

(EN)

spvtnik photos

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FORMS OF BEING TOGETHER

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‘Collaboration always already lies at the basis of the event of photography. Collaboration is the photographic event’s degree zero, as photography always involves an encounter between several protagonists in which the photographer cannot *a priori* claim a monopoly over knowledge, authorship, ownership, and rights.’¹

This was the basic assumption behind the over-decade-long studies conducted by the photographers Susan Meiselas and Wendy Ewald, and the academic and researcher Ariella Azoulay. The ultimate result and summary of their work is the book *Collaboration. Potential History of Photography*, released in October 2023. Together with a team of experts invited to contribute to the project, Azoulay, Meiselas, and Ewald propose a new approach to photography, defining it – first and foremost – as an ‘act of collaboration’ and an ‘event’. In this ‘act’, the photographer and the photographed, the community, the viewer, the authorities, but also individuals who use the image, reproduce or preserve it, can fulfill the equally important role. This act can also take various forms – ‘capturing the decisive moment’ in the photograph is just one of them and functions alongside such acts as collecting photographs, sharing, viewing, sorting, archiving, and commenting on them... Photography perceived and understood in this way both arises from relations and has the power to create them. And although the authors strongly emphasize that collaboration in this broader sense is far from the simple definition of collectivity and describes a mode of working together ‘without implying a collective or aiming to form a collective,’² their studies constitute an important background for Sputnik Photos’ activities. Exactly at the time when Meiselas, Ewald, and Azoulay were conducting their research and rewriting the history of photography, the members of Sputnik Photos were testing the ‘forms of being together’³ in practice.

In fact, collaboration has been the basis of their practice from the very beginning, and therefore since 2006. However, it has always exceeded the idea of a collective as such, understood as a group of people who share similar sensitivity and similar approaches to the role of the medium, a common goal, organization, and social bonds. For the photographers of Sputnik Photos, the collective

1 Azoulay, Ariella, ‘Photography Consists of Collaboration: Susan Meiselas, Wendy Ewald, and Ariella Azoulay,’ in: *Camera Obscura Feminism Culture and Media Studies*, May 2016, [access: 12/23/2023].

2 Ibidem.

3 Ibidem.

has always been a ground that has allowed them to develop artistically as individuals, but above all to create and constantly expand the network of collaboration, to 'let in' new, different points of view. Looking back on the collective's almost twenty years of activity, it is difficult to find projects carried out solely by the official members of the group. For all those years, the eponymous 'forms of being together' have been and continue to be implemented and practiced in various ways: from inviting other creatives (photographers, writers, filmmakers, animators, and curators) to collaborate, through sharing authorship (*Lost Territories Archive*, 2008-2016), to giving the stage to others (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, 2011, *New Varsovians*, 2019, *Survey* conducted as part of *Poland – the State of Research*, 2019); from educational and mentoring activities (*Mentoring Programme*; *As You Can See*, 2020), to participatory and solidarity actions, in which the tools that the photographers have at hand are used to support others (charity auctions and fundraising to help doctors fighting the pandemic or migrants from Ukraine and Belarus, 2019-2023).

All of the abovementioned forms of collaboration reflect the explorations of artists around the world, they show the dynamic changes in the area of photography, and the book by Azoulay, Meiselas, and Ewald can serve as one of the proofs of this. In the Polish landscape, however, they often begin to emerge thanks to the initiatives of the photographers from Sputnik Photos. The forms of acting and working together become tools for new generations of artists. In this publication, which is the first of three publications planned, we take a closer look not only at the various aspects of creative processes, educational work, and solidarity activities carried out by Sputnik Photos but also beyond that – at how the perception of photography has changed over the last 20 years.



The Sputnik Photos collective, from left:
Jan Brykczyński, Michał Łuczak, Agnieszka Rayss, Karolina Gembara (with Zorka),
Adam Pańczuk, Marzena Michałek-Dąbrowska, Rafał Milach, 2021

WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE FOR? 20 YEARS OF SPUTNIK PHOTOS

You met through a matchmaker.

Agnieszka Rayss: Altemus, an independent non-profit organization from Belgium, organized workshops aimed at young, promising photographers from developing democracies in Eastern and Central Europe. We managed to get in – Poland had just joined the European Union at the time.

Jan Brykczyński: The idea for these meetings and work in general was absolutely amazing. We did not only take photographs, but we also went hiking together, and during one of the gatherings, we fixed a wall in one of the old monasteries in France, the other was dedicated to war photography, which was abstract for us at the time. The three of us - Agnieszka, Rafał, and me - got to know. We became friends and returned to Poland with the conviction that we wanted to do something together.

AR: We also felt that some kind of formal frame would enable us to apply for funding for our activities.

Rafał Milach: A few months later, we started our first collective project – about economic migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Cameroon, and Vietnam who had come to the newly admitted EU member states in the hope of a better life. Exactly at the same time, Polish citizens were emigrating in droves to Ireland and the UK and therefore the context of our Polish migration to the West was a vital background for the project. We started our work in 2005 and the following year we published a book and began to organize exhibitions. The project was called *At the Border*. Later we moved on to Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, the Baltic States, and Central and East Asia.

And you grew larger and larger?

RM: Perhaps nobody remembers it today, but in the first few years of activity, Sputnik collaborated with over a dozen people from Ukraine, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Georgia. But it soon became clear that – due to organizational reasons

– the three of us were the natural core of the collective. We were at a similar stage in our professional careers, we lived in the same city, and that was important for us at the time. But it should be mentioned here that the photographers are just part of the Sputnik group. Throughout the twenty years of our activity, we have been supported by designers, curators, cultural workers, and writers. The list goes on and on.

But the core of the group was the three of you. Good chemistry?

AR: Without good chemistry, without a flow, we would not get anywhere really. The truth is that we liked each other from the very beginning. When we invited new people for collaboration, we checked whether such a combination would work out not only creatively, but also socially. After Michał, Adam, and Marzena – our project coordinator – joined us, we did not expand the collective for quite a while.

Michał Łuczak: Rafał invited me to participate in the Icelandic project and that was a turning point for me. After Iceland, there was a total boom! The project attracted whole loads of media attention. I am not sure if we have ever managed to repeat that with any other project. It was 2012 and we felt that we were still quite a new collective and quite young photographers who had just started building their professional careers.

Marzena, when we were setting up the date for this interview, you were surprised that I also wanted you to take part. You thought I would only talk to the creatives. And at the same time, you were mentioned by every person and in every single conversation as a key member of the collective.

Marzena Michałek-Dąbrowska: I joined Sputnik in 2010 when they decided to apply for funds from the so-called Norway Grants. One of the conditions was to establish collaboration with certain countries, and Iceland was one of them – I knew this country well; I had already been there once as a volunteer. I completed that application together with

Sputnik and then stayed with them to coordinate the project. It was *IS (not)*. The outcome was a book and an exhibition – the results of Sputnik’s collaboration with authors and writers from Iceland. We did not even have a seat at the time and yet more and more ideas kept popping up, so I wrote more and more applications and then coordinated all the subsequent projects.

JB: Very soon, Marzena’s role was no longer just that of a manager. She is the backbone that we all rely on – she is not a photographer, but she has known us for years and she is perfectly aware of how we work, she can see when we need support and when we need to give ourselves a break. She can communicate very clearly: ‘Hey, you do not have room for that right now, do you?’”

MMD: Today, I have the impression that the administrative work takes up much less of my time than it used to and that I spend more time supporting the photographers instead. My role has become less technical and more based on motivating others – I see this clearly when I compare how much time I dedicate to processing invoices or organizing some events, and how much time I spend talking to the members of the collective. Our collaboration is increasingly about the latter. Most probably it stems from the fact that they all have become very professional.

Karolina Gembara: When I joined Sputnik in 2018, their dynamics were very much different from what they had been a few years before. It was a special moment in the history of the collective.

What do you mean by that?

RM: For Sputnik, it was a kind of a turning point. We had just finished working on our most elaborate and perhaps also most challenging activity. Since 2008, we had been carrying out the *Lost Territories* project, as part of which we had been creating some

sort of extensive archival source with photographs from the region of the former Soviet states. Between 2013 and 2016, we finalized works related to it. In a relatively short time, we prepared more than a dozen exhibitions and three publications. We photographed for three years – without exhibitions, without publications, and without our work being consumed beforehand. Before that, we had realized approximately one project per year.

Lost Territories included photographs from as early as 2008, but the largest number of images dated from 2013 to 2016. The first, inaugural exhibition took place at the end of 2016 at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw and was accompanied by two publications. After that, there were further editions of your exhibitions.

Adam Pańczuk: We managed to show something that we could feel first-hand – that the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union was still in progress, despite the 25 years that had passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The cord linking the states with Russia had not been cut, and some of the former republics were still dependent on Russia. Personally, I could see a warning in this – aha, so that is how it could look here, in our country, too.

What did this work demand of you as a collective? Was it a question of mutual trust and confidence in the process you had decided upon?

RM: Both of us and of Paweł Szypulski, our curator.

AR: We went to selected places, looked for themes, and brought photographs from those places, but we did not show them anywhere. Paweł suggested that we should treat all our projects as one archive. And that we should not sign particular photographs presented at the future exhibitions. We provided descriptions so that certain photographs maintained their context, but particular stories became broken and fragmented. We treated and still treat this project as an archive of the territories that made up the former Soviet

Union, which was – at least in theory – dissolved, and in practice – it has left a trace both in places and in people, a mark which for us, here in Poland, is still very clear.

Did you talk about how much you were willing to sacrifice from your individual artistic practice? Is the word ‘sacrifice’ even relevant here?

JB: We did not perceive it that way. Paweł confronted us with a challenge that seemed the most interesting to us of all the proposals we heard from various curators at the time – because he was not the first person, we spoke to about this project. We were all at the peak moment of our creativity. His idea fitted in perfectly with our explorations at the time.

Why was this project so ground-breaking for you then?

