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## **What Makes 21<sup>st</sup> Century Central and East European Photobooks so Different, so Appealing?**

**Abstract:** If we reflect on the “photobook phenomenon” that has been developing for a quarter of a century, it will lead us to the verification of the research on the subject in Central and Eastern Europe. The following text was directly triggered by the exhibition and catalog: *Photobloc: Central Europe in Photobooks* opened at the International Cultural Center in Krakow in 2019. The subject of the project was the 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Central Europe told in photobooks. However, it seems that in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, Central and Eastern European photobooks attract the attention of researchers and collectors from all over the world, and subsequent nominations and awards confirm their high-quality artistic production. The shift of attention to the present day forces the verification of cognitive categories that are useful for cataloging and evaluating 20<sup>th</sup>-century books. The text is an insight into possible chapters, motifs and narratives concerning photobooks, and so the essay is divided into the following parts: the first deals with a new definition of photobook, the second with a cliché of the otherness of the region, the third is a reassessment of topographic photography, the fourth focuses on issues of history in Central and Eastern Europe, while the fifth and final part is about an intense political atmosphere influencing the production of photobooks. All proposed new chapters are supported by examples of the most important books published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an attempt to create an initial catalog of canonical books, as well as an attempt to answer the title question: what makes contemporary Central European photobooks so different and so attractive?

**Keywords:** contemporary photography; history of photography; photobooks; Central and Eastern Europe; Central and Eastern European art; photobloc.

If we reflect on the “photobook phenomenon” that has been developing for a quarter of a century, it will lead us to the verification of the research on the subject in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The following text was directly triggered by the exhibition and catalog *Photobloc: Central Europe in Photobooks*. The exhibition was curated by Łukasz Gorczyca, Adam Mazur and Natalia Żak, and was opened at the International Cultural Center in Krakow in 2019. Later, it was shown at the Art Museum in Olomouc (2020) and the National Gallery in Vilnius (2021). The subject of the project to which researchers from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany,

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<sup>1</sup> Łukasz Gorczyca and Adam Mazur, eds., *Photobloc: Central Europe in Photobooks* (Krakow: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2019), 11–19.

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Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary were invited, was the 20-century history of Central Europe told in photobooks. Although, in the beginning, 21<sup>st</sup> century books were also intended to be included in the project, the lack of space and the monumental achievements of 20<sup>th</sup> century photobooks meant that, in the end, the present was only acknowledged at the exhibition and in the catalog.

*Photobloc* indirectly questions the continuation of the history told by photo books. Contrary to the words of Vladimir Birgus, who said during a conference in Budapest in October 2021 that Central Europe has lost its attractiveness comparable to the 1990s, it seems that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Central European photobooks attract the attention of researchers and collectors from all over the world, and subsequent nominations and awards confirm their high quality artistic production.<sup>2</sup> The shift of attention to the present day forces the verification of cognitive categories that are useful for cataloging and evaluating 20<sup>th</sup> century books. The geopolitical situation also seems different; therefore, the scope of the research should be changed. While *Photobloc* omitted the already thoroughly researched histories of photobooks published in Germany and German-speaking countries, in the Soviet Union, and also in Yugoslavia, in the case of follow-up, the list of countries should be supplemented with, among others, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to chronology, we can mark the present day in the region around the dates 1989 (the first free elections in Poland) and 1991 (the collapse of the USSR) that delineate the beginning of the region's political transformation. In most countries of the region, the turning point at the end of the post-communist period was accession to the European Union (2004 or 2007). The countries that remain outside the community and at the same time remain important for the region, such as Belarus or Ukraine, require a separate chronology.

The *Photobloc* exhibition was divided into thematic chapters telling the history of the region through sequences of photographs and photobooks. It is essential to propose, based on a query, a new substantive division corresponding to the contemporary Central European identity. The *Photobloc* was divided into six parts: the first chapter presented the idea of the photobook and showed its changes over the decades underlining a complex relation between avant-garde and mainstream production of printed matter. In the second, entitled "Fotografika" ("Photo-graphics") artistic photography was at the center. The third – "Building a New State" – presented their relationship with propaganda, while the fourth – "War and Trauma" – touched upon dark events in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the First and Second World Wars, or the Holocaust. The fifth chapter – "Ordinary Life" – was devoted to everyday life, important for the era of socialism "with a human face". Finally, the sixth – Voice of the

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<sup>2</sup> Discussion took place on 10<sup>th</sup> of October during Artmarket event and was titled: "CREATIVE REFLECTION OR HISTORIC DOCUMENTATION? The role and forms of photographic and artistic documentation of historic turning points – how photography reflected on the last decades of communism in Eastern Europe".

