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They Came. An Introduction to the History
of Liminal Photography

Who knows whether, in American eyes, an expedition to Russia might not be less clear-cut than flight to the moon. On the moon, you can jauntily hoist a star-spangled banner, give the camera a wave, take a photo as a memento and, more or less safely, return. The risk of meeting alien life forms is close to zero and ideological neutrality is guaranteed by the cosmic vacuum. A trip to Russia is like a flight to Mars.

So it must have seemed during the interwar years and the Cold War era ... and, to a certain degree, the same holds true today. The remarkable works created by artist of genius Robert Rauschenberg are a report of contact with an alien civilisation and an endeavour to bring about a collision between two societies, cultures and political systems which are light years apart. Admittedly, his pop art collages invoke Constructivist photomontages, but even a deep red is no longer capable of winning anyone over to the Soviet revolution. Created during the nineteen eighties and thus in the empire's dying years, these are works both nostalgic and utopian at one and the same time. On the one hand, they sound the death knell of the American-Soviet war of images and, on the other, they are Rauschenberg's grappling with an archive of photographs brought out from behind the Iron Curtain and, more widely, from his travels around the world. In comparison with photo collages, they seem autonomic and well-nigh modernist. Lightness, control, knowledge of the history of art and photography and, above all, sensitivity can be seen in these photos. They balance on the borders between documentary, journal and that useful study of forms which photography has been for painters since its very birth. There is also an element of tourism here, but of the ambitious kind. With great subtlety and tact, Rauschenberg avoids the intolerable status of the outsider, gaze arrested by the surface of things, but incapable of more profound penetration.

The Robert Rauschenberg exhibition is going on show in the Polish city of Łódź. Somewhere between Moscow and New York, between East and West. This changes the shape of things. It commands reflection; what, in point of fact, are photos brought back from trips, then used and processed by artists and documentarists and what, in point of fact, are travelling exhibitions of masters of Western art and photography festivals arranged by Western curators? In Poland, which is to say, nowhere, as Alfred Jarry would phrase it. In pursuing the trope of the Rauschenberg exhibition in Łódź, it is possible to discover a whole world of photographs which evade the attention of scholars who are usually focused on narrative, be it universal, for which, read emphasising an Occidental, Anglo-Saxon-French-German hegemony, or be it local, for which, read provincial-national-untranslatable. Extremes attract, but perhaps the time has finally come to look at what lies in between? To look at photographs taken by those passing strangers who have visited us, the indigenous inhabitants of the plain ... but not, when all is said and done, desert ... stretching between East and West. Who, in point of fact, are those visitors? How long ago did they start arriving and how long do they stay? Why do they take photos and what do they photograph? What place do the photos they take hold in their oeuvre and in the history of art/photography? What use do they make of photography? How do they see us and how do they present us? Do they colonise us, hold us in contempt or marvel at us? Do they have any right whatsoever to do so? And what is it, this Central-Eastern-European, Polish and, simultaneously, non-Polish photography?

Photography has been travelling for one hundred and eighty years. The views photographed from a window by Nicéphore Niépce or the Parisian boulevards captured by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre are the heralds of scientific expeditions, colonial quarrels and tourist jaunts. Photography takes place beyond the studio window. In villages. On the streets. Out in the world. That is precisely the photography which interests me. The difference is, that I look at

photos and think about the travellers who took the shots of my village, my street, my world. A photo snapped 'there' is far less engrossing than one snapped 'here'. There is no sense in yet again analysing the photographs taken by local documentarists and photojournalists, let alone by the legions of amateur enthusiasts setting out to tackle the topic of their homeland. The traveller's photography interests me, but not the tourist's. Mass tourism is a separate issue. All those Polish-Americans visiting their families, Germans visiting the former East Prussia and Gdańsk, Silesia and Wrocław, British stag groups partying the weekend away in Krakow and tours from Israel taking in both that city's ancient Jewish quarter in the historical Kazimierz district and Auschwitz-Birkenau. More than one treasure could undoubtedly be picked out from this vernacular ocean, but looking at Robert Rauschenberg's photos, I know that what interests me is the artist on the road, the artist in quest of, and stepping beyond, the borders of visual and existential experience.