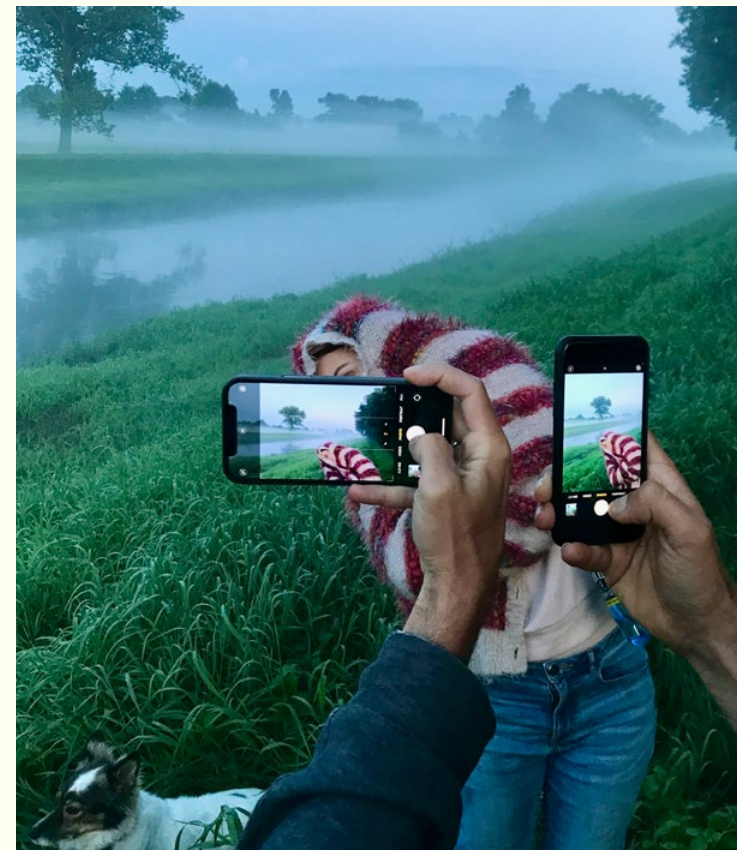
RM: For a number of reasons, not just because we kind of scattered afterward. Upon its completion, we felt that we wanted to focus more on our solo projects. But while working on *Lost Territories*, we were dealing with really interesting situations. I remember us standing in front of hundreds of photographs displayed on the floor, and at some moments we could not tell who had taken which photograph – there were so many similarities, both formally and thematically. It made me realize that some sort of extreme integration had occurred between us. After such an experience, we had to distance ourselves from each other artistically. That was a significant change for me compared to how I felt after our Icelandic project, for example. I remember the situation when we went out on the street after finishing the presentation of *IS (not)*. We immediately started talking about what would be next. We exchanged e-mails that very night. After *Lost Territories*, we felt – or I felt – totally otherwise.



Adam Pańczuk, Rafał Milach,
Jan Brykczyński and Paweł Szypulski
during their work on the exhibition *Lost Territories. Sediment* at the U-jazdowski
Centre for Contemporary Art, 2016



The Sputnik Photos collective at
the opening of Karolina Gembara's
Winter Mind exhibition,
Programme Gallery, 2019



MMD: There were a few other things that overlapped at the time. Firstly, some of us had children. Inevitably, Janek, Adam, and Michał focused mainly on their families for some time. My situation was completely different when my first daughter was a baby. I felt like I finally had time that I could dedicate almost entirely to Sputnik. I rocked the baby carriage with one hand and took care of our work with the other. And then in turn, when I started working full-time, I could easily delegate some tasks to other people from our team.

At some point, your Mentoring Programme became the linchpin of your activities. You have been running it continuously since 2012. As a collective of individuals, together and separately, you have a very broad experience regarding photographic education. You have studied in Poznan, Krakow, Lodz, Warsaw, Katowice, and Opava. Did you open your own school because you missed something in the educational institutions where you had been trained?

JB: I guess at first, we felt that we had something unique to offer, although we did not think that we were becoming a new school of photography or anything like that. But in the meantime, this area of education has expanded significantly and grown much stronger than we initially thought it would.

AP: I have the impression that the way we read photography or the way we think about and create projects is still coherent. Our approach attracts people who have a strong need to tell their stories. We meet them exactly at that very moment. We offer them support along the way, and they receive it not only from Sputnik members but also from visiting mentors we invite for collaboration. In 2023, we launched an additional one-year-long basic course. Right now, as we are doing this interview, we are in the middle of the first edition, and I can already say that it was a really good idea.



AR: It is fascinating to observe how the themes that the participants in our Mentoring Programme come to us with change over time. Those several years of experience give us quite an impressive insight into what young Polish photography lives with and what it wants to tell. Recently, we have noticed that people are doing much more personal, autobiographical projects. They have begun to turn the camera on themselves or rummage through family archives. Working with photography also becomes a process of self-therapy for them.

And what was that like in the past?

JB: They focused more on the outside world, they still did it subjectively and with an unique approach, but they directed their lenses rather outward.

AR: We heard about success and career more often. Perhaps there were also some people who thought that we would be a kind of a springboard to success, but they soon realized that it did not necessarily work that way.

Did you start with different assumptions?

AR: We were establishing Sputnik at a time when the photography market was changing dramatically. We knew that the end of press photography was actually drawing close and that there was no longer room for in-depth, long-term documentary projects. On the one hand, the collective offered us some sort of organizational ground – we could apply for funding, receive grants, think about the topics and directions that interested us. At times, one of us would come up with their own idea, and Sputnik would give that person a formal basis to apply for grants and so forth.

MŁ: For me, it has always been a space for very healthy and good competition right from the start. I had already known Rafał before I joined the collective – we both come

from Silesia. I had observed his work as a high school student, he is five years older than me, and when you are a teenager, five years make a difference. Rafał does not really like me talking about it, but I looked up to him a great deal, so when he invited me to join the Icelandic project a few years later, I did my best. I wanted to prove that I could do it. Later, I had several moments when my motivation waned during a project or I had no idea what I wanted to do. What helped me was listening to the stories of how others were working on their own ideas. That gave me the kick to catch up with them, to be as good as them.

The participants in your Mentoring Programme have not been so far from the truth. Sputnik has helped you with your careers, hasn't it?

MŁ: For sure, although we also learned a few lessons. After we had completed *Lost Territories*, we had a pretty bitter confrontation because the project turned out to be less successful than we expected. I thought it would move us up to the Western scene, and if we were a collective from the UK or Germany, it most probably would have ended up this way. But we soon understood that in photography geography matters. At the time, Poland was not the focus of the so-called West, which – as it appears – is generally interested mostly in itself.

AP: This subject is somehow resurfacing today. A few years after the first presentation of *Lost Territories*, we find ourselves at a very peculiar point to tell this story. Russia has invaded Ukraine, and this has strongly affected the context of that project, as well as the Polish social landscape. It also proved that our intuition to depict the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union had been more than shrewd. I have the feeling that my work on this project is not yet finished. Perhaps we are getting close to the point where we will start asking ourselves, one by one, who has similar feelings and what we are going to do with that.



What do you need the collective for today?

MŁ: Among other things, we need it so that the artists can bounce from each other, confront their works, inspire, and stimulate one another to take up new challenges. I experienced something similar in Opava when I was still a student. I learned more from older fellow students in the corridors filled with cigarette smoke than in the actual classes. A collective allows you to go through different stages of the process with other people, from total enthusiasm and punk energy through various risky situations to the moments of simmering down. It also helps to get out of a state of withdrawal when you feel that you are artistically anxious again.

MMD: In all these years, we have not really grown as an institution. One could perceive that as a failure, but I think it has kept us together – as the same group and with the same, coherent identity. We have not burned out from the stress of the necessity of earning enough to keep a large office and ten employees. We can operate flexibly, adapting the model to the current situation and our personal possibilities.

It is not exactly like you say with this institution. Since 2019, you have been co-creating the Social Centre for Photography in Warsaw.

MMD: Several aspects led us to this point, first and foremost the fact that we had to leave our previous office. We called it ‘The Parlor’ because it had served as a funeral parlor in the past. It was an important space for us, a place where we could meet and work. We kept scanners and other equipment there. At that time, it turned out that the Archeology of Photography Foundation was also looking for a new seat. We knew and liked each other – our environment is quite small – so we decided to look for a space together. The premises after an old pharmacy at 20 Chłodna Street seemed to be an ideal place. They brought in their archival work, their digitization equipment, and their archives. We, on the other hand, made our contribution by bringing our reflection on contemporary

photography. We have our room there and also part of the basement. A few times a year we do something together in the gallery, which is our shared exhibition space. All of this allows us to maintain the flexibility that we value so much. Together we have created a space that we call a social institution for culture, we have won one grant, then another, and thanks to that, the Social Centre for Photography has, at least for now, secured its place on the Warsaw map until the end of 2025. We hope that it will stay there even after that. Though it is a safe and pleasant time horizon for us.

In 2018, Karolina Gembara joined Sputnik.

KG: I had been orbiting around Sputnik for a while. I had taken part in their Mentoring Programme. The proposal to join the team coincided with my enormous exhaustion from my long-term project. I just felt that I wanted to work differently, more participatively. Sputnik offered me the space to do so, along with its institutional framework and structure. Before that, I had had the impression that my explorations and my longing for a different kind of photographic work were not ambitious enough, not artistic enough.

AR: Actually, we asked ourselves whether we wanted to invite someone new every year. It worked out with Karolina because she brought themes and tools that we had not used before.

KG: I had a soft landing because of my previous collaboration with Rafał, we had already worked together on some smaller projects. I also had a ready-made idea in the drawer that I had been trying to realize as part of a scholarship for artists, but to no avail. I wanted to take up the problem of migration, but I did not want to work on it by myself as a photographer. I decided that I wanted to invite a group of migrants who were making themselves at home in Warsaw and use photography as a storytelling tool so that they

could tell us about the city. The project was called *New Varsovians* and for me it was the first one funded within a larger grant for Sputnik.

And thanks to that, in addition to the artistic and educational path, you stepped on the social one as well.

KG: All of these paths actually merge and overlap in a way. Sputnik, which I joined, was already a very different organization in comparison with its beginnings. I even remember moments of disappointment – I thought they were artistically symbiotic, that they discussed and consulted all the ideas and progressed shoulder to shoulder. I missed it there, but today I think it was because I had been learning from Sputnik for several years before. And after I joined the collective, it took me quite a while to understand that in the end – paradoxically – we are independent, self-sufficient artists. And that boosts your self-confidence. At least that is how it worked for me.

MMD: We all take longer or shorter breaks when either our private or professional lives pull us away from the collective. Rafał has Magnum right now, earlier he was very invested in the Archive of Public Protests. Agnieszka has taken up a teaching position at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Janek, Adam, and Michał are also academic teachers. Karolina has her doctorate, and so does Adam. The others have already got their PhDs. On the other hand, Janek and Adam have become involved in the basic course most, while Agnieszka is currently taking a break from teaching at Sputnik. That is fine and we never feel that any of these decisions or activities pose a threat to our further existence.

KG: Today, Sputnik functions more as an umbrella under which we put our ideas into practice. I am not saying that we treat the collective instrumentally, but this creative flow is much weaker today than it used to be. Sometimes it happens that a certain subject seems important to us, we try to figure out some broader context and give it a direction,

but for instance, we do not get funding and life verifies whether it was really that important to us. For example, we have talked a lot about addressing the problem of the environment and climate change more seriously. As a collective, we are not so efficient in achieving long-term goals in this matter, but Michał is very consequent and determined to continue working on this issue. It is natural for him, regardless of whether he gets grants, receives scholarships, etc. It is because of him and thanks to him that the topics related to environmental issues are somehow present in our space.

