

# CENTRAL BY EAST CENTRAL

**Jan Brykczyński, Dénes Farkas,  
Ivars Gravlejs, Lukáš Jasanský/Martin Polák,  
Sasha Kurmaz, Diana Lelonek,  
Lucia Nimcová, Markéta Othová,  
Peter Puklus, Mateusz Sadowski,  
Indrė Šerpytytė, Algirdas Šeškus,  
Andrzej Tobis, Rimaldas Vikšraitis**

**Curator:** Adam Mazur

When – invited by Monika Szewczyk – working on a photography exhibition for the Białystok-based Arsenal Gallery, I focused on the centre, on the very heart of Europe. Photography and its consecutive layers: literature, art, film, even. History became another point of reference (and geopolitics, albeit to a lesser extent). History on the micro-scale: of a single person, single series, single photograph, even. The beauty of landscape. Visual poetry. Image intertwined with text. As a curator, I placed artists attempting photography above photographers with artistic aspirations. Artists I invited are showing their works together for the first time, defining a hazy – yet gradually emerging from beyond the horizon – concept of what contemporary Central European photography is. Below, a number of photographs of the many on display at the exhibition. Contribution to a debate rather than a user manual. An encouragement to look, and to join a Central and East European adventure.

**Algirdas Šeškus, untitled  
1975–1985**



“One of my wonderful colleagues has just said that one can see nothing in these photos of mine, with this meagre light, scarce detail and few recognisable clues. Indeed, these pictures show but a few things that we tend to lean on; there are few props in them, to be more exact,” Algirdas Šeškus (b. 1945) writes in his essay (*...the day that never was*). Šeškus’ photographs are neither titled nor dated. While individual

photographs allow recognition of Soviet-time Vilnius, Šeškus most certainly is not after topographic precision. Even worse, his photographs lack any clearly outlined theme. Depicting nothing specific, they seem random. No wonder Šeškus has been pigeonholed as an amateur: yet the photographer has no issues with his amateur approach to the medium, continuously emphasised by critics. On the contrary: he creates a world of his own, in opposition to permanent professionals and ambitious artists. Exposed on negatives nowhere near perfect, his photographs are scarred with scratches and flecked with dust; surfaces merge or show excess contrast yielded by under- or overexposure. Šeškus' small-format prints seem meagre in contrast to exhibition-class, showy works by post-war Lithuanian art photography classics (i.a. by Antanas Sutkus, Vytas Luckus, Romualdas Rakauskas, Antanas Macijauskas...). As pointed out by art critic and photography historian Margarita Matulytė, Šeškus' contestation of the world of modern art – ruled in the 1970s by professional photographers and a fashion for conceptualism – makes him independent while simultaneously excluding him from artistic life for many years. Šeškus' first major retrospect exhibition was held as late as 2010, by the National Gallery of Lithuania. Other exhibitions have followed, participation in *documenta 14* in 2017 included. Discovered in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Šeškus' photographs amaze with his conscientious recording of daily realities, a phenomenon which had escaped professionals pursuing one project after another. Pictures arranged into visual essays and organised in consecutive books published after years of marginalisation – *Meilės lyrika*, *Archives (Pohulianka)*, *Variacija buvimo išorėje tema*, or, simply, *Algirdas Šeškus* – morph into something beyond theme-less and blurred works by an amateur. The artist becomes more than a mere “functionary of the apparatus” (in the sense suggested by Vilém Flusser) who occasionally manages to take a magnificent shot in the vernacular photography style. Šeškus' programme focuses on a return to the sources of photography, on discovering its essence in daily life, and on detachment from current historical events and momentary fashions. This, in turn, spells deeper immersion in time. Slowdown is coupled

with escaping from major themes into banal daily life, monotony, and emptiness. No wonder Šeškus has been included among the protagonists of a monograph by Agnė Narušytė, with a focus on the aesthetics of boredom on Lithuanian photography. While most photographs are boring, boredom has rarely been photography's leading topic. Yet one feature prevents Šeškus from becoming a boring photographer *par excellence*. Employed by Lithuanian television as an operator, Šeškus is a master of frame composition – while abandoning the chance factor popular with conceptualists, he chooses not to pursue the aesthetics of the decisive moment, avidly believed in by photojournalists. A non-described and undated photograph shows a yard, washed clothes drying on a line. Black edges, including a stain in the lower left corner and an equally gloomy area bordering the frame from the top, remain in sharp contrast to the picture's bright centre blending into the middle of the yard. One would be hard-pressed to say whether all the blacks are an error in composition (clumsy frame structure) or in technique (overexposure); they may also be a purposeful exercise, emphasising the graphic and expressive nature of the composition itself. Similarly, the woman hanging her wash is no more than a shadow, a dark stain standing out in sharp relief to the bright surface of the wall of the building deeper within the image. Mid-gesture of seemingly shaking out a piece of wet clothing before hanging it on the line, the woman is facing right, towards the line with the wash. A doorway to the building and a fragment of a wooden shed close the bottom part of the composition. Its upper part features two windows, one of which open, a bald bearded man, his beard longish and white, standing there. While staring out the window, the old man is, however, not looking at the woman. The dark orifice framing his shape blends in with the black surface bordering the frame from the top. The scene captured by Šeškus brings an excerpt from Joseph Brodsky's *In Praise of Boredom* to mind: "In a manner of speaking, boredom is your window on time, on those properties of it one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one's mental equilibrium. In short, it is your window on time's infinity, which is to say, on your insignificance in it. That's what

accounts, perhaps, for one's dread of lonely, torpid evenings, for the fascination with which one watches sometimes a fleck of dust aswirl in a sunbeam, and somewhere a clock tick-tocks, the day is hot, and your willpower is at zero," Brodsky reflects, "Once this window opens, don't try to shut it; on the contrary, throw it wide open. For boredom speaks the language of time, and it is to teach you the most valuable lesson in your life, the lesson of your utter insignificance." You are finished – Šešek proclaims with his photograph-bound voice – therefore, whatever you do, you will, as I see it, have done it in vain.

