. To reach such connection however – between 'the seen' and 'the thought' – the photographer must immerse himself into a state of pure contemplation within his visual field and come into being with his creative self 'here and now'. If successful, this contemplative state of inspirational forms shall enable an effective expression of the 'hyper-individual-reality'.²⁹

In his article 'Minimal, Visual, Elementary' from 1988, Olek further clarifies his idea of photography as elementary as he states: 'Photography is an object, conscious of nothing except itself, an object minimal in its form, visual in its representation and elementary in its ideology'.³⁰ Its separateness from reality, he explains, allows the presence of an alternative representation that moves away from the literal and beyond the visually expected. According to the author, photography as art is then turned into a never-ending expedition of the physical world, representing both presence and absence. The result of this inquisitive activity constitutes nevertheless a realistic product, not as a factual document but rather as a 'realism of astounding visions'.³¹ In sum, traditional 'objectifying' purposes of the medium are replaced in Elementary Photography by an exercise of unrestricted experience, free perception and representation of the unknown. In a recent interview with the author, he insisted:

²⁶ Olek, J., 'Within-Photography', in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p. 68. The original text is dated in 1984

²⁷ Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, p. 68.

²⁸ Olek, J., 'Being-not-being', in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p. 88, The original text is dated in 1986

²⁹ Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, p. 88

³⁰ Olek, J., 'Minimal, Visual, Elementary', in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p. 74. The original text is dated in 1988

³¹ Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, p. 74.

Logical, rational, pure and perfectionist, captivating with its simplicity and poetic harmony; demanding artistic consistency, skill and self-discipline, not to mention explorer's passion and inventiveness, which are indispensable when you want to show the 'invisible' in common, everyday occurrences – this is how I defined Elementary Photography.³²

Olek's work produced during the 1980s often has text accompanying the photographs. In his series 'White Space', he depicts fragments of structures against a white background (figure 5.5). The text guides the reading of the photograph by stating the importance of the apparently empty space. The author argues that this represents 'non-presence', which carries equal prominence to present elements.

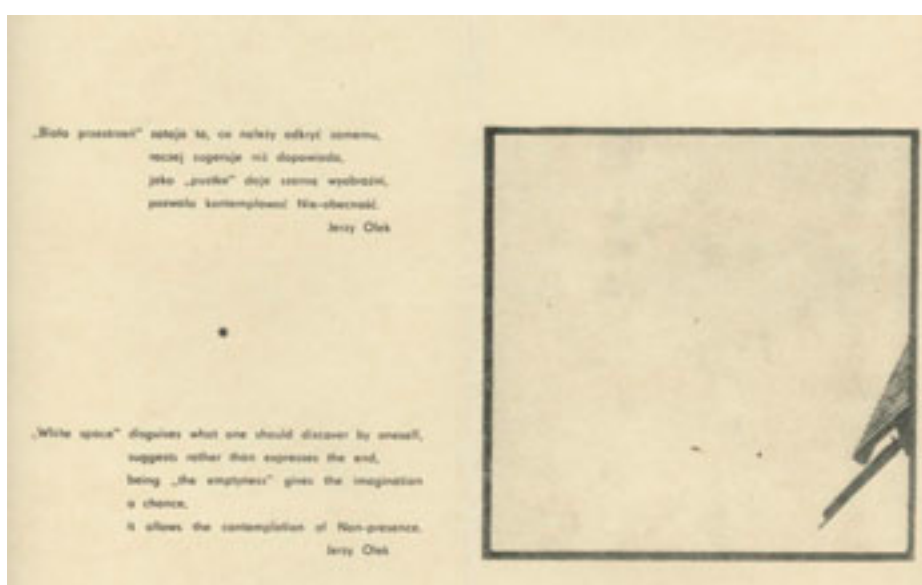


Figure 5.5. Photograph and text by Jerzy Olek, 'Untitled', from the series *White Space*, 1986. Gelatine Silver Print. From the exhibition catalogue *White Space*, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wrocław, 1986. Courtesy of the Artists.

It appears rather evident that Olek's thesis has a lot in common with the principles of Straight Photography developed from the 1930s in the USA by members of the so-called f/64 group like Edward Weston and Paul Strand. According to Olek himself, the works of these photographers were highly influential to his programme of 'Elementary Photography'. The aesthetic lines endorsed by f/64 members were characterised by the use of sharp focus and abstract compositions of nature, underlying the unusual geometric structure of depicted objects. This exhaustive examination of their surrounding world from the individual perspective of each photographer is precisely where Olek's fascination resides; making the 'common' extraordinary as a result of the observer's creative sensibility, who enables the production of original, personal views of reality.

³² Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

In order to make a fair judgement of his contribution to the theory of photography, it becomes essential to understand the context in which Jerzy Olek's claims for 'pure photography' were conceived. Two years before he first introduced the manifesto on 'Elementary Photography', the pressure of the oppositional Polish movement *Solidarity* (Solidarność) had pushed the communist government in Poland to abolish martial law in 1982. Following this decision, a political amnesty was granted across the nation. At that point the forces of *Solidarity* had demonstrated that civil movements were well empowered to abolish the long-lasting *status quo* of Polish politics. Subsequent civil victories then evidenced a prompt collapse of the communist government.³³ In this scenario Jerzy Olek's program arrived in search of alternative possibilities of visualisation; of 'pure' and 'free' ways of sensing and seeing. 'Elementary Photography' aimed to stop the photographer from taking reality for granted and encouraged them instead to find their own, personal meaning of their surrounding world. At a time when Polish society was finally able to start expressing its previously prosecuted concerns, Olek's theory of the photograph comes – as a pedagogical program – to celebrate this freedom of expression through visual means. And it is precisely here where Olek's 'elementarist' theory seemed to meet the motivations of Czechoslovakian 'visualist' photographers from the 1980s.

Although the country was still suffering the repressive attitude of the 'normalised' regime and had not yet been any progress in the grant of civil freedom, it was evident that a political change would take place sooner than later in Czechoslovakia. The movement 'Charter 77', born in 1977 and formed by Czechoslovakian intellectuals from all around the country, promoted the respect for human rights and constituted the first organised civil oppositional movement to the regime. Besides, a series of economic reforms, including the trading with capitalist countries or the seeking of western credits, made it clear that 'pure' communist economy was no longer viable. It was a matter of time that the communist government would have to accept their defeat.³⁴ In this sense, as it occurred with 'Elementary Photography' in Poland during the political changes of the 1980s, 'Visualism' in Czechoslovakia also served photographers to explore and vindicate a psychological space of freedom, from where they could criticise the functioning of the public sphere and question the timid political shifts that took place during the last decade before the transition of 1989.

In order to better understand the impact of the three concepts discussed ('Visualism', 'Opsognomie' and 'Elementary Photography') on the work of Czechoslovakian photographers during the 1980s, I will now turn to analyse the reception of these theories in the country and clarify the reasons why I believe that, despite the widely extended use of the term 'Visualism',

³³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 380

³⁴ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, pp. 284-385

it was Olek's concept of 'Elementary Photography' that was most important for Czechoslovakian photographers.

5. The Development of Visualism in Czechoslovakia

In a recent interview with Jerzy Olek, he explained the different activities that took place during the 1980s in relation of his 'elementarist' theory and how several Czechoslovakian photographers became active members of the program.³⁵ Between 1984 and 1990 Olek developed his program on Elementary Photography from his gallery Foto-Medium-Art in Wrocław – which he still directs. Founded by the artist in 1977, the gallery served an important role in the dissemination of art and photography theory during the last two decades of communist rule. In 1981, the gallery held the symposium *Art as a Medium for Art*, with the participation of over twenty speakers including, artists, philosophers, art theoreticians and scientists. This meeting set the tone for the artistic activities of the gallery. Throughout the seventies and the eighties Olek travelled often to Prague in search of personalities and potential artists that could fit into the exhibition program of his gallery. During those years, he became acquainted with curators Anna Fárová – who was very active popularising Czechoslovakian photography abroad – and the director of the Moravian Gallery Antonín Dufek. In their discussions they shared opinions on the state of the medium and the meaning of 'pure photography'. During these visits Olek also met several Czechoslovakian photographers whose practice was close to his ideas on the function of art photography. Before developing his programme on 'Elementary Photography', he invited Czech photographer Jaroslav Anděl to organise an exhibition at Foto-Medium-Art in 1979. The show was titled *Places and Moments* and it featured leading Czechoslovakian underground artists, including Anděl, Dalibor Chatrny, Michal Kern, Jiří Kovanda, Jan Mlčoch, Rudolf Sikora and Petr Štembera among others. This would be the first collaboration of many to come between Olek and several Czechoslovakian photographers.³⁶

The political situation in Poland in the eighties was more relaxed compared to 'normalised' Czechoslovakia of the time. According to Olek, it was a popular saying that Poland had the 'merriest barracks' of the Eastern Bloc. As a consequence, the situation allowed for a greater autonomy of artistic production and Polish alternative culture flourished especially during the eighties. Some quality art magazines like *Projekt* and *Fotografia* were published in Poland and distributed to other countries of the Bloc.³⁷ As argued by Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, from 1956 onwards abstract and modern art was often shown in official venues in Poland. Since

³⁵ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

³⁶ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, 31/07/2016.

³⁷ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, 31/07/2016.

the early 1970s, Conceptual Art was also supported by museums and national art collections. According to Piotrowski, the Polish government used this pseudo-liberal cultural environment as a strategy to distance itself from Soviet powers, in the belief that by addressing their political autonomy their authority would gain certain legitimacy.³⁸ Even some venues outside the public sphere – like Olek’s – were permitted to develop their activities through a ‘privately designed’ exhibition program. But as Piotrowski points out, this space for artistic autonomy defended by the authorities as a revolutionary progress had a very clear limit. Artists were banned from charging their artworks with critical content, especially if such content could be identified as oppositional towards the Polish regime’s policies. As a consequence, claims the writer, many artists in Poland developed a conformist position and agreed to respect those limits in order to maintain public support. In this scenario, explains Piotrowski, the country consolidated itself as a substitute for the West with regards to international artistic exchange. Czechoslovakian and Hungarian artists frequently travelled to Lodz and Warsaw, where they could show their artworks freely, attend exhibition openings and acquire books and magazines that were banned in their home countries.³⁹

As Jerzy Olek recounts, despite being in touch with oppositional artists from Czechoslovakia who showed their work in the Foto-Medium-Art gallery, he never had any problems with Polish authorities. Between 1986 and 1989, his relationship with Czechoslovakian photographers intensified. During those years he organised a series of collective shows on ‘Elementary Photography’ and numerous solo-exhibitions showcasing works of photographers from Czechoslovakia. An interesting programme of workshops under the title ‘Participation in Community’ took place regularly in his country house at Stary Gierałtów. Some of the Czechoslovakian photographers who attended these meetings include Jan Svoboda, Josef Moucha, Petr Fastej, Štěpán Grygar or Miroslav Machotka – whose work will be analysed in depth in the next case study.⁴⁰ The artistic exchange however operated in both directions between the two countries. In 1988, the exhibition *Elementary Photography: 10 Polish Photographers* opened in the House of Arts in Brno. Outside the Eastern Bloc, exhibitions on ‘Elementary Photography’ were also held in Bielefeld (Germany) in 1986 and Reims (France) in 1991.⁴¹ By 1990, Jerzy Olek understood that his ‘Elementary’ programme was exhausted and redirected his theoretical efforts towards the exploration of what he called ‘The Dimensionlessness of Illusion’; a self-articulated artistic program through which the artist has

³⁸ Piotrowski, P. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 286

³⁹ Piotrowski, P. *In the Shadow of Yalta*, p. 286

⁴⁰ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

⁴¹ The first of these exhibitions titled *Elementarna Fotografie* took place at the Fachhochschule gallery in Bielefeld, Germany in 1965, and showcased the work of four Polish photographers. The second exhibition with the same title was a solo show of Jerzy Olek’s work, held during the Month of Photography at Reims, France, in 1991

since tried to conceal the indivisible unity of his work ‘as a theorising artist with that of a theoretician putting his own theories to test’.⁴²

While Andreas Müller-Pohle and Jerzy Olek were both aware of each other’s theories and established a frequent collaboration in the eighties through the activities of Photo-Medium-Art gallery, neither of them knew Boreck Sousedick’s thesis on ‘Opsogemia’, whose impact was limited to the works of students from the People’s Conservatory of Ostrava, with people like Josef Hradil or Tomas Pospěch.⁴³

So why did the term ‘Visualism’ take hold? After all, the great majority of the photographers who identified with the ‘visualist’ style never adhered to Müller-Pohle’s movement and were instead mainly involved in Olek’s program of ‘Elementary Photography’. Although the influence of Olek’s thesis is acknowledged by curator Antonín Dufek in the exhibition catalogue *Full Spectrum*, the section dedicated to this type of photography is titled ‘Visualism’.⁴⁴ The same could be said about Tomáš Pospěch writings on the subject. In his text ‘Czech and Slovak Photography of the 1980s and the 1990s’ he makes reference to the activities of ‘Elementary Photography’ while exposing these ideas under the epigraph ‘Visualism’.⁴⁵ Whatever the reason might be for such a nominative choice, the use of the term ‘Elementary Photography’ would more accurately describe the history of the photographic movement discussed. But once language conventions start to operate, it becomes extremely difficult to argue otherwise. The problem remains in defining what did ‘Visualism’ exactly come to signify as a photographic style in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia.

Beyond the naming ‘Visualism’ granted by Czechoslovakian historians, the photographers whose work has been repeatedly identified with this style did not refer to their own work in such terms. Some of these practitioners include Miroslav Machotka, Štěpán Grygar, Karel Kameník or Jorsec Moucha. Although few of them participated in collective exhibitions that embraced the concept of ‘Visualism’ like *Current Photo II: Moment*, which opened in the Moravian Gallery in Brno in 1987 or *5x Město* at the Cultural Center of Ústí nad Labem in 1986, the participating photographers were not part of any concrete group which officially embraced the movement. It is therefore difficult to argue for the inclusion of their work in the realm of a ‘visualist’ practice as conceived by Müller-Pohle. What we find instead is a series of photographers who were producing a rather heterogeneous range of works that drew from a variety of sources, including Russian formalism, earlier Avant-garde abstractions,

⁴² Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p. 92.

⁴³ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016. See also Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary photography, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 207

⁴⁴ See Dufek, A., *The Third Side of the Wall*, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009

⁴⁵ See Pospěch, T., *Czech and Slovak Photography of the 1980s and the 1990s*, exhibition catalogue, Olomuc Museum of Art, 2012

Czechoslovakian surrealist photography, subjective practices and the ideas developed through the three theories discussed in this chapter. None the less, the repeated reference to ‘Visualism’ in history books, academic articles and exhibition catalogues, evidences the relevance of these types of practices during the last decade of Normalisation in Czechoslovakia.

In his essay ‘The term Visualism means...’ from 1983, Czech curator Antonín Dufek uses Müller-Pohle’s thesis in relation to the work of photographer Štěpán Grygar.⁴⁶ The curator starts by acknowledging the resemblance of ‘visualist’ practices with subjective documentary photography. He then attempts to define some original elements found in the German movement. According to Dufek, ‘Visualism could be defined as photo-centred experiences of vision’, where ‘the feeling and knowledge involved in visual perception are selected and transformed due to the possibilities of the photographic medium’.⁴⁷ Later in his essay, and in an effort to demonstrate certain cohesion among ‘visualist’ practices, Dufek lists a series of formal qualities carried by these types of images. The depiction of fragmented realities – where only sections of the photograph’s objects can be identified – the use of high contrast, the presence of motion blur, a difficult legibility or deconstructed compositions are, according to Dufek, some of the common characteristics of these photographs.⁴⁸

Dufek’s essay served also as an introduction for Štěpán Grygar’s solo show at Fotochema Hall, Prague, in 1983. The exhibition showcased works by the artist produced between 1979 and 1983; a period that coincides with the development of early ‘Visualism’ in Czechoslovakia. One of his most celebrated images was shot the night of St. Nicolas Day in Prague. It shows people celebrating the feast in the streets of Prague (figure 5. 6). Despite the cold temperature – evidenced by falling snow – people walk happily along the pavement road dressed up as angels and devils. While none of the subjects’ gazes can be read from the upward position where the camera is placed, Grygar’s ‘vision’ of the scene – with its dynamism and tonal contrast – has the ability to communicate the festive mood. It is here where his photographs come close to the notion of ‘Visualism’, as they move away from the descriptive qualities of the media and appear to communicate the photographer’s perceptive experience at a given time.

⁴⁶ Dufek, A., ‘The term Visualism Means...’, in Grygar, S., *Štěpán Grygar: Photographs from the years 1979-1981*, exhibition catalogue, Fotochema Halls, Prague, 1983

⁴⁷ Dufek, A., *Štěpán Grygar: Photographs from the years 1979-1981*

⁴⁸ Dufek, A., *Štěpán Grygar: Photographs from the years 1979-1981*



Figure 5. 6. Štěpán Grygar, *Untitled (St. Nicholas Day, Prague)*, 1981. Gelatine Silver Print,. From the collection of the Moravian Gallery, Brno, Czech Republic.

The range of photographs produced by Czechoslovakian practitioners identified with the movement ‘Visualism’ is rather diverse. In a recent exhibition at the Moravian Gallery in Brno under the title *The Third Side of the Wall*, the curator included a specific section of ‘visualist’ photography produced in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.⁴⁹ Some of the photographers whose work was shown under this section include Štěpán Grygar, Miroslav Machotka, Pavel Šešulka and Otaka Matušek. In the introductory text Antonín Dufek relates again these practices with subjective documentary photography.⁵⁰ It is arguable however that all exhibited works shared the characteristic of subjective documentary practices. Otaka Matušek’s experimental work for example comes closer to surrealist avant-garde tendencies (figure 5.7), while Pavel Šešulka’s work has more in common with the aesthetics of Russian formalist photography (figure 5.8). What is important for Dufek however is the aim of these photographers to innovate in the production of subjective photographs, challenging the rational logics of the visual field in order to offer a highly personal interpretation of the scene.⁵¹

⁴⁹ The exhibition *The Third side of the Wall* opened at the Moravian Gallery in Brno on the 14/11/2008. It was curated by Antonín Dufek and it showcased the work of over one hundred and fifty art photographers from the times of Normalisation (1969-1989)

⁵⁰ Dufek, A., ‘Documentary Photography Alternatives: Visuality as Vision’, in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009

⁵¹ Dufek, A., *The Third Side of the Wall*

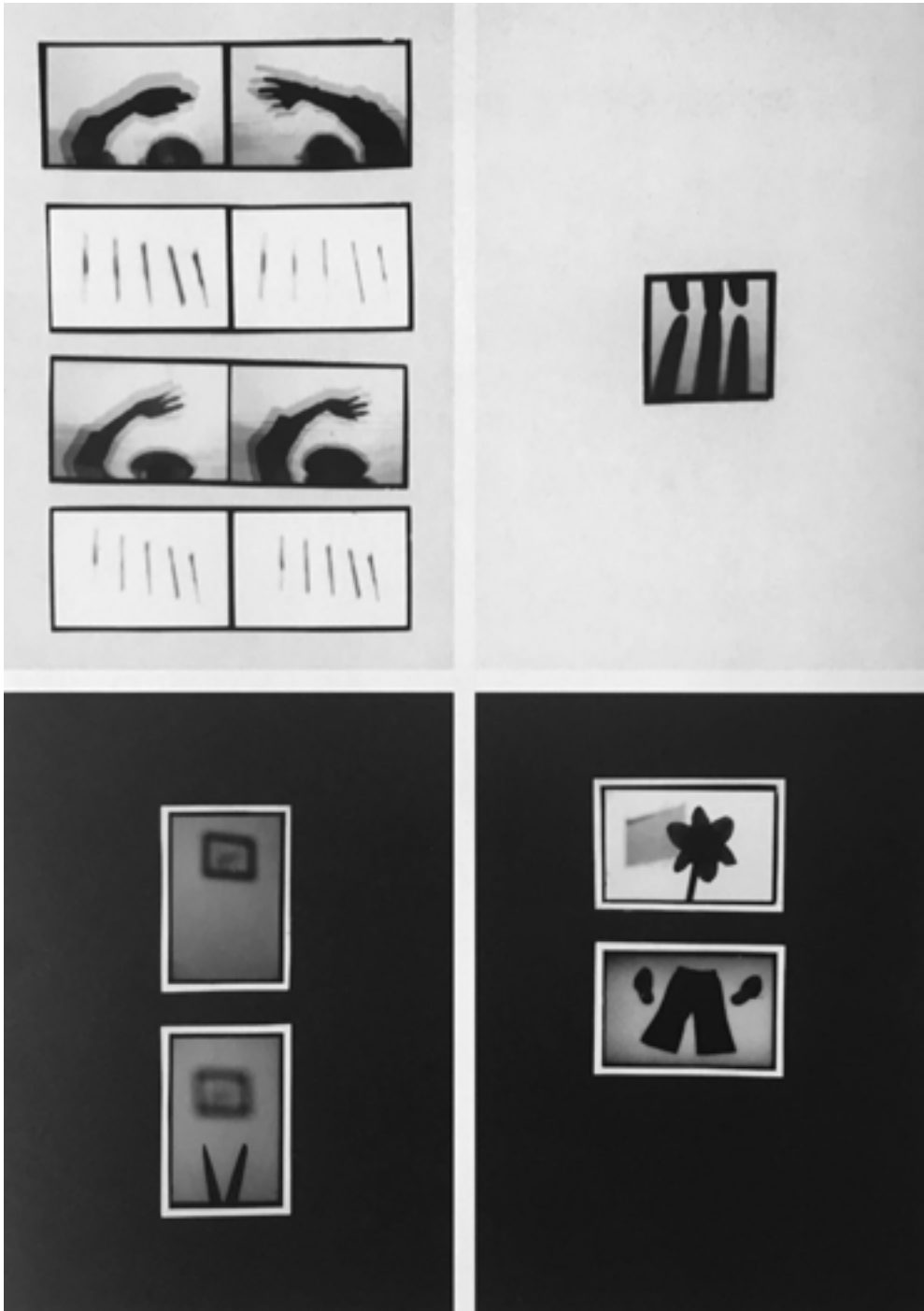


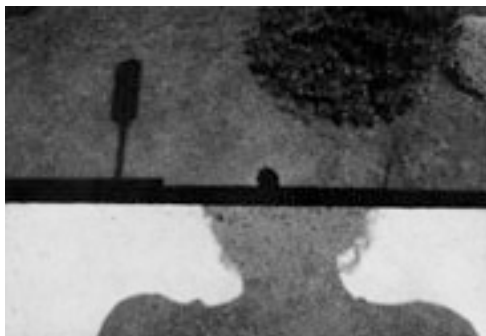
Figure 5.7. Otaka Matušek, *Untitled*, 1980-1985, Gelatine Silver Prints on Paper. From the Collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic.



Figure 5.8. Pavel Šešulka's, *Townsperson I*, 1984. Gelatine Silver Print,. From the collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic.

In a more recent exhibition from 2011, titled *Photography as Photography* at gallery Školská 28 in Prague, Czech curator Tomas Pospěch aimed to bring together – under the concept of ‘Visualism’ – the works of a series of Czechoslovakian photographers from the 1980s.⁵² Surprisingly enough, the exhibition title uses exactly the same words used by Jerzy Olek to define his notion of ‘Elementary Photography’ in his article ‘Minimal, Visual, Elementary’ from 1988.⁵³ But while Pospěch’s introductory text makes reference to Olek’s contribution in the development of the so-called Czechoslovakian ‘Visualism’, it nevertheless states that the main frame of reference for the concept of the show was Müller Phole’s notion of ‘Visualism’.⁵⁴

Pospěch’s exhibition showcased works by Karel Kameník, Josef Moucha and Bořek Sousedík. As opposed to Dufek’s selection of ‘visualist’ works for the exhibition *The Third Side of the Wall*, Pospěch’s choice clearly demonstrated a common aesthetic denominator among these photographers (figures 5. 9, 5.10 and 5 .11). The selected series of all three photographers depicted fragmented sections of different objects through abstract compositions. The scenes take place in the street, where ‘uninteresting’ subjects are turned into being ‘important’ by placing them within the frame.



From top to bottom, Figure 5. 9. Karel Kameník, *Untitled, 1987*, Gelatine Silver Print. Figure 5.10. Josef Moucha, *Geniezno, 1985*, Gelatine Silver Print. Figure 5.11. Bořek Sousedík, *Untitled, (Rostock), 1981*. All from Gallery Skolska 28, Prague, Czech Republic.

⁵² The exhibition *Photography as Photography* opened the 08/10/2011 at the gallery Školská 28 in Prague. It was curated by Tomas Pospěch and it showcased the works of Karel Kameník, Josef Moucha and Bořek Sousedík.

⁵³ Olek, J., ‘Minimal, Visual, Elementary’, in *The Dimesnionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wroclaw, 1995, p75. The original text is dated in 1988

⁵⁴ See the exhibition’s introduction from Školská 28 gallery at <http://skolska28.cz/node/1842>

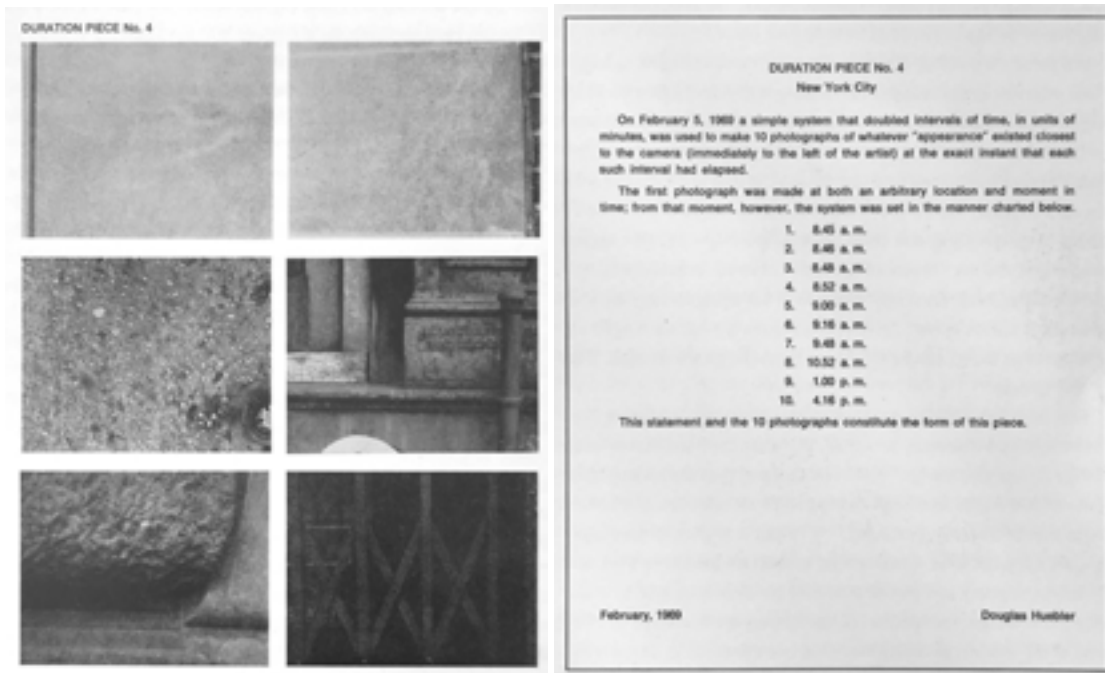


Figure 5.12. Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece No 4, New York City, February 1969*, 1969, Reproduced from Douglas Huebler, 17 December 1972 bis 28. January 1973, West-fälischer Kunstverein Münster, Germany

While the frequent diagonal disposition of the elements can be traced back to modernist aesthetics developed in Czechoslovakia during the 1920s and 1930s, the selection of subjects has much in common with factualist trends in photography developed in the USA during the 1960s. These practitioners were interested in exploring the visual field regardless of the apparent insignificance of the facts they encountered. In a rejection of modernist principles that defended the beauty of industrial and other unanimated subjects, USA factualists photographed mundane objects acknowledging their lack of aesthetic pleasure. What ultimately mattered was the existence of such objects at a given time/space that they shared simultaneously with the photographer. Among the different artists who engaged with this topic, Douglas Huebler's 'summaries' of the visual world shares many of the characteristics of Czechoslovakian 'Visualism'. In his series *Duration No. 4* from 1969, Huebler took ten pictures of close-up facades in New York, doubling the time frame between each photograph after each shot (figure 5. 12). In following this system, he claimed to have taken whatever was in front of him at that moment. According to the artist, his aim was not to 'interpret or state anything', he said, 'I prefer simply to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place'.⁵⁵ While there is no proof that Czechoslovakian photographers could have been aware of factualist trends developed in the USA, it is possible that Müller-Pohle – the ideologist of 'Visualism' in Western Germany – could have been aware of such work. Although the concept behind his series *Transformance*

⁵⁵ Huebler, D., quoted by Shanon, J., in 'Uninteresting Pictures. Photography and the Fact at the End of the 1960s' in S. Witkovsky (ed.), *Light Years. Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964-1977*, exhibition catalogue, The Art Institute of Chicago, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 92

differs from Huebler's *Duration No. 4*, it is evident that both projects share a very similar approach with regards to their 'unintentionally' chosen subjects.

After this discussion it remains complicated to establish a precise definition for 'visualist' practices developed in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia during the 1980s. If we were however to try to establish a common denominator it would be the rejection of traditional social documentary practices and the acknowledgement of a broader scope of the 'visually' relevant. Freedom of choice and the apparent 'unimportance' of depicted subject matter are also key elements for these photographers. What matters above all is the experience of seeing, of sensing – perhaps in an effort to better understand – the material space which the photographer inhabits. As a result, the spontaneity of the photograph often leads to fragmented compositions where only few clues are offered to resolve the scene.