MŁ: For me, on the other hand, the East was not the first choice or direction to take. I followed it because of Sputnik. All this shows me that we do not have a toxic relationship and that we do not put the group above the individual. We have never resented each other for our commitment and achievements outside of Sputnik. The fact that one of us has started a project or had a solo success means that in some way it will have a good impact on all of us.

KG: It is a kind of jigsaw to which we all add our elements. When it comes to social projects and activities, we also do them together – by getting Sputnik involved in various actions, organizing open portfolio reviews and photographic walks, and inviting different social problems to Chłodna every year. For instance, Adam has this social flair (with his enormous ability to win people over and befriend them), and part of his artistic activities have this very participatory character. Or Rafał, who is good at initiating new, collective activities and projects. I also contribute with social themes, but as an artist, I do not feel forced to do so. I would not be honest if I said that I realize these projects solely because of their social impact. I do them because they interest me as an artist and researcher. And along the way I make sure that the people we invite to participate are fully included in these activities and not taken advantage of or used as a means to achieve certain goals.



Do you come back to the old themes?

AP: After nearly two years of full-scale war in Ukraine, I have a strong inclination to return to the problems we researched and explored while working on *Lost Territories*. I would like to check how the war is affecting places I have previously been talking about – maybe by taking a closer look at how it is changing Poland as a country and our local social landscape, maybe by going to Ukraine? It will be interesting to verify to what extent the materials we gathered are still valid and if they are not, to tell the stories that our project is missing. In general, for me, it will be a ‘Check!’ in a broader sense: Has the disintegration of the Soviet Union never finished indeed? For example, is the thesis we started with still true in light of recent history? In my opinion, it is – what Russia has done is nothing else but claim its right to this ‘lost territory.’

AR: And I have absolutely no room for that. But I know I do not have to have it because we all adjust the pace and the way we work to the point in life we are in. And to our age – I am not sure I would have enough energy today to run with heavy equipment in 40-degree heat somewhere in the Georgian countryside. Sputnik is changing along with us.

Where are you now as a group?

AR: I feel a little restless. I have the impression that not only we have grown up but also that our world has changed dramatically since we started as a collective. I would need to come back to discussing and maybe revising the values that underpin our work because I have the feeling that some of them are no longer valid or have become simply obsolete. We have not yet reached a consensus on this matter.

JB: For me, teaching is also the core of our today’s identity. However, it is not something we do instead of artistic projects, but a parallel and equally important activity. Teaching others together, as a collective, gives us a lot of satisfaction because we somehow pass on the knowledge we gained through collaboration, through working together as artists.



AP: First and foremost, I see myself as a creative, and therefore the essence of Sputnik for me is storytelling. But I also feel very fulfilled when I can teach – I am standing on both pillars. As a collective, we have reached a point where we put those cards on the table that are interesting to us at that very moment. We check whether there is anyone else who feels the same way, and then we search for formulas or methods with which we can implement these ideas.

RM: We have managed to work out our collective mindset which is based – to make a long story short – on the premise that we do not report, we do not shout about what is most recent and makes the news, but we rather take backroads. Of course, we also try to construct the content of our projects so that they address current events and situations, but we do it on our terms. Sometimes, we face accusations of aestheticizing reality, but what we do in fact is an attempt to avoid literalness – among other things, this collective exists for us to be able to tell more nuanced stories. And now I am going to contradict myself because I am currently at quite a different point. As part of the work on the Archive of Public Protests, I am using a very simple, documentary form from the verge of press photography. But thanks to the different experiences I have had in both collectives, I better understand the dynamics of how the visual language can be adjusted to the relevant context.

KG: A lot has already happened between all of us – we have carried out artistic projects, we have started teaching, we have invested ourselves in actions at the intersection of art and social activities. It has been quite a long time since we were all equally involved. There are moments when one or the other drifts apart and for some time focuses on different engaging tasks, but this only works in the collective's favor.

MŁ: Today, we operate like a well-oiled machine, but if we want to maintain this, we need to continue to develop and make progress. I have the impression that today we are



less of a creative collective and more serve as initiators or animators of various situations in the environment, we are educators.

AR: And I am taking a break from current events because I would like to have more time for myself. I am not teaching in the present edition of our Mentoring Programme, and unlike Adam, I do not long to return to the topics we addressed in *Lost Territories*. I feel that this break works for me and I need it to come back.

MMD: Despite the fact that everyone here will give a different answer to your question, we also know where we will be as a collective in the future. On March 13, 2026, we will open an exhibition summarizing our activities, explorations, and practices of the last twenty years. And that is a kind of cosmic sensation. In quite a short time, the hustle and bustle we all know so well will start for good – and there will be more of this creative ferment among us again. I am more than cool about us.



POST-SOVIET CONSTELLATIONS – SPUTNIK PHOTOS

Ideas are eternal constellations, and by virtue of the elements being gathered as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed.

Walter Benjamin

Although the word ‘Sputnik’ refers to the first artificial satellite launched into orbit in 1957 as part of the Soviet space program, for people who have been living in the region of the former Eastern Bloc, this term can evoke significantly broader memories. Only a few decades ago, in countries like Poland, and thus in a time and place where all sports shoes were called ‘Adidas’ regardless of the manufacturer, the term ‘Sputnik’ referred to every single artificial satellite respectively, and beyond that, to all luminous, moving objects visible in the starry night sky. Perhaps this synonymity was a consequence of the prevailing propaganda language at the time, that emphasized the merits of the USSR – the central state of the entire communist part of the world strongly polarized by the Cold War. From today’s perspective, sputniks – as there were many of them – bridged the gap between Earth and space, moving freely across borders (of the conflicted blocs of states and the atmosphere above them), bypassing the rigorous customs procedures, flying over the strictly guarded walls and abatis, and at the same time delivering observational data from a safe distance. Sputniks were man-made objects that offered knowledge of distant things and phenomena. Launched into space, they sent out signals, and incidentally led to the escalation of conflicts, stimulated tensions and military competition. Developed and constructed by the authoritarian communist regime, they were able to deliver information about capitalism and democracy. Despite their technological flaws, the satellites could capture the imagination of people in the East and trouble the West with their intrusive eye of artificial observation. Visible only at night, they represented both human and moving addition to the constellations. In Russian, the word ‘sputnik’ means both a satellite and a fellow traveler.¹

¹ Compare: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sputnik_1 [access: 11/20/2023].

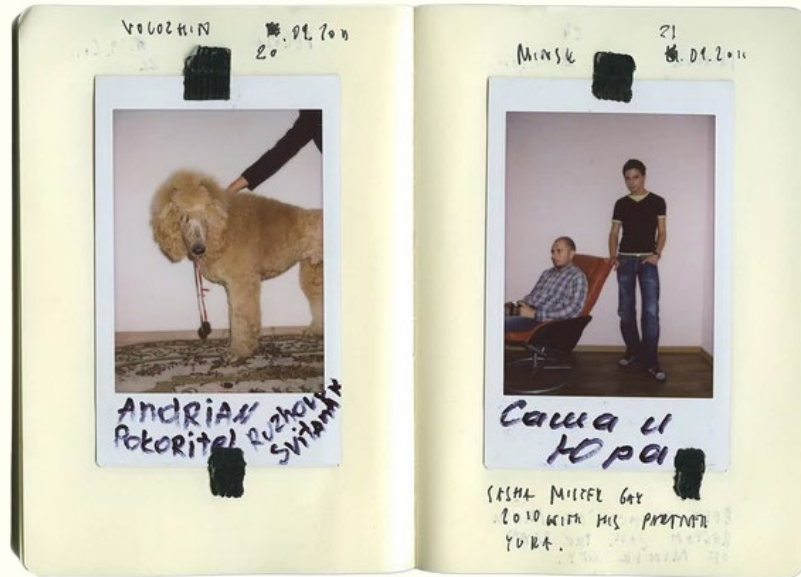
And thus, the name of the Sputnik Photos collective, founded in 2006, does not only involve the nostalgia for the concepts abandoned after 1989 that is in vogue today but also the variety of features typical of the Soviet satellite. The members of the group have changed over time, but all its photographers have been associated with the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, and it was the space of the former Communist Bloc that defined both the main field of their visual explorations and the essential trajectory of their journeys. Although they began their activity years after the end of the Cold War, the traces of the old tensions between communism and capitalism, or rather between East and West, still seem to be one of the most important themes of the Sputnik Photos photographic archive. The members of the collective have repeatedly pushed the boundaries and crossed borders, exploring their contemporary meanings and social consequences. Through their observations, as well as collecting and editing visual data, they have ultimately created photo-constellations that are presented to viewers in the form of exhibitions and books in which visual systems confront diverse spaces, and objects and phenomena are subjected to the ideas deeply rooted in the history of the former Communist Bloc.

BORDERS

The moment when Sputnik Photos came into being coincided with the period of intense political and artistic transformations, which had a strong impact on the themes and aesthetics of the photographs created by the members of the collective. The early years of the first decade of the 21st century can be associated, on the one hand, with the consequences of the enlargement of the EU, which suddenly expanded by the countries that were previously strongly associated with the communist side of the Cold War political scene. It was also the moment of the disillusionment caused by the fall of Francis Fukuyama's concept of the 'end of history,'² which was undermined by the piling up of military conflicts, revolutions, and terrorism. On the other hand, more or less at the same time, a significant crisis took place in the area of culture; it manifested itself mostly in the constantly progressing digitization of the world, linked to the network that today determines one of the fundamental areas of the daily life of contemporary humans. Perhaps these two moments have influenced the fact that the activities of the members of the collective are strongly focused on the broadly understood idea of a border – be it a national, social, historical, aesthetic border or transgressions related to the concept.

2 See: Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992. The essay was written in 1989, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and became one of the most often discussed treatises about the new political order which resulted from the end of Cold War and the dissolution of the Communist Bloc.

<01>



<02>



<03>



<img.01> Rafał Milach,
from the series *Winners*,
realized within the project
Stand BY, 2013

<img.02> Jan Brykczyński,
from the series realized
within the project *At the
Border*, 2006-2007

<img.03> Rafał Milach,
from the series *Be Lan* realized
within the project *At the Border*,
2006-2007

According to the information in the photo book *At the Border*,³ the members of the collective met in 2004, and therefore at the time when the EU was enlarged to include eight countries of the former Communist Bloc. For several of these countries, accession marked the end of the political transformation that had lasted since 1989 and the transition to a phase of rapidly accelerating economic growth. Accession to the Schengen Area, that accompanied these events, practically abolished the existence of the borders that had been so strictly policed before and constituted the source of traumatic memories shared by the citizens of the subjugated countries. Not without a reason Ryszard Kapuściński wrote that a border ‘is stress—fear, even (significantly more rarely: liberation).’⁴ All of a sudden, citizens of countries such as Poland who traveled to the West could even sleep all the way without noticing the previously dreaded and intimidating border crossing. In turn, the eastern border, separating the new member states of the EU from their former allies – Belarus, Russia, Serbia, or Ukraine became more fortified, and the consequence of this fortification clearly translates into the trauma of refugees trying to get through these borders today. What is critical here, the dissolution of the former Communist Bloc is not just about the freedom of movement, so strongly experienced in our cultural circles, but first and foremost, it is about chopping up the regions of the former Russian Empire and Yugoslavia with border fences and abatis.