**Lukáš Jasanský / Martin Polák**  
***Krajiny – Zemská fotografie***  
**1998–2000**



"Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák live in Prague, where they have been making photographic series together since 1986. The shortest series consists of two photographs, the largest of 10,000. By 2012 the two

artists had completed altogether 27 series of photographs," reads the text printed on the cover of a 472-page monograph by the duo of Jasanský (b. 1965) and Polák (b. 1966). In the years 1998–2000, the Czech photographers worked on their *Krajiny – Zemská fotografie* series, totalling 39 black and white 13 × 18 cm photographs, blown up to 80 × 105 cm on Foma paper. All but two landscapes are horizontal and rectangular. The horizon line runs mid-frame in all photographs. The series includes pictures of ploughed fields, meadows, wastelands, an artificial lake, groves, an orchard, solitary houses, a distant village, a river bank. While four photographs depict people, only one – that of a man with his back to the camera – shows a human character in the foreground (this became the *Krajiny* catalogue cover image). The rest is staffage: a group of farmers working the field, a man at a campfire, an assembly of women. One image shows a parked Citroen AX 1.4 D. Apart from earth shown in the lower part of the frame, sky – usually cloudless across the whole series – is vital to the composition. Lighting conditions selected by photographers (one might assume that all pictures were taken in early spring and autumn) have deprived the image of all contrast. Mild tonal transitions allow the viewer to discern every shrub, every furrow in the tilled soil. Hills visible in some images are a hint that Jasanský and Polák were recording the physical-geographical Bohemian Massif provincial region. Yet beyond meanings purely geological, photograph-depicted landscapes may be recognised as typical for Central Europe (between eastern parts of the North European Plain and western parts of the East European Plain). The title of the *Zemská fotografie* surpasses tautology in reference to homeland photography, a trend popular with advanced amateur photographers in Central Europe (German: *Heimatfotografie*). Jasanský and Polák aspire to undermine a style highlighting beauty and cultural identity and rooted in the völkisch *Blood and Soil* ideology, by showing a country devoid of symbols or sublimity. The significative void makes *Krajiny* a "non-photographic" landscape, to quote a category applied for purposes of analysing the duo's works by Pavel Vančát. Conversely, Charlotte Cotton, having erroneously identified the series as *Czech Landscapes*, claims

these photographs to be focusing on issues of land ownership and farming in post-communist Czechia. "Significantly, these photographers work in black and white, which, in the context of Eastern Europe, has much more currency today than in the most commercially developed Western art centres, where colour photography is much more common," she writes in her bestselling *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. In a comparison of Jasanský and Polák's interest in "Czech architecture and landscape" to Bernd and Hilla Bechers' practice, she points to the common "conceptual frame" feature. In the same paragraph, Cotton highlights similarities between the Czech photographers' intentions and movements proposing to document the changing landscape (implicitly: the so-called trend of "new topography"). Structured upon errors and stereotypes, Cotton's text describes everything *Zemská fotografie* is not. Artists are not concerned with ownership issues or farming methods. By adding vertical formats, by involving people, houses, or even a car as part of the frame, they negate the sense of typology, and cancel out the "conceptual frame", whatever it may be. In their disregard for any signs allowing (even approximate) identification of depicted locations, not to mention their abandonment of any photograph descriptions, they contest topographic documentation. By using black and white materials, they capture the western fashion of analogue (i.e. artistic) photography rather than rejecting commerce, while distancing themselves from the iconography and symbolism of artistic photography. Intuition has not failed Cotton in the single instance of making Jasanský and Polák part of the *Deadpan* chapter. Only when coupled with photographs by Andreas Gursky or Edward Burtynsky can the artists' dispassionate Czech humour be fully revealed. Following Cotton's lead, it ought to be concluded in dead earnest that "Czech landscapes" are to Central European photography what *Rhein II* (1998) by Gursky, a picture taken that same year, is to western.

**Rimaldas Vikšraitis, from the *Farmstead Dreams* series  
2002**



Rimaldas Vikšraitis' (b. 1954) black and white grainy photographs taken in Lithuania's rural areas depict staged situations. Vikšraitis directs people, going as far as to invite animals (rooster, goat, stork, horses, pigs...) to perform for the camera. Animals alive and animals dead. Objects are significant. They are more than props used by the author to outline the symbolic dimension of a photographic monodrama playing out before the viewer's eyes. Objects determine the composition, remaining the focal point of attention. Action evolves around objects. The Lithuanian landscape, its presence substantial, is an actor in itself. This is no idyll known from photographs by i.a. Jan Bůžhak or Antanas Sutkus; this, rather, is a wilderness complementing artistic excesses.

