

**During the 5 years since we entered the European Union, not only has the Polish economic situation improved but there has also been a series of positive changes in the field of photography. Just as in the case of economy, the changes are mutually beneficial.**

On the one hand, Polish photography has recently made great progress trying to catch up with the West. More and more local artists keep up-to-date with the achievements of the stars of modern photography. At the same time, they themselves start to draw the attention of international curators and art merchants. On the other hand, however, the new EU members have become an object of interest of Western artists, who more and more often head to the East to explore this 'terra incognita' in search for fresh incentives for their works. This year's edition of the Transphotographiques festival in Lille, which proved to be one of the major presentations of Polish photography in Western Europe, supports the point. Numerous 'Eastern European touches' were present there, both when it comes to the photographers and the themes they have chosen, e.g. French and German artists displayed their photos taken in Poland and in other countries of the former Eastern Block.

This year's review of photography in Lille was organized on a bit smaller scale than in previous years. It most probably resulted from the fact that another cultural event, the Europe XXL – Lille 3000 art festival, which was hosted in some of the spaces used by the photography exhibition last year, was organized at the same time as Transphotographiques. However, at this point its 'competitiveness' comes to an end. In fact, a kind of symbiosis can be observed here. Europe XXL, similarly to Transphotographiques, was devoted to the countries of the New Europe. What is more, due to the abundance of expositions, Lille was turned into a huge cultural centre in May, which must have had a positive influence on the turnout at both festivals. The Polish artists who took part in both events had a great opportunity to present their works to a wide audience.

The majority of the exhibitions of Transphotographiques were located in the monumental space of Palais Rameau. Among the Poles, who exhibited their works in the building, the most distinguishable one is Oiko Petersen with his cycle *Guys. From Poland with Love*, which in a smart way presents the issues of conventions and stereotypes. A set of stylized portraits depicts a variety of men types, whose outfit, make-up and props perfectly fit carefully arranged settings and at the same time highlight interests, professions, personalities and, above all, sexuality of the models. The outcome of the photographer's work is a composition of colour photos that present an imaginary or even a fairy-tale land, in which kitsch and the feeling of joy are purposefully contrasted with the dullness of what is ordinary and common. A totally opposite approach was offered by the photographers from the Sputnik Photos group, whose members come from the Czech Republic (Filip Singer), Georgia (Justyna Mielnikiewicz), Slovakia (Andrej Balco) and Slovenia (Manca Juvan, Domen Pal). There are also three Polish documentary photographers – Agnieszka Rayss, Jan Brykczyński and Rafał Milach. Their *At the borders* series is a classic example of photojournalism which poses questions about immigration and which is connected with the problems of living in a new and unfamiliar reality.

The issue of frontiers, which constitutes the key theme of the Sputnik group, was also depicted, though in less direct and more varied ways, in the international project entitled *Frontières*, which dealt with all sorts of social and cultural barriers in the post-communist countries. Out of the five photographers who took part in this project, the most significant are probably Kai Ziegner (Germany), who focuses on the post-DDR reality, and Tomasz

Rykaczewski (Poland), whose photographs tackle most controversial issues of the Polish society – sexuality and tolerance.

As compared with the aforementioned photographers, whose works are mostly devoted to the socio-cultural consequences of the transformations that have taken place in the post-USSR countries, the Czech photographers Bara Prasilova and Dita Pepe & Petr Hrubec appear distinct. Their works present symbolic and unrealistic images, a composition of fairy-tale spaces, fanciful outfits and digital intervention. Similar tendencies can be noticed in the works of other modern photographers that come from the Czech Republic, for instance, in the last year's Teresa Vlčkova's exhibition. It certainly proves the unquestionable integrity of the Czech school of photography, which more and more often focuses on romantic themes that dominate in the modern world of art. Still, it manages to retain its unique character and stylistic individuality. It is also worth mentioning that during the last year's Transphotographiques, the Czech presentations were among the most successful ones.

Dominique Secher, whose documentary cycle entitled *Romanes* depicts life of the contemporary Romani, also presented his photographs in Palais Rameau. The same theme was explored by other documentary photographers of Transphotographiques as well. Antoine Sude (the *Roms, Porte de Valenciennes, Lille* series, presented in Maison de la photographie) and Yves Leresche (the *Roma Realities – Eglise Saint-Maurice* series) are also interested in poor Romani communities. It certainly reveals a tendency, quite traditional in photography, to seek cultural differences both in the closest surroundings and during travels abroad. The neutral, 'outside' eye of a travelling photographer who enters the Eastern European reality, which is unknown to him, is one of the main motifs of the French festival. Jessica Backhaus from Germany is such an artist. Her works were created during

her numerous journeys to Netno – a tiny seaside village – where she captured the interiors of houses, people she came across and pieces of space. The outcome of her project is an extremely poetical set of photographs focused on provincial reality and gradually fading elements of Polish culture. This series, entitled *Jesus and the Cherries* (exhibited in Maison de la Photographie), creates an association with the aesthetics of American documentaries and at the same time with the British contemporary photography of Richard Wentworth and Peter Fraser. It also relates to the achievements of modern Eastern European photographers, who capture instant changes and the 'margins' of the familiar reality. Typical Backhaus' themes of everyday, common and ordinary objects and actions are also present in the works of Joao Urban, a Brazilian photographer. In the *Here and There* series (exhibited in Maison de la Photographie), he juxtaposes photos of Polish immigrants in Brazil with images of provincial villages of Poland. Our country and other parts of Easter Europe became the destination of yet another artist, Grégoire Eloy, a French documentary photographer, whose black-

and-white works from the *Visas* cycle were shown in Palais Rihour.

The heart of last year's events, Tri Postal, this year was devoted both to Transphotographiques and the aforementioned Europe XXL – Lille 3000 festival. The ground floor of this exhibition building was given to the photo festival, and a true celebration of Polish photography took place here. In Tri Postal, the oeuvre of the Photo-shop agency was presented, which comprises commercial pictures and also more independent (and definitely worth a closer look) works of individual members of this advertising agency. Igor Omulecki's photographs, presenting paradoxical motifs taken out of the Polish reality, were most significant. Every single picture of this artist is full of unexpectedly juxtaposed situations and unreality, found by the photographer in the atmosphere of the eastern (poorer) part of Poland. Some of them purposefully applied an amateur technique which perfectly corresponded with the provincial themes of the pictures. In Tri Postal, apart from Omulecki, Zuza Krajewska & Bartek Wiczorek, a duet co-operating with Photo-shop, presented their works, which in some cases are strongly

related to the works of Wolfgang Tillmans. This year's edition of Transphotographiques did not manage to escape some drawbacks, though. The commercial character of the event is certainly one of them. Sometimes, it was easier to find the prices than the titles of presented works... The same commercial dimension of the festival explains the presence of such figures as Tomasz Gudzowaty or Andrzej Dragan. The exhibition of Patrick Demarchelier's fashion photography was equally peculiar and surprising. His pretty mediocre works did not seem to fit the key themes of the event. However, the festival, which proved to be a unique promotion of Polish photography, should generally be described as successful. Olivier Spillebout, the director of Transphotographiques, plans to found a gallery devoted only to the Eastern European photography, and also to create a magazine, whose first edition would serve as a catalogue of the festival. Thanks to Spillebout's fascination with Poland, our photography was given a chance to emerge on the international scene. Hopefully, the aesthetics of the pictures and the commercial success will not be decisive in the choice of the artists, though.