If one gives it some thought, then Rauschenberg is a rare example of an artist who, availing himself of a medium radically different from photography/video in his work, accomplishes such a profound translation of a record he has created into an artistic form entirely his own. Admittedly, Frank Stella was inspired in his painting by photos of synagogues located on Polish soil, but he was only to come and see everything for himself when his exhibition opened at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Examples of artists employing techniques based directly on photographs and videos can more readily be found in film and installation creator Sharon Lockhart, with her Milena, Milena series (2009-2016), Yael Martina, with her And Europe Will Be Stunned film and performance-art trilogy comprising Mary Koszmary (Nightmares) 2007), Wall and Tower (2009) and Assassination (2011), Omar Fast, with Spielberg's List (2003) and Christian Jankowski, arranger of performance art pieces and creator of films, photographic works and objects on the basis of those pieces, as in his Heavy Weight History (2013). It would seem as if Poland no longer has a chance of becoming a plain air site for painters other than the locals. On the other hand, if mention has already been made of artists as far removed from each other as Stella and Jankowski, then maybe the thread can be tugged to bring synagogues into collision with heavyweight history? In this context, Poland and, more widely, Central-East Europe, appears to be a plain air site as much the stuff of nightmares as of inspiration, as in Ori Gerscht's multimedia installations The Forest (2004) and The Clearing (2006) or Christian Boltanski's Les Habitants de Varsovie (2001), pieces dedicated to the victims of the Shoa. Not to mention the journeys taken to the former extermination camps by a number of artists, from Hans Citroen, via Andreas Magdanz, to Georges Didi-Huberman. A journey to Poland and the adjacent countries in search of the vestiges of traumatic history is a liminal experience for the descendants and families of the victims and there really is nothing strange about that. What might be strange is how often that experience is translated into art. However, liminality can also be understood more widely by employing it to describe photography ... and not only in the meaning endowed upon the term by Arnold van Gennep and Victoria Turner when writing about rites of passage and the transitional moment between the stages of development in the individual and in social groups. This is photography carried out between East and West, suspended between the here-and-now and the there-and-then and often more bound up with the memory of events than by way of being an image of events themselves. Liminal, and thus of ambiguous identity and use. Non-canonical and unorthodox, transborder, oscillating between a limes, which is to say, a line, but also a boundary line, and a limin, in other words, a threshold, an obstacle.

Travellers visiting Poland can thus be roughly divided into two categories; artists using photo-

graphy and photographers who, in turn, can be divided into those with artistic aspirations and those who find fulfilment in documentation, photojournalism and other forms more akin to the journalistic arts. It may also be presumed that every visitor has a choice and can either bear in mind their knowledge concerning the topic of the history of the place they have ended up in or discard it. The Second World War and the extermination of Central European and, in particular, Polish Jewry, is a clear dividing line. It is enough to look at the documentation of pre-war Poland created by Louis Arner Boyd or Willem van de Pool in order to discern, without difficulty, that history was not the ruling idea. Even Roman Vishniac, who created a documentary record of the Jews of Poland for YIVO prior to the outbreak of the war, focused on the contemporary and, no matter how attachment to tradition is emphasised, what we find in his photos is the future in the form of Zionist propaganda, rather than an analysis of the past. The Poland of the pre-war years is documented relishing her independence and modernity and striving to catch up with the West in every respect. Proud of it and depicted looking to the future with hope.

An attempt can be made to generalise the conclusions which result from browsing through pre-war photographic books and press publications and through those related to that era. It would seem that the Mitteleuropa of the nineteenth century, split between three empires, did not survive to see its Felice Beato or Alexander Gardner. A province divided, colonised beforehand and only rarely rebelling, was of no interest to the elite powers as they zestfully reached out for photos of Africa, Asia or, in the case of the United States, the Wild West. The region which interests us held the status of an unacknowledged imperial periphery which needed subordinating and, at best, cataloguing. This is the context which should be brought to bear when considering archives such as that created by Imperial-Royal photographer Andreas Groll or the catalogues of far-flung regions, cities, towns and buildings put together by anonymous documentary photographers working for the institutions of the Prussian Civil Service. It took Gavriilo Princip to turn the eyes of the world to the depths of the Central European province but, by then, it was too late for good old, nineteenth-century, travel photography.

