



Jakub Dziewit, *This Is Not Another Martin Parr Exhibition*. Katowice: grupakulturalna.pl, 2018. 30 pages. A cloth-bound photobook.

A small book in a landscape format, bound in elegant, albeit somber, black cloth, triggers one's curiosity with its rather brusque declaration as to *what it is not*. Of course, the very presence of Jakub Dziewit's name, featuring rather prominently on the cover, leaves no doubt as to whether the photobook, or the exhibition it accompanied, could be Martin Parr's. And yet, the concurrence, on the same cover, of the names of the Master and the Disciple – both of whom employ photography as a tool of anthropological insight – may either be read as a statement of the already recognized student's impatience with what he perceives to be his prolonged apprenticeship... or as a playful wink of an eye. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the work of the British photographer will realize that between documenting the quotidian life of what he himself once dubbed a *Small World* and curating major exhibitions, he amuses himself collecting – and reviewing – photobooks. At first glance, therefore, Dziewit's intentions seem obvious. As Parr's admirer, as a photographer, and as a literary and cultural theoretician betraying a rather prominent inclination towards post-structural anthropology, he could have a very good motive to play on the British reporter's curiosity. After all, few creative artists would remain truly indifferent to their names if they saw it on the cover of an artbook representing their own discipline.

And it is only at the end of the book that the page following its album section informs us that “one of the photographs included in the series was made by Martin Parr in 2012” and that his project then “was entitled *Too Much Photography*.”¹ It is then that we realize that that the Master has been on board since the project's onset – and that the book, Dziewit's playful homage to his mentor, is a carefully premeditated point of departure for a much wider, polyphonic debate. This time, however, it is not the famous British reporter to provoke questions about mass tourism, global consumerism, or the condition of the working classes in times of austerity. This time, it is his follower, who, having reached artistic independence, raises the issue of how we interact with reality around us, sacred or profane.

1. Since the pages of Dziewit's book are not numbered, I do not provide page references in the text.

The series of photographs collected in the book is prefaced by several “key-note quotes,” which, delivered in two languages – white font for Polish, off-white for English – upon the plain, pitch black, rectangular surfaces of subsequent pages, prepare us for what we are to encounter when we reach the main section of the book, in which Dziewit’s photographs are reproduced. In the course of the deferral, however, we learn from the Nobel nominee, Hermann Broch, that “kitch arises as a result of giving up the truth in favor of beauty.” A page later, Vilém Flusser warns us about the consequences of our naivety should we allow our hubris to get the better of us and should we let ourselves believe that it is us to operate the camera. “Whereas fully automated apparatuses can do without human intervention,” the phenomenologist cautions us, “many apparatuses require the human being as a player and a functionary.” Yet, the blackness of the page becomes even deeper when the poignant quote from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* forces us to realize the obvious affinity of the camera lens and the panopticon – especially when one realizes that to a bilingual mind the seemingly innocent freeplay of the white and the off-white captions is meant to translate into a vision of distress. The Polish word “klatka,” meaning both “a photographic frame” and “a cage,” becomes unexpectedly ominous when Foucault observes that the panopticon prison cells “are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.” Cells as cages; cages as frames? A photo frame as the solitary cell of visibility? Indubitably, a horrifying prospect, but the horror, the horror overwhelms us when Baudelaire, the last of the “keynoters,” puts us up against the mirror of art and opens our eyes to the fact that “a form of lunacy, and extraordinary fanaticism, took hold of [those embracing photography] these new sun-worshippers,” who, yearning for narcissistic satisfaction, blindly render themselves to the mercy of the “easy” apparatus – which, unlike their brush, they cannot control. Willingly “framed,” they become willingly “caged.” Willingly locking themselves in their hi-tech dark chambers (camera obscura?), their mediated vision becomes fragmentary, blurred, distorted.

The dangerous supplement of the epigraphs prepares us for what is to come: the photographs will not be exploring beauty, but reality, and that it will demonstrate to those willing to see it that with the onset of photography, our control over what we represent has become even more tentative than ever before. Finally, it will bring us to the brink of despair when we realize how contemporary man becomes “caged” in a mediated, compartmentalized, reality that he or she “frames” using an apparatus whose “functionaries” they are.

Dziewit photographs people who have often traveled thousands of miles to experience the awesome power of the sublime. Searching for a mystical experience, they enter the space of the Sagrada Familia, where art and worship merge into one. All around them, Gaudí’s masterpiece comes alive with the unique light of Barcelona;

wondrous structures of stone, no longer inanimate, have a pulse; life and death fuse together in what Jędrzej Folcik beautifully describes as a magnificent aporia:

The power of Gaudí's magic manifests itself in the aporias: the stone of the basilica is "soft," it blossoms into flowers and grows into a forest; light, sifting through architecturally devised crevices, plays with colors and shapes, rendering the "rock-hard" reality flickering and uncertain. The "magic of the real" deactivates our "linguistic hubris": the real is fleeting; it shifts shapes and changes depending on the time of the day, depending on the weather, depending on the vantage point of the observer. Color, light, shape, as well as the symbolism of ornamentations and sculptures, all contribute to the mysterious fusion. On the outside, Gaudí imagined the whole façade of La Sagrada Familia as a bright, multicolored anthem for the praise of Lord². Inside, blazes of colors awakened on the walls and pillars by light slipping through mosaics and splitting into rainbow spectrums transform the inorganic into the organic, the dead stone coming into life. In Gaudí's world, with a flicker of light, pillars-trees, sandstone flowers, staircase-snails – like all life forms – are born and grow only to fade and die when the lights go out: the natural cycle makes his magical world real. Gijs Van Hensbergen observes that "behind the burst of textures, colors and alluring patterns there are hidden complex structures and meanings," and, on a more personal note, adds that "[t]here is no architect in history who would give us so much pleasure and joy."³ Similarly, Barbarelee Diamonstein, observing that the four perforated towers rising from the façade, topped with rich collages of ceramic tile and glass in an explosion of colors – reds, yellows, blues and whites⁴, seems to reiterate on Gaudí's belief that true art and beauty are energized by the landscape of the Mediterranean region. Mediterranean cultures, as Andrzej Kadłuczka's argues, are particularly sensitive to the richness of forms and shapes existing in nature because it is blessed with perfect natural light⁵ – light that an inspired architect may use for mystical ends, to communicate a message otherwise incommunicable. Which is why "[t]he exuberant architectural detail of the project, the iconographical architectural ornamentation and the dynamic sculptural form make the church an exotic world, but at the same time, its very exoticness defines its locality. It belongs only to Barcelona."^{6,7}

2. Gijs Van Hensbergen, *Gaudí, geniusz z Barcelony* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marginesy, 2015), 351.

3. Van Hensbergen, *Gaudí, geniusz z Barcelony*, 377.

4. Barbarelee Diamonstein, "Antonio Gaudí's Visions in Brick and Stone," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/12/travel/antonio-gaudi-s-visions-in-brick-and-stone.html> (7.12.2020).

5. Andrzej Kadłuczka, "Is the Game Over?," *Architektura*, 8A(14), 2015, 81.

6. Qi Zhu, *A Discussion of Two Design Approaches in Architecture* (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 1999), 21. <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/34314/thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (10.12.2020).

7. Jędrzej Folcik, Searching for Hope in a Liquid World. The Alan Parsons Project's Musical Interpretation of Antonio Gaudí's Masterpiece "La Sagrada Familia." Unpublished B. A. dissertation presented to the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philology of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian University in Bydgoszcz, 2017, 17.

And yet, an epiphany they seek may never be their share. Wondering around, the modern pilgrims admire the wonders of the Sagrada Familia through the displays of their digital cameras. The apparatus, of whose power Vilém Flusser warned us, has become an extropic extension of the human cyborg. Compartmentalizing reality into frames that they will peruse upon their return home – possibly with their friends or family – the hundreds of nameless individuals portrayed by Dziewit unwittingly allow the machine to “see reality for them,” delegating their tangible experience of living to the inhuman technology of representation. Young and elderly, men and women, Caucasians, Africans, Asians – all of them are permanently welded to their cameras, amazed with what they see in their miniature displays, yet utterly disconnected from the sublime they have traveled so far to find. The “lunacy” of which Baudelaire wrote has attained new heights: the mindfulness of the “here and now,” which is the *sine qua non* condition of the tangible experience of pulsing life, has been traded off for the mirage of permanence. Rather than documenting what they observe, the visitors to the basilica observe the document. Folcik is right to stress that “the real is fleeting”: when “captured,” imprisoned in a frame, fragmented, mediated, the flickering, uncertain, the real dies. Although immersed in the sublime, Dziewit’s pilgrims choose to admire the death mask of sublimity, a durable shadow of absence of what they failed to experience. They preserve memories of what they have never seen.

This, without a doubt, is not another Martin Parr exhibition. But, inspired by Parr’s keen empathy, Dziewit’s little black book opens one’s eyes to a major shift in the relational epistemologies of the digital era, in which the immediate experience has been ousted by the experience of the medium. Exploring the world through snapshots, embarking upon virtual tours, reducing its complexity to the standard of Facebook memes, the 21st-century human virtualizes his or her experience even though there is no such necessity. Choosing Insta-life, one becomes “framed”: lured by the specter of permanence, one irrevocably gives up his or her chance to experience the sublime epiphany of their own self-within-the-real, the immediacy of which recognizes no limits.

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