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'A series of documentary photographs and a printed publication about the Podlaskie region'.

PROJECT ASSUMPTIONS AND AIMS OF THE PUBLICATION

The main object of my artistic interest is the human being, both in their here and now as well as in their complex expressiveness of an ephemeral, but at the same time the strongest element of the natural and cultural worlds. Most of my accomplishments to date fall within the framework of anthropological reflection backed by observation and creation by means of photography. Whether it is a project about disappearing professions or herbalist cultivating the tradition of picking herbs in Podlachia, or even about socialist leisure centres located near mines and smelting plants, rather than in the passing of time and oblivion, I have always been interested in archetypical forms of leaving traces of the past, antagonised by the future, and the legacy put away in old attics, waiting for favourable winds of history. It is no different for 'The Linen Towel'. It is one of the projects where I want to stress that the object of my interest is the transient human being (their environment, artefacts, fate), but rather captured in a fraction of a second that does not aspire to be a timeless continuum. I am aware of the fact that this fraction of a second, precisely defined by technical features of the photographic equipment and contained within the exposure time, is both deadly and life-giving. Deadly, because it registers something which will not be there in the next fracture of a second. Life-giving, because it offers a new form of lasting.

The project seeks to document folklore, local architectural and artistic styles, culture, history, tradition and rituals of Podlachia, with a special focus on the multicultural aspects of this region as well as visual documentation of cultural and social changes that are taking place there. The intended artistic purpose was to create a series of documentary photographs of artistic value to be published as a print publication, whereas the scientific aspect focuses on the preservation of disappearing cultural and ritual forms. The visual



documentation of the current cultural and social changes was carried out with the use of the full-frame digital cameras: Canon 6D and Sony A7rIII, with ambient light, undeniably necessary in order to capture the specific character of the photographed scenes.

SPECIFICITIES OF THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

The border region of Podlachia changed its country affiliation many times, thus unavoidably creating a specific personality profile of its inhabitants (the borderland profile). It was located successively within the borders of: Ruthenia, Lithuania, Poland, Prussia, Russia, USSR, Germany and again Poland and the bordering countries often divided this land among themselves. It is for this reason that Podlachia is currently among the most diversified regions in Poland when it comes to religious denominations and nationalities. Its cultural mosaic, which is so unique in many aspects, has been created by ethnic groups living side by side for centuries: Poles, Germans, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Tatars, as well as Jews and Roma. This peculiarity makes Polish, Lithuanian, Ruthenian, German, Muslim and Jewish cultural elements intermingle and centuries-old beliefs, traditions and rituals are cultivated on a daily basis. In the world of expanding globalisation, this region is among many that see these local characteristics slowly become a thing of the past, giving way to the mainstream trends and values. Thus, the aim of my study is mostly to capture this moment, so that it is not only about passing into oblivion. The concept of 'borderlanders' is absolutely crucial to me and expressed by the paradigm of constantly being 'not-one-self', beyond oneself or even in search of oneself. People from Podlachia elude simple definitions, professing their local credo: I am from 'here'. This 'here' has become the structural axis of the publication where the category of 'human being' is used interchangeably with the category of 'soul'. I metaphorically put my commentary on the reality observed and photographed in Podlachia in the context of the basic anthropological categories: life, love and death, which in the dimension of human life related to place (the return of souls), food (metaphorically: the food of souls) and death (products of human hands, handicrafts).



context. The third one focuses mostly on the products of human hands, equally diverse, but reflecting the specific character of this cross-border reality. It also best presents the truth about transience, hence the reference to death, explicitly articulated in the words: 'There's no one to' ['Nie ma komu'], in the context of the absence of those willing to take on the knowledge.

PUBLICATION

The publication is designed in a vertical format: 202.5 × 270 mm. The proportions of the margins of the spread (3:2) mirror the proportions of the photographs placed on full spreads to the bleeds. These spread proportions have resulted in the page proportions of 3:4. The main text has been printed in the *Alegreya* font with the titles in *Alegreya Sans*. Two master pages were adopted – one for the text and the other for the photographs. Due to the need to adapt the layout to the type of content, their pagination as well as margin proportions differ. The text is adjusted to a grid modelled on the baseline grid whose size corresponds to the line spacing in the main text. The photographs were placed on a modular grid resulting from the previously described page proportions.

The publication consists of 324 pages, 195 of which include photographs alone. It has been printed in 11 copies with the use of digital printing technology and with HP Indigo, on matte, uncoated E-PURE paper from Felix Schoeller. Hard cover and half-linen, thread-sewn binding were selected due to their durability (this factor is especially important given the volume of the book), possibility to fully open the spread (due to the large number of photographs placed on double page spreads) as well as their aesthetic value. The canvas used for the cover is linen canvas from the beginning of 1970s, woven by hand from manually twisted linen threads. The embroidery pattern comes from a towel dating back to around 1915-1920. The embroidery is hand-made. Apart from the canvas, the cover uses uncoated paper mass-dyed with light-fast Siro Color Lampone pigments from Fedrigoni. The colours used on the cover refer to the colours of a ceremonial towel – its basic colours are white and red (black also appeared later on). The binding includes a two-colour



I also want to render the almost oneiric character of this land where the axiom of transience is amplified by painful experiences and their acceptance fosters inner maturity.

PROJECT PHASES

The work on the project comprised of a number of stages and was divided into the research part (research on the region), and the part involving art and design (photography, book design). The preparatory phase involved collection of materials on the subject discussed with the use of formerly existing data as well as research based on secondary data analysis. As part of the field study in the Podlaskie region, I used the following research methods: biographical interview, semi-structured interview, expert interview and interview with the use photographs, uncontrolled, overt and participation observation as well as desk research.

In the final phase, the collected source material underwent thorough editing: assigning descriptions and stories to the chapters of the designed book, writing and editing the texts and then selecting and editing the photographs. The last phase involved book design.

ORGANISATION OF THE MATERIAL

With a three-chapter structure (including the introduction and the conclusion), I attempt to subjectively organise the heterogeneous material where the intertwining of human fate, the history of a nation and the course of the world (including not only the world of ‚culture‘ – understood as a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and customs developed by humans as members of a society – but also of ‚nature‘ in the broadest sense) creates a unique tableau that can never be reproduced again. The task I set myself was to capture it, while remaining impartial.

The first chapter discusses the aspects of national diversity of the Podlaskie borderland and the history of this land in the context of people’s national affiliation. The second chapter superimposes this diversity on the religious



(black and red) decorative endband that was handmade and two ribbon bookmarks in the same colours. The cover lettering has been made by hot-stamping with the use of white foil.

END RESULT

The project has resulted in a story about the past, the present and the unavoidable processes taking place in the Podlaskie region, i.e. cultural and social changes, presented in the publication titled 'The Linen Towel'. At its core are photographs – of people, nature, everyday items, artefacts as well as objects related to religious beliefs and religious expression. These are certainly tangible examples of the reality of Podlachia – current as well as historical – presented in their ephemerality and vulnerability in the face of emerging civilisational trends. Since photography is about attribution of value, it would be perfect if the end result of this work convinced the public of the special value of the Podlaskie borderland. The world presented in 'The Linen Towel', both through the photographs and the text is – obviously – a world at a standstill, as if the linear course of history was indeed disturbed. But 'The Linen Towel' does not place it in any mythical space, does not use simulation or hyperrealism, despite it being much easier. It rather attempts to bring it out from the mythical depths, proving that Podlachia is a land of flesh-and-blood people who have learnt to co-exist with others in harmony.

Dominika Koro



