**Toward an Emancipation of Photographic Vision: "Visualism"
Under Czechoslovakian "Normalization" (1968–89)**

Gortazar, P.

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Author: Dr. Paula Gortázar**,** University of Westminster

Abstract:

This article discusses photographic approaches that emerged in the Eastern Bloc and in Western Europe during the 1980s, with reference to the theories of Andreas Müller-Pohle from West Germany, Bořek Sousedík from Czechoslovakia, and Jerzy Olek from Poland. In their search for emancipation from externally imposed ideologies and ways of understanding their surrounding world, these photographers articulated a series of similar ideas that called upon photographers to see their medium as a means to express their inner views of reality rather than as a mere representational instrument of 'the real'. This article demonstrates how their discussions of photography contributed to promoting social and political emancipation specifically in Czechoslovakia, at a time in which the communist regime strove to normalize its rule, after an internal attempt to reform the political system in the country had been oppressed. The text begins with a discussion of the period of 'normalization' (1968–89) and how it redefined the scene of art photography in Czechoslovakia. It then analyses the theoretical and practical work of Müller-Pohle, Sousedík, and Olek. It argues that, although the theories of these three photographers were known by some practitioners in Czechoslovakia, it was Olek's theory 'Elementary Photography' and pedagogical program that was most influential in their practice. The article explains how the involvement of Czechoslovakian photographers in the activities of Olek's gallery in Warsaw contributed to the development of a so-called 'visualist' style in Czechoslovakian photography that embraced an entirely subjective approach in the depiction of reality, and that signalled the decline of the communist power in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.

Toward an Emancipation of Photographic Vision: 'Visualism' under Czechoslovakian 'Normalization' (1968–89)

In August 1968, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia with the aim of re-establishing control over the country's politics. The attempts at reform carried out by President Alexander Dubček were revoked and harsh totalitarianism was established, under the direction of communist leader Gustáv Husák. As instructed by the Soviet power in the Moscow Protocol of 1968, the public sphere in Czechoslovakia was pacified through a wave of political purges. Censorship mechanisms were intensified and the repression against artists and intellectuals was aggravated (Mazzone 2009, 79–84). Historically referred to by the term 'normalization', this process extended from 1968 to 1989 and it now signifies the last two decades of communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

During normalization, the communist authorities constantly censored photographs that, according to their understanding, depicted Czechoslovakian society pessimistically, for example by passing critical judgment of the conditions of life in the communist state. (Birgus and Mlčoch 2005, 197–208). In obliterating imagery of this kind, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia reinforced its ideological principles and totalitarian power.

Under these circumstances, from the late 1970s and especially during the 1980s, a number of art photographers realized that in order to preserve their artistic autonomy they must render their photographs into windows that open up not to the world outside, but rather onto their own subjective psychological mindset. Moving away from the descriptive approach embraced by social documentary photographers, these practitioners still engaged with the realities that conditioned their lived experience in the country. However, because they used their practice to explore and give meaning to their own inner impressions of their immediate surroundings, they were able to reflect on life in the country without triggering the suspicion of the powers in charge. This practice enabled them to open an interstitial space between the public sphere – controlled by the communist regime – and their private psychological realm. Their contemplative attitude towards reality was clearly understood within the country's artistic circles as an effort to

'quietly watch' and 'calmly deconstruct' the vanishing status quo of its political system, as it experienced the progressive collapse of its forty-year-long totalitarian regime.

In the context of 1980s Czechoslovakia, the endeavor of offering mild criticism of external realities through the production of photographs that mirrored the photographer's complex inner reality has its roots in a variety of photographic theories and practices that were developed in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe. These include, more specifically, Andreas Müller-Pohle's theory of 'Visualism' (1980), Bořek Sousedík's theory of 'Opsognomy' (1980), and Jerzy Olek's theory of 'Elementary Photography', which he originally published in 1988 and in English in 1995. Müller-Pohle's Visualism would eventually become the most well-known in the region and, to some extent, it had already occasionally been used in 1980s Czechoslovakia to refer to the work of like-minded photographers who employed their cameras to offer an alternative way of seeing to that sanctioned by the communist regime during normalization. However, as I later show, the theory of 'Elementary Photography' that Polish artist Jerzy Olek developed between 1984 and 1989 in particular had most influence on their work.

In this article I first discuss how the period of normalization defined the scene of art photography in Czechoslovakia. I then clarify how Müller-Pohle, Sousedík, and Olek conceptualized photography, while discussing how their theories directly related to the political sphere in the West and the East. Considering the kinds of photographic works that emerged through the application of their ideas, I aim to demonstrate how their approaches to photography and photographic practice contributed to promoting nonconformist interpretations of the social and political reality in Czechoslovakia at such a convulsive time in its history.

Czechoslovakia's Normalized Photography Scene

While the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in August 1968 resulted in the re-establishment of full Party domination, and the introduction of a new criminal law that facilitated the prosecution of 'ideological enemies' (Crampton 2015, 346–347), not all hope for political change was lost. Following the events of the late 1960s, anti-Russianism grew in large parts of Czechoslovakian civil society and communism was more than ever before perceived as a foreign imposition. In 1977, a number of local intellectuals published the now-legendary document known as Charter 77, a Human

Rights appeal that would later serve as a basis to weaken the totalitarian communist power in the country and lead Czechoslovakia towards its transition to democratic politics. While Charter 77 merely requested that individual civil rights be respected and guaranteed by law, the circulation of this document constituted a crime. Although most of its signatories suffered different forms of state retaliation, by 1980 around one thousand signatories supported the initiative, which turned Charter 77 into a key nexus between Czechoslovakian reformers and Western sympathizers, in both Czechoslovakia and other countries of the Eastern Bloc (Crampton 2015, 347–348). As a consequence, the communist regime's intimidating attitude persisted, and the secret police were more vigilant than ever throughout the last decade of communism in the country.