<sup>3</sup> An exception was an essay devoted to books published in the German Democratic Republic, Thomas Wiegand, "The Photobook as Propaganda: The Case of the GDR," in *Photobloc. Central Europe in Photobooks*, ed. by Łukasz Gorczyca and Adam Mazur (Krakow: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2019), 337–46.

Street – described the collapse of the system of Soviet domination and the subsequent political transformation. At first glance, it seems that some of the chapters do not make sense due to the changed historical context. Later in the text, the proposed new chapters will be supported by examples of the most important books published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an attempt to create an initial catalog of canonical books, as well as an attempt to answer the title question – what makes contemporary Central and Eastern European photobooks so different and so attractive?

### **Handbook to the Stars**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the definition of a photobook has changed. On the one hand, avant-garde tradition manifested in printed matter eroded. On the other, the format of the album, which was popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presenting the beauty of nature, culture and art of a given country, region, or city, has disappeared not only in Central Europe. Occasional, business, and artistic albums have also lost their importance. The reasons can be seen in the shift in the mainstream of visual and artistic culture, which has gradually moved to the Internet since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to social media after 2010. The photobook has become a low-circulation print addressed to and kept in circulation for collectors. Once counted in tens of thousands of copies sold, photobooks have given way to artistic editions published in small publishing houses in numbers of copies ranging from several to several hundred. The photobook has become a work of art.

The change in approach to avant-garde printmaking tradition is presented in a book by Hungarian photographer Peter Puklus, *Handbook to the Stars* (2013). It is an originally edited hardcover volume of 300 copies.<sup>4</sup> The surprisingly framed photos fit together when you open and fold two or more books in the right way. Only the installation, planned by Puklus, consisting of a total of thirty-two books presented on the wall, reveals the full artistic meaning of the *Handbook*. The composition of books resembles a stellar constellation.

Another example illustrating the evolution of thinking about photography and art publication rooted in avant-garde tradition is Katia Novitskova's *Post-Internet Survival Guide* (2010).<sup>5</sup> Prepared by an Estonian artist of Russian origin in the form of a PDF file and intended for printing, the book is a collective work based on material found on the Internet. The Guide updates the avant-garde tradition and transfers the experience of the Internet and – more broadly – the post-Internet into publication format. Novitskova's book, a manifesto of post-Internet art, functions as a PISG.pdf file, and, at the exhibitions, is also available as a printed and stapled copy. Novitskova's guide is an example of new methods of production and distribution of publications, which are available on platforms and in online stores of publishing houses, sent directly to the reader and bypassing the bookstores, which were once so important in distribution.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Puklus, *Handbook to the Stars* (Banská Stiavnica: Štokovec, Space for Culture, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Katja Novitskova, *Post-Internet Survival Guide* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2010).

The decline of the book market caused the collapse of large publishing houses specializing in luxurious albums, beautifully bound and printed on fine paper. New publishing houses focus on micro-circulation and work with selected artists. They use the Internet to promote and distribute the books and participate – as the publishing house NoRoutine Books led by a pair of Lithuanian photographers Vilma Samulionyte and Gytis Skudzinskas – in photo and book fairs in Berlin, Paris and London, arriving in this way to a selected but opinion-forming group of recipients and collectors. Books prepared in this way are usually financially supported by the artists themselves, scholarship programs, grants (including ministerial, municipal and university grants), or followers interested in publishing the book. In the latter case, an important role is played by support programs such as kickstarter.com or – in Poland – zrzutka.pl. In this way, funding was obtained, for example, for books by Agnieszka Sejud (*HOAX*) or Rafał Milach (*I Am Warning You*).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, artists do not wait for the support of large publishing houses or institutions and produce their own books in a circulation of one to five copies, which means that – as in the case of Aneta Grzeszykowska's books, e.g., *Album* (2005) or *Iranian Film Stills* (2015) – they become rare and valued works of art.