Poland thus made her first, timid appearance as a separate photographic theme in world photography in the twentieth century. A heterogenic and fluid being, like the name of the place itself, oft-modified in four languages. A border zone. Like Central-East Europe in its entirety, gathering up a range of new political beings, small, scattered and, above all, remaining in the shadow of two totalitarian regimes growing in power; first the Soviet and, with time, the Nazi. No matter how ghastly it may sound, Hitler and Stalin made a theme for world photography out of our Poland, with their tanks criss-crossing her from West to East and back again. As Janina Struk has so rightly observed, the Nazis perceived the invasion in September 1939 as exotic and set about photographing the subjugated country with a will. The photos taken by those criminals and invaders haunt the textbooks on the history of photography and, to a considerable extent, they define the image of the region and its specificity. But not solely, as is borne out by the photographs taken during the numerous trips made to Poland just before and just after the war by John Vachon, who penetrated much further into the historical fabric than the agency photographers who also came, commissioned by the departments of American organisations bringing aid in the immediate post-war period, and documented the destruction; photographers of the ilk of Robert Capa or photo-taking architect Henry 'Harry' N. Cobb. Vachon is an example illustrating the category of 'photographer who returns', seeking opportunities to tackle a theme anew and delve again into the stories of people met and places encountered. The antithesis of this approach is the one-off visit, brief and itemised; a visit such as that paid by Capa, who, like many a post-war photographer, carried out a commission illustrating the post-war destruction

in Central-East Europe. By way of contrast, Seymour is an example of a return after years of voluntary emigration. Some return briefly and take photographs, some, like Marian Schmidt, for instance, return for good, while some, such as Tadeusz Rolke, Eustachy Kossakowski, Zbigniew Dłubak, Mariusz Hermanowicz and Andrzej Jerzy Lech, amongst others, can scarcely be called emigrants, since they never really severed their ties to their country for once and for all. Others again, like Joanna Helander, for example, remain emigrants and publish their pictures of Poland there, where they have settled. Even if every story is a personal one, when we speak of the shaping of the history of twentieth-century photography, then, in the case of Central-East Poland, we can speak of the inexorable principle of emigration, enforced to a greater or lesser extent. The exodus which began with World War I lasted, to all intents and purposes, until 1989 and, in the eyes of many, such as Josef Koudelka and Bogdan Konopka, for instance, it has never come to an end. The photography of Central-East Europe is photography departing, expelled, expatriated and returning. Like literature, to a certain degree, as Czesław Miłosz remarked in his prefatory essay to Koudelka's *Exiles*.

The next impetus for taking an interest in the region sprang from Solidarity and the election of Karol Wojtyła to the papacy, visible symbols of the decline of the system of Soviet domination. Not by chance did Chris Niedenthal settle in Poland at that time and it was not by chance that Bruno Barbey of Magnum Photos published his books of photographs, *Portrait of Poland* (1979-1981), under a foreign imprint, as did Tomasz Tomaszewski with *Remnants. The Last Jews of Poland* (with Małgorzata Niezabitowska; 1986), or that Bertien van Manen came to photograph Polish women or that the end of the nineteen eighties saw the appearance of Carl de Keyzer, who would return in the mid-nineteen nineties to tackle the topic of the post-communist transformation in *East of Eden* (1996). That interest in the decline of communism is the anticipation of change both epoch-making and epic. The anticipation of the prophesied, and never accomplished, "end of history", which was to mark the absolute triumph of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. It was a theme which interested a number of outstanding artists, all of them independent of one another and all highly significant to the present day; artists such as Allan Sekula, Mark Power, Hannah Collins and Rosalind Salomon, amongst others. At the same time, if de Keyzer, Sekula and Power were primarily interested in the economic transformation, then Collins and Salomon combined that with an interest in the history acting on that change, an interest which resounds in the titles of two series of photos; Salomon's *Polish Shadow* (1988-2003) and Collin's *In the Course of Time* (1996).

Two notable artists, Zoe Leonard and Rineke Dijkstra, took a slightly broader approach to the theme, seeing the changes occurring in Poland within the context of the global economy, but simultaneously treating them more symbolically. Leonard included her photos of shop and trade-emporium windows in her monumental *Analogue* project (1998-2009), while Dijkstra's famous portraits taken on Polish beaches in 1996 became part of her *Beach Portraits* series (1992-2002), which also encompassed Ukraine and the United States.

The Polish context was treated completely differently by Ahlam Shibli in her series focused on children from a care home, *The House Starves When You Are Away*, also known as *Unhoming* (2009). Like Sharon Lockhart, of whom mention was made earlier in this essay, Shibli is interested in the situation and problems of young people, endowing a universal and poetic character upon their struggles with adolescence under extremely unfavourable conditions. *Passengers* (2013), a series of portraits taken by duo Dagmar Keller and Martin Wittwer, appears even less documental and more subjective, with the artists biding their time until the moment when people travelling on public transport in provincial Poland sink into musing and reverie. Taken

without their subjects' knowledge, they form a well-nigh painterly metaphor for existence, a metaphor which is connected to the Polish social and political context in the second decade of the twenty-first century by no more than a slender thread.