Under these conditions, art photographers fought to preserve their expressive autonomy. But the state's harsh oppression also provoked a tension that in many ways stimulated artistic creativity. As photography historian Antonín Dufek explains, taking photographs during the time of normalization allowed some practitioners to let go of their thoughts, express their concerns, and critique the social reality created by the regime (Dufek 2008b). Most art photographers in the country confronted the system by producing social documentary work that was rather pessimistic and thus clearly critical of the regime. Others took photographs that were not regarded as threatening and were therefore tolerated. Still others produced critical work but kept it secret. One way or another, much of the photographs that art photographers produced in Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989 negotiated and reworked the regime's official vision of the country.

A centralized censorship organization did not exist in the Czechoslovakia of that period. Instead, the regime operated a series of focalized censorship mechanisms that were activated case by case. When it came to publishing images, the decision was made by the editor-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 subjected to much more scrutiny than art photography that was intended for publication in one of the country's photography journals, such as *Revue Fotografie* (Birgus and Mlčoch 2005, 197). It is not so easy to find a reason for that difference about which one can be certain. However, it was most probably because the former was directed at the masses and meant to construct a convincing optimistic image of life in the country, whereas the latter was seen to focus on artistic creativity and its target audience group was significantly smaller.

As Czech photo-historian Vládimir Birgus recalls from his own experience of the time (personal communication, November 17, 2014), compared to other areas of the arts, such as cinematography or literature, the state's security apparatus did not seem as afraid of photography's insurgent possibilities, as the regime believed that the medium's ability to become a subversive weapon was relatively limited. Reasons for this conception of the medium by the totalitarian regime are quite diverse. First, in the eyes of the regime photography lacked the explicit power of the written word, which meant that its visual message had to be decoded (often not so easy for the authorities either). Second, the regime did not conceive of photography as a form of 'high-art'. Despite the strong tradition that art photography enjoyed in Czechoslovakia, for the communist authorities it was still either a hobby or a mechanical profession. Indeed, the photography section in the Union of Czechoslovakian Artists was part of the Applied Arts Department. It was therefore separated as well as differentiated from what the regime considered to be expressive (and thus threatening) art forms, in particular painting and sculpture, for example (Chuchma 2007, 47). Despite all the above, it must be pointed out that censors *did* carefully watch the documentation of conceptual works that directly interfered with reality itself, such as happenings and performances. Photographers working in this arena had to be extremely cautious, and they usually kept their work secret (Jan Ságl, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

The regime's otherwise relatively relaxed approach toward photography also applied in the context of the Centralized Union of Czechoslovakian artists. Its censorship apparatus was first led by the Union director and board members, 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 (personal communication, November 17, 2014). While restrictions on painting were quite tough, the photography section enjoyed a much more liberal atmosphere. This was a huge advantage, since each section was in charge of distributing its own grants, scholarships and work-stay funds, which were awards equivalent to artistic residencies (Michl 1999, 37–38). Nevertheless, the relative difficulties of 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 photo-historian and curator Anna Fárová (1928–2010). It was thanks to her that the work of many international photographers,

such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Klein and Robert Frank, among many others, was disseminated in Czechoslovakia through the publication of dozens of articles and books. But as curator she also made great efforts to publish and show the work of Czechoslovakian photographers abroad, including that of Josef Sudek and Magnum photographer Josef Koudelka. As a photography critic and curator, Anna Fárová had virtually no rivals in her country. From 1962, she organized an average of three photography exhibitions per year, each featuring both national and international works. Sometimes these were installed in official sites such as Kabinet gallery (in the Brno House of Arts), while smaller exhibitions were also held outside the state's museums and galleries, in venues such as peripheral art centers, cinema foyers, and small theatres (Meisnerová Wismer 2007). Funding for any official exhibition held in national galleries and museums came from the state. Conversely, curators and participating photographers were often those who supported production costs for any shows that ran outside those art venues. Such costs, however, were relatively low, as in most cases the photographs were exhibited unframed and unmounted. Furthermore, if any illustrated documents were produced to accompany these exhibitions, they often consisted of short leaflets or booklets (Chuchma 2007, 49–50). Fárová's most important contribution during the last decade of communist rule was her activity as an underground photography curator. Thanks at least in part to the shows she organized in this capacity, Czechoslovakia's art photography scene was sustained in spite of the prevailing political reality. Her activity motivated photographers who would otherwise never have had the possibility of exhibiting their work in the public circuit to continue practicing their art.

Another curator whose work was decisive in the dissemination of Czechoslovakian art photography during the period of normalization was Antonín Dufek (Brno, 1943). A trained art historian, Dufek was appointed director of the photographic collection at the Moravian Gallery in Brno in 1968. While during the years of normalization most directors of public institutions were members of the Communist Party, Dufek was not. However, abstaining from framing any photographic work with reference to political issues, he was able to build a diverse collection that featured photographs with critical content. The same applies to the photographs he installed in museum exhibitions around the country (Dufek, personal communication, November 13, 2014). Yet, while during normalization Dufek organized numerous official photography shows that were supported by the communist regime, he also

installed a number of privately-organized exhibitions at Fotochema halls and in Galerie 4 in Cheb. These latter type of exhibitions were referred to as 'unofficial exhibitions' at the time, simply because they were not publicly supported. Nevertheless, they were not organized in secret and, on most occasions, were open to the public.

Although at that moment in history Czechoslovakia was still one country (it would split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993), in the Slovak lands the situation was rather different. The National Gallery in Bratislava did not start collecting photography until 1990. This was most likely because the selection board at the National Gallery was rather conservative during normalization and there was no influential figure such as Fárová or Dufek fighting for the status of art photography in this part of the country, as opposed to the situation in Prague and Brno (Macek Václav, personal communication, September 12, 2016). As a result, art photography could not be found in any official venue nor in the public art collection in Bratislava. What did exist was a series of underground venues showing art photography. These included the Profil Gallery, directed by Ludovit Hlavac, and the numerous unofficial exhibitions that took place at the foyers of the Institute of Mathematics of the Slovak Academy of Science. A circle of conceptual artists who worked with photography, such as Rudolf Sikora, Jullious Koller, and Vladimir Kordos, also prepared multiple exhibitions in their studios and apartments, mainly for fellow artists and close friends (Macek Václav, personal communication, September 12, 2016).

