# Just Like Home

## Photo Album on the Edge of the Everyday

## Barbora Kundračíková

In the last few decades we have observed an increased interest in photography as an object of study of the everyday, as well as of the formation of everyday habits and aesthetics. It is no longer understood strictly as an artistic entity, a document, or a personal commodity, but – under the impression of a material turn – it is experiencing a substantial renaissance as a complex tool for learning about the socio-cultural parameters of a given community or space-time with a specific aesthetics. The photographic history, rather than the history of photography, involves a series of tools and methodological procedures that make the photographic image not only a source of banal information but is understood as a saturated structure. Institutional practice becomes one of the key themes, with the archive establishing itself alongside collections. Or rather, and this is what the text focuses on, the photo album – is a complex tool on the borderline between active and passive perception, personal and shared experience, image, and text. How does this medium work in the context of contemporary art practice? What means does it have at its disposal when the author turns his attention to the problem of *everyday*? And can we truly talk about specific aesthetic attributes? | *Keywords: Everyday Aesthetics, Photography, Photo Album, Memory, Stereotype*

### 1. Introduction

The aesthetics of the everyday is a new sub-discipline of aesthetic theory that has been actively discussed since the 1980s (Cf. Saito (2010)). This paper inadvertently addresses what many consider to be its central problem, its 'dilemma'. It reflects on the approach of several authorities, including Yuriko Saito (2020, p. 38), Allen Carlson, and Paisley Livingston, but using a secure foundation in the tradition of Dewey's anti-dualist stance (Fiore, 2022), it argues in favour of maintaining continuity between the aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of art. During the discussion, it challenges such dichotomies as those between the practical and the aesthetic, the ordinary and the extraordinary, or disinterestedness and engagement. In my view, this dilemma is realistic only for those who wish to maintain a strict distinction within these dichotomies. Ultimately, the dilemma is only a dilemma if we allow it to be – if we hold to the belief that there is anything

possible about the idea of aesthetically minimal experiences, respectively their enhancement through adoption, experience, or reflection in the form of *artistic experience.*

The aesthetics of the everyday, which is paradoxically (sic) based on the modernist tradition, specifically the contributions of Henri Lefebvre, is generally understood as an extension of traditional aesthetics (Light and Smith, 2005), which usually focuses on works of art. It is not limited to the study of *ordinary* or *minimal* objects but is concerned with those *high or deep* aesthetic experiences that arise when contemplating objects of certain aesthetic and artistic value or when performing specific acts outside the realm of everyday practices.[1]

The 20th-century Western philosophical tradition of aesthetics, especially in its Anglo-American version, has long been dominated by discussion of the visual arts. This almost exclusive focus is one of the apparent impetuses for revising the scope of the discussion of *modern* aesthetics, beginning with the aesthetics of nature, followed by the aesthetics of the environment or the aesthetics of folk art (Cf. Gruyter (2015, Vol. 3)). Although the aesthetics of the everyday poses an intellectual challenge to the current discourse, it has many of the same generalizable features as aesthetics in the traditional sense.

The aesthetics of the everyday explores those aesthetic aspects of everyday life that defy capture by theories of aesthetic attitudes or visual arts-centred aesthetics. But that is precisely why it can be understood as their litmus test. One such possibility is the ordinary and familiar experience of the self, in its ordinariness and familiarity, rather than its transformation into the *extraordinary*. While the prevailing aesthetic discourse focuses on positive aesthetic qualities, everyday aesthetics includes what might be called *negative aesthetics*. The traditional focus of aesthetics on experiences the reception of which requires cultivation, education, and refined sensibility – this at least generally presupposes a reflection on beauty, sublimity, or artistic excellence – is balanced in this case by a greater range of stimuli and responses.

There is a certain ambiguity in the phrase 'the aesthetics of everyday life that we commonly experience'. While it focuses on the realm of *minimal aesthetic extraordinariness*, it still encompasses the process of recognising, considering, and categorising a wide range of common experiences present in everyday life – a good example is the morning choice of clothing. Aesthetic experiences of this kind, however, still possess at least a certain *aura* (i.e., they make a heightened sense). So is it a matter of scale, not a difference of kind or category in what we end up reflecting? While I will concede that the term *extraordinary* should be reserved for the peak examples of aesthetic experience,

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[1] Yuriko Saito (2020, p. 36) writes: "Modern Western aesthetics that emerged during the 18th century is characterized by the following two features. First, it is primarily concerned with the aesthetic experience of the viewers, audience members, and readers; in short, the receivers. Second, with the emphasis on disinterestedness as the distinguishing mark of an aesthetic attitude or experience, the sphere of the aesthetic is relatively unencumbered by other areas of human concerns such as the moral, political, religious, scientific, and practical. Thus, the model for the aesthetic discourse is a spectator perceiving an object and deriving an aesthetic experience in isolation from the rest of life."

it is still true that aesthetics takes us out of the mundanity of the ordinary and out of the tedium of the dull – it *offers us the world in its freshness and liveliness*.