Another phenomenon developed after 2000, when authors in Central Europe began transferring their book projects to Western publishing houses. Thanks to the competitions for the first editions, artists such as Joanna Piotrowska (*FROWST*) or Ivars Gravlejs (*Early Works*) could prepare their outstanding books.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, publishing houses in London, Berlin or New York support, co-finance and also often expect authors to secure funds for the publication of books, and in return guarantee high quality of printing and international distribution. The collaboration of authors such as Martin Kollar, Peter Puklus or Rafał Milach with publishers from Germany, Great Britain and the United States makes Central Europe a topic constantly present in catalogs, making them visible and promoting other artists from the region. Networking and openness to international cooperation is a sign of the region's integration within the European Union and – more broadly – with the West. At the same time, it should be noted that there is still a persistent asymmetry between the former West and the East. The lack of large fairs and publishing events in Central and Eastern Europe is blatant, as well as the lack of important photobook competitions and publications with a supra-local range. The establishment of a printing house with back-up facilities in the form of bindery, paper and logistics companies, as well as graphic designers and folders is a moderate success, which means that many books in the world circulation are printed, for example, in the well-known and respected Lithuanian printing house Kopa, and graphic designers such as Anna Nałęcka-Milach also edit books by Western authors.

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<sup>6</sup> Agnieszka Sejud, *HOAX* (Wrocław: self-published, 2020). Rafał Milach, *I Am Warning You* (London: GOST Books, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Piotrowska, *FROWST* (London: MACK, 2014), Ivars Gravlejs, *Early Works* (London: MACK, 2015).

## The Real World

The cultural difference of Central and Eastern Europe, which was strongly present in the 1990s in photography and in photobooks, is less intense but still present in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Iconic for the decade after the collapse of the Soviet domination system is the book and a series of colorful photos by the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov *Case History*.<sup>8</sup> The publication, full of brutal photos of drunk “bomzhyj” and “biesprizornyje”, drug-addicted children, shocked the contemporary audience by graphically presenting the social cost of systemic transformations in Ukraine and – more broadly – in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. The exoticism gradually waned in the following years, but it cannot be denied that the fascination of the former West with the East behind the Iron Curtain can be felt, for example, in the headlines accompanying Rimaldas Vikšraitis’s Infinity Award in Arles in 2009. On the occasion of the joint exhibition and publication of Vikšraitis and Parr, *The Real World*, *The Independent* newspaper published “The boozed-up Lithuanian peasants who appeal to Martin Parr.”<sup>9</sup> The joint project of the Englishman and the Lithuanian emphasizes the equality – but also the parallelism and incompatibility – of the historical experiences of both authors, one of which is situated in the prosperous, comfortable world of late capitalism, and the other in the dark, wild and poor fallen wasteland of post-communism. The systemic inequality is emphasized by the color of Parr’s photographs, contrasted with the grainy black and white photograph of Vikšraitis.

The Czech outsider Miroslav Tichý is one of the authors who distinguished himself in the post-communist landscape and entered world photography circulation. During communist Czechoslovakia, the photographer was a victim of persecution and a psychiatric hospital patient, and, at the end of his life, he was homeless and in a crisis. His photos combine beauty and careful composition with a growing sense of threat in the viewer, resulting from obsessive photographing from a hiding place of young women who were treated as sexual trophies. Like Vikšraitis, Tichý is a photographic phenomenon whose popularity is associated with the transgression of social norms and the rules of political correctness, accepted in the case of the region. Tichý’s oeuvre, shown at numerous exhibitions, has been published in a number of great books, among others, in France and Japan.<sup>10</sup>

A look at Central Europe in the era of transformation generates a number of questions about identity and ways of telling about the recent history of the region. Books and photographs that show the region in a way that deviate from the standards of political correctness adopted in the West seem particularly problematic.

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<sup>8</sup> Boris Mikhailov, *Case History* (Zurich: Scalo Publishers, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Rimaldas Vikšraitis, Martin Parr, *The Real World* (Kaunas: Kaunas Photography Gallery, 2010). Jay Merrick, “Observations: The boozed-up Lithuanian peasants who appealed to Martin Parr,” *The Independent* (2009), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/observations-the-boozedup-lithuanian-peasants-who-appeal-to-martin-parr-1837715.html>, acc. on May 10, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Gianfranco Sanguinetti, ed., *Miroslav Tichý. Les Formes du Vrai / Forms of Truth* (Prague: Kant, 2011). Roman Buxbaum, ed., *Tichý* (Prague-Tokyo, Foundation Tichý Ocean, Taka Ishii Gallery, 2006).