Exhibition activities outside Czechoslovakia's publicly sanctioned sphere remained relatively fluid during normalization. To avoid potential problems, their curators and exhibitors either abstained from including explicit political works or used photographs whose politically critical messages maintained a healthy level of ambiguity, as it were (Vladimír Birgus, personal communication, November 17, 2014). Related to that, photographers who took part in underground exhibitions rarely wrote about their work, and curators who organized such exhibitions abstained from writing about photographs in connection with politics, usually offering scant information just about the exhibition's topic (Vladimír Birgus, personal communication, November 17, 2014). It must be pointed out in this context that, while art photography was mainly produced outside the public sphere, art photographs were not by default politically or socially critical. Yet frequently the photographic images produced delivered a 'double meaning' or 'double speak'. One of the most telling examples was the 1982 publication 'Sílu dává strana' (The Party Gives Us Strength), which showcased a collection of

photographs of official mass demonstrations taken by a series of critical documentary photographers (Sílu nám dáva Strada 1928). Despite the photographs' ironic content, which aimed to depict the absurdity of organized communist demonstrations – where most participants were often pushed by their employers to parade – the editors of such official publications understood that, from the regime's perspective, these kinds of images would be perceived as celebrations of the communist message (Birgus and Mlčoch 2005, 199). Such and other strategies often enabled artists and curators to maintain and perpetuate artistic production despite the repressive atmosphere of the time (Morganová 2012, 23–25). To gain more concrete understanding of the strategies employed during normalization, one first needs to become familiar with the three theoretical photographic frameworks that guided the work of a number of practitioners who unlike the great majority of art photographers of the time, did not apply a social documentary approach to express their dissenting political opinion.

‘Visualism’, ‘Opsognomy’ and ‘Elementary Photography’

The 1980s were crucial political times in several parts of the world, and Czechoslovakia was by no means alone in its struggle for social, cultural, and political emancipation. The progressive weakening of national economies across the entire Eastern Bloc evidenced the inability of the communist system to guarantee minimum living standards for society. As a result, the activity of opposition forces intensified around the region. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachov's liberal economic and political approach – known as Perestroika – accelerated the defeat of communist governments across Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, in the USA and Western Europe it was unclear to what extent this process might impact the capitalist economy. Against this background and during the same period, three European art photographers from both sides of the Berlin Wall developed similar theses to promote a 'new', free vision of 'the real', each of which encouraged the subversion of institutionalized, normalizing (thus politically conventionalizing) forms of vision. The three theories were informed by the individual socio-political contexts present in the countries in which they originated.

In 1980, artist and theoretician Andreas Müller-Pohle from the Federal Republic of Germany published an article entitled 'Visualism' in the newly-launched *European Photography* magazine, which he founded in 1979. Visualism was not only the title of the article but also the name of the theory it presented. Having emerged in the western

side of the Iron Curtain, the theory of Visualism challenged Cold War ideologies concerning ideas about traditional Western social roles and the idyllic Western lifestyle, which were established in the West through the production and circulation of a critical mass of media and advertisement photographs. Müller-Pohle's theory, coupled with his own practice, was the result of a vindication of authenticity; a response to an overdose of imagery charged with capitalist ideology.

In his text, Müller-Pohle (1980, 4–10) defines Visualism as a form of vision detached from conventionally imposed visual rhetoric, essential for any photographer aiming to 'truly' understand the 'genuine nature' of the visual world. According to the author, traditional documentary photographers describe reality through a voluntarily accepted system of given codes, providing a mere inventory of the world. Visualism, instead, as Müller-Pohle explained, embraces all possibilities of representation, leaving behind any external categories in order to achieve a genuine search of the visible world. Visualism aims, in other words, to rediscover the original essence of a visual world whose pure form has been progressively corrupted by layers of externally imposed connotations. To overcome the problem, the photographer must become free of any artificial factors that limit his or her representational choices of the visible world. To understand how the photographer could reach this state of so-called free perception better, it is useful to look at Müller-Pohle's photographic work from the same period, in particular the photographs in the series *Transformance* (1979–82).

According to Müller-Pohle (1982): 'The neologism Transformance (transforma-tion/performance) designates', the active but optically impassive intervention in the space-time-continuum.' For the production of this body of work, Müller-Pohle took 10,000 photographs while in motion and without looking through the viewfinder. The black and white images depict a range of subjects with motion blur. In some cases, one may see what looks like human silhouettes (fig. 1). Other photographs seem to show fragments of objects without leaving sufficient recognizable traces of the reality that revealed itself to the camera lens. In 1983, Müller-Pohle published the series in his book *Transformance*. An essay by philosopher Vilém Flusser (1983), also included in the book, explains that Müller-Pohle 'freed' the camera from the photographer's aesthetic choices in order to demonstrate that most circulating images of the time, the so-called 'normal (in a way "doc-umentary") photographs, attempt to hide their "arti-ficiality", their programmed nature, and pretend that it is the world itself which is represented on their surfaces'. Instead, 'Müller-Pohle's photographs', argues

Flusser, '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' (1983, n.p.).

Figure 1. Andreas Müller-Pohle, 'Transformance 3590', gelatin silver print, 1980. Courtesy of the artist.

In spite of such claims of objectivity, Müller-Pohle certainly made a number of crucial subjective choices during the production process. He decided to take exactly 10,000 images, while moving, and without looking through the viewfinder. Furthermore, he chose where to go to take the photographs, when to press the shutter, and which of the 10,000 photographs would be included in the final series. In this regard, it is evident that Müller-Pohle was in full control of the final art product. It is, however, his visual commentary on Cold War ideologies that is most relevant here. By addressing the lack of freedom in the perception of consumer culture imagery, Müller-Pohle challenged the visual principles embraced, nurtured, and perpetuated by capitalist ideology in the Western world of the 1980s.

