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A Photo Book as a Box: On Mladen Teofilović's work *The Core*

Abstract: The history of the photo book is practically old as the history of photography. A photo book is more than just an object with leaves and pages, photographs, with or without text. Throughout *The Core*, the work of the young artist Mladen Teofilović, the text analyses the photography book as the relationships between text, images, and spectator. According to the artist's idea, the photo book looks like a metal box that imitates a hospital file. Conceiving the work in this way, the artist reveals and interprets the fragments from his life: his struggle with a severe migraine, his attempt to find a solution, to accept his condition and live with it. Teofilović directs his photo book to the spectator, inviting him to take a part in disassembly, analysis and reading where every picture, text or sentence does not have to but can take on a different meaning.

Keywords: photo book; box; history of photography; science; text; presentation; spectator; interpretation.

A photo book *The Core*, by photographer and cinematographer Mladen Teofilović, was presented during the *International Student Biennale of Art of Book [s] BUK2: PHOTO BOOK* in Belgrade in 2020.¹ A graduate with the first-class honours degree of the University of Arts, Faculty of Dramatic Art's Class of 2020, Mladen Teofilović works in the domain of feature, documentary and experimental film and photography. He has exhibited in several group photo exhibitions. As a cinematographer, he worked on several award-winning films, including *Everything in its Right Place* (2020) and *Dog Days of Summer* (2019). *The Core* is his first photo book and according to his words: "Designed as a medical record file, this book can be viewed in several ways, with the awareness that fear and expectation of another attack (affecting either an organ or the spirit), as well as the general uncertainty is the only constant

¹ The biennale exhibition was held from November 12 to December 3, 2020, at Gallery Artget, Belgrade Cultural Center. See: *International Student Biennale of Art of Book [s] BUK2: PHOTO BOOK*, <https://www.kcb.org.rs/en-us/2020/11/international-student-biennale-of-art-of-book-s-buk2-photo-book/>, acc. on July 17, 2022.

of my work, since it reveals the always unknown – the new. There is no completeness of a process. The obscureness of the artistic and the emotional, through the prism of illness, confronts fear and beauty.”² In contrast to photo books, which have the look and the structure of a book and where the spectator or reader interacts with the content by turning the pages, in the *The Core*, this is absent. The photo book is made in a form of a metal box, dimensions 21x29, 5x15.5 cm. The interior of the box is divided into two main sections, one with a magnifying glass, and another one with fifteen photographs (dimensions 10x15 cm) and the same number of cards with short typed texts. The photographs and cards are divided into three groups, with five photographs and cards each. The reader first interacts with the object, or metal box, then with three various objects within (photographs, texts, magnifying glass). The contents of the box are visual and textual notes about the artist's life, during which he has suffered from an almost unbearable migraine that has accompanied him since childhood. Severe pain, loss of the real perception of the world around him, disability of conversation and tingling of body parts, are all parts of his life. A state of general helplessness and isolation can be short but can also last for several days and usually end with hospitalization.

The first series consists of surreal and abstract photographs of medical scans of the head and body parts juxtaposed with photographs of a monument of fallen partisans in the battle at Kadinjača. All photographs are printed on gilded aluminum plates. In the early history of its developments, photography was *mimesis*, or mirror, of nature. With dada, surrealism, constructivism, and other avant-garde movements between the two world wars, the perception of photography changed. By introducing various techniques, such as photo-montages or double exposures as well and other visual materials, avant-garde destroyed the notion of photography as a mimetic presentation. In *The Core*, Teofilović uses the montage technique to make unusual juxtapositions of two opposite images (X-Rays and photographs) to present his own sometimes elusive state. The texts on the cards feature the date and time, and are the artist's testimonies, or diary pages, about the migraine episodes and various events, things, or situations that preceded them. In contrast to the first, the texts on the cards in the second group of works are nothing more than various reports or conclusions from doctors about the patient and his conditions. The language and narrations of texts are disturbed by Teofilović's intervention. Certain words in medical reports related to his inner state are simply enlarged. In a case of photography works, gilded aluminium plates have been replaced with glass. The glass plate symbolizes something fragile and vulnerable or, as in the case of the words in the texts, his state during his migraines. In photography works, he involved or juxtaposed photo montage techniques and another very popular photographic image: the Polaroid. During the second half of the 20th century, instant photography, or Polaroid, was used in medicine to record surgical procedures (especially in plastic or corrective surgery), as well as for family snapshots, and in popular culture and art practices. In *The Core* polaroids are scanned and

