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A black and white photograph of a tree trunk and a wall with graffiti. The tree trunk is on the left, and the wall is on the right. The wall has some graffiti that looks like 'SLK'. The text 'TOMASZ SOBIERAJ' is overlaid on the image.

TOMASZ SOBIERAJ

SIGNS OF
THE PROMISED LAND

TOMASZ SOBIERAJ

Tomasz Sobieraj was born on July 1, 1964, in Lodz, Poland.

He is a poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist, critic, and of course, a photographer.

He has a Masters Degree in hydrology and climatology from the University of Lodz, and he studied information systems at the University of Lisbon, in Portugal.

His works have been published in many cultural periodicals, and he has authored several books: *The Game* (poetry), *The War Of Flowers* (poetry), *Panopticon* (short stories & photographs), *General Theory Of Autumn* (micronovel), *Banal Objects* (photographs, monodrama), and *Tailor* (ironical poem).

SIGNS OF THE PROMISED LAND

The selection of images in this monograph were curated from Tomasz Sobieraj's recent book, *Behind The Gates Of The Promised Land*, published by Editions Sur Ner, Lodz, Poland.

Two essays about Tomasz's images – *The Mythology Of Accursed Neighborhoods* by **Witold Egerth**, and *Before Or After The Apocalypse?* by **Krzysztof Jurecki**– are included at the end of this monograph, starting on page 25.

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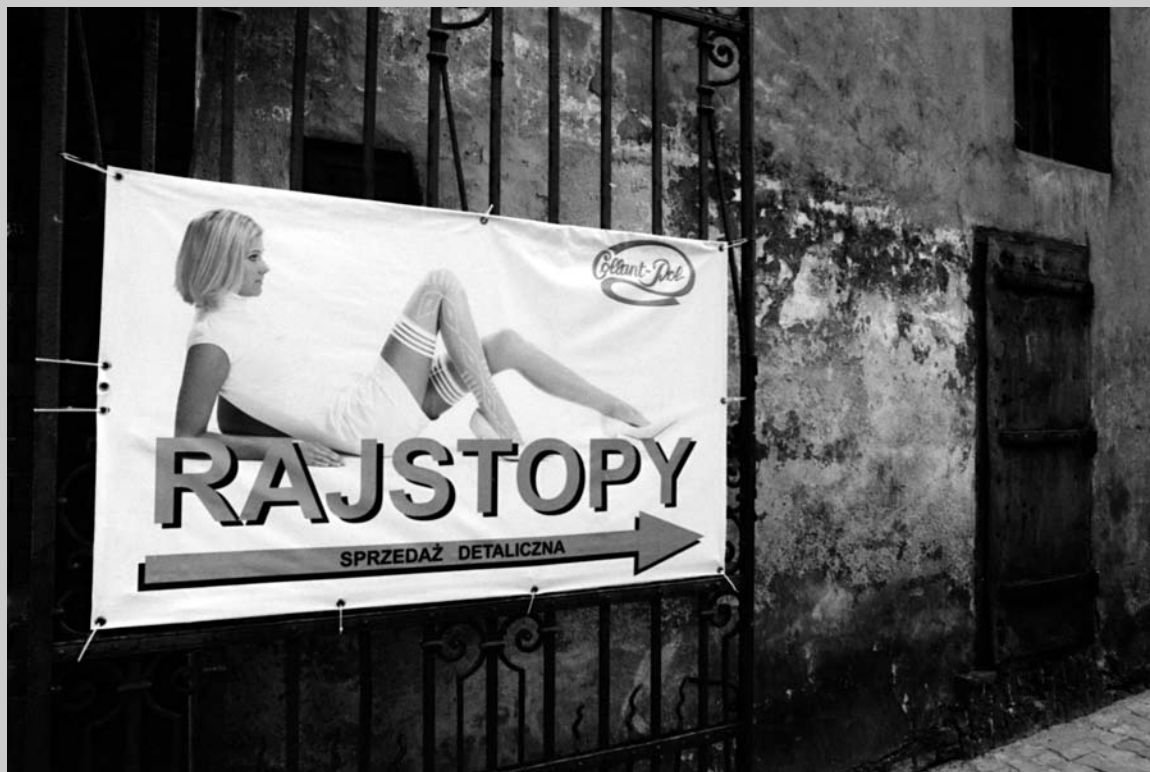
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THE MYTHOLOGY OF ACCURSED NEIGHBORHOODS

Witold Egerth

Tomasz Sobieraj's photographic series called *Behind the Gates of the Promised Land* is characterized by prose-like clarity and a poetic metaphor; it is a journey through a purgatory coupled with a lesson of humility, taught in the context of history and the whims of Fortune which treated Łódź, especially its centre, in an extraordinary way. The author communicates with the public on many levels: historical, social, philosophical and, of course, artistic.