Arnold Berleant urges the evaluator to *immerse* himself or herself in the object of evaluation (Berleant, 2002, p. 27). However, we can only identify with what we perceive through the imagination in this case. It is only through imagination that the *ordinary* object seems to us to have a greater significance than that which results from purely sensory data. To engage, imagination (and/ or mindfulness) is needed to intensify the perception. The "mundane, the ordinary, the routine, the humdrum, the banal, and even the downright uninteresting" (Saito, 2017, p. 79) cannot be engaged with (i.e., lived in their instance) otherwise. The dilemma of the aesthetics of the everyday can only be resolved by realising this. After all, John Dewey believed that art itself refines and intensifies everyday experience, and vice versa, i.e., that it provides some structure where there was none before. But the adoption of structure is also part of everyday experience (Cf. Vaamonde (2023)). We create – and share – structure when we *tell* someone else an experience we have had when we grasp it in the form of a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Telling the events of our lives, encapsulating them in words and figurative descriptions, including our dreams and fantasies, is part of what it means to "live everyday life aesthetically" (Saito, 2023). In this transformation, part of the *flow* is lost, but not all of it, respectively not the idea of it. After all, *flow* as a given, intentional, quality is characteristic of artistic praxis and experience.

To return to the beginning, the aesthetics of the everyday faces a dilemma, namely that whenever the phenomena of the everyday are given aesthetic attention, they are elevated above mere ordinariness, and thus the very ordinariness of the everyday is lost. The solution to this, however, may be simpler than expected – it may be offered by a *conscious relationship* between the everyday and the extraordinary, a relationship that is continuous and dynamic, involving a constant interaction between different levels and areas of aesthetics. The elevation of the ordinary over the mundane, whether through mindfulness, imagination, artistic vision, or the application of an aesthetic stance, can be seen as a conditioning exercise, a development of the mind, and the cognitive and imaginative skills of the perceiver. Hence the ideal of everyday aesthetics as a practice, not something to be rejected lest it accidentally is considered a true *bore* (Ganger, 2006).

Here, finally, I come to the main topic of this paper, which is one of the outcomes of a long-term research project entitled *Photo album and / versus Crisis*.[2] It is being carried out at the Department of Art History of the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University in Olomouc and in cooperation with the Centre for Photography Research of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (Photo album, anthropological approaches and domestic traditions of photography research/ Resilient society for the 21st century). Photo Album a/ versus Crisis is dedicated – as title suggest – to the research of the photo

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[2]    For more information visit – https://photoalbum.hypotheses.org.

album as a specific type of individual or collective representation that combines visual and linguistic strategies to grasp events on the border between everyday and extraordinary, personal and shared, lived and critically reflected, descriptive, narrative and performative. In doing so, it follows three levels – historiographical, media, and methodological.

It focuses primarily on so-called crisis periods, periods of historical transformations, and cultural ruptures. And reflects not only socially dominant groups but also minorities and excluded communities. The individual case studies respond to key historical moments associated with the region – they include, among others, the formation and transformation of state formations, the state of war and occupation, total deployment, the expulsion of Germans, post-war confiscations, the re-construction of border zones, waves of emigration and immigration, the course, and forms of homogenization of society, etc. All this, of course, selectively, and rather with the aim of understanding the basic principles of 'how things work' – the compatibility of personal and general histories or experiences in their depiction, or the way of adopting and modifying the chosen strategies of narration.

The photo album as such does not have a precise definition.[3] It can be loosely understood as "a series of photographs collected by an individual or group of individuals to create a particular visual narrative" (Cf. Harrison (2002)). In a broad sense, it encompasses overlaps to the forms of memoirs, scrapbooks, digital albums, etc., using a component of images (photographs, illustrations, postcards, digital and manipulated images) and text (captions, notes, accompanying comments, embedded letters, etc.). to understand it means not just to grasp the aesthetic or informational levels of the matter, but also memory formation processes (e.g., the process of displacement), private emotionality, the formation of behavioral patterns, the relationship between creator, owner, and performer, and reciprocal the sustainability of material culture in times of crisis, the transformation of its functions and ways of solving ethical dilemmas.

Special attention is then paid to the photo album in the sense of a specific type of material culture in the context of the history of photography, technological circumstances of the production of photography, the process of its distribution (book, magazine, album, print), presentation (individual, series, text), and preservation (archive, museum collection, library). The project expands the existing spectrum of Czech photographic studies – it goes beyond the still dominant field of artistic photography in favour of applied and private photography.[4] It also adopts the methods of several disciplines, in addition to general history and art history, especially anthropology and sociology. The aim of the project is a comprehensive view of photography, using the example of

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[3]  To follow current approach, I recommend *The book about your life. Photo album – memory – identity* (2009-2012) research project led by Anna Dahlgren. More information – https://www.su.se/english/research/research-projects/the-book-about-your-life-photo-album-memory-identity.