² “Authors and descriptions of works,” in *International Student Biennale of Art of Book [s] BUK2: PHOTO BOOK* <https://www.kcb.org.rs/meta-content/uploads/2020/11/international-student-biennale-of-art-of-books-buk2-photo-book-kcb.pdf>, acc. on July 2022.

digitally processed. Before the spectator are different black-and-white images: body fragments, eye, mouth, nose, ear, a dog's jaw or an X-Ray of the head doubling as a self-portrait of the artist. According to traditional viewpoints, the purpose of portrait and self-portrait photography is to show a person's individuality and inner strength through the facial features and external characteristics. Here, we have a different picture, or deconstruction, where the author uses X-Ray to present in the literal sense his inwardness. All of these fragments and images are juxtaposed too with abstract, fluid, colored compositions. Like those in the first group of works, these motives and images are obscure or unnoticeable if we observe them with just the naked eye.

In medicine, scanner machines or scanned images are used to identify something that is in the body but cannot be seen with the naked eye or through blood tests. A doctor interprets a scanned image based on his or her knowledge and experience. However, these two notions are not only related to medicine. We may also connect them with photography. The act of looking at the photographs in the sense of attempting to read them, to understand them, to discover another, deeper meaning, is nothing more than scanning. In his analysis of photography, Vilém Flusser used the term as follows:

The significance of the images is on the surface. One can take them in at a single glance, yet this remains superficial. If one wishes to deepen the significance, i.e., to reconstruct the abstracted dimensions, one has to allow one's gaze to wander over the surface feeling the way as one goes. This wandering over the surface of the image is called 'scanning'. In so doing one's gaze follows a complex path formed, on the one hand, by the structure of the image and, on the other, by the observer's intentions.³

Although not in the same way as scanner machines, the magnifying glass here aims to bring us closer to medicine; to the laboratory, the microscope and research, scientific accuracy, and finally to some comprehension about the nature of disease. The magnifying glass is just a tool used for the observing and finding answers or solutions. In the case of medicine or science, that solution, frequently, is not fixed. Outside of science, and in the domain of the photographic medium and art, the meaning of photography is not fixed. In the Michelangelo Antonioni movie *Blow-Up* (1966), the protagonist Thomas is a fashion photographer who unintentionally photographed a pair of lovers in the park. The curiosity of the woman who had been photographed and her attempt to get photographic film prompted Thomas to explore the photographed scene. Gradually, he enlarges black-and-white photographs. In some scenes he uses a magnifying glass as a tool for the further investigation of the enlarged photography. With all those enlargements, those *blow-ups*, turned classical documentary photography into nothing more than an unperfect, grainy image. The everyday scene of two totally unknown lovers at the same time became strange and bizarre, because behind the picture lay another picture – that of a murder. In the French movie *Amélie*

³ Willem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 9.

