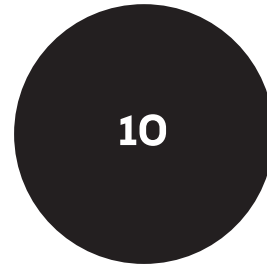




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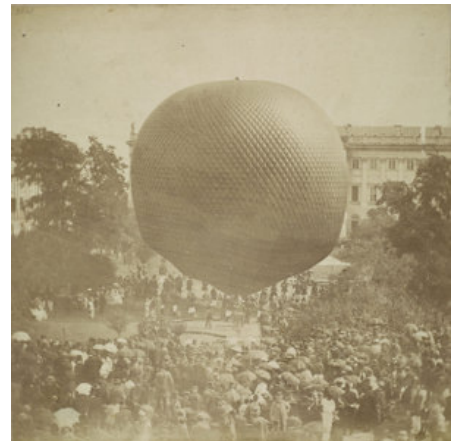
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The Polish 19th Century. A Visual Complex

Translated by Patrick Trompiz

In his book *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Jonathan Crary moves the watershed date for modernity – strictly connected to the seeing subject – from the widely accepted date of the invention of photography (1839) to a somewhat earlier date: to the second and third decades of the XIX century. Before patenting the Daguerreotype process there was the:

[...] uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed relations incarnated in the camera obscura. If the camera obscura, as a concept, subsisted as an objective ground of visual truth, a variety of discourses and practices – in philosophy, science, and in procedures of social normalization – tend to abolish the foundations of that ground in the early nineteenth century. In a sense, what occurs is a new valuation of visual experience: it is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracted from any founding site or referent¹.



Balloon launch from the courtyard in front of the Kazimierz Palace, 25 August 1872. Photo by Konrad Brandel / National Museum in Warsaw

This change begins with Goethe's theory of colour (*Farbenlehre*, 1810) where there is a shift in emphasis from the physical properties of the colorful spectrum to the physical and psychological condition of *perception*, and it continues up to the appearance of cinematography at the end of the century. Seeing the world underwent scattering, destabilization and fragmentation.

Tony Bennett – whose seminal essay *The Exhibitionary Complex* is published in this issue in Małgorzata Szubartowska's translation – locates a whole series of institutions among the practices of seeing and being seen. In the 19th century, these institutions "were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to

a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power (but of a different type) through society.² Bennett modifies or rather extends the Foucaultian diagnosis, placing the “carceral archipelago” described in *Discipline and Punish* in the context of the “exhibitionary complex.” This complex includes every institution of social life (“sewers, the morgue, a slaughterhouse, a tobacco factory, the government printing office, a tapestry works, the mint, the stock exchange and the supreme court in session.”³) considered as an object of observation. And observation brings in its train the subject as an integral part of the spectacle. “The complex of knowledge and power” emerges thanks to the development of the technology of vision – technology which allows the crowd to view itself.

The image of the 19th century proposed in this issue of *View* might be described as a “panoramic reconnaissance.” While aiming to take into account phenomena ranging across the entire century, we focus on extracts, close-ups of selected cases and practices – both highly particular and symptomatic. Małgorzata Litwinowicz offers us the big picture, literally sketching a panorama of 19th century practices of seeing. She reflects on the thematic exhibition, a kind of spectacle which may be considered a hyper-icon: an image-concept representing the whole of western culture of that time. The kinds of phenomena discussed in the articles in **Close-Up** range widely: from the daguerreotype process (which fascinated Zygmunt Krasiński in his search for the ideal experience of love in an image, as Katarzyna Czczot relates) through to *re-enactment* (a model of which Dorota Sajewska finds in Stanisław Wyspiański’s thought); from specific instances (the photographs of the Five Killed Men analyzed by Iwona Kurz) to designs of a visual utopia (an embodiment of which was the Crystal Palace discussed by Małgorzata Litwinowicz) and the visual revolution postulated by the 1871 Paris Commune. It was as a result of the Paris Commune that art and education became the sphere of “communal luxury” (in Kristin Ross’s reconstruction in her *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, the first chapter of which is published here in Katarzyna Bojarska’s translation). In the above texts one finds encounters of love and the daguerreotype; of sensitivity – perceived both as an emotional attitude and as a physical property of light-sensitive material (Czczot article) and contemporary theory of *re-enactment* (Sajewska); of the tendency of “modern” photography

towards cultural uniformity and the uniqueness of an individual victim as well as traditional social practices (Kurz); and last but not least, the desire to “hold one’s gaze steadily” and its constant distraction (Litwinowicz).

We are attempting to go beyond the visual complex in yet another sense, one pertinent to Polish culture where the visual has usually played a (merely) illustrative and accompanying role. “Slavic people [“Słowianie” in Polish, related to “słowo”, *word*] – means the people of the word, the Word of God in fact. This people [...] has believed until now that a single word is quite enough to bring on or to chase off moral and physical storms; a single word may possess a soul or remove the spell that binds it, may bring suffering to people or heal them, one word may arm a people or disarm them.” Thus speaks Adam Mickiewicz, consistently: using language to “reign hearts and minds.” Word and gesture were also of course supported by Artur Grottger and Jan Matejko, but in their case clearly invoking stories and literary forms that would organize the collective imagination. (More than that – Matejko even painted historical narratives).