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the photo album as a specific form of its realisation. This area allows for the adaptation and development of existing methodological approaches or their adaptation for future applications not only within the domain.[5] It also offers an opportunity to reflect differently on some questions of historical research in general as well as the relationship of individual social groups, or the narratives that are linked to their formation and existence, respectively – more fundamentally in the given situation – to rely on the principles of the aesthetics of the everyday.

The reflection of photography from the position of the everyday is, of course, nothing new; we encounter it in various modifications in authors well known in global and local discourse, such as Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu. In all these cases, however, often without any real support in the discursive tools, we find ourselves on a precarious surface of conjectures, intuitive understandings or metaphors. It is therefore one of the starting assumptions of this study that it is the aesthetics of the everyday that can provide a desirable underpinning to existing research – while in turn giving the theories of semiologists such as Vilém Flusser the necessary anchorage in a spatiotemporally and culturally defined social reality.

In my opinion, a similar methodological anchoring would be highly appropriate and instructive in the context of 'historical' photography. This study, however, focuses primarily on three photo albums created either in the context of one's own artistic practice or as a conscious reflection of it. And it is in this 'zone in the middle', a qualitative and conceptual transition zone, that the problematic points not only of methodological turns but also of photographic research are – in our opinion – concentrated. We will thus focus our attention on an album conceived by a Hungarian photographer and visual artist Ágnes Eperjesi (2004), or a Czech conceptualist Michal Pěchouček.[6] The third example will be a 'study' album reflecting the Czech participation in the 1958 EXPO produced by architect Miroslav Řepa.[7]

## 2. Case Study 01 - Miroslav Řepa' EXPO 1958

The album by architect Miroslav Řepa (1930–2023), a graduate of the University of Architecture and Civil Engineering and the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, represents important documentary material for the World Exhibition EXPO 1958 held in Brussels, not only from the perspective of architectural studies but also from the those of the new visual style that emerged during the preparations or the exhibition and that influenced the subsequent development of many artistic, cultural, and social areas.[8]

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[5]   Here are just a few consequential possibilities and basic sources: Pasternak (2020), Schwartz and James (2003) and Tucker (2006).

[6]   *The White Book* is part of the Moravian Gallery in Brno collection.

[7]   This photo album comes from the collections of the Olomouc Museum of Art, where it was acquired in 2009 with another convolute of works from the author's private archive. It is stored there under the Inventory No. A 3177, Incremental No. 11/2009.

[8]   The comprehensive treatment summarises – Mertová and Švácha (2023).

The album is hardcover, covered with red leatherette. The spine is stamped with the black inscription Brussels Expo 1958. It contains 82 black and white and two-colour photographs on 88 pages documenting the world pavilions and their expositions, fine arts, and social and cultural life, but there are also three photographs produced by the author. The photographic material is always exhibited on odd-numbered pages. On the even pages, they are accompanied by coloured newspaper cuttings relating to architecture, fine arts, and our success in Brussels. In addition, illustrations and cartoons depicting visitors, various promotional materials, and emblems often appear. Photographs of the world pavilions are also accompanied by captions to make them easier to identify.

The concept is not clearly defined – to say this means that the pictorial part is not accompanied by any authorial text, but an imaginary story is suggested symbolically in the organization of photographs, illustrations, and articles. The introduction consists of a putative second title page with a portrait of the author instead of a written introduction, a map of the site, an emblem, and a fragment from a pocket guide entitled After Expo 58. This time through the streets. The main theme is apparently the young architect's fascination with the uncharted, hard-to-reach Western civilization and modern world architecture. This can be read especially in the first pages, which are influenced by the 'shocking new world' imaginary – including images from a cabaret, urban night scenes, details of the *Atomium*, maps, and promotional material. The remaining pages are already devoted to the individual pavilions. They are always labelled and in specific moments accompanied by texts discussing the architecture of the pavilions and art written by authors who had the same or very similar experience of the event as the young Miroslav Řepa.

From the point of aesthetics, Řepa deliberately and strongly evocative drew on the visual style of the world exhibition, the path of which was suggested in the competition for the poster and emblem designed by Lucien de Roeck, professor at the University of Architecture and Fine Arts in Brussels. In his proposal, he addressed the colours of the Belgian flag and the Brussels city emblem – and Miroslav Řepa has followed the impulse in his album. He used black hard paper as a base for the adjusted objects, and shades of yellow, red, blue, and green to colour the cut-outs and illustrations.

In addition to the applied tinting based on the above graphics, the overall expression can be contextualised with the so-called 'atomic style'. This was based on the use of the *Atomium* symbol, a building characteristic of Brussels. It often appeared on posters or promotional material. Its black-and-white colour scheme contrasts with the colour scheme of Roeck's posters.[9] Similarly, in Řepa's album, black and white photographs and water-coloured texts with drawings, as well as colour images, are in opposition.