While metaphoric in its entirety, all meanings escape unambiguous interpretation. The form of photographs is noteworthy: albeit arranged in a coherent whole, they do not tell a linear or easily comprehensible story. At first glance, the function of Vikšraitis' photography is obscure. What was the overriding intent? To record the life of Lithuanian countryside? To capture ephemeral action? To create an autonomous artwork? To mock oneself, the viewer and the world? Pictures show destroyed objects, impoverished homes and interiors, drinking sprees, pig slaughter, people fornicating in the fields. These people are not beautiful – they seem to be the last residents of the last Lithuanian village. *The Real World*, as one of the artist's albums has been titled, is a blend of the late medieval ages and a post-apocalyptic thriller. How to write about it, how to talk? Will this not ridicule the region, seeming to prove its cultural inferiority to the west? In his far-from-idyllic *Farmstead Dreams* series, Vikšraitis occasionally approaches the brutality of Ukrainian photographers, such as Arsen Savadov or Boris Mikhailov. He is also akin to performers, such as Russian Oleg Kulik or Serb Tomislav Gotovac. In photographs of Lithuania, the bond with residents and neighbours is palpable. This is a wild rite in a community to whom Vikšraitis is the shaman. Mikhailov's systemic downfall of the *Homo sovieticus* can be juxtaposed with *Homo Vikšraitis*, a camera-constructed ritual in a neo-pagan spirituality setting. The contrast photograph depicting a goat's head, cut off and placed upon a sill of an unfinished brick house, was taken in the Lithuanian town of Kudirkos Naumiestis near the Kaliningrad Oblast border. This photograph is a double portrait: that of a dead animal, its vitreous pupil reflecting the camera's flash, and that of a child, his oval-shaped face visible through a glass pane photographed at a slight angle. The image's expression is enhanced by the rough texture of the stained wall, standing out against the smooth surface of a steamy or frozen window. Looking out of a square window, the boy gazes above the goat's head, staring directly into the camera lens. The surreal juxtaposition of both image layers undermines the belief in an innocent and joyful childhood. The child's features are gentle, as if he did not see or was not affected by the

goat's head, placed after all right before his very nose. The title of the series – *Farmstead Dreams* – seems rather ironic in the context of the “nightmarish” scenes photographed by Vikšraitis. After all, what could the boy behind the glass pane possibly be dreaming of? The picture of the goat's head – ears drooping pitifully, beard curled and blood-soaked – opens the *Grimaces of the Weary Village* album, Martin Parr its photo editor. This celebrity of British and international photography had contributed to Lithuanian photography before by nominating Vikšraitis for the *Discovery Award* presented annually at the oldest photography festival held in Arles. A comparison of Parr's and Vikšraitis' photographs allowed by the double album format emphasises the ever-present differences between Europe's east and her west. In his introduction, Parr describes the world of gadgets shown in Vikšraitis' images, and liberalism-driven consumption the artist contrasts with real parties of booze, sex, and animals making sudden appearances. “If I spoke Lithuanian, I would love to join in the party,” Parr writes. “However, as this will never happen, Viksraitis provides us with a ringside seat, with all the emotion, the drink and the ensuing madness.” In all certainty, Parr's photographs allow Vikšraitis – who has no command of the English language – a similar experience of non-first-hand participation in a different, western world.

**Andrzej Tobis, *Alfabet (Ilustrowany słownik polsko-niemiecki) / ABC (Polish-German Illustrated Dictionary)*  
2007**



144 10 die Kartoffel

144 10 ziemniak

“The *ABC*’s beginnings are a parable, Old Testament-style,” says Andrzej Tobis (b. 1970), and recalls waking up in the night and hearing the Lord’s voice: “Andrzej, get up, go to the shops, and buy a Canon EOS 5D camera. – My Lord, whatever for? I am a painter, not a photographer. – Do it! – My Lord, I don’t have the money. It’s an expensive camera. – Andrzej, cancel your insurance policy. Your life insurance is an expression of your lack of faith in me.” Tobis struggles with destiny. Finally, having lost all strength, he browses the web for the cheapest camera, buys a ticket, and boards a train from Katowice to Warsaw. “I was overwhelmed with a great sense of peace,” he recollects. “Completely enraptured, I watched images passing me by. I gazed upon reality as if upon a magnificent

film at the pictures. I knew my decision was sound, that reality should be recorded as is rather than interfered with. It is worth it, absolutely. With all its oddities." The notion of the *ABC* was born when Tobis found a Polish-German illustrated dictionary among books he had purchased as a university student. Published in Leipzig in 1954, the *Bildwörterbuch* is a compendium of knowledge on communist reality as well as an attempt at classifying and describing the world in entries, indices, and schematic figures. Tobis' series – initiated in 2007 – is a total work of art, intended (according to the author himself) for development over twenty-four years, yielding illustrations for all entries in the original dictionary. The *ABC*, known also as *A-Z (Gabloty edukacyjne) (A to Z: Educational Showcases)* comprises photographs showing excerpts from contemporary Polish reality, numbered and captioned in both languages for the sake of order. In terms of concept, Tobis' *ABC* is simple. Visually, however, matters become rather complicated. As in the case of all dictionaries – some things are irretrievably lost in translation, others unexpectedly added. The signified and signifiers combine to form new and significantly startling totalities. The absurdity of an association amuses; the form of a found object delights; the viewer is disarmed by the accuracy of a sociological observation. Discrepancies between image and text and imperfections of the German-Polish translation arising from cultural differences apart, the reception of Tobis' atlas is also affected by the time which has passed since the dictionary was first published, and by differences in the communist and capitalist systems, framing all entries within specific meanings. "Occasionally, the thing resembles Chinese whispers in time and space, additionally swollen to include differences separating the political systems of times past and current," Tobis adds.

