

Non-Routine Aesthetics: A Phenomenological Reading of *NoRoutine Books*

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——— The independent Lithuanian publisher *NoRoutine Books*, founded by Vilma Samulionytė and Gytis Skudžinskas in 2014, has produced 15 photobooks. They treat the photobook as a medium which has its own material qualities, its own language and ways of producing meaning. The strictly kept print run of 99 copies not only turns the books into rare collectible items, but also functions as a statement about the books as objects to be appreciated and read slowly, with pleasure, while taking time to decipher the message conveyed by the structure of the book. In order to demonstrate how such a reading works, the article discusses five books: *Album* by Gytis Skudžinskas, *Burning Slides* by Aurelija Maknytė, *Photoobjects* by Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Invisible Images* by Ieva Balode and *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag* by Vilma Samulionytė.

Keywords: photobook, photobookwork, *NoRoutine Books*, Gytis Skudžinskas, Vilma Samulionytė, Aurelija Maknytė, Arūnas Kulikauskas, Ieva Balode.

When I write the word “photobook”, an image pops up in my mind, the one I believe is shared by many readers. The covers of that imaginary book and its pages are black or white. The photographer’s name is written in large bold typeface and the word “photographs” is spelled in tiny letters. A shortish essay at the beginning or at the end is a must, better still if the narrative is structured by the text in equal partnership with images¹. The narrative is usually linear and it develops while the viewer is turning the pages that include one or more images. They are linked by a theme, such as a day in a city, people enjoying themselves at the seaside, exchanging agricultural produce for money in a country market or performing religious rituals². The sequence is carefully considered, depending on the function of the book, whether it has to tell a story, entertain, document history, or persuade³. With some exceptions of modernist books, the design itself does not usually attract attention so as not to disturb the process of viewing⁴. Such is the canon, or, as the researcher of the history of photobooks, José Luís Neves, defines it: “the codex format – the near-universal set of standard size rectangular or square pages bound into a rigid sequence that is widely used in the Western world – was and continues to be the central composition space for photobook practice”⁵. The reader-viewer is invited to dive into the images, maybe read the text, and forget the book: “Telling a story by turning the pages is a simple, yet profoundly powerful way of making them speak to us. Composition, light, depth of field, colour and all the aspects we tick off when describing a great picture become secondary when the images become discursive,” claims the curator of a prominent exhibition, *Photobook Phenomenon*, Moritz Neumüller⁶.

The book, in other words, should not intervene in the construction of the message as a medium with its specific material qualities that could enhance, complicate or destroy the story and emphasise or blur certain

1 This tradition was set by *The Pencil of Nature*, the first ever photobook by Talbot, and then continued throughout the 20th century in such examples as Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941); Frank, *The Americans* with the introduction by Jack Kerouac (1959), and so on.

2 Such were the topics of the most significant books published by Lithuanian photographers who emerged in the 1960s: Sutkus and Rakauskas, *Vilniaus šiokiadieniai*; Kunčius, *Prie jūros*; Macijauskas, *Lietuvos turgūs*; Požerskis, *Atlaidai/Lithuanian pilgrimages*.

3 Gorczyca and Mazur, “The Photobloc”, 12.

4 For example, Vorobeichik, *Ein Ghetto im Osten*.

5 Neves, “Photobook or Artist’s Book?”.

6 Neumüller, “By the Book”, 7.x

characteristics of the photographs. The book is an excellent platform for exhibiting images because photography on its pages looks almost as good as the original prints. Yet photographs acquire a new identity in photobooks because of their different size and the context of other images and text. Therefore, even a 'transparent' book is also a medium that changes how the photographs are presented, viewed, read and preserved. Because of the choices of specific photographs, their sequencing, decisions concerning the design, the quality of paper and printing, photography books form our knowledge of private or public photographic archives or of individual photographers' entire creative output, yet they are only fragments shaped by professionals. The result is deceptive: a photographer's oeuvre is summed up in a book that pretends to be the neutral medium, but it is not. This is why some photographers have treated the photobook as the best way not only to present their work, but also to express their ideas by using the syntax and materiality of the book.

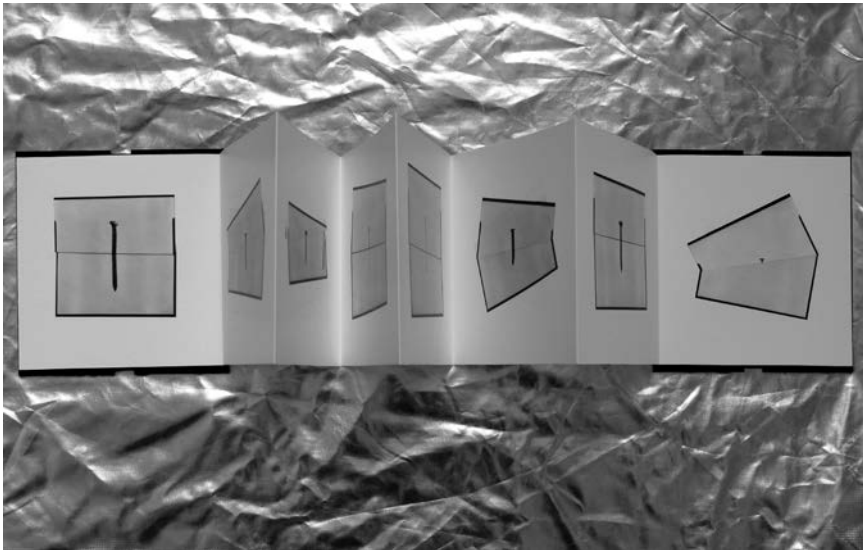
The independent Lithuanian publisher *NoRoutine Books*, founded by Vilma Samulionytė and Gytis Skudžinskas in 2014, produces this category of photobooks – 15 so far (one book does not include photographs⁷). They treat the photobook as a medium which has its own material qualities, its own language and ways of producing meaning. The words chosen as the publisher's name imply a negative definition of the context into which it emerges: whilst reading the words 'NoRoutine' we immediately know that other books should be routine, perhaps fitting the type, repeating the canon or the codex of the book described above. Routine would be the mindlessly overused approach to design, typefaces, colours, structure, size, format. Decisions made by the makers of the first photographic books in the 19th century are repeated endlessly and without self-reflection until their novelty and meaning wear off and become 'invisible'.