In effect, we might argue that these photographers opened up a critical space; an interstitial space between the public sphere - controlled by the regime - and private psychological space. Besides, their contemplative attitude towards reality might well speak of the uncertain times their country underwent during the eighties. After the appearance of the oppositional manifesto Charter 77 in 1977 – signed by nearly 250 artists, intellectuals and former officials – the 'normalised' communist power was especially repressive when confronting dissident attitudes. The manifesto's signatories were arrested, interrogated and many of them were made redundant from their jobs. It would take yet another ten years for the leader General Húšak to resign and a further two for the Velvet Revolution to conclude the communist era. During this last decade however a glimpse of 'openness' could be perceived in Czechoslovakia. Although the structural reforms of the Russian *perestroika* were hardly welcomed by the national communist power, General Húšak agreed in 1986 to slightly decentralise economic planning. One year after – following the resignation of the general in favour of the reformist Miloš Jakeš – Czechoslovakia sought western credits and started to widen their trading agreements with the capitalist world.⁵⁶ It became clear then that an ideological decline was rapidly spreading throughout the vast communist territory. In this scenario, we might understand the contemplative attitude developed by Czechoslovakian 'visualist' photographers during the last years of communist rule as an effort to 'quietly watch' and 'calmly deconstruct' their uncertain and rapidly evolving milieu.

In order to better understand the development of 'Visualism' in Czechoslovakia, I will now use the following case study to introduce the work of one of its most important representatives, the Czech Miroslav Machotka. By a closer examination of his photographs, I aim to offer a comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic-ideological critique that lies behind his 'visualist' work.

⁵⁶ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 384

6. Miroslav Machotka. Deconstruction as Parable

One of the best representatives of Czechoslovakian ‘Visualism’ is Miroslav Machotka. On rare occasions is the viewer confronted with a photograph capable of arising the level of intrigue that his work reaches. His images open up the possibilities of our visual world, suggesting a limitless configuration of its physical properties. The originality of these photographs together with the compactness of Machotka’s body of work, make his *oeuvre* one of the most compelling of the Czech photography scene produced during the second half of the twentieth century.

Born in 1946 in the ancient Czech town of Ridice nad Labem, Machotka is one of the few established Czechoslovakian photographers from his generation that did not attend a photography or art school. In 1970 he completed his electro-technical studies and soon after graduating started working at the Czech National Television in Prague. It was then when Machotka started taking pictures systematically. For a few years he joined his University Camera Club in the Prague district of Strahov, where he met influential figures from the Czechoslovakian photography scene such as Eva Hejdová or Jaroslav Kučera. Although some teachers from FAMU lectured from time to time in this club, Machotka’s technical knowledge of the medium was primarily self-taught.⁵⁷

His first series followed the trend of staged photography that was widely being developed in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s, but instead of the often-used life models, most of his images depict geometrically arranged still life. Although the creative process in the production of these photographs differs substantially from the body of work he would develop for the next forty years, we can already observe an interest in the visual possibilities of geometric disposition. The use of thoughtful perspective enables the illusion of impossible laws of physics. Weak objects miraculously support the weight of much heavier forms. Rounded shapes fight gravity as they are pushed from the back on top of a hill. Minimal, poetic compositions are already placed in the centre of Machotka’s visual expression (figure 5. 13). The quality of his early works was soon acknowledged. In 1973, some of these pieces were published at *Revue Fotografie* and shown a year later in his first solo exhibition at Divadlo v Nerudovche; an independent theatre in Nerudova Ulice, Prague.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

⁵⁸ Interview with Miroslav Machotka, 20/11/2014



Figure 5. 13. Figure 4.1 Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1972, Gelatine Silver Print, . Courtesy of the Artist.

From 1974, Machotka stopped interfering in the disposition of the objects he was photographing.⁵⁹ Mimicking the activity of street photographers, he would go out on the streets of Prague in the hunt for his static scenes. ‘What’ he photographs becomes secondary in the perception of his images and it is rather the ‘how’ and ‘why’ that the viewer might struggle to understand. Each image constitutes simultaneously a question, a dialogue and an open answer. A tense conversation is usually established between two or three elements. Through the juxtaposition, comparison or disconnection of shapes and textures, the author depicts a world where the logics of geometry lose its *raison d’être*. A visual enigma arises at times from the apparent impossibility of the object’s given form. On other occasions the configuration of elements is done through a carefully chosen – often fragmented – composition, which exposes the absurdity of ‘the real’; an aspect that might have served him to criticise the arbitrary functioning of the ‘normalised’ order. The first works of this new cycle are rather simple in content (figure 5. 14). Two shapes are confronted as if trying to illustrate some sort of contradiction; a collapse of opposite moods or a dialectical dilemma. Chosen structures and textures however are entirely nonfigurative; he does not search for symbolic meanings or direct metaphors in found objects. Instead, Machotka is interested in abstract questions that suggest open answers in the line of Abstract Expressionism or *Art Informel*.

⁵⁹ From this year also Machotka would never join any other club or attend any photography course again. Interview with Miroslav Machotka, Trans. Nikola Krutilová , Prague, 20/11/2014

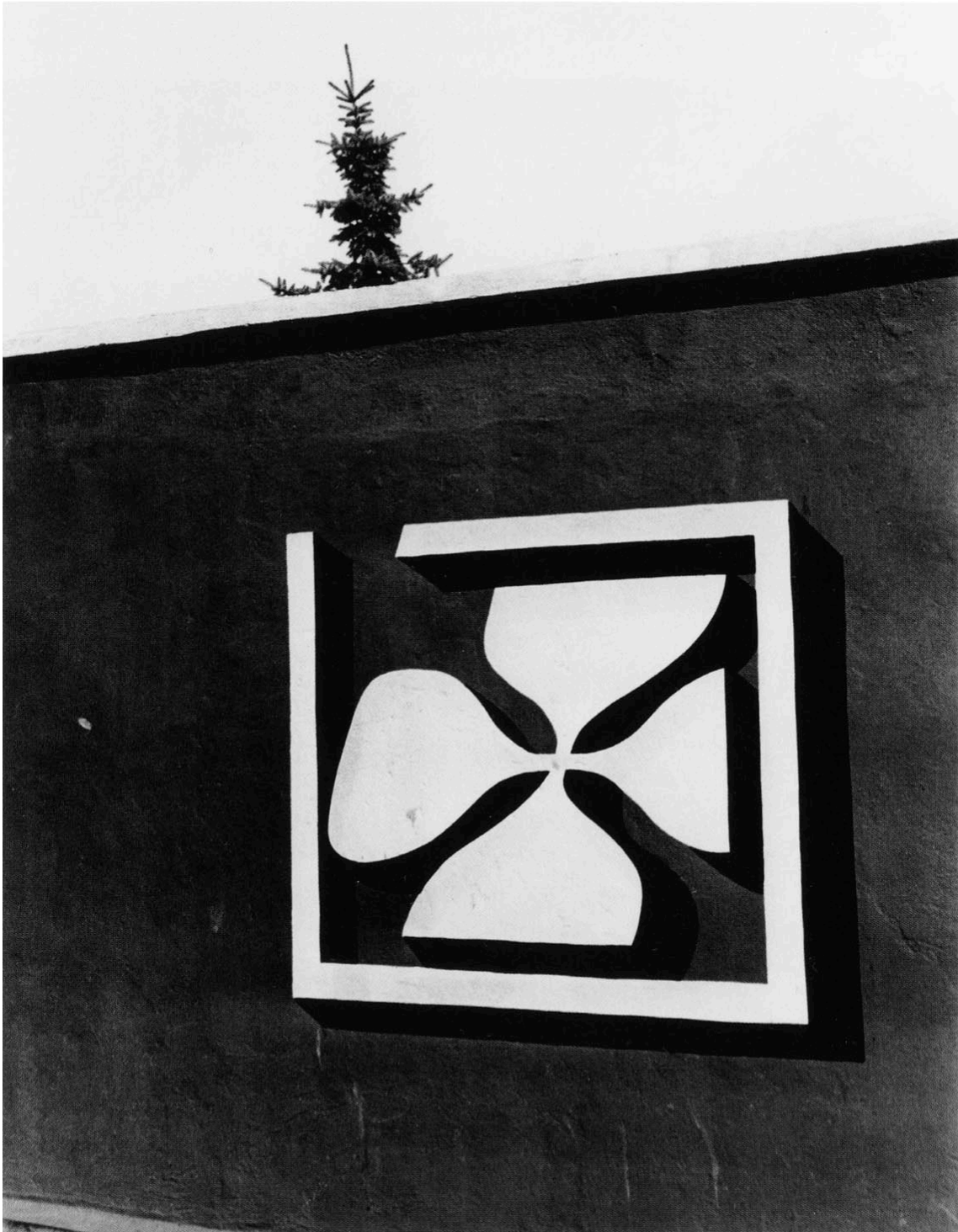


Figure 5.14. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1978. Gelatine Silver Print,. Courtesy of the Artist.

From 1980 onwards, Machotka's exploration achieves a much greater sophistication. Following on from constructivist aesthetics, the use of lines and diagonals permeate his visual field (figure 5.15). Cropped sections of the scene give the illusion of two-dimensionality and guide the viewer's perception to an infinite space placed elsewhere outside the frame. The lines divide and connect, cut and lead, enlarge and confine surfaces, textures and open spaces in clouded skies, walls, windows and riversides. Ropes, cords, wires, bricks, stairs, pavement roads, nests and chains, all serve Machotka in his peculiar reconfiguration of place. The perception of distance is constantly challenged, as forms – deprived from their volume – are often transformed into plain territories of uninhabited space. This entire new universe – unspeakable as it might be – allows the artist to place a rather complex mental state within the frame.

From the mid-1980s, Machotka became acquainted with Jerzy Olek and the activities of Foto-Medium-Art gallery in Wrocław. Between 1986 and 1989 he was invited to participate in a series of exhibitions on 'Elementary Photography' organised by Olek and in 1986 the gallery hosted a solo show with Machotka's work titled *Events and Places*. He also attended various meetings and workshops with fellow Czechoslovakian photographers which took place regularly at Olek's country house in Poland.⁶⁰ In a recent interview with Olek, the Polish artist, he recalls:

I liked Miroslav Machotka very much, if only for his sense of humour and distance towards current events. I think he never believed in political mottos hanging all over Prague...we had a lot of conversations, beer in hand. Machotka noticed fragments of the surrounding reality in a very original way.⁶¹

The work produced by Machotka had indeed many of the defining qualities of 'Elementary Photography' proposed by Olek in his 1984 manifesto. His contemplative images achieve the formal detachment proclaimed by the Polish theoretician. Machotka's photographs become an autonomous entity that have little to do with the place where they came to life. Instead, it seems as if a 'spiritual' dimension of the artist was reflected through the new 'image-object' – namely the photographic print. In an artist's statement written in 1986 for the catalogue of his exhibition *Events and Places* at Foto-Medium-Art Gallery in Wrocław, one can see how he 'accepted' Jerzy Olek's conception of the photograph. Here Machotka explains how his work had been often discussed in connection with the theme of civilisation, when for him it had nothing to do with this. Instead, he explained, his images were 'linked with the concept of existence in the

⁶⁰ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

⁶¹ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, 31/07/2016.

philosophical sense...they capture a state of mind'.⁶² The reason why the objects of civilisation appear in the images ,he argues, is only because he lives in a city, but this does not necessarily mean that the work evolves around this topic. As Machotka explains, these objects of civilisation merely serve a purpose of expressive questioning (figure 5.16).⁶³



Figure 5.15. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1981, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 5.16. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1983, Gelatine Silver Print,, Reproduced from the catalogue *Events and Places*, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wroclaw, 1986, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁶² Machotka, M., *Events and Places*, exhibition catalogue, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wroclaw, 1986,page unknown

⁶³ Machotka, M., *Events and Places*, exhibition catalogue, Foto-Medium-Art gallery, Wroclaw, 1986

Machotka's work in its totality however, depicts indeed urban structures and objects of modern civilisation. Whether the photographer acknowledges it or not, the role of these artefacts in the meaning of art might give us some clues to understand his work, but it is certainly difficult for the viewer to ignore their recurrent presence and make an interpretation of the photographs without paying attention to the physical properties of chosen objects. As impulsively and randomly selected as these photographs might be, the artist consciously or unconsciously makes repeated use of certain types of forms. Aerials and wires, walls, tunnels, insurmountable fences or fragments of nature struggling to survive in the urban environment often appear in his photographs.

It would also be impossible to obviate the cultural and political context in which Machotka's work was produced. As the photographer explains, at times he used photography to document certain actions inflicted by the regime. In 1981, he took a picture of an aerial installed by the communist government to interfere with the signal of *Free Europe*; a banned, unofficial Czech radio station that used short wave to broadcast its content (figure 5.17). These types of shots, he argues, came close to the strict documentary style, but in general terms his work is not directed to record concrete actions performed by the state.⁶⁴ The repressive atmosphere however, can be felt in the tension present in most of Machotka's images. If we can agree on the existential nature of his body of work, then certainly such existence needs to be understood in the concrete context of an artist producing work within a totalitarian state. In the catalogue of the exhibition *Events and Places*, Machotka writes:

The close connection between photographing and my own existence is what I become more and more often aware of. I mean the existence in a philosophical sense. A term 'existential photography' should exist. It would enable to understand different photos as spots made-to-be-seen in the curves of Being, placed in the coordinates of the continuity of time and the perceived reality.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁵ Machotka, M., *Events and Places*, exhibition catalogue, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wrocław, 1986.

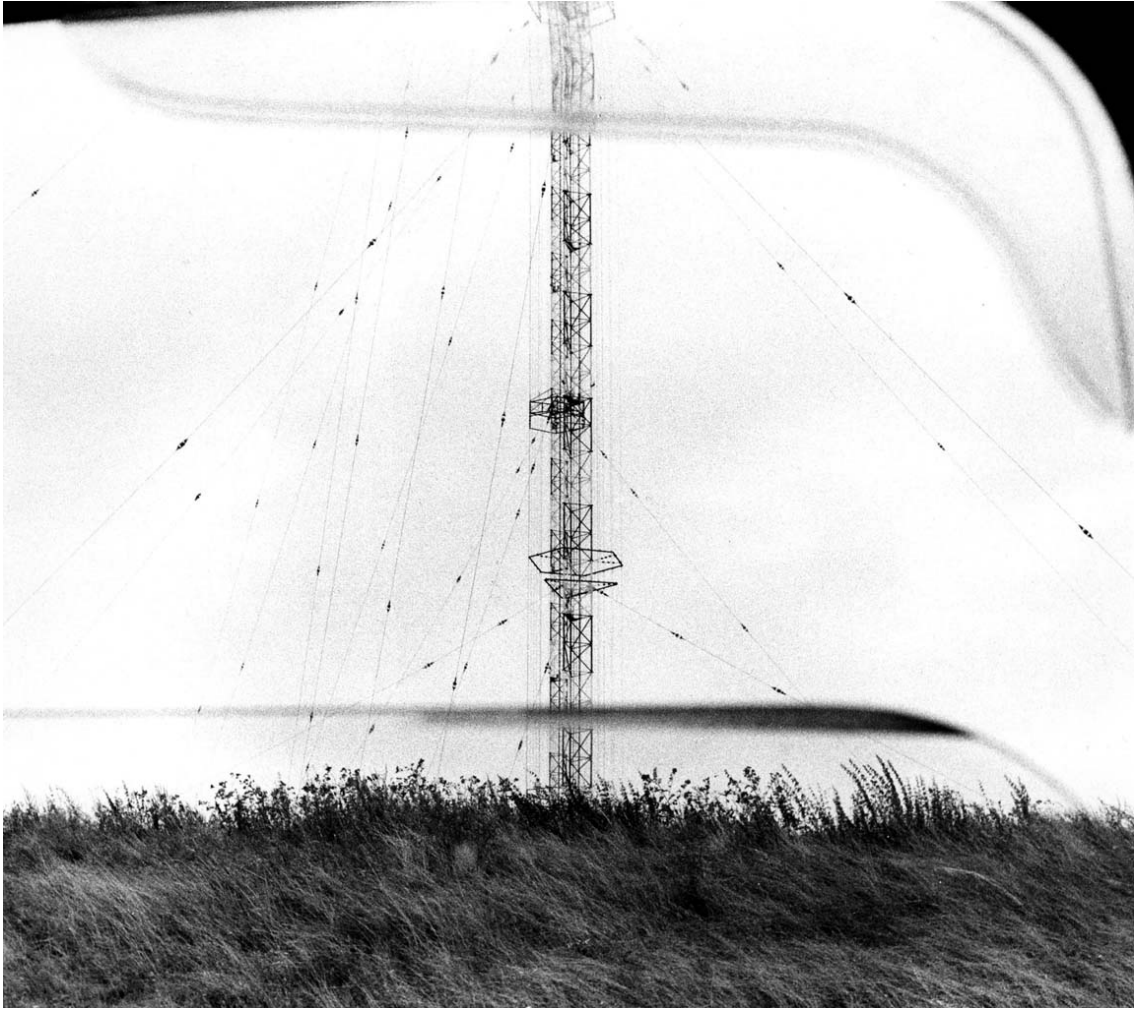


Figure 5.17. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print,. Courtesy of the Artist.

Following the Velvet Revolution and the democratisation of Czechoslovakia in 1989, Machotka continued to work for the Czech National Television while developing his photographic practice in his spare time. For an artist working elsewhere full time, it is certainly remarkable the quality and extension his creative work achieved. Throughout the nineties and despite the radical changes undergone in his country, his newer work is very similar to the photographs produced during the period of Normalisation. The fragmentation of forms, superposition of surfaces and extreme abstractions evidence a very similar mood to that perceived in his previous photographs. As the artist explains, this was probably because not much changed for him in practical terms after the establishment of Democracy and Capitalism in Czechoslovakia. Of course, as he explains, when the borders opened one could finally travel abroad freely and acquire a range of international consumables in shops and supermarkets, but for what it was worth, after 1989, Machotka held the same position at the National Television, lived in the same

house and developed his photographic practice in the streets of the same city.⁶⁶ An evocative image from 1989 however appears highly significant (figure 5.18). The photographer stands inside a building behind its main door. In front of him, a precarious rope tightens from side to side impeding the exit to the exterior where other citizens are freely walking. The rope however has two knots that seem easily releasable. Standing still, Machotka depicts the scene from a head down perspective, as if waiting for someone else to come and resolve the restrictive situation. Emerged from his spontaneous attitude towards ‘the shot’, the photograph undoubtedly becomes iconic of the historical moment when it was shot: the whole country was indeed impatiently waiting for the ‘weakened’ Wall to be finally ‘resealed’.

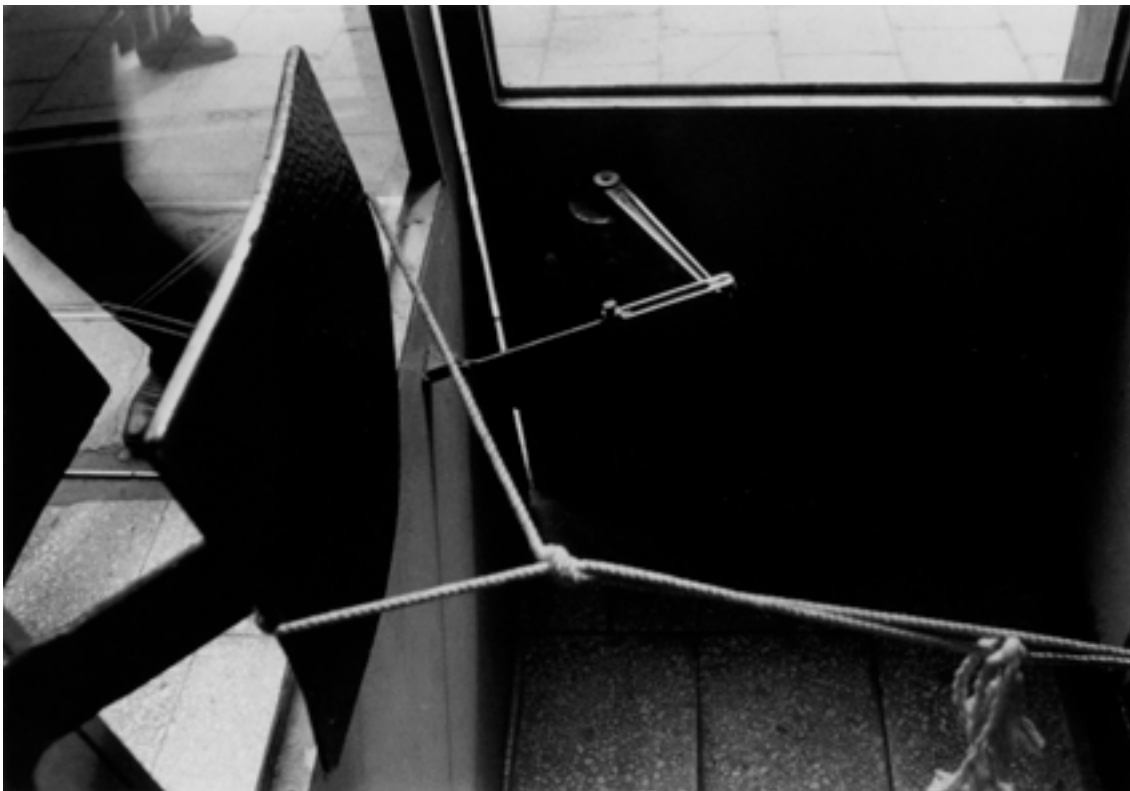


Figure 5.18. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

In a recent interview with the artist in 2014, Machotka explained how rather than a change of topic after the Velvet Revolution, his work simply underwent the ‘natural’ evolution most artists would go through as they get older. ‘Experience and age change the way you see the world’ – he argued. According to the artist, each photograph influences the one that is about to be shot. ‘A finished photograph is most importantly the beginning of a new creation, which, enriched by

⁶⁶ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

the recently acquired experience, is better informed in its search for the meaning of the visual world', explained Machotka.⁶⁷ In an earlier statement from 1986 he observed:

My feelings and reactions are not only influenced by what I am right now: what I have been until now is important as well. Tomorrow I will not be able to catch what I can today. Or if so, it will happen in a different way. For I will be different – again in the existential sense. I will be changed too for the simple fact that I have already photographed a certain thing today.⁶⁸

The idea of this endless continuity of the work, constantly dependant on previous creations served the artist as a basis for the attempt to create the 'Kotinium Group' with Polish photographer and theoretician Jerzy Olek. Around 1986, both artists discussed the possibility of placing 'Kotinium Fotografie' as a continuation of the 'Elementary Photography' movement.⁶⁹ Although this attempt never reached practical terms – as Jerzy Olek's interests moved later away from these thoughts – the notion of the continuity of visual research constitutes a central element of Machotka's work produced until present days. As a result, the process of sequencing here becomes highly significant. In order to fully appreciate his images it becomes essential to perceive them as a continuous narrative, where the meaning of each photograph never ends in its individual reading, but permeates the conception of the next. The artist expressed the importance of such connection earlier in 1981 when he wrote:

I record events in places and moments when the boundaries between them are tumbling down and the events in one place are the events in another. The travelling between places, like the ordering of photographs, is then a search for the connections, order and meaning of these events.⁷⁰

Machotka's most recent work produced from the year 2000 onwards remains, at first glance, in the aesthetic lines of his previous images. In a closer analysis however we might find certain variations. With regards to chosen objects, the artist starts to experiment with light beyond the use of high contrast previously seen. Reflections, transparencies and shadows contribute to add a higher degree of enigma in his shots, to the point where on most occasions it becomes very difficult to decode what type of surfaces we are actually looking at (figure 5.19) The use of shadows without their projecting objects is quite recurrent during this period. Likewise, the interplay between reflected light and textured surfaces in fragmented structures suggest a visual

⁶⁷ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

⁶⁸ Machotka, M., *Events and Places*, exhibition catalogue, Foto-Medium-Art Gallery, Wrocław, 1986.

⁶⁹ Dufek, A., 'Introduction', in *Miroslav Machotka Fotografie*, Prague: Kant, 2015, p. 13

⁷⁰ Machotka, M., as quoted in Dufek, A., 'Introduction', in *Miroslav Machotka Fotografie*, Prague: Kant, 2015, p. 11 First published in *Review Fotografie*, n 43, 1981

puzzle rather difficult to resolve. These last works evidence an artistic maturity reached after decades of deconstructing – and reconstructing – his visual field. The photographs seem now less minimalistic and more epic, as if representing some sort of imaginary world. The fragmentation of structures is reduced and a larger part of the object is now offered within the frame. They also appear less dramatic than the work produced during times of Normalisation and throughout the nineties. Instead, many of them are charged with a certain irony and a timid sense of humour (figure 5.20). According to the author, this change of mood had little to do with the political changes of his country but rather with his growth as a human being. In a recent interview with the artist he explained:

When we are young we tend to take everything very seriously. As you get older and the idea of death comes closer – something that personally makes me very sad – you become more cynical. The humour and irony projected in my work help me cope with a rather upsetting state of mind.⁷¹



Figure 5.19. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 2012. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

⁷¹ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

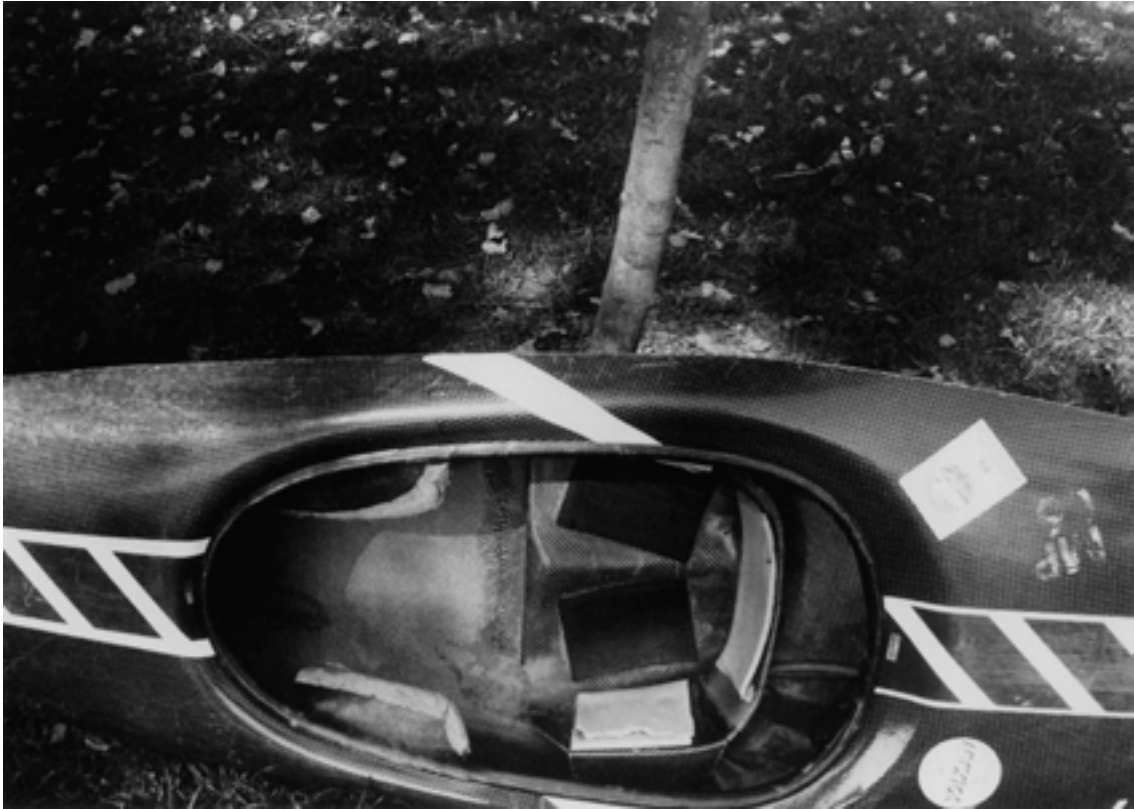


Figure 5.20. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 2007, Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Overall, the *oeuvre* of Miroslav Machotka can be understood from two perspectives. On the one hand he searches for a visual representation of his ‘existential’ state of mind. The physical qualities of depicted objects, the cropping choices and the use of light, enable the author to express his ‘here and now’ of the world he inhabits. On the other hand, there is a constant – perhaps unconscious – search for the ‘visuality’ of the city, its structures and urban artefacts. The totality of his work documents the products of civilisation and the traces infringed on its surface by the human race (figure 5.21). In this sense, Machotka’s work constitutes somehow a visual testimony of the history of material culture. But while this last testifying aspect of his work could be more or less accessible for the viewer, the analysis of his inner, existential projection in the very frame can only be done through a mere speculative exercise. One way or the other, his body of work produced from the mid-seventies to the present constitutes one of the most coherent samples of Czechoslovakian photography during the second half of the twentieth century.