Fortunately, it seems that in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question of whether the Central European photography must be associated with the exoticisation of one's own identity in the global photographic circulation, is no longer relevant. If this motif is current, it is rather like in the case of Sasha Kurmaz (*Oh Yeah, Yea, Yea, Yea!*), Andrew Miksys (*Disko*), Sergey Melnitchenko (*Schwarzenegger is My Idol*) or Ivars Gravlejs (*Nežinoma Latvijos fotografija*) on the basis of a certain transgression, playing with the expectations of recipients, or simply ridiculing post-Soviet clichés.<sup>11</sup> Although some observers of the regional scene, such as Birgus mentioned in the introduction, are concerned about the progressive westernization in the region, resulting in homogenization, and the loss of an expressive, wild and aggressive identity, it seems that books such as Agnieszka Sejud's *HOAX* or *Evokatív* by Libuše Jarcoviaková show a possible direction of evolution of "Otherness" free from complexes, and based on original vision and photographic tenderness.<sup>12</sup> While Sejud looks at motley, contrasting, provincial, but also fascinating Poland at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jarcoviaková takes the reader on a journey through the lesbian underground of the last decade of communist Czechoslovakia. The photo archive broadens the view of queer culture and places it in specific social and political realities, but without inclinations towards being sensational or having the scandalous characteristics of, for example, Mikhailov. The success of books by Sejud and Jarcoviaková shows that it is also possible to look at the region in a different way, taking into account otherness, and maintain respect for other people, and for minorities, including sexual ones.

### Memory Unearthed

Based on the artist's own archive, Jarcoviaková's book *Evokatív* is characteristic of the common focus on memory in Central European publishing houses, and on history, which was censored and distorted in the era of the Soviet regime. In countries behind the Iron Curtain, it was only in the 1990s that interest in the past gained momentum; after 2000, publications appeared that were significant and acknowledged by critics. Although the photobook is sometimes included in the process of historical politics, as evidenced by artistic books published in Poland in cooperation with the Institute of National Remembrance, such as Łukasz Rusznica and Beata Bartecka, *How to Look Natural in Photos*, or in Lithuania, the three-volume *Vaizdu archyvas* compiled by Kestutis Grigaliūnas, it is essentially a medium intimately dealing with personal memories.<sup>13</sup> The modern photobook is limited to private memory and family history. The most interesting publications of this type include books by Algirdas

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<sup>11</sup> Sasha Kurmaz, *Oh Yeah, Yea, Yea, Yea!* (Kiev: self-published, 2018). Andrew Miksys, *Disko* (Vilnius: ARÖK, 2013), Sergey Melnitchenko, *Schwarzenegger is My Idol* (Kiev: Moksop, 2020). Ivars Gravlejs, *Nežinoma Latvijos fotografija* (Kaunas: Kaunas Photography Gallery, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Libuše Jarcovjáčová, *Evokatív* (Prague: untitled, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica, *How to Look Natural in Photos* (London, Wrocław: Palm Studios, Ośrodek Postaw Twórczych, 2021). Kęstutis Grigaliūnas and Agne Narusyte, *Vaizdu archyvas* (Vilnius: Vaizdu archyvas, 2014).

Šeškus, an author who returned to his photographs after a quarter of a century, extracting them from the archives and publishing them in subsequent original volumes. Šeškus presents both series of photos taken while working for Lithuanian television, where he was employed from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, as well as rediscovered lyrical and love photos (*Meiles lyrika*).<sup>14</sup>

A type of photobook characteristic for the region is a book with visual material that was unknown, inaccessible, or one that could not be published for political reasons. It is often a newly discovered vernacular material, e.g., the Latvian *Glass Strenci* or Hungarian *Fortepan Masters*.<sup>15</sup> These types of publications surprise with the power of amateur photography, but also attract attention with the careful processing of archival material. The monumental volume *Fortepan Masters* emphasizes the importance of private stories, different from the official experience of history by the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe present in propaganda publications. The 700-page book prepared by Szabolcs Barakonyi is viewed and read like a novel by Peter Nadas or the journals of Sandor Marai.

Among the newly discovered and internationally published sets of photographs, there are also photos of Central European classics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Posthumous, monographic studies are characteristic, among which one is dedicated to Vytas Luckus.<sup>16</sup> The two-volume publication, awarded at the Arles Photography Festival as a historical book of 2015, is the Lithuanian artist's "late debut" on the international stage, as well as a new reading, important from the point of view of the narrative of Lithuanian and Central European photography. The impact of the book accompanying the exhibition by Wojciech Zamecznik, awarded in Paris with the Aperture and Paris Photo awards, should be seen somewhat differently.<sup>17</sup> The publication drew attention to the quality of not only outstanding projects, related to the so-called Polish School of Posters, but revealed the potential of his photography, contributing to the creation of further exhibitions and publications, including monographs. It is worth noting that both in the case of Luckus, Zamecznik, but also the aforementioned authors and other authors, such as Tichy or Jarcoviakova, the book publication resulted from many years of work on organizing and providing access to their archives.