The atomic age, and its association with the understanding of the new lifestyle of the atomic age, was also the basis for the shape expression. The Commission

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[9]    For more information – https://www.lucienderoeck.be/en/werk/expo-58/.

recommended the use of abstract shapes – organic curves, forms inspired by science derived from X-ray images, etc. This was subsequently reflected not only in Czechoslovak graphic design but also in industrial design. Here we can look for a connection in the use of shapes copying the circular section or curve that appears in colouring.
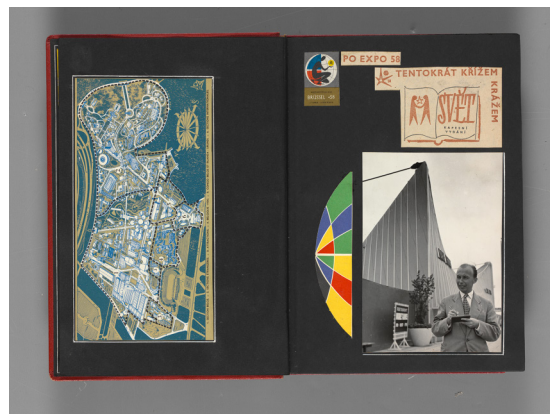


Miroslav Řepa, *BRUSEL´58,* photo album with clippings and illustrations Brussels EXPO 1958, mixed media, photography (82 pieces), 88 pages, app. 148 x 210 mm, Olomouc Museum of Art (Architecture Collections, Miroslav Řepa Fund, P 11/2009, A03177)

## 3. Case Study 02 - Agnes Eperjesi' Family Album

Agnes Eperjesi (1964) graduated from the then freshly launched, photography-oriented Department of Visual Communication and Typography of the Hungarian Academy of Applied Arts, and Hungarian University of Fine Arts. Since then, she has been teaching, first at the Intermedia Department of the institution, now at the Budapest Metropolitan University, and develops its own artistic activity.

Agnes Eperjesi's work, *The Family Album*, "an absolutely real, fictional album," as she says, is fragmented and difficult to read – it focuses on a private history and works with reprints of photographs, not their "originals". It is also not a record of a temporal experience, but it demonstrates more of its mental image. Eperjesi says:

> This family album is entirely conventional (real). It traces the most pressing events of my life up to the age of eighteen. The images begin with my grandparents, follow the story of my parents' acquaintance and end with my gradual detachment from them. The images are accompanied by short sentences limited to conveying a minimum of information. Most of you probably own a similar album. This family album is quite unconventional (fictional). It is a collection that allows me to reflect on my emotions and connections to various members of my family from a distance. Just as when we look at a stranger's album, we see the faces of strangers that seem familiar in some way. It is as if we are discovering our own life through the life of another. And that's exactly what's happening here. The images in this family story are, without exception, illustrations of packaging material from commercial stores. I have arranged their selection in a certain order. With the help of these pictures, I have followed the trail of the story of my own life. And most

interestingly, the paths intertwine. The basic correspondence of our lives and the images stored in our collective unconscious refer to each other. We slip back and forth between memories of our most intimate selves and prefabricated clichés. This is a very real, fictional album. (Berecz, 2006)

In her practice, Eperjesi in general examines the specificities, untapped possibilities, and meanings of artistic representation, especially the photographic medium, and its impact on the dominant power contexts of social existence. Her conceptually oriented works and their intellectual background are not mere theoretical derivatives, but aesthetically high-toned and even sensually rich creations. Eperjesi's dominant creative attitude is based on her knowledge of the role and meaning of the medium that is used, combining the exercise of awareness and rational self-control with coincidence, intuition, or experiment, which is embodied in both (scientifically) detached and (subjectively) intimate works. She often turns herself towards stereotypes and stereotyping (Hammer, 1997), her strategies come from the mass imagery (Cf. Berecz (2006)). Therefore, the witty fusion of personal and trivial, culminating in unsettling, disturbing, or even fearsome imaginary, "as if our lives were also arranged according to prefabricated clichés" (Tatai, 2007). The first level is socio-psychological (i.e., stereotypes of femininity), and the second is technical (visual/verbal) from which the work itself is constructed (i.e., repetition). Eperjesi's clichés themselves are concrete, ready-made *printing forms*, matrices. She recycles the images, creates an unusual visual effect, and at the same time makes the language visible. The fact that the whole album is structured according to stereotypical patterns speaks for itself – three generations, important family events, and so-called family life, in other words, buildings, objects, animals. Pictures are arranged chronologically and labelled – saying this, Agnes Eperjesi seems as the *perfect* pattern follower. Even if her album does not contain everything, this does not detract from its completeness, since as a *variation* it stands its ground.