All these projects concerning Poland and, often, the region, going through the process of transformation are distinctive both for the consistency with which they are accomplished and for the time devoted to that end, which was associated with weeks and months spent travelling through the territory. It is often a return to Polish roots stretching back for generations, as is the case with Allan Sekula's *Polonia and Other Fables* (2009) or the artist's endeavour to bend their steps toward their own birthplace, as with Misha Komonek's *First Journey Home* (1997). However, results in the form of exhibitions and autonomic books or reportage are only one of the possibilities. Others are represented by Sebastião Salgado, for instance, who also photographed Polish workers and the once great, but now crumbling, industries of the former states of the Soviet bloc, yet incorporated only single photos into his *Workers. An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (1993) project.

Another type of photography, less epic, but even more lyric, comprises single photos and series focused on the photographer's Polish life partner. Apart from the model 'Polish wife' who was the reason that a photographer like Chris Niedenthal faced no quandaries in deciding to remain in the People's Republic and apart from Richard Kern and Craigie Horsfield photographing their Polish wives with exceptional results and travelling to Poland on the proverbial visits to their in-laws, incidental, but interesting, amatory interludes occur. A range of photos can be explained in this way, such as Nan Goldin's *Pawel on the Beach Laughing, Positano, Italy* (1996), Heinz Cibulki's photomontages or the intimate journal of less well-known Austrian photographer Philippe Gerlach, *Gosia* (2010), for instance. This is also interesting, liminal photography, touching upon personal events and intimate experiences. Less intimate in nature are the photos taken by such eminent artists as Wolfgang Tillmans, Jürgen Teller and Torbjørn Rødland, amongst others, during their professional travels through the countries of the region.

Enumerating the names allows us to get a grip on a fundamental issue concerning the status of the photos of the periphery taken by photographers from the centre. How vital are the photos/works to their oeuvre? Do they really not fill out the margins of their work, as well? This is certainly so in the case of individual photos, although here, too, exceptions occur, as in the instance of Dijkstra's most famous shots of the Baltic from her series. When Horsfield's, Collins' and Salomon's series of photos are evaluated on the basis of their authors' return to the region and their publication in book form and exhibitions, then they should, indeed be acknowledged as being pivotal to the artist's oeuvre. The same holds true for the works by Mark Power and duo Dagmar Keller and Martin Wittwer, all of whom have returned repeatedly and even lived in Poland for a number of years. Stories like those of Niedenthal and Nicolas Groszperre, both of whom came to Poland, assimilated and have succeeded in becoming part of the national historical narrative, do occur, albeit rarely.

The photographers and artists discussed in this essay come from Western centres of culture, from London, Berlin, New York, Vienna and Paris. Is Poland only a theme of interest to photographers from the West? A handful of interesting examples can be found amongst the photo-taking representatives of the East. Japanese photographers Takuya Tsukahara and the author of *10 Days in Krakow* (2014), Yuanyuan Yang, who have made repeated visits, stretching back to the nineteen eighties in the case of the former, perceive the region's history and events from a different perspective. At this moment in time, I have difficulty in providing even one convincing example of a photographer from Africa, South America or India who has produced

work on the theme of our region. The exchange between photographers from the states of the region, states which are as close and far removed from one another as the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Poland, is yet another topic. The example of the journeys by photographers' collective Sputnik Photos into what is, to Poles, the exotic territory of Belarus can be contrasted with the photos taken by Czech duo Martin Jasanky and Lukas Polak in Poland, which seems, at the very least, to be equally as strange to our neighbours to the south.

Liminal photography of Central-East Europe is something other than Robert Frank's America. The journey might, perhaps, be similar in nature, but the meanings discovered along the way are quite different. It is more by way of being a journey to the borderlands. The periphery visited by the stars of Western culture in quest of memories, traumas, identities and transformations is something other than a readily and, indeed, predictably undertaken journey from province to centre, from countryside to city. What is to be done with that photography and those images? In general, failing to qualify for the global canon, but also failing to fit the peripheral narratives, they are located in a no man's land. The question as to what America would be without Robert Frank needs reshaping into the question as to what Poland would be without John Vachon, Rineke Dijkstra, Allan Sekula, Hannah Collins Rosalind Salomon, Misha Kominek and many another about whom we still know too little.

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