

Annemarie Türk in an interview with Lucia Nimcova

Annemarie Türk Lucia, you are among the representatives of contemporary Slovak photography who are also well known internationally. You have followed your artistic path very rigorously – do you see yourself as part of the tradition of Slovak photography? Which influences have been important for your artistic development?

Lucia Nimcova As you know, we used to be Czechoslovakia until 1992. Almost all the best Slovak photographers and film directors studied in Prague. It is a bit difficult to say what Slovak photography is. If you had asked me ten years ago, I might have said that Slovak photography is not so intellectual; usually it is very human and full of dreams and visions. Today the situation is different. Many photographers try to reflect our new society in a very clear and straightforward way. We can speak about a new documentary wave, independent of the Czech tradition since 2000 (Martin Kollár, Jozef Ondzik, Andrej Bán, Martin Marenčin, Andrej Balco, etc.). I am from the Rusyn minority, so I do not consider myself as pure Slovak, and I studied in Opava (Czech Republic) at a very traditional photography school. It was my choice. I did not want to become a big artist without knowing my field of study really deeply, which can happen in the West. "First you have to find an idea and then a medium to express it." I chose photography as my medium and was experimenting to find out what was possible to say with it, depending on the topic. In my life I had many crucial influences, because I am from nowhere special and nobody is interested in art in my family. KulturKontakt Austria was one of these influences. My boyfriend sent you my portfolio, because I was not confident enough to do it. I will never forget our first lunch in Vienna, where I was not able to say one sentence in English, but you were smiling and answering your questions yourself. I wonder how many similar experiences you had? It would make a great video about my generation of Eastern European artists their first time abroad.

Annemarie Türk We got to know you as an artist in residence in Vienna in 2004. What has happened since then? What has characterised your continuing path as a photographer?

Lucia Nimcova I was trying to understand where my position was in the world as a photographer, because I did not fit Slovak standards. The photography I was working on was not part of the Slovak art world at that time, so I had to try to show my work abroad. I was named one of the twelve best young

photojournalists in 2004 (Joop Swart Masterclass/World Press Photo). At the same time I also understood that this was not my way. The logic of the press world is not something I am fighting for, so I decided to continue in my work as an independent artist with a very low budget to survive. I was working on my series *Instant Women* in Ukraine. I slept in a car, or in the houses of friends I met on the way. It was a very important period in my life and I learned a lot. At the same time I had a lot of exhibitions around Europe. Usually curators found my website and asked to present my work, so I was not dependent on Slovak art structures. In 2006 I did a site-specific installation in my hometown, about the history of the town, installed in prefabs as a part of an alternative film and music festival organised by my boyfriend. After that I did a project about the Rusyn minority, when I realized that it was more about music than photography in the end. In 2006 I was accepted at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. It was the right timing, because I was very tired of continuing alone and could not see another possible step to survive as a freelance artist. I started to work with archives. The past influences the present. I spent one year with official documentation from my hometown Humenné as a preparation for the project *UNOFFICIAL*; I finished the project in Amsterdam, at a distance – to a certain extent also in terms of perspective. In 2007 I won the Oskar Čepan Award as the best young Slovak artist, which I considered a huge surprise. I was the first artist working with the medium of photography to receive it.

Annemarie Türk You are currently finishing two years' residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and are at the same time preparing a dissertation for the University of Silesia in Opava. It therefore seems that moving between East and West is very natural for you. Was it difficult for an artist from Eastern Slovakia to be accepted and to gain a foothold in the international exhibitions scene?

Lucia Nimcova Transition between West and East is always very painful, as you always miss something. It is much easier to work in Western countries, as people take art seriously; on the other hand, I cannot comment on life there, as I am not absolutely part of it. In contrast, in Eastern countries there is no discussion or professionalism. My experiences with exhibitions in Slovakia have been the toughest and saddest ones. If I am criticising something, they do not think about it; they say I have Western manners, that I am spoiled. As a real Eastern European artist you should not complain about installing an exhibition on a dirty wall with holes. And if you do ... you can paint it yourself. To remain an Eastern European artist requires a special thick skin and a very Spartan way of life. And

still you can't be sure that the local context will not kill you. I would say ... I am more accepted outside than in Slovakia. Maybe I was just lucky.

Annemarie Türk You explore your Slovak roots a great deal in your artistic work. An important theme of many of your projects is the recent past in your home country. What effects did the major changes have for people, and what remained from everyday "socialist" life?