And, conversely, a 'no-routine' book would be the opposite in all the aforementioned aspects. Its shape would not readily jump to one's mind with a fixed design. It would snub repetition even with regard to the books by the same publisher because, as it is stated on the *NoRoutine Books* website, this is an "initiative dedicated to designing and printing unique fine



1.
Ričardas Šileika, *Everyday Aphorisms*. Vilnius:
NoRoutine Books, 2017. 6,9 × 3 cm. Photo by Agnė
Narušytė

Ričardas Šileika, *Nuogirdos*. Vilnius: NoRoutine
Books, 2017



2.
Evelina Kerpaitė, *Nails*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books,
2015. 15,5 × 17 cm. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Evelina Kerpaitė, *Nails*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books,
2015

arts books” and each book is created by working “closely with artists to conceptualise and produce their works in book format” and experimenting “with different printing and binding processes”⁸. Most importantly, the book itself would become a message enhancing the meaning of the photographs. While routine is predominantly safe, *NoRoutine Books* would sacrifice safety for the sake of adventure. Every new book should be unpredictable. For example, even if all of them are smallish, one book is even smaller – *Everyday Aphorisms* by Ričardas Šileika (*Nuogirdos*, 2017) is a ring holding tiny pieces of paper and can serve as a key ring [fig. 1]. Thus, it can be carried around like a handy resource of bizarre wisdom overheard by the author who likes to collect found snapshots of everyday language. A book may also become three-dimensional, thus reflecting the way artists sometimes test the ‘reality’ inherent in photography. *Nails* by Evelina Kerpaite (2015) is such a book: it can be unfolded into a harmonica and then folded back into a book like the artist folds her photographs of bent and useless nails in order to ‘straighten’ them and make ‘functional’ again [fig. 2]. Or, if most books offer a predetermined sequence of images, some come as box-sets and others destabilise the notion of photographs as ‘decisive moments’ by revealing the process of arranging the set, performing and having fun, like in the case of *Staged Pictures* by Audrius Puipa and Gintautas Trimakas (*Inscenizuoti paveikslai*, 2018) [fig. 3]. Otherwise, even, instead of displaying images, a book can serve as a source for the analysis of patterns and codes that make up the printed surface of the image and, perhaps, the entire visual sphere, as in the case of *T6031_T6061_T8001* by Reinis Lismanis (2019) [fig. 4].

In order to make all this experimentation possible, the publisher would have to exist in the *interstice* of the publishing business. Borrowing the term from Karl Marx, Nicolas Bourriaud defined interstice as “a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system” and creates “time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life”⁹. Publishers exist in such an interstice when they do not try to make money from their products, but rather use their own sources to fund them on creating something new every time

⁸ NoRoutine Books website: <http://www.nrb.lt/>.

⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.



3.
Audrius Puipa and Gintautas Trimakas, *Staged Pictures*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. 21 × 24 cm.
Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Audrius Puipa ir Gintautas Trimakas, *Inscenizuoti paveikslai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018



4.
Reinis Lismanis, *T6031_T6061_T8001*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2019. 23,5 × 29,7 cm. Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Reinis Lismanis, *T6031_T6061_T8001*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2019

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in small quantities. The strictly kept print run of 99 copies by *NoRoutine Books* not only turns the books into rare collectible items, but also functions as a statement that the books are not just products to be sold for profit, but objects to be appreciated and read slowly, taking the time to have pleasure in deciphering the message conveyed by the structure of the book, not just by photographs. In order to show how that additional message – and time – is created, and also what makes each book unpredictable – or ‘no routine’, I shall analyse five books designed by Gytis Skudžinskas as unique objects: *Album* by Gytis Skudžinskas (2014), *Burning Slides* by Aurelija Maknytė (2016), *Photoobjects* by Arūnas Kulikauskas (2017), *invisible images* by Ieva Balode (2016) and *Liebe Oma. Guten Tag* by Vilma Samulionytė (2018). I shall delve into the experience of the syntax and materiality of each book and explore the performative aspect of their meaning. For that purpose, I shall first discuss what a photobook is and how it works as a medium, and then analyse how new meanings are created via the tension between showing and saying, implying and eliding.

Photobook as a Medium

The term ‘photobook’ emerged as early as the 19th century, when book makers and publishers started inserting photographs into books¹⁰. But the term was used synonymously with others to refer to books whose main purpose was to present a meaningful sequence of photographs. Several histories of photobooks were published in the 20th century, but photobooks remained marginal in the historiography of photography¹¹. It was only at the beginning of the 21st century, thanks to the interest of some curators, photographers and publishers, that the photobook became a lens for revising the history of photography itself¹².

Fascinated by the Horacio Fernández’s exhibition *Fotografía pública Photography in Print 1919–1939* at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid in 1999, the photographer Martin Parr started his research into the history of photobooks and, together with Gerry Badger, published the results

¹⁰ Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook,” 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44–72.

¹² The term “photographic book” was used in the first known comprehensive history of this form by Sweetman, in his *Photographic Book to Photowork*. But already in 1989, the term was used in the title of the study of photobook-making in Boom’s *Foto in Omslag*.

in an impressive set of three volumes of *The Photobook: A History* – the first came out in 2004 and the last, in 2014¹³. The three abundantly illustrated volumes raised international interest in the photobook as a phenomenon. Many countries started writing national histories of photobooks¹⁴. Photography magazines launched sections dedicated to photobooks. Most significantly, in 2011, the leading art photography magazine *Aperture* started publishing the biannual supplement *The PhotoBook Review* with the intention to reach “a better understanding of the ecosystem of the photobook as a whole.” Each issue is guest edited by different, and internationally famous, researchers and creators of photobooks¹⁵. In 2016, influenced by the trend, the photography magazine *Source* asked international experts to select the 150 most important photobooks in the history of photography and published an issue dedicated to photobooks¹⁶.

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, exhibitions of photobooks started inviting their viewers to appreciate photobooks as intriguing artefacts. Alex Sweetman curated an exhibition of the history of photographic books as far back as 1986. At the beginning of the 21st century, Andrew Roth curated a travelling exhibition to accompany his monograph *The Open Book: A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present*, which itself followed his earlier publication *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century*¹⁷. In the introduction to *The Open Book*, the photographer, curator and director of Museum Folkwang (Essen, Germany), Ute Eskildsen, emphasised that viewing photography books was inseparable from the physical – haptic – experience¹⁸. This idea was realised as fully as possible by the team of curators of the international exhibition Photobook Phenomenon held in Barcelona in 2017 where photobooks were interpreted as a means to display photographs, “but also the perfect space

13 Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, vols. 1–3.

14 For example, Wiegand, *Deutschland im Fotobuch, Latin American Photobook* (2011), listed by Neumüller, “By the Book”, 7.

15 The most recent issues of *The PhotoBook Review* were guest edited by Deborah Willis (Issue #018, Fall 2020), Carmen Winant (Issue #017, Fall 2019), Federica Chiochetti (Issue #016, Spring 2019), David Company (Issue #015, Fall 2018), Deirdre Donohue (Issue #014, Spring 2018), Lesley A. Martin (Issue #013, Fall 2017), Daria Tuminas (Issue #012, Spring 2017) and so on.

16 *Source*, Issue 88, Winter 2016, <https://www.source.ie/photobook/index.php>.

17 Roth, *The Open Book*; Roth, *The Book of 101 Books*; discussed by Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 77.

18 Eskildsen, “Photographs in Books”, 11–29.

for experimentation and creativity”¹⁹. Works by contemporary artists who use the material quality of books in order to express their ideas were exhibited alongside historical curiosities, propaganda and protest books, photobooks created by famous photographers, particularly William Klein’s *New York: Life is Good & Good for You in New York* (1956), and Japanese books. Not one, but many copies of the same book were acquired for the show, so that the viewers could touch the books, leaf through them and experience their physical qualities, instead of just seeing them displayed in window displays²⁰. Impressed by this approach, Łukasz Gorczyca and Adam Mazur, the curators of the exhibition *Photobloc: Central Europe in Photobooks*, also took care to make it possible for the viewers to see more than the covers or single spreads of books from this region, neglected by all the previous researchers of photobooks²¹.