(2001) is another, opposite situation. One of the protagonists is the collector of the lost or thrown-away photographs for ID cards from a photo booth. As the main character in the movie, Amélie Poulain, he tries to discover the identity of the man in some of the photographs. For both of them – the collector and Amélie – the man on photographs looks strange, mysterious or bizarre. At the end of the movie, that strange man is just the repairer of vending machines, who is, in order to check if the photo booth works or not, photographed himself. In his essay *The Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes analyses a simple advertising image as a combination of different sights.⁴ On the other hand, the theory of poststructuralism photography is not just a set of sights. Victor Burgin uses a term 'photographic text', which is like any other text: "[...] the site of a complex 'intertextuality' and overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at particular cultural and historical conjuncture. These prior texts, those *presupposed* by the photograph, are autonomous; they serve a role in the actual text but do not appear in it [...]"⁵ 'Photographic text' identifies photography as a set of different constantly changing and fluid signs and meanings. In other words, photography is an open space and more than just a visual object, representation, or surface, but what lies under the surface. Photography is not an autonomous medium, independent from the other forms of visual or written expression. Therefore, every photograph, regardless of the technique, genre or type, is in constant relation with other discourses from the world of photography, art, art history, art institutions, with discourse of the spectator and the time, culture and society in which it is read and observed.

The third and the final group of photographs and cards in *The Core* is opposite to the first and the second. On the cards are diagnoses and medical recommendations for the further treatment. Here, as in the second group of cards, the reader is confronted with intervention by the artist. On the surfaces of these texts are words such as "relief", "security", "release", "balance", and "sodden", typed by the artist in capital letters. Black-and-white photographs are without scanned images, photo-montages or any other already mentioned techniques. They are simple, very clear with various objects or still lifes (a rope tied in a knot, a stone wrapped in barbed wire, an egg in an old carpenter's clamp) and in the front of a neutral background. Yet, even in their simplicity and purity, they are surreal and complex. The techniques mentioned here, such as photo-montage and collage, are not the only ones that make photography surreal. Due to the nature of the medium itself, a seemingly simple or documentary photography can be much more surreal and stratified. Every end is the beginning. This last works is the last stadium artist's conditions; the period after a migraine, when medical reports do not give a final cure, but refer to further treatments. Not every photograph gives a final meaning. The final meaning does not exist.

Illness has been processed within artistic or photographic practices on many different ways. In the case of the book, one of the examples is Matthew Geller's work

⁴ See: Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 269–5.

⁵ Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Education, 1982), 143–4.

Difficulty swallowing: A medical chronicle (1981). The book presents a medical case history of the artist's girlfriend. The narrative itself is cold and practically emotionless because the texts consist doctor's and nurse's reports about leukemia and the treatments, medical tests and other notes. On the other hand, documentary photographs are portraits of the artist's girlfriend during the treatment, including the final chapter of her hospital treatment, and of her life. For Shelley Rice *Difficulty swallowing: A medical chronicle* is not sentimental: "[...] its straightforward presentation of facts and documents serves to distance both the artist and the reader from the emotional tragedy of the situations and leaves no room for speculation about the meaning of either life or death."⁶ Some parallels can be drawn between this book and *The Core*: science, photography, medical report, illness. Everything else, including the design of the book, photographs who are far from the documentary and the author's basic idea, are different. Geller's book has its end. The topic of the book is leukemia and his girlfriend. Teofilović's photo book is about private parts of an artist's life with illness; narration and photographs are emotional. Also, in *The Core*, photographs and cards are not marked or numbered. Instead, Teofilović neatly arranged them in a box in three groups. However, there is no strict rule how observers will treat them. In other words, it does not matter if we will read or look at them as they arranged or not, with or without magnifying glass. *Difficulty swallowing: A medical chronicle* is printed and published in many copies. But photo or artist's book can be published in limited editions. In the case of *The Core*, they can even be made as a single copy. "An artist's book can be a unique work, a highly limited edition, or an inconsistent edition, and still be a work which is a direct expression of aesthetic ideas in a book form. And these works do not have to fall into the conventions of livres d'artistes or fine printing."⁷ Books can be designed as the box. Some such books are about the process of the artist's work, with visual and written material. For Johanna Drucker one of the earliest examples or predecessor of that type of the books is *Green Box* by Marcel Duchamp from 1934⁸: a cardboard box, covered with green silk storing 94 documents, including handwritten notes, photographs, sketches and diagrams on Duchamp's work *The Large Glass* (or *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even*). But *The Core* cannot simply be termed "book as a private archive"⁹. Here, the archive material is used as a part of the artistic process. In my opinion *The Core* has some similarities with the book of Yani Pecanins *Un Viaje en Zeppelin* (1980). Both books are personal. The design of the book by Pecanins is something between the notebook and the box with works. She used archival photographs, newspapers clipping and written documents to explore parts of family history.¹⁰

⁶ Shelley Rice, "Words and Images: Artists Books as Visual Literature," in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. by Joan Lyons (Layton: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 63–64.