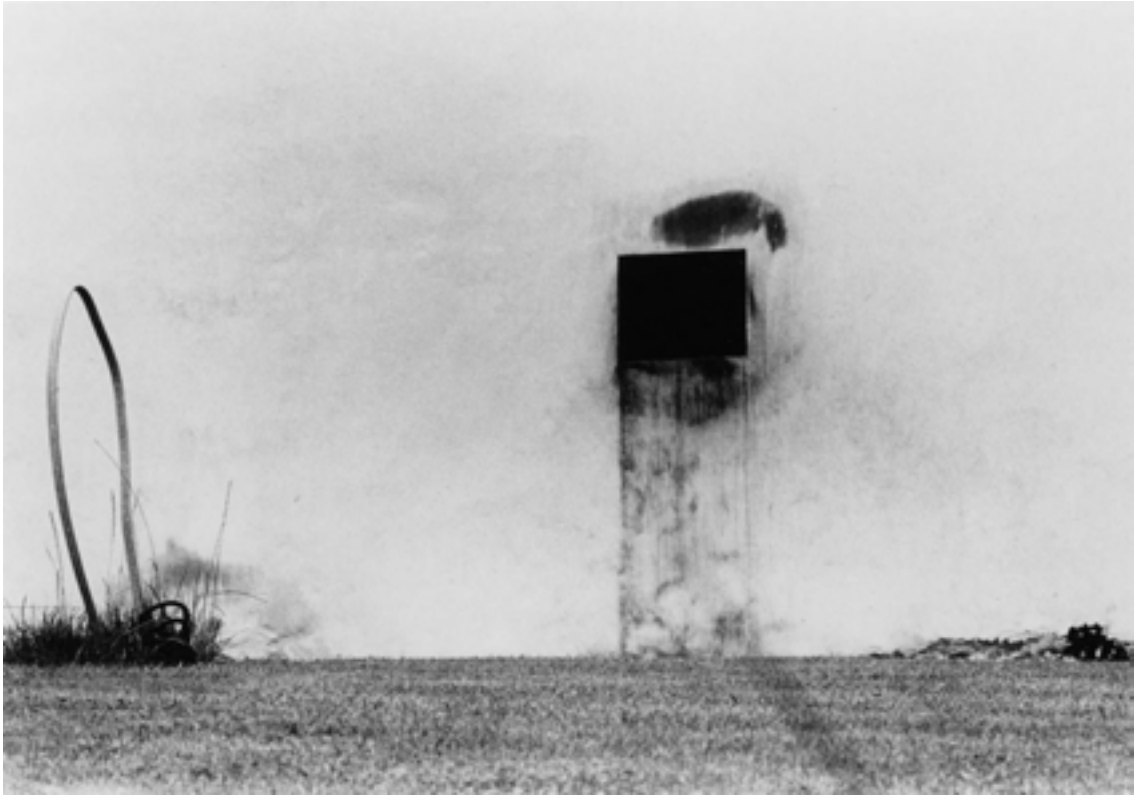


Figure 5.21. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1996, Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Miroslav Machotka currently lives and works in Prague. He has participated in over ninety exhibitions, out of which twenty-five are solo shows. Since 1974, his photographs have been shown both in the Czech Republic and abroad, including places like FotoFest Festival in Houston (1990) or the Art Institute of Chicago (1993). His work is part of various private and public collections including the Moravian Gallery in Brno, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the International Center of Photography in New York or the Museum of Fine Art in Houston. Despite his artistic success, the work sold to these collectors had never been sufficient for the artist to earn a living. This is one of the reasons why he continued to work as a technician for the Czech Television until present days. The other reason – he explains – was that he wanted to keep his artistic practice totally isolated from his everyday job in order to preserve his artistic autonomy.⁷² His last retrospective exhibition was held at Leica Gallery, Prague, in 2014. The show was organised to accompany the presentation of his monograph ‘Miroslav Machotka. Fotografie’, which compiles four decades of his photographic work.⁷³

⁷² Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

⁷³ See full exhibition list in Machotka, M., *Miroslav Machotka Fotografie*, Prague: Kant, 2015, p.115

7. Conclusions

It has been discussed how the theories of ‘Visualism’, ‘Opsognomie’ and ‘Elementary Photography’ share similar ideas with regards to the role of the photographer in the ‘rediscovery’ of a new visual order. Each of them however puts the emphasis on different aspects of the creative process. For Müller-Pohle, the detachment of conventional signifiers is key to deepen into the ‘true nature’ of our surrounding world. Sousedík instead stresses the intuitive attitude of the photographer as a key element to reach authentic perception. Jerzy Olek on the other hand, insists on the necessity of achieving a contemplative mental state during the action of photographing in order to permeate the image with the viewer’s self-consciousness and thus confer on the ‘photograph-object’ a complete autonomy from its referred subject. It is evident that all these ideas have much in common with modernist principles in photography that aimed to achieve a ‘new vision’ of the surrounding world. But while the latter had emphasised sixty years earlier the technical possibilities of the medium to achieve distinctive views, the former were not interested in offering a range of unusual versions of nature, but rather a visual research of such nature through an autonomous psychological process directed to heighten the photographic truth. It remains unclear however the extent to which these theses hold enough originality to offer a substantial contribution to photographic theory. But although the overall novelty of these theoretical programmes might well be put in question, the context in which each of these theories was conceived holds major relevance. An understanding of each of their contexts of art production is key to appreciating the historical meaning of ‘visualist’ practices in Czechoslovakia.

Among the three theories described, Jerzy Olek’s ‘Elementary Photography’ was clearly the most important for Czechoslovakian practitioners identified with the ‘visualist’ style. This becomes evident when looking at the numerous activities organised by Olek – including exhibitions, workshops and seminars – in which several Czechoslovakian photographers participated. It remains unclear however why the term ‘Visualism’ has been commonly accepted in reference to the work produced by these practitioners, when it is evident that most of them were instead actively engaged with Olek’s ‘elementarist’ programme. I am inclined to think that the term ‘Visualism’ is simply the most appealing – in a linguistic sense – of the three concepts discussed in this chapter. In any case, it is also true that outside the circle of Olek’s gallery, no further theoretical debates took place among these photographers in the Czechoslovakian territory. There was no official ‘visualist’ or ‘elementarist’ group in the country and each practitioner seems to have pursued their own artistic program. What they do appear to share however, as a common denominator, is, on the one hand, their search for a representation of personal, visual experiences, as opposed to the descriptive documentary scenes so widely explored by fellow Czechoslovakian photographers at the time. On the other hand, their

contemplative attitude towards their surrounding world and the search for meaning on the mundane, material culture might be understood as a political and social critique; a response to the eminently vanishing *status quo* of the Czechoslovakian society of the 1980s. But as we have observed however – through the work of Miroslav Machotka – the political changes of the Velvet Revolution did not interrupt the search of these ‘visualist’ photographers. Unlike what happened to many social documentary photographers after the fall of the Wall in 1989, ‘visualist’ photographers did not ‘lose the topic’ with the arrival of Democracy and Capitalism. Their existential questioning through the visual remains present nearly thirty years after the collapse of the communist regime.

We might agree that ‘Visualism’ in Czechoslovakia stands half way between subjective documentary photography and a conceptual use of the medium. In this sense, the last decade of Communism in the country appears as a turning point in Czechoslovakian photography, which moved from ‘representing’ the outside world to ‘conceptualising’ the photographer’s inner view of such world. It is for this reason that I decided to include this chapter following the analysis of subjective photography practices in the previous section. The following chapter will now be dedicated to studying the role of photography in the development of Conceptual Art in ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia (1969-1989) and its evolution during the decade following the Velvet Revolution (1989-1998).

CHAPTER 6 //

**BODY, FICTION AND TRANSCENDENCE:
PHOTOGRAPHY AND CONCEPTUAL ART
IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

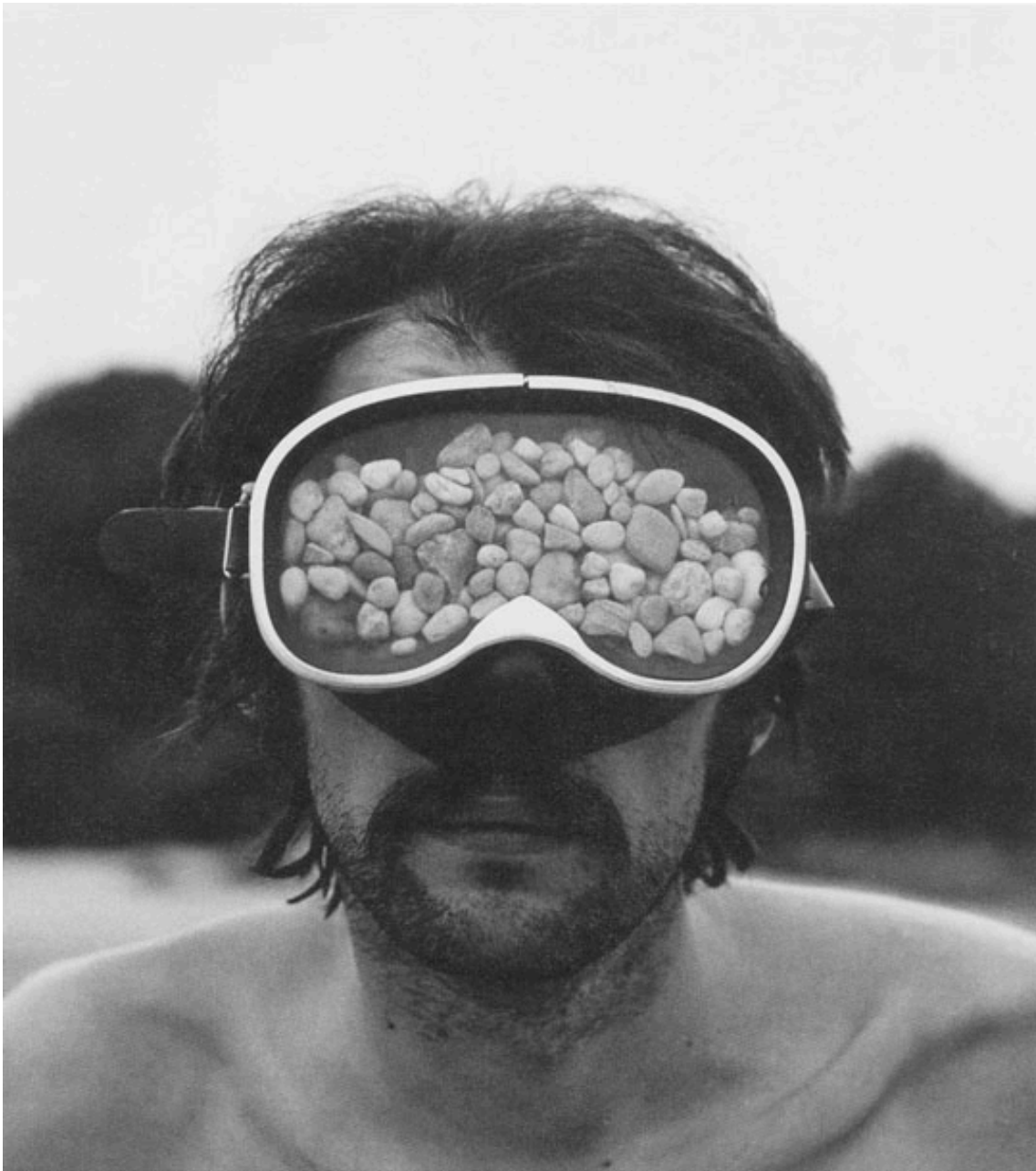


Figure 6.0. Ľubomír Ďurček, *Self-Portrait with a Diving Mask*, 1978, Photo-performance, Gelatine Silver Print, Slovak National Gallery.

1. Introduction

Having discussed the development of art photography practices, this last chapter is dedicated to analysing the role photography played in the development of Conceptual Art in Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation period (1968-1989). Given the isolation of Conceptual Art circles throughout these two decades, their specific motivations and differentiated contexts of art production, it will be more appropriate to discuss its development in the Czech and Slovak territories separately – and more concretely within the artistic circles of Prague and Bratislava.

In order to contextualise the very meaning of Conceptual Art from a broader perspective, I will start by introducing some of the formal and theoretical aspects that characterised an artwork as ‘conceptual’ in the USA and other Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. This will allow me to position Czech and Slovak Conceptual Art within a broader, theoretical discussion, as well as to determine its distinctive attributes born out of the particular context of art production present in the region during the Normalisation period.

Following this introduction, I move on to discuss the rise of Conceptualism during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1967) and the development of Conceptual Art practices in Prague and Bratislava since the establishment of the Normalisation period in 1968. On this occasion, instead of focusing on analysing the work of a concrete artist through a separate case study – as I have done in previous chapters – I will analyse the work of several conceptual artists. This approach will allow me to draw a better understanding of the different creative strategies developed by these practitioners in order to overcome the intensified repression and censorship barriers established after 1968. These include the use of metaphors, parody, puns, fictions and utopian models of art production.

Finally, I will conclude by drawing an analytical comparison between the work produced in the Bratislava and Prague circles of conceptual artists and discuss the possible reasons behind the different formal qualities of their work.

2. A Movement to Free One’s Self

While Conceptual Art practices developed around the globe share countless similarities (both in time and form) it is clear that the individual contexts of art production differ radically among these territories.¹ In his essay ‘Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art’, Peter Wollen argues that although North American conceptualism seems to have gained some sort of ‘original authorship’ in the history of Conceptual Art, this assumption has no substantial

¹ For a detailed discussion on the development of Conceptual Art practices around the globe during the 60s and 70s see Foster, H., and Krauss, R., *Art since 1900*, London : Thames and Hudson, 2004, pp. 434-584.

facts to sustain it.² While it is true that the extensive curatorial and theoretical activity present in the USA during the late 1960s and early 1970s helped to rapidly promote North American Conceptual Art like no other in the global art scene, he explains, this does not mean that the rest of conceptual artists around the globe produced their work *a posteriori*, influenced by some sort of North American trend. On the contrary, their practice reflects their very different circumstances, antecedents and preoccupations.³ As a consequence, the content of such works, their very *raison d'être*, carries a totally different meaning. Unlike previous avant-garde movements like Constructivism, Conceptual Art did not spread from 'a capital' outwards. It emerged more or less simultaneously throughout North and South America, Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, Korea, New Zealand, Australia and Japan.⁴ In fact, in most cases – especially in the early days – artists were unaware of the works produced beyond their country's borders. But as New York critic Lucy Lippard observed, when talking about her encounters with European artists:

the spontaneous appearance of similar work totally unknown to the artists can only be explained by an energy generated by (well-known, common) sources and by the wholly unrelated art against which all the potentially 'conceptual' artists were commonly reacting.⁵

While the 'sources' shared between West European and North American conceptual artists – namely Duchamp, Pop Art and Minimalism – were not common for their Czechoslovakian counterparts, the artistic 'energy' Lippard refers to – a rather radical one indeed – was certainly present in Czechoslovakia too. Their 'reaction' however did not respond so much to a discontent with the 'one and only' dominant art practice at the time in the country, that is, Socialist Realism, but rather with the predatory political context that had since the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 turned the country into a highly claustrophobic space for artistic expression.

In the United States, the emergence of Conceptual Art is understood as a reaction to Modernist principles – with its arbitrary and authoritarian criteria – and a will to demystify the role of 'gifted' artists satiating the thirst for valuable art commodities to the elitist art market. What they proposed instead was a shift from product to ideas, from the 'artist-maker' to the 'thinker-maker', from the confined gallery walls and the canvas to an infinite open world and its limitless interpretative possibilities; a 'true' democratic art, where virtually any practice could

² Powell, P., 'Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art', in *Paris Manhattan Writings on Art*, New York: Verso, 2004, p. 15.

³ Powell, P., *Paris Manhattan Writings on Art*, pp. 15-34.

⁴ Bate, D., *Art Photography*, London: Tate Publishing, 2015, p. 81.

⁵ Lippard, L.R., 'Escape Attempts', in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London: University of California Press 2001, p. ix, first published in New York: Praeger, 1973.

reach an art status as long as the author wished to confer it as such. In this scenario, aesthetic – retinal – pleasure lost its appeal in favour of philosophical joy. On the one hand the reader was liberated to make whatever they wished out of the work. On the other hand, the spectator was also expected to participate actively in the construction of meaning of such a work. Through the dematerialisation of the object, the ‘thinking’ behind the production process became the very work of art itself. Any posterior execution was only accessory to the superior, genuine ‘idea’. As artist Sol LeWitt expressed it in 1976, ‘all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.’⁶ In similar terms, Lippard observed: ‘Conceptual Art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or dematerialised.’⁷ Although artistic in its form, the aim of Conceptual Art in the USA was to break with the traditional principles of the capitalist art market translated into a clear ‘anti-establishment’ reaction that conferred on the work an explicit political content. By rejecting the established art system, conceptual artists were also rejecting the values of the elite who ruled it. This reaction ran parallel to the social unrest of the late 1960s produced by the numerous open fronts present in the country, including the Vietnam War, a growing feminist movement and racial and post-colonial issues to name only a few.⁸

Likewise, in Czechoslovakia, the political situation of the Normalisation period shaped the attitudes of several artists who found in Conceptual Art an intimate, secret space, where their political anxieties saw a path to be released. But while the formal qualities of Czechoslovakian Conceptual Art had many aspects in common with similar practices developed in the USA and Western Europe, the artists’ motivations differed substantially from the aspirations of the latter. During the decade preceding the Soviet Invasion of 1968, a moderate thaw allowed the development of certain art practices that had been previously prosecuted under the strict communist rule. From 1957, during the lead of President Antonín Novotný, the arts experienced a considerable liberalisation. While only some artists gained access to public exhibitions, the repression towards those producing work within the unofficial sphere was relaxed. In the period between 1964 and 1968, Czechoslovakian culture experienced a great expansion. During those years, international artists were shown in the country, including works by Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein or the Gutai Group, and in 1966 the Fluxus festival was held for the first time in Prague (figure 6.1).⁹ Although it took place under the watchful eyes of the authorities, it never the less constituted a breaking point in the attitude of the Regime towards progressive Western

⁶ Hewitt, S., as quoted by Plummer, S., in ‘Conceptual Photography’, *Source*, Issue 71, 2012, p. 25.

⁷ Lippard, L.R., ‘Escape Attempts’, in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London: University of California Press 2001, p. viii, first published in New York: Praeger, 1973.

⁸ Powell, P., ‘Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art’, in *Paris Manhattan Writings on Art*, New York: Verso, 2004, p. 18.

⁹ Morganová, P. ‘Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries’, in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, pp. 20-21.

art.¹⁰ By the mid-sixties, Post-surrealist and *Art-informel* abstraction tendencies were ‘tolerated’ within the realm of ‘imaginative art’ and shown in unofficial venues.¹¹ And despite the fact that these progressive art practices were run only in the parallel underground culture, their activities remained relatively fluent during this period.¹²



Figure 6.1. Fluxus festival in Prague, 1966, Ben Vautier and Jeff Berner (sitting) performing Ben Vautier’s *Tying-up Piece for Christo*, Photo-documentation of Performance, Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

The arrival of Soviet troops to Prague in August 1968 put an end to the liberal reforms introduced during the previous decade. The so-called ‘Normalisation’ was established by the new lead of Gustáv Husák.¹³ The occupation was followed by a huge wave of emigration and a massive purge in the Communist Party. Harsh censorship was re-established and only eight per cent of the members of the Union of Visual Artists were allowed to remain.¹⁴ The style of Socialist Realism prevailed once again within the official art scene, with artists exploring their ‘individual’ views on the ‘much-needed’ reforms of Normalisation. In this scenario, some artists whose progressive work had started to see the light during the Thaw (1957-1967), shut themselves up in their studios waiting for the winds to change. Others instead joined forces in alternative groups whose members supported and protected each other, such as the *Crusaders’ School of Pure Humour Without Jokes*.¹⁵ Since participating in alternative exhibitions became

¹⁰ Morganová, P, ‘Preface’, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 23.

¹¹ The term ‘post-surrealism’ in Czechoslovakia refers to the surrealist trend developed after the War and which expanded rapidly during the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1968). One of the best representatives of this second surrealist wave was photographer Emila Medková, whose images documenting the material world in Prague invite the viewer to reflect on ‘the absurdity of modern thought’. See Fijalkowski, F., Richardson, M., and Walker, I., ‘Objective Poetry: Post-War Czech Surrealist photography and the Everyday’, in *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia*, London: ASGATE, 2013, pp. 89-102

¹² Morganová, P. ‘Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries’, in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, p. 23.

¹³ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 326-344.

¹⁴ Morganová, P. *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Morganová, P. ‘Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries’, in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, p. 24.

highly risky, numerous artists shifted their pictorial or sculptural practices towards conceptual work. Land art and performance art became the most suitable forms of expression for those who would not give up in their artistic autonomy.¹⁶ Unlike conceptual works produced in the USA, the aim of Czechoslovakian artists was not to change art or the institutions where it had traditionally operated. Their work constituted simultaneously a space for freedom and a personal protest. Often produced in their free time and at their own expense, their basic starting point was a need to devote themselves to this activity, with no need of public recognition and despite the threat of prosecution.¹⁷ Away from the city's surveillance apparatus, nature was often turned into a key scenario for body art practices and conceptual interventions in the land (figure 6.2).¹⁸ As I will later discuss through the analysis of specific works, these performances sometimes took place in basements, apartments or artists' studios. Other times it was the author alone who would carry the artistic action without an audience. Far away from the sight of the secret police, these places served as 'safe bunkers' where – at least momentarily for the length of the event – both the artist and his participating audience could exercise artistic freedom without limits.

In this scenario, photography played an essential role. On the one hand, it served as the main way to document these secret events at a time when video recording was a luxury for most. On the other hand, its relatively cheap price also encouraged many conceptual artists to adopt photography as their main medium of expression. Prints and negatives were easier to hide, transport and post secretly than paintings or sculptures.¹⁹ Sometimes artists performed directly for the camera, turning their work into a 'photo-performance' (figure 6.0). Other times they photographed installations; turning the photograph-object into a secondary sculpture. The formal properties of the medium were also explored by some of these artists, who questioned its indexical abilities, perceptive qualities or 'perpetual' nature. Quite often the negatives were never printed due to a lack of resources and when they were, only a couple of small, unframed prints were privately produced and secretly kept.²⁰ In this sense, we could argue that the 'dematerialization of the art object' in Czechoslovakian Conceptual Art responded not so much to a critique of art as a commodity for an elite audience, but to pure economic necessity and personal safety.²¹

¹⁶ Morganová, P, 'Preface', in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 24.

¹⁷ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art*. p. 44.

¹⁸ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art*. pp. 24-25.

¹⁹ Interview with visual artist Lubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.

²⁰ Interview with visual artist Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 10/09/2016, Bratislava.

²¹ See Lippard, L.R., 'Escape Attempts', in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London: University of California Press 2001, p. viii, first published in New York: Praeger, 1973.



Figure 6.2. Vladimír Havlík, *An Attempt at Sleeping*, 1982, Gelatine Silver Print, Archiv of Vladimír Havlík, Reproduction from the book Morganová, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014.

It is important to understand that the use of photography in Conceptual Art was made by artists, not art photographers. Art photography practices discussed in the previous chapters were not considered ‘conceptual’ by the Czechoslovakian photography scene. Even ‘Visualist’ photography, which emerged from a highly conceptual theoretical background, was at its best placed within the ‘imaginative photography’ field. This separation between art photography and conceptual photographic work meant that the latter was rarely published or exhibited alongside art photographs in alternative venues and with few exceptions, never considered for the public photographic collections of the Moravian Gallery in Brno or the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.²²

Conceptual artists using photography did not study at the FAMU school like the great majority of art photographers from the time. In the case of the Czech, neither did they attend the Fine Art Academy. In Prague, self-education often took place in the form of informal lectures where artists would share their specific knowledge among their peers. Hence conceptual works of photography often lacked professional quality. But unlike the ‘intended amateurism’ applied for conceptual purposes by USA artists like Douglas Huebler, Czech conceptual artists simply had – for a variety of reasons – a limited knowledge of the medium’s technicalities.²³ In Bratislava instead, where most conceptual artists did have a formal art education, the quality of the photographic work produced is clearly higher.²⁴

3. The Beginnings of Czech Conceptualism (1957-1967)

The first known conceptualist in Prague was Vladimír Boudník. In the mid-1950s, he carried out over a hundred happenings in the city streets. Standing in front of empty canvases hanging over chipped walls, Boudník explained to passers by the principles ‘Explosioanalism’; a theory developed by the artist himself, which proclaimed the ability of every individual to participate actively in the creative process (figure 6.3). According to Boudník, this could be done by freeing their minds and allowing their imagination to appreciate art beyond the material boundaries of traditional art practices.²⁵ At the time the artist was carrying out these actions, the general public in Prague took him for an individual with serious mental problems. For others however, Boudník’s aim to merge life and art became a source of inspiration. His actions influenced the work of the first generation of Czech conceptualists who developed their work during the ‘relaxed’ artistic environment of the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1967). And for

²² Interview with art historian and curator Macek Václav, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 12/09/2016, Bratislava.

²³ For a discussion on Douglas Huebler’s work see Chapter V.

²⁴ According to Photo-historian Václav Macek, the great majority of conceptual artist who were working with the photographic medium in Czechoslovakia had been trained as painters or sculptors at The Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. Interview with Václav Macek, 12/09/2016.

²⁵ Boudník’s manifesto on Explosionalism was written in 1956. The full text is published in English in Morganová, P, ‘Preface’, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 41, footnote 46.

the first generation of conceptual artists that started to produce work during the period of Normalisation, Boudník was a key inspirational figure.²⁶



Figure 6.3. Vladimír Boudník, *Explosionalismn*, Photo-documentation of Performance by Karel Koukal, 1959, reproduction from the book Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014

A secondary source of inspiration for these early conceptualists came from literature. In 1965, the poet Jiří Kolář wrote *Instructions for Use*; a series of fifty-two poems where the writer created a ‘script’ describing briefly a series of actions to be carried out by the reader – either literally or in their imagination (figure 6.4).²⁷ In his poem *Journey*, we can read:

Leave
or leave with bare hands
to the city
where you know no one
and spend three days there
if you get hungry
ask for bread
if you get thirsty
ask for water
sleep where you can
and everyday ask
nine people about a person
with your name
with your life. ²⁸

²⁶ Morganová, P. ‘Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries’, in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, p. 18.

²⁷ Morganová, P. *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, p. 42.

²⁸ English translation of Kolář’s poem as published in Morganová, P, ‘Preface’, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 42.

Alongside the poems, the poet published his manifesto *Maybe Nothing, Maybe Something*, where he explained his aim to separate his work from ‘all other classical and artificial poetry that seems hopelessly static’. Instead, he aimed his poems to turn ‘primitive, void of any secondary intentions’ through a total rejection of poetic narcissism and ‘all kinds of models’.²⁹ On the one hand, Kolář’s poem-instructions served as a stylistic guidance for the scripts designed by ‘Action Art’ artists prior to their performances. On the other hand, his determination to break radically with all known forms of Czechoslovakian literature was highly inspiring for early conceptualists who were in search of entirely new ways of artistic expression.

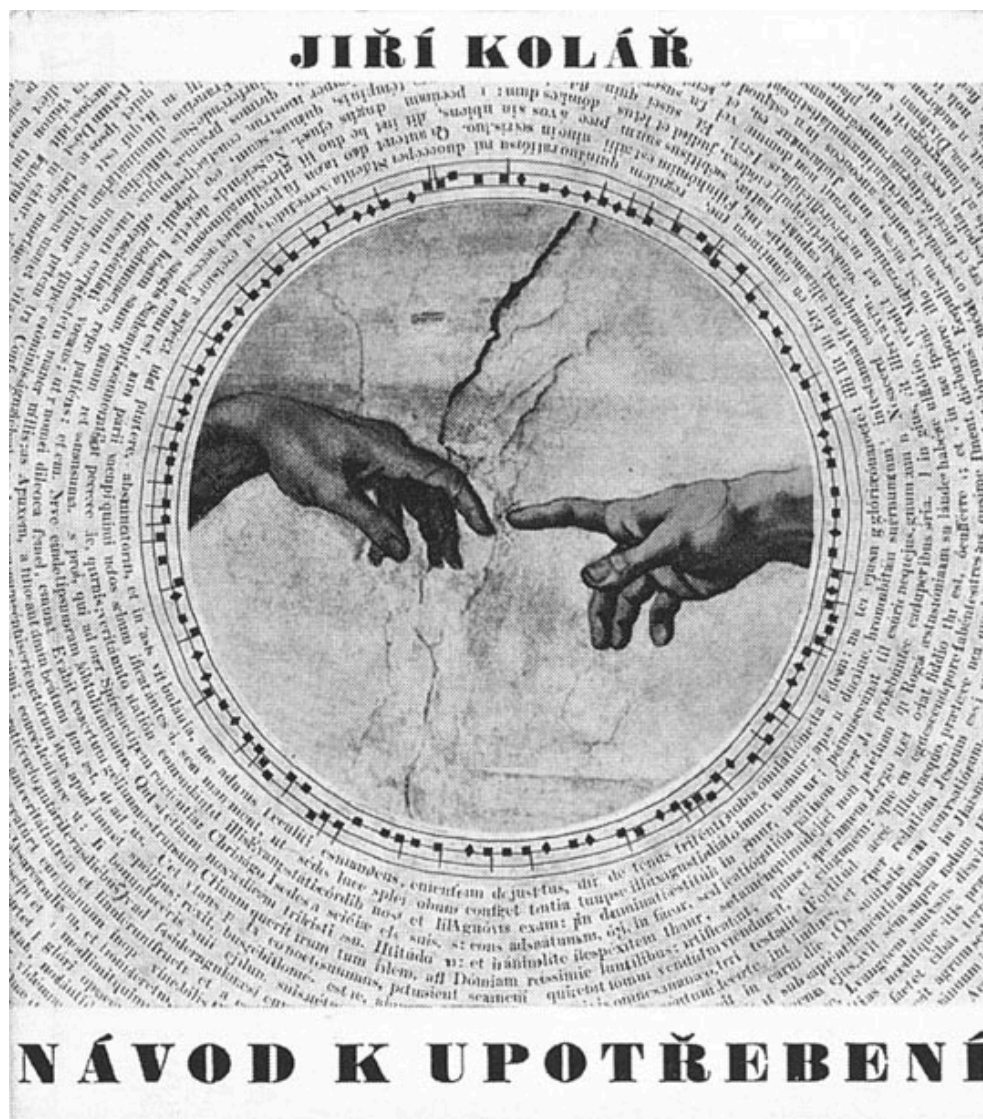


Figure 6.4. Jiří Kolář, *Instructions for Use*, 1969, Book Cover. reproduction from the book Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014

²⁹ Kolář’s *Instructions of Use* and his manifesto *Maybe Nothing, Maybe Something* was published in the journal *Literární noviny*, Issue 14, 1965. For a full translation see Morganová, P, ‘Preface’, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 42.