Of course, the local setting in a specific historical context, is of fundamental importance for Central and Eastern European books and photography, but it is worth noting that the interpretation has been transferred to a new, more universal level. It is significant that contextual publications such as Vytas Stanionis' book devoted

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<sup>14</sup> Algirdas Šeškus, *Archyvas (Pohulianka)* (Vilnius: Lietuvos dailės muzieju, 2010). Algirdas Šeškus, *Meiles lyrika* (Vilnius: Kitos Knygos, 2011). Algirdas Šeškus, *TV* (Vilnius: Lietuvos Nacionalinis Radijas ir Televizija, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Szabolcs Barakonyi, ed., *Fortepan Masters. Collective Photography in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Bazin Investments Ltd., 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Margarita Matulytė and Tatjana Luckienė-Aldag, eds., *Vytas Luckus. Works*, Vol. I and II (Kaunas, Vilnius: Kaunas Photography Gallery, Lietuvos dailės muzieju, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Karolina Puchała-Rojek and Karolina Ziębińska-Lewandowska, eds., *Wojciech Zamecznik. Photo-Graphics* (Warszawa: Zachęta, Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, 2016).

to his father are awarded at major photography competitions and festivals.<sup>18</sup> Stanionis Junior reexamined the archive of his father's vernacular photos. Photographs that identify Lithuanian men and women, taken at the request of the Soviet authorities, become an allegory of resistance to Russian aggression. But they also emphasize the durability of the Lithuanian national identity and the strength of the father-son bond, both of whom were involved in photography.

A separate, important part of archives and photobooks is the memory of the Holocaust of Central and Eastern European Jews. During the Soviet domination, the topic was instrumentalized and used for propaganda purposes by regimes dependent on Moscow. Only after the collapse of the USSR the process of working through the trauma of the Holocaust began. This applies to both new interpretations of photos – as in the case of perhaps the most important book on 21<sup>st</sup> century photography – Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* – and the discovery of archives and resources often located in places remote from the region.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition and study of the archive of Henryk Ross from Litzmannstadt Ghetto can serve as an example. After the photographer's death, it was transferred by the heirs to the Modern Conflict Archive in London, where it is interpreted by other artists working with the photobook format (including Thomas Mailaender, or the Broomberg-Chanarin duo).<sup>20</sup> Jan van der Pelt and Maia-Mari Sutnik have also examined the archive and – as it seems – it has become a permanent feature of the iconographic resources used by Holocaust historians.<sup>21</sup> It is the title of Ross's photobook that serves as the inspiration for this chapter of Central European photobooks. It seems that despite the passage of time, we are still closer to the beginning than the end of the process of excavating archives and working with collective memory.

### Mapping territories

The multi-layered identity of the region is related to the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianisms, conflicts, wars and the Holocaust, which leads to the fundamental fluidity of the cartography of Central and Eastern Europe. The multiplicity of cultures, histories and languages, displacement and resettlement, flight and migration waves, changing administrative borders, emerging and failing states make Central and Eastern Europe an obscure entity, requiring description and representation, even for its inhabitants. No wonder then that an important topic is documentary landscape and topographic photography. Classic examples of this are the books of Czech

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<sup>18</sup> Gintaras Česonis, ed., *Vytautas V. Stanionis. Photographs for Documents* (Kaunas: Kaunas Photography Gallery, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Mailaender, *Illustrated People* (Paris: RVB, 2014). Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Holy Bible* (London: MACK, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Jan van der Pelt and Maia-Mari Sutnik, *Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015).



photographers returning from immigration in the 1990s, such as Josef Koudelka (*The Black Triangle*) and Jitka Hanzlová (*Rokytnik*).<sup>22</sup> In these books, the recognition of the homeland abandoned years ago is combined with the observation of social and cultural transformation.

After 2000, the next generation of photographers born and raised in the region have created their own atlases looking at the surrounding landscape. The classics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century genre include a subjective documentary by a Slovak, Martin Kollar (*Nothing Special*), and depictions of Lithuania and Belarus in books by Andrew Miksys (*Disco and Tulips*).<sup>23</sup> An important author in this context is Rafał Milach, co-founder of the Sputnik Photos collective focusing on documenting Central and Eastern Europe. Milach ended his trips to Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and also to Hungary with publications that almost always aroused discussion and interest among critics, collectors and photographers. In Belarus he took photos for the book *Winners*, in Russia *7 Rooms*, and in Ukraine he worked on the *Black Sea of Concrete*.<sup>24</sup> Milach and other Sputnik Photos photographers show how to present the region without stereotype, and at the same time as faithfully and interestingly as possible.