The project *At the Border* from 2006, which dealt with the theme of borders and constituted an inauguration of the collective’s activity in its initial line-up, focused on the changes in the political situation of the time. As one of the most narrative-oriented projects by Sputnik Photos, it related to people for whom the countries of the so-called New Europe were the hope for improving their difficult economic situation. Crossing the strictly policed western flank of the European Union was still a source of enormous stress for them, and getting to the other side of the cultural fence gave them hope of liberation and joining the heavenly space with no borders at all. Instead of the expected paradise, however, the protagonists of the project are shown in the situation of not belonging to the Western world. They function in illegal zones with harsh living conditions, in the multicultural melting pots of bazaars or the ghettos of refugee camps, that determine the enclaves of unacceptable *Otherness*, are closed and separated from the rest of society. The boundaries of these internal spaces make us aware

3 Sputnik Photos, *At the Border*, Warsaw: Sputnik Photos, 2008.

4 Kapuscinski, Ryszard, *Imperium*, translated by Klara Glowczewska, New York: Vintage International, 1994, p. 19.

5 Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Manca Juvan, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Domen Pal, Agnieszka Rayss, Filip Singer.

of the barriers that exist in societies distrustful towards newcomers, who often live in an extremely difficult economic situation. It is worth mentioning that the satellite-like observation carried out by the photographers of Sputnik Photos also allows us to see the families of the protagonists who still live on the other side of the cultural fence that divides Europe.

The theme of the new borders between East and West, and essentially the traces of the former union of the communist states resurfaced in the collective's subsequent exhibitions and books. The photographs from the publications realized as part of two projects – *U(2010)*⁶ and *Stand BY'(2012)* – are permeated not only with people living in contemporary Ukraine and Belarus but also with spaces and monuments of the old regime, traces of the past, cosmological systems of the post-Soviet households, or constellations of the gathered objects. Some of the photographs that have made it into these books emphasize specific mesalliances – contrasts between the old and the new order, clashes between these two independent (yet coexisting) worlds. This is why the vodka associated with the East is lying next to the bottles of Pepsi that bring to mind the consumerist West; the consumer goods exported from Western supermarkets are sometimes displayed in the spaces of makeshift bazaars set up in a birch forest; elderly women from the *Homo Sovieticus* generation moving up one line of an escalator are carrying the portrait of a communist politician with respect and care, while the other line is used by young, Western-dressed citizens of the post-transformation world. The misalliances of East and West, communism and capitalism, and perhaps also of authoritarianism and democracy, can even be noticed at the level of conflict between the applied method of taking photographs and the thematic content of the images. Both the aesthetics of the color snapshots and the Fuji Instax instant prints are difficult to reconcile with the relics of Soviet ideology that they depict.

The internal contradictions of the post-Soviet system are best reflected in the project *Lost Territories Archive, LTA*,⁸ which was realized between 2008 and 2016 and focuses on the documentation of visual traces in countries that have broken away from the former Soviet empire. The resulting collection includes several thousand photographs that simultaneously form a unique repository of phantoms and afterimages of the vanishing regime, as well as of history that continues to influence contemporary life in the republics that were once part of the former Communist Bloc.

6 Sputnik Photos, *U*, Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Agnieszka Rayss, Filip Singer, 2010.

Photographs from projects realized within *Lost Territories Archive*

Documentation of the exhibitions realized within the *Lost Territories* project

7 Sputnik Photos, *Stand BY*, Jan Brykczyński, Manca Juvan, Andrei Liankevich, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Warsaw, 2012.

Photographs from the project *Stand BY*

8 Sputnik Photos, *Lost Territories Archive*, Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Andrej Balco, 2008-2016.



<04>

<img.04> Jan Brykczyński,
from the series *The Gardner*,
Lost Territories Archive,
2008-2016



<05>



<06>

<img.05> Michał Łuczak,
from the series *11.41*,
Lost Territories Archive,
2008-2016

<img.06> Adam Pańczuk,
from the series *The Bright Night*,
Lost Territories Archive,
2008-2016

Creating the archive significantly influenced the artistic practice of the members of the collective; they have released the entire collections of photographs, leaving them at the curators' disposal for the latter to arrange them freely in their own constellations and sets. Based on the archive, two books and over a dozen various exhibitions and installations have been created so far, each of them constructed around a different narrative. The abandonment of the practice of assigning each photograph to its author also turned out to be a vital innovation. Thanks to this measure, the books and the exhibitions created in line with this idea started to reflect the group's collective view onto the themes they tackled. Simultaneously – and this should be emphasized once again – the completion of the project *Lost Territories Archive* project was the beginning of searching for completely new areas of photographic exploration, areas that go far beyond the threads of post-Soviet identity.

One of the themes, significantly outstanding in the area of *Lost Territories Archive*, was the subject of nuclear technologies – and thus the use of radionuclides (such as uranium and radium) for the purposes of energy production and in the arms race. Nuclear bombs and the possibility of global military conflict determined one of the essential areas of social anxiety from the Cold War era. However, the radioactive materials used in the power plants, the exploitation of which was supposed to become the proof of the Soviet scientific greatness, ultimately led to the dissolution of the USSR, which was accelerated by the Chernobyl disaster. Among other factors, it was precisely this catastrophe that brought back the border crossings between Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, in this way isolating not only people who shared the same, local identity from each other, but also those whose idea of the state is determined by the concept of the USSR to this day. The dire consequences of the nuclear reactor explosion marked a clearly defined area on the maps of the region – a strictly controlled zone of severe radioactive contamination, a fragment of the former empire that was no longer habitable.

The theme of radionuclides looms up in the photographs presented in the photo book *Fruit Garden* (2016),⁹ which was created on the basis of *Lost Territories Archive* and contains several photographs taken both at scientific institutes for radiation research, as well as test sites, uranium mines, and radioactive waste disposal sites.

9 Sputnik Photos, *Fruit Garden*, Jan Bryk-czyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Andrej Balco, Warsaw, 2016.



<07>



<08>

<img.07> Documentation of the *Palimpsest* exhibition, Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival, Toronto, Canada, 4/29/2019 - 5/31/2019

<img.08> Documentation of the *Lost Territories. The New End* exhibition, Arsenal Gallery, Białystok, Poland, 3/3/2017 - 4/20/2017

<img.10>

p.41

The Lost Territories Word Book

The collection of photographs associated with this subject describes radiation with the use of reproductions of documents collected for research purposes, juxtaposed with photographs of contaminated areas, ruins, traces, and sites of raw material extraction. In some cases, the viewer may experience a specific kind of cognitive dissonance due to the contradictions manifested in the tranquil and apparently harmless landscapes, where the contamination is pushed beyond the visual sphere. What is worth emphasizing, the photographs taken by the members of the collective were created in areas heavily affected by history; the book title *Kontaminierte Landschaften* [*Contaminated Landscapes*], in which its author Martin Pollack describes the history of countries from Central Europe that were marked by a series of genocides,¹⁰ gains an additional symbolic layer here, hinting at the existence of the invisible reality of gamma radiation. The photographs become palimpsests, always concealing invisible information somewhere underneath, showing only the landscapes that overlay the hidden radiation and history. The abovementioned motifs and themes also reemerge in the publication *The Lost Territories Word Book*,¹¹ in which the photographs by Sputnik Photos are combined with texts written by journalists, historians, novelists, and philosophers. The result is an unobvious lexicon of associations that refer to the era of the Soviet empire's domination. This visual encyclopedia, in which concepts are confronted with images, constructs the post-Soviet constellation around which the photographers of the collective revolve. Biographies of objects, memory of places and people are linked in an invisible network of associations and relationships between ideas, memory, and history.

11 Sputnik Photos, *The Lost Territories Word Book*, Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Andrej Balco, Warsaw: Sputnik Photos, 2016.

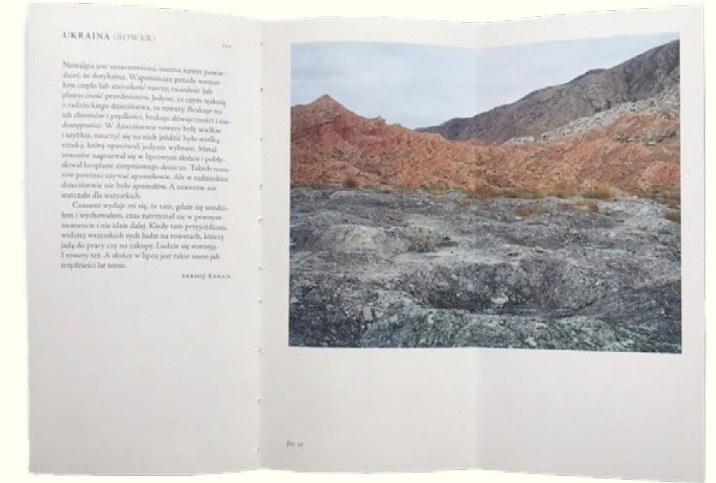
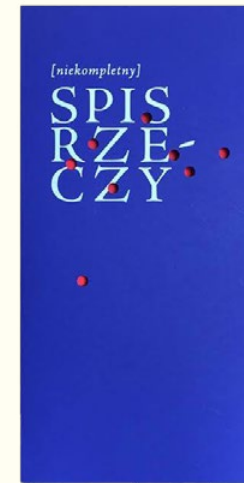
10 Pollack, Martin, *Skażone krajobrazy*, translated by Karolina Niedenthal, Wołowiec: Czarne, 2014.