Although the great ‘explosion’ of Conceptual Art in Czechoslovakia took place following the events of 1968, by the time the Soviet power killed the hopes for change expressed during the Prague Spring, a number of artists had already been actively exploring conceptualist practices throughout the Thaw (1957-1967). The key figure of Czech Conceptualism during the 1960s was Milan Knížák. Having been rejected from studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, he started developing his work on his own in 1960. His first known actions - a series of ‘short-term exhibitions’ – took place outside his studio (figure 6.5). The artist placed several objects forming an installation over the street’s pavement. At times, a person would complement the scene laying on the ground or holding one of those objects. His aim was not so much to claim that his installation *was* art, but rather to confront random viewers passing by with something unexpected in their everyday public space.³⁰



Figure 6.5. Milan Knížák, *Short-term Exhibitions*, Prague, Nový Svět, 1962-1964, Photo-ocumentation of Performance Unknown Photographer, Archive of Milan Knížák.

³⁰ Weibgen, L., ‘Performance as ‘Ethical Memento’: Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *Third Text*, Vol 23, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 56-58.



Figure 6.6. Milan Knížák, Vít Mach, Soňa Švecová, Jan trtílek, *A Walk Around Nový Svět - A Demonstration for All the Senses*, 1964, Photo-documentation of Performance, Unknown Photographer, Archive of Milan Knížák.

Soon Knížák formed the Aktual group alongside Jan Trtílek and Soňa Ševcová. Similar to Fluxus events, their actions aimed to produce timid disruptions in the everyday life of the city. But regardless of their ‘low profile’, the subversive character of their actions was more than the official art scene was able to cope with. Despite the relatively liberal atmosphere of the Thaw (1957-1967) – which had allowed some underground abstract artists to be increasingly present in the public domain – the activities of the Aktual group were kept totally away from the ‘alternative’ (then tolerated) context.³¹ Their actions however did not constitute an activist political act as such. Instead, their playful interventions aimed – (rather innocently) to offer a temporary escape to an audience bored with intolerable politics (figure 6.6). But the communist authorities did not see it that innocently. Their experimental art was perceived, like theorist Miško Šuvaković observed, as ‘a political provocation and an attack on social normality’.³² Their performances and happenings were often photographed, though in most cases the identity of the photographer is unknown. This graphic documentation of the event, together with its description or ‘script’, is all we are left with nowadays.³³ And while it is probably true that the photograph can never serve as a substitute for the event, it nonetheless becomes its ‘perpetual’ material proof. In this sense, some authors have argued that the photograph always corrupts the essence of the action as a temporary work of art. In her book, *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan observed:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.³⁴

Certainly, the photograph *is* something else. Its physical properties are directly opposed to the ‘dematerialisation’ of the art object aimed through performance. As pointed out by American conceptual artist Mary Kelly, once documented, the resulting action-object is available for circulation and turned into a potential commodity.³⁵ Besides, by fixing only a momentarily, specific scene, the photographer only depicts one or more instants of the whole ‘spectacle’. These subjectively chosen moments might indeed not be those of higher relevance. Indeed, the physical bodily experience of the performer can never ‘return’ through the photograph, nor will the audience formerly present ever ‘re-sense’ their exposure to the performed act. As Susan Sontag observed, ‘photographic images tend to subtract feeling from something we experience

³¹ Morganová, P, ‘Preface’, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, pp. 49-79.

³² Miško Šuvaković as quoted by Weibgen, L., in ‘Performance as ‘Ethical Memento’: Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *Third Text*, Vol 23, Issue 1, 2009, p. 58.

³³ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art*, p. 34.

³⁴ Phelan, P., as quoted by Morganová, P, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 34.

³⁵ Kelly, M., ‘Re-viewing Modernist Criticism’, *Screen*, Vol 22, Issue 3, 1981, p. 53.

at first hand and the feelings they do arouse are, largely, not those we have in real life'.³⁶ However, as Sontag remarks, it might also occur that the photograph disturbs the reader more than the actual life-experience of the depicted scene.³⁷

But we might argue that these critiques towards the role of the photograph in conceptual practices would not make much sense when extrapolated to the context of 'normalised' Czechoslovakia. The scenario in which Knížák and the Aktual group carried out their work differed completely from the situation present in Western societies. With a lack of an art market and the impossibility of publishing or showing their work in any gallery, the photograph of their actions could have never turned into a commodity. Instead, the fact of keeping a photographic record of their actions might have responded to self-critique purposes. Going through the available images of their actions performed between 1962 and 1968, it can be noticed that the totality of them include the audience within the frame. Generally, the spectators act surprised. Some smile timidly. Others observe seriously showing a certain suspicion. Many pause their intended journey, standing still, driven by the curiosity of such unusual behaviour. The fact that we can see their gaze in every image suggests that the anonymous photographer might have been instructed to record the spectators reactions. Since the aim of the Aktual group was – as I have explained – to offer passers-by different situations that were out of their ordinary life, it makes much sense that the authors would have been interested in discovering the public's reaction through the photographs.

In addition, the print served as a way of sharing their artwork – or at least an aspect of it – with fellow artists with similar interests. It is known that thanks to these photographs and the cooperation of Czechoslovakian art critic Jindřich Chaloupecký, that the founder of the Fluxus group George Maciunas became acquainted with the activities of the Aktual group in 1964.³⁸ The work of the Czechoslovakian group must have caused an impression on Maciunas since he named Knížák director of 'Fluxus East'. In practice, this meant that Knížák was in charge of promoting Fluxus activities in his geographic area of influence – namely Prague.³⁹ The existence of those photographs was thus crucial for the establishment of relations between Czech conceptualists and the Western art scene of the 1960s.

Knížák paradoxically received his temporary visa to travel to the USA right after the arrival of Soviet troops in Prague in 1968. When he returned from America the situation in his country was distanced completely from the 'relaxed' atmosphere where he had been undertaking his street actions with the Aktual group. The streets were no longer a safe place for art experiments.

³⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Rosetta Books, 2005, p. 131,

³⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 132

³⁸ Morganová, P., *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 55.

³⁹ Morganová, P., *Czech Action Art*, pp. 54-55.

Being arrested now meant a lot worse than a short stay at the local police office. In this scenario, Knížák – like many other conceptualists of the time – turned to the tranquillity of nature where he founded an alternative commune. During the first half of the 1970s, he continued to organise some actions alongside the members of the commune but his ‘conceptual’ artistic activity progressively decelerated. In 1974, his life took a more relaxed direction as the artist devoted himself to music and advanced mathematics.⁴⁰

4. Czech Conceptual Art Under Normalisation: The ‘Prague Body-Art Troika’

The establishment of the Normalisation period in 1968 marked the evolution of Conceptual Art practices in Czechoslovakia. The liberal reforms of the Prague Spring were replaced by Soviet style restrictive regulations and harsh censorship mechanisms were implemented without mercy. In this scenario, conceptual artists abandoned completely the public space and turned their activities to rural settlements or concealed indoor spaces in their studios and apartments. Friendship and trust were the main weapons against suspicion and social espionage. Throughout the 1970s, the content of some of the actions turned progressively self-aggressive. Instead of distracting or amusing a random street audience with playful interventions, a number of artists used their body both as a source of ‘free’ experience and an ‘objective’ communication channel. Pseudo-masochist actions – with different levels of intensity – were often perpetrated by artists in front of an intimate audience. Some suggest that throughout the times of Normalisation, Conceptual Art assumed the space of an absent political activism. Indeed, the self-infliction of pain has been understood as a protest against the totalitarian control of the state over every single aspect of the individual’s life. By ‘owning’ their physical suffering, these artists reclaimed a space of freedom where only they could graduate the extent of their self-produced affliction.⁴¹

The main representatives of body-art in the Czech territory during the 1970s were the trio formed by Karel Miller, Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch, known as the Prague Body-Art Troika. Though working in different paths, their works shared similarities with regards to their formulation and highly progressive content. Despite their hermetic isolation inside Czechoslovakian borders, they managed to make contacts with international artists working with body-art like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci or Marina Abramović, who surprisingly managed to travel to Prague during the Normalisation period.⁴²

⁴⁰ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, pp. 71-79.

⁴¹ See Weibgen, L., in ‘Performance as ‘Ethical Memento’: Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *Third Text*, Vol 23, Issue 1, 2009, p. 55-64

⁴² Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art*, p. 140

Like the Aktual group, these three artists often had their events photographed. In the case of Karel Miller, it is evident that his actions aimed at being visually recorded, as their artistic meaning can only be envisaged through the two-dimensional print. In his work *Identification* (1973), the artist stands balancing in foetal position on the edge of a shed's roof (figure 6.7). The picture is taken immediately before his body effectively falls a few metres down. The artist's intention was to evidence the importance of gravity; an invisible and yet determining force to which the body is constantly subordinated.⁴³ The photograph allows the artist to point out the precise moment before losing control of his body mass, thus identifying his existence with the inescapable presence of gravity. In his piece *Perpendicular* (1937), the essential role of the photograph in the production of the event's meaning becomes even more evident. During the action Miller stands still on the ground (figure 6.8). The camera is then twisted while the horizon appears straight. As a result, his body seems to be challenging the logical consequences of gravity. It is evident that both of these works would lose much of their sense without the photograph, since the communication of meaning relies entirely in the presence of the photograph's 'punctum'.⁴⁴ Besides, the composition of the images suggests a well-thought through design process in their conception. This suggests the artist's will to attribute artistic value to the document - and even perhaps to confer on the photograph the status of an artwork itself. It remains unclear however if it was the artist or someone else who made the creative choices with regards to the very aesthetics of the photograph. One way or the other, the artist agreed to have the performance recorded in that precise way and make the action available to a wider public through its photographic form, turning the photograph into an integral part of the work.

⁴³ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 158

⁴⁴ The concept of 'punctum' was articulated by Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980) as the element within the frame that is stable to define the entire essence of the photograph and confirms its *noeme* or defining characteristics, that is: the absolute certainty that 'that-has-been'. See Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 77



Figure 6.7. Karel Miller, *Identification*, 1973, photo-documentation of performance, Unknown photographer, Archive of Karel Miller.



Figure 6.8. Karel Miller, *Perpendicular*, 1973, photo-documentation of performance, Unknown photographer, Archive of Karel Miller.

Out of the three artists who formed the Prague Body-Art Troika, Miller was the less aggressive in the treatment of his body. Inspired by Zen and Buddhist theories, his attitude was more poetic.⁴⁵ His actions could be understood as some sort of philosophical meditation, where the artist explores the subordination of his bodily existence to uncontrollable laws governing nature. But the ‘natural’ challenge represented in his photographs might well be understood as a metaphor of the relation between the artist and the state; despite the strength of the force pulling him down, he succeeds in keeping the balance and control over his body (existence).

Far more disruptive were the actions carried out by Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch. Their performances usually took place indoors, at apartments, basements or studios. A script was often written beforehand to be followed precisely during the event. One of the best-known actions performed by Mlčoch was *20 Minutes* (1975). The artist described the piece as follows:

In a basement room, I placed a long iron rod on the ground, perpendicular to the wall. I screwed one end to the floor and tied one knife to the other end whose tip touched the wall. I asked a member of the audience to assist me. I asked him to sit on a wooden board placed on the rod and when he saw that I wasn't concentrating, to move up any distance he chose. I set the clock at 20 minutes without him knowing about this limit and sat down between the knife and the wall. The clock didn't work properly. I stopped the action after 44 minutes.⁴⁶

Mlčoch placed his body within an artificially designed dangerous situation in order to explore the limits of self-discipline and control over the stressful event. The challenge was not to succumb, to stay alert and vigilant despite the pain.⁴⁷ To pursue this mission Mlčoch forged a participatory relation with the audience. The most active player was the assistant, who had to punish him as instructed every time the artist got distracted. Of course, the assistant was not responsible for Mlčoch's pain but nevertheless participated actively in the result. The rest of the audience watched the disturbing scene quietly, forced to overcome any possible identification with the artist's pain. In this case, the metaphor of the State's repression towards society is rather clear. On the one hand, the target repressed (the artist) has no choice but to accept the punishment and its resulting physical pain. On the other hand, the audience (Czechoslovakian citizens) cannot do anything but stare in silence at the penalty inflicted before their eyes.

⁴⁵ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 159.

⁴⁶ Mlčoch, J., as quoted by Weibgen, L., in 'Performance as 'Ethical Memento': Art and Self-Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia', *Third Text*, Vol 23, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁷ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art*. p. 175.



Figure 6.9. Jan Mlčoch, *20 Minutes*, 1975, Photo-Documentation of Performance, Unknown Photographer, Archive of Jan Mlčoch.

A special role is then given to the anonymous photographer. Pointing at Mlčoch throughout the event, he waited for the most dramatic moment to take the picture; when the knife was already deepening into his flesh (figure 6.9). Apart from the artist, the photograph makes reference to the assistant holding the ‘weapon’ through the presence of one of his feet. But despite the acknowledgment of his participation, any possible issues of responsibility on his side are diminished by the exclusion of his identity within the frame. The photographer thus holds a double role. On the one hand, he is one more member of the audience forced to watch the disturbing scene. On the other hand, for those absent from the event, he contributes to the creation of meaning through his depictive choices, probably as much as Mlčoch himself. Indeed, it is only from the photograph that we know the outcome of the performance: the artist failed to control his mental state. He got distracted and as result, the damage was done. The visual document becomes the proof of the individual’s inescapable vulnerability under an externally controlled threat.

In his essay ‘Photography, Iconophobia and The Ruins of Conceptual Art’, John Roberts explains the notion of ‘new spectator requirements’ that was described by artists Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden in their essay ‘The Grammarian’ from 1970. As Roberts recounts, analytic conceptualism aimed at ‘the production of new conditions of dialogue between artists and their

audience'.⁴⁸ According to the writer, the whole point was to 'release the spectator from what was seen as the 'sleep' of the Modernist spectator', to 're-awaken the viewer as intellectually attentive', turning him into a 'creatively imaginative spectator'.⁴⁹ In the performances carried out by the Prague Body-Art Troika, these so-called 'new spectator requirements' reached an entirely new level. Attending to these performances during the times of Normalisation constituted an act of bravery in itself. Unlike the street interventions of the Aktual Art group performed during the 1960s, where the public was formed spontaneously by passers-by who suspected nothing about the artistic status of the event taking place, those who witnessed the actions of the Prague Body-Art Troika knew well the level of their assumed risk. Their presence in those acts could be understood as 'human support' flowing reciprocally in two directions. On the one hand, the artists offered the audience a space where they could enjoy watching an entirely 'free' act of expression, on the other, by attending the performance – and often taking a proactive attitude in the event – the audience seconded the fact that the effort was worth it and the artwork 'mattered'.

In a less aggressive performance, *Washing?* (1974), carried out by Mlčoch, the naked artist washed his body in the presence of several friends. The content of this action, though rather simple, was also highly political. For its representation, a bath was placed in the middle of an empty room where the artist washed himself as the viewers stared at the scene. The aim was to explore the issues of intimacy at a time where the border between private and public life had practically merged.⁵⁰ In this sense, his action of washing his naked body in public might well constitute a metaphor of the State's interference in all aspects of private life, including the most intimate, which could always be under potential public surveillance.

The available photograph of the event depicts Mlčoch washing his hair, a male who observes the scene holding a candle and a woman standing in a corner as she covers her mouth and looks elsewhere (figure 6.10). Although the artist's presence has a slightly more dominant role within the frame – as he is placed roughly in the centre of the picture – it is evident that the photographer attributed an important weight to the representation of those two members of the public. Given the aim of the performance to enact a traditionally private ritual in public, it seems reasonable that the photograph should depict the 'intimate' action alongside elements that demonstrate its publicity. But beyond the artistic meaning of the documentation, the inclusion of the public also provides an interesting testimony of the spectators' behaviour.

⁴⁸ Roberts, J., 'Photography, Iconophobia and The Ruins of Conceptual Art', in Roberts, J., (ed.), *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, London: Camera Work, 1997, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Roberts, J., *The Impossible Document*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Morganová, P., *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 177.

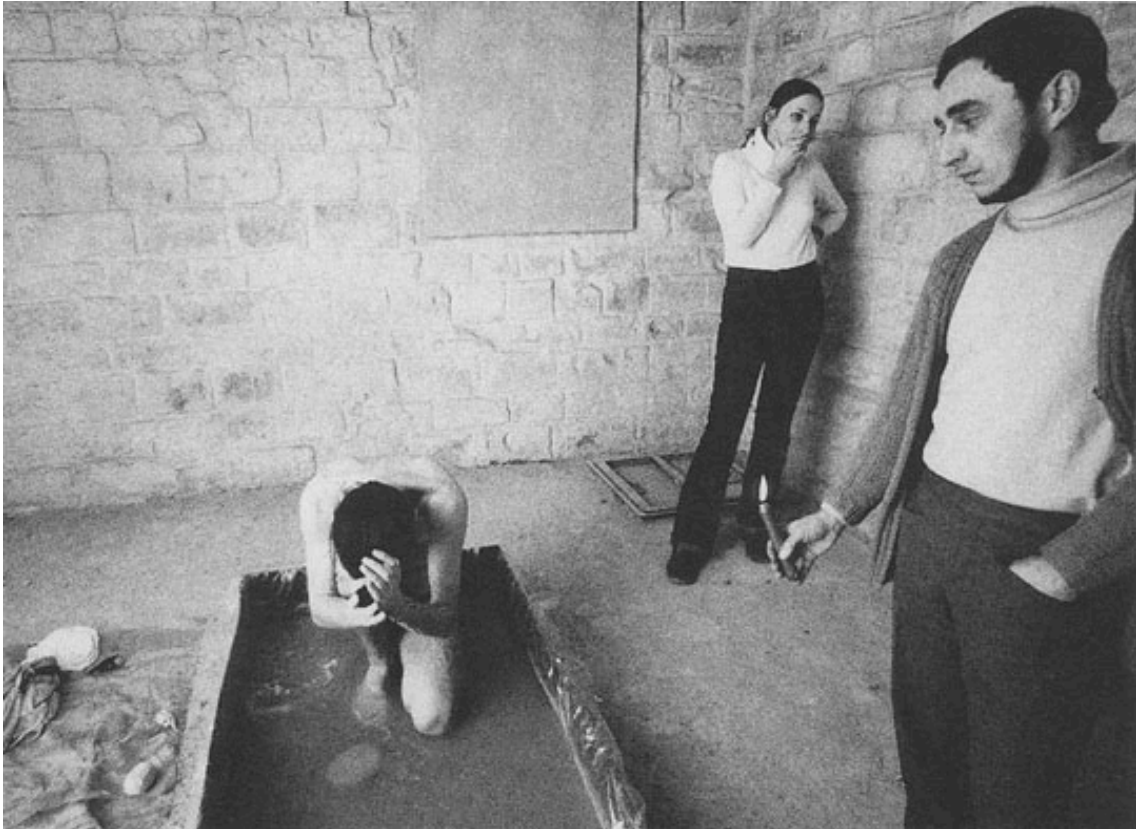


Figure 6.10. Jan Mlčoch, *Washing?*, 1974, Photo-documentation of Performance, Unknown Photographer, Archive of Jan Mlčoch

If we observe the reaction of the two members of the audience, the attitude of the male and the female are radically the opposite. While the man – hands in his pocket – stares closely at Mlčoch's naked body facing forward, the woman prefers to stand further away and stare elsewhere far from the scene. Her gesture suggests a compromised situation. She 'has' to be present but she would probably rather leave. It is important to note that Czechoslovakian society during the 1970s was still highly conservative and had not experienced the 'sexual' liberation that took place in Western societies during the sixties.⁵¹ Another explanation for the woman's attitude might be the fact that she became aware of the presence of the camera pointing towards her. Attending to this type of performance constituted an act of bravery that only few would dare to carry and having a picture evidencing her presence might have been more than the woman was willing to risk. This would also explain her attempt to partially cover her gaze and move her body as far away from the scene as possible to remain outside the photographic frame. The wall however limited her escape and her presence in the photograph serves now to add a secondary layer of meaning to Mlčoch's iconic performance.

⁵¹ Interview with photographer Ján Krížik, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

Beyond the use of photography as a document in body-art, some Czech conceptual artists questioned the non-artistic uses of the medium in society. During communist times, everyday surveillance was often made with the assistance of a photographic camera hidden inside the surveyor's clothes or other wearable accessories. These photographs are still kept and available for public consultation at the photographic archive of the secret police in Prague, which was formed of thousands of folders, each containing several images and informative documents from different 'suspects'.⁵² Subjects were always identified by nicknames and photographed in all sorts of everyday situations. Shot from below, these images were usually taken without looking through the viewfinder (figure 6.11 and 6.12). The surveyor stood within a close distance from his 'objective' and using a wide-angle lens, attempted to capture as much information as possible from the 'suspicious' action taking place. The resulting visual evidence was often accompanied by a written report, where the surveyor provided a short but detailed description about the course of the event. These visual proofs were sometimes used in court against the 'objectives'. Other times, they were simply kept in the subject's folder, perhaps with the hope that the accumulation of information would eventually bring to light the individual's 'illicit behaviour'. The intensity of surveillance activity that took place in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia was certainly overwhelming. It is not surprising that many artists chose to produce their conceptual artworks in isolated places away from surveyed cities. But some artists like Jiří Kovanda opted precisely to carry their actions in public space in order to vindicate a sphere of freedom in the heavily watched, 'normalised' streets.

In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Kovanda carried out a series of happenings and performances in the streets of Prague. Through the use of parody, the artist made a critique of the State's omnipresent surveillance over individuals. In his work *Theatre* from 1976, the artist followed a previously written script that dictated a series of meaningless movements and gestures to be enacted by the artist (figure 6.13). Since only Kovanda knew about the content of his own directions, the performance remained unnoticed to passers by. Walkers are thus unconsciously forced to participate passively into the secret situation. The script read:

I followed a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements were selected so that passers-by would not suspect that they were watching a performance.⁵³

The photographs of the event were taken discreetly by one of his friends.⁵⁴ Accompanied by Kovanda's script, the resulting images mimic the aesthetics of surveillance photographs taken

⁵² In a visit to the photographic archive of the secret police in Prague in November 2014, I had access to a large amount of graphic material from the times of Normalisation.

⁵³ Kovanda, J., as quoted by Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 182

by the secret police. Here too, depicted subjects – in this case the spontaneous audience – remain oblivious of their exposure to the camera’s lens. Their accidental inclusion is however visually documented. Similarly, to the police’s archive, this material proof might remain available thereafter in order to demonstrate their possible ‘involvement’ in the ‘illicit scene’. The lack of meaning in Kovanda’s script, alongside the random inclusion of passers-by in the photographic document, constitutes a parody of the arbitrary surveillance system designed by communist authorities. His work suggests that virtually anyone carrying out the most innocent activity could become an ‘objective’ worth monitoring.

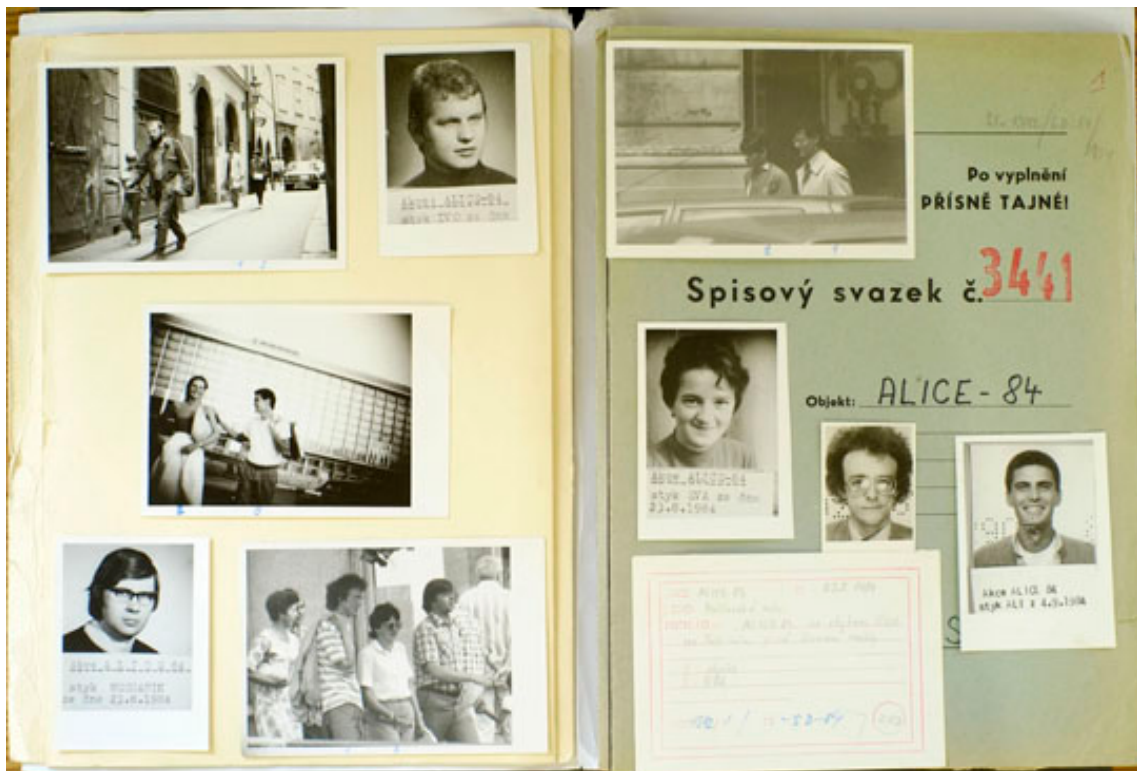


Figure 6.11. *Objekt Alice-84*, 1984, Photographic Archive of the Secret Police, Prague, Reproduction by Paula Gortázar, 2014.

⁵⁴ Pospiszyl, T., ‘Look Who’s Watching: Photographic Documentation of Happenings and Performances in Czechoslovakia’, in *1968-1989*, Seminar Publication, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2010, p. 86.

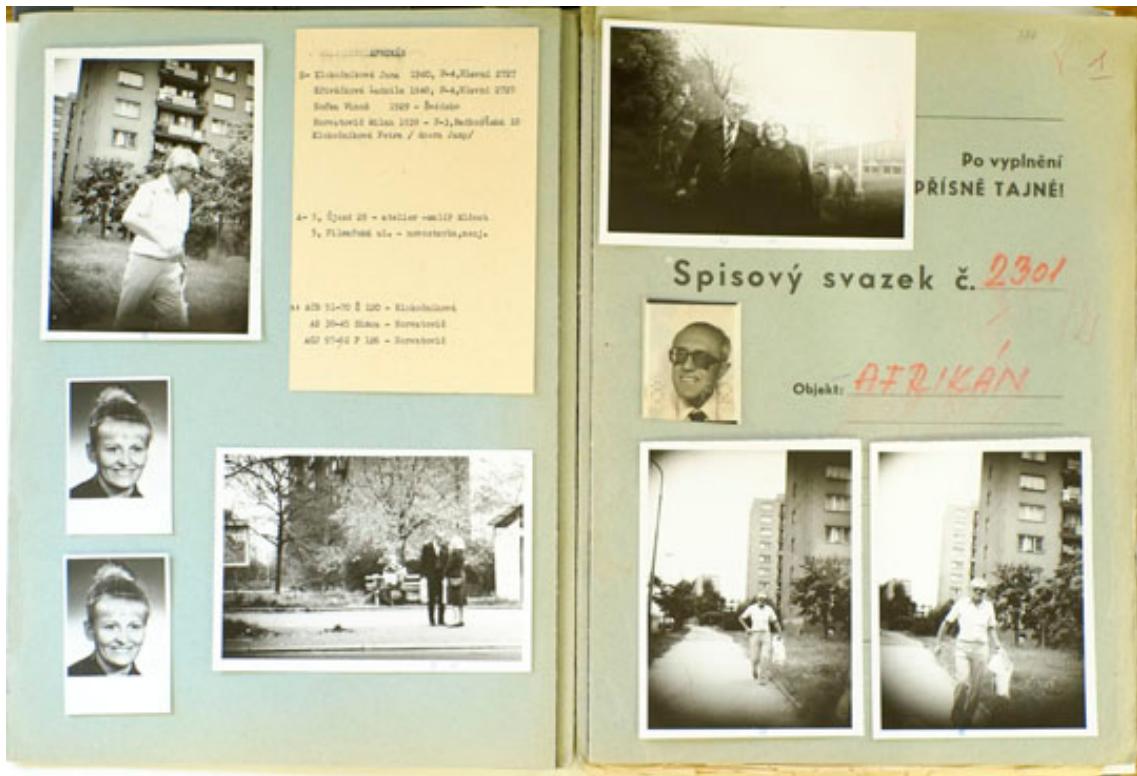


Figure 6.12. *Objekt Afrikán*, 1984, Between 1969 and 1989, Photographic Archive of the Secret Police, Prague, Reproduction by Paula Gortázar, 2014.