And yet, similar ideas and photographic styles to those advanced by Müller-Pohle also arose in parts of the Eastern Bloc at the same time. While Müller-Pohle was concerned with the nature of 'capitalist imagery', art photographers on the other side of

the Iron Curtain turned to similar concepts and practices to contest the visual forms offered by state-generated communist propaganda (the flip side of advertising). Although eventually, especially in post-communist Czechoslovakia and beyond, all the photographers who adhered to these types of art photography practices had become known as 'Visualists', after Müller-Pohle's term, they often followed photographic theories that originated in the Eastern Bloc, more specifically in Czechoslovakia and Poland.

A few months after Müller-Pohle published his article on Visualism, Czechoslovakian photographer and lecturer Bořek Sousedík (1980) introduced his theory of 'Opsognomy' 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.[1] By 1980, Czechoslovakia had subjected to normalization for over a decade. After the arrival of Soviet troops in Prague in 1968 and the 1969 establishment of harsh totalitarianism by President Gustáv Husák, the conditions for artists and intellectuals became especially difficult (Dufek 2008a). As I noted earlier, censorship mechanisms became more hostile and the possibility of maintaining artistic autonomy had to be carefully defended. In this scenario, Sousedík's concept of 'Opsognomy' came to celebrate the importance of the photographer's individual – and irreparable – experience in the production process. According to Sousedík (1980), it is thanks to the photographer's ability to understand reality that nature's authentic attributes arise within the photographic frame. The external qualities of the object depicted are of lesser importance. The photographer (or 'opsognomy creator') perceives optical pictures as sensory forms, not as mere physical objects (Sousedík, personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Despite the fact that Sousedík was unaware of Müller-Pohle's Visualism at that point, his thesis on Opsognogmy shared many of its defining characteristics (Pospěch 2012, 39). Similarly to Müller-Pohle, Sousedík emphasized the power of photography to achieve a genuine perception of reality, arguing that it is able to make the unknown (the invisible) visible through photographic means. Contrary to Müller-Pohle, however, Sousedík (1980) believed that the photographer – and not the 'autonomous' camera – is central to this process. The term 'Opsognomy' is formed by the conjunction of the ancient Greek words 'opsis' (vision) and 'gnóme' (thought). According to this theory,

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[1] Note that although the author refers to the concept as 'Opsognomy', it can also be found in literature as 'Opsognomie'. See, for example, Pospěch (2012).

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 nevertheless be the product of spontaneity and constitute 'inevitable choices' (because certain reality at a precise moment in time is regarded as highly significant). Above all, photographers must let go of the need to place the attributes of the depicted subject at the center of the photograph's meaning. What is important for Sousedík is the personal momentum; the mood of perception at a given time, which moves the photographer to engage in the process of picture-making.

To understand the practical implications of the theory, it is helpful here too to discuss the kinds of photographs that Sousedík produced at the time. His conception of photography puts emphasis on the individual experience of the photographer rather than on the social experience of the depicted subjects. Fragile, volatile actions often take place at the edges of the images that he captured when following his theoretical ideas, while the stillness of other accompanying elements in each picture govern the majority of the representational space in his photographs. Children are frequently the human protagonists in those images. At least to some extent they reflect his wish to reference (ephemeral) childhood; a plea for innocence in the interpretation of the visual world. The presence of children and their depiction as 'weightless' figures could also be understood as an escape strategy from adult pressures that often arise under difficult economic and social living conditions. Moreover, the majority of Sousedík's photographs from that time period reflect dream-like aesthetics, which he achieved by means of motion blur and soft focus. This distinct visual effect may well represent an ideal constructed reality where actions occur fluently, free of any social judgments or prejudices.[2]

Sousedík's ideas had a great deal of influence on the work of his fellow artists studying at the People's Conservatory of Ostrava. However, it was actually the theory of 'Elementary Photography', developed by Polish artist Jerzy Olek from 1984, that was most influential for like-minded Czechoslovakian photographers who sought to find a way to show reality through visual means other than those offered by the communist regime.

In 1983 the communist government in Poland abolished martial law, only, however, after incorporating all martial law restrictions into the general legal system,

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[2] See, for example, Sousedík's photograph 'Untitled, Kimklovice, 1981', in Dufek (2008a).

which in practice meant no effective progress on civil rights. Nonetheless, three waves of political amnesties followed this decision, the most significant of which was granted in 1986. In this scenario, Jerzy Olek instigated his theory in search of alternative ways to visualize reality. Elementary Photography promised a 'pure' and 'free' way of sensing and seeing, encouraging photographers to give their own personal meaning to the surrounding world.

Raised in the avant-garde tradition, Olek claims to have been highly influenced by German 'New Objectivity' and American 'Straight Photography'. From the 1970s onwards, he became interested in the tradition of Japanese puristic aesthetics and the American minimalist concepts developed by Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt during the 1960s (Jerzy Olek, personal communication, July 31, 2016). The different terms used by Olek to define his conception of the medium demonstrate his determination to reformulate the autonomy of the photograph:

> 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. (1995b, 75)

In his manifesto of 1984, Olek emphasized the need to reach a self-referential identity of the photographic image. To achieve such a mission, 'one must look not through photography but into photography' (Olek 1995c, 67). According to Olek, although in its making any photograph must initially relate to a concrete object, the very same object 'turns into a sign in the photograph; a separate symbol which reflects the viewer's deepest self-consciousness' (1995c, 68). Elementary Photography, Olek explains, is an attempt to explore ways to make photographs that refer to themselves and not to their referent.

Olek's essay 'Being-not-being' from 1986 deepens his theory. Here he explains his ideas through a didactic tone. The camera, as he clarifies, is merely a mechanical instrument that transmits 'towards the object and back, the photographer's way of seeing the world' (Olek 1995a, 88). This instrument, Olek's explanation continues, allows photographers to choose particular fragments of a reality that otherwise surrounds them. The photographer himself or herself then constitutes a second instrument – of cognition. Thus, the photograph she or he makes becomes a useful

vehicle of communication, as it enables a reflection of the photographer's mystical experience into the objectified image, turning the verbally inexpressible readable by visual means. However, Olek argues that in order to connect what can be seen to thought, photographers must contemplate the reality in front of them and become fully aware of their own existence within it. If successful, this contemplative state of inspirational forms enables an effective expression of an 'hyper-individual-reality' (Olek 1995a, 88).