The series – currently comprising seven hundred photographs – is astonishing in its lack of formality, in the intertwining portraits and landscapes, short- and long-range shots, frames diurnal and nocturnal. "I have no idea how to name the genre my work represents, maybe it's an in-between. Maybe, to paraphrase an otherwise well-known slogan, this is 'conceptualism with a human face'," says the artist in conversation with Sebastian Cichocki. Tobis makes no attempt to force reality into the

rigours of typology; his attempts are rather to use photography to render the wealth of form. Simultaneously, in the book and at exhibitions, Tobis creates a structure making his work uniform, allowing efficiency in perusing the *ABC*. While the original illustrated dictionary chiefly contained nouns, Tobis' dictionary bases on nouns in its entirety. "It is all about the basics of education – pointing with the finger and naming. The noun is the most natural grammar form for the static image a photograph is. The potential of adjectives is insufficient – all is diluted in description. Verbs, on the other hand, make everything ephemeral and difficult to capture: the issue of controlling reality becomes much less evident," the artist explains. Tobis' photographs are a panoramic image of contemporary Poland immersed in communism and post-communist transformation. In Silesia – a natural reference for the Katowice-dwelling Tobis – history does not close with the Third Polish Republic or the Polish People's Republic: photographs allow discovery of one layer of times past after another, including the nineteenth-century story of the region's industrialisation. In Tobis' photographs, Poland is more of an illustration than a metaphor of the peripheral. The atlas of photographs helps understand the specificity of the location: of Silesia, of Poland, and of Central Europe. The *ABC*'s timeless nature has been well rendered by a photographed object captioned as "potato" ("die Kartoffel"). The monument – by an anonymous author, set upon a light-green, pincer-like plinth – could have been erected in any part of this region, whose cuisine is based on the potato tuber. The monument photographed by Tobis is rounded in shape, dark grey in its lower quarters, gradually turning dark brown higher up. While the bright sky and sun shining to the left serve to yield a supple shadow, they disallow the identification of the mass or volume of the object which seems to have been formed of metal or stone. The body of the potato has been separated to an extent resembling perfect photomontage. The weeds growing in front of the monument and visible near the bottom of the frame, the ornamental though damaged fencing, the lavish larch closing the composition to the right, and the single-storey building visible to the left in the background all allow an estimate of the monument's

height, plinth included, at six to seven metres, of the potato itself – at two and a half to three metres. The photograph is awarded certain rhythm in the horizontal array of the building's windows, the ornamentation of the fencing and the weed line, all contrasted with the central (vertical) axis of the monument and the less slender larch visible in the background. Mild sunlight and yellowed grass suggest late summer or early autumn. In terms of colour, the composition's perfection is achieved in a blend of the light green of the pedestal, the salmon-coloured plastering of the modernistic building's wall, and the blue of the sky. The object Tobis captured for purposes of the Polish-German dictionary is no ordinary potato. This potato is monumental and perfect. This is a model potato.

**Jan Brykczyński, *Boiko***  
**2013–2014**



On a frosty winter's day, Jan Brykczyński (b. 1979) photographed a funeral on a graveyard hill in the village of Karpatske, Bieszczady Mountains, Ukraine. The picture shows nine men in the snow. They are all staring ahead, each in a slightly different direction, none into the lens. While dispersed, the group does show an order akin to symmetry. Four on each side, one in the middle, cap off, leg resting against a wooden sleigh. His posture suggests a wish to genuflect, or maybe just to reveal the crucifix which seems to be rising from behind his back. He possibly wanted to hold on to the sleigh, to prevent it from following the bay horse whose rump is visible to the left. Men know their place, all lined up in three rows as if in church (women are most likely standing on the other side of the grave, next to the photographer, the priest perhaps to the left). Those in the back are clutching two ornate church banners blowing in the strong wind. Not everyone's head is uncovered. One is protecting himself against the cold with the hood of his jacket, another has pulled up his collar, only grey hair visible. Apart from the man next to the horse's rump, all in camouflage, everyone is wearing dark, sombre colours (leaning towards mismatched suit trousers and black leather jackets). Clasped hands suggest a prayer for the deceased. The man to the forefront standing right next to the disinterred frozen earth seems to be grasping a clod he will shortly throw onto the coffin. The graveyard's fencing posts and mesh, a young pine, and several leafless trees outline the snow-covered hill in the background. Skies are bright – only far away to the right can a wind-swirled cloud of snow be seen. The assembled are probably the family and neighbours of the deceased – the man in camouflage the gravedigger, perhaps. They are all middle-aged, and all strikingly similar. They are the Boiko, whose life Brykczyński documents. Life, and thus death. Taras Prokhasko writes of his countrymen in a book with Brykczyński's photographs: "The Boikos were once White Croats, with their wondrous Carpathian land – land Constantine Porphyrogenitus marvelled at, as did Al-Masudi. And these Croats were enslaved by Kyiv a long, long time ago. And then they took to peaks divided between Ugrians and Red Ruthenia. And there, and there, the Boiko stood by their own."