Figure 6.13. Jiří Kovanda, *Theater*, 1976, Photo-documentation of Performance, Prague, Archive of Jiří Kovanda.

"POKUS O SEZNÁMENÍ"

19. října 1977
Praha, Staroměstské náměstí

Pozval jsem přátele, aby se podívali, jak se pokusím
seznámit s holkou.



Figure 6.14. Jiří Kovanda, *An attempt at Meeting a Girl*, 1977, Photo-documentation of Performance, Prague, Photographs on Paper, Archive of Jiří Kovanda.

The following year, Kovanda carried out the performance *An Attempt at Meeting a Girl* (1977) (figure 6.14). The script read ‘I invited some friends to watch me trying to make friends with a girl’.⁵⁵ In this case, the artist invited a group of friends to come to Prague’s Old Town Square and watch him trying to charm a girl. The artist thus put himself in the situation of being surveyed during a very private – intimate – moment. The fact that he knew he was being watched added an extra level of anxiety. As a result, the pressure of being surveyed discouraged him to complete ‘his mission’ of seducing the girl.⁵⁶ In this case the parody seems directed to critique the interference of public surveillance in the normal functioning of the citizen’s personal and social relations.

With the exception of Miller’s work, the work produced by the members of the Prague Body-Art Troika was highly political. Their actions often express high levels of distress emerged as a result of their claustrophobic living conditions. And although they make use of metaphors and parody to disguise their political critiques, their message does tend to point rather clearly to the abuses inflicted by the state. With regards to the role of photography (again with the exception of Miller’s pieces) it was often of a documentary nature. The value of these prints however goes beyond the documentation of the very artistic event. They offer as well a valuable testimony of the relation between the artists and their audience and allow us to better comprehend the meaning of ‘participatory spectatorship’ in the context of communist Czechoslovakia.

5. From the Academy to the Underground. Conceptual Art in Bratislava

The roots of Slovak Conceptual Art, as it occurred with the Czech, could be traced back to the ‘pseudo-liberal’ artistic conditions present during the political thaw of the sixties. More specifically, 1965 is commonly agreed to have set up the start of conceptual thought in Slovakia. That year, a collaboration between the artists Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik, with a manifesto written by art theorist Zita Kostrová, gave birth to the legendary *Happsoc I* project.⁵⁷ The project was designed as a social happening in which the entire city of Bratislava was invited to participate. Through a simply designed invitation card, the artists encouraged citizens to turn the city into a work of art between the 2nd and the 9th of May (figure 6.15). The invitation listed a series of ‘urban subjects’ that were to be used to produce the action each day. Next to the object, a number is given in form of statistical information. And then a day, precisely stated,

⁵⁵ Kovanda, J., as quoted by Morganová, P, in *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 187.

⁵⁶ Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, p. 188.

⁵⁷ Brozman, D., and Kršňák, B., Kršňák, B (ed.), *Conceptual Art and Communism in Slovakia in 1965-1989 or 50 years of Slovak Neo-Avant Garde*, exhibition catalogue, BBLA Gallery, New York, 2015, p. 3 See full manifesto in

where each of these subjects were to be elevated to the realm of ‘art’.⁵⁸ While the tautological function of the work (‘the whole city will be art’) evidences the conceptual nature of this project, it was also directly linked to French Nouveau Realism by its founder Pierre Restany. In a visit to Bratislava in 1965, Restany described the enumeration of objects in *Happsoc I* as a way to record and reveal the ‘société trouvé’ or ‘found society’. The French movement – known as the European counterpart of Pop Art – has since been understood as a strong influence for Slovak conceptual artists.⁵⁹ In addition, art historians have envisaged further inspirational sources like North American Minimalism and Dadaism.⁶⁰

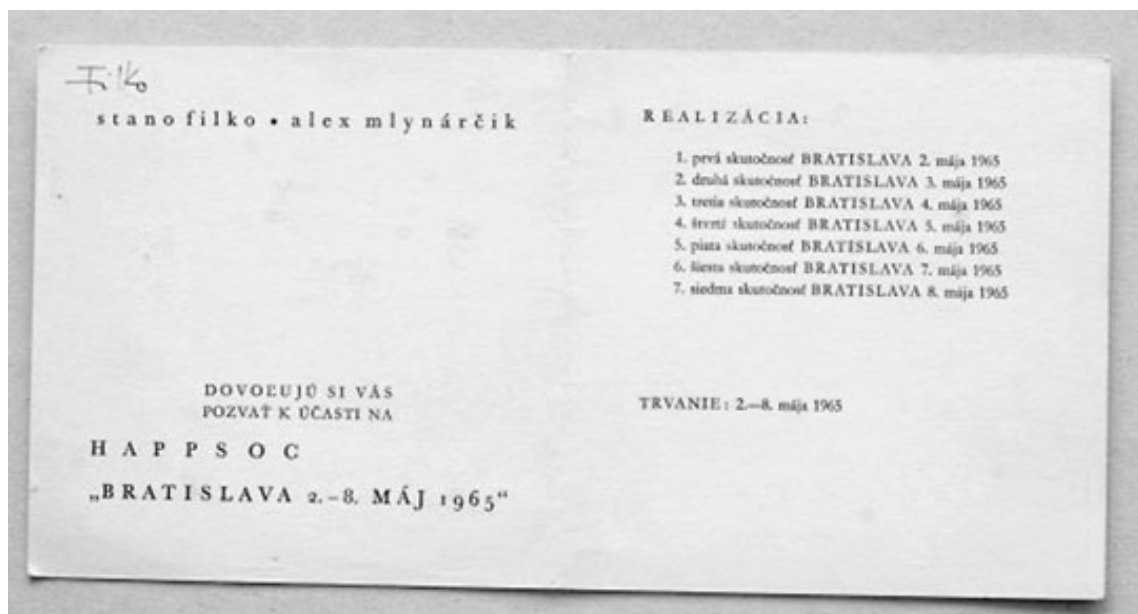


Figure 6.15. Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik, Invitation to *Happsoc I*, 1965, Parallel Chronologies, Courtesy of Stano Filko

As innocent as *Happsoc I* happening might seem, during communist times this event was certainly provocative in political terms. On the one hand, the use of those very precise dates confers on the project an evident political character; May 2nd is Labour Day and the 9th is the anniversary of the Slovak liberation from Nazi forces. On the other hand, inviting citizens to engage in a participatory artistic action went way beyond the organisational power granted to the individual by the totalitarian state. The content of the action however was still rather playful and the ‘soft’ political vindication did not result in negative consequences for its authors.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See full manifesto in Filko, S., Kostrova, A. and Mlynárčik, A., ‘Manifest Happsoc’, in Hoptman, L., J. (ed.), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, MIT Press, Minneapolis, 2002. First Published in Bratislava in 1965.

⁵⁹ Brozman, D., and Kršňák, B., Kršňák, B(ed.), *Conceptual Art and Communism in Slovakia in 1965-1989 or 50 years of Slovak Neo-Avant Garde*, exhibition catalogue, BBLA Gallery, New York, 2015, p. 3.

⁶⁰ See for example Schöllhammer, G., ‘Engagement Instead of Arrangement’, in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futorologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.126.

⁶¹ Interview with visual artist Rufolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

These were however the times of the Thaw (1957-1967), when the artistic sphere was still enjoying a 'relaxed' atmosphere.⁶²

Following the Soviet Invasion of Prague in 1968 and the establishment of the Normalisation period in the entire Czechoslovakian territory, censorship was intensified and numerous practitioners were expelled from the Union of Visual Artists. In the resolution of the 2nd of November of 1972, the committee of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists elaborated a list which denounced a series of subversive artistic activities that took place during the sixties. As a result, their authors were expelled from the Union, their work was excluded from acquisition in public collections and the artists were banned from participating in exhibitions in Czechoslovakia or abroad. In addition, further censorship measures were implemented during the early 1970s: articles on the development of contemporary art were forbidden, numerous art catalogues were censored and many art theoreticians were forced to leave their teaching positions or editorial roles.⁶³

In this scenario of augmented censorship, conceptual artists from Bratislava developed a variety of strategies to pursue their independent artistic production and disguise the critical content of their work. Expelled from the Union, they were negated the freelance licence which allowed artists to earn money from their practice. With a lack of access to artistic commissions, all sorts of alternative jobs – often very precarious – served them to earn a living and allowed them to produce their artistic practice aside. They also lost state access to artistic resources (oil painting, canvases, clay, etc...) and since studio spaces were only allocated for Union members, most were forced to produce their work in their – often very small – apartments.⁶⁴ All these conditions, which were directed to impede any possibility of free expression, determined a radical change in the production process. Large paintings and sculptural pieces had to be substituted by small photographic prints and posters.⁶⁵ As explained by photo-historian Václav Macek, sometimes a piece of white paper or a leaflet was all they needed to materialise their work. 'Idea-art' was also created in the form of small visit cards and postcards, which allowed an easy and secret way of posting.⁶⁶

Under such conditions a very particular cultural phenomenon emerged: the inclination of Slovak conceptual artists towards the topic of outer space, where the wider Universe is treated as a utopian, alternative reality; a simultaneous space of escape from repression and political

⁶² Brozman, D., and Kršňák, B., Kršňák, B(ed.), *Conceptual Art and Communism in Slovakia in 1965-1989 or 50 years of Slovak Neo-Avant Garde*, exhibition catalogue, BBLA Gallery, New York, 2015, p. 4.

⁶³ Hrabušický, A., trans. Havelová, B., 'Summary', in *Slovak Visual Art 1970-1985*, exhibition catalogue, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2002, p. 236.

⁶⁴ Interview with visual artist Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 10/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁶⁵ Interview with art historian and curator Macek Václav, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 12/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁶⁶ Interview with visual artist Ľubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.

critique. In this sense, we could argue that these types of practices could be considered as utopian models of artworks in the sense defined by USA theorist Richard Noble. According to the writer, in order for an artwork to be utopian, it needs to have a double characteristic. On the one hand, it must represent a vision of a better place than the one the artist inhabits. On the other hand, it must offer an insight into the contradictions that drive the artist's will to escape their current circumstances. But overall, explains Noble, all utopian artworks are political, since they are born out of the awareness of the imperfections of a given system and propose a series of (fictional) solutions to improve the current state of affairs.⁶⁷

The propagation of such interest for cosmology was of course not a coincidence. During the previous decade and due to the relaxation of censorship mechanisms of the Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1968), the dream of space travel was nourished by the presence of sci-fi movies that had gradually started to be screened in the country. With the establishment of Normalisation and the return to the claustrophobic living conditions of the early communist times, conceptual artists found – up in the sky – a place where the reach of their sight could not be restricted.⁶⁸ The fantasy of extraterrestrial existence turned somehow into a very palpable hope. The role of the individual in relation to a wider cosmos – as insignificant as it might seem – became an incredibly powerful source of inspiration for those artists. The interest for the unknown universe however does not seem to be born out of mere curiosity. In such questioning, there is an evident search for the meaning of life and human transcendence. Being deprived by the state from the practice of any type of spiritual belief, these artists probably felt a need to search for answers beyond their earthy (confined) realm. As we might observe from the following visual examples, the notion of life and death are constantly being referred to in their practice.

6. Transcendence as Political Stance: The Work of Július Koller and Rudolf Sikora

A key figure of the 'Cosmology' movement was Július Koller (1939-2007). In 1965, he completed his painting studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. There he met his future fellows Stano Filko and Alex Mlynárčik. Soon after graduating he abandoned painting, started to experiment with alternative media, and photography soon became his preferred way of expression alongside graphic art. In 1968, coinciding with the invasion of Prague by Soviet troops, Koller used for the first time the symbol which would become a constant in his entire

⁶⁷ Noble, R. 'Introduction', in Noble, R., *Utopias*, London: MIT Press, 2009, p.14

⁶⁸ See Hrabušický, A., 'Cosmic Poetry', in Bajkurová, K., (ed.), trans. McCullough, P. and McCullough, E., *Slovak Picture (Anti-Picture). 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art*, exhibition catalogue, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2008, pp. 169-171.

oeuvre: the question mark.⁶⁹ According to the author, this symbol had a double function: on the one hand, it asked about the human relation to the cosmos and on the other, it questioned the individual's relation to society.⁷⁰ Throughout his life, the question mark appears in a variety of forms and is often recorded through photographs. At times, the artist painted it on different surfaces and then photographed them; at other times, he drew them directly on the photographic print and on repeated occasions the sign is placed directly on his own body before performing for the camera (figures 6.16, 6.17, and 6.18). In the context of a totalitarian Regime, this constant questioning in the photograph through the self-portrait could be read as a metaphor for a vindication for the right of holding an individual thought.



Figure 6.16. Július Koller, *Universal Fantastic Orientation 6*, 1978, Painted Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

⁶⁹ Schöllhammer, G., 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, pp.125-126.

⁷⁰ Koller, J., 'Conversation Between Július Koller and Roman Ondák', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.136.

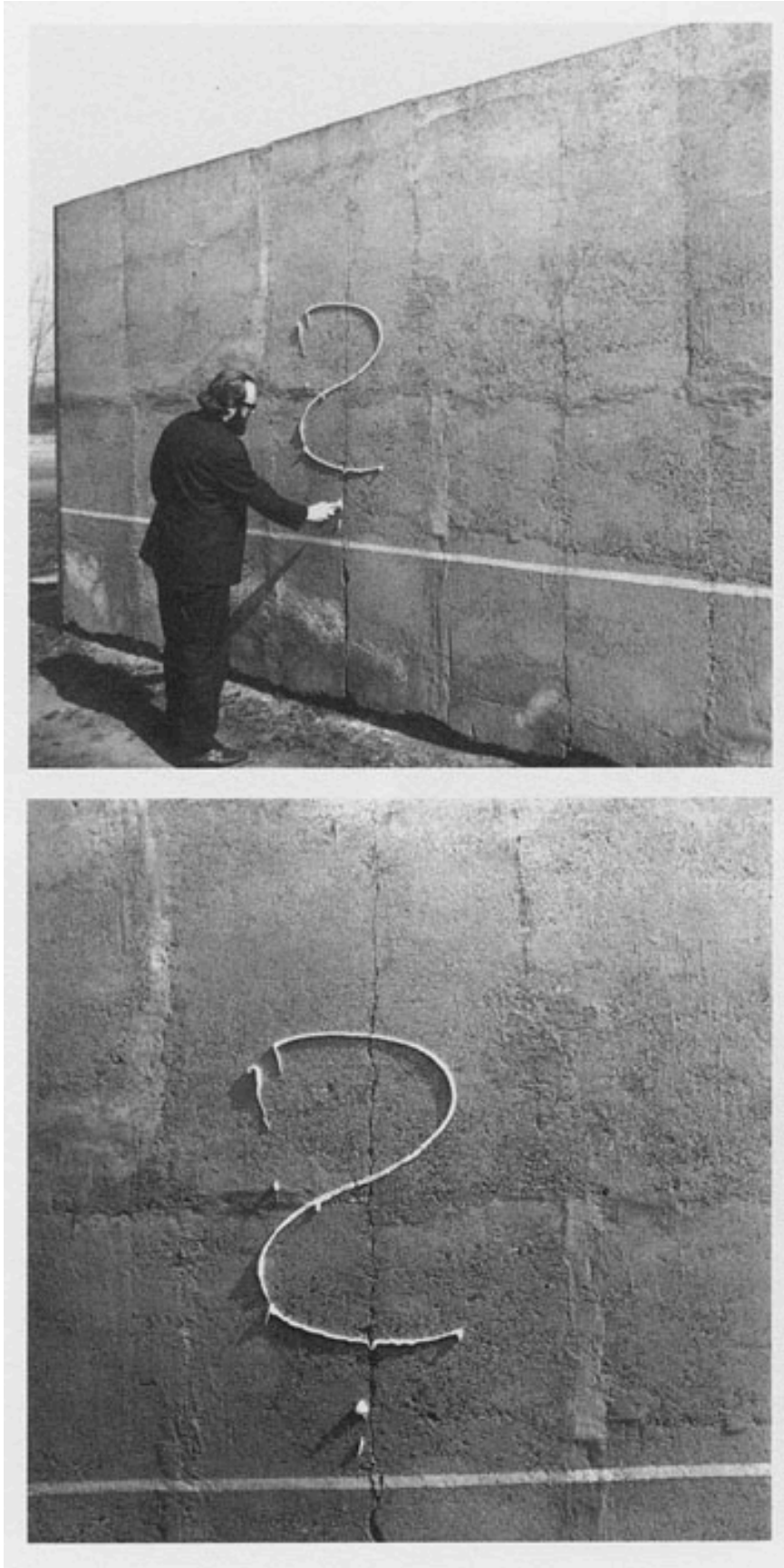


Figure 6.17. Július Koller, *Universal Futurological Question Mark a-d (UFO)*, 3-4, 1972 Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

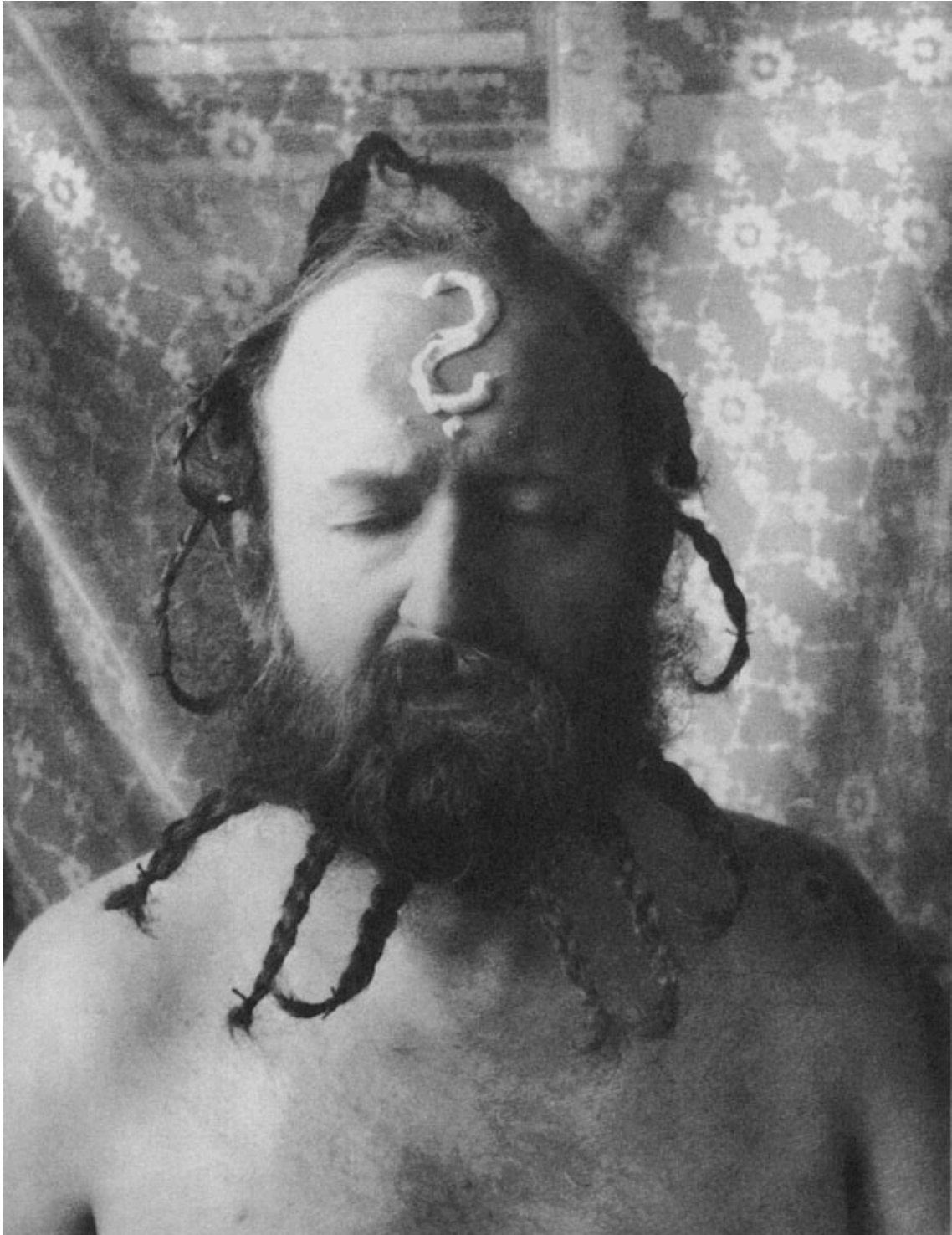


Figure 6.18. Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K.*, 1983, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

In 1970, two years after the defeat of the Prague Spring, Koller introduced his insignia concept *U.F.O.*, under which his main body of work would develop for the next thirty years. In Koller's hands, through the use of puns, the term stands for 'Universal-Cultural Futurological Situations'. As he explained in his manifesto, these cultural situations were:

Subjective Cultural Actions; operations which in the universality of the objective reality, form cultural situations directed into the future. The operations will effect psychophysical projects of cosmonautic culture and instead of a new art-aesthetics, will create a new life, a new subject, awareness, creativity and a new cultural reality.⁷¹

In practical terms, the *U.F.O* project consists of a series of actions performed for the camera by Koller himself alongside some graphic work printed as postcards, posters or visit cards. The question mark is often present throughout this cycle, so are references to black holes, flying saucers and childhood – symbolising a 'future presence'.⁷² Each of these works constitutes an act of designation using variations of his *U.F.O.* concept.⁷³ The captions read: 'Archaeological Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)', 'Flying Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)', 'Impossible Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)', etc. (figures 6.19, 6.20 and 6.21). Hence, through the use of puns, Koller creates a relationship system that operates between the designation of a concrete act and its infinite possibilities of mutation. Although the political character of the work might not be easily readable, we could argue that in the cultural context of communist Czechoslovakia, Koller's subversiveness is achieved by the free exercise of re-defining the very content of a 'cultural' situation. Simultaneously, the numerous variations of his *U.F.O.* concept in each of the captions might well point to the necessity of an inclusive artistic ground away from officialism, where all types of artistic expression could be accepted.

⁷¹ Koller, J., as quoted by Schöllhammer, G., in 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.128.

⁷² Julius Koller explains this meaning of childhood in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, p.136.

⁷³ Schöllhammer, G., 'Engagement Instead of Arrangement', in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.129.

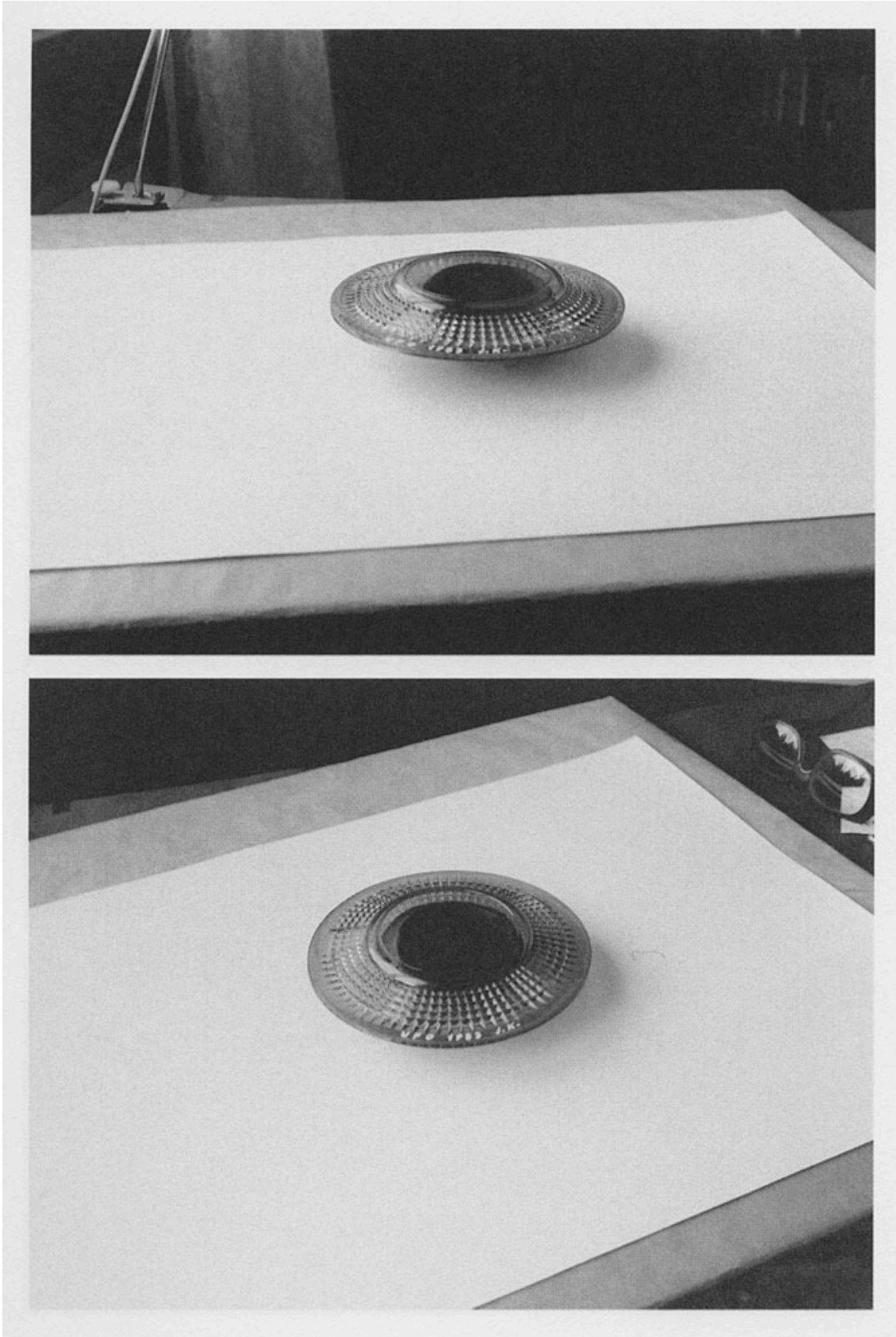


Figure 6.19. Július Koller, *Archaeological Cultural Situation*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.



Figure 6.20. Július Koller, *Flying Cultural Situation*, 1982, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

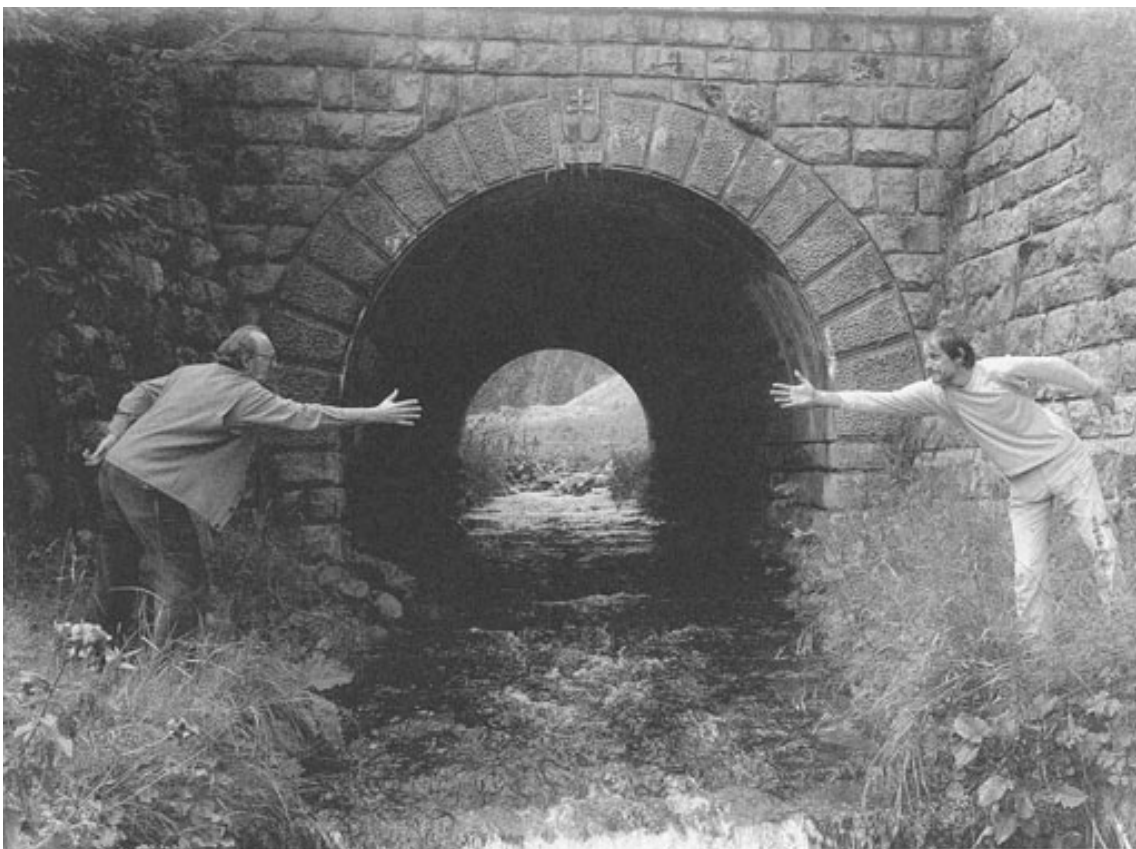


Figure 6.21. Július Koller, *Impossible Cultural Situation, 2*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

Among the various pieces from the *U.F.O.* project, his photo-collage ‘Ping-Pong Monument’ (1971) is one of his most celebrated works (figure 6.22). Koller’s arm stretches out holding a ping-pong bat in front of the image of a modern city filled with skyscrapers. The bat’s shade becomes a metaphor for a black hole which is about to end our civilisation as we know it. By designating the ping-pong bat as a ‘monument’ in his caption, Koller magnifies the role of the black hole, perhaps due to its ability to send recent history to a distant, inaccessible dimension, from where its rulers would never be able to return.