The world presented by Sobieraj is subject to merciless, destructive forces of time and man, and to the influence of Nature which creeps into every crack and eagerly grows over everything that is degraded and obsolete. Mute witnesses of this inevitable process are ubiquitous pigeons and motionless people, as if turned to stone, crouching on the stairs, benches or window-sills. Such statuesqueness gives these characters an allegorical, not to say sacred dimension – a mother sitting in the yard in a dilapidated armchair and watching the children play, a pair of tramps looking somewhere into the distance, a female beggar with a pram, looking as if ashamed of her living conditions. The photographer seems to pass unnoticed by these people, he is transparent, but sometimes comes in direct contact with them – and then in the eyes of these people we can see that they reflect on their fate, we notice the feeling of hopelessness and sadness. These photographs are not silent, we have to “read” them and “listen” to them carefully; they record transitory – looking from the point of view of an individual – although universal stories of what is going on in the “humanosphere”. In a photograph with two content young men, one of whom is sitting on the stairs and the other on the hood of an old BMW, the most important element, though perhaps not evident at once, is a hole in the windshield: “The guy got so fucking stoned at a party that he decided to fly, and what do you know, he didn't fuckin' make it” - said one of these fellows about the dead owner of the car. Others talked about themselves, some willingly, some less so, but there were also those who said: “What do you do? 'Cause we beat the hell out of strangers here...”, thus immediately setting up a certain hierarchy – although they generously allowed the artist to photograph their accursed neighborhoods.

A considerable amount of vitality and energy is introduced into those pictures thanks to the portrayed children. This world – which from the point of view of adults is dying – means a “carefree” time for children, for whom it is most of all a true academy of real life.

From their perspective all these writings on the walls, vulgar and unclear for the stranger from the world of the so-called intelligentsia, begin to gain meaning, they come alive and make up a specific “street decalogue”, a street code that will remain in their memory for good and will be used in the creation of the mythology of this place and time. Therefore, each photograph contained in this epic story about the passing of time requires careful “reading”, “rereading” and “listening”, as well as the removal of its successive layers – and hence the transitory, the fleeting and the local carries us away into the universal dimension of archetypes and symbols.

The places photographed here often look like empty theatre stage-sets where actors will appear any minute and a new performance will begin. There are still traces (abandoned furniture, bicycles, prams) of those who have just left the stage - their time nears the end, only a few dawdlers are still there. But we can already see and hear the steps of “the brave new world” which ruthlessly breaks into these territories with enormous, overwhelming billboards and advertising posters presenting new gods and new magic formulas as the harbingers of “destruction” on the one hand and universal “happiness” on the other. Some of these poster figures become grotesque and “mystic” characters like, for example, a woman in a white apron smiling from a drugstore window under which a homeless beggar is sitting with his head down. The juxtaposition of the old and the new often borders on mockery, and here we can see that Sobieraj does not conduct his photographic narrative without emotion, that he is sensitive and on the side of those who “are leaving the stage” and whose “exotic” world is coming to ruin. But the journey through this world allows us to experience directly the natural element of life; real life, that is – not the plastic, posed and artificial life of billboards, but the life of the lowest, darkest corners of this city’s and whole mankind’s purgatory. That is why life here is so real. From time to time Tomasz Sobieraj tries to “delight” us with some detail, one charming corner or other, but in the rest of the pictures, when he broadens the range of observation or changes his perspective, he does not leave us with any illusions as to the tragic situation of these places, which happen to lie, after all, so close to the parks... – parks that have been recalled three times in the series as a faraway echo of the “normal” world.

