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On Easternfut

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*POST-PHOTOGRAPHY LETTERS
A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF
PHOTOGRAPHY BETWEEN*

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AND SONIA VOSS



[4224 Words, 10 Pages]

Iosif Kiraly, *Echoes Libertate 2B*, 1989-2017, photo object,
120 x 90 cm. Exhibition view *Letting the days go by*, water
wing underground, Iosif Kiraly, Anca Poterasu Gallery 2020.
Courtesy of the artist and Anca Poterasu Gallery.

Cristina Stoenescu (CS)
Sonia Voss (SV)

Two curators—one from Bucharest, the other living between Paris and Berlin—devise an arc in time and space and engage in an exciting exchange about the future of photography as an artistic medium. What does it mean to live through images? How is time measured in photography? And how can we overcome the temporal disorientation of a continuous now? Stoenescu and Voss seek to formulate tentative answers to these questions, grounding them in the works of contemporary artists like Iosif Kiraly, Isabelle Le Minh, Olivia Mihăltianu, Marianne

ays been a tension between the mechanical aspects of photography and the illusion of seeing through the eye. The world, captured by sight, the movement of a brush-stroke, the touch of a chisel, makes the mind of the viewer accessible. It's a shared effect of seeing what I see, do I see what

er Benjamin stated that "a desire to bring things 'closer' to the humanly [...] is just as ardent as their overcoming the uniqueness of every thing by its reproduction."⁰¹ In our age of digitality, the uniqueness of every thing is lost—there is a readily nihilistic acceptance of cyclical repetition in an apathetic, digitalised, post-truth world. There is another obsession at play—a far more profound one. The camera becomes a disembodying machine and creates a highly subjective image, mirroring a virtual self, a would-be image of itself as the image-maker. What it transmits, what the mind sees through the camera's eye, is a shared subjectivity, made visible through light. It is less about seizing reality and more about finding a shared space of meaning to understand a common world, which is as unmediated as possible. In other words, the indexicality of the image is lost as the direct referent of the image becomes itself a mirage, no matter how objectively the process of registering reality is attempted. The temptation to think that the world is accurately shared and reproduced, is easily transported only by light passing through sensitive materials, and thus free of distortion. However, if the photographic image is a multiple of reality, it cannot fully escape being interpreted. The *where* and *when* become relative, because the same image can create a different reality for each viewer. Their own subjective knowledge of the image keeps a trace of the in-between, held by the mind of the would-be author in front of the camera. Its many

connections with a particular space and time multiply until the trace, the indexicality of the image, becomes irrelevant.

The photographic image transmits this shared subjectivity through *temporal dislocations* that it creates and through our perception of these temporal pockets, as dependent on the time of observation. That is to say, if images work against the memory of the original object in the sense that the viewer's time will always influence how they contextualise a photograph, once they forgo its pretence to record, they can see photography as a means to express, create, and escape its present tense/past tense cycle. While photography belongs to the past, the *there/then* (à la Roland Barthes) is also of the *here/now*. If photographs are meant to be further created, imagined, and to develop new connections with lost times, I think that they also contain an anterior future—a *will-have-been* as a space of speculations between subjective readings of the image.

I was inspired by the phrase *temporal disorientation* in *Kajet's* open-call for texts. I saw in this a connection to Iosif Király's work, which I curated in the show *Letting days go by, water flowing underground* at the Anca Poterașu Gallery during the summer of 2020. I would like to use his work as an incentive for a wider discussion on photography today. Király's digital and analogue photomontages reconstruct the same space across different times: days, hours, or even years. His images create a layering of meanings. We can talk at length about the documentary aspect of his *Indirect* series, which follows the same space since the 1990s, or about the deconstruction in his attempt to conceptualise the photographic act.

For example, there is a certain performative dimension to the people he captures in his photomontages, but these are rather *found* (as he creates hundreds of snapshots and postpones the decisive moment of choosing) and not *directed*, and, at the same time, *selected*, but not *sought for*. In the work *Reconstruction—LA Getty Museum*, he photographed various visitors in several places around the museum's entrance on a hot summer day. The decisive moment for the work takes place several years later, when he digitally stitches together the snapshots into one composition.