Figure 6.22. Július Koller, *Ping-pong Monument*, 1975, Collage, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

Once a year between 1970 and 2000, Koller made self-portraits covering partially his gaze with different objects (figure 6.23 and 6.24). Unlike his *U.F.O.* images (where the photographs depict various elements of the action) the totality of the photographs from *U.F.O.-naut J.K.* series are straight headshots of the artist. This closer approach to his facial features suggests an even greater vindication of the artist’s subjectivity and his power to question the given reality. In the project manifesto, he writes:

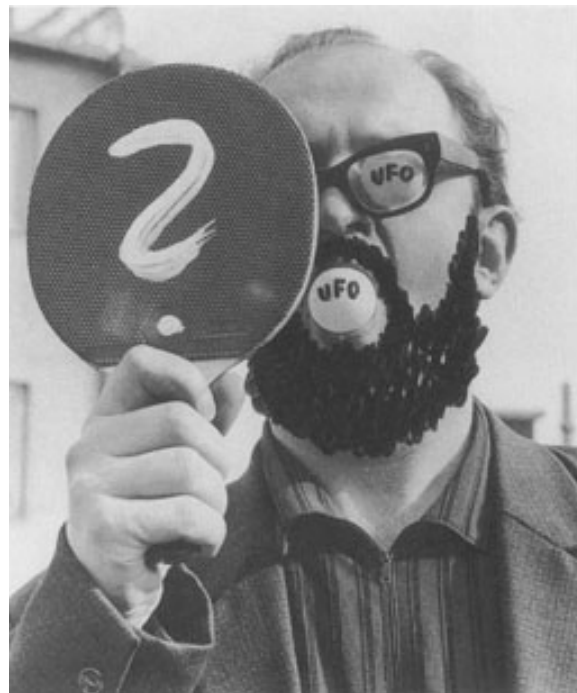
Universal futurological orientation; the process of transformation of the head (object) of J.K. expressing a personal cultural situation. The photo-visualisation will take place at a time (yearly) intervals into the future.⁷⁴

Through these self-portraits Koller seems to escape reality and return as some sort of ‘extraterrestrial visitor’, who comes both as an observer and source of interrogations. According to the author himself, both *U.F.O.* and *U.F.O.-naut J.K.* ‘constituted a way of fleeing with every day existence, from the political and cultural situation’.⁷⁵ But as I pointed out earlier in the text, the search for meaning in life in the sense of identifying one’s transcendence in an atheist state is also very much present in the work of Slovak ‘cosmologists’. We must not forget that by the

⁷⁴ Schöllhammer, G., ‘Engagement Instead of Arrangement’, in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.128.

⁷⁵ Koller, J., ‘Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist’, in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.145.

time Communism was established in Czechoslovakia in 1948, religion was banned and Christians were no longer able to practice their faith in public.⁷⁶ Július Koller makes a very explicit reference to Christian faith in his *U.F.O.-naut J.K* series. In an interview with the author he explains that his initials J.K. – placed intentionally as part of the project title – are also the initials of Jesus Christ in the Slovak language. According to Koller, the letters allude to the humanist culture that forms ‘the fundamental concept of his life’.⁷⁷ He then further explains that the recurrent use of question marks symbolise his position not only within the political situation of Czechoslovakia but also in relation to his existence in the wider world.⁷⁸ Was he comparing anyhow his own presence on earth to that of Jesus Christ? Or could he have suggested that Jesus Christ might have been some sort of extraterrestrial being (U.F.O.-naut)? While only Koller would have been able to answer these questions, it is evident that his work carries a heavy transcendental weight throughout.



From left to right, figure 6.23. Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K*, 1975, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller.

Figure 6.24. Július Koller, *UFO-naut J.K*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Július Koller

Most significant about his work is the formation of a complex fictional space, where the author constructs a utopian existence away from the unidirectional norms and repression of the State. His parallel *U.F.O* universe serves Koller to express conceptually a political critique in a way

⁷⁶ Hrabušický, A., ‘Cosmic Poetry’, in Bajkurová, K., (ed.), trans. McCullough, P. and McCullough, E., *Slovak Picture (Anti-Picture). 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art*, exhibition catalogue, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2008, p. 169.

⁷⁷ Koller, J., ‘Conversation between Július Koller and Hans Ulrich Obrist’, in *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, exhibition catalogue, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln, 2003, p.144.

⁷⁸ Koller, J., *Július Koller, Univerzálne Futurologické Operácie*, p.144.

difficult to decode by the authorities. Simultaneously, it operates as an ideal, free place, where the possibilities of personal expression have no limits. In this sense, his fictional universe coincides with the group of utopian fictions defined by Raymond Williams as *The Paradise*, which the writer describes as a place where a happier life is made possible elsewhere, formed by ‘the projections of a magical or religious consciousness, inherently universal and timeless, thus commonly beyond the conditions of any imaginable ordinary or worldly life’.⁷⁹

Koller’s friend, Rudolf Sikora (1946) is currently one of the most celebrated and internationally acclaimed Slovak conceptual artists. Slightly younger than his colleague, Sikora studied painting too at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. Like the majority of ‘progressive’ artists from the times of Normalisation, he was never accepted as a member of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists. Luckily for him – and due to a bureaucratic mistake – once he had completed his studies in 1969 his ID was stamped confirming that he *was* an artist. This ‘miraculous situation’, as the artist puts it, allowed him to undertake some artistic freelance work as a way to earn a living.⁸⁰

During his student years, Sikora produced various abstract paintings with repeated reference to topics of life and death, as well as topography and geometry. He soon started to include writing and symbols in his paintings, and by the early 1970s, he practically abandoned painting in favour of photography and graphic design. According to the author, what ultimately mattered was the idea he was trying to communicate and the medium was always secondary. However, as he explained, beyond the limited access he had to oil paint and canvases during Normalisation times, photography and graphics became his favourite media due to their indexical properties, which allowed him to be very precise when communicating his visual message.⁸¹ The majority of his works however are produced through a great variety of mixed media techniques. Photographic prints are often painted on top. A photo-collage is later photographed and transformed into a poster containing different graphic elements. Negatives are scratched and then exposed multiple times in the darkroom. Variations of a given work are also produced throughout the years, shifting its meaning as time goes by. Such complexity and richness of the very material production of his work have conferred a special place to Sikora not only within the realm of Slovak visual arts but also in the photography scene. As argued by photo-historian Václav Macek, while for a very long time Sikora’s work was rejected from public photographic collections in Czechoslovakia because it ‘lacked’ the photographic qualities which had been

⁷⁹ Williams, R., ‘Utopia and Science Fiction’, in *Culture and Materialism. Selected Essays*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 198, first published in *Problems with Materialism and Culture*, London: Verso, 1980.

⁸⁰ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Euboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁸¹ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, 15/09/2016

formerly appreciated, his contribution to Slovak photography is nowadays widely acknowledged.⁸²

Like his peers Koller and Filko – with whom he repeatedly collaborated - Sikora was also fascinated with cosmology.⁸³ His interest however spreads to a wider variety of related topics compared to Koller's *oeuvre*. Although he is constantly looking up at the universe, he does it from an anchored earthy existence. From very early on, Sikora manifests a deep concern for ecological issues. Since the early 1970s, the artist has produced numerous pieces where he shows a specific fear of the fatal consequences that economic progress is inflicting on nature.⁸⁴ In this aspect Sikora was certainly a pioneer, not only in his country but also in the global artistic scene. Ecological awareness at that time had only started to emerge in Western societies and considering the political isolation of Czechoslovakia at the time, it is remarkable that he was able to acknowledge those issues from such a confined context.

According to the artist, it was thanks to a Polish *samizdat* publication that he became acquainted with the fragile environmental situation of our planet.⁸⁵ The publication was distributed secretly in Czechoslovakia and contained the entire report *The Limits of Growth* (1972) by the environmentalist group 'Club of Rome'.⁸⁶ Some of his most iconic works that deal with the topic of ecology include *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet* (1972) and *Exclamation Mark* (1974). The first consists of a series of six photographs that depict a 'vertical cut' of the atmospheric layers and the earth's crust (figure 6.25). Between them we can see iconic buildings of the different civilisations that have populated the planet until present days. From the Stone Age, to the industrial society, Sikora makes a contrast between the ever-changing state of civilisation in opposition to the immutability of the planet's layers. Instead of buildings, the last image depicts the explosion of the atomic bomb as a symbol of the final natural disaster that might eventually turn Earth into a dead planet. An exclamation mark painted in red on the last photograph further accentuates the necessity of immediate action.

⁸² Macek, V., 'Energized Photography', in Bajkurová, K. (ed.), *Alone With Photography. Rudolf Sikora*, exhibition catalogue, Central European House of Photography, Bratislava, p. 67

⁸³ Sikora's fascination with the cosmos becomes evident in his numerous projects where the Universe is the main subject matter, such as his photographic series from 1972 depicting a blackhole, which include images like *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979, See figure 6.30.

⁸⁴ See Fowkes, M., 'Correlations of Geography, Ecology and Cosmology', in *The Green Bloc*, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2015.

⁸⁵ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Euboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁸⁶ Fowkes, M., *The Green Bloc*, p. 180.



Figure 6.25 (a). Rudolf Sikora, *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet*, 1972,
Photographs on Canvas, Slovak National Gallery

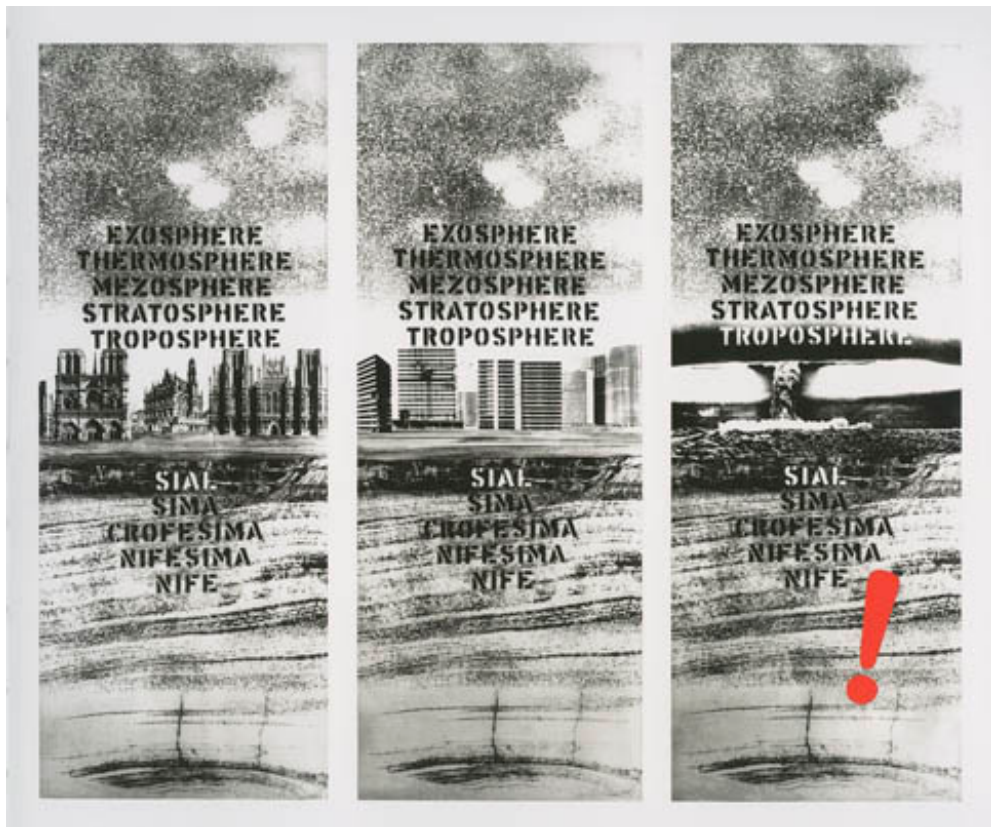


Figure 6.25 (b). Rudolf Sikora, *The Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet*, 1972,
Photographs on Canvas, Slovak National Gallery.

In the photo-collage *Exclamation Mark* from 1974, Sikora turns the globe into the lower section of the graphic symbol (figure 6.26). The top section – formed by the open night sky – seems to make reference to our galaxy, while the image background could be identified as the ‘wider’ universe. In 1974, Sikora made multiple versions of this work, placing the exclamation mark in the forest, in an industrial landscape, or inside a shopping centre (figure 6.27, 6.28 and 6.29). While Koller’s question mark suggests the artist’s feeling of uncertainty in relation to his very existence, Sikora’s exclamation mark aims at a direct awareness.⁸⁷ His work also appears far less ambiguous than Koller’s. He aims to identify very precisely the issue in question – often of environmental or existential nature – and communicates it visually in a rather clear and direct way. Making use of very few elements which signifiers are easily identifiable, Sikora usually points at the contrast between them, inviting the viewer to reflect and take action.



Figure 6.26. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark*, 1974, Photo-collage, Paper on Plywood, Slovak National Gallery.

⁸⁷ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.



From top to bottom and left to right: Figure 6.29. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark*, 1974, Project, Photograph, Collage, Paper on Plywood, Slovak National Gallery. Figure 6.28. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark*, 1974, Project sketch, Photograph, Collage, Paper on Cardboard, Slovak National Gallery. Figure 6.27. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark*, 1974, Project sketches, Photograph, Collage, Paper on Cardboard, Slovak National Gallery.

Sikora's environmental works could also be considered as a model of the dystopian artwork, since he represents a place of catastrophe and destruction where a worse life – or the complete absence of it – is imagined and envisaged into an irreversible future time. This type of dystopia, understood as the result of human irrational development, is what Raymond Williams identified as the opposite of the utopian fiction of technological transformation. In this dystopia, explains the author, the technical discoveries and its developments result in a catastrophic worsening of our living conditions.⁸⁸ But we could go one step further and suggest that the awareness Sikora was aiming for went beyond his environmental worries. In his essay 'Censorship Today: Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses', Slavoj Žižek discusses the 'echoing between the internal and external Real in psychoanalysis' as articulated by Freud and Lacan.⁸⁹ Žižek explains how, for Freud external shocks owe their impact to pre-existing traumatic 'psychic reality', so that the encounter with the unexpected shocking situation of the (exterior) real, triggers the true (interior) real. In this sense, we could argue that perhaps through making visible the possible – but imaged – devastated future environment in Sikora's work, the author could also be trying to trigger a very different and less distant awareness, that is: the calamities that the totalitarian state was inflicting on Czechoslovakian society, which in Lacan could be identified as the 'unknowns knowns' – or things we do not know we know.⁹⁰ Thus, by displacing the danger from the State's repression to a devastating pollution, the author could be trying to illuminate the consciousness of Czechoslovakian citizens; suggesting a reflection on the presence of a much closer and palpable threat.

⁸⁸ Williams, R., 'Utopia and Science Fiction', in *Culture and Materialism. Selected Essays*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 196, first published in *Problems with Materialism and Culture*, London: Verso, 1980.

⁸⁹ Žižek, S., *Censorship Today: Ecology as a New Opium for the Mass*, Part II, <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm> [accessed on 16/03/2017]

⁹⁰ Žižek, S., *Censorship Today, Part II*

In the mid-1970s, the author introduces three other graphic symbols which will continue to appear in his work until the present day: the asterisk, symbolising birth, the crucifix which makes reference to death and an arrow representing the present time as an ‘inevitable flow’.⁹¹ These marks are usually painted on photographic prints and seem to point to human’s fate and the natural cycle of life. During the second half of the seventies he produced a series of images where a black hole is surrounded by those three symbols. Through several variations of the photograph, the author moved the photographic paper under the enlarger in order to produce different effects, which visual result gives meaning and name to each of these versions: *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown*, *Asymmetric Impact of the Unknown*, *Total Impact of the Unknown* etc. (figures 6.30, 6.31 and 6.32). These works suggest the inescapable fate of human beings to the rules of nature and its capacity to create and destroy energy beyond the control of the individual.

From 1980 onwards, Sikora starts to appear in his work, as if he wished to explore a direct bodily experience within his cosmological scenario. Through different self-portraits the author appears as an observer of the complex existential situation. His graphic symbols are often painted on his skin or depicted around his silhouette (figure 6.33). The relation between man and cosmos is also questioned during this decade through a series of works where the artist combines radiographies of his own skull and skeleton with images of the night sky (figures 6.34 and 6.35).

⁹¹ Interview with visual artist Růfolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

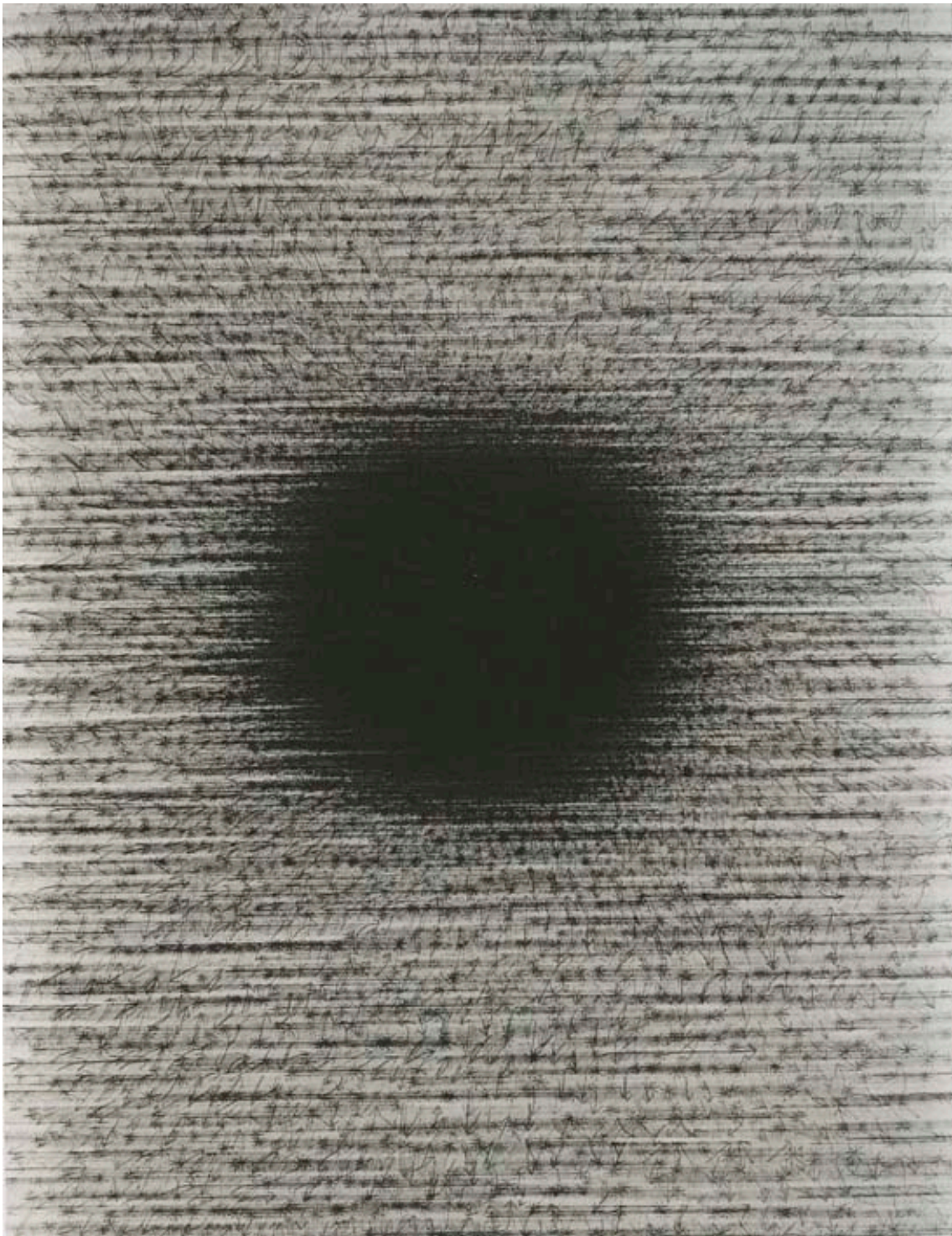


Figure 6.30. Rudolf Sikora, *Horizontal Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979,
Photograph on Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.

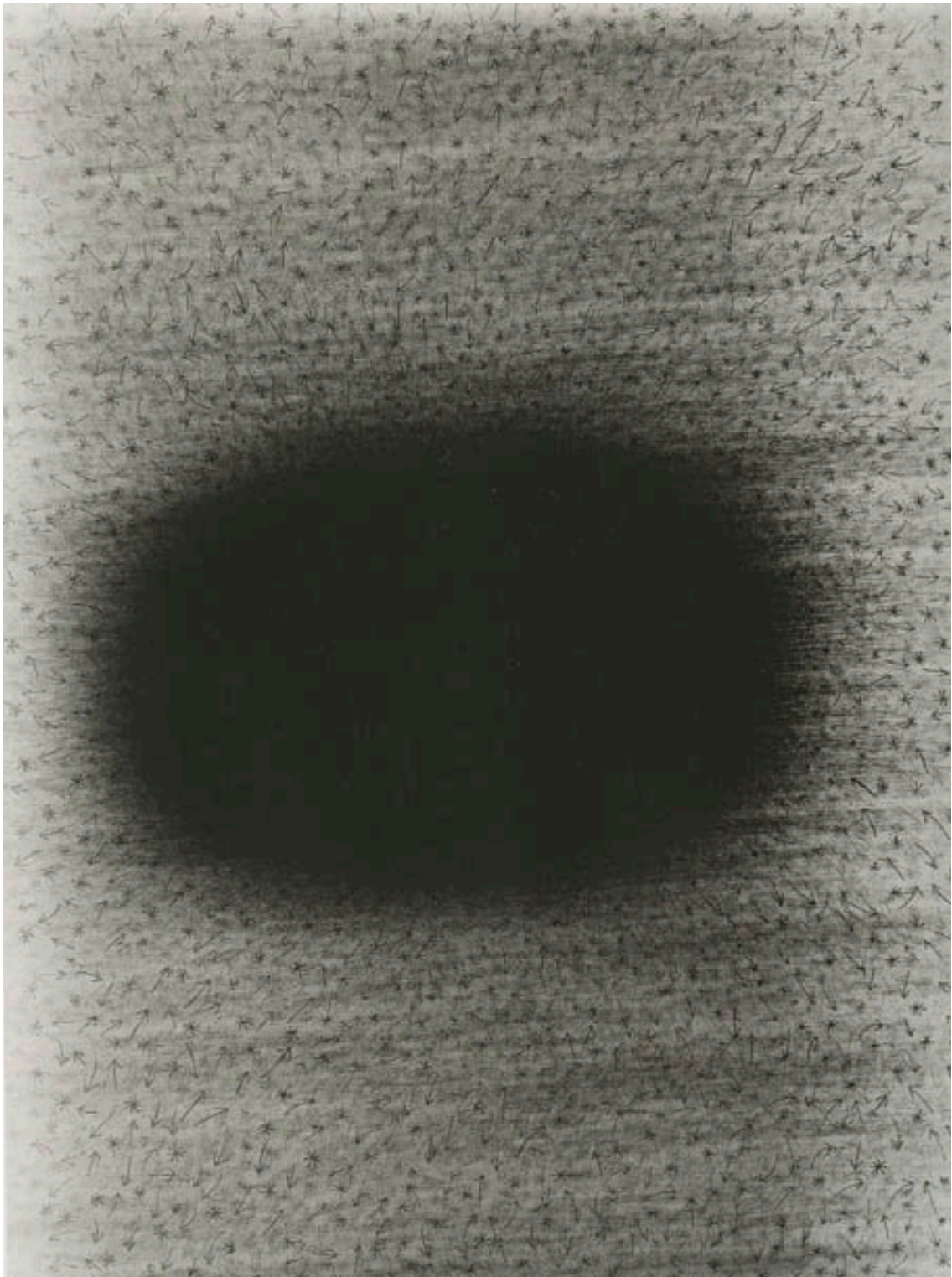


Figure 6.31. Rudolf Sikora, *Asymmetric Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979,
Photograph on Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.

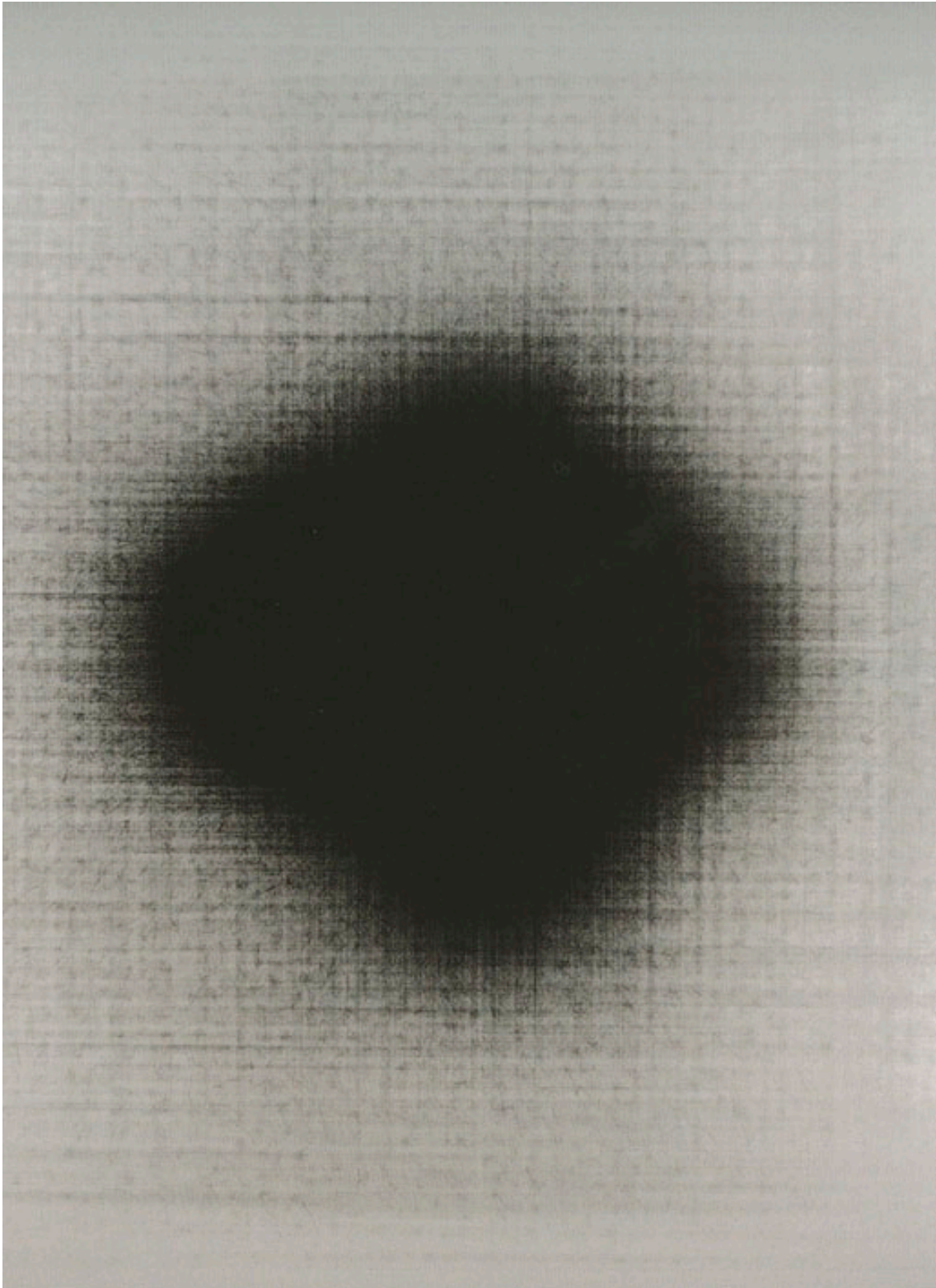


Figure 6.32. Rudolf Sikora, *Total Impact of the Unknown (Different) Energy*, 1979,
Photograph on Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 6.33. Rudolf Sikora, *No! No! Yes!*, 1980, Photograph on Paper, Slovak National Gallery.



Figure 6.34. Rudolf Sikora, From *Atrophic Principle (self-portrait)*, 1983-84
Photograph on Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 6.35. Rudolf Sikora, From *Atrophic Principle (self-portrait)*, 1983-84
Photograph on Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.

The work produced by Sikora during the times of Normalisation evidences the artist's desire to escape a rather claustrophobic existence. While his concern with ecology was born out of scientific evidence of the earth's fragile environmental situation, his interest in the forces of cosmological elements and their relation to human existence seems to be born out of a personal search for a parallel fantasy outside Czechoslovakian borders. In a recent interview with the author, he explained how instead of focusing on the everyday problems of the time, he aimed at bigger, global questions. What mattered the most however was not finding a concrete answer, but asking – and understanding the meaning – of the question itself.⁹² In a certain way, this could be understood as a rebel position too. By avoiding a direct political critique in his work and ignoring the abuses inflicted by the authorities, Sikora somehow resists any importance to Communism itself and even delegitimises – from his individual perspective – the Regime's effective power over an individual who is able to enjoy a much richer, wider and deeper existence.