In his 1988 article 'Minimal, Visual, Elementary' (1995b Olek further clarifies his idea of Elementary Photography, stating that: 'Photography is an object, conscious of nothing except itself, an object minimal in its form, visual in its representation and elementary in its ideology' (Olek 1995b, 74). Its separateness from reality, he explains, allows the presence of an alternative representation that moves away from the literal and beyond the visually expected. Photography as art is then turned into a never-ending expedition in 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' (Olek 1995b, 74). In short, the traditional objectifying characteristics of the medium of photography are replaced in Elementary Photography by an exercise of unrestricted experience, free perception, and representation of the unknown.

Text often accompanies Olek's photographs from the 1980s. In his 1986 series *White Space*, he depicts fragments of structures against a white background (fig. 2). 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 with the recognizable elements in view. The author seems to invite viewers to pay attention to apparently missing information. There appears to be a need to go beyond obvious appearances and point toward that that is somehow hidden or out of sight, but that nevertheless the author considers equally relevant to the visible objects depicted. A similar reading can be drawn from Olek's series 'The Revealed World is Not Real' from 1988 (figs. 3–4), where the photographs depict abstract compositions of different objects and human silhouettes. The caption then seems to suggest that the world as it is often visually revealed does not correspond to reality, because 'the real' (according to his Elementary theory) can only be understood subjectively from the perspective of each individual observer.
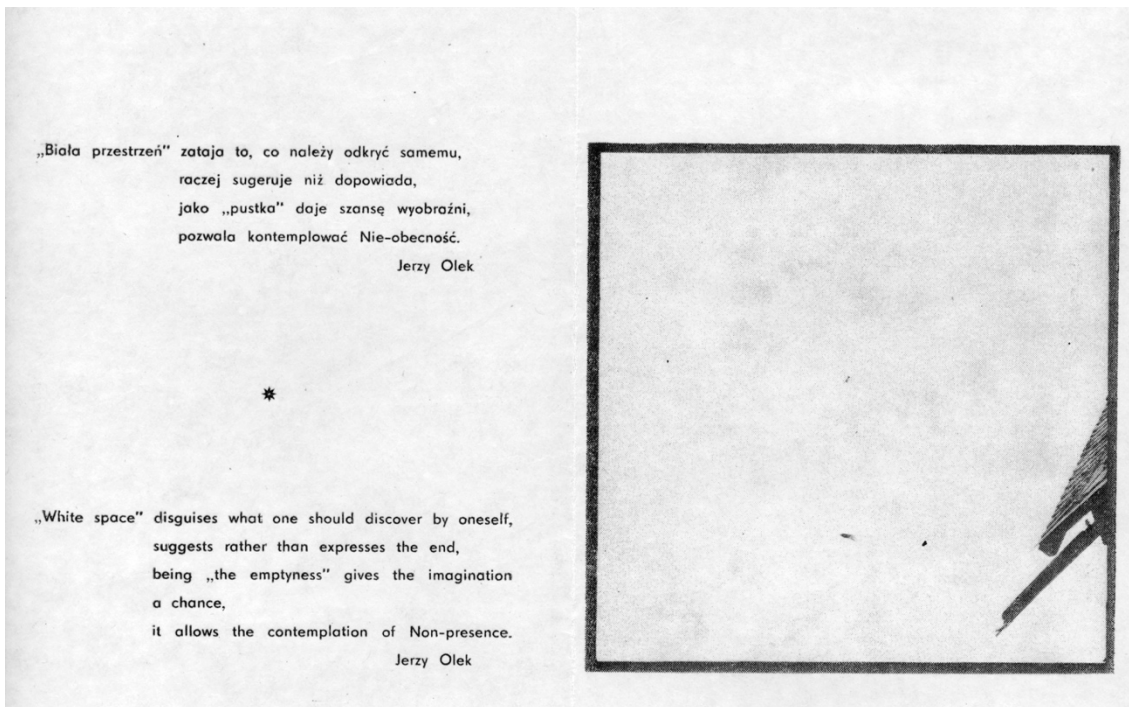
Figure 2. Jerzy Olek, 'Untitled', from the series *White Space*, gelatin silver print, 1986. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3. Jerzy Olek, 'Untitled', from the series *The Revealed World is not Real*, gelatin silver print, 1988. Courtesy of the artis

Figure 4. Jerzy Olek, 'Untitled', from the series *The Revealed World is not Real*, gelatin silver print, 1988. Courtesy of the artist.

In both examples, it is clear that Olek intended to put the photographer's experience of the world first. He repeatedly insists that it is necessary to acknowledge the photographer's 'free' individual perspective, which might only be achieved through deep contemplation. Olek's Elementary theory thus makes two key suggestions. The first is that, when taking pictures, photographers enjoy total autonomy to experience the visual world in a personal and unrepeatable way. The second is that the exercise of such autonomy would lead them to discover the unseen, the previously misunderstood, and reveal the true meaning of reality. We might argue that the exercise of contemplation to which Olek constantly refers in his theory could in practice be an exercise of questioning, of doubting; of no longer taking things for granted and believing only what they appear to be at first sight. In this sense, the examination of the photographer's 'surrounding visual world' might actually equate to a reflection of the political status quo. By believing in one's own ability to freely examine what otherwise seems to be a given condition, the individual will discover their power to understand 'the present truth' and work freely on its 're-presentation'. To put it another way, it will enable the

individual to know, start to disbelieve, then observe carefully from their free individual perspective and unleash the truth. If successful, they would finally be in a position to rebuild reality and grant it their very own (and thus veridical) meaning.

While Olek's position might indeed sound as programmatic as the desire that determined the scopic regime of the Soviet state, in this case the 'meaning' attributed to the visual world emerges individually from each person rather than unilaterally from the regime that then imposes it on the totality of its citizens by force.