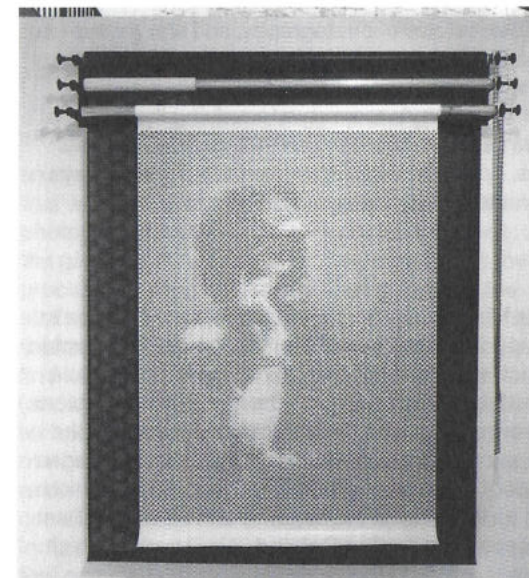
Iosif Király, *Reconstruction—LA Getty Museum*, 2012–2020, archival pigment print on dibond, 80 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Anca Poterasu Gallery.

I think that in such works, the *index* and the *icon* become transparent, breaking the relationship between subject and object. In renouncing its association with direct representation, the work moves into a more complex connection between photography and the reality that it depicts, but also into a new relation with other mediums.

SV

Allow me to pick up on that last sentence, in which you allude to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the sign. When we started talking about our written exchange, I immediately wanted to discuss the French artist Isabelle Le Minh, whom I have been following for a few years. But I never thought you would offer me—without premeditation of course—such a perfect transition to introduce her work.

One of Le Minh's pieces is called *Peircing* (2015), a title that plays with the name of the semiologist and the act of punching holes—of piercing. Its source is a self-portrait of the Countess of Castiglione, who can be considered the first self-performer in the history of photography. The countess was photographed numerous times in poses that she always thoroughly prepared. The self-portrait in question—I speak of a self-portrait even though the countess collaborated with operators whose names are known today—is her most famous. It dates from 1860 and is signed by Meyer and Pierson. The latter name is very close to that of 'Peirce' and is of course another element that Le Minh plays with. In her work, Le Minh translates the image into the holes of a cardboard. The image is recreated by its negative. Let's recall that Peirce, in defining the concept of 'clue,' uses the example of a perforation caused by a gunshot. Walter Benjamin, in *Passages*, also writes that "the real has, so to speak, burned a hole in the image."⁰²



Isabelle Le Minh, *Peircing*, 2015, installation: photo studio backdrop, wallpaper, hand-pierced photograph, about 250 x 220 cm. Courtesy Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris.



Virginia Verasis Countess of Castiglione. Musée d'Orsay, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In line with this critical homage to Peirce, all of Le Minh's works consist of deconstructing the

indexical role of photography, and she always does it with a great deal of humour. Relying on the history of the medium itself, she questions photography's property of 'verifying the real' that we usually attribute to it. Photography, she tells us, can deceive us. Nevertheless, it also always creates a new reality.

CS

Le Minh deconstructs the photographic image's rapport to reality beautifully in the a-photographic, tactile, and mechanical punching of holes into a surface, which suggests the tangibility of photons leaving traces on the photosensitive paper. She also creates a very tactile way of shaping images out of missing matter (the image surface), which is an interplay of the negative and also pointillism. I especially like her *Rebond* (2015) series, which also plays with the direct relationship between the form of the lens and the rectangular film strip that excludes parts of what the camera captures as a whole and at the same time, is connected to a cinematic image. It makes one question how the photograph and even the camera lens follow a rectangular way of perceiving the image, which is tethered to a legitimization process or a comparison with painting, depending on its interpretation of pre-existing (pictorial) expectations.

In the *Rebond* series, the artist lets the surface of the photograph be affected by gun shots to create a direct relationship between the shutter-speed and the bullet-time. In both *Piercing* and *Rebond*, the index becomes secondary to the process and the photograph's time is translated into other mediums, as a deconstruction of photography's distance from reality. Do photographs become more transparent as intermedium works? Communication scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use the term *transparent immediacy*⁰³ for instances when the observer looks past the medium and directly at the subject, and *hypermediacy*, if the observer looks at the medium instead of through it, to reality.⁰⁴ In your example,

the slow time of the Countess of Castiglione—whose stillness was imprinted in a photographic portrait versus the voyeuristic, instantaneous snapshot of a shooter and an on-looker—becomes part of a demystification of the photographic image in relation to slices of reality and, most importantly, to time.