The Boiko, lingering in Galicia for generations, are, as Prokhasko writes, “by far the most curious tribe along the whole length and breadth of Carpathia.” Akin to the Polish Lemkos, they describe themselves as people of the Verkhovyna or Halychyna, or Russynians, but not Boiko, never the Boiko. When photographing them, Brykczyński avoids the press photojournalism convention; neither is he interested in styling a black and white expressive documentary highlighting the heavy drinking typical for post-Soviet rural areas, or the poverty-hardened otherness. While the funeral’s severe image resembles paintings by nineteenth-century realists, other pictures in the series are decidedly closer to the poetics of magic realism comprehended as an encounter between a rose and an axe. Life recorded in the Carpathian village becomes a metaphor of the reality of olden rural days in Central and Eastern Europe. Prokhasko captured this perfectly: “You cannot do without the Boiko when making a film about times long gone – regardless of whether telling the story of the Middle Ages or of the mid-twentieth century. In any case, their faces are outlandish. As is their daily life. Each detail carries more of centuries past than of current fashions. They still have so many objects and gestures to be found nowhere else; and they still have so little of what is everywhere.” Yet Brykczyński is free of stereotypes or sentimentalism. The coffin has been interred, all that is left is the sleigh – and the Boiko, their glances avoiding the open cavity. The photographer – and so are we – remains standing over the grave; elevated above it, actually. This is a rather non-typical perspective in light of the fact that the lead protagonist of the photograph is no longer. “In order to vanquish dread or tenacious anxiety, there is nothing better than to imagine one’s own funeral: efficient method, accessible to all,” Emil Cioran advises.

**Ivars Gravlejs, *The Finger* (from the *Works* series)  
the 1990s /2014**



'Fuck off, get fucked, go fuck yourself, get the fuck out, fuck you, fuck you right back'... As Ivars Gravlejs (b. 1979) duly notes, Slavic languages – the Polish language included – allow numerous translations of the simple and unambiguous gesture of the middle finger protruding, originating in Anglo-Saxon culture. Referred to, in line with English pronunciation, as “the fuck” or a variety of its structural derivatives, this vulgar and offensive gesture makes it to the children’s sign language glossary – to the utter despair of parents – usually as a side effect of early school years. Towards the end of primary school and in secondary school, the “fuck” takes on deeper meaning as a mark of rebellion, a synonym of nonconformity. Gravlejs took the portrait photograph of the boy sneaking a covert glance at the photographer in the first

half of the 1990s in the primary school he himself attended. The facial grimace and the vulgar gesture stand in contrast to the suit jacket, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and the white shirt, part of its collar visible from behind the hand of a boy roughly thirteen years of age. In all probability, this is a school celebration: an anniversary, a state holiday, the beginning or end of a semester. The distinctly blown-up photograph seems badly developed, too grainy, scratched, non-retouched white flecks typical for amateurs in the picture's darker parts. Yet the aesthetics of error do not eliminate the texture or the irregular pattern of the boy's houndstooth jacket, the cheap curtain, and the black and white stripes of the sweatshirt worn by a person to the boy's left, visible only in part. While the flash Gravléjs used reduces the perspective, we do see copybooks stacked irregularly on a tabletop to the forefront, and a white net curtain concealing a doorframe behind the boy's back. This portrait of a schoolboy forced into his desk and yet doing anything he can to seem anything but a model pupil was published on the back cover of Gravléjs' *Early Works*. The archive of early works as suggested by the title was organised years later for book purposes, by themed chapters referencing trends in contemporary art. *Pop Art* features photographs of western cars, playing cards illustrated with porn star snapshots, series showing photographic cameras, western make cars, and even walls of empty soda and beer cans collected by children of the transformation age (Gravléjs himself paid for his first camera in this bizarre currency). *Experiments* are an amateur game of photograms in the darkroom, showy long and replicated exposures, photomontages with female classmates as models. The *Conceptualism?* chapter comprise attempts at forging banknotes, photographs scribbled over and covered with text, photographs of calendars, unidentified objects, bushes, wastelands, and dog shit. *Performance* is all about schooltime antics, masquerades, truancy. *Actions*, conversely, feature broken windows, fights over breaks and in class, portraits of teachers caught unawares, sneak peeks of female classmates in the changing room, and an entire censored section of pictures of boys displaying their penises, sticking out their buttocks, and – as described by

Gravlejs himself – playing “adult games”. Actually, the original school-time horseplay and youngster capers are less astonishing than the fact that they were recorded live by a participant. “I often felt nauseous before going to school because of the humiliation that I faced from my teachers,” Gravlejs recalls. “The only way to survive school was to do something creative (. ..),” he adds. Gravlejs’ book is thus aimed at the education and forced school guidance system, somewhat in a simile to writings by Thomas Bernhard and novels by Witold Gombrowicz, Michal Novotný writes. The heteronymous collection of photographs allows an image of how a teenager from Riga grew up. Concurrently, the boy’s amateur photographs go beyond a private archive. This is an image of the end of communism seen through the eyes of a child. Anyone with memories of the USSR’s domination will recognise classroom interiors, crowded changing rooms, and physiognomies of their maths, geography, or gym teachers. This project created by Gravlejs – born in Riga, living in Prague, and working in Bratislava and Brno – spiked the interest of western critics with little knowledge of Eastern Bloc realities. Thus, perhaps, the focal point has shifted from the region’s totalitarian history to a satire mocking the discourse of contemporary art blended in with an original image of coming of age. On the one hand, Gravlejs shows how ossified the divisions organising the art world have become (performance, conceptualism, pop art. . .). On the other – that it is possible to overcome the stereotype of an older-generation photographer interested in female and male puberty. As duly noted by Colin Pantall, in such context the work becomes a unique document, featuring a story of puberty created on the fly and with a dash of ironic self-distance rather than the fantasies and projections of adults nostalgic for their long-gone youth. “Fuck you” in Latvian: “ej dirst”.