But as emancipatory as Olek's ideas might be, it is evident that achieving a complete autonomy in the understanding of the visual world is highly complicated, if not totally impossible. His theory, however, fulfils the mission of inspiring doubts about how reality is presented by the regime and invites the viewer to expose such questions and elaborate their own responses. At a time when Polish society was finally able to start expressing its most immediate concerns more openly, Olek's theory of Elementary Photography appeared – as a pedagogical program – to encourage and elaborate the freedom of expression through visual means. And it is precisely here that Olek's theory seemed to meet the motivations of like-minded Czechoslovakian photographers of the 1980s.

Elementary Photography and the Emancipation of Photographic Vision in Czechoslovakia

In a 2016 interview, Jerzy Olek explained how his theory of Elementary Photography gained prominence amongst a variety of Czechoslovakian photographers in the 1980s (personal communication, July 31, 2016). Between 1984 and 1989 Olek propagated his theory through his work at his gallery, Foto-Medium-Art in Wrocław. Founded by the artist in 1977, the gallery served an important role in the dissemination of art and photography theory until the end of communist rule. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Olek often travelled to Prague in search of artists whose works would fit into the scope of the exhibitions he installed in his gallery back in Poland. During those years, he became acquainted with curators Anna Fárová – who was very active in popularizing 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 his visits to Prague, Olek also met several Czechoslovakian photographers whose practices were close to his ideas on

the function of art photography. Before developing his theory of Elementary Photography, he invited Czech photographer Jaroslav Andél to organize an exhibition at Foto-Medium-Art in 1979. The show was entitled *Places and Moments* and featured leading Czechoslovakian conceptual artists who used photography as their main medium, including Anděl, Dalibor Chatrny, Michal Kern, Jiři Kovanda, Jan Mlčoch, Rudolf Sikora and Petr Štembera, among others (Jerzy Olek, personal communication, July 31, 2016). It is important to point out that Conceptual Art in normalized Czechoslovakia was perceived as a highly subversive artistic style. Although the authorities were largely unable to understand the critical message underlying such work, activities run by conceptual artists had to take place in secret, in isolated spaces (Morganová 2012: 24–25). In this sense, the possibility of working together in a gallery space like Photo-Media-Art in Poland constituted a rare and highly valued opportunity for these Czechoslovakian artists.

The political situation in Poland in the 1980s was more relaxed compared to that in Czechoslovakia. The situation allowed for a greater autonomy of artistic production and Polish alternative culture flourished, especially during the 1980s. Some quality art magazines like *Projekt* and *Fotografia* were published there and distributed to other countries of the Bloc (Jerzy Olek, personal communication, July 31, 2016). As argued by Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (2009: 286), from 1956 onwards abstract and modern art was often shown in official venues in Poland. From 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. Even some venues that operated within 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 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 toward the Polish regime's policies. As a consequence, claims the author, many artists in Poland developed a conformist position and agreed to respect those limits in order to maintain public support. Poland thus consolidated itself as a substitute for the West, for artists who were interested in international exchange. Czechoslovakian and Hungarian artists frequently travelled to Łódź and Warsaw, where they could show their artworks freely,

attend exhibition openings, and acquire books and magazines banned in their home countries.

As Jerzy Olek recounts, despite being in touch with oppositional artists from Czechoslovakia who showed their work in his Foto-Medium-Art gallery, he never had any trouble from the Polish authorities. Between 1986 and 1989, his relationship with Czechoslovakian photographers intensified, as he organized a series of collective shows on Elementary Photography and numerous solo exhibitions showcasing works of photographers from Czechoslovakia. In addition, a program 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 were Jan Svoboda, Josef Moucha, Petr Faster, Štěpán Grygar and Miroslav Machotka (Jerzy Olek, personal communication, July 31, 2016). 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.

Some of the Czechoslovakian photographers whose work was repeatedly identified with a style aimed at challenging photographic vision of the country in the 1980s include Miroslav Machotka, Štěpán Grygar, Karel Kameník and Jorsef Moucha. Although a few of them participated in collective exhibitions that directly denoted Müller-Pohle's concept of Visualism – such as *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 – they were not part of any concrete group that officially embraced the term as an accurate descriptor of their endeavors. It is therefore difficult to argue for the inclusion of their work in the realm of Visualism, 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, Czechoslovakian surrealist photography, subjective practices, and Jerzy Olek's Elementary Photography.

One of the most renowned Czechoslovakian photographers to experiment with alternative photographic visions and who largely adopted Olek's proposition when the two met in the mid 1980s is Miroslav Machotka. In his earlier work, Machotka mainly attempted to mimic the activity of street photographers. Going out on the streets of Prague in the search for his static scenes, the objective realities that he captured on film were secondary in the viewer's perception to the subjective realities that his

photographs made manifest. Each of his photographic images resembles a tense conversation between two or three visual elements. Through the juxtaposition, comparison, or disconnection of shapes and textures, Machotka's photographs depict a world where the logic of geometry loses its *raison d'être*. The ambiguity arises at times from an apparent lack of rationality in the object's geometry. On other occasions, visual elements are organized in the image through a carefully constructed composition that frames the reality encountered by the photographer as absurd, thus rendering the picture a critical commentary on the arbitrary functioning of the 'normalized' order in the country (fig. 5). The structures and textures that Machotka brought together in each of these images are nonfigurative, however. By themselves they were not meant to betray any symbolic meanings nor to form metaphors. Instead, Machotka wished to confront his viewers with photographs that could communicate his own perception of the realities that he encountered and lead them to question the arbitrary organization of the familiar.
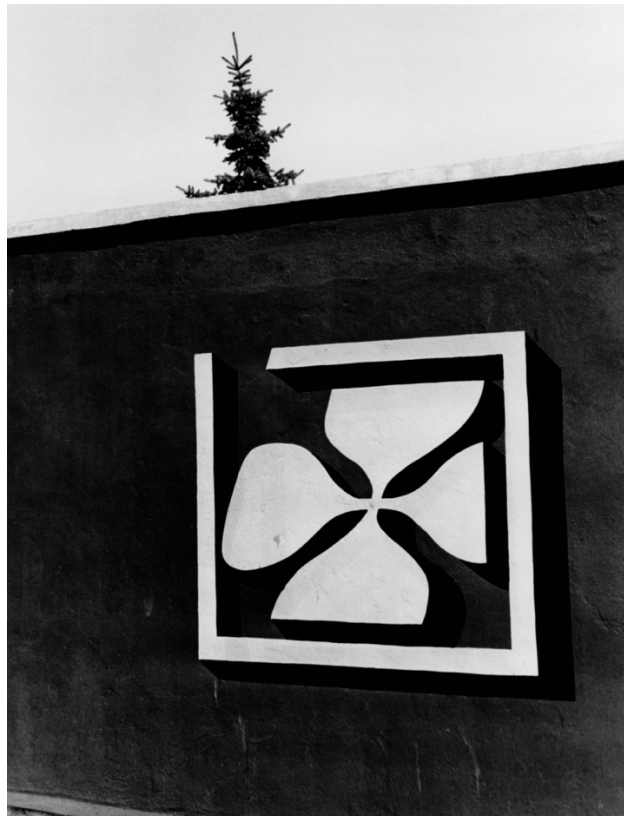