Take, for instance, Olivia Mihălțianu's transmedial approach in one of her latest installations in the show *Wounded Identity* (2020) in Bucharest, curated by Ileana Pintilie. Her work, *Self Portrait as a Drowned Artist and The Portrait Studio* (2020), references Hippolyte Bayard's nineteenth-century self-portrait, *Le Noyé*. The artist writes in her statement: "He may have been the first inventor of photography or just an impostor (as some researchers consider), but for certain he was the first to understand and use the true essence of photography as art, as well as the power of the artistic statement in front of a camera."⁰⁵ Mihălțianu's work considers how technology influences the artistic practice, and it also approaches how photography interacts with other mediums,



Olivia Mihălțianu, *Self Portrait as a Drowned Artist and The Portrait Studio*, 2020, photographic salt print on 50% cotton paper (9 x 12 cm), acrylic glass, plexiglass, stainless steel, brass, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Anca Poterasu Gallery.

such as documents, through artistic statements, suspensions of time, or time as decomposed, rather than embalmed. It is a living medium, which rearticulates itself in social spaces, in Henri Lefebvre's understanding of the social process, as spaces of internal conflict and contradictions. I infer here that, even though photography seems to be dependent on the evolution of technology, the subjective image and the virtual worldmaking of the artist and of the observer are decidedly not. Instead, they open towards the speculative realities, imagined pasts, and *will-have-beens* we still debate in the history of photography today.

I like comparing Mihălțianu's reproduction of the self-portrait with the work you presented from Le Minh since they both appeal to the history of photography to generate new spaces of reflection. They start from the uncertain status of the photograph as an art form, and, at the same time, add even more indexes, until the medium disappears. I think that in our conversation, the relation between medium and time is important, especially considering that nowadays the image is fast, and slows down only to create pockets of present time.

SV

Your answers could lead us in so many different directions. In response to Le Minh's *Rebond*, which refers to a practice of vernacular photography (the shooting stands at fairs), I cannot resist mentioning a show that I curated in 2015. It featured George Shiras, an American who learnt hunting techniques from Native Americans in the region of Michigan and who was the pioneer of 'camera hunting.' In the 1870s, he decided, out of environmental concern, to swap his gun for a camera and immortalise his prey rather than kill them. I showed his incredibly beautiful photographs at

the Hunting and Nature Museum in Paris. I later also showed Sophie Calle's *US petty criminals*—portraits used during their practice shooting sessions.

Responding to what you wrote about sharing the view of the photograph, I think that we often overlook the body as part of the photographic device. It is always about the gaze, as if the body is not fully present in the process, as if it is not literally ripping the image out of the air, or dancing in three-dimensional space to extract a photograph. In the case of *US petty criminals*, I find it beautiful that you can sense the tension (and sometimes dangerous) face-to-face between the photographer and the subject (just as in hunting). With *US petty criminals*, the return to a symbolic function of photography as criminals stand in for an enemy to be hunted induces strong physical violence. I think this parenthesis and go back to photography and time.

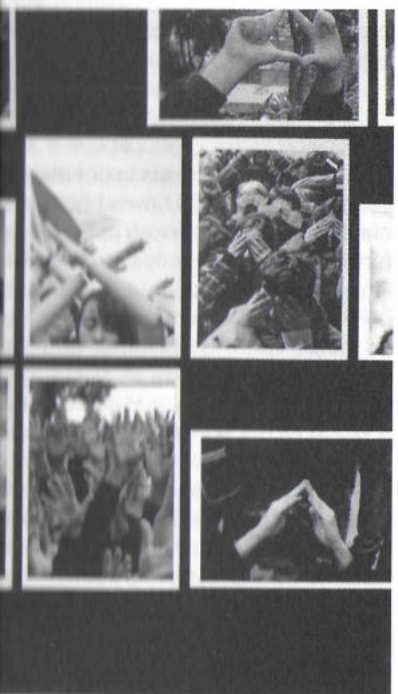
CS

I like these time-pockets in our dialogue caught by the idea of how a photograph captures our common experiences and cultural differences. It further confirms the position of the photograph in the liminal space of encounters. The difficulty of these encounters still very much depends on the participants, the observers. Post-humanist theories on photography start from the object itself. If photography is a space for encounters, can it be a space for a relational social process? For example, we no longer rely on the photograph, the words of Walter Benjamin, but on 'camera hunting,' where the instrument becomes the subject and object.⁰⁶ Looking past medium and hypermediacy, there is also a tendency