Sobieraj refers to the works of such artists and documentarists as Brassai, André Kertész, Robert Frank or Eugene Smith and produces a historical document; a record of fragments of space-time continuum, invisible for an ordinary pedestrian and free from any postcard qualities; his is a critical and realistic interpretation, undoubtedly useful for future scholars like historians, cultural anthropologists or sociologists. Yet on the other hand Sobieraj produces a pure work of art and mythologizes reality, giving it a poetic, contemplative and laconic charm.

BEFORE OR AFTER THE APOCALYPSE?

Krzysztof Jurecki

In every historical period and in all social circumstances we ask questions and look for images that could demonstrate the real state of things; and by real I mean here “objective” or rather “truthful”. We are especially interested in the stories about the place we live in, which in this case is Łódź, our chosen city, the Promised Land. How does Tomasz Sobieraj photograph Łódź and in what context does he place it? Certainly we shall not find such “truthful” photographs as his at the competition organized by the municipal authorities under the title which sounds as pompous as it is funny - The Power of Łódź. Soon enough we shall surely see which photographer produced a probing and “truthful” documentation of Łódź that shows what happened here after the political transformation of 1989. The term “truthfulness” in spite of its many shades of meaning, including religious and political ones, is quite significant as far as I am concerned. It is one of the key terms for the understanding of the problems of the city which in recent years to a large extent fell victim to social and architectural degradation and as such became the subject matter of Tomasz Sobieraj’s art.

His photographs from the new series called *Behind the Gates of the Promised Land*, completed in 2012 and consisting of over 140 photographs, seem especially interesting to me because the author once more investigated the visual, but above all the spiritual structure of the city which is still standing in spite of its decline – which has perhaps become so evident by now precisely thanks to the attitude of this photographer. Tomasz Sobieraj’s monumental series, consisting of made on film black-and-white photographs, exists in and for itself as a work of art but at the same time it is also a continuation of his study of the problems tackled earlier in a very successful series called *The Colossal Mug of the City*; it becomes a part of the history of the anthropology of image and “the truth of being”, like the renowned *Carcieri* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, famous for its fantastic vision, or the preromantic paintings of Hubert Robert, a Frenchman. Piranesi’s graphics and Robert’s works are optimistic but also heroic in their message, while Sobieraj’s photographs are usually depressing and veristic in their interpretation; for some people, especially for the representatives of city authorities, they will certainly be exaggerated and extremely subjective.

In my opinion the series *Behind the Gates of the Promised Land* – that might be compared artistically and aesthetically with the works by Bogdan Dziworski from the 1960s – has, as far as I can tell, no equal among the photographs of Łódź taken during the last 30 years.

Naturally we have to assume that somebody else with a completely different artistic attitude could produce something surprising that would not have anything to do with, for example, the problem of a documentary and could become, let us say, a quasi-conceptual vision or a perverse staging, like the astoundingly imaginative works by Artur Chrzanowski, produced at the beginning of the 21st century using a pinhole camera and containing even the spectre of death. Indeed, they belong to the best works produced by means of this technique in Poland.

Before or after the Apocalypse...?

Actually this question is not too important for this particular series because as far as the inhabitants of Łódź are concerned, their Apocalypse was most of all World War II which brought about the death of thousands of residents of the city and fundamental changes in its social structure. A more reasonable question would be: who administered this degrading blow whose effects have been with us for years, and who destroyed the organic tissue of Łódź? History, the communist government or perhaps the representatives of the new political system, established after 1989? Or maybe it was "blind fate", an important element of tragedy, respected in ancient times and forgotten today? Undoubtedly the deterioration of many parts of 19th century Łódź was also caused by some of its inhabitants themselves who terribly demolished their own living space, bringing to mind the results of a war or some kind of natural disaster. It is enough to look at the almost surrealistic pictures of household appliances or walls covered with slogans written by Widzew fans and directed against the fans of our second football club, ŁKS. In this respect, though, Łódź is no different from Warsaw or Cracow, or even smaller cities.

Documentary style

It is important to determine the style adopted by Tomasz Sobieraj, not only a photographer, but also a successful writer and poet - which is of consequence for his photography, too. Those of his works that I am trying to grasp in their authenticity definitely come closer to prose although the author sometimes produces such compositions which I perceive, perhaps intuitively, as works that speak the language of poetry, resemble haiku and are full of details, sometimes including floral motifs or minor figures of people or animals; moreover, Sobieraj's works occasionally also remind us of the tradition of abstract painting. But maybe I am only labouring under a delusion when looking at those photographs I assign them to this or that artistic genre?