**Mateusz Sadowski, *Half a Banana*  
2014**



The object visible on a large-format board has been created from scratch. A flat banana, or rather a sliced half-banana placed against a uniform grey surface and enlarged by a multiple factor, has, to Mateusz Sadowski (b. 1984), become a mere model allowing better view of the artist's focal concern: how to achieve an interesting image using possibly modest resources? How to augment the power of expression with the use of lacklustre matter? "To me, a powerful image is one that stimulates the imagination," says Sadowski, connected to the Poznań-based University of Arts. *Half a Banana* is also food for reflection concerning the condition of 21<sup>st</sup>-century photography. Contrary to appearances, images created digitally have little in common with reality – if anything, possibly with its perception. Half a banana devoid of depth bears resemblance to

a paused MRI scanner animation. Enlarging the image and abstracting it from its original background makes it monumental and unrealistic. In a simile to a 3D scan, a render created with the use of computer hardware and graphic software may potentially become a film, an animation, or a still image resembling a photograph. Individual frames may create an illusion of tangible reality – yet the image shows no real situation or object, merely referencing the artist’s invention restricted by hard- and software capacities. “I begin working once I run out of words; to verify anything, I have to see it – or do it. I am interested in suggesting such visual state senses as I am reasonably unable to verbalise,” says the artist. On the other hand, the artist – who uses techniques akin to photography – may be accused of abandoning analogue techniques, the specificity of a medium involving indicative connections to reality, or even of abandoning the mimetics concept. Once thus viewed, such images as *Half a Banana* displayed in galleries become a thing parallel to computer graphics, or an unspecified type of new media along the lines of animation and software art. Yet *Half a Banana* is an image crucial to photography. Obviously, in contrast to communist times, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the banana is no longer a symbol of consumption or even a substitute for the patriarchal penis (Natalia LL). While pop art classic references (Andy Warhol) are fully justified, Sadowski’s banana is rather of the breed of experimenting with the very technique of reproducing real images. From Hermann Krone and his microscopic photographs of lice and Wilhelm Roentgen X-raying his wife’s hand through to the abstract compositions by Christian Schad and László Moholy-Nagy, the age-old question concerning the definition of the world’s image returns. The question is important in that it concerns the form of perceiving, investigating, and comprehending the structure of reality from the vantage point of contemporary mentalities. The optically illuded human brain doubts what it sees – is this half a banana, or is the banana whole though sliced? The longer we look, the more certain we become: this is no banana; this is no photograph of a banana or of half a banana; this isn’t even half a photograph of half a banana. Sadowski presents an ambivalent image, exposing the omnipresence of surface. The photographer’s gesture, cre-

ated by the artist and described in Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, gradually takes the viewer away from the performance, allowing critical distance to realise the full transparency of contemporary technical images and their magic. In a simile to the early days of the moving image, CGI (Computer-Generated Image) draws from the experience of photographic image, exceeding it in fundamental ways. While issues of representation and technique – of major significance to photography – seem solemn enough, “half a banana” is still all we see in the image. Every tautology carries an element of absurd humour (half a banana is half a banana is half a banana). Karl Kraus was correct in writing that “There are truths the discovery of which may prove one’s shortage of wit.”

**Markéta Othová, 1933**  
**2015**

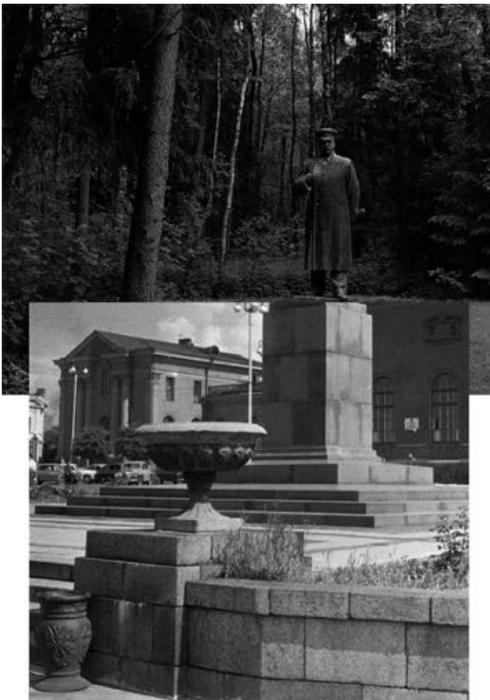


Black and white photographs show glass objects, some photographed twice: in different light, or at an altered angle. Tableware, dishes, bowls, paperweights, ashtrays, vases, all printed in large format, lose their everyday nature and become abstract in form. Glass morphing into photographs is a calm process devoid of any redundant expression. Soft light reveals the texture of objects casting their discernible shadows against neutral backgrounds. Some are photographed straight ahead, others slightly from above, as if viewed on a table or worktop. The central composition of the frame emphasises the beauty of the object. The lighting, backgrounds, shooting angles – all variable, all matching the objects – yield a catalogue rather than typology of the items. Critics are in agreement that time is the key to Markéta Othova's (b. 1968) oeuvre. Photographs arranged in series create a narration wherein the beginning may be the end, and the end may be the beginning. Othova's time comes in cycles. *1933* was created in the wake of the death of artist Antonín Oth in October 2014 – author of all glassware shown in photographs. Othova's photography is mournful art – a tribute to her father's memory without plunging into sentimentalism. In their form, photograph reference artistic glassware catalogues of the 1960s and 1970s, albeit some shots might also bring object-focused concreteness to mind, a trend typical for the years 1918–1939. An intuitive suggestion of associations with studio works by Josef Sudek and Jan Svoboda seems justified as well. Othova's title – *1933* – is nagging: referencing Oth's birth date, it conceals something mysterious, as in the Nietzschean myth of eternal recurrence. The artist used to confuse audiences and critics before, in developing exhibitions and designing works – as Stefan Gronert writes – by applying the metaphor of a mirror (right is left, left is right, the beginning is the end, the end is the beginning...) Yet in its connection to the artist's father's death, *1933* highlights the existential dimension of Othova's art. "If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross," the narrator of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* remarks, adding, "It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable re-

sponsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (*das schwerste Gewicht*). If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.”