03 Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
04 T.J. Demos, *Photography between Poetry and Politics: The Critical Position of the Photographic Medium in Contemporary Art* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2008), 63.
05 Olivia Mihălțianu, artistic statement accompanying her artwork *Self Portrait as a Drowned Artist and The Portrait Studio* (2020) in the group show *Wounded Identity* curated by Ileana Pintilie.

06 "Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

spects of reality as independent of our models.⁰⁷ When I refer to the speculativity of the photograph, this is not potential of the photographic medium, Bridgeman considers it. Rather, it encounters that photography creates speculative realities possible: the would-be author, the context of the camera, the realities of the and so on. If we look beyond the medium's process, there is no isolated instant it may seem that it is formed when a button is pressed, when the images are rather, as in the case of Király's work, seen by the viewer, but none of these can constitute the *birth of the image*. Can they be read in the physical space alone?



Mispelaëre, *Silent Slogan*, using postcards (series of 50 photos, bilingual text), each 8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

SV

There seems to be a strong trend nowadays among young conceptual artists to question photography through the history of the medium and to thus open an internal temporality, directly related to a revisitation of the origins, rather than the use of new (dematerialised) tools. Le Minh and Mihaľianu are brilliant examples of this, but I recently also discovered the work of Peruvian-American artist Tarrah Krajnak (whom I showed this summer in Arles). She questions Edward Weston's series *Nudes*, their female representation, and the beauty canons they convey, by re-enacting them as self-portraits in which she poses like Weston's models. It is probably not a coincidence that these strategies of rereading and paying critical homage to the founders and masters of photography emerge so strongly among women artists, particularly in contexts where female representation is an important topic. These artists have a very interesting approach, which is both intellectually solid and 'pacifist.' They don't reject the artistic heritage they received, but propose a shift in the way we view it.

CS

When referring to post-photography, there is an after-photography implied—which is ironic, because it seems that everything in the photographic act is after-the-fact. The photograph's relation to past realities allows for, and even encourages, shifts in the historical perspective, just as you described in the practices of Le Minh or Mihaľianu. When the obvious connection that photography has to passing time is unravelled, the historical context also unravels in our contemporary minds and toys with indexes and relativities much easier than any other medium. Even vernacular, documentary, or conceptual tags associated with photography change and allow for poetic and political reconsiderations.

SV

I think post-photography is never as interesting as when it takes the shape of a reflexive movement back toward the foundation of the medium and,

again, to its materiality, its intrinsic quality as an object. The photographic *object* refers not only to the precise moment of the depicted scene (the index function), but to the moment of shooting itself, and thus to the time separating the acts of viewing and of photographing. This back-and-forth movement between the photograph and the viewer creates a new theoretical space.

But in the case of Király, I find it impressive that the space he creates is not only theoretical, but also very physical (configured with bits of tape, metal wires, etc.). It is a multiple, diffracted, and temporal space. I recently reread Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and was struck by this sentence: "In its countless alveoli, space contains compressed time. That is what space is for."⁰⁸

CS

One of my favourite works by Király, *Echoes_Liberty*, depicts a snowman that caught the artist's eye somewhere in Bucharest during the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The snowman holds the pierced Romanian flag and conjures up the victory sign. The photograph is framed in a cassette, as if bottling the enthusiasm of those days and hopes for the future. Along its edges, the artist collages smaller images, jumping from the momentous visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania in 1991, to the bereft socle of Lenin's statue in the Piața Victoriei, or to his son playing next to the head of the statue, which lay for years on the vast lawns of the Mog-șoaia Palace. The arrangement of the collage is inspired by the vernacular framing of family photos with a large, important event at the centre, such as a wedding or a baptism, that is then followed by smaller portraits of the married couple having children, of the children growing up, and so on. The work embodies Barthes' idea of the *future past* in photography, the would-have-been that we deduce in any image, of what followed and what happened before.⁰⁹ The compressed time that is created in the cassette space of Király's photo assemblage further enhances how we relate to the 1989 events. The piece does not strictly document the past, but instead creates the diffracted temporal space that relates to the viewer, adding to your

reference of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. It is the space through which we see the moments that could have created a different version of the future than the one we experience now.