Figure 5. Miroslav Machotka, 'Untitled', gelatin silver print, 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

From 1980 onwards, Machotka's exploration began achieving an even greater sophistication. Following on from constructivist aesthetics, he began paying more attention to the dynamic organization of geometrical forms in the visual field (fig. 6). Cropped sections of the scenes photographed give the illusion of two-dimensionality and guide the viewer's perception to infinite spaces placed elsewhere, outside the frame. The forms captured by his camera both 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 served Machotka to continue to project his peculiar vision of spaces in identifiable places.
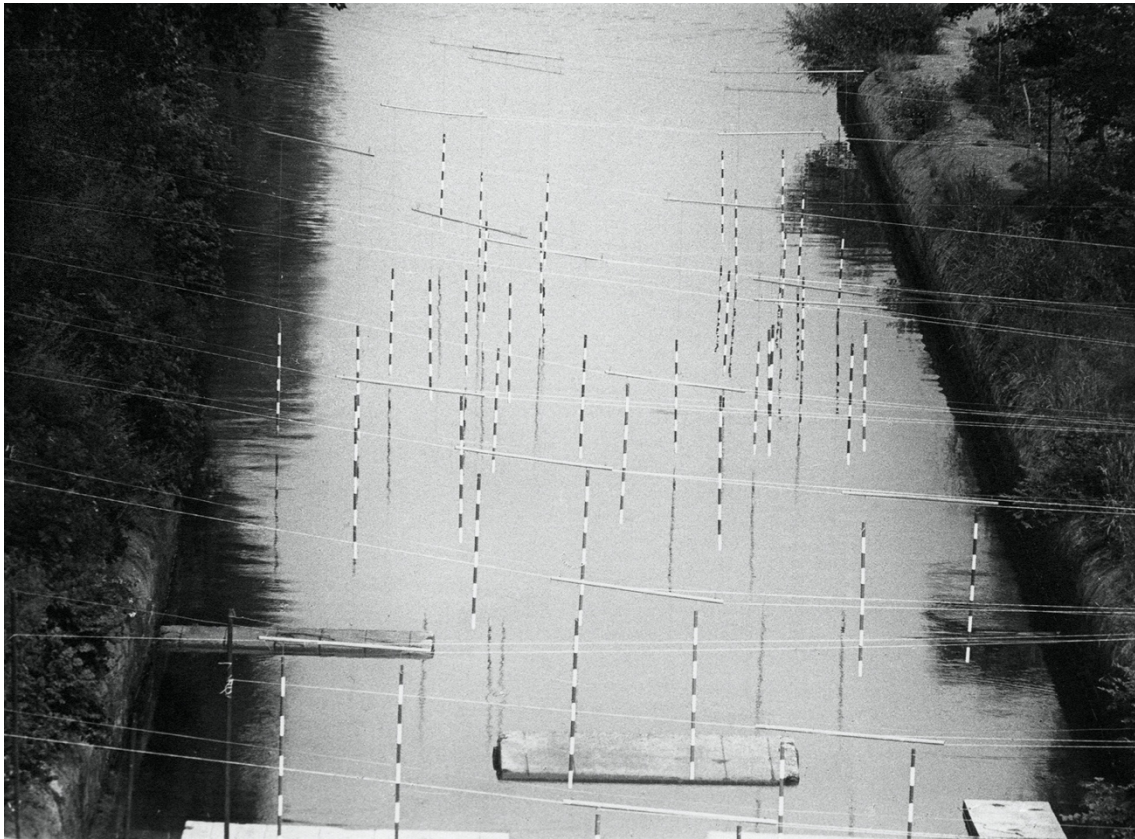

Figure 6. Miroslav Machotka, 'Untitled', gelatin silver print, 1981. Courtesy of the artist.

At times Machotka's photographs were made in environments explicitly affected by the activities of the country's communist regime. In 1981, for example, 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 shortwave to broadcast (fig. 7). None of Machotka's photographs, however, were intended as visual records of any concrete actions performed by the state (Miroslav Machotka, personal communication, November 21, 2014). Rather, much of his work from this period recorded the repressive atmosphere that he felt as a citizen in the country.

Figure 7. Miroslav Machotka, 'Untitled', gelatin silver print, 1981. Courtesy of the artist.

Machotka's work did indeed have many of the defining qualities of Elementary Photography proposed by Olek in his 1984 manifesto. In the mid-1980s, Machotka became acquainted with Olek and the activities of Foto-Medium-Art gallery in Wroclaw. He started attending various meetings and workshops with fellow Czechoslovakian photographers that took place regularly at Olek's country house in Poland, and between 1986 and 1989 he participated in a series of exhibitions on 'Elementary Photography' that Olek organised in his gallery. In 1986, as part of the

series, Machotka had a solo show in which he exhibited his work under the title *Events and Places.* In the artist's statement he wrote for the exhibition catalogue, Machotka argued that:

> 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. (1986, n.p.)