By using the affiliation between glass and photography, both fragile and yet often more durable than human life, the artist creates the image of a man and hands it over to her successors. After all, even if these items are family heirloom to Othova’s next of kin, viewers of 1933 may say, “This is an image of which Antonin Oth was born.”

**Indrė Šerpytytė, *Pedestal***  
**2016**



“First and foremost, we were taught to love comrade Stalin. The first letters we ever wrote were sent to the Kremlin,” a protagonist of Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time. The Last of the Soviets* recalls her childhood. “Once we knew our letters, we were each given a sheet of white writing paper, and we took dictation of a letter to our best and most beloved leader. We really and truly loved him, we believed we would receive a response and that he would send us presents. Lots of presents! We gazed at his portrait, and he seemed so beautiful to us. The most beautiful man in the world! We even argued who would give the most days of his or her life for one day in Stalin’s.” These children were possibly looking at one of the surviving portraits of the general-issimus; a secondhand image, it also drew the attention of Lithuanian artist Indrė Šerpytytė (b. 1983). Šerpytytė had focused on modern history before. The project *1944–1991* (2011) – a watershed in the life of the artist, born in Palanga and living in London – concerned places of torture, prisons, and detention centres operated by Soviet security agencies (i.a. *NKVD*, People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, and *KGB*, Committee for State Security). *Forest Brothers* (2009) in turn showed Lithuanian settings, wherein anti-Soviet guerrilla movement had been active until the mid-1970s. In her series, Šerpytytė references memory and photography, occasionally supplementing her exhibition with objects. Against such backdrop, *Pedestal* differs in the use of montage and large-format pictures allowing better recognition of details and context. Each work in the series comprises two photographs blended into one. Top half: summertime colour photograph of one of the Grūtas Park statues near Druskininkai, Lithuania. Bottom half: archival black and white picture of a part of Vilnius, the same statue at the centre of the frame. The tension in this unusual diptych-like composition is emphasised by differences in the sizes and formats of the top and bottom halves of the image. The mismatch references traditions of modernistic photomontage, revealing the artwork’s structure to the recipient. The perfection of the composition arises from the picture’s vertical axis yielded by the monument at the centre of the dual work, the horizontal dividing line traversing the sculpture or its plinth.

Only now does the montage of two photographs allow admiration of the statue's body as well as a guess at the identity and theme of the presentation. Lush nature has become a backdrop for monuments to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, both brought to Druskininkai from Vilnius. While the communist sculpture theme park established in 2001 by Viliumas Malinauskas has become a home to other communist activists (Lithuanian, chiefly) as well, the artist chose statues of the two most well-known Soviet leaders. Photographs of (partly restored) sculptures saved from destruction have been contrasted with archival photographs showing the same monuments in USSR's times of glory; surrounded by elated crowds during communist holidays and parades, they were also meeting points for young people and a backdrop for family photos marking an important occasion. Photographically, Lenin the orator is less interesting than Joseph Stalin, whose likenesses were removed along with his name from street names, buildings, and all public spaces during the political thaw of 1956. In contrast to other photographs of the *Pedestal* series, there are no crowds at the foot of Stalin's monument; there are even no families or friends taking a souvenir snapshot. The park, with its tarnished figure rising from among the trees, is empty. The city itself is vacant as well, cars parked in the distance the only sign of life. Stalin – erect and staring straight ahead – is clad in a general's overcoat with epaulets and ornate buttons, Bolshevik star-adorned military cap on his head. His posture is distinctive: left foot slightly forward, left hand behind the back, right palm on the chest, concealed in the space between overcoat buttons. This likeness of Stalin references a photograph taken on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1937 during his visit to the Moskva-Volga Canal. One of the most famous pictures in the history of Soviet photography shows the dictator accompanied by Kliment Voroshilov and Vyacheslav Molotov (both to the right), and Nikolai Yezhov standing on the other side, the canal behind him. Yezhov, responsible for the supervision of mass repressions in times of the Great Terror and dubbed the "Bloody Dwarf" for reasons of his height (151 cm) was arrested in 1939, detained, charged, and executed by firing squad after torture and a secret tri-

al. Following Stalin's orders, he became too dangerous a witness. Yet physical annihilation was not enough: *narkom* (people's commissar) Yezhov was to vanish off the pages of all history books. He was also removed from all photographs, including the one taken during the walk on the canal. Stalin's image on the monument referencing the photo taken at the acme of the Great Terror differs from the original in a number of details. The general's overcoat is double-breasted: Stalin finds it more difficult to insert his hand under the coat; it must have been easier wearing the regular officer's greatcoat, as in the archival picture. Differently to the canal snapshot, Stalin seems to be clutching his heart rather than reaching for a weapon – yet he continues evoking fear rather than love. In the *Pedestal* series photomontage, the sense of threat is intensified both by the dark woods the figure emerges from and by the deserted city, a stone flowerpot placed before the monument adding surrealism to the scene. Typically for Šerpytytė's art, once contrasted with a souvenir from Stalinist times, the image of the sculpture park becomes somewhat ambiguous. Viewing the *Pedestal* one may well imagine the Soviet era unearthed, in a simile to ancient times. Ripped out from historical context nailed with an archival photograph and replaced with nature, Stalin resembles an archaeological finding, majestic as if a leader of ancient ages. Though the gutter becomes him much more than a pedestal, there he is, living on in a park of statues, in a deserted town conquered by Soviets. Standing there and still frightening people. "Everything collapsed with no war. Nobody understands why... Because one would need to think... and nobody was taught to think," says another of Alexievich's protagonists. "All people remember is fear... I read somewhere that fear is also a form of love. I think Stalin said that."