This recent interest in the history of photobooks and in the photobook as a medium has been influenced by the rise of photobooks created by artists, which also prompted discussions as to what the photobook actually is. Can we thus refer to all books that present mainly photographs, for example, the 1903 instruction for bakers that features photographs of good and bad quality loafs of bread, the case that fascinated Parr and Badger? And how could we define the boundary separating an artist’s book from a photobook? According to Badger and Parr, the photobook is “an extended essay in photographs”²². Badger emphasises its “elliptical” narrative – speaking through omissions and gaps left for the work of imagination²³. They also used American photographer John Gossange’s definition of a “good photobook”, which contains “great work... make that work function as a concise world within the book itself... have a design that complements

¹⁹ See CCCB website, <https://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/photobook-phenomenon/225004>. The exhibition *Photobook Phenomenon* was held at the Centro de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in and Fundació Foto Colectania in Barcelona from 17 March until 27 August 2017. It was curated by Martín Parr, Gerry Badger, Horacio Fernández, Ryuichi Kaneko, Erik Kessels, Markus Schaden, Frederic Lezmi, Irene de Mendoza, and Moritz Neumüller to celebrate photographers who used the photobook as a means of expression: Alexander Rodchenko, William Klein, Robert Frank, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Gabriel Cualladó, Henri Cartier-Bresson and others. One section was dedicated to contemporary artists experimenting with photobooks: Laia Abril, Julián Barón, Alejandro Cartagena, Jana Romanova, Vivianne Sassen, Thomas Sauvin, and Katja Stuke & Oliver Sieber. See the catalogue *Photobook Phenomenon*.

²⁰ Morley, “Barcelona’s Photobook Phenomenon”.

²¹ Gorczyca and Mazur, “The Photobloc”, 12–13.

²² Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, vol. 1, 8.

²³ Badger, “Elliptical Narratives”, 221.

what is being dealt with [and] deal[s] with content that sustains an ongoing interest.”²⁴ Neves disputes this definition because there are many books that use not “great photographs”, but archival material, found images. Additionally, previous definitions are “converting the photobooks into a ‘container’ of information” and disregarding their materiality. The books that simply present photographs should be called “photographically illustrated books”, thus separating them from “photobooks” that emerged only in the 1920s “by developing a visual discourse based on a suprasegmental, cumulative and relational narrative that traversed the whole book”²⁵.

The photobook, however, still does not deviate from the recognisable form of the book, while contemporary artists disturb the hierarchy of its elements. They create the photobook as “a sculptural artefact” or a “ready-made”, deconstruct “the code” by dispensing with the book’s linearity, its size, its flatness, the boundaries of the page, the stability of the author’s work, and invite the viewer to participate. These are, however, the same strategies used in artists’ books, which makes it difficult to define the boundary separating them from photobooks. The boundary is blurred also by the fact that, according to Neves, photobooks of the 1920s might have inspired conceptual artists to start creating artists’ books in the 1960s. One of them, Ed Ruscha, used photographs for his *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and claimed it was an artist’s book, not a photobook, which confuses the matter even further. To solve the puzzle, Neves suggests using the term “photobookwork” to refer to photographic books that derive their strategies from artists’ books, often defined as “bookwork”. The term “photobookwork” could be used “to describe volumes constructed upon the interrelationship of the narrative discourse present in the single photographic image and the juxtaposition of those elements to generate an indivisible photographic sequence in book form”²⁶. Such a decision would also solve the dichotomy of “routine” versus “non-routine” aesthetics, because as a work of art, photobookwork cannot be routine by definition and *NoRoutine*

24 Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, vol. 1 (December 1, 2004): 7. Quoted in Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 81.

25 Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 5–6, 191–228; see also Neves, “Photobook or Artist’s Book?”. Neves bases his argument on research and definitions by Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, and Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*.

26 Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 23, 38. He has borrowed the term from Alex Sweetman, and the latter, from Ulises Carrión who used the term “bookwork.”

Books publications clearly fall into this category. Yet in this article, I shall use the more widespread term photobook.

Scholars, curators and creators of photobooks seem to agree that the presence of a multi-layered narrative, self-reflexivity and experimentation with form and canon are the characteristics that define such books. The creative director of Aperture Foundation and publisher of *The Photo-Book Review* Lesley A. Martin claims that we are now experiencing “The Baroque era of the Photobook” when “photography on the printed page has become elastic, responsive, and willing to take risks”. She identifies three categories of such books: thematic appropriations of photographic archives, puzzles inviting viewers to construct their own narratives, and “the Baroque form” that might end up being nothing like a book²⁷. Yet in order to make the right choices from the infinity of possibilities, the creators of books must answer three important questions: “What is the concept of the work and of the book? How does the edit, sequence, and design treatment of images in the book carry that concept through from start to finish? How do the materials used in printing and binding the book further support the concept and the editorial decisions made?”²⁸

Nevertheless, despite carefully constructed sequences and design, it is the reader-viewer who has to discover meaning in the photobook. According to Neves, “the author must generate a reading process in which the reader/viewer creates a narrative pathway based on an affiliation between individual photographic images and photographic sequences”²⁹. Neves uses Roland Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”³⁰ to explain how syntactical units of photographs acquire their functions in the reader’s mind: “the essence of a function is, so to speak, the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later – either on the same level or elsewhere”³¹. The sequences work on the basis of Gestalt psychology – “the four laws of grouping: *proximity*, *similarity*, *continuity* and *closure*”³². Closure is exercised at the level of individual photographs by negotiating “the dialectical relationship between the indexical

27 Martin, “Invitation to a Taxonomy”, 12–15.

28 Ibid., 15.

29 Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 134.

30 Barthes, “The Photographic Message”, 88.

31 Ibid., 89; quoted by Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 244.

32 Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 217.

and the fictional qualities present in the photograph(s)”, which anchors the story to reality³³. Some images work as nuclei that “inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty”. Others are catalysers, which “fill in” the gaps between nuclei with the material of the story³⁴. The story is assembled by linking photographs and their sequences as if they were discontinuous fragments of reality in the past. The experience of reading-viewing such a book is similar to the way our consciousness forms the amalgam of time by combining present perceptions, imagination, memories, and anticipation of the future into “a multidimensional network or world of significance”³⁵. This process has been aptly described by John Berger:

Both the photograph and the remembered depend upon and equally oppose the passing of time. Both preserve moments, and propose their own form of simultaneity, in which all their images can coexist. Both stimulate, and are stimulated by, the interconnectedness of events. Both seek instants of revelation, for it is only such instants which give full reason to their own capacity to withstand the flow of time³⁶.

This is why it is unavoidable that phenomenological reading of photobooks would involve the reader-viewer’s subjectivity, which plays a part in the following interpretations of five *NoRoutine* books.

The Universal Album of Photographs

The first book published by *NoRoutine Books* was *Album* by Gytis Skudžinskas (2014). Its cover is corrugated, grey, a bit like a roof covering of an old shed where people keep the stuff collected during their lives [fig. 5]. The cover immediately suggests that this book is such a storage of forgotten mementoes – and thus falls into Martin’s category of “thematic appropriations of photographic archives”. Its contents, and theme, however, remain a mystery because there is no title, no author, just a cut-out letter ‘a’, the first in the alphabet, which signifies the beginning. Through it I can see

³³ Ibid., 218.

³⁴ Barthes, “Structural Analysis of Narrative”, 93; quoted in Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 252.