CONSTELLATIONS

Whilst in the first publications of the Sputnik Photos collective, its members strongly emphasized their photojournalistic experience, in the later projects, the constellations of images clearly outweighed the narrative formula associated with journalism. Both the exhibitions and the publications realized as part of *Lost Territories Archive* use the language of a unique atlas in which – in the words of Georges Didi-Huberman – thinking with correspondences and analogies, intimate and secret relations between images constitutes a negation of traditional, epic narrative.¹² The atlas, understood by the French philosopher and researcher as a visual form of knowledge, thus replaces

12 Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*, translated by Shane Lillis, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

<10>



<09>



<img.09> Documentation of the *Lost Territories. Sediment* exhibition, U-jazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland, 10/21/2016 - 2/5/2017

<img.10> *[[Niekompletny] Spis Rzeczy*, designed by Ania Nałęcka-Milach / [TapirBookDesign](#), Sputnik Photos, 2016

reportage, in which the linguistic narrative is accompanied by images that often have an illustrative function. Instead of coherent and linearly presented events or conventionally organized collections, the recipient of Sputnik Photo's projects is confronted with a fragmented labyrinth of visual traces. The paths that stretch between them demand from the viewer recognition and decoding, finding secret passages and connections. The constellations of images created at the exhibitions and in the publications of the collective, based on unobvious clashes and juxtapositions, increasingly move away from the descriptions that commonly put documentary photo projects in order and are reduced to often vague pieces of information included in titles. The departure from the photojournalistic conventions, evident in the early works by some members of Sputnik Photos, is clearly visible in *The Lost Territories Word Book*, where – despite the texts that prevail in the book – the photographs seem to function autonomously, and their relationship with the linguistic layer is not obvious at all. The articles, written by representatives of various areas of culture, just like the photographs, break the expected homogeneity of conventions, styles, and literary genres, which are instead consolidated and unified mainly by the broad subject of the book combined with its graphic design.

Atlases are created through the act of montage – the selection of photographs from an archive.¹³ While documentalists applying the archivist perspective would rather try to build coherent groups, typological sets, or collections banally organized by themes, formats or compositions, the constellation-like atlases of the collective are based on discontinuities, they go beyond the borders of conventions, styles, times and spaces. Whether they are published in books or displayed on the walls of galleries, the images collectively defy the concepts of hierarchy and classification. Through the clash of heterogeneous images, the atlases that Didi-Huberman elaborated on deconstruct the ideals of specificity and purity of the genre.¹⁴ That is why, in the publications of Sputnik Photos, contemporary landscapes were juxtaposed with historical documents; photographs of people were accompanied by images depicting objects that did not belong to them; color photographs full of sharp details were contrasted with blurred monochromes.

13 Ibidem, p.10.

14 Ibidem.



<img.11> Documentation of the *Lost Territories Archive* exhibition, RIBOCA, Kristaps Morbergs residence, Riga, Latvia, 6/2/2018 - 10/28/2018

For all the reasons mentioned above, the activity of the Sputnik Photos collective is particularly outstanding in the landscape of Central and Eastern European artistic photography from the first decades of the 21st century. The truth is that around 2010 the idea of applying photography in Polish art was still soaked in the ethos of Critical Art, postmodern quotations, black and white documentaries, or staged photoshoots and studio situations. While many artists working with photography at the time located themselves on one side of the conflict between politics and aesthetics, the collective's artistic practice combined these formerly polarized categories. Perhaps what weighted in their favor was also the form of the photo book, which only gained popularity in the last decade and is an elaborately designed object, an autonomous work of art that – like an exhibition – determines a separate, independent space of both reading and visual experience. In contrast to works sold at auctions, books are relatively inexpensive and their accessibility is just another proof of the social sensitivity of the collective's members as they seek an audience beyond the hermetic circles of wealthy art collectors. Equally close to social practices is the aesthetics of the color snapshot, so often present in the various realizations of the members of Sputnik Photos, which has its origins in amateur photography and only seeped into Polish art at the beginning of the new century. What is worth noticing, however, is that it is often overpowered by the aforementioned radical and detailed documents, reproductions that appropriate someone else's images and sculptures, but also by very well-thought portraits. Although social awareness can be seen in all of the Sputnik Photos' projects, it would become an especially powerful driving force for their activities after 2019 – and these activities include educational and participatory projects, solidarity residencies, charity auctions, and finally, the Social Centre for Photography in Warsaw, co-created by the members of the collective.

Thus, the aspects characteristic of critical constellations, such as dialectics of coherence and disarticulation, unity and division, relationships and boundaries, singularity and pluralism penetrate both the aesthetic and thematic layers in the projects by Sputnik Photos. On the level of aesthetics, the already mentioned diversity of conventions and genres contributes to a body of work that integrates into and is associated with the broadly understood *Notherness* in photography. So many

of the images from the variety of the collective's projects stress the characteristics and phenomena commonly associated with the North: Winter, night, darkness, fog, grayness, and finally, melancholy, and eminence of the landscape overpowering the cultural staffage. In the area of the subject matter, the contrasting tensions arise precisely from the sense of the collapse of the old community, so typical of this region of the world, as well as from local tensions and relational identities, social losses, and individual gains. The coherence of the post-communist cultural context that defines the main area of the Sputnik Photos collective's visual experience is superimposed onto the individuality of the people who inhabit it. The subdivisions and redemptions mentioned by Walter Benjamin frame the specifics of the regional phenomena in which the echo of past ideas takes on the structure of a constellation.

**COMMUNITY OF EXPERIENCE.
ON THE SOCIAL ASPECTS
OF THE SPUTNIK PHOTOS ACTIVITY**

‘Of course, we are not naive enough to believe that a photograph can change the world [...],’¹

said the co-founder of Sputnik Photos, Agnieszka Rayss in 2008 about the collective’s first exhibition. Four years later, Marvin Heiferman, an American writer and curator involved in projects about the impact of photographic images on art, science, and visual culture, would gather texts and essays by almost eighty academics, researchers, and artists who discussed their experiences of working with photography, which he would conclude with one sentence: ‘Photography changes everything.’ These articles would be featured in a book under the same title – *Photography Changes Everything* – published by the Smithsonian Institution and the Aperture Foundation (2012). The eponymous thesis, as true as it seems unlikely, would lead the editor of the publication to the conclusion that determining what ‘everything’ means is as difficult as defining photography as such. However, photography requires critical reflection in order to grasp what it does to us and with us, how it affects us, and how we use it in our everyday lives, not only in the field of art.

Understood in a traditional way, photography comes down to representation. In this article, we will try to look at it from a different angle and see it as a photographic event, an encounter. What would be taken into consideration as important and valid, would be the context in which certain images are created, the relationships we enter with and through photographs, as well as the question of responsibility for the produced images. Photography leaves traces. And this is not solely about physical objects, such as prints in exhibitions or photo books, but also about its imprints in both individual and collective experience, about how it repositis in our memory. Sometimes immediately and sometimes after several years when we reach for the archives, images can act as triggers – they can compel us to take a stand, inspire action, and evoke feelings and emotions that lead to deeply personal experience (the power of affect).

1 A. Cymer, *Rozmowa z członkami grupy Sputnik Photos*, *Świat Obrazu*, 8/21/2008, [access: 13.12.2023].

But let's come back to Agnieszka Rayss' unfinished thought: 'Of course, we are not naive enough to believe that a photograph can change the world, but we find it valuable that our photographs spark discussions, that people begin to reconsider it [a social problem – author's note], that there is feedback on the issues, we have addressed.'² Such conversations allow us to take photography beyond the realm of art and include it in the public debate. It is no longer about observing the environment and situations around us but contributing and having an impact on them. Sputnik's first collaborative project *At the Border (2006-2008)* was dedicated to the economic migration of Ukrainian, Belarussian, Cameroonian, Georgian, and Vietnamese citizens to four of the eight countries admitted to the European Union in 2004 – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Interestingly, years later when Karolina Gembara, one of the Sputnik photographers, would launch her initiative *New Varsovians (2019)*, creatives from the collective would be still interested in the experience of migration, but Gembara would reach for different methods of working with images than her colleagues not so long ago. This time, migrants who had arrived in Warsaw would take photographs to tell the story about their experiences and the world they are now part of. The photographer would step into the background with her camera. Together with the collective, she would provide tools, facilitate social networks, help prepare the exhibition, and publish the zine.

The activities and projects that Sputnik Photos has carried out over almost two decades allow us to trace the entire path of the collective that started with the press photo reportage; and how this path has diverged – toward documentary photography, toward creative photography, toward socially engaged photography, and finally, toward visual activism – and regardless of the formal measures chosen, it has ultimately led to the same important point – the encounter with another human being.

They meet in 2004 during workshops for photojournalists from Eastern and Central Europe coordinated by the non-governmental organization Altemus and the VII Photo Agency – Andrej Balco (Slovakia), Jan Brykczyński (Poland), Manca Juvan (Slovenia), Justyna Mielnikiewicz (Poland/Georgia), Rafał Milach (Poland), Domen Pal (Slovenia), Janis Pipars (Latvia), Agnieszka Rayss (Poland), Filip Singer (Czech Republic), and Wiktor Suvorov (Ukraine). They are absorbed by the same problems, and their stories have a lot in common. They set up a grassroots initiative and look for financing that

2 Ibidem.

The *New Varsovians* project



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<img.12, 13> Participants of the project
New Varsovians by Karolina Gembara, realized
within the project *Pulse Project*, 2019

would cover their joint activities. In the following years, the members of the collective would come and go, which would also influence the visual language and methods applied by the group. However, what would stay intact, would be their interest in the matters of Eastern and Central Europe.

The return to the beginnings is important for two reasons. First of all, the creatives met on the ground of photojournalism which is associated with a specific kind of mission, reliability, and humanistic drive. VII Photo Agency, founded in 2001, had exactly the same roots. During the aforementioned workshop, the members of Sputnik Photos can observe from the inside how it operates. Why shouldn't they try as well? The impulses also come from outside. It is a time when the media market is increasingly dominated by image banks and large photo stock agencies. More and more frequently, photo reportages printed in the press are being replaced by Internet publications, and these are governed by a different speed. The members of Sputnik Photos opt for current topics, although not those that make the news. They are familiar with the method of long-term efforts spread over a longer period of time. Sometimes their images seep into the mainstream press, but they are increasingly moving away from photojournalistic literalness. They are replacing representation with interpretation. By engaging writers, essayists, curators, and other photographers in their activities, they expand the community of thought and experience. They create a network of expert alliances and thus strengthen their ability to act and influence. They are no longer just photographers; they initiate artistic situations and use photography in action. Over the years, they develop their language of expression through exhibitions, books, newspapers, blogs, films, installations, interventions, archives, and streaming images on social media. They also start to educate. And once again – all this to get closer to another human.

If I had to describe the social character of Sputnik Photos creative work, I would link it to intention. The artists make no secret of the fact that they photograph for themselves (to explore themes, they find disturbing or interesting), but simultaneously, they create images with a view to the people to whom those images relate and to those who will become their future users.

Between 2008 and 2010, they photograph in Ukraine.³ The outcome is an exhibition and the inconspicuous publication *U (2010)*, designed by *Ania Nałęcka-Milach*. The book has no cover as if it was handmade by the person holding it. When Russia would invade Ukraine in February 2022, Sputnik

3 Andrej Balco (Slovakia), Jan Brykczyński (Poland), Ivan Kurinoy (Russia), Andrei Liankevich (Belarus), Justyna Mielnikiewicz (Poland, Georgia), Rafał Milach (Poland), Janis Pipars (Latvia), Agnieszka Rayss (Poland), Filip Singer (Czech Republic).

would start collecting money and organizing charity actions. All proceeds from the sale of *U* would go to those in need, also animals and their caretakers, and the act of embracing and extending a helping hand would no longer be just a metaphor.

