

## "Taking Stock"

text by Dariusz Czaja

1. Phenomenology carries light in its name. If one were to forget about the word's historical genesis and concentrate solely on its linguistic traces, it would not only refer to a new method of philosophical conjecture, but above all to the art of vision. Sharp vision. To recall the Greek, phainomenon represents that which is being brought to light, appears, with an emphasis on its self-contained demonstrative nature. Phenomenology thus would not be merely an active cognitive effort, but directed towards intense contemplation; a state whose real traits come to light under such circumstances. This "coming to light" is of a particular nature. It is not concerned with what was previously held undisclosed, those things which, for one reason or another, we could not grasp, but quite the opposite: it is about things, matters, which have always juxtaposed us, which were within arm's reach or in sight, but which we simply could not see.

This sudden insight, this amazement at the unfamiliarity of those things which are familiar, as if to view an object for the first time although it has been seen tens of times, passed by without emotion. I am absolutely certain that these essentially phenomenological thoughts formed the basis of Andrzej Kramarz's approach to these objects, and the resulting photographic images. This resembles a contemporary quotation of Husserl's: *zu den Sachen selbst*. We will direct our attention to the objects anon; let us first describe the space in which they appear. It so happens that I am well acquainted with the place where these photographs were taken, and my enthusiasm for the images stems from a certain biographical underlay. It is a small square in Kraków's Grzegórzki district: a rectangular slab squeezed in between the Hala Targowa, the Cracovia ice-rink, a railway embankment and the ever-busy Grzegórzecka Street. An area which has for years served as the Sunday meeting place for the buying and selling of various things.

A few permanent stalls in the most prominent places trade in pictures, antique glass and porcelain, old furniture, and all books, CDs, stamps, old radios and cameras. These are native stores: goods here hold their value, and items are often priced accordingly. The displayed objects (though not always new), create a particular aristocratic trading enclave. There is no room for junk, or for defunct objects. Nonetheless there is a specific place within this bastion of weekend trading: something like a poor imitation of the noble stores that make up the market, a trashy equivalent, a dark passage. It reminds me of a modern-day version of *The Street of Crocodiles*, penned by Schulz, where "[...] reality is paper-thin, and it betrays its imitativeness in every chink," and which "[falls] to pieces above us into plaster and oakum, into the lumber room of some enormous, empty theatre."

This suspect passage, a paved channel along the base of the railway embankment, changes its guise every week into a kind of exhibition of all sorts of bric-a-brac. The displays are arranged on the ground, on newspapers, cartons, strips of foil, and sheets of various colours. The objects are densely packed into the displays, lying one on top of the other, as if following the trend of horror vacui seen in folk art. The items are for the most part old, obsolete, sometimes defunct, tacky, and of little worth, if any. Just some used and worn-out trash, desolate objects which look as if they've been pulled out of a dumpster and displayed only in pieces. In a word: that, which is left of a previous life; that, which used to live, and now leads a life after death, sometimes an imagined existence. The lens of the photographer dives into this trivial space dimension with a definite fascination, and records with sensitivity these fragile remainders of daily life, searching for traces of their (non)existence. And to quote Schulz again, "despite [our] better judgement, [we are] drawn to the tawdry charm of the district."

2. Let us progress to the eye of the lens. What exactly was recorded on these thirty-or-so colourful images? There are so many different worlds, with every one having its unique and individual atmosphere: there is no point in trying to resist the forces emanating from this junk store. Knives, blades, spoons, forks, tweezers, candlesticks and holders; a kettle, fruit bowl, decorative plate; a cleaver, machete, metal cross, stoup; a coffee grinder, an eyepiece, alarm clock; a wall-hanger, a padlock with a key stuck inside, weights, clothes brushes, knife-sharpeners; an ashtray, a sugar bowl, a pair of scissors. A little further on we have: a cosmetics kit, a screwdriver, corkscrew; exotic sea shells, glasses frames, epaulettes; rubber dolls, medals, meat grinders; a seed extractor, clock faces and various glass panels, watch glasses; springs, mechanisms, whisks for kitchen blenders; fasteners, screws, nuts, nails, some kind of metre or scale; a Buddha statuette, dolls and clothing for them; rosaries, crosses, birdcages, old shoes, cigarette cases, match boxes, a tobacco tin; a relief carving, medals, a plane, chisel, a cake slice; a trumpet, violin, guitar; a box with clips, hooks, nuts, valves, pre-war pornographic photos. What else? A paper-knife, a glass in the shape of a shoe, a brush, a glass siphon, coins, buttons; door fittings, cake moulds, a stone paperweight; glasses, tumblers; a monkey wrench, locks, drill bits, a vice; a glass bottle stopper, razors, plaster models of the Wawel heads, a crystal vase; lighters, cardboard beer mats, a metal door number (32), a vinyl record; a bottle opener with deer horns, ivory canes, a chopper with a sharpener in the shape of a horse, shoe trees, sheath knives; holy figures made of porcelain, mobile phone chargers; a children's bike, a pipe, wooden angels, computer parts; a stuffed toy, a crime novel with its cover ripped off, a bicycle

wheel, a saddle. Not enough? Cords, cables, plugs, sockets, transistors, ball bearings, switches, a potentiometer, a torch, speakers, handles, irons, an iron-stand; fluorescent lamps, boxes with medals on soft padding, a wristwatch, a stopwatch, a miniature rail for a train set; ashtrays made of wood, metal, marble; lampshades, military headgear, old tennis balls, a glass ladle, a camera case...