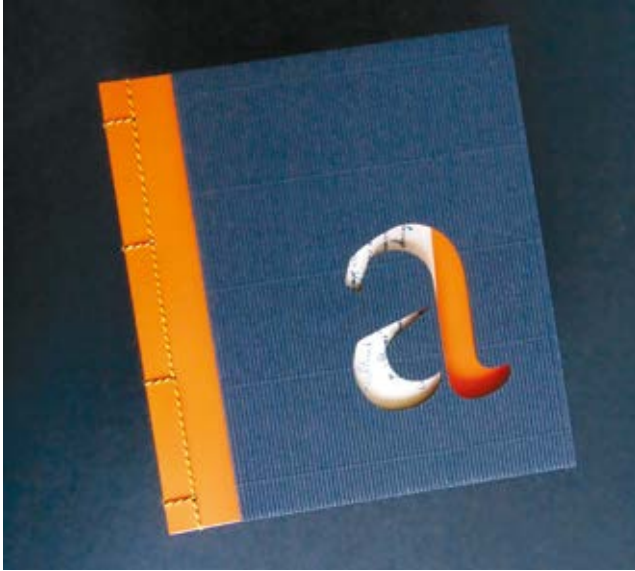
³⁵ Tallis, *Of Time and Lamentation*, 296.

³⁶ Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 280; quoted in Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 233.

an inscription in blue ink on white paper and a strip of orange background. The spine of the book is also orange, hand-sown with a striped thread. Those who know Skudžinskas as a designer will recognise orange as his signature colour. Thus, we can read the meaning which the book's cover conveys: it is the first work by this designer when he is free to create an object also as an author, not bound by the interests of other people or publishers.

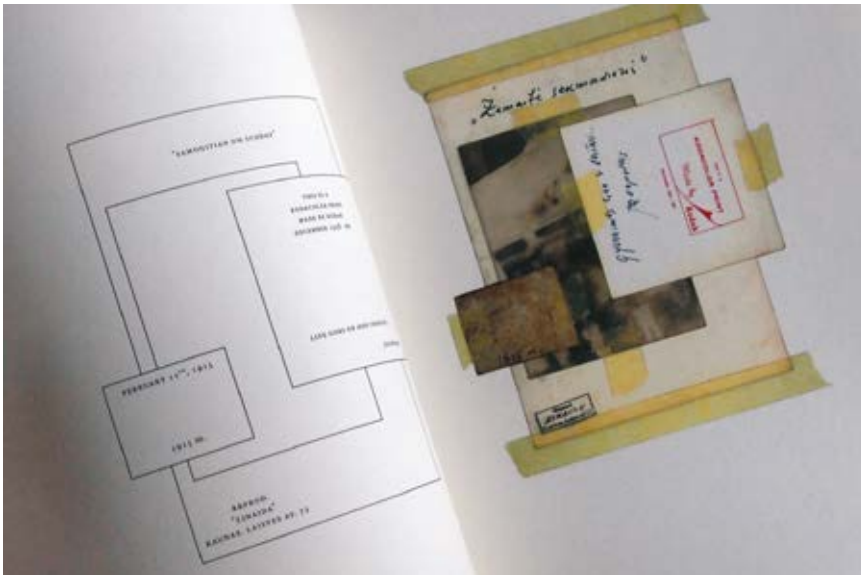
If this is a book of photographs, it conspicuously lacks them. The reproductions on white pages represent only the backs of photographs we don't see [fig. 6]. Instead, we can read what is written occasionally on their backs, we can examine their worn, spotty, crumpled surfaces and sticky tapes attaching the overturned photographs together into compositions. The traces of use imply the lives of photographs in albums or boxes, in frames or in wallets, transferred from owner to owner and then thrown out or sold, thus, finding their way into this anonymous collection. The inscriptions offer mini-stories, though. They tell of love, even of making love. They indicate that the photographs are for keeping memory. The repeated reference to digging trenches in collective farms suggests a strange importance of this activity, which used to be photographed, perhaps, in order to remember doing something together. And there are mysteries. For example, what could be represented in a photograph that declares the following: "while practicing shooting you can rest a bit"?

The inscriptions offer fragments of life during the different periods of the 20th century, which was full of upheavals and tragedies: two wars, political systems changing several times, new photographic habits and technologies replacing the obsolete ones. The arrangement of the backs of photographs in the book, especially the fact that most of them contain nothing, seems to tell us that their contents should be too easy to guess. We know the cliché compositions of the family photo album photos. Rather than describe the particular ones, the artist leaves them as a mystery where we have to use our own imagination. The text by the poet Ričardas Šileika at the end of the book does not help much either – he does not tell us anything about this project or about photography, only suggests an epitaph for it. Hence the book is a memory for the ways of fixing memories that vanish anyway. The emptiness



5.
Gytis Skudžinskas, *Album*.
Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014.
17 × 18,5 cm. Photo by Gytis
Skudžinskas

Gytis Skudžinskas, *Albumas*.
Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014



6.
Gytis Skudžinskas, *Album*. Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014.
Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Gytis Skudžinskas, *Albumas*. Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014

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7.

Gytis Skudžinskas, *Album*. Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014.
Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Gytis Skudžinskas, *Albumas*. Vilnius: Nerutina, 2014

that remains seems to be conveyed by the way the pages are double, as if the reader should separate them with a knife, only to discover nothing inside. Yet there is one real photograph in each copy of the book, an original, the inscription of which I saw through the aperture of the letter 'a' on the cover.

The one in my copy says: “Virga – let this dead shadow remind you of the living heart. – Bronius R.” [fig. 7] It is both about love and about photography, which might represent the man who signed it. It seems that the users of this undated photograph were well aware of its relationship to death discussed in depth by Roland Barthes³⁷. Yet, it is precisely the memory of Barthes that prevents me from taking the photograph out and looking at what it represents. As long as I have not seen it, like I have not seen his mother’s photograph in *Camera lucida*, I can enhance its meaning and feel a presence of something dear to me in the moment that has been there, in front of a camera. The moment I see the particular photograph of that particular man (or a couple, or something else – I don’t know), the picture

37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 92–94.

would lose its mystery and universal meaning. Thus, by reading only the words written in blue ink, I relate the images in this book to my old albums, and those anonymous memories thus become my own. Thus, the book turns me into its special reader. Its topic turns out to be the photography's role in shaping subjectivity, particularly the perception of time. In other words, this book is a 3D theory of photography.

Discarded Memories Brought to Life – a Scrapbook

Another book that represents an appropriated archive is *Burning Slides* by Aurelija Maknytė (2016). Its cover is plain cardboard and the title seems to have been burnt into it [fig. 8]. This modest appearance and three rubber bands binding the pages make it look like an artist's scrapbook where all kinds of found materials are kept for a future use, and it includes experiments happen without thinking much about their sequence or significance. Neves cites the scrapbook as a book form that deconstructs the smooth narrative of the history of photobooks presented by Badger and Parr because they are “edited, sequenced and produced by non-photographers” with “an intention”³⁸. In other words, scrapbooks are not photographers' bookwork constructed from photographs to tell a story, but “are anthologies of photographs where the purpose is not just to focus on a subject – be that the Red Army or an overview of the year in pictures – but is to propose some kind of didactic thesis about the nature of the medium itself. They are books with polemical intent”³⁹. Thus, the appearance of a scrapbook suggests that Maknytė's *Burning Slides* will tell us something about photography as a medium “with polemical intent”.