There are many outstanding photographers who document the changes taking place in individual countries of the region. Many books, although remarkable from the graphic point of view and cognitively important both literally and figuratively, remain untranslated and in local circulation. Such examples include photobooks by Belarusian photographer and writer Artur Klinau (*City of the Sun*) or publications by Wojciech Wilczyk (*Kapitał*).<sup>25</sup> The publications and work on them is important from the perspective of a specific decolonization of the region. Nevertheless, the books that managed to break through the glass ceiling and find international circulation are important for the topic of the essay. Such publications include the photobook by Adam and Dyba Lach *Rewizje/Revisions*, presenting Poland at the end of the second decade of the century, a country ruled by populists and engulfed in a kind of patriotic fever.<sup>26</sup> It is an important book, noticed, among others In Paris Photo, it shows a political phenomenon which is present in Europe, especially in Poland and Hungary, has been increasingly connected in recent years. A similar diagnosis is presented by Michał Siarek in his album devoted in turn to the Macedonian megalomania entitled *Alexander*.<sup>27</sup>

Among the books that regularly appear on the short lists of nominees and awards, there are numerous works by authors living in the West but with roots in

<sup>22</sup> Josef Koudelka, *Černý trojúhelník. Podkrušnohoří. Fotografie 1990-1994* (Praha: Vesmir, 1994). Jitka Hanzlová, *Rokytnik* (Velbert-Neviges: Museum Schloss Hardenberg, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Martin Kollar, *Nothing Special* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008). Andrew Miksys, *Tulips* (Vilnius: ARÖK, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Rafał Milach, *Winners* (London: GOST Books, 2015). Rafał Milach, *7 Rooms* (Berlin-Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2011). Rafał Milach, *Black Sea of Concrete* (Warsaw: self-published, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Artur Klinau, *Horad Sonca* (Minsk: Lohvinau, 2006). Krzysztof Jaworski and Wojciech Wilczyk, *Kapitał w słowach i obrazach* (Kielce: Zakład Wydawniczy SFS, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Adam Lach and Dyba Lach, *Rewizje/Revisions. How to Rejuvenate an Eagle* (Warszawa: self-published, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Michał Siarek, *Alexander* (Skarżysko-Kamienna: self-published, 2018).

Central and Eastern Europe. The second, sometimes third generation, while looking for their roots, has a different perspective than emigrants returning to the country of childhood and youth, such as Hanzlova and Koudelka, or the Silesian photographer and Berlin-based publisher Misha Kominek. Among the most interesting publications of the last two decades are *45* by Damian Heinisch or *Odłonić (Unveiling)* Maria Dabrowski.<sup>28</sup> There is often nostalgia present in the books, or even a certain kind of sentimentality, emotions that are difficult to control when looking at the country of their ancestors, thinking about their life, death, emigration or expulsion. The above-mentioned books, awarded and published in Germany, Switzerland or Great Britain, belong to the collection of Central and Eastern European photobooks. They are easy to distinguish from the books of Western authors presenting the neo-colonial perspective, who in the East seek the exotic, distancing themselves from this “other” world. Among the postcolonial photobooks there are often ironic works such as *Ekaterina* by Romain Mader, and more often significant and monumental pieces about the East under the influence of Russia like *Zona* by Carl de Keyzer, *The Sochi Project* by Rob Hornstra, or Andy Rocchelli’s *Russian Interiors*.<sup>29</sup>

There are several ways to escape the trap of the postcolonial perspective. It is important to identify oneself with the place, grow roots, be it in the form of permanent residence or a long, deepened and participatory stay, living together with a given community for many years as in the case of Mark Power (*The Melody of Two Songs*).<sup>30</sup> You can also – like Nicolas Groszpiere – settle permanently in one of the countries of the region. Groszpiere, who comes from France, settled in Warsaw, making it a base for the exploration of international, including post-Soviet, modernism (*Modern Forms, Modern Interiors*), thus positioning the region in the center of the world.<sup>31</sup> Another interesting theme present in books is the return of photographers to Central and Eastern Europe, in search of traces of their youth, as in the case of Michael Ackerman who has found inspiration in this. The theme of traveling in time and rediscovering places visited in the past is deepened by Lorenzo Castore (*Ziemia / Land*) or Stephanie Kiwitt (*Maj / May*), who realized their projects, after many years, in Gliwice and Prague. Both projects resulted in books that are significant for their own careers.<sup>32</sup> In this case, mapping the territory also becomes a journey in time, different than in the case of those returning from immigration or descendants of immigrants, but no less an important path to oneself, to one’s emotions, memories and experiences, which