SV

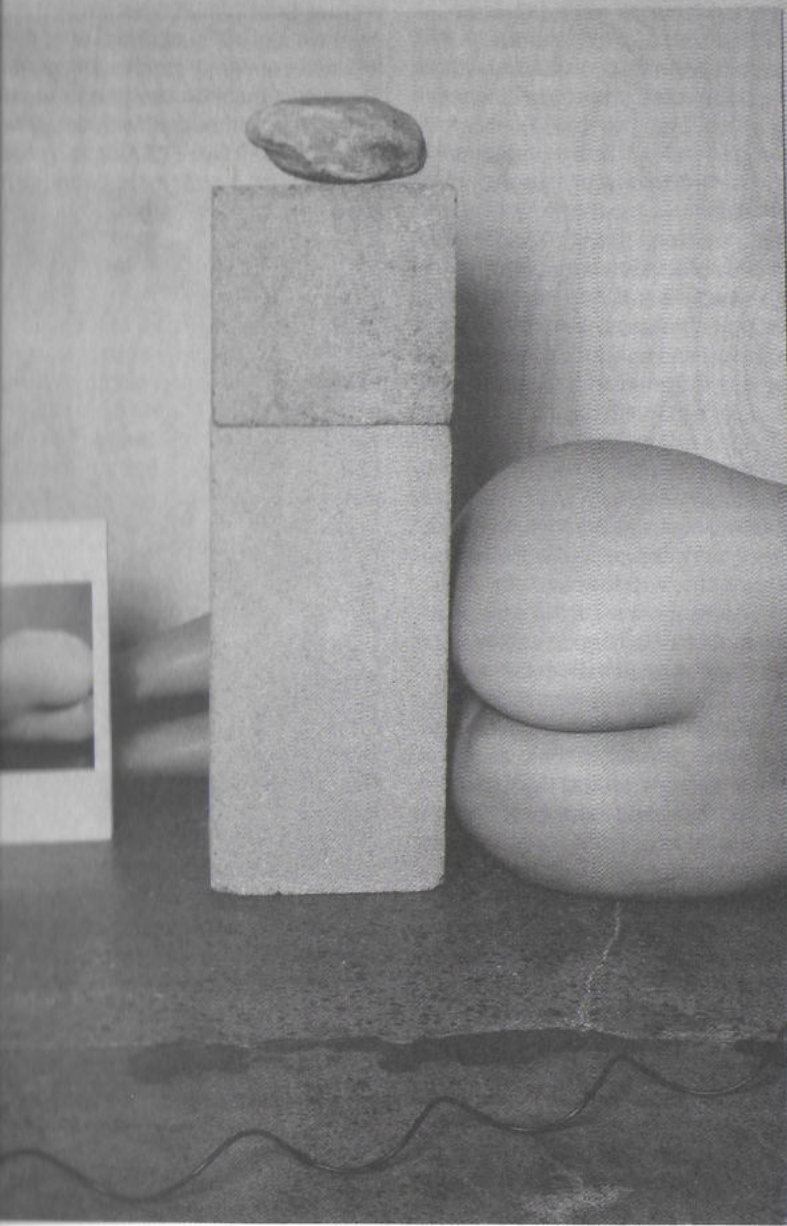
In attempting to figure the flow of time in one collage made from photographs of multiple separate moments, Király creates works that both succeed in forming a utopian space and demonstrate the impossible dimension of the task. We like to think that we exist in fluid time, while the consciousness we have of ourselves, or of the world, is in fact a combination of multiple static states. The use of the time stamp in some of Király's other images that deal with time itself, such as *Inter-City 593 No. 2* (2003), is a clever way of making such a statement because it is a typical photographic device (and a quite dated one, too!). It has also been used by Marie Tomanova—another 'emerging talent' whom I presented in Arles this summer. She confronts the subjective time of her memory with the objective information conveyed by the time stamp, thus superposing two temporalities in a single picture (which reminds me of the magnificent 1954 film *Brigadoon* by Vincente Minnelli, in which the character is caught between two temporalities: his own and a suspended time that might be the time of dreams, or eternal myths). Tomanova thus opens a gap between two poles where a vibration occurs, a very troubling effect that resonates with both our fleeting and archaic nature.

