



Polish Dream

contemporary Poland in documentary photography

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Indeed, in 1989 the Poles had different expectations and dreams. In fact they had the feeling of being reborn. In Polish photography this feeling is encapsulated in Witold Krassowski’s iconic portrait of a man at an election rally. A tear running down the man’s cheek and the grimace of uncontrolled emotion are expressive of both the joy and the burden of the time.

All had their own hopes and dreams. What was and has been the Polish dream? What about its putting into life? What does freedom look like?

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**SAMORZĄD WOJEWÓDZTWA
WIELKOPOLSKIEGO**

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In 2014, marking the 10th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union and the 25th anniversary of the Round Table, the role of our country in Europe rose significantly: Donald Tusk, the incumbent Polish Prime Minister, was elected head of the Union. A Pole became the President of the European Council at a difficult moment and, as he admitted right after his election, "our European dream may be a major energy source".

Polish Dream project was born at a time when the above developments were hard to foresee. We therefore present it now with an even greater pleasure. It documents the change that has taken place in Poland after 1989. Ten Polish photographers involved in the Polish Dream project show an image of a transformed Poland. Their photographs, taken in a course of years, making up series and notes, help one feel the dynamics of history.

proFotografia Institute of Photography Foundation
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Texts

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Opening

The East-West A 2 highway in Poland is known as the Highway of Freedom. “Not only does this highway connect Poland with Germany, but via Germany with the whole of Europe”, observed President Bronisław Komorowski (who unveiled a plaque with a new name of the A 2 highway to commemorate

the 25th anniversary of the 1989 elections). Its construction finished as late as 2012, and the excessive use of Western freedom was since the onset of the transition period in Poland the most evident token of Poles’ openness, our dormant and unlimited energy. Poles rushed to buy and sell whatever they had: rows of collapsible tables and beds, the first vending stalls of the free market, started to line the streets. A large number of Poles in their small Fiats began to “conquer Europe”, if not the entire continent, then at least neighbouring Berlin. Mass events mushroomed, people used different, even the most bizarre self-advertisement, and minorities came out of the closet.



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American Dream
Agnieszka Rayss

In the realm of culture it was pop culture that revealed the earliest a huge need for an immediate implementation of a dream about a career, triggered by a total openness to the Western world. New conditions meant new possibilities. As in mythical America, or the USA. Rayss demonstrates that this drive unified and globalised the young people from across the former Eastern Bloc. Many followed this trend both in Poland and in the other countries of the region. Mass castings for TV shows, cheerleaders performing at sports facilities, or public and mass castings for top-models revealed previously unsuspected needs and patterns of behaviour. However, the participation of hundreds of girls, some barely in their teens, in beauty pageants is also a way of shunning the daily drabness and entering the world of colours and emotions where one can remain visible and appreciated, if only for a while. Still, as Rayss says about the participants of the beauty pageants, who are ready to accept many a sacrifice, "Most of them are nice girls who simply want to look good".



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Beautiful Bodies

Agnieszka Rayss

Self-advertisement quickly became commonplace and commonly accepted. Apart from the flat world of celebrities, there were those who at the expense of hard work managed to create themselves to the extreme. Bodybuilding, a feature of the amazing protagonists of Rayss's series, is like identity building. It is also a token of extreme adherence to the Western fashion of a healthy and beautiful body.



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“Przystanek Woodstock” in Kostrzyn on Oder reveals the entire potential of a colourful state of all kinds of beings. This is the biggest open music festival in Europe. 20 years after its first edition, it gathers an audience of 500,000 people, including 150,000 from across Europe. Situated right at the state border, on a huge meadow in a suburban forest, the place is alive with the music by Polish and international bands and with the tradition of flower-children. It is a microcosm with its own rights; the rights are respected and for three days the half a million people are a huge family. The Germans who come here are shocked: no one robs them, all are friends, there are no railings, sectors, drugs, you can get as far as the stage, and the concerts are for free. Instead of security staff there are volunteers. There is a festival shop, a Hare Krishna village and the famous mud, or a place of “purification”, a manifestation of freedom and rejection of conventions. The entire event is a kind of state-generating and educational anarchy. Important for the Poles is the philosophy of debate with invited guests from the world of politics, culture or the Church. This is a philosophy of openness rather than closure and rejection. Jurek Owsiak, the initiator and guru of the festival element, has indefatigably fostered this philosophy from the start. This year he called: “Come, nationalists and right-wing sympathisers!” The problem is: they won’t come.



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Element

Grzegorz Dembiński

“Przystanek Woodstock” in Kostrzyn on Oder reveals the entire potential of a colourful state of all kinds of beings. This is the biggest open music festival in Europe. 20 years after its first edition, it gathers an audience of 500,000 people, including 150,000 from across Europe. Situated right at the state border, on a huge meadow in a suburban forest, the place is alive with the music by Polish and international bands and with the tradition of flower-children. It is a microcosm with its own rights; the rights are respected and for three days the half a million people are a huge family. The Germans who come here are shocked: no one robs them, all are friends, there are no railings, sectors, drugs, you can get as far as the stage, and the concerts are for free. Instead of security staff there are volunteers. There is a festival shop, a Hare Krishna village and the famous mud, or a place of “purification”, a manifestation of freedom and rejection of conventions. The entire event is a kind of state-generating and educational anarchy. Important for the Poles is the philosophy of debate with invited guests from the world of politics, culture or the Church. This is a philosophy of openness rather than closure and rejection. Jurek Owsiak, the initiator and guru of the festival element, has indefatigably fostered this philosophy from the start. This year he called: “Come, nationalists and right-wing sympathisers!” The problem is: they won’t come.



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Opening

Kings of the Night
Bartosz Dziamski

Drag queens, a marginal group of men who cross-dress as female singers to appear on stage, are mainly homosexuals, sometimes transvestites. They have their clubs. They do not have social approval. Their self-creation takes place in closed enclaves. They are a subculture which is hardly acceptable in Poland. They rarely decide to come out in their everyday environment. Those who are let in on their rituals, like Dziamski, experience however their own, private coming-out: "For an ordinary straight guy like me, it is a colossal experience and their world is colourful and positive".



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Turning point

The Polish tendency to come up with the West is very conspicuous. We tend to forget that our country “lies supine between the East and the West” to use the precise observation of Andrzej Stasiuk, who remembers well that the Polish use of freedom is often simultaneous with the erasure of humiliation. This unfortunate combination belatedly bears bizarre fruit indeed.



Polish Dream
contemporary Poland in documentary photography

Turning point

Pop Culture of Work

Mariusz Forecki

A lesson in western professionalism, efficiency and aesthetics of behaviour stripped Polish worker of their ethos. Yet it is they who fought for this capitalist reality. Now workers are disappearing and we have employees instead. Actually, the process itself, like climbing the career ladder, is not endemic to Poland and occurs in the other former socialist countries.

The author of Pop Culture of Work has always seen a state of relative equilibrium between grotesque and normal, typical of Polish everyday life. In recent years he has been inspired by a clear change in the style of work. Still in the 1990s it was most often identical to that of the socialist era. Florecki says: "It was fat, dirty and rather murky. But it was cosy. Now, we entered the new 21st century in the glow of state-of-the-art manufacturing halls, shiny protective clothing and sterile social rooms. Emotional bonds are created to increase work efficiency. On the face of it, all looks as in former days, but the rewards are more attractive and the demand for them, aroused by omnipresent commercials, is greater".

Many colourful pictures of this reality indicate that the warmth of contacts triggered by a natural sense of community is disappearing and that the only honest individuals are those on the breadline, i.e. workers at risk of unemployment. There is, however, a whole series of purging rites, ranging from the erection of a Christ monument larger than that in Rio de Janeiro, through shooting commercials together, brawls during strikes, and drinking after matches. Still, a writer is right when he observes: "We live shorter and tastelessly. Something happened to time. It has shrunk. Ever since capitalism, time has shrunk like a shabby T-shirt in washing" (A. Stasiuk).



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Turning point

Silesian Aura

Arek Gola

Time has shrunk the most painfully in Silesia. The process which ran through generations in the West, in Poland, in particular in the kingdom of coal mines and the heavy industry, occurred within one, quite young generation. Arek Gola, who lives in Silesia, is a representative of this generation. One of Poland's most characteristic regions is disappearing. Gola says: "I take pictures of backyards, multi-family living units, which will be covered with plaster in a few years, their windows changed to plastic ones; the mines will be closed down and the slag heaps reclaimed. Around the brick multifamily houses one clearly senses the vegetation of people from a closed down mine or ironworks (in the 1970s one mine employed from 4 to 7 thousand people). Gola regards the dying districts, streets and the "Riviera" on the slag heaps not through the prism of poverty but through that of the death of the former aura of the region and the life within a still strong community.



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Time has shrunk the most painfully in Silesia. The process which ran through generations in the West, in Poland, in particular in the kingdom of coal mines and the heavy industry, occurred within one, quite young generation. Arek Gola, who lives in Silesia, is a representative of this generation. One of Poland's most characteristic regions is disappearing. Gola says: "I take pictures of backyards, multi-family living units, which will be covered with plaster in a few years, their windows changed to plastic ones; the mines will be closed down and the slag heaps reclaimed. Around the brick multifamily houses one clearly senses the vegetation of people from a closed down mine or ironworks (in the 1970s one mine employed from 4 to 7 thousand people). Gola regards the dying districts, streets and the "Riviera" on the slag heaps not through the prism of poverty but through that of the death of the former aura of the region and the life within a still strong community.



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contemporary Poland in documentary photography

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Awakening

Foreigners who enter the Polish Freedom Highway are impressed by its quality. So are Poles. There is one thing, though: you need to pay toll. The section between the western border and Warsaw is about 20 euro. It is a lot by Polish standards.

The new Poland will soon become the world's champion in the number of shopping malls per capita and a leader in the demise of traditional old city centres. Construction is dependent on developers, as money rules everything. This ubiquitous mercantilism, however, has ever wider repercussions, is opposed to and finally leads to seeking in history and tradition of the places and customs in return to a respect of community and what is commonly shared and to a new, better quality of life.



Shipyard

Michał Szlaga

Michał Szlaga created an intervention material. The Gdańsk Shipyard was not only the “cradle of Solidarity”. For 200 years it contributed to the city’s well-being and provided employment for thousands of people and was a landscape landmark visible for miles around. The laws of the market, ruthlessly applied for the past 25 years, led to the collapse of the shipyard. It was first closed down bit by bit and today only 1,300 out of the 17,000 workers are left to manufacture ... wind towers. In fact, its collapse was due to an urban planning decision to sell half of its premises to developers, who are to build there a Young City, with few references to the history of this place. For 13 years Szlaga documented the life of the shipyard. He was one of the artists who set up an Artists’ Colony there and the Wyspa Art Institute to show their disapproval of the place disappearing without a trace, and of the fact that its architecture was not made use of even by the European Solidarity Centre, built with substantial financial public aid. In his studio in a former management building, Szlaga co-organises resistance to demolitions and scrapping. In 2007 the Artists’ Colony was closed down. It was only in 2013 that Szlaga’s extensive documentary shown in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw provoked a reaction of decision makers; in April this year 240 buildings and areas of the shipyard were listed as protected.



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Brzeska

Maciej Pisuk

Warsaw has its infamous district: Praga. Brzeska Street is its very core. As Pisuk observes: “The place perfectly corresponds to commonplace ideas about crime districts. This is really one of the most run-down areas in town. Many families live here in extremely poor conditions, without bathrooms, central heating, and with a shared toilet in the lobby.” Pisuk moved there in 2003 with a growing sense of his own failure, which brought him close to the local residents. “These are my neighbours. Those who have trusted me.

Perhaps it is our shared problems that make us foster neighbourly relations, unlike in other districts, where people lock themselves in their homes. Here more than elsewhere people spend time together, raise kids, help and support one another”. Pisuk does not sell photographs from Praga in agencies and does not publish them other than in connection with exhibitions. He slowly but steadily develops respect for those who are only too often treated as inhabitants of a hostile ghetto.



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Perhaps it is our shared problems that make us foster neighbourly relations, unlike in other districts, where people lock themselves in their homes. Here more than elsewhere people spend time together, raise kids, help and support one another”. Pisuk does not sell photographs from Praga in agencies and does not publish them other than in connection with exhibitions. He slowly but steadily develops respect for those who are only too often treated as inhabitants of a hostile ghetto.



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As Paweł Supernak admits: “I talk about death. I wish to familiarise people with it.” Until recently things looked different: an old person could say out loud where and how he or she are going to be buried. There was also a rite of bereavement. Death accompanied life almost ostentatiously. Today it is easier to enrol in a survival event than be confronted with death, even of the nearest and dearest. Pursuing all kinds of goods, people have lost touch with reality. Supernak has for a few years now patiently found those who want to let death into their lives and demonstrate where and how they are going to be buried. It is hard to direct death in life, so they direct what will happen to them hereafter. The now fashionable making plans about everything one dreams of has a lot to do with self-creation but the very reference to a memory of death, the medieval memento mori, restores people to actual life. “Death is very likely the single best invention of Life”, said Steve Jobs when he fell ill with cancer; he was no doubt the one who fulfilled the American Dream.



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Witold Krassowski (1956)

One of Poland's greatest photographers, for 30 years specialising in social photography and reportage. He has published extensively across Europe, especially in English publications. Laureate of many awards for photography, including twice in the World Press Photo competition, of which he was also a juror (1999). Master during the World Press Photo Joop Swart Masterclass. He has cooperated with The Independent, The Observer, The New Yorker, Der Spiegel, National Geographic Polska, and Poland's biggest daily Gazeta Wyborcza. Author of albums *Powidoki z Polski (Afterimages of Poland/Ansichten aus Polen)* and *Pieśń na wyjście (Grand Finale)*.