This kind of scrapbooking illustrates the creation of family identity, through the visual formation of the self-identity, the construction and maintenance of family memory – and the *family institution* itself (András, 2004). In the traditional division of labour, it was the woman who was responsible for keeping the family together. This mirrors here in the presentation of a mother as *mother* and a father as *father*, with roles and attributes coming from classical iconography sprinkled with the visuality of vivid photographic aesthetics (Cf. Ripa (2019)). Even more recent *pictographs* in the end tend to work with *photographic models* – since those types, the footballer, the skier, or the cyclist we see in Eperjesi's work do not have a long-established tradition of the pre-photographic era.

The text of the album, the narration, is itself a template (Cf. Ripa (2019)). The scrappy, sketch-like inscriptions follow the album pattern, where the texts are 'for personal use only', intended to evoke the memories of the family. Eperjesi personalises the narrative by using specific names – we learn that her paternal grandmother is Emma mama, her grandfather is Jenő papa, her maternal grandfather even has a surname, he is Ignác Fischer, and has best

friend Mazsi, cow Manci, dog Zsömle, and cat Bandi. Geographical areas, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia are another domain of the socio-cultural cliché – they date and localise the place of heterotopia, the ʿera of the Kádár' in East-Central Europe, when skiing was done in Slovakia and Italy was the favourite holiday destination. The images, arranged in linear order and with text, tell a story that could be anyone's – and no one's:

> Only the texts have a reference to reality, the images merely illustrate the text, although the text also refers to the image. It refers to, but it cannot connect with, and thus through it cannot evoke in an amplified way, the piece of reality to which it alone refers since the images themselves are not related to the personal reality they are meant to represent. In the context of the diary, the images are only related to the reality that the texts create, but the album texts are only viable through the images. (Fromm, 2020)

In this way, Eperjesi also highlights the constructed nature of family album referentiality in general.

In *Family Album* everything is a bit blurred and grainy, and the colours are off. Family history and its recycled image, reality, and its representation are never in sync – the grass is lilac, the dog is blue, and the grandmother is neon-colored, as if the artist, with a twist of self-referentiality, wanted to reveal the fictionality of what is in front of us. As in Warhol's silkscreens, where Marilyn's fabulous blondeness becomes the canary-yellow wig of a clown, the Family Album acts as a travesty of mechanical reproduction. The technical reversal of the commercial pictograms reiterates their recontextualization – their repositioning from the sphere of the commercial to that of cultural goods – while also echoing the process of remembrance. As remembering is as much about substituting one thing for another, repeating and distorting what was not even our own experience, but a story heard from someone else, seen in a movie, or read in a book, the replacement of real family photographs with blown-up negatives of commercial pictograms functions not only as a device of the mnemonic practice but also as its model. The pictograms, like memories, are reversed and turned into something else (Cf. Assmann (2008)).



Ágnes Eperjesi, *Családi Album / Family Album*, 2004, book, with
52 sticked-in C-prints, hand bound, hand written, 18 pages,
255 x 355 mm, edition 28 (both English and Hungarian)

Even the memories, even the most important ones, are one like the other. We learn and create family memories in a dual dynamic of forgetting and remembering, telling and retelling, looking and looking again. The images of the *Family Album* simulate the structures of repetition inscribed in the practices of identity formation and remembering. From this perspective, the use of recycled packaging seems more than reasonable. The Family Album is based on the recognition that a photograph cannot be more than a code to a meaning located elsewhere, outside of its frame, and yet cannot refuse the possibility of iconic figuration.

The originals of the Album are already appropriated, 'modelled after' scenes and sights of everyday life. Pictograms, family photographs, and snapshots are all without originals; they are *simulacra per se* (Smith, 2020). Because they are defined by replication, both photographs and pictograms, just like memories, are treacherous and replaceable. And it applies also to albums *of and for* families coming from about the 1860s until the recent emergence of digital photography – that is, in the age when family albums functioned as unique repositories of personal and collective memory. Despite being pictograms and symbols meant to speak for themselves, Eperjesi's pictures prove that nothing speaks for itself and everything, even gender, is interchangeable here – as if in a "true Freudian family romance" (Freud, 1909, p. ???). Thus Berecz (2006) conclusion: "The ordered chain of images in Family Album could suggest a family history without textual support, but the work could not become a visual biography without the text."

Eperjesi's places and stories take us to that half of Europe where, in 1948, the totalitarian authorities nationalised the dairies of grandfathers, where collectivism led to the global sharing of homes and private spaces with strangers, and where moving one generation into a state-supported housing estate was a dream come true, as well as ownership of TV sets. However, the cultural, social, and geographical specificities of the album and its ability to deal with collective history are constantly undermined. One of the reasons is that, like other real 'real albums', it avoids depictions of violence and trauma. For example, in 1956, only Mother and Aunt Rozi avoid each other as they move through the apartment.