An evocative photograph that Machotka made three years later, in 1989, helps to clarify the relationship between his photographic mindset and the reality that surrounded his existence (fig. 8). It was taken from inside a building, with the camera positioned behind a door that leads directly to the street outside. A rope tightens from side to side impeding the exit to the exterior, where fragments of other individuals appear. The rope, however, has two knots that seem easily releasable. Machotka depicts the scene from a head down perspective, as if waiting for someone else to come and resolve the restrictive situation. The photograph thus connotes the historical moment in which it was taken, when the vast majority of Czechoslovakian citizens were impatiently waiting for the weakening Berlin Wall to collapse.

Figure 8. Miroslav Machotka, 'Untitled', gelatin silver print, 1989. Courtesy of the artist.

Another Czech photographer who was involved in the activities organized in Olek's gallery in the 1980s was Štěpán Grygar. One of his most celebrated images was taken the night of St Nicolas Day in Prague. The photograph shows people celebrating the festivity in the streets of Prague (fig. 9). Shot from above, this image breaks completely with the stylistic rules that governed official social documentary photographs used by the regime. In the latter, the gaze of every single subject had to face the camera, which was usually placed pointing upwards, in an attempt to magnify the importance of those being photographed (be it a politician, worker, or revolutionary hero). Using a sharp focus and a well thought-through composition, the subjects of these official images often posed, staying still and offering their best performance. Grygar's photograph, instead, using a down-facing point of view, motion blur and fragmented composition, hides the identity of the subjects depicted, who act with total spontaneity, unaware of their presence inside the photographic frame. It is here that his work comes close to the notion of Elementary Photography, as it moves away from the descriptive qualities of the media and appears to communicate the photographer's perceptive experience at the moment the photograph is made.

Figure 9. Štěpán Grygar, 'Untitled (St Nicholas Day, Prague)', gelatin silver print, 1981. Courtesy of the artist.

A Fresh Vision for a New Order

The theories of Visualism, Opsognomy, and Elementary Photography share similar ideas with regard to the assumed ability of photographers to entice different visual orders to that sanctioned by the (political) powers in charge. Each of them, however, puts the emphasis on different aspects of the creative process. In Müller-Pohle's Visualism, the photographer must forget about any externally imposed connotation of the visual world. Sousedík's Opsognomy stresses the intuitive attitude of the photographer as key to authentic perception. And Jerzy Olek's theory of Elementary Photography insists on the necessity of deeply contemplating reality from the particular perspective of the photographer, with the aim of questioning all given conditions of their visual field and rediscovering alternative meanings of such reality. Evidently, the three theories have much in common with modernist photographic styles that aim to offer a so-called new vision of the surrounding world. While, however, the latter emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and emphasized the technical possibilities of the medium to achieve optic views of the world, the theories of Visualism, Opsognomy and Elementary Photography were interested in heightening the credibility of the photographer's vision of this world.

Among the three theories discussed, Jerzy Olek's Elementary Photography was clearly the most important for Czechoslovakian practitioners who took an interest in contesting the worldviews propagated by the communist state in the 1980s. Olek's all-round work as a creator, theoretician, curator, and pedagog had an important impact in the development of Czech art photography during the last decade of Czechoslovakian normalization, as it helped to open both the political frontiers and artistic borders that these practitioners faced in times of normalization.

While Czechoslovakia has never seen an official group of 'visualist' or 'elementarist' photographers, it is important to note that the term 'Visualism' was often already in use in the 1980s as a common reference to the work of some Czechoslovakian photographers who dedicated their practice to the exploration of alternative ways of capturing the real during the last decade of normalization in the country. In his 1983 essay, 'The Term Visualism Means…', curator Antonín Dufek, for example, uses Müller-Pohle's thesis in relation to the work of Czechoslovakian photographer Štěpán Grygar, who later became one of the country's leading art photographers. First acknowledging the resemblance of Visualism to subjective documentary photography, Dufek (1983: 2) then offers his definition of the term 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'. According to Dufek, some of the common characteristics of photographs that can be classified under the term 'Visualism' include: 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; and difficult legibility or deconstructed compositions.

The circulation and adoption of the term in Czechoslovakia of the 1980s reveals local awareness of and some level of conformity to so-called Western photographic theory. However, although historically inaccurate, the continuous use of the term with reference to photographic works made by such photographers who sought out ways to engage with the political realities that prevailed in the country in the 1980s but without simply recording them directly appears even more significant. This is because it demonstrates the perception of such works as negotiations with 1980s communist politics of vision. Indeed, in the 2008 exhibition *The Third Side of the Wall*, which opened on November 14, 2008, at the Moravian Gallery in Brno and showcased the work of over 150 photographers from the period of normalization, curator Antonín Dufek dedicated a section to 1980s Czechoslovakian photography that he identified as part of the style of Visualism. Some of the photographers whose work was associated with this approach were Štěpán Grygar, Miroslav Machotka, Pavel Šešulka and Otaka Matušek. As Dufek (2008a) explains in the exhibition catalogue, the show intended to avoid the traditionally used dichotomy of photography 'in favor' and 'against' the regime, and to highlight instead the role they played in the photographers' attempts to preserve self-respect under the regime's repressive ideological mechanisms.

The work developed by the so-called Czechoslovakian 'visualist' photographers during the 1980s appeared highly innovative at the time. They cultivated a style that broke completely not only with the politics of vision applied by the communist regime but also with more traditional art photography practices that did not adhere to official politics either, such as social documentary photography. In this sense, Olek's work (both theoretical and didactic) seems crucial to understanding the progression in the work of 'visualist' photographers in Czechoslovakia toward an entirely subjective approach to the depiction of reality. Endeavoring to represent their individual experiences and state of mind, their photographs were free of any evident subversive hint at the same time as, in artistic circles, they were understood as clear celebrations of

individual freedom that signalled the decline of the communist power in Czechoslovakia of the 1980s.

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