4 Jan Brykczyński,
Manca Juvan, Andrei
Liankevich, Justyna
Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach,
Adam Pańczuk,
and Agnieszka Rayss.

Belarus comes next. They explore it between 2011 and 2012,⁴ and the final result of the project is the exhibition and the book *Stand BY (2012)*. The method they develop at the time was well described by Andrei Liankevich: ‘First, each of us presented our own point of view on a particular social problem associated with Belarus, but without offering simple, black and white solutions. Then there was a lot of discussion in this project. Should we add text to the photographs? What can we tell about our protagonists? [...] And the third aspect, which was really difficult for all of us, was to get to Belarus and understand what was going on there. Because this was something that the Belarusians themselves found difficult to comprehend.’⁵ Among the social issues, as Liankevich described them, were: the economic emigration of Belarusians to the USA, the identity that manifests itself in the style of clothes, the memories of the women veterans of the Great Patriotic War or the approach of people to the environment.

Such were the beginnings of Sputnik Photos – fields of interest that focused on social issues and working methods derived from documentary photography. With every subsequent undertaking (*Stand BY* was already a harbinger of this shift), Sputnik’s photographs would increasingly get rid of literalness, and elude simple definitions and divisions into genres. What would become important are the relationships between the images, as well as the connections between photography and text. The artists would experiment with both form and content. Their narratives would take the form of visual essays. Many photographs would lose their representative character and start to engage with the power of a symbol, a metaphor, or an association. Representation and reporting would become less important than building engagement through images.

The shift in accents – from the social function of photography toward its aesthetic function – clearly manifests itself in in the *Lost Territories* project. It is distinctive for its curatorial concept (which I will elaborate on later), but it is also worth noting that *Lost Territories* also involved the *Speaking in a Loud Voice* workshops conducted by Sputnik Photos in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova between 2011

5 Wójcińska,
Agnieszka, *Wyjść poza
kliszę*, conversation with
Andrei Liankevich from
Sputnik Photos [in:] No 1
(Supplement), Wójcińska,
Agnieszka, ed., Warsaw:
Sputnik Photos, 2012, p. 1.



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<img.14> Agnieszka Rayss, from the series realized within the project *Stand BY*, 2011

<img.15> Adam Pańczuk, from the series *I am in Vogue*, realized within the project *Stand BY*, 2011

<img.16> JJan Brykczyński, from the series *Primeval Forest* realized within the project *Stand BY*, 2011

and 2013. These was a series of meetings during which photography served as a means of building connections and relationships, exchanging experiences, and learning from each other. Until 2016, the members of Sputnik Photos⁶ take photographs in the countries of the former USSR, and then they compile all the photographs into one archive. So far, they had relied on their individuality, distinctiveness, and the variety of different perspectives. They had found separate themes and realized them in their own style. This enabled them to maintain their individual approaches and styles while working together as a collective. By embracing the concept of *Lost Territories Archive* proposed by curator Paweł Szypulski, they resigned from authorship and signing their works. The collective visual narrative replaced the individual voices. Today, this archive still remains the source for a number of curators. They browse through it in search of content that is interesting from the perspective of their country (Bulgaria, Latvia, Ukraine, or Canada – to name just a few of the countries where *Lost Territories* has been shown in recent years), such as themes associated with ecology, politics, and identity.

Lost Territories Archive (2008-2016) is the first. The second is the *Archive of Public Protests (A-P-P)*. It emerges in 2019 on the initiative of Rafał Milach and functions as a separate collective thanks to the organizational support of Sputnik Photos. A-P-P collects photographs documenting the socio-political tensions in Poland – strikes, protests, demonstrations, occupations, and sit-ins – that started to gain momentum after 2015. Almost twenty photographers have joined in their efforts around the idea of the Archive. Apart from Rafał Milach, the person bridging A-P-P and Sputnik Photos is Karolina Gembara who writes articles about the Archive's activities and presents photographs from the protests at conferences and lectures. The photographs of A-P-P are accessible on a dedicated website which serves as a source of material for research and studies, but it is also intended to warn against increasing populism and discrimination. They are also printed as part of the grassroots paper called the *Strike Newspaper*, which also contains texts, graphic symbols, and slogans from banners and posters from the protests, that one can come back to the streets with. 'I thought it would be good to leave a trace that is more solid than solely internet content, – says Rafał Milach about A-P-P – so that the photographs, texts, and slogans could function beyond the relatively closed circuit associated with photographic or artistic circles. Our photographs are not created for us to like them, but for people to

6 Jan Brykczyński,
Michał Łuczak, Rafał
Milach, Adam Pańczuk, and
Agnieszka Rayss.



<img.17> Wojtek Radwański,
Archive of Public Protests, 2022

[...] ‘Our photographs are not created for us to like them, but for people to be able to draw from them so that we can support their postulates with the tools we have at hand. And it appeared that what we do can be useful – people use our newspaper during protests. This is the first such experience in my entire career as a creative. It is amazing.’

Rafał Milach

for years. The artists begin to turn their attention to the situation in their country. Like a lens, it focuses the global problems of the second and the early years of the third decade of the 21st century: the rise of populism that leads to the persecution of women, migrants, or people who identify as LGBTQ+, the migration crisis, the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the push-backs on the Polish-Belarusian border, the war in Ukraine... Photography enables civil resistance and its manifestation, it sparks new forms of activism and engagement. What seems interesting, sometimes it becomes redundant – thanks to the network of connections developed over the years, the collective is able to integrate and animate artistic circles even without photography.

Such was the case of ‘Strony’ [‘Pages’]. The three subsequent issues of the zine expressed the refusal to accept the situation in Poland. They were a form of civil disobedience and protest, a kind of personal revolution. They were released by Sputnik Photos in 2017 as a commentary on current problems, such as ecology and the environment; ‘one of us’ and the ‘Other’; truth and post-truth. The free zine, available in both paper and online versions, was edited by Sputnik but mainly filled with content by activists, writers, reporters, and artists invited by Sputnik to contribute. The zines were accompanied

be able to draw from them so that we can support their postulates with the tools we have at hand. And it appeared that what we do can be useful – people use our newspaper during protests. This is the first such experience in my entire career as a creative. It is amazing.⁷

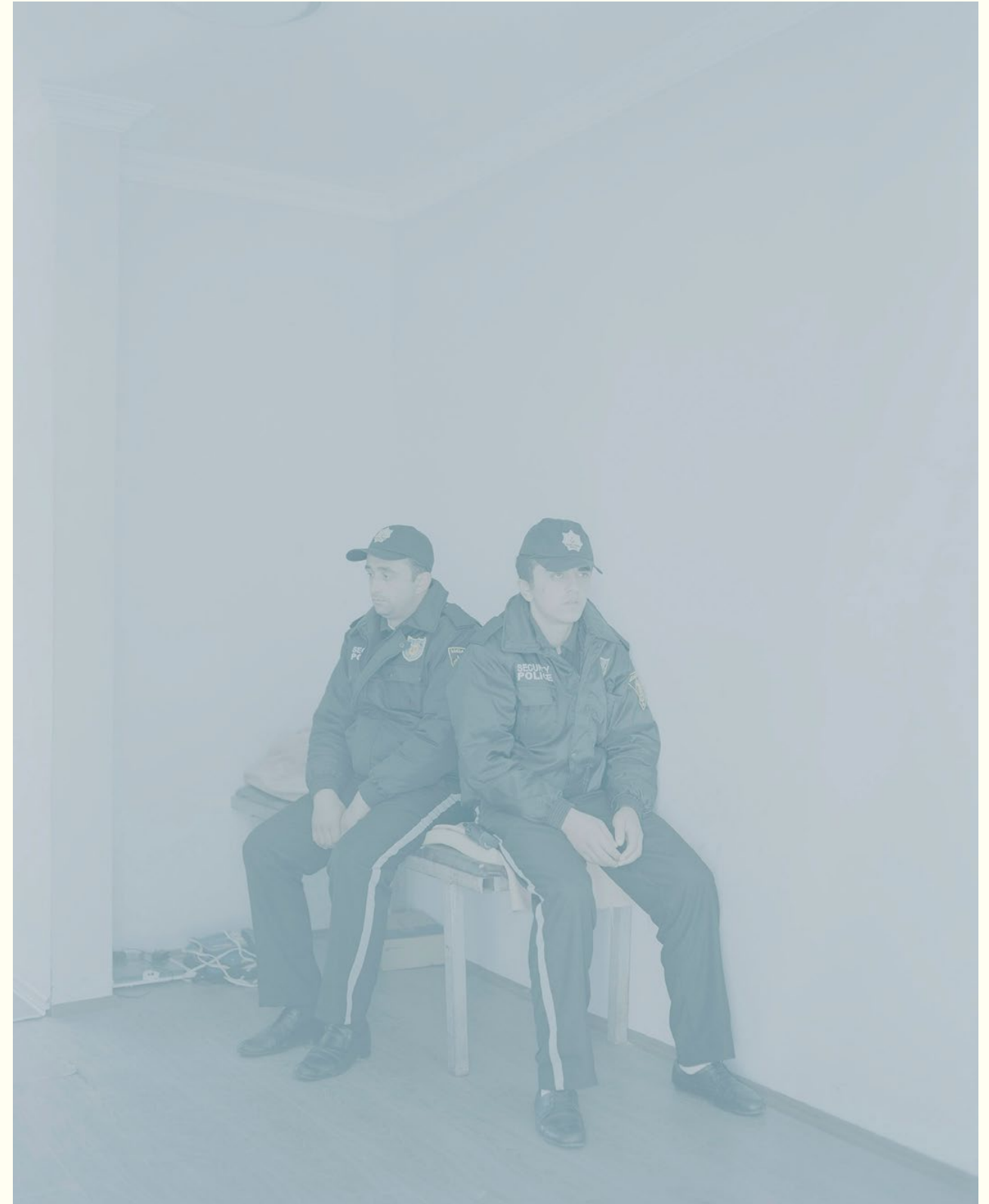
I recall this initiative to put emphasis on the fact that the end of working on *Lost Territories* in 2016 opens a new chapter in the activity of Sputnik Photos. This is the time when only the photographers from Poland remain in the group: Jan Brykczyński, Karolina Gembara, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, and Agnieszka Rayss, together with their coordinator Marzena Michałek-Dąbrowska, who had supported them

7 Boćkowska, Aleksandra, *Zdjęcia do czytania*, Dwutygodnik.com, Issue 302, 02/2021 [access: 12/13/2023].



<18>

<img.18> Agnieszka Rayss,
from *Lost Territories Archive*,
2008-2016



<19>

<img.19> Rafał Milach,
from *Lost Territories Archive*,
2008-2016

by the presentation of visual works in public spaces in Warsaw. Over the years, the collective's activities become more and more inclusive.