Our point is not to exaggerate the significance of images, but to perceive them as autonomous forms: to view them not merely as the illusions of ideas but as the *embodiment* of those ideas. That is why we focus on practices and their formative role in identity constructions; in order to render visual imagination an integral part of the cultural complex with its reflection on Polishness and the concept of the nation, as well as fascination with new technologies. Pointing out the ongoing opposition between modernisation and conservative tendencies or between technological hardware and spiritual software is often less interesting here than viewing these tendencies and related practices as intertwined. We tend to focus rather on the images of life and on the life of images than on the heroes and their beautiful deaths in order to see Polish culture from awry and spot in it something new.

In this sense we have an “an-archaeological” approach to use the term of Siegfried Zieliński⁴, who in the media practices of the past sees a “collection of peculiarities,” i.e. the paradoxical contemporaneity of the hierarchical and chronological orders with the chaos of bits of themes and individual forms. This can be most easily seen on the map, or rather maps, of Poland. In the small but highly suggestive collection of Igor Piotrkowski we can see a complicated network of features and their

dramatic changes: shifting borders, geometrically conceived plans both pragmatic and utopian as well as critical diagnoses. These maps not only render the 19th century – what it was, what it failed to be – but also how it continues until this day. They are also an emblematic realization of the words of Paul Virillo, words which open Crary's book: "The field of vision has always seemed to me comparable to the ground of an archaeological excavation."⁵

Work on the 19th century is indeed an archaeological work – and of course it is *archival* as well. But today the archives have also changed: we view the 19th century from the perspective of the digital revolution which has enabled the online publication of all those genres, forms and media – like illustrated press or photography – which can so densely record reality (a case in point being [Polona](#). From clandestine warehouses and library cupboards the archivist or curator overs the collections and allows us to view the productions of the past. (Such as Mikołaj Groszpiere pointing to Karol Beyer's *Album budowy mostu Aleksandryjskiego* [Album of the Construction of the Alexandrian Bridge] (1859–1964).)

However, the existence and life of these past productions are in fact illusory and the digital image that preserves them represents at most a surface. The attempted return to the 19th century therefore ends up being an entry into a separate, virtual space – into the *atopy*. Paula Kaniewska writes about the work *Graduation Tower* by Robert Kuśmirowski who throughout his creative output has been undermining the category of authenticity; this has included situations where authenticity was to find its confirmation even in material form: nostalgia for the concrete need not always provide a solution to our predicament. Another kind of illusion is revealed in the works of the art collective Slavs and Tatars; here Justyna Chmielewska analyzes selected themes from their oeuvre. With Slavs and Tatars, an unlimited fantasy allows unexpected and impossible coincidences to come to the fore, together with geographical and historical relationships – as far as artistic fantasy is concerned, we are all still living in the 19th century.

Just like on the cover photo of this issue: Karol Brandel's depiction of the first manned balloon flight which took place in 1783. Almost a hundred years later this invention still attracts attention. When it happened, of course a photographer came and the flight itself was intended to impress the gathered onlookers. Though the archival photograph is not of our times, were we to release a balloon in front of

Kazimierz Palace it would most probably attract crowds (and all would be equipped with cameras...) Neither in the past, nor today, has the balloon played a major civilizational role. And yet the balloon was and remains a cultural fantasy.

The whole issue includes, as usual, a broader range of articles and topics than the main theme. In the **Panorama** section Weronika Szczawińska writes about two models of memory in Polish theatre (both in fact rooted in the 19th century), and Paweł Mościcki writes about the autobiography of Jonas Mekas.

In **Perspectives**, we present a discussion *On Whose Borders? Memory, nostalgia and Resentment in Central and Eastern Europe* (Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Andrzej Leder, Jan Sowa in conversation). This discussion accompanied the exhibition "Majątek" [The Estate] in Warsaw's Królikarnia Gallery and takes up the theme of material and sentimental inheritance of the pre-war order, most of all regarding Poland and Germany.

In **Snapshots**, we present a review of Ewa Toniak's *Śmierć bohatera* [Death of the Hero] by Justyna Jaworska, of the recently published Polish translation of *Male Fantasies* by Klaus Theweleit (Jan Borowicz), as well as feminist fantasies and utopias which the curator, Joanna Sokołowska, presented at her exhibition "All Men Become Sisters" at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Monika Borys). To close, Tomasz Szerszeń takes a walk through the exhibition "Dust / Histoires de poussière d'après Man Ray et Marcel Duchamp" [A Handful of Dust], curated by David Company at LE BAL in Paris. From the perspective of one work of art we see the history of the avant-garde and its relationship with its own history.

Editorial Team

Footnotes

- 1 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge - London: MIT Press, 1990), 14.
- 2 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, (London and

New York: Routledge, 1995), 61.

3 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p.57. Cited in Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 65.

4 Compare Siegfried Zielinski, trans. G. Custance, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

5 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 14.