At the very beginning of our discussion, I suggested I would talk about Marianne Mispelaëre and maybe I can write a few words about her and close for today. Her work *Silent Slogan* shows a number of gestures that she gathered from the internet: collective, codified gestures that emerge through processes you cannot really track down, in demonstrations, public gatherings, etc. Although connected to specific historical moments (Occupy Wall Street and other movements of revendication), they take on, through the artist's cropping and their repetitive display, an atemporal dimension. They become like mantras that belong to each one of us and to all of us at the same time. Mispelaëre

⁰⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Classic, 2014).

⁰⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Inseamnă despre fotografie* (Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography), trans. Virgil

interesting thesis I read recently details this idea
ther: Redmond Bridgeman, *From Beyond: A Speculative and*
list Photography?, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of
Humanities, and the Arts University of Wollongong, 2013



Tarrah Krajnak, *Self-Portrait as Weston/as Charis Wilson, 1925/2020*, from the *Master Rituals II: Weston's Nudes* series, 2020, silver gelatin print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Köln.

presents on a wall, but she also leaves multiple sets for the visitor to take (for free), thus putting these images and the gestures back into motion and extending the space and duration of their display, which she accepts losing control over.

The idea of photography as a democratic tool is at play here, but I can also see a reflection about the repetition of history, its non-linear movement. Interestingly, it is not an idealistic work, as you might first think, about the collective gesture as empowerment and a tool of expression at the service of positive values. Reactionary gestures are represented as well as progressive revendications. There is an interrogation of the relationship between body and history, between archaic group dynamics and present time considerations, between the moment of the action and the communication of gestures inside a group, and the moment of image circulation and the broader collective aftereffects of this circulation—and, of course, what photography and its objects can teach us about all this.

CS

Mispelaëre's *Silent Slogan* did indeed seem to me to be an idealistic process at first, a play with authorship and also an intervention in the capitalist logic of the art market. However, I agree that it is more than that, and in a way a perfect conclusion to our talk, which began with the reconsideration of the photographic index. Mispelaëre portrays almost all the ways through which the index no longer exists, enacting Jean Baudrillard's *perfect crime*.¹⁰ She uses collective internet images, so the criminal/would-be author is missing. Meanwhile, the crime itself is hidden with no reference to a direct political cause, but rather to the idea of collective protest itself. There is also no victim to be identified. The loop goes on, and reality seems to never arrive at a conclusion. All of the pasts, presents, and would-have-been futures are locked in a continuous interrogation. The traces of the photographic images merely mark a 'continuity of nothingness,' not even the spectre of a nostalgic past lingers on. It is a mark of postmodernity in the end, relativisation to the point of disappearance, the future as a captive self-referential loop.

Minh, Mihăltianu, and Krajnak, photography and the recorded image are particularly malleable to a questioning of its medium and through its medium, in relation to the way history is recorded, its distance to our present time, and its direct rapport with our contemporary social beliefs and ideologies. The possible future for the photograph cannot then be part of the object itself, but it can instantiate a collective incentive within the art scene, to pay attention to an image, to read it not merely as an object of documentation, or artistic intent, but as a shared collective space that belongs neither to the past nor to the present. It is a worldmaking of undetermined potentiality, part of a complex network of associations linked to the environment that the photograph is part of. In the end, even if reality is a dream, and the blind machine of the camera cannot faithfully return it to us, we can perhaps start dreaming it anew.



On Easternfuturism

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Over the last three decades of increased precarity and insecurity, the act of remodeling the future has disappeared in the turbulent transformations that took over Eastern Europe. The very notion of imagining a better future was relegated into a worn-out ideal, widely regarded as a by-product of privilege, or removed entirely from the collective imagination. Who has time to think about the future in the age of semiocapitalism, when ideology has pervasively leaked into all forms of

existence? Juxtaposed between utopia and absurdity, even the possibility of fantasising about what is to come has been discarded and nullified. The main intention of the fifth issue of Kajet Journal is to tentatively sketch a re-conceptualisation of Eastern Europe's future: to formulate a novel prototype of Easternfuturism, one that is by no means exhaustive but should be read as an invitation for new cultural, artistic, and activist entities to develop their own understandings of the concept.