Beyond the relevance of his artistic work, Sikora was – alongside Filko and Koller – one of the leaders of the Conceptual Art movement in Slovakia. On the 19th of November 1970, he hosted the *First Open Studio* in his house in Bratislava. Following a series of creative workshops and discussions that connected the new generation of upcoming artists, eighteen conceptual artists took part in the underground exhibition. The show welcomed all types of artistic production without restriction and it served to introduce the younger generation of artists – including Sikora – who were determined to explore the limits of art despite the tough political atmosphere. The art on display at the *First Open Studio* ranged from minimalist interventions, to works of Conceptual Art and progressive music pieces.⁹³ On the day following the opening, Sikora was interrogated for the first time by the secret police. This would be the first of a series of arrests that the author would suffer during the period of Normalisation. As a result of these detentions, he would often have his passport confiscated – sometimes for several months.⁹⁴

In 1971, Sikora organised a series of meetings called 'Tuesdays' that took place in his apartment in Bratislava alongside friends from the unofficial art scene including, Koller, Filko or Michall Kern among others. During these gatherings, the artists produced collaborative projects, organised unofficial exhibitions and discussed their individual artistic programmes with their peers. According to Sikora, sometimes one of them managed to introduce a foreign art catalogue obtained in one of their travels abroad. That type of information – though very limited – allowed them to remain more or less aware of the art movements developed elsewhere outside Czechoslovakia. Rather surprisingly, the contact with Russian conceptual artists from the

⁹² Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Euboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁹³ For original footage of the First Open Studio, 1970 see <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-first-open-studio/>

⁹⁴ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, 15/09/2016

Moscow circle was very limited. According to Sikora, this was because in the eyes of the Russian authorities, establishing contact with Czechoslovakian artists or from other communist countries outside the Soviet Union represented a threat as dangerous as the ‘West’ itself. More frequent were the relations among the unofficial art scenes of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Since it was sometimes possible to obtain a visa to travel to non-Soviet communist countries from the eastern Bloc, there was a certain collaboration among conceptual artists from these countries.⁹⁵ In 1973, Sikora organised *Symposium I*; a meeting between representatives of these three countries where they discussed different ways of artistic cooperation.⁹⁶ With regards to exhibiting abroad, according to Sikora and other artists like Lubomír Ďurček, this became possible due to the small size of the work they produced during Normalisation. The *modus operandi* consisted in posting their artwork (prints, postcards, posters, etc.) to different art institutions in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. The parcel also contained a note asking the institution not to have their works returned. While they were giving their work for free in order to avoid prosecution by Czechoslovakian authorities – had the works been reposted from the West – thanks to this mechanism their artwork was exhibited and included in numerous Western art collections.⁹⁷

Sikora’s active role as an artist and promoter of Conceptual Art both inside and outside Czechoslovakian borders turned him into one of the most influential representatives of the unofficial art scene of the seventies and the eighties. From 1989 onwards, Sikora continued to produce work and is currently considered one of the most important contemporary artists in Slovakia.

7. Lubomír Ďurček: Conceptual Analysis of Communication Systems

Apart from the widespread interest for the Universe and its mysteries, conceptual artists in Slovakia also explored other topics. One of the most interesting artists (whose national recognition has only recently been acknowledged) is Lubomír Ďurček (1948).⁹⁸ Like the majority of his colleagues from Bratislava, he studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, but once he graduated his application was rejected from the Union of Slovak of Visual Artists.

⁹⁵ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁹⁶ Bajkurová, K. (ed.), *Alone With Photography. Rudolf Sikora*, exhibition catalogue, Central European House of Photography, Bratislava, 2016

⁹⁷ Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, 15/09/2016. Similar testimony was obtained in an interview with visual artist Lubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava

⁹⁸ It was not until 2013 that Ďurček had his first major retrospective exhibition in Slovakia at the National Gallery in Bratislava.

Throughout the years of Normalisation, he held different positions as an art teacher and worked independently in his artistic production.⁹⁹

A large part of Ďurček's work is concern with the process of communication, which he has explored from different perspectives. His most political works question the truth of the State's publications and constitute a critique against the propagandistic use of public media. The Slovak daily newspaper *Pravda* (Truth), has served him on repeated occasions to point directly at the Regime's control over public information. One of his most celebrated works is *Visitor (Five Visits)*, from 1980 (figure 6.36). The self-portrait refers to a performance that was never visually documented but its final scene was re-enacted later by the artist in front of a camera. During the event, Ďurček filled up his mouth with cuttings of *Pravda* newspaper and visited several friends at their apartments. In his notes the artist wrote: 'I rang at the door. My mouth was filled with *Pravda* newspaper. Twenty seconds after the door opened I went home. I could not respond because my mouth was filled with truth'.¹⁰⁰ For those who understand its metaphoric and ironic message, that is; 'all information comes from a unidirectional source (the State), which leaves no space for further self-expression', then the work critiques in a very explicit way the control of the Regime's media over the citizen's ability to think for themselves. However, if the audience is not able to read such irony and metaphor, then the double coding of the work enables the opposite reading: His mouth is physically filled with truth (*Pravda* newspaper) and therefore it is materially impossible for him to say a word. In a similar photo-performance from 1989, *The Head In Pravda*, he applied again the same ironic strategy and covered his entire head with the daily (figure 6.37). This time Ďurček is not only prevented from speaking but also from seeing from a different perspective or listening to alternative sources of information. In both cases, we could argue that by using a double-coded message in his work, the artist might be trying to preserve his artistic autonomy while simultaneously avoiding a clear criticism against the Regime, and its more than probable repressive consequences.

⁹⁹ Interview with visual artist Eubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.

¹⁰⁰ Ďurček, L., as quoted by Keratová, M., in 'Situational Models of Communication', *Lubomír Ďurček*, exhibition catalogue, Slovak, National, Gallery, Bratislava, 2013, p. 51

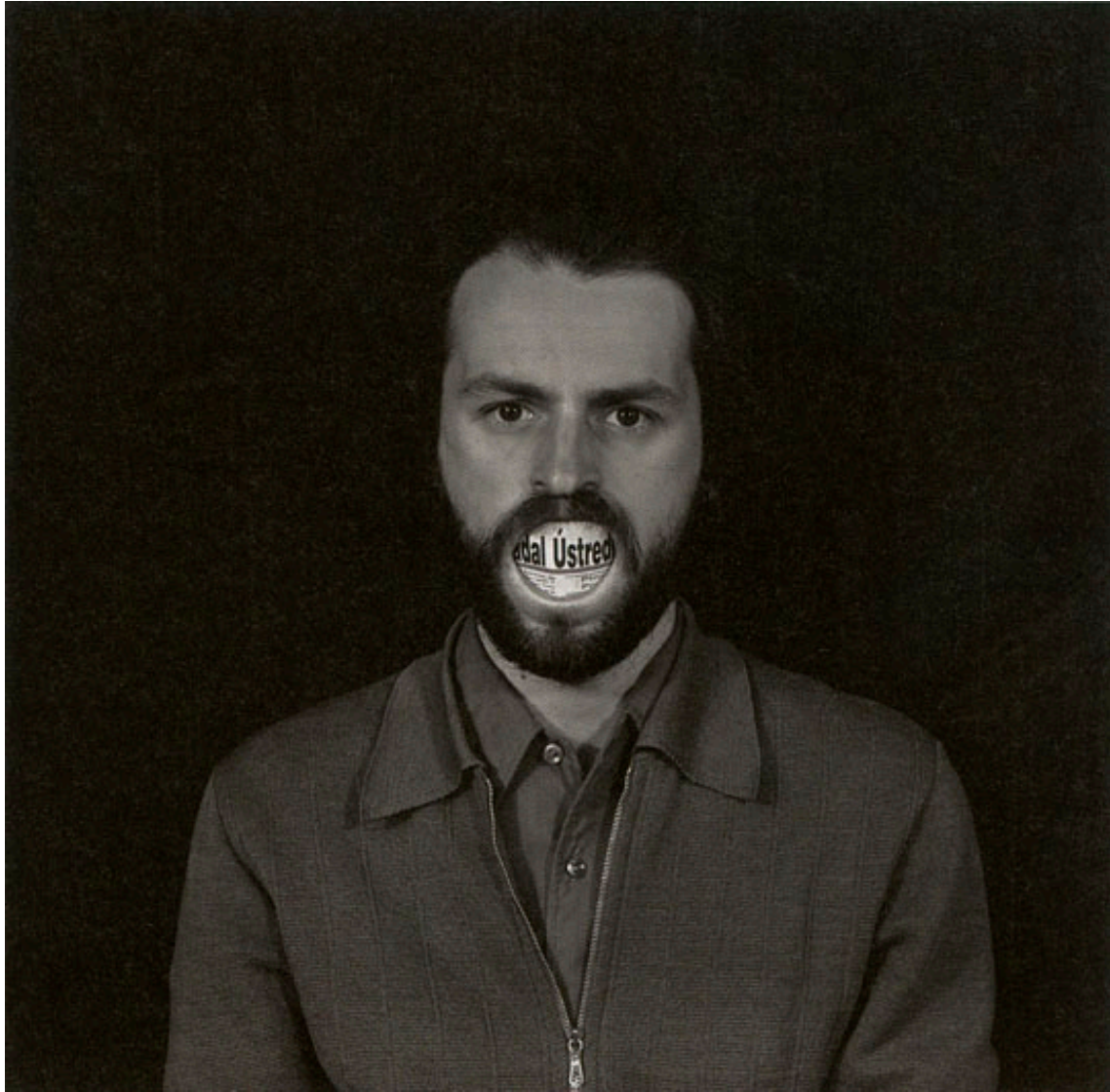


Figure 6.36. Ľubomír Ďurček, *Visitor (Five Visits)*, 1980, Gelatine Silver Print, Slovak National Gallery.



Figure 6.37. Lubomír Ďurček, *The Head in Pravda*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

In a different approach, Ďurček was also interested in spatial relations and more concretely in what he called the ‘psycho-geographical’ mental coordinates. Through different photo-performances he determines, constructs and alters the properties of the image space; a confined territory artificially constructed. The performance *Determining of the Image Space* (1988) serves the author to delimit the position of each angle of the squared photograph (figure 6.38). Through an alternative reflection however, we might argue that the demarcation of space produced by the photographic frame could well make reference to artificially created political borders. On the other hand, we might also read an ‘internalisation’ of power structures through parody, as he mimics Lenin’s iconic pointing gesture that was represented in Russia through sculptures, photographs and propaganda posters (figures 6.38).



Figure 6.38. Eubomír Ďurček, *Determining of the Image Space*, 1989, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist

Like Sikora, Ďurček's conceptual work was often materialised through photography and graphic design. In most cases, both the photographs and the graphic works appear highly aestheticised. This 'beautification' of the artwork however is something he seems to reject. When asked about this aspect in a recent interview, he negated any intention to make the work visually pleasurable.¹⁰¹ But while this might not have been his primary aim, it is evident that Ďurček's work cannot escape the fact of being indeed a highly aestheticised collection of Conceptual Art. Both his photographs and graphic designs demonstrate a careful consideration of the material aspects of the work. The composition of his images is very well balanced and the quality of his gelatin silver prints, which Ďurček produced himself, evidences a 'beautifying' intention. Besides, as it happened with most of his peers working as conceptual artists in Bratislava, these artistic abilities were acquired during his previous studies at the Academy of Fine Arts; an education which must have unavoidably influenced his way of seeing and making.

8. Conclusions

While developed within a very similar political context, the formal qualities of the work produced by conceptual artists from Bratislava differs substantially from that of their Prague counterparts. This might be explained by a variety of factors. While most conceptual artists from Prague were intellectuals with different backgrounds who lacked an academic education in the arts, the great majority of Slovak practitioners had studied painting or sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava. Perhaps as a result, the work produced by the Slovaks appears far more aestheticised. And although Conceptual Art practices – developed both in Prague and Bratislava – did not put emphasis on the 'beauty' of the art object and even rejected 'retinal pleasure' in favour of the communication of ideas, it is evident that the photographic work produced by Slovak conceptual artists is very often visually attractive.

But beyond their aesthetic qualities, the main differences in their practice relate to the type of strategies developed by those artists to disguise the political content of their work and avoid repressive consequences from the authorities. In the case of the work produced by the Prague Body-Art Troika, despite avoiding any literal reference to the repressive situation through the frequent use of metaphors and parody, the political critique against the forces of Normalisation was probably easier to read in their artwork. Slovak conceptual artists instead – with the exception of Ďurček – abstained from articulating their message against the established power in such a straightforward manner. The construction of utopias and dystopias, as well as the use of puns, parody, metaphors and irony, is developed in such a complex form that it would be

¹⁰¹ Interview with visual artist Ľubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.

practically impossible for the authorities to detect the critical message underlying their ‘playful’ work.

But despite the less obvious political character of Slovak Conceptual Art, it is important to understand that the very fact of distancing their practice from the official lines of ‘soviet art’ placed these practitioners at the centre of the authorities’ watchful sight. Conceptual Art from Bratislava, just like its Prague counterpart, was viewed with suspicion because it constituted a subversive attitude. And in the context of communist Czechoslovakia, even if we ignore their coded, critical message, they most certainly formed a rebel thought. On the one hand, spiritual questioning had no place within an atheistic state, where the ‘one and only God’ was the Party’s leader. On the other, the analysis of communication systems developed by Ďurček certainly constituted a threat to the long-established – and rather effective – propagandistic strategies. In addition, any form of self-representation in art was simply not acceptable in a system where the anonymity of subjects in visual art was regarded as a key guideline to spread an ‘objective’ type of the revolutionary worker/hero.

It is also important to point out that although the work produced both within the Prague and Bratislava circles of Conceptual Art served as a valve of escape for those artists to express themselves, in the case of Slovak artists, the need to produce art outside the official (banned) scene constituted one of their main motivations. Unlike the Czech, Slovak conceptual artists had been trained to become practising artists and negated the right to do so through their rejection to enter the Union. As a result, they could not gain access to art materials in the hands of the state or communicate their work in the public scene. We could argue that while Conceptual Art practices developed by Prague intellectuals served somehow as a substitute for oppositional politics, the activities of the Slovaks were directed to offer an alternative – inclusive – scene for professional artists, who had been neglected by the state and marginalised from the official art sphere.

As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, although the work might share certain formal properties, the motivations of Czechoslovakian conceptual artists differ radically from the USA artists who had been producing conceptual works since the late 1960s. I have also explained how even the specific circumstances were very different in the context of Prague and Bratislava. It is therefore evident that the individual contexts for the production of Conceptual Art are as diverse as the different cultural conditions present in the territories where such works were produced. In similar terms, the role photography played in Conceptual Art in each of these territories needs to be analysed taking into account the concrete reasons for the choice of that very specific medium. While for USA artists photography represented a democratic medium – as opposed to painting and sculpture used to produce ‘high art’ – for Slovak practitioners the use

of photography was in part motivated by their lack of access to expensive art materials. Besides, thanks to the reduced size of prints and negatives, the work produced by Czechoslovakian conceptual artists was easy to hide and post secretly. Thanks to this crucial fact, their work managed to cross tight state borders and reach several art institutions both from the Eastern and the Western side of the Iron curtain. In any case, and just as it had occurred in other countries during the same period, it is clear that photography played a decisive role in the development of Czech and Slovak Conceptual Art.

THESIS CONCLUSIONS //

The aim of the present research has been to understand the relationship between the work produced by Czech and Slovak art photographers from 1968 to 1998 and the shifting context of art production present in both territories during this period. The project has been carried out from the perspective of the social history of art, taking into account the presence of relevant social structures affecting the production of photographs throughout these years. The research was done using a variety of methods, including the access to online and offline archives, the collection of primary research material from several photography collections and local libraries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as twenty interviews with the main actors of the photography scene of the time. During the different stages of the research, the information obtained through each of these methods has complemented each other enabled a semiotic analysis of selected photographs. Through this informed reading, the signified meaning of each depicted element appears charged not only with that which is visually verifiable, but most importantly, with a range of ‘coded messages’ revealing its surrounding circumstances and a hidden ideological content in the work.

The research contributes to the history of art and photography by offering a comprehensive picture of the type of practices developed by Czech and Slovak practitioners during the period of Normalisation and the decade following the establishment of Democracy in 1989, including the work of several photographers whose practice remained practically unknown outside their country’s borders. By presenting these works, the thesis allows for a potential integration of Czech and Slovak history of photography within a broader art-historical narrative of international photography practices that had been developed simultaneously during the second half of the twentieth century.

In addition, the analysis of the different creative strategies negotiated by these practitioners to ‘cover-up’ the critical message of their work from the totalitarian state, alongside the study of the conceptual shifts observed in their practice after the change of regime in 1989, contributes to art-theoretical debates on the relation between artistic production and current politics.

1. The Political Factor

From a political point of view, the configuration of the context of art production where Czechoslovakian art photography operated between 1968 and 1989 was determined by two key factors: The Czechoslovakian Thaw (1957-1968) and the Normalisation period (1968-1989)

The so-called ‘Czechoslovakian Thaw’ (1957-1968) followed the death of Stalin in 1953 and the establishment of a political thaw in the entire Soviet Union by president Nikita Khrushchev. Throughout those years the Czechoslovakian president Antonín Novotný approved a series of progressive reforms.¹ As censorship mechanisms were relaxed, the conditions for art photographers improved significantly. Thanks to a timid opening of the art scene, avant-garde photographers whose work had been banned from the public scene after the establishment of Communism in 1948, had again the opportunity to exhibit in public venues.² In addition, a number of new photography journals and periodicals started to publish art photographs, such as the quarterly *Revue Fotografie*, directed by Daniela Mrázková, who managed to publish a wide variety of photographic content that often distanced the official lines of the state’s artistic policy.³ Various photography books were printed as well during this period by the state’s publishing house SNKLHU, including a monograph with works of French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.⁴ The first public photographic collection was also established in 1962 at the Moravian Gallery in Brno under the direction of Czech curator Antonin Dufek.⁵ And finally, what was probably the most significant progress of all, for the first time a Degree in Photography started to be taught at FAMU School in 1960.⁶ This relative openness contributed to the development of a so-called ‘Grey Zone’: a mid-ground operating between the official and unofficial art scenes.

The relaxation of the state’s control during this decade helped modulate the repression implemented after the defeat of the reformist movement known as ‘The Prague Spring’ in 1968. In effect, the improvements in the conditions for the development of art photography practices achieved during the Thaw could not be completely removed by President Gustáv Husák, following the establishment of ‘harsh totalitarianism’ during the period of Normalisation. As instructed by the Soviet power in the Moscow Protocol of 1968, the public sphere in

¹ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 268-325.

² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., ‘Lyrical Tendencies, Surrealism, Art Informel and Staged Photography’, in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 173.

³ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, pp. 197-198.

⁴ Chuchma, J., ‘Anna Fárová and Fifty Years of Work for Photography’, in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha – PRO pp. 40-41.

⁵ Dufek, A., ‘Half a Century of The Moravian Gallery in Brno’, in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, pp. 17-18.

⁶ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

Czechoslovakia was ‘pacified’ through a wave of political purges, censorship mechanisms were intensified and the repression against artists and intellectuals was aggravated.⁷

Some of the restrictions implemented from 1968 included the prohibition of founding artists groups under the threat of being expelled from the Union of Visual Artists, which automatically meant losing the licence to work as a freelancer for the state.⁸ But overall, it is clear that the improvements in the conditions for art photographers achieved during the Thaw with the relaxation of censorship mechanisms, meant a great step forward for the development of art photography practices in the country, which despite the repressive atmosphere introduced during Normalisation, continued to bear fruits throughout the last two decades of communist rule in the country.

After 1968, while most photographs were highly scrutinised by the editors in-chief working for national newspapers, the national editorial house SNKLHU and most official journals, certain publications like *Revue Fotografie* continued to publish a variety of art photographs and remained relatively relaxed about the topics explored. Likewise, the photographic collection of the Moravian Gallery in Brno continued to grow, incorporating art photographs by practitioners from all over the country, while a second public photography collection was established under the direction of curator Anna Fárová in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.⁹ In addition, FAMU School continued to offer photography education at an undergraduate level and most of its graduates became important figures of the Czechoslovakian art photography scene.

These advances achieved in the public photography sphere stimulated a parallel development of numerous underground activities that could never gain the support of the regime and which were thus organised exclusively within the private realm. In addition, a new, mid-ground area known as the ‘Grey Zone’, started to emerge.

2. The Grey Zone

The expression the ‘Grey Zone’ is used repeatedly by art historians and curators in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since the late 1970s. The term makes reference to the space developed between the official and underground art scenes that operated simultaneously during the Normalisation period in Czechoslovakia (1968-1989). This ‘zone’ covers a range of strategic activities through which numerous artists and curators attempted to preserve a ‘normal functioning’ of artistic production in the repressive atmosphere of Normalisation.¹⁰ However,

⁷ Mazzone, M., ‘Drawing Conceptual Lessons from 1968’, *Third Text*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, January 2009, pp.79-84.

⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 203.

⁹ See Anna Fárová’s biography in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha Langhans– PRO

¹⁰ Morganová, P., ‘Czech Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries’, in *Czech Contemporary Art Guide*, trans. by Jones, P., Prague: The Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012, pp. 23-25.

looking at the available literature on the history of photography from the period, it remains unclear what the very meaning and structure of this so-called 'Grey Zone' consisted of within the photography scene of the time.¹¹ The numerous conversations I have had with photographers, artists, curators, theoreticians and historians from Prague, Brno and Bratislava, have been key to gaining an understanding of the dynamics of this 'Grey Zone'. By contrasting the information obtained through the different interviews, I have acquired a clearer perception of the type of repression suffered by the actors of the photography scene and the strategies developed to preserve their artistic autonomy while also meeting their professional and economic needs.

In order to determine how this 'mid-ground' space operated, it became essential to establish first where its two extremes stood; that is, what was considered the official photography scene and why did the underground remain within the scope of unofficial activities. Throughout the thesis and especially in its second chapter, the operating rules of the official scene have been widely discussed. Under the communist regime, in order for any photographer to access the public sphere and thus make their work openly available, their photographs needed to be sanctioned as 'acceptable' through the various regulation systems present in the different public institutions where photography operated. The type of activities that took place within the public sphere include the publication of photographs in the official press, journals or through the state's book publishing house, the participation in exhibitions at museums and national galleries, the access to the state's art trading shops 'Dílo', the possibility of becoming a member of the Union of Visual Artists, access to public photography commissions or even undertaking undergraduate studies in photography at FAMU School.

In this scenario, the 'Grey Zone' operating within the public sphere was formed by a few micro-spaces where the conditions for the dissemination of photographs allowed certain practitioners to enter the official realm without compromising their artistic autonomy. These exceptional conditions were present in a small number of places but their existence was none-the-less highly significant for the development of art photography during Normalisation. Concretely, this so-called 'Grey Zone' was present in the publishing arena, where certain editors-in-chief like Daniela Mrázková promoted the publication of a wide range of art photographs that did not always align with the state's publishing policy.¹² In addition, some photographs managed to enter the public realm through the national press, thanks to their ability to carrying a double message – also known as 'double coding'. With regards to the exhibition activity in public museums and galleries, it was thanks to Fárová and Dufek that numerous art photographs

¹¹ See Chapter 1.2, 'History of Czechoslovakian Photography. Existing Literature', in this thesis.

¹² Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'From Humanist Photojournalism to Subjective Documentary Photography', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 197-198.

entered the official scene thanks to their inclusion in public photographic collections.¹³ At an academic level, Professor Ján Šmok promoted an atmosphere of freedom within the FAMU School, where students were able to explore a wide range of photographic topics beyond the ideological limitations imposed by the regime.¹⁴ Finally, it has also been demonstrated how it was sometimes possible to preserve one's artistic autonomy even when working for public photographic commissions. This occurred for example in the numerous collaborations established between Jano Rečo and the Czechoslovakian Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Dr. Emiliano Hamernik since 1977. All these examples form the so-called 'Grey Zone' of the official photography scene.

The underground scene on the other hand, operated solely within the private realm. It did not receive any public funding and was entirely organised by individual citizens in the absence of any collaboration with the state. This was the space where most art photographers operated during the times of Normalisation, a place where despite its financial limitations and the risks it represented, served to promote the development of the medium by stimulating practitioners and enabling a fluent artistic dialogue among its members. These underground activities were very diverse and included the organisation of small exhibitions, private lectures and discussions in reduced groups of artists and intellectuals, the edition of samizdat publications, artistic collaborations or occasional contacts with international artists and curators. These activities took place at all sorts of alternative spaces like artists' apartments and studios, cafés, foyers of cinemas, abandoned buildings or open nature. But while some of these activities took place in absolute secrecy and thus managed to avoid all official censorship mechanisms, other events, like the many underground exhibitions organised by Anna Farová or Antonín Dufek, could be easily surveilled by the authorities since they often ran in open spaces which virtually anyone could access. These types of unofficial activities, privately organised but publicly presented, constitute the so-called 'Grey Zone' of the unofficial photography scene.

There are multiple reasons that explain why this 'Grey Zone' operating both in the official and unofficial realm could survive under the repressive atmosphere present throughout Normalisation. As explained by artist and historian Vladimír Birgus, on the one hand, photography lacked the explicit power of the written word, which meant its visual message had to be decoded, something that was not often easily achieved by the authorities. On the other hand, in order to keep things running as smoothly as possible, photographers rarely wrote about their own work, while curators and editors abstained from writing politically about it and

¹³ Dufek, A., 'Half a Century of The Moravian Gallery in Brno', in *Full Spectrum*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Prague: KANT, 2011, pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

usually offered scant information about the photographs.¹⁵ But of course under the existing repression the regime retained very clear limits of what could be tolerated even when it operated exclusively within the unofficial scene. For instance, the authorities did not welcome documentary photographs which depicted what the state considered to be a ‘pessimistic’ view of Socialism.¹⁶ When declared as such, they had to be removed before the exhibition opening, even if they were taken and shown in a purely amateur environment with no aim of being published. The case of Czech photographer Jindřich Štreit is an example of how dangerous it could be to exhibit critical photographs.¹⁷ But it was not only these types of photographs that were under the spotlight. The censors also carefully watched the documentation of conceptual works such as happenings and performances. Photographers working in this arena, like the Czech Jan SágI, were extremely cautious and usually kept their work in secret, completely hidden from the public scene.¹⁸

Having established what both scenes consisted of and where precisely the so-called ‘Grey Zone’ stood, it becomes essential to avoid an oversimplification of this reality by dividing artists’ attitudes into ‘in-favour’ or ‘against’. It has been demonstrated that art photography produced in the times of Normalisation was the result of a complex inner negotiation by each photographer, who searched for their own ways of expression, and overall, for the preservation of a ‘genuine meaning’ in their artwork. As expressed by curator Antonín Dufek, what these photographers had in common was that they were all ultimately ‘seekers of alternatives’.¹⁹ But the fact they looked for an alternative existence does not mean that they isolated themselves by constantly rejecting the established rules of the game. Most art photographers had no choice but to participate as well in the official cultural structure in one way or the other. While few photographers like Jaromír Čejka or Miroslav Machotka held a completely different profession in order to keep their photographic practice ‘untouched’ by officialism, the great majority of them accepted the fact that they were to join the officially controlled Artists’ Union if they wanted to undertake freelance work.²⁰ In order to make ends meet, a number of photographers combined their private photographic practice with occasional work in public commissions. Such was the case for example of Jan SágI or Vladimír Birgus, who for a few years produced official tourist photographs in the form of ‘optimistic picture-postcards’. Others went even further and

¹⁵ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vadimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

¹⁶ Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

¹⁷ Štreit was imprisoned for ten months after documenting and exhibiting photographs of the Czechoslovakian general elections of 1981.

¹⁸ Interview with photographer Jan SágI, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Alena Saglova, 16/11/2014, Prague.

¹⁹ Dufek, A, ‘Photographic Alternatives’, in *The Third Side of the Wall*, exhibition catalogue, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Prague: KANT, 2009.

²⁰ Interviews with Jaromír Čejka and Miroslav Machotka, 17/11/2014 and 20/11/2014 respectively, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Trans. Nikola Krutilová, Prague.

even illustrated public reports with their images, like the case of Jano Rečo.²¹ These ‘migrations’ between the official and unofficial photography scenes were rather frequent and thus make it difficult to simply label a practitioner as merely ‘dissident’ or ‘collaborator’ with the regime.

3. Inner Negotiations

While it is true that art photographers could find a variety of paths to communicate their artwork in the public realm both within the official and unofficial photography scenes through the so-called ‘Grey Zone’, by no means did these practitioners enjoy a total liberty in the production of photographic meaning. Any possible subversion that emerged from the reading of their work could have tragic consequences for these photographers, even if such work was never published or exhibited. In the eyes of the totalitarian authorities, these subversive attitudes could take a variety of forms.



