

DELO

Visions of the future (translated from Slovenian)

Parallel - A European photography network that brings together creators, curators and institutions

Pia Prezelj - August 31, 2021

In the Hungarian Center for Contemporary Photography Robert Capa, under the auspices of the European photography network Parallel, the exhibition A Forged and Delicate Future opened last week, presenting American curator Eric Lawton and the works of five photographers - Gustavo Balbela (Brazil), Else Gregersdotter (Sweden), Andreja Lamut (Slovenia), Ida Nissen (Denmark) and André Viking (Denmark) - while shedding light on the shaky foundations of modernity and questioning the role, value and credibility of archives.

Since its establishment in 2017, the Parallel photography network has been committed to promoting mentoring and cross-cultural exchanges between contemporary photographic creators, curators and institutions, bringing together museums, galleries, art-cultural

centers, festivals, fairs, schools and publishers from 16 European countries, as well as offers for creators to build a wide range of exhibition opportunities. These are available to both photographers and curators every year, as Parallel annually selects new participants (only participants from previous years could apply for this year's fourth cycle on the theme of changing times), and the work process takes place in two phases - Creative Guidance and Exhibition Platform. Photographers and curators first get to know each other, and then, on the basis of past projects, coordination and joint thematic orientations, they start a collaboration for several months; photographers create new works and series, and curators create exhibitions (and catalogs), which are then hosted in partner institutions. This is the case with the

Center for Contemporary Photography in Budapest (named after the famous Hungarian-American war photographer, photojournalist and co-founder of the Magnum photography agency Robert Capa), which is hosting the exhibition A Forged and Delicate Future until September 19; this one, with newly created works by five artists, "offers different, secondary visions of the future." However, since it is not possible to look into the future without knowing, questioning and evaluating the past, photographers mostly refer to visual and textual archive material, which - on the border between intimate and public - is a starting point for rearranging, merging and stratifying meanings.

According to Eric Lawton, who curates photography exhibitions exclusively, but would also like to interweave photography with painting, sculpture and other media, because "the possibilities of photographic composition are usually quite classical, but I myself like to test the limits of the medium and reach for compositions that, from two-dimensionality, carried into space." The exhibition A Forged and Delicate Future testifies not only to the role, value and (in)authenticity of archives, but also to the modernity of disinformation and deception, authoritarian regimes, social inequality

and ecological catastrophe.

"The archive can thus take the form of a newspaper, a family album or even an inventory of invasive plant species; every object, document, every piece of information can be transformed into artistic material that helps us understand the world and ourselves," while "rejecting notions of absolute truth in favor of liminal realms and unanswered questions" (the border between rejecting absolute truth and the relativization of truth, which leads to deception, is thin and slippery, in the context of the exhibition it would make sense to discuss it in more detail).

Gustavo Balbela, Elsa Gregersdotter, Andrej Lamut, Ida Nissen, André Viking and Eric Lawton designed the exhibition virtually (the works only came to life in the common space when they were finally installed), but Lawton emphasized that it was a "unique experience, as the curator is usually confronted with the created works, but here we created together with the photographers, which allowed me to give certain directions and suggestions during the consultations." Eric Lawton added that with cycles like this, Parallel is "a tremendous opportunity and support for the wider European photography – and art – community.

Publicly funded projects like Parallel don't exist in the US, which is a shame, because they are crucial in supporting emerging artists and curators.

The limits of (European) photography

This was also confirmed by the Brazilian photographer Gustavo Balbela, who highlighted the importance of the relationship between the photographer and the curator, in which both can encourage and develop, and added that "the role of the curator in Brazil is usually much smaller, as curators devote themselves less to individual works and they direct the series less. For example: one of my exhibited works was initially two-dimensional, but Eric Lawton suggested that, based on past projects, I should transform it from a regular collage into a spatial installation." The collage series Nothing Will Be As Before (Nothing Will Be As Before) otherwise stems from the photographer's pandemic experience, in which self-isolation mixes with news of "growing political tension, in which Bolsonaro is sabotaging and attacking legislative and judicial authorities. Because of this, I devoted more

time to following the news, and at the same time began to cut, transform, splice and juxtapose them, so that the collages form new meanings - and bear witness to the inconsistencies of our world.

Balbela wants Latin America to boast a larger range of initiatives like Parallel and "a larger ecosystem of artistic production. The infrastructure here – from educational programs to museums and galleries – is drastically underfunded, despite some brilliant projects (such as the Uruguayan Center of Photography in Montevideo).

Differences not only in cultural politics, but also in substantive approaches, Eric Lawton also pointed out, who believes that the subjects of American and European photography "undoubtedly differ. In New York, many exhibitions touch on identity politics and racial issues, which are very important in the United States, but in Europe this discourse often fades away. I also notice that issues of race, gender and identity are often passively perceived by European audiences as an American problem - which of course it is, but by no means only that.

As one of the interesting features of European photography, Ida Nissen, who in the exhibited series, referring to her South Korean roots, approaches photography as a "material that lives through colors, textures and tactility of surfaces", pointed out the collaboration of photographers with smaller, boutique publishing houses, which often reveal new ways of perceiving modern photography and what is an image today. André Viking, who also likes to question the limits of the medium and creates in a variety of techniques, and in his latest project uses archival letters and photo albums, also highlighted the issue of unpaid or poorly paid work, which pervades the entire creative-cultural sector. Elsa Gregersdotter added that photography should occupy a larger part of the European art scene, because "as an art, it is still not taken seriously enough

Content and formal diversity

The exhibition A Forged and Delicate Future also includes the works of the Slovenian photographer Andrej Lamut, who mainly uses the manipulation of motifs in his series, while at the same time he understands photography "as a complete work of art that functions best in a material form, so I pay attention to every detail, from the choice of paper and printing to the way the artworks

are framed and placed in the room". In the Invasive Alien Species series, he used light-sensitive emulsions, which allowed him to enlarge abstract photos of invasive alien species from the surrounding area in the darkroom onto paper made from Japanese knotweed, which is also an invasive alien species. "The process is very important in my work, and with photographs I prefer to ask the viewer questions rather than offer them answers," he added.

Lamut also confirmed that Parallel "opens up opportunities for cooperation with artists and curators from Europe and beyond, which would otherwise be more difficult to access" (the Maribor Art Gallery joined the network from the beginning and invited him to participate), while emphasizing that that the European photography scene is currently very diversified in content and form. "They are constantly looking for new and fresh approaches, not something established. There is a lot of mixing and combining of genres and media – pure photography (so-called straight photography) is replaced by collage, creation with personal archives, video, combining text and images, or even alternative photographic processes. The tradition of European documentary photography no longer dominates, which is not necessarily a bad thing.