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**Towards an Emancipation of Photographic Vision: 'Visualism',
'Opsognomie' and 'Elementary Photography'
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*Towards an Emancipation of Photographic Vision:
‘Visualism’, ‘Opsognomie’ and ‘Elementary Photography’.*

During the decade of the 80s, three different photographers from the Federal Republic of Germany, former Czechoslovakia and Poland, articulated a series of similar theories aiming for a ‘new’, free vision of ‘the real’, with the purpose of producing a contemplative reflection of their surrounding world through visual means.

The first to publish his method in 1980 was German photographer Andreas Müller-Pohle, whose ‘Visualist’ theory explains how the detachment of conventional signifiers is key to deepen into the ‘true nature’ of our surrounding world. Only few months after, the Czech Bořek Sousedík published for the first time his theory ‘Opsognomie’, which stresses the intuitive attitude of the photographer as a key element to reach ‘authentic perception’. Finally in Poland, it was artist Jerzy Olek who developed his program on ‘Elementary Photography’ between 1984 and 1989, with the aim of exploring which ways of ‘making’ could lead to complete the autonomy of the photograph from the depicted object. As I intend to discuss, the relation between these theories and the particular context of art production present in each of these countries becomes key to understanding the meaning of their work. I will argue that the rise of these photographic styles, which have their roots in the development of a so-called ‘subjective view’ during the 1920s and the 1930s, evidences a turning point in the development of art photography in East-Central Europe, as it progressively moved from a ‘representative’ function of the medium into a pseudo-conceptualist practice.

Visualism

Following a chronological order, I shall start by discussing the work of German photographer Andreas Müller-Pohle, whose article ‘Visualism’, was published in 1980 in the newly launched *European Photography* magazine. 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 tend to describe reality from a 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 free perception and the imposed understanding of such reality. But in order to understand how this ‘new vision’ might be achieved, let’s have a look at the photographic work the author was producing when his programme on ‘Visualism’ was first published.

In his series, ‘Transformance’ (produced between 1979 and 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 that are practically impossible to read. In some cases, we can see what looks like human silhouettes. 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.²

From this practical exercise, it might be deduced that he intended 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. Although the resulting visual effect of the process might be different than that obtained through a ‘controlled’ use of the camera, 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. In effect, the possibility of looking at the world through a brain that is absolutely free from any visual reference appears rather

¹ See Müller-Pohle, A., ‘Visualism’, in *European Photography*, No3, 1980, pp. 4-10

² See entire series in the artist’s website <http://muellerpohle.net/projects/transformance/>

unlikely in neurological terms. Exercises in this direction – which had already been 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

A similar creative method was envisaged by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky over sixty decades before, which although was conceived for literary purposes, it could potentially aid artists working with any medium. As explained in his essay ‘Art as Device’ from 1917⁴, every day perception of the objects translates into an automatism that prevents us from sensing reality.⁵ 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’.⁶ 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.

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 critique 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.

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 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

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

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

Opsognomie

A few months after the publication of Müller-Pohle's article on 'Visualism', Czech photographer 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.⁷ Despite Sousedík's unawareness of 'Visualism' theory at that point, his thesis on 'Opsognomie' shared many of its defining points.⁸ Like Müller-Pohle, Sousedík emphasised the power of photography to achieve a genuine perception of reality, as it is able to make the 'unknown' 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.⁹

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 chosen reality enables the miraculous appearance of nature's unknown attributes within the photographic frame.¹⁰ But in order to better understand the practical applications of this theory, it would also be helpful to have a look at the kind of work Sousedík produced during that time.

Like some of Müller-Pohle's 'visualist' images, Sousedík's photographs often depict human silhouettes in motion. This might respond to his aim of rendering the shot as

⁷ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

⁸ Pospěch, T., 'Visualism and its Notion of Photography as Photography', in *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones*, n13, 2012, p. 39

⁹ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

¹⁰ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

spontaneous as possible, which leaves little time to adjust the camera's shutter speed.¹¹ 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 frightening mood. Moving subjects are often about to enter threatening spaces, produced by means of cast shadows, cropped structures or spectral landscapes. 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 1956.¹² 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. This approach to the 'taking' of the photograph is also very similar to the creative process followed by surrealist artists. The spontaneous attitude which produces 'inevitable choices' in the depiction of an 'inevitably significant reality' or the 'miraculous appearance of nature', are well-known attributes of surrealist photography. But here again, what is most relevant about his thesis is not so much its novelty as a photographic style but rather the context in which it was conceived.

By 1980, Czechoslovakia had been living under the repressive period of 'Normalisation' for over a decade. Since the arrival of Soviet troops to Prague in 1968 and the establishment of harsh totalitarianism in 1969, the conditions for artists and intellectuals turned especially tough.¹³ Censorship mechanisms became more hostile and the possibility of maintaining one's artistic autonomy had to be carefully defended. In this scenario, where art subjectivity had turned highly suspicious, Sousedík's program 'Opsognomie' came to celebrate the importance of the photographer's individual experience in the production process. According to the author, it is the

¹¹ 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'.

¹² 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.

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

photographer's 'knowing' that is capable of raising nature's authentic attributes within the photographic frame.¹⁴ 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.

Elementary Photography

Jerzy Olek's ideas in relation to what he called 'Elementary Photography' were developed between 1984 and 1989, with the aim of reformulating the autonomy of the photograph. In his manifesto of 1984, Olek 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'.¹⁵ 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, (quote) 'turns into a sign in the photograph; a separate symbol which reflects the viewer's deepest self-consciousness' (end of quote).¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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'.¹⁸ 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 the '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

¹⁴ Sousedík, B., *Exhibition of Photographs Between Authenticity and Iconicity*, Prague: Fotografia, 1980

¹⁵ 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

¹⁶ 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

¹⁷ Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, p. 68.

¹⁸ Olek, J., 'Being-not-being', in *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Art and Culture Center of Wrocław, 1995, p88, The original text is dated in 1986

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'.¹⁹

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. 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.

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.²⁰ 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 to exercise this freedom of expression through visual means.

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

¹⁹ Olek, J., *The Dimensionlessness of Illusion*, p. 88

²⁰ Crampton, R. J., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 380

action of photographing in order to permeate the image with the viewer's self-consciousness. It is evident that all these ideas have much in common with modernist principles 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 theories might well be put in question, the socio-political context in which each of them was conceived holds major relevance.

Most revealing however is the fact that these three theories were envisaged nearly simultaneously in three different countries with a rather different political and social context. In my opinion this demonstrates that there was an evident synergy floating in the photography arena of the 80s in East-Central Europe. Just as it had previously occurred during the interwar period with Russian Formalism, German New Objectivity or American Straight Photography, very similar debates were again taking place when the political situation in Eastern and Central Europe was about to suffer another radical shift. The ambition of Muller-Pohle, Sousedik and Olek to reach true perception demonstrates a recurrent believe that tends to emerge during convulsive times of our history and which defends the unique ability of the photographic medium to disclose aspects of our world that remain invisible to the naked eye. And I am inclined to think that this will continue to constitute the never-ending search on the meaning of photography and the photograph. But like any magic trick, I am also afraid that its secret might never be disclosed.