This particular scrapbook contains slides – positive photographs on film that come to their full effect only when they are projected on a wall. The slides represented on the pages are of natural size [fig. 9]. They are laminated in order to make them look like the actual collected found objects, which have lost relevance to their previous owners and were then sold to people like Maknytė who could grant them another life. And she does that by burning the slides literally with flame, but in a controlled way, in order to create patterns, holes, or star bursts on the images. She also organises

³⁸ Wylie and Prus, *Scrapbook*; quoted in Neves, “Many Faces of the Photobook”, 4.

³⁹ Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, vol. 2 (October 7, 2006): 206.



8.
Aurelija Maknytė, *Burning Slides*. Vilnius:
NoRoutine Books, 2016. 15 × 16,5 cm. Photo by Gytis
Skudžinskas

Aurelija Maknytė, *Degintos skaidrės*. Vilnius:
NoRoutine Books, 2016



9.
Aurelija Maknytė, *Burning Slides*. Vilnius:
NoRoutine Books, 2016. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Aurelija Maknytė, *Degintos skaidrės*. Vilnius:
NoRoutine Books, 2016

burning actions where others can participate and see their creations projected on the wall immediately. A kind of competition takes place over who will create a more impressive picture with fire. The original image, although pushed to the background, remains important – there has to be a relationship, however strange, between the past moment of reality recorded by an anonymous photographer and the drawing with fire happening now. Maknytė, the master, gets it right, and her images are the best. She succeeds in making her fire interventions reflect on the objects and landscapes photographed long ago. The act of burning displaces forgotten memories further into the past, marks them as a bygone period, exactly like the technology of slide projections is now obsolete when we can view photographs on computer screens anytime.

The standard way of presenting those two-layered creations in a book would be to enlarge the images and let the reader explore the visual intricacies of interaction between reality and abstraction. That would preserve the traditional conception of the photograph as a frame around a moment of reality, which would strike us with beauty or strangeness. Indeed, there is such an image in the book, on the inside of its first cover – an enlarged photograph kept on the page with corners used in photo albums. It depicts a city somewhere in Asia (we see hieroglyphs on the buildings). A worm-shaped explosion of light is tearing through its stillness. It comes not exactly from the sky, but from a reality beyond and parallel to the photographed one, like a message, a sign sent by unknown forces. This apocalyptic sight is covered with a semi-transparent sheet of paper including a short text by the artist. She writes about “abstract glimmers of parallel worlds” and suggests “opening up paradoxical depths in their surface seemingly out of nothing”. We can lift the sheet and check for the truth of words with the photograph – itself a standard proof of truth.

This first image, however, emphasises the material quality of slides in the subsequent pages. The tiny laminated squares mimic the slick appearance of the film that reflects light and thus hides the miniature image until we put it into the projector. The slide image is usually a secret until it is revealed like a miracle of light. The slides in the book are readily visible,

thus they are both the objects (slides) and the projections, albeit tiny, not cinema-like. Thus, they do not plunge us into the alternative reality created by light. Instead, we study the third layer, not mentioned in the text, but made explicit by such a presentation: the frames of the slides, which also contain numerous signs. Red dots, dates, numbers, and printed inscriptions indicate that the image is made by some educational agency rather than a family photographer. There are hand-written inscriptions that tell the opposite. Some frames are just dirty; some bear photographic company names and even statements showing that they were used as aids to teach people something about photography. There are also some instructions about how the slides should be put into the projector; names of countries where they were produced or where the photographed objects are situated. Many of those inscriptions and signs are upside down with regard to the images, which is also a mark of their half-baked quality: in order to be appreciated fully, they have to be put into the projector upside down, switching left to right, because the projection reverses the image. These traces of the old photographic culture, highlighted by the design of the book, are no less interesting than the transformed images of the past themselves.

The scrapbook form adds another insight – that these are just materials for something more, just curious discoveries out of which one could create something. Or not. The beauty of scrapbooks is their diary-like quality, the way they reveal the raw process of thinking as a prompt for something that will (or will not) develop in the future. And the reader of this book is put into this position of creative beginnings, which is an unexpected gift and a rare event with books that tend to be finished products. The reader is also presented with photography as a medium that keeps changing its materiality, its shape and its effect, and is also elusive. The scrapbook seems to be asking: do we still recognise it as photography after all these reversals and acts of burning? If yes, what is it that helps us claim that the images produced by many different technologies are actually photographs?



10.

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Photoobjects*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017. 15 × 17 cm. Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Fotoobjektai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017

A Photoobject as a Rare Find

The third book, *Photoobjects* by Arūnas Kulikauskas (2017), has to be taken out of its box [fig. 10]. The first impression is of an object, not a book, because its covers remind the wooden lid of a chest for the reader to open and see what is inside. But there is a photograph on the lid – just a thin layer of photo-sensitive film that accepts the relief and the texture of the surface, as if it sinks into it, becomes one with it, like an impression or an evasive memory left on the object, touched by someone’s mind. So, the book itself is a photoobject – or an example of a ‘Baroque form’. We know immediately what this strange entity is as soon as we see and touch the book.

The cover photograph is different on each of the 99 printed copies. Mine is of a busy square, perhaps somewhere in New York, with the letters

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11.

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Photoobjects*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017. Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Fotoobjektai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017



12.

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Photoobjects*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017. Photo by Agnė Narušytė

Arūnas Kulikauskas, *Fotoobjektai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2017

FOREVER 21, with 'forever' repeated twice, and with the crowds of people in front of the entrance to the shop. And above it, there is an advertisement featuring a girl photographed above a square with tiny people underneath her. The image is fractured into many rectangles, multiple references to the photographic frame, thus it is in a way made of many photographs, like a montage, only it is a 'found montage'. This, as well as a reference to young age and its energy, is why I have chosen this particular copy of the book-photoobject. It is mine and nobody else can have it. It is like a personal box-book for keeping my own memories and carrying them around the world like in a suitcase.

The inside of this 'box' is 'upholstered' with the special colour printed in silkscreen by the artist Kęstutis Grigaliūnas. It is deep and opaque, with a touch of mystery. When I turn the page, I find the various photoobjects of Kulikauskas, his memories left as a thin layer of photo-sensitive film on various things, which are now presented as reproductions. The first object is one glass of a broken pair of spectacles with a photograph of an eye that had once looked through them, only upside down, like in a broken mirror reality [fig. 11]. This seems to suggest that my gaze will be also imprinted on the photoobjects I shall see in this book: stones, Pandora's boxes, cans, pieces of wood, the cameras once owned by Jonas Mekas. But another design solution prevents the reader from just examining the images: the edges of the pages are frayed, as if the sheets have been torn from somewhere only to be put into this collection, into this box bound as a book. That larger 'somewhere' must be the photographer's life, richer with experiences and more extended in time than these preserved fragments.

Some pages have to be unfolded to reveal prolonged objects – pieces of wood covered with photographic memories [fig. 12]. The opened pages create horizontal spreads throughout the book – as if it is just to fit in the horizontal objects, including a horizon once observed at the seaside. But also, the process of unfolding and folding back activates the sensation of searching in a box full of secret openings, in which things are hidden from everyone's sight, kept just for one's private viewing. Thus, the artist, with the help of the designer, lets us into his private world not only by showing recorded memories, but also by engaging us in the action of looking for secrets, finding them

and exploring them in private. This creates an intimate and magic experience, for I know that my copy is unique with that image of “forever 21”.

