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Polish photo-designed books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

I'm a first-year doctoral candidate at the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. My current research focuses on Polish photo-designed books in the 19th and early 20th centuries. My intention is to look closely at the times during which the photograph was made part of the printed page. I am interested in discovering (and reading into) the context (also the printed background) from which the photograph is very often removed.

The twenty-first century witnessed the significant rise in the interest in books containing photography. They are usually referred to as 'photographic books' or 'photobooks'. I'm inclined to use instead the term 'photo-designed books' which in my opinion describe books in which the photograph acts as neither 'a pure image' nor an illustration (for the purpose of this abstract, I will put the difficulty with the definition aside).

[To historicise] A few publications tried to establish a general history of the photobook and its canon. There also have been books taking a strictly national or regional outlook on the subject: focusing on Dutch books, Japanese books, Latin American books, German books, and so on. However, no serious scholarship has been produced about the history of the Polish photobook. Hence, I decided to start my research at the very beginning and focus firstly on the long nineteenth century and the various appearances of the photo-designed books throughout that time. E.g. the development of the photographically illustrated book in the nineteenth century should be looked at in relation to the unprecedented advances in science, travel and industry whereas the twentieth century witnessed a dynamic use of the photo-designed book as propaganda.

[To define, to typologise] Photobooks inspired comment from writers on art, photographers, photography historians and collectors. Just like photography itself, photobooks present some difficulty for those trying to define or categorize them. The photographic image surfaces in fine art, journalism, and empirical sciences, even the legal system. Naturally, as a consequence, the classification and definitions of the photographic books also vary considerably according to context or conditions.

[To contextualize] Therefore, firstly, I am certain that my research material will present challenges in identifying and interpreting relevant documents, since there are probably few photobooks that could easily be defined by one category only: artistic, ideological, documentary or other. Nevertheless, it will be one of my goals to address my research material with maximum attention to discovering and distinguishing diverse circumstances in which it was created, from a range of political, social and aesthetic viewpoints. My hypothesis here being that the history of photobooks presents us not only with an alternative version of history of photography but tells us mainly about the history of the times in which these books were created.

Secondly, the big question remains, given the history of Poland, which printed documents should be considered today as Polish and which should be rather called Russian, Lithuanian, Belarusian or Ukrainian. What are my nationality criteria for the Polish national bibliography?

And finally, history of photobook in obvious ways is connected to the history of book and the graphic design history and as such it requires interdisciplinary research (not just multidisciplinary). In part this may be due to book's and graphic design's various beginnings in the history of art, photography, publishing, printing, typography and even advertising. Print culture and technology changed over time; e.g. a vast majority of nineteenth-century prints were originally manufactured and meant to be seen in a bound format, and the later commercial production of albums and photobooks followed technical advances in both the photographic medium and the printing industry.

In short, in my discussions about the Polish photobook I wish to include the country-specific background of its production, the authors, the publishers involved, and the production technology, as well as the detailed circumstances under which the selected case studies were published.