Lucia Nimcova Many times I have been approached with the question: "How could Communism affect you, if you were only twelve back then?" It is hard to explain that Communism never collapsed completely; it has only transformed itself into something hardly definable. I cannot say that the remains of Communism are only bad; one can find positive things. So I tried to portray this schizophrenic society, which somehow does not want to become mature, which does not want to wake up from its dream. For some people the dream is a nice one ... for others, a total nightmare. In the project *UNOFFICIAL*, I used text as an autonomous part of the work for the first time, and the titles of the photographs are also very important.

Annemarie Türk Your perspective of people in Humenné, your hometown, is characterised by solidarity, and is never judgemental. You seem to really like their art of survival, their ability to be able to laugh about themselves and also about their circumstances. In your photos we encounter people who ultimately remain unimpressed by the systems and the political transformation – archetypes.

Lucia Nimcova It is fascinating to meet these archetypes; you see them often when you arrive after a long time abroad. As if they were stuck in a parallel world, somewhere in the last century, despite all the external movements. They refuse to live in reality. They understand their own world and they are not interested in a new one. They are stubborn. They were often important officials ... so they are not just some kind of "normal folks". Many people from my project *UNOFFICIAL* are not living in the real life world ... they live a life according to their memories and that is what fascinated me. Finding new objects at every cultural event obsessed me. They had the same poses and attitudes, movements, and gestures as persons I knew from archives. It is somewhat similar when you look at the hip-hop community. By their way of moving and dressing you identify those people wherever you are in the world. The most dangerous ones are those younger (40–50) lovers of the masses with socialist faces and capitalist aims

(never in a different order). I think we have many of those in Slovakia and they are very good at educating their followers ... so I guess Slovakia has a long way to go. I think the visuality of *UNOFFICIAL* will disappear in five years, but the people and their actions will remain longer.

Annemarie Türk You were twelve when the iron curtain fell and Slovakia became "democratic". You therefore have very specific memories of the time before and after the major political changes.

Lucia Nimcova The children's choir I was singing in was invited for a revolutionary demonstration. Well, the event started as a communist anniversary, which by the socialist "standard" means it would be attended by everybody. I was singing and reciting at many public communist events at that time. However, this one was special, because important officials were indecisive about whether we should sing a Russian hymn or not. At the end we started to sing, but people started to whistle and shout at us. As children we did not understand the context, so we thought we were singing badly, so we started to sing louder ... it did not help ... this was revolution for me ... a total fiasco.

Annemarie Türk You are now – as we can see in this exhibition – working with video and film. A "logical" development? What made you decide work in this medium?

Lucia Nimcova All the important visual steps I have ever made in photography were usually inspired by music. So it was just a question of time until music became part of my works. I was waiting for the right moment, for the moment of urgent need. Music is a big, unknown, and free world for me, the same as video. During many years as a photographer I have accumulated many moments, which could not be photographed, because movement and sound were part of the situation or scene. I am sure my experience with video will influence my photos. I am fascinated by moments, which are frozen by photographs forever, or contrary moments in loop. They do not physically move, but in your imagination they are in constant movement; they live in time. You can say they are indecisive moments.

Annemarie Türk You also involve the (artistic) work of others in your projects – such as *UNOFFICIAL*, the picture archive of the Regional Cultural Centre in Humenné. It is a point of departure, an inspiration... In one of your new projects, it is the banned films of Slovak directors. Do you make the perspective of others into your own – or is it the other way around? How do you define your relationship between "self " and "other" in art?

Lucia Nimcova If you want to understand the present, you need to know the past ... and because history is always being rewritten in Eastern Europe, there is only one option left for you ... to research it by yourself. Before *UNOFFICIAL*, I was working on the project *RUSYNS*. I tried to portray Rusyn villages and communities (I was part of), which were forced to leave their homes for the Starina water dam to be built. I encountered different types of memories: my family – as victims; amateur photographers – who were documenting it as an attraction from outside; and finally the official documentation – made by the people who had decided to carry out this socialist project, supposedly for the common good. I was surprised by the fact that amateur photographers were much more conformist than the official photographer. He was paid by the state and was working on official commissions, but nobody was really controlling him. He was not really criticising or making anything look better; his photographs are quite neutral. He was just documenting life as it was lived. The archive of Juraj Kammer was special, as he was archiving the whole negative, not only one frame. So you can now read his way of working and thinking. After seeing all his negatives, I realized that photographs I hated from the beginning have become part of my life. I started to photograph as he did. I started to see people and situations I saw in his archive. They became alive for me again. When you are selecting 30 photographs from 1000 negatives, it is almost the same as photographing them. If I did not find them, they would not be shown to the world. It was interesting to see how the importance of different photographs changed over the months. I selected photographs I would have made if I had been working during that time and had been able to stay completely neutral, which would be very difficult, I guess.

Annemarie Türk
Vienna, 11/2008

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