Although the album Eperjesi evokes the artistic strategies of historical and neo-avant-garde artists, including working with found objects and postmodern appropriations, it does not only function as an attempt to combine the high and the low, destabilise authorship or comment on the politics of representation. The album is also interested in the culture of use; its critical potential lies precisely in its ability to engage with modes of production and consumption, as well as their material history. The family album is neither a collage nor a series of photographic doublings or mimetic arrangements, but a sequence of technical, historical, and material twists. Acting as a scavenger and archaeologist of the everyday, Eperjesi converts the debris of mass culture into a visual autobiography, creating a work that could also be considered an example of garbage culture or garbage theory. Making memories out of garbage instead of photographs is part of her admission of photography's

inability to engage with memory (Arruti, 2007). Who would, in the end, care about the content of the household trash more than those women who are also in charge of putting together family albums?

To close this analysis again with Berecz:

> While remembering, repeating, and working through, as Freud might say, Eperjesi has created a discursive object that is historically specific, yet acknowledges the impossibility of historical representation; that is an autobiographical confession, yet through its opacity resists prevalent industries of ego-history; and that contains not a single photograph, yet is still able to speak about the photographic. (Berecz, 2006)

### 4. Case Study 03 - Michal Pěchouček' The White Book

Michal Pěchouček (1973) has occupied an important position on the contemporary Czech art scene for several years. He studied at the Václav Hollar School of Art, majoring in illustration and graphic design, and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, first in the studio of classical graphic techniques of Jiří Lindovský, and later in the studio of visual communication led Jiří David.[10] He first gained attention for his technically demanding multi-coloured linocuts, but already in them, he processed themes coming from everyday and played with the aesthetics of photographs. Later he dealt with unconventional techniques applied within the painting medium – embroidery on canvas, painting on layered mesh or glass, etc. Although he achieved considerable success in these areas, he soon abandoned them and devoted himself mainly to photography and video. At the same time, formal experiments cease to be at the forefront of his work, and instead, he focuses more on the actual content of the message and storytelling as such.

The pictorial cycle *The Collector*, for example, consists of twenty-six individual paintings – oils on canvas measuring 105 x 125 cm. Moreover, one painting has an independent position within the *cycle*. The exhibition also includes the reproduced music originally used in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho. Most of all, the cycle resembles a storyboard, a pictorial script, or a solo, hand-painted film, which is even subtitled. After single shots of a tangle of plants, the editing takes us to a hospital corridor, followed by a sequence from a police station where a policeman is interrogating a man. Finally, the interrogation scene is intercut in a cinematic way with an image of a sailboat entering the harbour. The epilogue is then represented by a separately placed image of a nurse whose face looks 'like a Vincent van Gogh painting', a replica of the Sunflowers we see in the background. What story is taking place here, as well as, for example, the content of the conversation between the police officer and the perpetrator (or witness?), remains a mystery to the viewer. A vague clue may be the fact that the final image of the sailboat is the same one seen in the hospital corridor. The two scenes are thus connected, and what the ship brings on board is likely to be the key to the whole story. The abandoned ship entering the harbour is also one of the central scenes of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, which inspired the whole series. The viewer is thus made aware that

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[10]    For more information see Pěchouček et. al. (2006).

there is something 'horrific' in the background of the story, of which he can only glimpse the rough outlines through the images. This 'horror' also covers the innocent title of the exhibition, The Collector – the collector here is both the man being interrogated and the viewer himself as a collector of perceptions.

In his photographic novels, such as *Euforion* (1999) or *Splendid Isolation* (1998), and short films, Pěchouček explored new possibilities for the visualisation of real-life stories. These stories are either his own – this category includes works inspired by his father's amateur photo production – or stories featuring someone else. However, they also carry certain autobiographical elements and the key to understanding them lies in the area of the artist's artistic idiosyncrasy. This applies to some extent to all three of the reflected photo albums, but in this case, the tension between the two dimensions becomes the actual subject of reflection.

Later, Pěchouček chose to exploit the possibilities of film language and combine them with the means of traditional painting. From the point of view of contemporary painting, this step is logical in the sense that modern painters had already been inspired by photography, for example. It can be argued that film, unlike still photography, is a *time-based* medium, and therefore its transfer to painting is not quite possible. On the other hand, it must be said that while 'film images' are always forced to be viewed only in a linear sequence, painted ones can be returned to, and in any order.

The so-called White Book dates back to 1998.[11] A paraphrase of a family photo album, which, in addition to the original family photographs, includes several composed cycles, historical photographs, or photographs from mass media, magazines, and pictorial journals. Through these, the family becomes a composition, a deliberately constructed visual construction whose nature is at odds with what is seen and codified as such. Social habitus, cliché, and stereotype are the most prominent tools in Pěchouček's work. However, apart from their hidden, almost surreal, presence, they also possess an element that is intimate, fragile, and deeply subjective. This impression is further fed by the aforementioned journalistic images, portraits of personalities such as Madonna or Leonardo DiCaprio – they share the same tendency to present publicly a private image, often in shocking juxtapositions, which, however, emphasize precisely and above all its initial (and target) vulnerability. If Benjamin speaks of the loss of distance that the use of new, reproducible media leads to, it is here that the moment of 'fusion' is demonstrated in the extreme.