In 2012, the collective launches the Sputnik Photos Mentoring Programme, a course that allows participants to go through all stages of the creative process – from the idea itself to its completion. This is when a kind of community of people expressing themselves through photography begins to form around Sputnik. Apart from passion, their bond is based on a certain set of values. The series created as part of the Mentoring Programme are mostly problematized documentaries that deal with either autobiographical or social themes. Perhaps this is why when the collective initiates aid campaigns and relief efforts – during COVID-19 pandemic or after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the former students get eagerly engaged. When Russia invades Ukraine, they submit their works to the charity auctions organized by Sputnik or they take photos for documents for people fleeing the war. When you enter the orbit of Sputnik, it becomes clear that it is not just about photography, but rather about the way of thinking, the way of perceiving the world and reacting to its problems.

Over time, the collective manages to obtain funding from Polish and international institutions to organize residencies for artists, internships for volunteers, portfolio reviews, or photo walks – to be able to educate for free. 'Since 2015, Sputnik Photos has been running an ongoing internship program for volunteers financed by EU funds (current name: the European Solidarity Corps) and dedicated to young people from countries other than Poland,' – explains Marzena Michałek-Dąbrowska, who is responsible for coordinating this program and several other initiatives at Sputnik Photos. 'Altogether, we have hosted eight volunteers from Central and Eastern Europe, mainly from Belarus and Ukraine. They helped us implement our educational and social projects, and thanks to their perspective, we were able to avoid many mistakes while planning both aid and educational activities for migrants and artists from the former Soviet republics. Some of these people have stayed in Poland and are continuing their careers here. Language skills, organizational skills, and competencies such as knowledge of photography have enabled them to develop their careers and get involved in other initiatives. Without the support of our volunteers, the realization of the collective's social activities would be a huge challenge.'



<img.20> Documentation of the *Lost Territories Archive* exhibition, RIBOCA, Kristaps Morbergs residence, Riga, Latvia, 6/2/2018 - 10/28/2018

Since 2019, a number of events have been organized under the aegis of the Social Centre for Photography (SCF) at 20 Chłodna Street in Warsaw, which is a space run by Sputnik in collaboration with the Archeology of Photography Foundation. The SCF is an art gallery, a reading room for photography books, a culture-making place, and a room for dialog at the same time. The project that inaugurated the collective's engagement in the SCF is *Pulse* – an initiative dedicated to Warsaw. As with their other projects and undertakings, the creatives of Sputnik Photos look for their own, often unobvious themes, which together would create a diverse image of the capital. They make works that revise Warsaw's history inscribed in objects and architecture, go beyond the center, and toward the peripheries. But there is also something else happening there. Karolina Gembara, the graduate of the first edition of the Sputnik Photos Mentoring Program and now a member of the collective, proposes a community project based on conversations and photography. She asks questions about tolerance and acceptance, respect, collaboration, and practical aspects of multiculturalism and cultural diversity in the capital. Within the SCF, she conducts the abovementioned workshops with immigrants and asylum seekers under the title *New Varsovians*. On her initiative, the artist Pamela Bożek is invited to collaborate. At the time, she works with people from the centers for foreigners in Łuków and in the Targówek district in Warsaw.

The following years bring other projects that could be described as photography in action. The workshop *As You Can See? (2020)*⁸ is attended by emerging women photographers who work under the watchful eye of women artists and curators, with additional support from volunteers collaborating with Sputnik Photos. The feminist aspect of this action is essential, as the workshop takes place in a country where women have been protesting on the streets and fighting for their rights for years.

Next year, Sputnik launches the residencies program called *Solidarity Art Residence (2021)*,⁹ dedicated to Belarusian citizens as a gesture of solidarity with the country's artistic circles. As a result of the protests that spread across Belarus after the rigged presidential elections in 2020 and in response to the deterioration of living conditions as well as the negligence of local authorities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many artists were unable to leave the country or – on the contrary – were forced to flee for political reasons. Sputnik Photos made it possible for four artists to leave the country legally and, after they arrived in Warsaw, took care of their safety, provided them with accommodation, and enabled them to work and develop artistically.

8 Mentors: Agnieszka Rayss (photographer), Karolina Puchała-Rojek (curator), Karolina Gembara (photographer, activist), Magdalena Hueckel (artist); emerging photographers: Karolina Ćwik, Magdalena Noga, Natalia Sienkiewicz, Justyna Streichsbier.

9 Artists who took part in the program: Ihar Hancharuk, Pavel Kritchko, Swiatłana Stankiewicz, Viktoriia Tan.



<21>



<23>

<img.21> Family workshop accompanying the project *Poland - the State of Research*, 2019



<22>

<img.22> Rafał Milach leading a photo walk realized within the project *Pulse*, 2019

<img.23> Karolina Ćwik working on her exhibition realized within the project *As you can see*, 2020

In 2023, when I am writing this text, many of the collective's activities have their source in photography, but they are also close to visual practices that manifested themselves in the diversity of forms that preserve the character of action and intervention. The project *Traveling Photo Atelier*, conducted in 2011 and concluded with the book *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, was the harbinger of such practices. And it so happens I was a part of it.¹⁰

Here is the fragment of a letter: '[...] thank you very much for everything. I am sending you my drawing / Me and Marta are standing. / I worked on it for two days.' Nine-year-old Asia had drawn three girls: one is swinging in a hammock between the trees, and the other two are standing shoulder to shoulder – they are sisters and their names are Asia and Marta. The girl on the left has her arms crossed, and the girl on the right is holding a camera. It looks as if they are about to turn toward their friend in the hammock to take a picture of her. This is a flashback to the photographic workshop organized by Sputnik Photos, the workshop we all took part in just a while ago.

It was the summer of 2011. Four campers set off for the four corners of Poland: the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, the Bieszczady Mountains, and Silesia. In each of these regions, a small team: two photographers and one person responsible for animation of the events. We visited small towns and villages. There we met children who did not go on vacation and for various reasons had no access to art on a daily basis. The idea was simple: if art is a mature form of fun, as the American psychologist Thomas Gordon stated, then let's give cameras to children and encourage them to create a visual record of their world, and at the same time, let's have fun, let's laugh. However, it was not about making jokes or infantilizing the entire process. Adopting the fun approach allowed us to enter the path of experiment and unrestricted communication. We did not correct the photos. We paid attention to what the images depicted, and that was a spark for the children to tell stories and an inspiration for further engagement. We played ball, swam in the lake, picked up currants. We built mutual trust. In those campers, we were like a traveling photo atelier. But these were not children who came to visit us, we came to visit them. After three days, because we spent so much time in each of the places from different regions of Poland, we knew quite a lot about each other. Thanks to photography, we peeked into various houses and backyards. And there was

10 Participants of the project: Rafał Milach, Kuba Dąbrowski, Krzysztof Pacholak (the West Pomeranian Voivodeship); Adam Pańczuk, Michał Łuczak, Ewelina Lasota (Bieszczady Mountains); Agnieszka Rayss, Tomasz Wiech, Marzena Michatek-Dąbrowska (the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship); Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Rafał Siderski, Agnieszka Pajczkowska (Silesia).

everything there, sometimes even more than we wanted to see: a drunken father, decaying buildings, garbage scattered around. But the aim was to create a space for every possible conversation. At the end of each stay, we organized public screenings of the photographs – on one of the school walls or at the local movie theater – and children, as their authors and creators, were proud beyond words. We were leaving with the hope that the creativity we had sparked in them, the agency, and the awareness that they had managed to succeed in a completely new situation had empowered them and would stay with them for a long time. Eighty-one children from twelve towns and places took part in the project. A lot. And not enough.

I remember that summer when – at the invitation of Sputnik Photos – I joined the photographers – Michał Łuczak and Adam Pańczuk (we visited villages in the Bieszczady Mountains) and once again I wonder how aesthetic and ethical sensitivity merge and overlap in the artistic, cultural and educational practices of Sputnik Photos, as well as their activism. Has the publication of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, and thus the book, which was thought to empower creativity in children, been enough to bring about any change at all? The question about the future of the people, who we invite to collaborate, seems to be essential. It is also accompanied by other questions: about the results and the impact, which in the case of such soft-skills projects, and among Sputnik's activities there are many of them, are delayed in time and not always measurable. Sometimes they do not engage as many people as we would like. But isn't it like little by little does the trick?



<24>



<25>



<26>

LIST OF PROJECTS

2006-2023

2006-2007 →

At the Border

BOOK

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Manca Juvan, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Domen Pal, Agnieszka Rayss, Filip Singer

2010 →

U

BOOK

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Ivan Kurinnoy, Andrei Liankevich, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Janis Pipars, Agnieszka Rayss, Filip Singer

MEDIA:

M. Rosen, 'U' revisited: Sputnik Photos in Ukraine 2008-2010, mediapart.fr, 3/20/2014



2010-2011 →

Is (not)

BOOK

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED WRITERS:

Huldar Breiðfjörð, Sindri Freysson, Kristín Heida Kristinsdóttir, Sigurbjörg Prastardóttir, Hermann Stefánsson

MEDIA:

A. Jastrzębska, 'IS (not)' album, biweekly.pl, 04.2011



2011 →

One, Two, Buckle my Shoe

WORKSHOP

BLOG

BOOK

PARTICIPATORY PROJECT

AUTHORS:

children participating in the workshop

INVITED PHOTOGRAPHERS AND ANIMATORS:

Jan Brykczyński, Kuba Dąbrowski, Ewelina Lasota, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Marzena Michałek-Dąbrowska, Rafał Milach, Krzysztof Pacholak, Agnieszka Pajęczkowska, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Rafał Siderski, Tomasz Wiech

MEDIA:

[www] <https://kronikacyfrowa.blogspot.com/>

2011-2012 →

Stand BY

BOOK

TEXT

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Manca Juvan, Andrei Liankevich, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

2012-2013 →

Speaking in a Loud Voice

Training and networking of emerging photographers and journalists in Eastern Partnership Countries.