**Peter Puklus, *Diana***  
**from *The Epic Love Story of a Warrior* series**  
**2016**



Albeit the Roman goddess Diana and her Greek counterpart Artemis are female, Peter Puklus' (b. 1980) black and white photograph features the central figure of a naked youth. His white, well-proportioned body forms the vertical axis of the composition. The model is standing on his left foot, his right lifted and slightly to the rear. His right arm reaches to the side, the left (visible only in part) lifted upwards. The man's muscles are taut, unsurprisingly, given the fact that a white sphere resembling a ball in shape remains his sole point of support. The figure has been decapitated with the upper edge of the frame. Of all the elements of the photograph brightly illuminated with the camera's flash, an oblong rectangular wooden block to the left of the image

and the pedestal the man is standing on (comprising a pallet-like base and the aforementioned sphere) are the most distinct. The dark backdrop of the presentation allows a look into the discernible spacious interior of a studio or warehouse: entrance doorway, industrial windows, ceiling lighting, wrapped objects placed against walls, another rectangular block and another sphere peeking out of its cardboard box. Genitals remain the focal element of the frame. The penis is at rest, a noteworthy factor, given other photographs by Puklus. The classic rendering of the penis is distorted by the exposed glans, another distinctive feature of the frame selected by the artist for gallery display from among the larger number of colour variations of the *Diana* published in Puklus' book *The Epic Love Story of a Warrior*. A comparison of consecutive photographs taken in the studio allows the viewer to note how the model attempts to keep his balance in a one-legged stand on the sphere by using nearby plinths as supports, flexing his muscles, inhaling. The first intuitive suggestion is to include images created by the Hungarian artist born in Cluj-Napoca, Romania in trends of on-camera performances (Ion Grigorescu) and one-minute sculptures (Erwin Wurm). The importance of association in the process of comprehending art, emphasised by the artist and possibly gleaned from his studies at the Budapest Moholy-Nagy university, suggests that *Diana* references iconography rooted in the ancient. Possibly, the youth standing on his white sphere is a photographic struggle with the ideal represented by the iconic sculpture of the goddess of the hunt and the moon by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Once atop the tower of Madison Square Garden in central New York, the figure has been made famous by its consecutive versions, casts, and smaller copies. The figure of a naked girl holding a bow at the ready (an attribute Puklus' *Diana* is missing) is also raised on the toes of one foot on a sphere, the symbol of complete excellence and referencing the moon. Puklus' work is doomed to fail, twice. Firstly – by replacing a sculpted form intended for eternity with a pose captured in an instant as decisive as it is ephemeral. Secondly – by bringing the ideal of chastity and female beauty down from its pedestal to a level of hairy male genitals.

The awkwardness of the model aspiring to excellence may be a quip (rather than an academic variation) on the myth of one of the many lovers threatening Diana's virtue. In such setting, a decapitated man with an exposed penis is pathetic in his imperfect pose he manages to preserve but for a moment: a split second allowing a flash-illuminated photograph to be taken. Following the lead of sculpture-related associations, one might note that the photographic sculpture Puklus created is closer in composition and gender to *The Genius of Liberty* atop the July Column in the Parisian Place de la Bastille. *The Genius* by Augustine-Alexandre Dumont – indubitably influenced by Giambologna's *Mercury* – while marking the success of the French Revolution of 1830, is considered a personification of freedom after having been placed atop a column commemorating the storming of the Bastille. And that is not all. The anonymous man modelling for Puklus forms part of the narrative comprising a series of photographs and the project-recapitulating book. "*The Epic Love Story of a Warrior forges a fragmented photographic voyage through the history of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century,*" Puklus writes. The story itself is told from the vantage point of a fictitious family by an anonymous protagonist, a young European dreaming of a voyage from the east to the west. Puklus admits to a game of associations, to revealing images imprinted on the awareness of the region's inhabitants. Concurrently, he writes, his ambition is to convey the complexity of history and the (frequently coincidental) connection between events he has arbitrarily chosen. The *Diana* sequence published on three pages positioned far from each other forms part of Chapter Two titled *Unsafe to Dance 1933–1945* (remaining chapters: *The Beginning of Hope 1918–1939, Bigger. Faster. Higher 1944–1989, Life Is Techno 1989–2016*). Intended for reading from left to right, the publication is a visual treaty of love and history, full of allegories and symbols. The multi-layered composition of this art book is striking in more than just its partitioning into chapters describing individual historical periods. The abandonment of pagination is another issue. Page numbers have been replaced by letters arranged to form a piece by Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. Puklus' associations

developing into a history of Central and Eastern Europe, erudite games of art history, and female-male photographic amusements all take on an existential dimension with the reading of the consecutive stanzas of a poem penned on November 8<sup>th</sup> 1913, opening with the following sequence: "The many fallen ones into the deepest / Insatiable abyss! / One of these days I'll also vanish, guiltless / from earthly living bliss. (...)" („Уж сколько их упало в эту бездну, / Разверзтую вдали! / Настанет день, когда и я исчезну"...).

Adam Mazur

translated from Polish by Aleksandra Sobczak

# CENTRAL BY EAST CENTRAL

Curator: Adam Mazur

Exhibition coordinator: Sylwia Narewska

Galeria Arsenał, Białystok, 13.10.–19.11.2017

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