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Soft focus generation *versus* „the bizarre freaks”. Theoretical and social background of the development of the pre- and post-war Polish avant-garde photography

In 2015 during the Second International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History I had a pleasure to shortly present my current state of research concerning the subject of reintroducing an experimental spirit into the photography in the post-war period in the East-Central Europe. My speech provoked interesting questions, among others:

- Why the Polish photographic milieu in 1950s and 1960s mostly rejected modern solutions?
- Why I could mention only few examples of the neo-avant-garde artists?

Those significant inquiries raised by other participants of the Forum provoked me to broaden the perspective of the study. Therefore at present the project seeks to investigate the theoretical and social background of the development of the pre- and post-war Polish avant-garde photography.

Although the first symptoms of the avant-garde solutions in Polish photography can be acknowledged already in the inter-war period, they were suppressed by the pictorialism. Thus, most of the photographs from the 1920s and 1930s can be described as soft-focused, nostalgic images. What is important, we can observe the same aesthetic tendency many years later – in 1950s and 1960s.

The paper is based on the thesis that in the inter-war as well as in the post-war period the sharpness of the image was not purely a technical parameter, but it was the crucial stand-point of the aesthetic program of that time. Opting for softening all lines, or on the contrary – being in favour of non-blurred, sharp contours, was identified as conscious declaration of belonging to a particular artistic formation. Creating soft-focused images testified that the particular artist cultivated the old, classic "photographic culture" (Fig. 1), while brutal,

geometrical figures were a manifestation of author's sympathy for new and foreign solutions (Fig. 2).

In this study the micro-narration on the issue of focus is the starting point for wider analysis of the context of the development of modernity in the Polish photography. The aim of this paper is to analyse the theoretical discourse accompanying the attempts to diversify the artistic scene (which raises a number of ideological and aesthetic controversies).

Photographic magazines can be concerned as a key source to undertake such an analysis. This reference material is essential because in the Polish photographic milieu there was no division of roles – artists were critics at the same time. Authors of the manifestos and theoretical texts were photographers themselves. In the published articles the approach represented by Roland Barthes or Mieke Bal is clearly evident: the meaning of an artwork is construed with each re-reading. This material reminds us that interpretation is a process of multiple discoveries. However, we must be aware of what Michel de Certeau underlined: that the researcher never works with neutral source. He or she is always establishing it, since we produce, rather than find, data.

What caused such a radical rejection of innovation? What kind of theory was so strongly rooted in the numerous of photographic generations that even after the Second World War any proposal seeking to deconstruct the existing canon was criticised? Why overcoming the hegemony of the romantic, blurry images in the Polish environment was so difficult to accept and proceeded slower than in neighbouring countries? The answers to the mentioned questions were prepared based on the original, authorial elaboration of the photographic magazines of the era (mentioned in the “Sources” section).

Literature:

“Foto-Amator”, publisher: Arthur Gutowski's publishing house, month periodical, volumes from the years: 1933–1934.

“Fotograf Polski”, publisher: Polish Society of Friends of Photography in cooperation with the Professional Photographers Association in Warsaw and the Association of

Photographers from Greater Poland [Wielkopolska], month periodical, volumes from the years: 1925–1939.

“Nowości Fotograficzne”, publisher: "Alfa" factory, published twice a year, volumes from the years: 1928–1939.

“Polski Przegląd Fotograficzny. Czasopismo poświęcone fotografii artystycznej, naukowej i amatorskiej”, publisher: Society of Friends of Photography in Poznań, month periodical, volumes from the years: 1925–1930.

“Świat Fotografii”, publisher: Society of Friends of Photography in Poznań, 31 volumes from the years: 1946–52

“Fotografia”, publisher: “Sztuka” – state publishing house, month periodical, volumes from the years: 1953–74