Much like “forever 21”, this book stops time. The memory-objects it contains send me down the path of my own memories, which cuts me out of the flow of presence, and forms a capsule in time where I can safely explore the past. Therefore, my reading experience is not so much that of being carried away to the elsewhere (although Kulikauskas has created photoobjects commemorating his travels to various countries and letters to distant people), but to another time. Its reality is disintegrating in the same way as the material surfaces holding it are rubbing away, because visual perceptions of wearing off are supplemented with the tactile perceptions of the rough woody cover and the frayed edges of paper. Thus, the identity of the book as a photoobject, together with the reproduced photoobjects inside it, enhances the reader’s perception of the reality of things that have been only photographed and makes another person’s memories into the palpable, almost-lived experiences.

The Uncertainty Principle

It could seem strange that the book by the Latvian artist Ieva Balode is titled *invisible images* [fig. 13], for it contains many pages that display easily definable images: water, candles in an Orthodox church, ice-drift, a number burnt into somebody’s skin and a finger pointing to it, a couple rowing a boat along a flooded village street, a row of soldiers down on one knee holding rifles, and so on. The images are taken from the Latvian Museum of War, the Latvian National Library and private archives of Sandra Mi kova and Rolands Seilis. The book, in fact, consists of two separate booklets attached to two separate flexions of the dark green cardboard cover, which acts more like a folder: its two flaps fold onto the booklets like a ‘file of documents’. The title of the book is cut through the left cover: letters are holes that, when the book is closed, coincide with the title written in darker green, almost black, on the right cover. The title disappears in the dark cloud. It is palpable, but concealed from our vision.

When I open the “folder” and start “reading the file,” the pages of the two booklets fall onto each other [fig. 14]. Thus, three images can be



13.

Ieva Balode, *Invisible Images*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016. 18 × 18 cm. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Ieva Balode, *Nematomi vaizdai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016

seen all the time; sometimes the edge of the fourth is visible from underneath the image in the middle. The combinations of photographs vary – the juxtapose elements depend on the viewer of the book, and they vary every time. This book is clearly a puzzle I must solve.

My first ‘reading’ starts with a photograph of disturbed water, as if the book were promising a plunge into dangerous cold depths. But I could equally start with the soldier’s hands holding cartridge clips. Two different images – one almost abstract and instilling the sense of vague fear; another, concrete, but also a metonymy of abstract violence and war, unrelated to any personal experiences, nor any specific memory. I continue turning

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14.
Ieva Balode, *Invisible Images*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Ieva Balode, *Nematomi vaizdai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016



15.
Ieva Balode, *Invisible Images*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Ieva Balode, *Nematomi vaizdai*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2016

the pages: a hand holding the bird; an almost beastly body of a tree bathing in the sun, its trunks and branches snarling angrily; ruins of a city; a building somebody could even recognise. Then, a face emerges – blurred, almost anonymous, against the background of crops, and soldiers lined up in a field. There are more soldiers with Nazi swastikas. The war turns out to be specific, especially when the image of swastikas ‘meets’ the pile of clothes pouring out of a brick building in another photograph. Taken separately, this could be a record of a present-day storehouse of second-hand clothes, but a shovel nearby, also the barred door, do not let the first impression go away: these are the clothes of Jews undressed before execution, undressed so that their clothes could be later sold to people like us who buy them in second-hand shops even now. But here is another photograph: a flash of light reveals a roe in the dark. It links the images of violence to the present and the times yet to come. The beam of light crosses an Orthodox icon. Then, the photograph of a table with rubber gloves and strange utensils is separated by white pages. This reference to horrible medicinal experiments cannot be confused with any other image. Orthodox churches, light, water, soldiers – perhaps, no longer Nazis, but Russians – replace each other, while I am turning the pages, thus creating a contradictory combination of sacrum and violence. Yet this contradiction is not impossible, because people are always called to march to the holy war.

I have read all this from the images. But as I turn the last pages, I discover a concertina of texts hidden underneath [fig. 15]. They are printed in blue ink, which reminds me of typing machines of the pre-computer age. The texts are seen through on the other side of the page, so they are printed only on one side. These are quotations from Carl Gustav Jung, Hannah Arendt, Eliot Aronson, and Stanley Milgram. The letters are slightly smudged, sometimes disappearing, as if the ink on the tape was running out, as if the texts were being printed in poor conditions underground in an attempt to make sense of what was happening – all those soldiers, the biblical flood. Or, perhaps, the purpose was to memorise great ideas. Or to send a coded message. Thus, the pages containing quotations become performative. Ieva Balode has found them during her investigations prompted

by the experiment carried out by Stanley Milgram in 1963. He asked people to administer painful and even deadly electric shocks to other people for wrong answers, and 65 per cent complied. “This work talks about those 65 per cent who performed 450-volt fatal shock and 35 percent of people who, however, refused to perform it to the person in the next room,” writes Ieva Balode on the back of the book. She “aims to talk about human beings in and outside of context, individuality in a crowd and apart from it.”

The quotations create a network of concepts that help us interpret the fluctuating combinations of images. Jung writes about the idealised state in human psyche “that borders on the pathological, [...] in the same way that the State has caught the individual, the individual imagines that he has caught the psyche and holds her in the hollow of his hand.” The hands seen in the photographs acquire a new meaning: the psyche is squeezed like a bird in the “hand” of the individual stubbornly faithful to the ideals projected on him by the totalitarian state. The state takes responsibility for the results of cruel actions that the squeezed individual human-bird has a duty to perform dully, without passion. Hannah Arendt seems to comment on these photographs when she writes the following:

If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from the outside, but will be self-set. These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably from person to person, from country to country, from century to century; but limitless extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent. They are absent where men skid only over the surface of events, where they permit themselves to be carried away without ever penetrating into whatever depth they may be capable of⁴⁰.

This is a revelation: the photographs taken from various archives and revealing the facts, the context, or providing metaphors, do not actually awaken memories because there is no one to remember, or no one who would be capable of remembering. The reader of this ‘file’ is a bureaucratic

⁴⁰ The quotation is taken from Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 101.

researcher from the distant future, only interested in finding proof for her thesis. The photographs are nothing but surfaces, just like the facts they record, and they welcome anyone who just wants to be carried away without penetrating the depths of thoughts and remembrances. Such is the usual way of looking at photographs, and it is disturbed by the very design of this book. The viewer, encouraged to form their own juxtapositions of photographs, must link and then unlink them, and then link again with new images the way that artistic images affect us through the discrepancies between “the visible and its signification,” which “create and frustrate expectations,” as well as deny us recognition by producing “an alteration of resemblance”⁴¹. By making herself involved in the acts of creation and sense making the viewer no longer skids through the surface and is bound to rediscover the limits that would prevent her from inflicting those shocks to other human – or non-human – beings.