⁷ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), 93.

⁸ See: *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹ See: *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁰ See: *Ibid.*, 99.

In *The Core* Teofilović introduced and translated, into the sphere of the public and art, science and something very sensitive and fragile as is his inner struggle with pain, vulnerability and faith that he must confront to live with his condition. In my opinion, this book can be viewed or read as a small history of photography too; a history of photography in the form of an art object or, in this case, a photo book. Making parallels with this book and some parts of prehistory and history of photography I will try to explain my observation below.

At the joint meeting of the Academies of Fine Arts and Science in the Institute of France in Paris in 1839, physicist François Arago presented daguerreotype techniques for the first time to the public. On that occasion, it was stated that this new discovery, or a miracle of technical and technological development, could be very useful for science and art.¹¹ In those first decades of its development, photography was nothing but a tool for artists and scientists. The one and only duty for photography was to be a servant, or as Charles Baudelaire wrote: “[...] the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented the literature ...”¹² The first photo book *The Pencil of Nature*¹³ by William Henry Fox Talbot was published just to promote calotype or talbotype processes.¹⁴ Photographs in the first scientific books were just illustrations of text. In *The Core* photographs are printed on aluminum and glass plates. If we go back to the first decades of history of photography, heliography¹⁵ and daguerreotype¹⁶ are produced on the metal plates with different sensitive emulsions. Talbotypia is made on the sensitive paper, and then came a glass plates, wet and dry collodion process and many other photography techniques. In the last decades of the 19th century the “Eastman Kodak Company” launched two models of Kodak cameras with roll film. They were easy to handle and, more importantly, they were designed as a box. The most popular Kodak camera was simply called Box Braunie. Like many others, that camera, has its predecessor – the dark chamber, or *camera obscura*. During the long history of art, camera obscura was the most famous tool by which artists could convey the image of nature as faithfully as possible. Until

¹¹ See: Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2007), 18–19.

¹² Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography,” in *Art in Theory: 1815–1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 668.

¹³ First photo book is *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* published by botanist and photographer Anna Atkins 1844. *The Pencil of the Nature* is the first photographic book dedicated only to photography. The book was published in six fascicles between 1844 and 1846. See: Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Calotype or talbotype photographic process discovered by Scottish and English scientist William Henry Fox Talbot in 1841. Calotype is the first photographic process with positive and negative print. A negative was exposed in the camera, developed and the printed on the sensitive paper or positive. See: *Ibid.*, 24–31.

¹⁵ Heliography (sundrawing), or the heliographic process, is photographic techniques invented by Nicéphore Niépce. He used metal plate with light sensitive bitumen and lavender oil. After treatment he exposed plate in the camera obscura. See: *Ibid.*, 194–5.

¹⁶ Daguerreotype was the first official and commercially successful photographic process. Daguerreotype is unique image fixed on silver-coated metal plate treated with iodine and bromine vapor and exposed in the camera obscura. See: *Ibid.*