Bartosz Dziamski (1983)

An independent photographer; take pictures of everyday life and social and cultural phenomena in Poland. Laureate of Polish competitions of press photography. He has published e.g. in Newsweek Polska, Przekrój, Forbes; cooperates with Dziennik Gazeta Prawna.

Filip Springer (1982)

Journalist, essayist, photojournalist. Expert on architecture and collector of visual absurdities. He has published four collections of reportages on socialist architecture and Polish landscape, illustrated with photographs. The last one is *Wanna z kolumnadą. Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni (Bathtub with a Colonnade. Reportages of Polish Space)*. His photographs have been extensively presented in Poland; a collaborator of Poland's leading weekly Polityka. Works in the Institute of Reportage in Warsaw.

Paweł Supernak (1979)

For 14 years a professional press photo journalist, since 2005 in the Polish Press Agency. Participant of numerous collective exhibitions and photographic projects, including the "Ex Oriente Lux", on display at the Interfoto in Moscow and the Photography Month in Paris. Awarded at major Polish competitions of press photography.

Agnieszka Rayss (1970)

An independent photographer, member of the Sputnik Photos International Association of Photographers. Twice a recipient of the Picture of the Year Award and twice a finalist of the Hasselblad Masters Award. Scholarship holder of the Minister of Culture, Art and National Heritage and of the Visegrad Fund. Thanks to the Visegrad Fund grant she has published an album titled *American Dream*, about women and pop culture in former communist countries.

Mariusz Forecki (1962)

The only Polish photographer to make a long essay about the Poland of social and cultural transformations from the late 1980s until the early 21st c. In the 1980s an independent photojournalist abroad, e.g. during an earthquake in Armenia (1987), during the war in Afghanistan (1988); the only photographer to document the last hours of defence of the Presidential Palace in Grozny by Shamil Basayev's troops during the first Russian-Chechen War (1995). Author of albums *I Love Poland*, *Września Collection* and *W pracy – Życie Praca Robotnicy (At Work – Life Work Workers)*.

Michał Szlaga (1978)

One of the most intriguing young Polish photographers. Since graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk he has received awards in Poland and abroad, including the International Photo Award. His leading project is the legendary Gdańsk Shipyard, which he has documented for 13 years (he has bought a flat opposite the shipyard). He has published an album *Stocznia (Shipyard)*. Known also as a photography blogger and a celebrities photographer.

Grzegorz Dembiński (1973)

Since 1995 a journalist, since 2004 a photojournalist. Studied Political Science at AMU in Poznań. Publishes e.g. in Newsweek, Polityka, Przekrój, Super Express, and Rzeczpospolita. Since 2007 head of the photo section in Poznań-based newspaper Głos Wielkopolski. Recipient of awards at major competitions of press photography in Poland.

Arek Gola (1972)

Since 1996 in Dziennik Zachodni daily. Laureate of numerous awards in Polish competitions of press photography. His pictures are held in the collections of a few museums in Silesia. Strongly tied with the region of Silesia, which he has documented for years. Has published albums *Ludzie z węgla (People of Coal)* and *Nie muszą wracać (I Do Not Need To Come Back)*.

Maciej Pisuk (1965)

A scriptwriter renowned in Poland, has been committed to photography for 11 years. His moving series of pictures from Warsaw's poorest district developed for years as a kind of therapy for the author and a token of profound friendship with his protagonists. In 2008 winner of the first prize in the category Photojournalism Non-Pro – People/Personality at the PX3 Prix de la Photographie Paris 2008 Photo Competition. Received the Portfolio Award at the Stockholm Photography Week 2012. Member of the "Forum" Photo Agency.



Monika Piotrowska (1966)

Curator, art historian; in recent years she has prepared five editions of the international Festival Photo-documentary (Festiwal Fotodokumentu) and over twenty exhibitions for the 2piR Gallery in Poznań. She has worked as a lecturer, journalist and culture expert (at the Polish Institute in Leipzig). Art reviewer and critic, author of over a hundred texts. Since 2008 President of the Foundation "proFotografia" Institute of Photography in Poznań.

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Apart from this publication, the Polish Dream project consists of a comprehensive photography show of all the ten authors, held in collaboration with the Verein zur Förderung der Fotografie, Hanover, between 12 November 2014 -11 January 2015, at the GAF Galerie für Fotografie (www.gafeisfabrik.de, Seilerstraße 15d, 30171 Hannover).

Curatorial cooperation in Germany: Sonja Palade

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Monika Piotrowska

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**SAMORZĄD WOJEWÓDZTWA
WIELKOPOLSKIEGO**

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