Like the Eperjesi's album, that of Pěchouček is 'organized' – we follow this fictional 'family' from its symbolic birth, the wedding, through individual, more or less clearly demonstrated personal events. The premise of narrative sharing is strongly present in the album's composition and is a recognisable

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[11]  The album is mounted in pale blue plastic covers and has 43 pages measuring 245 x 335mm, one of which is blank. To protect the pictures, a classic transparent paper with a 'spider' web is used.

appeal. But what is lacking is exactly this clearly defined narrative – the viewer only guesses the line, sometimes (based on the author's well-thought-out direction) gropes and gets lost. Orientation is gained thanks to clearly recognisable images (portraits of film and music stars), shocking situations, or enticing narratives (the cake scene).

Unlike Eperjesi, Pěchouček's *White Book* contains a number of openly attacking visual inputs. Be it sexuality, physical coercion, or psychological, it is in many ways an open reflection on the crisis of the 'family institution', or at least its latent structurisation and inner violence. If artificiality, the absence of explicit evocation of trauma and crisis, is typical of photo albums, in this case, it is just the opposite – trauma in a complex sense becomes the main motif to which the viewer relates. At the same time, however, it is obvious – we observe the organisation of the album and the way the images are arranged, or rather their placement in the individual pages – that even trauma is not without humour, wit, and sour irony. In other words, it is not about a specific situation, a specific perpetrator, and a victim; it is not about the victim at all. It reflects a real situation, with a slight admixture of personal fragility and naivety. The physiognomy of the author plays a significant role in this case – and the whole project thus points to another of the key features of the album, or rather the ways of its sharing: the reflection of the concrete physical existence of the captured person(s). This is why the photo album is so interesting to us, as is family and personal photography in general, because we relate to a specific existence that we recognise as our own. Barthesian studium and punctum mix here; we are fascinated to see ourselves in situations that we have not experienced yet recognised as such (Cf. Fried (2005)).
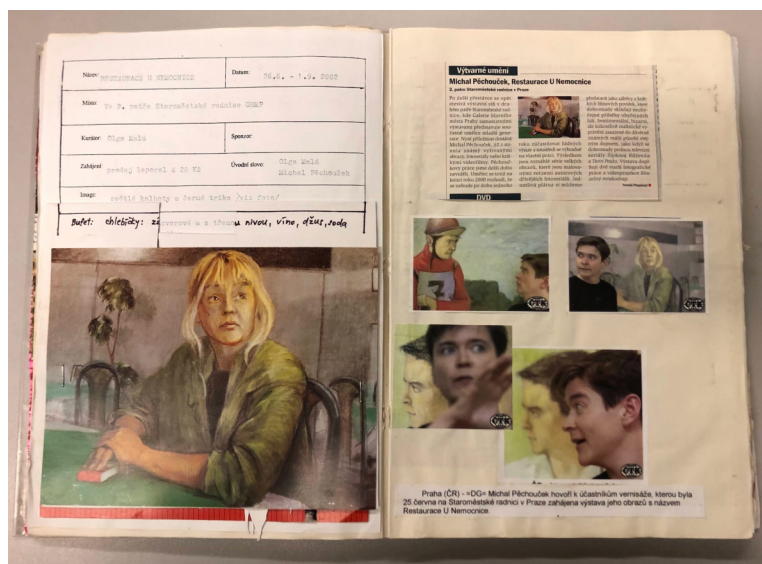


Michal Pěchouček, *White Book*, 1998, photograph, paper, app. 210 × 297 mm, Moravian Gallery in Brno (Photography Collection, MG 25789)

## 5. Conclusion

To give our material more perspective, Georges Perec describes in *The Memory of Childhood* his own childhood photographs without ever actually showing them. The same applies to another French author, Annie Ernaux. He cannot speak about anything but clothing, outfits, hats, and shoes, unable to connect the image to any trace of personal memory. She is obsessed with just the opposite, but again, stuck at first with a limited photo. In his *Atlas*, Gerhard Richter merges sentimental family photographs of the 1930s with the images of Buchenwald, framing the family pictures as 'souvenirs of a past that were left behind forever'. Tacita Dean's *Floh*, a book composed of found family snapshots of strangers, escapes the autobiographical impulse. It refuses authorship and subjecthood when positioning the sequence of found photographs as a floating narrative of signs whose referents are undisclosed. Same quality is shared by the postcards-cycle produced as part of her *Otwock Project*. Fiona Tan's *Vox Populi: Norway*, a project commissioned by the Norwegian Parliament, is a collection of private photographs taken from the albums of Norwegian families. All of them, including Řepa's, Pěchouček's, and Eperjesi's works, are balancing acts that display the ambiguities inscribed into the medium of photography, exposing it within the binaries of presence versus absence, anonymity versus individuality, and private versus collective. Moreover, they also heavily explore domains in-between art and everyday.