the 17th century, a camera obscura was a chamber with a small circular aperture on the wall. The light from the illuminated exterior objects passed through the aperture and created the image on the opposite wall. In the 17th century, the camera obscura became a simple and portable wooden box with a lens on the front. Inside the camera obscura and on the opposite side of the lens, is frosted glass or paper on which is outlined the real, reduced and inverted image of the object in front of the camera. One of the earliest photographs or heliographs, *A View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826) by Nicéphore Niépce, was taken in such camera obscura. The first photograph, *Boulevard du Temple* (1838–1839), by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre made with daguerreotype process is also an image from the camera obscura. Teofilović's *The Core* is not a wooden but a metal box without a lens and does not capture photographs. Yet, this work has something in common with the camera obscura, Box Braunie and other photo cameras. Each of them and in their own way keeps the memories or ideas. The role of the camera is to capture the memory, preserve it and pass it as a photograph to the spectator. *The Core* keeps some memories too and displays them to the spectator. Because of the presence of collage or photo-montage techniques, surrealism and abstraction, photographs from the first and second series in *The Core* can be connected with avant-garde movements between the two world wars. Polaroid, on the other hand, became very popular in art with Pop art, Conceptual, Postconceptual art and in the artistic practices of Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Chuck Close, Lukas Samaras, Peter Beard, Robert Mapplethorpe, et al. Finally, in Teofilović's book photographs are, in some way, digitally processed, which is the state of photography and art today. At the beginnings of its history, as mentioned above, photography was the servant of science. Now we have a different or opposite situation, in that science became a servant to photography.

An artist aspiration, as Teofilović stated, is: "By microsymbolics, the visual quality, the correlation of masses, the exploration of genres and physical manifestations of a photograph, but also by a dedicated investigation of processes and identification of (ir)regularities within it, I do not reflect on it, but want to find out the core of the problem, or, at least to get closer to it."¹⁷ The core of photography is its meaning. Photography has always given us the opportunity to get closer to her, after all, today, she is an integral part of our lives. What she never gave to us, nor will she give us, is the final meaning.

¹⁷ "Authors and descriptions of works," acc. on July 17, 2022.

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Webography:

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Article received: April 12, 2022

Article accepted: June 21, 2022

Original scholarly paper



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Image 3: *The Core*, work by Mladen Teofilović, 2020 © all rights reserved



Image 4: *The Core*, work by Mladen Teofilović, 2020 © all rights reserved



Image 5: *The Core*, work by Mladen Teofilović, 2020 © all rights reserved

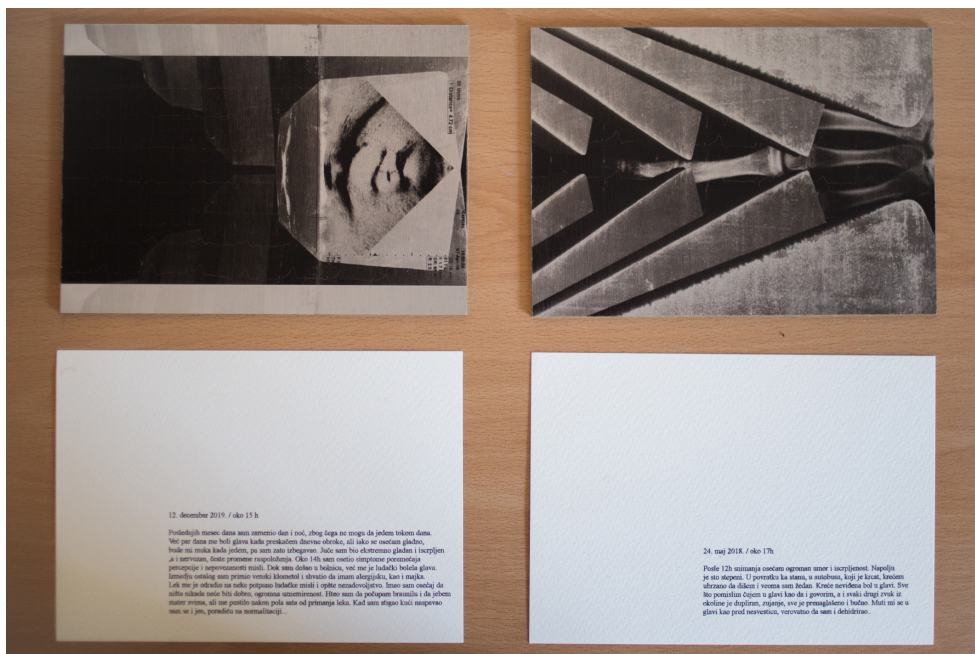


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