It is difficult to give an unambiguous answer to the question about the style of Sobieraj's document. We can certainly hear distant echoes of its 19th century provenance, filtered through the new awareness of photographic works by Andrzej J. Lech. But Sobieraj's pictures are taken with a camera of different optical characteristics, using different light-sensitive materials and taking advantage of large close-ups of the "instant seized", whose framing as well as the freezing of the "decisive moment" resembles also the photography of the 1950s and 1960s and differs from the nostalgic and melancholy style of Lech who definitely wants to come closer to 19th century photography - which is impossible.

In Sobieraj's art I can also detect a kind of Polish "street photography" which usually portrays children, old people and tramps who often look like degraded human phantoms. These are the dominating figures in this city space. In fact, this is the reality depicted by the representatives of the so-called "critical art" in Poland, as yet undiscovered and unrevived. Presentation of this reality is surely the responsibility of art whose educational obligations must include the world of ruins, working among them with children and teaching them the foundations of artistic sensitivity. Among the photographs of *Behind the Gates of the Promised Land* our attention is drawn especially by extremely interesting portraits which even carry an air of optimism in the case of children, or at least the possibility they have of choosing their own way of life – though in the case of old people we rather feel nostalgia and eternal transitoriness. Such pictures are not easy to take due to the fact that they demand close-ups, so the photographer comes in direct contact with the people he portrays. He either must convince them to allow him to photograph them or make them consent in some other way.

Limits in the presentation of the city - The problem of staging

Selecting an object to be photographed is always a specific form of staging but in Sobieraj's pictures I see not only "proper" but specific framing – he is waiting for concrete situations, like people passing by, and adopts an appropriate vantage point, the frog's eye view which gives reality a dynamic quality. Therefore for me it is not a kind of staging but rather the search for "the reality of lower forms of existence" in a world corrupted by a number of factors which may be the subject of sociological or economical analyses. Of course, I am also interested in the visual aspect of these pictures which is surprising and absurd as it juxtaposes real life with shop-signs - a technique used even by the surrealists in the 1920s and 30s – with beautiful but phony advertisements or with stupid and vulgar antisemitic slogans.

Sobieraj's observations are extremely thorough. He has concentrated mostly on just several blocks but I nonetheless believe that he is one of the few artists who penetrated many unknown nooks and crannies of the city and contrary to other photographers gave his works a definite, specific form and managed to control it - which hundreds of his colleagues who undertook this topic failed to do. Sheds, cobblestones, fragments of rather unattractive tenements in which workers used to live - this is the basic subject of Sobieraj's analysis. Only vegetation seems not to succumb to omnipresent deterioration - it remains in symbiosis with its surroundings or fights a battle with them which it eventually might win.

Visual and psychological effect

The artist showed us the concealed and unknown image of the centre of Łódź and its immediate neighbourhood, although, of course, he only pictured fragments, like those alleyways that refuse to disappear from the pages of history and live on in their hopelessness by the force of inertia. If I were to sum up this state of things in somewhat blunter terms I would speak of "sadness/poverty", of the "disappearance of human existence without a trace" or of "a hopeless emptiness of life" that must persist in its moment immobilized in time. I am sure that such "images without memory" looked very much alike even a few decades ago. But the style and the concept of the photographer provided them with a new historical and artistic existence, perhaps saving them from the oblivion of being.

Thus we are looking at "trivial objects", attractive due to their anachronism, to their disconnection from the reality of historical time. This enclave of Łódź does not suggest any optimism; on the contrary, these places cannot be saved.

The above reflections should be treated as a continuation of my text called *Two Series Which Will Change Photography in Łódź*, published in the catalogue of the exhibition entitled Tomasz Sobieraj. *Theatrum Prefunebris* (The FF Gallery, Łódź 2012).

Which works from this series will remain in my memory - and, I hope, in the memory of the public? This time I remember works that are optimistic, that illustrate the vitality and the spontaneous joy of children as yet untainted by the tradition and ways of these neighborhoods of our "evil city", as well as those photographs that present vigorous and spontaneous Nature that exists but for itself - or perhaps we only think it does, because everything can have a hidden meaning, inaccessible to man.

Translations by **Maciej Świekocki**