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<sup>28</sup> Damian Heinisch, *45* (London: MACK, 2020). Maria Dabrowski, *Odłonić* (Amsterdam: self-published, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Romain Mader, *Ekaterina* (London: Mörel Books, 2017). Carl de Keyzer, *Zona. Siberian prison camps* (London: Trolley, 2003). Rob Hornstra, *The Sochi Project: An Atlas of War and Tourism in the Caucasus* (New York: Aperture, 2013). Andy Rocchelli, *Russian Interiors* (Pianello Val Tidone: Cesura, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Mark Power, *The Sound of Two Songs: Poland 2004–2009* (Brighton: Photoworks, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Nicolas Groszpiere, *Modern Forms: A Subjective Atlas of Twentieth Century Architecture* (München: Prestel Verlag, 2016), Nicolas Groszpiere, *Modern Spaces* (München: Prestel Verlag, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Stephanie Kiwitt, *Maj/May* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018), Lorenzo Castore, *Ziemia/Land* (Gliwice: Czytelnia Sztuki, 2019).

allows for an insight into the sensitivity and vision of the world. In this approach, Central and Eastern Europe become a kind of mirror, a tool of introspection.

## Frowst

Traveling to Central and Eastern Europe and working on a book are for many artists a kind of “bildungsreise”, and the search for one’s own identity allows for a better perception of the region’s specific, melancholic, and reflective mood. The departure from landscape and documentary towards staging and working on emotions and sensitivity is clearly visible in one of the most important books of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely *FROWST* by Joanna Piotrowska. It was published in 2014 as part of the award in a competition organized by the London-based MACK publishing house. The book includes black and white photos of models performing setups and reflecting moods through gestures. Inspired by Hellinger’s settings, the series of photos becomes a story not only about relationships in the family of the artist from Warsaw. The 2020 exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, with the same title as the book, became a clear commentary on the situation in Poland, dominated by right-wing and populist discourse. Piotrowska is one of the numerous authors who, in the last two decades, expresses themselves on personal topics through the photobook format, creating a story about herself, her maturation, and working through her own stories and her family’s. Other authors referring to family relationships and complicated personal stories include, among others, Tereza Cervenova (*June*) and Maryna Brodovska (*My Dear Vira*).<sup>33</sup>

A separate phenomenon that affects the relationship between individual history and the political and social context are the books of Hungarian authors such as Peter Puklus (*Love Story of a Warrior*), Arion Gabor Kudasz (*Human*), and Csilla Klenyanszki (*Pillars of Home*).<sup>34</sup> These books combine a photographic story about a family, trauma and history with a process similar to therapy, a record of the process of going through difficult life moments.

Not all books are strictly feminist, but in most cases, one can find a moment of translating the personal into the political, whether in the situation of contemporary women (Klenyanszki) or men (Puklus). To some extent, an author’s publications, so saturated with personal stories and talking about the experience of one’s own body, personality, and sexuality, pose a question about the gender of a photobook. Is it possible to talk not only about feminist, or also female, but maybe also non-binary photobooks? How are they different from those created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by men? Certainly, the history of books about women and created by women also needs to be developed in the region and should take into account the history of this type of publication with already classic books such as *Zena v svetle* by Frantisek Drtikol or

<sup>33</sup> Tereza Cervenova, *June* (London: self-published, 2019). Maryna Brodovska, *My Dear Vira* (Kiev: self-published, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Puklus, *The Epic Love Story of a Warrior* (New York: Self Publish Be Happy, 2016). Arion Gabor Kudasz, *Human* (Budapest: self-published, 2018). Csilla Klenyanszki, *Pillars of Home* (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 2019).