The legend on the back of the booklet on the right side explains the provenance of the images: 13 photographs taken by Ieva Balode, 12 historical photographs on glass, and a letter written on a piece of fabric by the Latvian soldier. Although the handwritten letters in blue ink are often blurred, I can still make out the date: May 7, 1944. The letter is now printed as a postcard, attached to the inside cover by photo corners. One can take it out and turn over to see the list of victims of the Salaspils death camp. In Salaspils, the Nazis had built a concentration camp where, along with the usual activities, they carried out medical experiments on children. As much as I can understand Latvian, the soldier writes about the weather in spring – here is yet another image, linguistic, next to the others, that Balode has used to summon the invisible images of violence that are rarely photographed. She quotes Jung from *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*:

Primitive man is not much interested in objective explanations of the obvious, but he has an imperative need – or rather, his unconscious psyche has an irresistible urge – to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner, psychic events. It is not enough for the primitive to see the sun rise and set; this external observation must at the same time be a psychic happening: the sun in its course must represent the fate of a god or hero who, in the last analysis dwells nowhere except in the soul of man⁴².

⁴¹ Rancière, *Future of the Image*, 4–6.

⁴² Jung, “Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious”, 6.

Thus, the visible image is less important than the deity, the beyond, the transcendence it represents, or the longing of our soul for something else, something bigger and holier than the reality we are so bored with. The beyond is the ‘invisible image’ of the title. In my reading of the book, it is used to cover (and justify) violence. The process of discovering this truth has been disturbing, nothing like the Kantian disinterested aesthetic pleasure.

A (Pandora’s) Box of Family Secrets

Two books published by *NoRoutine Books* come in the shape of boxes: *Stages / Scenos* (2017) and Vilma Samulionytė’s *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag* (2018). While the former box serves as a container for booklets by five artists (Dainius Liškevičius, Alvydas Lukys, Vilma Samulionytė, Gytis Skudžinskas and Darius Žiūra), the latter turns the reader into a detective digging into the family’s past and trying to decipher its secrets – a yet another puzzle.

The book emerged as a supplement to the film *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* by Vilma and Jūratė Samulionytės [fig. 16]. Intrigued by the presence of German roots in their family, two sisters follow the track of photographs and letters, meet the surviving members of their family in the hope of filling in the gaps and reconstruct what happened before and during the war. The story goes that Ella Fink and her cousin Méta Fink, both of German origin, were ordered to leave the Klaipėda region for Germany at the beginning of war. But they separated from their family and were later ‘saved’ by the Soviets as citizens of the Soviet Union captured by Germans. A Lithuanian suffix was added to their name, which became Finkytė. Méta explained this turn of events by claiming that Ella wanted to meet her lover Kazimieras, but they never met, and a letter from him arrived only twenty-seven years later from Canada. Ella, however, said that it was Méta who wanted to meet her boyfriend. In any case, due to this mysterious event, the girls stayed in the Soviet Union, losing their German identity as well as any chance of travelling across the Iron Curtain and meeting their relatives. The letters written by Ella’s relatives from Germany, and Aunt Selma’s and her daughter Irma’s visit in 1979 to the Soviet Union, were the only proof of this intriguing story. The sisters of the third generation, Vilma and Jūratė, set out



16–17.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Brangi močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018

to discover what really happened, but only end up collecting more photographs and letters than they can put in the box.

The prompt for this quest is the memory of Ella's – their grandmother's – suicide, which was hushed-up when the sisters were children. When questioned, their mother refuses to give a clear answer and says: I wanted to 'close this'. Into a box, one might as well add, while opening the lid of the metal box-as-a-book. On that lid, there is the photograph with decoratively cropped edges, a detail repeatedly shown in the film. In it, the young grandmother's figure emerges from darkness, only to disappear when the viewing angle is changed. In fact, she is vanishing during the very act of her emergence. The effect is kinetic. It predicts the result of the sisters' quest: they will not find certainty, only more questions, only yet another suicide – committed by their father this time.

I open the box like a personal box of treasures – or secrets. A piece of dark red cardboard – a marker with a hole – provides a 'lens' for examining the faces, for zooming in on details, for comparing different people in an attempt to understand their relationships – and destinies [fig. 17].

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Two women reclining on a bank of a lake, their heads close together: this is the grandmother with her sister Emma. Two sisters from the beginning of the 20th century are looking at two sisters at the beginning of the 21st, asking them to find out the truth or asking not to. The photographs are ‘fossils’ of past experiences⁴³. But they are also illusions, projected by the people portrayed towards the outside, even the images of the future themselves serve as an outside. The photographs are also ‘shields’ or Lacanian ‘screens’ designed to protect one’s inner insecurities against the gaze coming from the environment, from the objects, through which the subject is ‘photo-graphed.’⁴⁴ Therefore, they either lie or tell nothing.

The simple solution, the one that the owner of this box expects to find, after hearing that this is about a quest for the truth about a grandmother’s life, would be to tell a story. Who cares if it is true or not? The mechanism of the story deals with the gaps of uncertainty and provides meaning. Photographs then serve as evidence. But the designer of this ‘book’ displays the photographs on large sheets of paper – not in a grid, but rather scattered all over, like on a map [fig. 18]. The captions only say who the people in the photographs are. There is not only the grandmother – Ella Fink turned Elė Finkytė – and her sister Emma. There are more siblings: Erna, Selma, Eduard. There is the mother Amalia, Erna’s son Erwin, cousin Mėta, a wedding and a funeral. Ella is present in all photographs, projecting appropriate emotion for the camera. There is also war, which removed everyone from their original places. The change is dramatic, but it is represented on the sheets only with the photograph of a “Temporary house while fleeing”, also by once new, but now battered, documents, such as “Deutscher Umsiedler (Германский переселенец)” issued to Ella Fink by the officials of the Third Reich. The one she did not use and returned to Lithuania, while everybody else travelled on.

The photographs show the changing age and appearances of people who moved to Germany, their families. The third sheet is dedicated to Ella’s life as it continued in Lithuania: marriage, children, grandchildren, her sister Selma’s visit from Germany in 1979. There is Ella’s handwritten CV before retiring. It cites service to farmers, work in a bakery and other

43 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 9.

44 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 106.



18.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Brangi močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018

places like that. There is also a natural size envelope that included Ella's last letter to her daughter – the one hushed-about for decades. Finally, we get to read two real letters (facsimiles) in Lithuanian and in German. The one in Lithuanian informs about a mother's illness, death and funeral – in detail, particularly mentioning how many wreaths people had brought. The writer also lists people who came to the funeral. And the story is completed with a small photograph that 'falls out' of the folded letter: the coffin, the dead mother in it, and wreaths by the side. Such photographs of dead relatives used to be indeed sent by émigré relatives back to Lithuania, as if to confirm the sad facts, but then it was also customary to provide

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19.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Brangi močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018

photographic evidence of a person's proper funeral. As if the family album would not be complete without the image of the dead body of the one who once was photographed as a baby in mother's arms. It is a closure. The funeral photographs are macabre, no one likes to look at them, and they are often hidden in an envelope inserted in the album, but still, someone would take it out, in private, and look at the dead body, reflecting on the certainty and mystery of death.