The photo album as such eminently embodies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a *middle-brow art* (Bourdieu, 1996). It expresses the essence of social memory (Cf. Bate (2010)). In Central Europe, where most of the traumas and major historical events of the 20th century were suppressed through collective, state-administered amnesia, and not only under the Socialist regime, all album's engagement with the impossibility of historical recollection and its overlapping of private and collective history transgresses quietly "the taboo of history and the politics of forgetting" (Cf. Nascimento Araújo and Sepúlveda dos Santos (2009)).

One of the constants with which the aesthetics of the everyday deals differently than the standard aesthetics is the *author*, the subject who – in this context – *remembers*. Where the latter – for fear of intentional fallacy – abandons the domain of creation and concentrates all its efforts on the realm of perception and aesthetic experience, the former, on the other hand, likes to 'fool around'. As a result, the problematic horizons of ethics, politics, religion, or science enter our frame. But as Friedrich Nietzsche has already pointed out, the importance of aesthetics in our lives is profound exactly because it provides a strategy for shaping the so-called 'good life'. Therefore, according to him, there is no separation between the aesthetic, the moral, and the existential (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 344).

Does this apply also to the cases of the 'in-between', projects that are private, personal, or – as in the case of postmodernism – apply practices associated with everyday practice? It is answering, or at least reflecting on, this question that can contribute substantially to countering some of the anxieties

associated with modern aesthetics in general. On the one hand, it is the fear of triviality, on the other the absence of real intersubjective discourse, which we are dealing with, primarily subjective and personal experiences and their objectivization. Hence, the emphasis on everyday aesthetics as a tool for the development of general literacy – i.e., alertness to the way in which our seemingly innocuous and irrelevant aesthetic tastes, judgments, and decisions significantly affect the state of the world and the quality of life in it. For what to do with those who are not professionals, but nevertheless participate in the 'world-shaping project' through their everyday aesthetic choices (Cf. Purdy, Guildi, Grove et al. (2016)). If it is true that we allow the power of aesthetics to operate within any purposes or agendas, regardless of its cumulative and collective consequences, we have good reasons for this approach. For now, however, it is more likely that we favour complete freedom when it comes to aesthetic matters and reject any attempt to regulate aesthetic taste, if such legislation of aesthetic taste is even possible. The problem is that we are part of a society that is inherently *aesthetic*, living in an aesthetic regime that is sophisticated and complex (Cf. Rancière (2006)). The power of aesthetic taste has also already been duly co-opted by those who seek to manipulate our aesthetic lives in a particular direction. These pressures can be quite trivial, from a preference for a certain colour to the idea of spending time in the "right" way. However, they are necessarily socio-politically formative in their implications – with the awareness of advanced globalisation (Thaler  and Sunstein, 2008, p. 10).

The question is then to what extent everyday aesthetics can be understood normatively, without a consensus on what constitutes the above-mentioned *good life* or the *good society*. On the other hand, there do seem to be some basic realities and values that we believe can be accepted as common to the "flourishing of humanity, such as health, a sustainable future, a humane and civil society based on mutual respect, and a stable and welcoming environment" (Saito, 2017, p. 258) – though their specific components will depend on cultural, historical, and other contexts. As John Dewey puts it, the ethical function of art is to help

> to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, (and) perfect the power to perceive [because] works of art are means by which we enter [...] into other forms of relationship and participation than our own. (Dewey, 1916)

Appreciating art on its own terms, rather than our own, helps us cultivate this moral capacity to recognize and understand the reality of the other through empathy, empathic imagination, thereby expanding our horizons and ultimately laying the "foundations of (true) civil society" (Dewey, 1958, pp. 325, 333).

Based on the analysis of the historical materials, photo albums on the border between the personal and artistic spheres, or their historical examples, we assume that characterizing aesthetics as an instructive value in this way does not diminish its place in human life – on the contrary, it hopefully justifies why it is indispensable. Our aesthetic life is an important tool for shaping

society as well as the world and improving the quality of life. Therefore, as Yuriko Saito says, it

> makes sense to pay attention to the aesthetics of the everyday within the broader concept of developing a critical discourse that would enhance our aesthetic life beyond art and appreciation of nature, so that we are better equipped to participate in the collective project of shaping the world. (Saito, 2020, p. 54)

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Barbora Kundračíková
Department of Art History
Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc
Univerzitní 3, 779 00  Olomouc, Czech Republic
barbora.kundracikova@upol.cz