And this is only a fragment of the archipelago of curious objects. When we start labelling them, we quickly notice that their names bear witness to a lesson of forgotten language (siphon, vinyl, stoup, mechanism...). This stocktaking which the photographer has recorded allows us to see the objects at our leisure, without haste. It is clear that many of these things have been well used, are "re-freshed", showing their stigmata of a previous life (rips, crumples, burns, stains, chips, rust, &c.). These items are invariably *démodé*, labelled from the heights of refined taste as being aesthetically poor, simply junk or even plain kitsch.

Even if there are objects from our (chiefly technical) modernity, they are, as the above list confirms, only a meagre element of the presented whole, not mentioning the fact that they are of inferior value or indeed use (why should we buy a phone charger for a phone that we don't actually possess?). What reigns here is a world which has passed on: either not so long ago (communism), or a few decades earlier (the war, the inter war years). It does not really matter where we place the border, beyond which we speak of "the past", "antiquity", or use terms such as "out of date". What is important is that these items belong to a warm and tangible "today". After all it's not a CD: all these rubber dolls, corkscrews from the times of the People's Republic of Poland, relief carvings of "our" pope or Marshal Piłsudki, glass and crystal ware of varied authorship, all these things are emblematic of this world and the essence of its reality.

When we look at individual photographs as wholes closed in their entirety, there is one thing that stands out: the peculiarity of juxtaposition. An unexpected and magical surrealism fills the space; places where fate allows all these objects to join together. There are no two objects which cannot be found alongside one another, irrespective of their differing origins there are 'no borders' as the Ich Troje song puts it – keine Grenze! Thus, for example, in a single frame we have the following: a glass siphon, a woodprint showing a man riding a unicorn, a *kelim* depicting John Paul II, an old mobile phone casing, and a pocket Polish-German dictionary from the 1970s. On another: a metal (possibly) bust of Hitler on a silver platter, juxtaposed with a machete! The whole immediately makes one ponder historical tales, bringing to mind the iconography of evangelical stories, of the head of John the Baptist presented on a plate, although the context of the image is unquestionably secular. In another photograph we see two clocks, with both showing exactly 12:25 – surely a curious case of fortune (although maybe one is showing 12 noon, and the other 12 midnight?). Juxtaposition in the following photograph: a CD of "Hej sokoły" and other folk tunes, "The French Connection" (most probably a blue movie), and just next to it a photo album of John Paul II. And just one more intriguing example from this collection: a corkscrew whose opening mechanism looks like a penis, with its spiral prick pointing towards the stoup depicting an image of Christ carrying the Cross! This example is almost instructive, showing the banishment of normal divisions and taxonomies in each of these microcosms; a liberal combination of the spheres of *sacrum* and *profanum*. In this secluded space, in this peripheral and borderland world which is governed by the law of fate, indeed anything can happen.

3. Being enveloped in these photographic works and delving into subsequent details, there is one emotion that is hard to suppress: sympathy. Yes, indeed it is a feeling of sympathy which is expressed by the onlooker. Sympathy for what? For this collection of stuff which is so ostensibly poor, and not only in the literal sense that cheap *bric-a-brac* is sold here (with the recurring question: are any of these traders selling their own stuff?): also poor in the sense which Tadeusz Kantor once wrote about. He was the first person to recognise the existential sense which is hidden in such junk, rubbish, scraps, in this whole human wasteland which we happily keep out of sight. It was Kantor who spoke first of the "poor objects" and later of a "plausibility of the lowest category" whose articles do not contain any layers of meaning, but even still emanate a poetic aura. We find such entries in his notebook:

"... if the object is of an 'inferior category', then it has a greater chance to demonstrate its objectivity – and its extraction from the realms of disdain and eccentricity form a purely poetic act in art...

(...)

the imagined sphere is created with the use of  
MEAGRE PLAUSIBILITY  
which is pathetic and  
helpless like a child

... the highest matters are contained in the imagined sphere ...  
existence, death, love...  
with no pathos or illusion...  
all that suffices is a meagre corner,  
a box, a cane, a bicycle wheel..."

In conclusion to the programme text "The idea of plausibility of the lowest order" he noted:

"In this layer  
of most profound realities  
is hidden the  
MEANING OF LIFE  
devoid of  
STYLE, SHIMMER, false PATHOS and ACADEMIC BEAUTY."

In this meagre corner by the railway embankment, somewhere on the periphery of a world of acknowledged beauty and values, in this dark passage, sometimes great things really do happen. Another kind of life smoulders on and histories are presented which we never would have dreamed of.

4. It is important that we don't forget that we are only looking at photographic representations of these items, not the objects themselves. So are these images of ordinary things? It is hard to give a clear-cut answer. I think that the answers lie in the limbo between a straightforward document of historical record and symbolic realism. I don't see any reason why these pictures could not be used as a historical source: they are a record of a moment in time, a chronicle of objects thrown to the margins, which comprise a collection of portraits of realities of the lowest order. On the other hand, many of them contain an excess which is hard to discern, a form of poetic surplus. It is then we realise that these are not pictures for a report, but are clearly composed, arranged. Indeed, the primary "composer" is reality itself, the photographer merely helps in illustrating its hidden aspects. Nevertheless we feel that what is being shown in a direct and uninterrupted manner is ripped from its material substance, and aspires to metaphorical abbreviation and allusion.

A blue sheet plays host to metal objects, among which many old keys are bunched up in a way that attracts the eye. Looking at them for more than an instant, we stop seeing them as regular objects with an instrumental function: on the contrary, we begin to notice an intriguing ornament. Or the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven...