

Lucia Nimcova

Instant Truths between the OFFICIAL and the UNOFFICIAL

In her photographs and videos, the Slovak artist Lucia Nimcova, who studied at University of Silesia in Opava, focuses on the visual codes of her homeland's communist past and pursues the traces of this past in the present day. Born in 1977, Nimcova belongs to the generation of Slovak artists who experienced the era of communism in their youth but began their artistic careers under conditions fundamentally different from those that prevailed before 1989. From this position of oscillation between empathic closeness and critical distance, she examines the hybrid condition of the post-communist epoch – an ambivalent mixture of backward yearnings and apathy, Westernisation and self-colonisation.¹

Ever since she began working as an artist, Nimcova has probed the radical transformation of society taking place in Slovakia today, and in her works she focuses on the inconsistencies and contradictions of the cultural transformation process: Whether she creates portraits of women in Central and Eastern Europe whose living conditions could not be more different from the promises of capitalism, in *Instant Women* (2003–2005), or documents the fate of the people of Rusyn – an ethnic minority to which she herself belongs – who were forced to leave their homes to make way for the Starina dam project, in *RUSYNS – Lost Homes* (2006), it is obvious that Nimcova has developed an artistic concept and a clear photographic language which enable her to question the myth of a direct approach to reality and the alleged naturalness and truth of visual representation. Her subjective style of documentation unites political awareness and critical precision with an approach based on personal experience and subjectivity, in which the reality of the present is reflected and presented as something changeable.

In accordance with the focal shift characteristic of many representatives of her generation, the main photographic focus of Nimcova's works is not the centre but rather the periphery: For her extensive project *UNOFFICIAL*, she spent two years doing in-depth research into the history of her birthplace, the town of Humenné in eastern Slovakia, combing the official picture archives as well as pictures made by amateur photographers for historical documentation of the everyday world.

¹ According to the Bulgarian philosopher Alexander Kiossev, the phenomenon of self-colonisation describes the metamorphosis of identity undergone by entire cultures which came under the sway of the EU after the fall of the Wall. Such countries, according to Kiossev, import alien values and models of civilisation from outside their borders, thereby devotedly colonising their own authenticity so as to become totally encompassed by the generally prevailing culture of Western liberal democracy: Alexander Kiossev, "Notes on Self-colonising Cultures", in: Bojana Pejic, David Elliott (ed.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-communist Europe*, Stockholm 1999.

Using her hometown as an example, Nimcova creates a historical panorama and a time slice of the current post-communist situation that sidesteps the frequently all-too-simple documentation of an “ex-communist identity”. A central core of her work is the selection she made from a compendium of photographs which she discovered in the archive of the Regional Cultural Centre in Humenné: These officially commissioned photographs present aspects of communist life, but above all semi-official cultural events – such as local assemblies, choir performances, sports activities or regional festivities. A substantial portion of these photographs were made by Juraj Kammer, a professional photographer who, over the course of twenty years, documented the cultural life of Humenné in his pictures, thus contributing to the formation of a political identity and strongly influencing the public image of socialist Czechoslovakia. In looking through Kammer’s photographs, Nimcova realised, to her surprise, that in contrast to many amateur photographs, these pictures were not propagandist in nature and that to a large extent they communicated a neutral perspective of the 1970s and 1980s in the region where Nimcova grew up. Nevertheless, in *UNOFFICIAL* these pictures are presented as a part of the personal history of the artist: Having subjected the extensive pictorial material to a protracted process of analysis and interpretation, Nimcova made a narrow selection, with the result that the found footage is given a sense of Nimcova’s personal authorship. Here and there the artist brings herself into play as a protagonist, for example by marking her own image in a photograph of the children’s choir Nezábudka (“Forget-me-not”) with a red cross, thus identifying herself as a historical witness, or by integrating private family photographs from her childhood into the selection. Nimcova causes a discourse to unfold in pictures, a discourse which puts collective and personal memories in a metonymic relation to one another and closely interweaves “identity” with the process of remembering.

Nimcova places the narratives of these historical, mainly official photographs in dialogue with works of her own, which she created only after intensive study of the former: They illustrate the post-socialist status quo and at the same time deal with general questions about constructions of power and gender, about the relation between past and present, politics and individual identity, space and history. By juxtaposing historical and current pictures, Nimcova searches for traces of change and discovers a surprising continuity of everyday reality – as if time had stood still. In order to do this, she borrows the visual strategies of official photography and returns to the people, places and situations she has seen in the archives. There she discovers a society untouched by global change, living

in memories: These people hold public positions similar to those they held years ago; the places and institutions appear to be unchanged, frozen in time; even events and political discussions show the traces of long-forgotten days. Nimcova documents the continuity of local rituals, attitudes and gestures. She weaves the results of her photographic research into a pictorial panorama of contemporary life with historical references, in which the microcosmic perspective of Humenné serves as the key to an understanding of social upheavals in a larger context. What impact have the socio-political metamorphoses, the shifts of power blocks and hegemonies and accession to the EU actually had? What is post-communist everyday life really like today?

In all this, Nimcova does not focus on the official political culture but instead portrays, with great empathy and at times with an ironic undertone, the private everyday world of people who unerringly carry on their struggle for existence between the systems of communism and capitalism. Nimcova is aware of her power as a photographer; in fact, her closeness to the people she documents forms the basis of her work. In the video *Exercise*, which is part of the project *UNOFFICIAL*, the artist animates elderly people to a physical performance, acting to a certain extent as a catalyst for their body memories. The artist comments: "I encourage them to become animated again, because I believe they have a great deal to tell us, even if they consider our generation to be lost."² The sharpness of the series of images is based on the ambivalently used pair of terms *Official – Unofficial*, for it is precisely society's separation of the private and the political which is demonstrated to be obsolete in Nimcova's juxtaposition of yesterday and today. Nimcova's pictures, which oppose the fiction of an absoluteness of pictorial evidence and which reveal a multitude of truths, sharpen the viewer's ability to see the complex connections between everyday life, politics, economics and cultural identity.

Her visual approach to the continuity of social and cultural patterns not only serves as a method of disclosure but is also to be understood as a contribution to historical discourse. The black-and-white aesthetic of the historical photographs contrasts with Nimcova's colour pictures, which identify the here and now. In her juxtaposition of the two, the relation between present and past is shown as something that has to be continually renegotiated. It is in the nature of the ambivalence of memories that the significance of the past is continually recreated when it is remembered in the present, as Kaja Silverman once explained with

² All quotations by Lucia Nimcova have been taken from her e-mails to the author.

reference to Chris Marker's documentary *Sans Soleil* (1983): "To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present."³

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Vienna, 11/2008

From the catalogue
Lucia Nimcova - UNOFFICIAL III, Tresor, Kunstforum, Vienna
ISBN: 978-3-940748-63-8

³ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York/London 1996, p. 189.