Figure 7.1. Jaromír Čejka, ‘Untitled 1982’, from the series *Jižní Město*, Gelatine Silver Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

²¹ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

In the case of social documentary photographers, the limit was established in the ‘pessimistic’ approach to depicted socialist realities, since this would be taken as a direct critique against the regime.²² Given the representational nature of these types of images, it was probably rather complicated for documentary photographers to find an alternative, ‘coded’ strategy through which to communicate their view of Czechoslovakian ‘normalised’ society. However, reading an image as ‘pessimistic’ or ‘optimistic’ constitutes a highly subjective exercise. It has been discussed in the third chapter how the work produced by Jaromír Čejka in the suburban town of Jižní Město was never censored by the authorities when he attempted to exhibit the work both in public and unofficial venues, despite constituting – in the eyes of many – a rather tough critique of the living conditions present in this peripheral part of Prague (figure 7.1).²³ This could be explained by the fact that his photographs allowed a parallel and complete opposite reading. In this sense, it was possible for the authorities – and probably politically profitable – to understand Čejka’s work as a praise of the ‘outstanding’ living conditions provided to Czechoslovakian citizens through these housing estates. This double coding could sometimes be found in press photographs, where social documentary photographers managed to publish certain works carrying a double message. One of the best examples was the publication *Sílu dává Strana* (The Party Gives us Strength) in 1982, which published a collection of photographs of official mass demonstrations taken by a series of critical documentary photographers (figure 7.2).²⁴ Despite the photographs’ ironic content, which aimed to depict the absurdity of ‘fake’ communist demonstrations where most attendants were often pushed by their employers to parade, the editors-in-chief of the official publication understood that such images – with their ‘true’ record of the events – were instead praising the regime. Interestingly, on other occasions however, this type of ‘double speak’ could also work in the opposite direction. Such was the case of the series *Spartakiada* produced by Zdenek Lhoták in 1985, when he took pictures of young soldiers performing on muddy fields during a communist parade (figure 7.3).²⁵ Although the images represented the humiliation of human dignity – which led the artist to international renown as a non-conformist photographer – some fellow Czechoslovakian practitioners expressed their suspicions about Lhoták’s intention to praise Husák’s regime through the apparent political enthusiasm expressed by those young brigades.²⁶

²² Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.

²³ Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.

²⁴ *Sílu nám dává strana: Kapitoli z dějin Mládežnického a Dělnického Československu*, Prague and Bratislava: Maldá fronta and Smena, 1928.

²⁵ See complete Lhotak’s *Spartakiada* series at his website <http://www.lhotak.com/SpartakiadaEn.html>

²⁶ Birgus, V. and Jan, M., ‘From Socialist Realism to Humanist Photography’ in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, p. 199.

**SÍLU
NĀM DĀVĀ
STRANA**

PRVNÍ DÍL

MLADÁ FRONTA
SMENA



Figure 7.2. Front Cover from *Sílu dává Strana* (The Party Gives Us Strength), 1982.



Figure 7.3. Zdenek Lhoták, 'Untitled', from the series *Spartakiada* (Brigades), 1985, Gelatine Silver Print, Archive of Zdenek Lhoták.

For other practitioners whose work was less representational, like the conceptualists or the so-called 'visualists', the subversive or critical message of their work could be coded through a variety of strategies. The construction of utopias and dystopias, as well as the use of puns, parody, metaphors and irony, were developed by these photographers in such a complex form that it would have been practically impossible for the authorities to detect the critical message underlying behind their 'playful' work.

The most common tactic was probably the use of visual metaphors, present for example in the works of subjective documentary photographers like Vladimír Birgus. Moving away from the descriptive approach embraced by social documentary photographers, these practitioners explored their social concerns in a less explicit way, from a rather existential point of view. They applied an elaborated visual language in their photographs that was often impossible to decode by the authorities. In the lack of explicit messages, their approach in the treatment of social topics through the use of complex visual metaphors allowed them to reflect on social and political matters while avoiding a direct confrontation with the official power (figure 7.4). Similarly, with their search for meaning in the mundane, material culture, the so-called 'Visuals' photographers like Miroslav Machotka opened up a critical space, an interstitial space between public sphere – controlled by the regime – and their private psychological realm. Their contemplative attitude towards reality might well speak of the uncertain times their country underwent during the last decade of Communism, as an effort to 'quietly watch' and 'calmly deconstruct' the eminently vanishing status quo of the Czechoslovakian society of the 1980s (figures 7.5).



Figure 7.4. Vladimír Birgus, *Zabriskie Point*, 1986. Silver Gelatine Print, Courtesy of the Artist.

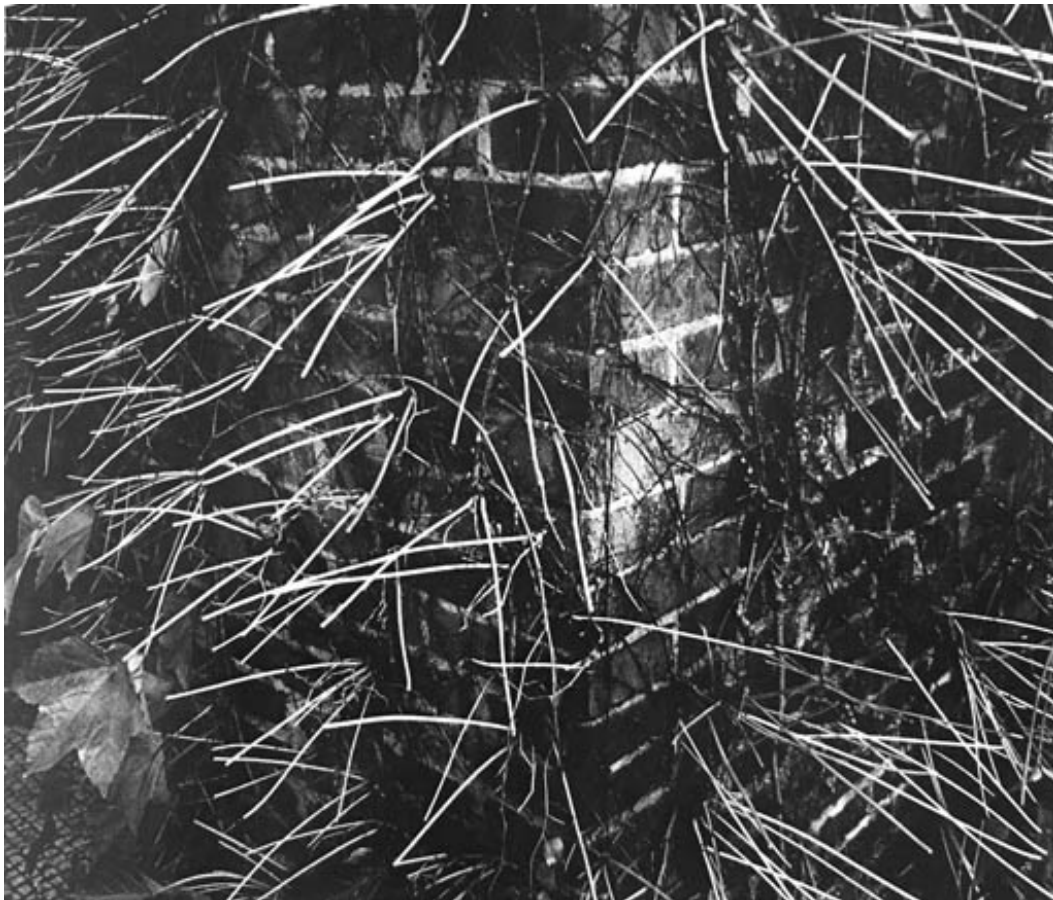


Figure 7.5. Miroslav Machotka, *Untitled*, 1984. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

On other occasions, it was parody that served these photographers to express their opposition to certain repressive practices inflicted by the totalitarian state. Such was the case for example of the various photo-performances produced by the Czech conceptualist Jiří Kovanda, where he enacted a series of banal actions in the streets of Prague that were photographed by a friend in the style of surveillance pictures (figures 7.6). Through the use of parody Kovanda pointed to the randomness of the intense surveillance activity carried out by the secret police during the days of Normalisation.



Figure 7.6. Jiří Kovanda, *Theater*, 1976, Photo-documentation of Performance, Prague, Archive of Jiří Kovan



Figure 7.7. Jùlius Koller, *Mysterious Cultural Situation 1 (U.F.O.)*, 1988, Gelatine Silver Print, The State of Jùlius Koller.

The reflection on utopian realities in distant places of the Universe found in the works of conceptual artists from Bratislava like Rudolf Sikora and Júius Koller, could well be understood as a critique of their present existence determined by the totalitarian state (figure 7.7). Similarly, it has been discussed how the dystopian discourse articulated by Sikora through his fatalistic environmental work could have been designed by the author to trigger a very different and less distant awareness, that is, the calamities that the communist regime was inflicting on Czechoslovakian society, which in Lacan could be identified as the ‘unknowns knowns’ – or things we do not know we know (figure 7.8).²⁷ By displacing the danger from the State’s repression to a devastating pollution, the author could have tried to illuminate the consciousness of Czechoslovakian citizens, suggesting a reflection on the presence of a much closer and palpable threat.

The use of all these strategies evidences the need to cover-up the critical message of their photographs. The possibility of expressing their political and personal frustrations through visual means probably constituted an immense relief from the every-day contention exercise performed by these artists. Besides, it is important to note that at the time their work was produced, only a small section of the audience was intellectually prepared to read through the coded message hidden in their work and grasp its meaning. As discussed in the fourth chapter, while the perceptual connotation of their work might have been accessible to reach, the censors lacked the necessary ‘cultural knowledge’ to understand any ‘cognitive’ connotation of depicted elements.²⁸ Through a process of a rather elaborated ‘estrangement’ – in Shklovsky’s sense – these authors hindered the ‘analogical plenitude’ of the photograph.²⁹ Thereafter, without the appropriate ‘cognitive’ tools, the censor officials were left with a rather incoherent set of denotative meanings. As a result, the ideological content within their work was hardly possible to be perceived in the eyes of the authorities.

²⁷ Žižek, S., *Censorship Today: Ecology as a New Opium for the Mass*, part II, <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm> [accessed on 16/03/2017]

²⁸ Barthes, R., ‘The Photographic Message’, in Heath, S. (ed. And trans.) *Image, Music, Text*, New York: Hill, 1977

²⁹ Shklovsky, V., ‘Art as Device’, in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Sher, B., Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991. Originally published in Moscow in 1925, pp. 1-14.

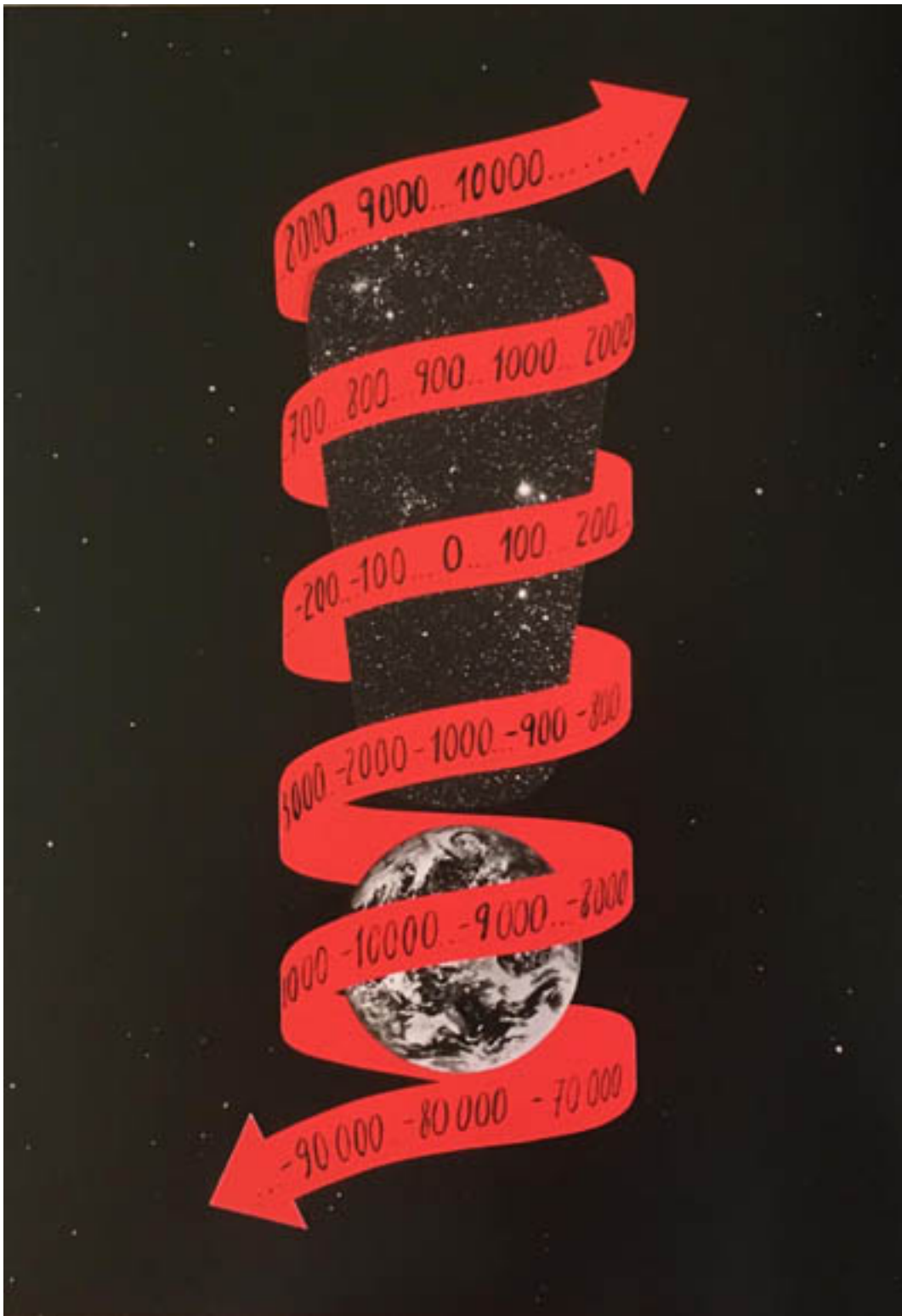


Figure 7.8. Rudolf Sikora, *Exclamation Mark*, 1974, Photo-collage, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

4. Cracks in the Wall

The fascinating manner in which art photography practices developed in Czechoslovakia during the period of Normalisation was also favoured by the occasional – but rather influential – contact with the work of international photographers outside the country's borders. It has been discussed in the second chapter how despite the political isolation of Czechoslovakia throughout this period and the censorship mechanisms directed to scrutinise any cultural content arriving from abroad, the country did not remain completely hermetic to international photography practices; neither did Czechoslovakian works of photography stay solely within its national territory. Thanks especially to the efforts of curator Anna Fárová, the work of various international photographers was legitimately shown in Czechoslovakia throughout numerous retrospective shows, including: Werner Bichof (1964), Elliot Erwitt (1968 and 1970), Robert Doisneau (1969), Bruce Davidson (1970), Henri Cartier-Bresson (1988) and Wendy Watriss (1989). Fárová also produced two collective exhibitions with works by Magnum photographers in 1965 during the Czechoslovakian Thaw and a third one in 1973 in the days of Normalisation.³⁰ In addition, Fárová managed to publish a number of books with the work of these photographers through the official publishing house, including a monograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1968 and Robert Capa's works in 1973.³¹

Apart from Fárová's efforts to disseminate the work of international photographers in her country, catalogues and books published outside Czechoslovakian borders also managed to enter the country from time to time through private hands. According to Slovak conceptual artist Rudolf Sikora, it was often the case that fellow artists and intellectuals would attempt to bring back home some books and catalogues from their trips abroad. Although the opportunities to travel to Western Europe or the USA were very limited and the authorities usually checked all luggage on the traveller's arrival, Sikora explained how some international publications occasionally made it to Czechoslovakia. When this happened, they passed from hand to hand and were treated as precious objects.³² In addition, a number of contacts also took place with other countries from the Eastern Bloc like Hungary, though as explained in the fifth chapter, the most fluent communication was established with the Polish art scene. Due to the 'relaxed' attitude of Polish communist authorities, Poland acted in many aspects as a substitute for 'the West'; as a platform for open theoretical discussions and international artistic exchange.³³ During the 1980s, the underground activities developed by Polish artist and curator Jerzy Olek

³⁰ Chuchma, J., 'Exhibitions and Catalogues', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha – PRO pp. 78-88.

³¹ Chuchma, J., 'Books', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, pp. 78-88.

³² Interview with visual artist Rudolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

³³ Piotrowski, P., *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 286.

in Warsaw through his gallery 'Foto-Media-Art', became a key space for theoretical discussions on the medium and the development of the photographic style commonly known in Czechoslovakia as 'Visualism'.³⁴

The artistic exchange however worked in both directions and the work of Czechoslovakian photographers was also exhibited from time to time outside the country's borders. Fárová played again a crucial role in the dissemination of Czechoslovakian art photography abroad and organised several exhibitions in Milan (1962), London (1974 and 1977), Birmingham (1974), Stockholm (1983), Brussels (1985), Frankfurt (1985) and Paris (1986).³⁵ Another curator committed to the dissemination of Czechoslovakian art photography abroad was Antonín Dufek, who also produced various exhibitions in Western Europe and North America during the period of Normalisation, including a controversial show at 'The Photographers' Gallery' in London in 1985, when the Czechoslovakian authorities attempted to boycott the show by confiscating its catalogue due to the 'subversive' content of Jindřich Štreit's images.³⁶ But apart from these organised shows, some photographers promoted their work individually abroad by posting photographs to museums and galleries in Europe and the United States. Most of the time, the work sent by these artists was included in the art collections of the recipient institution. On some occasions however, the work was posted back once the exhibition had concluded; a situation that endangered the fate of these artists who found it difficult to justify the reasons for sending their artwork privately abroad in front of the authorities.³⁷

All these 'leaks' in the cultural sphere of the Wall enabled the permeability of Czechoslovakian art photography with contemporary ideas developed outside the state-controlled artistic sphere. This occasional – but certainly existing – international artistic exchange, together with the continuity of a strong Czechoslovakian photographic tradition that had been cultivated during the first half of the twentieth century in parallel rhythm with the various photography movements that had arisen in Russia, Germany and USA, enabled the development of art photography practices in the country during Normalisation in ways that were just as innovative as the work produced in Western Europe or North America during the same period (1968-1989). In this sense, we could argue that no matter how tyrannical and strict censorship mechanisms might be, the 'porosity' nature of culture is probably impossible to block.

³⁴ Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

³⁵ Chuchma, J., 'Exhibitions and Catalogues', in Meisnerová Wismer, Z., (ed.), *Anna Fárová & fotografie / Photography*, Prague: Langhans Galerie Praha – PRO pp. 78-88.

³⁶ Interview with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno.

³⁷ Interview with visual artist Eubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.

5. The Velvet Aftermath

Following the triumph of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the establishment of a capitalist and democratic system in Czechoslovakia, the situation for art photographers who had been producing their work during the earlier period of Normalisation suffered a radical change. Official censorship mechanisms that had been in charge of safeguarding the ideology of the socialist state were dismantled and the privatisation of former public companies ended four decades of the state's monopoly on the arts and media.³⁸ In this scenario, one of the most important changes for art photographers arrived in the form of legitimacy. From 1989 onwards, photographs produced during the past two decades that had been banned from the public scene for being regarded as 'subversive' were no longer 'illegal' and could thus be disseminated freely through exhibitions or any sort of publication willing to publish such work. Besides this, every professional artist was now able to become a member in the Union of Visual Artists and apply for public and private commissions regardless of the content of the topics explored in their work.³⁹ In addition, job positions to work in commercial photography multiplied around the country, creating a wide range of career opportunities. As a consequence, photography education expanded and four new degrees in photography were created in different universities around the country.

Following the ideological shift, audiences changed too. The potential public was no longer limited to circles of intimate friends. Consequently, art criticism expanded rapidly and curatorial activities multiplied all around the country. The establishment of Capitalism on the other hand provided these artists access to the free market where they could acquire a wider range of photographic materials. Besides, with the opening of frontiers, they were finally able to travel abroad and promote their artwork freely in the global art market.⁴⁰ But Capitalism also brought a number of disadvantages. While it is true that the working conditions for art photographers during the communist rule were extremely tough, the arrival of Capitalism did not bring the opportunities many had hoped for. With the new economic system, living expenses rose. Art materials and studio space needed to be funded from their own pockets. Although the Union still offered a limited number of grants and scholarships, there were now a lot more 'working artists' and only some managed to make a living through their artistic production. As a result, most of them searched for alternative income sources, working as art teachers or other non-art related jobs. Besides, only a few artists from the unofficial sphere were formally recognised

³⁸ Birgus, V. and Mlčoch, J., 'Photojournalism and Documentary photography since Late 1989', in *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, Prague: Kant Publications, 2005, pp. 287-295.

³⁹ Interview with visual artist Růfolf Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Euboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.

⁴⁰ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vadimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

after 1989 in their home countries through major exhibitions and a handful of them caught the attention of international curators.⁴¹

The change of circumstances had an evident effect in the type of images produced by many art photographers. However, the artistic trajectories each practitioner followed after the change of regime differed substantially from one another. The reasons for such divergences were the result of a combination of factors, which include the personal circumstances of the artists and their ability to adapt to the rules of the new art scene, as well as the level of currency achieved by their work under the new system. In general terms, it is possible to identify three different paths in the development of their 'post-Communist' production.



Figure 7.9. Jano Rečo, 'Untitled', from the series *Photos from Japan*, 2014, Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

The most significant variations can be found in the work of social documentary photographers like Jaromír Čejka and Jano Rečo. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, many of these practitioners seemed to have 'lost the topic' and with it, the source of inspiration present during communist times. Following the change to a capitalist regime, it took a while for most of them to re-position their practice under the new system. Many photographers started to look for appealing documentary themes outside Czechoslovakian frontiers. Some started to work as photojournalists, producing photo-essays for international press agencies, while others like Dana Kyndrová, continued working independently and focused their attention on foreign

⁴¹ Interview with visual artist Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Luboš Kotlár, 10/09/2016, Bratislava.

regions where different forms of social struggle remained present. There were also a few photographers, such as Viktor Kolář, who preserved a deep interest in documenting their country's social situation and successfully continued to depict the everyday life of Czech and Slovak citizens throughout the economic and political changes the country underwent during the 1990s. For many others however, it was the time to move away from their previous documentary practice and, like Jano Rečo, they started to experiment with different techniques and explore other concepts (figure 7.9).



Figure 7.10. Vladimír Birgus, *Untitled*, 2000. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the Artist.

The work of subjective documentary photographers and the so-called ‘Visualists’ did not seem to go through such a radical conceptual shift. While it is evident that the use of visual metaphors used by these photographers throughout Normalisation was no longer needed to cover up their critical message in order to avoid the repression of the state, looking at post-89 images by photographers like Vladimír Birgus and Miroslav Machotka, it seems that the need to question one's own existence through ‘the visual’ persisted. While the content of their questions might have changed, their photographic style and creative strategies for suggesting such queries remained practically unaltered after 1989 (figure 7.10).

The situation of conceptual artists was rather different. To start with, we could argue that as an artistic movement Conceptual Art was over by the time Communism collapsed in 1989. What is most relevant however is the fact that the conceptual messages present in the work of these artists during the period of Normalisation were mostly directed to critique the abuses inflicted

by the totalitarian state. Once Communism collapsed and Democracy was established in 1989, many of these practitioners, like the members of the Prague-Body-Art Troika, abandoned completely their artistic practice.⁴² A few of them however continued to develop their work – now considered ‘post-modern’ in the new art-historical discourse – and explored a variety of contemporary issues present in their new, capitalist reality (figure 7.11). Such was the case of Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora, whose efforts to promote his *oeuvre* internationally, alongside his ability to evolve artistically with the new times in the ‘post-89’ era, have turned this practitioner into one of the best known contemporary artists in Slovakia. But the success achieved by Sikora immediately after the fall of the Wall constitutes a very rare exception. For most conceptual artists and art photographers of the time of Normalisation, recognition arrived late and timidly. Although many photographers exhibited their work nationally in different collective exhibitions in the years following the fall of the Wall and often published their photographs through a monograph, very few of them had major retrospective exhibitions or the opportunity to show their artwork elsewhere outside the country.⁴³

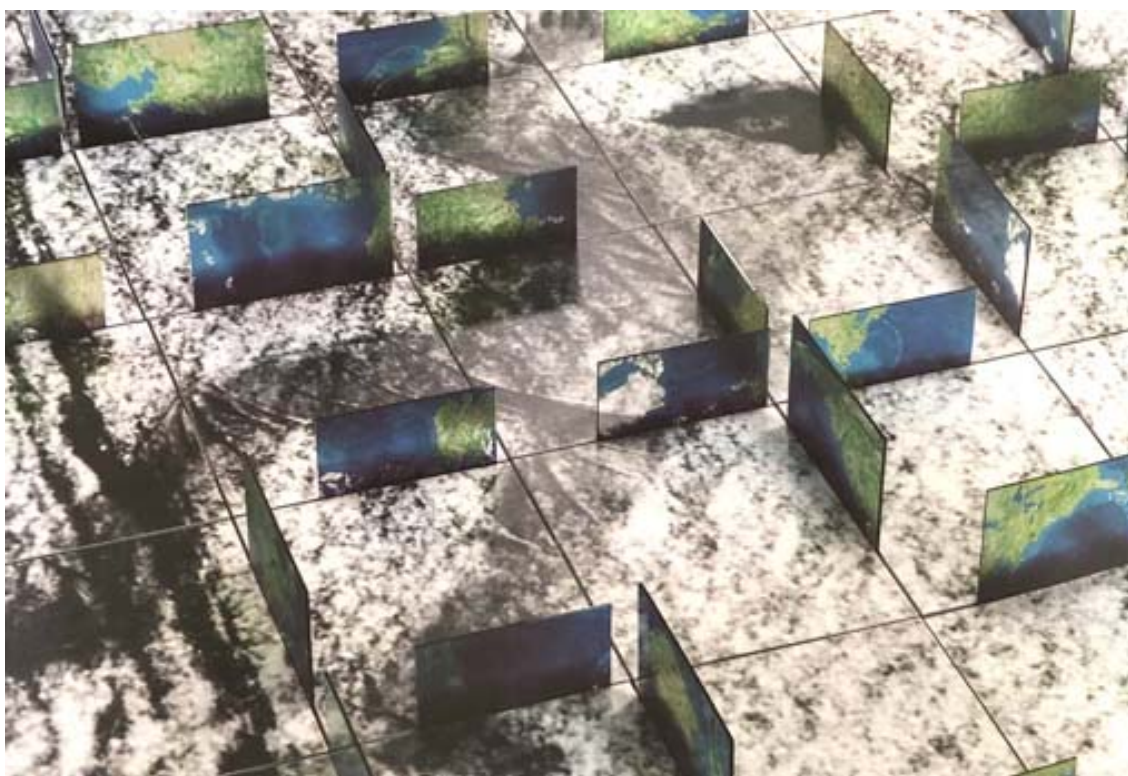


Figure 7.11. Rudolf Sikora, *The Terrestrial Awakening*, 1996/2016, Photographic Paper on Wood, Print on Plexiglass, Courtesy of the Artist.

⁴² Morganová, P, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, trans. by Morgan, D., Prague: Charles University, 2014, pp. 154-180.

⁴³ Interviews with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno and art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Václav Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

All things considered, it is evident that the political and social circumstances present during Normalisation times served as a powerful source of inspiration for Czechoslovakian practitioners, which gave birth to some of the most extraordinary samples of art photography practices of the second half of the twentieth century. However, given the relative isolation of the Czechoslovakian photography scene during the communist rule (1948-1989) and the low artistic profile achieved by these photographers in the 'post-1989' era, the possibility of incorporating their highly elaborated photography discourses into a global History of Art had been temporarily neglected in art-historical discourses. Hopefully, the content of the present thesis will enable a definite incorporation of Czechoslovakian art photography into the orthodox history of photography, where the former is no longer placed on the periphery but running in a parallel line of significance with the practices developed in the (still so-called) 'West'.

LIST OF INTERVIEWED SUBJECTS

A total of twenty interviews have been conducted for the present research. They all took place in Bratislava, Prague and Brno, with the exception of one of them that was conducted online. In most cases, an interpreter was used to translate the conversation from Czech and Slovak into English language. Where no translator is referenced, the interview was carried out entirely in English.

1. Interview with photographer Jano Rečo, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 12/11/2014, Prague.
2. Interview with art historian and curator Prof. Antonín Dufěk, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 13/11/2014, Brno.
3. Interview with photographer Vladimír Židlický, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Jan Vala, 13/11/2014, Brno.
4. Interview with photographer Jan SágI, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Alena Saglova, 16/11/2014, Prague.
5. Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vadimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.
6. Interview with photographer Jaromír Čejka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 17/11/2014, Prague.
7. Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Tomáš Pospěch, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 19/11/2014, Prague.
8. Interview with photographer Miroslav Machotka, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.
9. Interview with photographer Miroslav Švolík, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Nikola Krutilová, 20/11/2014, Prague.
10. Interview with visual artist Peter Rónai, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 10/09/2016, Bratislava.
11. Interview with art historian and curator Macek Václav, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 12/09/2016, Bratislava.

12. Interview with photographer Anton Sládek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Veronika Markovičová, 13/09/2016, Bratislava.
13. Interview with photographer Judita Csáderová, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 14/09/2016, Bratislava.
14. Interview with photographer Milota Havránková, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 14/09/2016, Bratislava.
15. Interview with photographer Ján Krížik, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.
16. Interview with visual artist Vladimír Kordoš, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.
17. Interview with visual artist Rulfík Sikora, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 15/09/2016, Bratislava.
18. Interview with visual artist Ľubomír Ďurček, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.
18. Interview with photographer Josef Sedlák, conducted by Paula Gortázar, trans. Ľuboš Kotlár, 16/09/2016, Bratislava.
20. Online interview with Polish theoretician, visual artist and curator Jerzy Olek, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 31/07/2016.

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