WORKSHOP

BLOG

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

MEDIA:

[www] <https://loud-voice.blogspot.com/2013/09/>

2012



Distant Place

BOOK

EXHIBITION

TEXT

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED WRITERS:

Dawid Bienkowski, Krzysztof Koehler, Jacek Kopciński, Zyta Rudzka, Krzysztof Rutkowski, Michał Walczak

od 2012



Mentoring Programme

BOOK

EXHIBITION

WORKSHOP

MENTORING

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Karolina Gembara (od 2018), Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

2013-2015



Iceland in residence

FILM

REZYDENCJA

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED FILMMAKERS:

Huldar Breiðfjörð, Helena Stefánsdóttir i Kristján Loðmfjörð

MEDIA:

[www]
<https://icelandinresidence.wordpress.com/o-projekcieabout-the-project/>

2014



PSOPLAAINND. Mapping the Blind Spots

EXHIBITION

MAGAZINE

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED AUTHORS:

Ania Nałęcka-Milach, NOPHOTO Collective

2015



Series of projects for Triennial of Photography in Hamburg

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

MEDIA:

M. Niedużak, *Polish Photography in Hamburg*, contemporarylynx.co.uk, 7/16/2015

2008-2016



Lost Territories Archive

BOOK

EXHIBITION

MAGAZINE

ARCHIVE

URBAN SPACE

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Andrei Liankevich, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss

MEDIA:

A. Skuja, Adam Panczuk: *Dreams often tell more about reality than we suspect*, fkmagazine.lv, 1/8/2018

J. M. Colberg *Fruit Garden – Photo Book Review*, cphmag.com 2017

„Stracone Terytoria. Nowy koniec” *Sputnik Photos w Galerii Arsenał w Białymstoku*, magazynsum.pl [PL/ENG]

Sputnik Photos. Lost Territories. Sediment, u-jazdowski.pl, 2017



2017 →

Pages

MAGAZINE

URBAN SPACE

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach,
Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED AUTHORS:

Edgar Bąk, Przemek Branas,
Sebastian Cichocki, Monika
Drożyńska, Jarosław Dudycz,
Jacek Frąś, Marta Frej,
Dominika Gęsicka, Olga
Gitkiewicz, Jacek Karczewski,
Magdalena Karpińska,
Magdalena Kicińska, Michał
Książek, Wojtek Kucharczyk,
Aleksandra Lipczak,
Wiesław Łukaszewski,
Honorata Martin, Witek
Orski, Weronika Perłowska,
Antonina Piechota, Igor
Pisuk, Marcin Polak, Krzysztof
Posłajko, Aneta Prymaka-
Oniszk, Marta Sapała, Filip
Springer, Wolfgang Tillmans,
Wakat/Notoria, the team of
Demokracja Ilustrowana

MEDIA:

[www]
<http://strony.sputnikphotos.com/>

2019 →

Poland – the State of Research

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Jan Brykczyński, Karolina
Gembara, Michał Łuczak,
Rafał Milach, Adam Pańczuk,
Agnieszka Rayss

since 2019 →

Social Center for Photography in Warsaw

INSTITUTION

2019 →

Pulse Project

ARCHIVE

BOOK

PARTICIPATORY PROJECT

MAGAZINE

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Karolina Gembara, Rafał
Milach, Adam Pańczuk,
Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED ARTISTS:

Paweł Althamer, Pamela
Bożek, Maciej Pisuk, Joanna
Sosnowska, Filip Springer,
Jan Śpiewak, Ludwika Włodek

since 2019 →

The Archive of Public Protests

ARCHIVE

MAGAZINE

EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Michał Adamski, Marta
Bogdańska, Karolina Gembara,
Łukasz Głowala, Marcin
Kruk, Agata Kubis, Michalina
Kuczyńska, Adam Lach, Alicja
Lesiak, Rafał Milach, Joanna
Musiał, Chris Niedenthal,
Wojtek Radwański, Bartek
Sadowski, Karolina Sobel,
Paweł Starzec, Grzegorz
Wełnicki, Dawid Zieliński

MEDIA:

[www]
<https://archiwumprotestow.pl/pl/strona-glowna/>

The Archive of Public Protest. Interview with Rafał Milach, truthinphotography.org ↓

E. Ruka, A Long Distance Run: Interview with Rafał Milach, fkmagazine.lv, 3/31/2021 ↓

J. M. Colberg, A Conversation with Karolina Gembara, Conscientious Photography Magazine, 1/24/2021 ↓

The Discourse of Protest. Karolina Gembara. Interview and Photographs, www.truthinphotography.org ↓

2020 →

As You Can See

BOOK

EXHIBITION

WORKSHOP

MENTORING

INVITED PHOTOGRAPHERS AND CURATORS:

Karolina Ćwik, Karolina
Gembara (Sputnik Photos),
Magdalena Hueckel,
Magdalena Noga, Karolina
Puchała-Rojek, Agnieszka
Rayss (Sputnik Photos),
Natalia Sienkiewicz, Justyna
Streichsbier

2021



2022



Solidarity Art Residence

RESIDENCY

INVITED PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Ihar Hancharuk,
Pasha Kritchko,
Swiatłana Stankiewicz,
Viktoryia Tan

#Odra

ONLINE PROJECT

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Karolina Gembara,
Michał Łuczak,
Rafał Milach,
Adam Pańczuk,
Agnieszka Rayss

INVITED PHOTOGRAPHER:

Justyna Streichsbier

sputnikphotos.com

THE COLLECTIVE

2006-2023

SPUTNIK PHOTOS is an international collective of East-Central European photographers, established in 2006. The experience of the fall of communism in their region became a starting point for collective discussion of the social, cultural, and political processes that take place there. Using photography, film, and photo books, the collective has been creating a record of the transformations in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. In pursuing their activity, Sputnik members collaborate with curators, writers, graphic designers, and cultural managers. Engaged in documentary practice, they investigate its boundaries, modern dimensions, and functions. Importantly, Sputnik is engaged in creating a diversity of visual education platforms which support and promote young artists from the region.

JAN BRYKCZYŃSKI

Born in 1979. He is a photographer, educator, and author of photo books. He is interested in the peripheries of our civilization, the places of grassroots, spontaneous human activity, and the ways in which they satisfy the need to live close to nature. He is a lecturer at the Lodz Film School and the Institute of Creative Photography at the Silesian University in Opava (Czech Republic). He is a co-founder of the Sputnik Photos collective and lecturer on the Sputnik Photos Mentoring Programme. His work has been presented at numerous national and international exhibitions. He has won competitions and scholarships, including the Visegrad Fund, the European Cultural Foundation, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. His works are in the collections of the Musée de l'Elysée and the Centre Pompidou.

janbrykczynski.com

KAROLINA GEMBARA

Born in 1981. She is a photographer, researcher and activist whose work revolves around themes such as home, migration, and care, as well as political issues of her home country. She uses photography both as a tool and a pretext for collaboration, fostering creative processes. In recent years, she has initiated and completed several participatory projects involving people with a migratory experience. In 2013, she published her debut book *Fitting Rooms* which examines the role of women in her generation. Between 2009 and 2016, Karolina was based in India, where she produced her second book *When We Lie Down, Grasses Grow From Us*. Karolina collaborates with the Archive of Public Protest and is a member of Sputnik Photos. She is currently working on her PhD dissertation, which centres around the subjective narratives of historical migrations. She divides her time between Berlin and Warsaw.

cargocollective.com/karolinagembara

MICHAŁ ŁUCZAK

Born in 1983. He is a photographer, visual artist and curator. He works mainly with photography and video. He is a graduate of the Institute of Creative Photography at the University of Silesia, Opava (Czech Republic) and Hispanic Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Since 2010, he has been a member of the Sputnik Photos collective. He co-leads a year-long workshop on documentary photography called the Sputnik Photos Mentoring Programme and teaches at the Faculty of Art at the Pedagogical University in Krakow.

In recent years, he has focused on the complicated and mercantile relationship between humans, their immediate surroundings and the natural environment. He does not look very far away, his latest works focus on local problems that can also be viewed universally: the consequences of the coal industry or the economic treatment of forests.

michal-luczak.com

MARZENA MICHAŁEK- DĄBROWSKA

Sputnik Photos project coordinator. She is a graduate of the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. Since 2010, she has been in the field of project management: creating grant applications, coordinating and settling national projects, including those funded by Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Ministry of Education and Science, National Centre for Culture, as well as international projects: EEA, V4, FWPN and the European Cultural Foundation, British Council and the European Solidarity Corps. From 2010-2021, she was an employee of the Royal Łazienki Museum, and since 2021, she has been associated with the Museum of Warsaw. She is a member of the Sectoral Committee for Social Dialogue for Culture at the City Council in Warsaw.

RAFAŁ MILACH

Born in 1978. He is a visual artist, photographer, activist, and educator. His work focuses on the tension between society and power structures. He is the author of protest books and critical publications on state control. He is a professor at the Krzysztof Kieślowski Film School at Silesian University in Katowice, Poland. He has received scholarships from the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Magnum Foundation, and European Cultural Foundation. Rafał is a finalist of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, Polityka Passports Award, a winner of the Author Book Award at the Rencontres Photographiques d'Arles and World Press Photo contest. He is a co-founder of the Archive of Public Protests and Sputnik Photos collectives. His work has been widely exhibited, and is part of public institutional collections worldwide. Rafał is a member of Magnum Photos.

rafalmilach.com

ADAM PAŃCZUK

Born in 1978. He is a documentary photographer, he tells his stories using portraits, combining documentary and creative photography. His most important photographic project, *Karczuby*, a story about man's belonging to the land, was awarded the Best Photographic Book of the Year 2013 in the world by the jury of the 71st Pictures of the Year International competition. He has been appreciated by the longest-published photography magazine in the world, *The British Journal of Photography*, which recognized Pańczuk as one of the most promising young generation photographers in the world. He studied at the University of Economics and Photography at the Faculty of Multimedia Communication of the University of the Arts in Poznań. He is currently a PhD student at the Institute of Creative Photography in Opava. He has been a scholarship holder of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Winner of many awards, including National Geographic, Pictures of the Year International, Magnum Expression Award, Newsweek Photo Award and Grand Press Photo.

www.adampanczuk.pl

AGNIESZKA RAYSS

Born in 1970. She is a photographer and freelancer, based in Warsaw, Poland. She is a co-founder of the Sputnik Photos collective. Her area of work is documentary photography. She studied History of Art at Jagiellonian University, and holds a PhD from the University of the Arts in Poznań. A two-time winner of the Picture of the Year award, a two-time finalist in the Hasselblad Masters Award, finalist of the Lucie Foundation scholarship, Alexia Foundation grant, and LensCulture Exposure Award. Winner of several national press photography competitions. Recipient of a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture, Polish-German Co-operation Foundation, Municipality of Warsaw Grant and a scholarship from the Visegrad Fund. Her work has appeared in magazines such as 'Newsweek', 'The Guardian', and others.

agnieszkarayss.com

THE FORMER MEMBERS OF SPUTNIK PHOTOS

Andrej Balco (2006-2016)

Manca Juvan (2006-2012)

Andrei Liankevich (2006-2016)

Justyna Mielnikiewicz (2006-2012)

Domen Pal (2006-2008)

Janis Pipars (2006-2012)

Filip Singer (2006-2010)

Viktor Suvorov (2006-2008)



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English version proofreading: Aleksandra Szymczyk

Graphic design: Dasha Abibok



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miasto stołeczne
Warszawa



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