*Kobieta* by Joanna Helander.<sup>35</sup> Diana Tamane suggested such a temporality stretched over generations in her book *Flower Smuggler*.<sup>36</sup> Nominated for Paris Photo in the category of the best debut, the book collects Tamane's previous projects telling the stories of mother and grandmother creating a complicated relationship with their daughter and granddaughter. The title "smuggler of flowers" is the artist's grandmother, who illegally crosses the Latvian-Russian border to pay tribute to the ancestors buried on the other side. Playing with the aesthetics of vernacular photography, Tamane's photos tell the story of the family in an authentic and unconventional way. Intimate and emotional, sometimes toxic, always real photos refresh the formula of a family album.

Among the books that deal with the subject from a different, somehow external perspective, it is worth mentioning *Agata* Bieke Depoorter and *Santa Barbara* by Diana Markosian.<sup>37</sup> The books combine the aesthetics of a subjective document with an attempt to understand complex relationships spanning over the years and decades. *Agata* is the story of a Polish dancer and stripper, whose personality is mysterious and unpredictable. Fascinated by an immigrant escaping from stuffy Central Europe, the Belgian photographer draws the reader into her obsessive adventure. Markosian, on the other hand, returns to the memory of his childhood spent in post-Soviet Russia and the captivation by American culture manifested in the form of the *Santa Barbara* TV series popular in the early 1990s. Through this prism, the book tells the story of the photographer's family. Markosian's mother, who decided to go to the United States with her children, is located in the center. The book may resemble photobooks typical for the region devoted to returning to the roots, with the difference that Markosian rejects the form of reportage and documentary, staging situations remembered from childhood and youth like the director of her own series. In the book, the artist also uses material from the archives of her own family. The escape from Central and Eastern European "frowst" complicates life, but also leads to the creation of extraordinary photos, describing the tragic fate of the family, beautiful and cruel moments that make up fascinating stories.

## Conclusion

The examples presented above seem to confirm the thesis that the phenomenon of photobooks in Central and Eastern Europe is not limited to the 20<sup>th</sup> century but has rather continued to develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Keeping in mind that it is just a preliminary overview of a vast field to be examined in future, the text constitutes an initial catalog of canonical books dividing them into thematic sections which seem to be most attractive for collectors, curators, and researchers. Many publications allow for the revision of the history of photography in individual countries and in the region

<sup>35</sup> Frantisek Drtikol, *Žena ve světle výběr 46 aktů* (Prague: Beaufort, 1930). Joanna Helander, *Kobieta: en bok om kvinor i Polen* (Helsingborg: Fyra Förläggare, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> Diana Tamane, *Flower Smuggler* (Gent: Art Paper Editions, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Bieke Depoorter, *Agata* (Brussels: Des Palais, 2021). Diana Markosian, *Santa Barbara* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2020).

as a heterogeneous whole. Books allow photographers to express and develop their own vision and provide visibility incomparably stronger than exhibitions. The artistic and research potential of photobooks is evidenced by the fact that not all books were even mentioned, even those awarded at international competitions.

There is a strong sense of being immersed in history in Central and Eastern Europe. The collapse of the Soviet system did not lead to the “death of history”, but only increased awareness of social and political processes. If, in the 1990s and 2000s, we lived with the war in the Balkans and the Caucasus, then, after 2014, the war has been taking place in Ukraine. Among the books giving a universal character to the experience of war, it is worth mentioning the *Shifters* project by Marta Bogdańska, nominated for the MACK award, which examines conflicts from the perspective of animals used by humans.<sup>38</sup> In the context of most recent Russian aggression, the situation in Ukraine would require a separate discussion. In the last decade there has been a real photographic and photobook boom, as evidenced by the collective *UPHA* book published just before the outbreak of the war on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022.<sup>39</sup> It is worth emphasizing the speed of reaction of Ukrainian artists to political events, the most important of which was Maidan. The patriotic insurgency relates herself, inter alia, to Julia Polunina-But with her book *Barricade* – with its harmonica form, it resembles the title barricade just built on the square.<sup>40</sup> The event is conveyed in a different way by Vladislav Krasnoshek and Sergey Lebedynsky's *Euromaidan*, a dark and dramatic book of events that have changed Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> Central and Eastern Europe are again in the spotlight of the world. The trauma freshly renewed by Russian imperialism will one day be worked through, and the bloody events will be followed by photos and books documenting the heroism of soldiers, shaping historical awareness, stigmatizing criminals, and commemorating the victims.

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<sup>38</sup> Marta Bogdańska, *Shifters* (Kraków: Fundacja Sztuk Wizualnych, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Yaroslav Solop, ed., *UPHA Made in Ukraine* (Kiev: Booksha, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Julia Polunina-But, *Barricade* (Kiev: Luta Sprava Books, 2014).

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