Another letter is from Erwin, his wife Erika and her daughter Rosalie, written in 1975. Its contents remain inaccessible for those who do not speak German. Because of this, the photograph inserted in it is even more mysterious [fig. 19]. It is a vertical black and white image. It shows an ordinary country house surrounded by tall trees, a dirt road leading to

it, and clouds above. It could be a place of nostalgia – the photograph, paradoxically, seems to show not so much a real home, but a dream, a memory, especially because there are no inscriptions on its back and the text of the letter remains illegible to me. This gap of communication represents the gap in the family created by the loss of its German roots – also the loss of language, the loss of relatives who moved to live on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Its author, Erwin, is present on the first sheet as a boy in the group portrait with his parents – Ella’s sister Erna and her husband – as well as Ella herself, her cousin Mėta and brother Eduardas. Erwin is also seen in another photograph, together with Erna and Eduardas during the war, standing at the gate inside some courtyard, perhaps even of the same house. On the second sheet, he is a teenager with his parents and twin sisters, and then, as a middle-aged man now writing to his aunt who lives in Lithuania, in the Soviet Union – the forbidden land. Thus, willing to link the letter with the photographs, I find myself now following the life story of Erwin, both presented and hidden in the complex family map. His attempt to communicate with his aunt across the political barriers mirrors the sisters’ attempt to communicate across the barriers of time and silence, and also my attempt to make sense of all of this network of people previously unknown to me, but now somewhat uncannily familiar.

And then, after I take out the three folded sheets, I find a red book – a diary of the sisters’ quest. It is ‘written’ in photographs with concise captions printed in red letters on a cardboard glued onto the last spread, like an insert. The photographs show the Fink’s house, at first from the outside, then inside [fig. 20]. There are portraits of the sisters themselves and the people they meet in between: not only the relatives, but also neighbours who fill in the gaps of their story [fig. 21]. The house is abandoned, a ruin, but the apple trees in its garden continue to produce fruit – the ground is covered by fallen apples. Inside, the sisters find traces of former life, now dusty and rotten, but they keep glancing through the windows, seeing perhaps the same view as their grandmother and her siblings used to see while growing up. There is also a photograph of the dairy where Ella’s lover Kazimieras presumably worked (in the film, the sisters spend some time



20.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Brangi močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018



21.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Brangi močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018

looking for his traces in the dairy's archive but find nothing). There are also the Fink family graves, the field in the former place of the refugee camp, the path to the river, the border between Lithuania and East Prussia next to which the family once lived.

The photographs reveal the geography that spreads from the house, which has been consumed by time like the food for this growing family tree. They also reveal the passage of time, different temporalities experienced by people who came from the same place and point in time. The places also look uncannily unchanged in time, preserving the same views, the same paths, but no longer the same people who walked or saw them. If anything, this diary is about the impossibility of filling the gaps, of redeeming what was lost, of going back in time, yet it expresses the yearning to do so. It creates a relationship with the viewer who most certainly has similar derelict houses in her past from where her family tree has grown. Which tells us about the impossibility of tracing the point of origin, the accidental point, from which one starts, always retrospectively, to identify a 'family'. The rotten house in this book is the same kind of a reference point which we use to pick up a 'species' from the slow and continuous, but also broken, time of all that lives on earth⁴⁵.

Finally, on the bottom of the box, I find a black booklet [fig. 22]. It looks very simple, cheap, and includes a text printed in white letters, while the title is printed in golden ones. In the text, the artist Vilma Samulionytė explains her attempt to tell a coherent story divided into three periods that also represent three stages of her own relationship to the past: the pre-war life near the East Prussian border that is part of family memory, but not of her own experience; the war 'constructed' out of photographs, letters and historical facts discovered during the quest; the life in Soviet Lithuania she experienced. The artist admits: "Whilst trying to separate these three stages, it's impossible to avoid any overlapping or stumbling upon the same information." This is indeed the narrative that is proposed not only via the layout of texts, photographs and letters, but also via the book's material body. In order to understand what is going on, the reader has to unfold the sheets and fold them back and then, having made a different person the



22.

Vilma Samulionytė, *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018. Photo by Gytis Skudžinskas

Vilma Samulionytė, *Branži močiute, laba diena*. Vilnius: NoRoutine Books, 2018

centre-stage or having discovered a loose photograph, she has to go back to the same sheets, unfold them, and fold them back again. The photographs in the diary also tell a story, which is corrected by the captions, and having read them, one is tempted to leaf through the photographs again. Unfolding and folding, placing one layer onto another, taking photographs out of folds and sliding them back in echoes the quest itself, which was not linear, not coherent, but convoluted, with overlapping strands, and preserving silence enveloped in the fold of all conversations and time.

The last paragraph in the booklet also provides a key to rereading the material once again:

I've tried narrowing all these moments down to those that intrigue me most, and it appears that I'm probably most interested in the emotional experiences of my grandmother – why did she decide on staying in Lithuania? What was life in the Schlawe refugee camp like? Who was Kazimieras and was he the reason to return? How did she come back to Lithuania? Did she ever stop and think that some of the decisions she took back then would turn out to be fateful? Did Ella know that she might not have the chance to make things the way they were before⁴⁶?

The material body of the book makes this impossibility physical and real. The photographs allow us to perceive the reality of the past, but only in the shape of fragments whose links to the context remain unexplained. The missed communication through the letters rather reveals gaps than fills them in. The images of the decaying house do not leave any doubt regarding the impossibility of bringing it back to its lived-in state.

Most importantly, the 'why' of this quest also remains unanswered and, as a gap, entices the viewer (owner) of the book to attempt her own quest and imagine their own answers, to construct their own versions of events. Through this investigation carried out by constructing, remembering, imagining, unfolding and folding, comparing, weaving several different life stories and plunging into her own memories, it is the viewer who is turned into the subject of this book. To re-live someone else's life requires time and turns time into an object that can be kept in a box, preserved, re-visited and 'resurrected'.

Conclusions

The discussion of five publications of *NoRoutine Books* has shown the variety of approaches that have been carefully selected to convey the ideas behind the works of different artists. In this, the publisher and its designer Gytis Skudžinskas realises the full spectrum of photobook work identified by its internationally famous practitioners. Photographic archives have been used to reflect on photography as a medium, to theorise on its changing status in the digital age, and to tell stories that are elliptical, which means they provide space for the creativity of the reader-viewer. The latter

⁴⁶ The language is slightly corrected as this is a translation of Vilma Samulionytė's thoughts originally written in Lithuanian.

is involved in solving historical puzzles, deciphering narratives and discovering meaning from the given material by performing actions pre-programmed by the structure of the book. The experience of reading-viewing such books is pleasurable as the process of following the original trajectories across the book-as-a-map provides the sense of closure. Or by studying 'secret files', which sometimes leads to horrifying and wide-reaching existential conclusions that may or may not be intended by the artists of the books. Continuing to experiment with materials and their arrangement, the designer succeeds in justifying the name of the publisher. Each new book is unique and unexpected, thus participating in the 'The Baroque era of the Photobook'.

The publisher *NoRoutine Books* treats the photobook both as a medium and a work of art. It is a medium in the sense that the book helps to convey the concept of the series of works by the given artist in the book form. As works of art, the books designed by Gytis Skudžinskas add a thick layer of perceptual reality to the reader's experience of visual content and thus contribute to the sense of witnessing something intimate and uniquely personal. In fact, the reader-viewer experiences a work of art rather than its presentation in the book. Additionally, since the design is both conspicuous and amalgamated with the material and the idea realised in each book, this knowledge of being manipulated by the designer escapes the reader's attention. What she is left with is an object that falls out of the routine of dealing with both objects and books. And thus, the reading of every book becomes memorable in the 21st century world overflowed with myriads of experiences that tend to numb our attention.

Received ——— 2021 05 20

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Santrauka

Nerutinė fotografijos knygos estetika: fenomenologinis *NoRoutine* knygų skaitymas

Agnė Narušytė

Reikšminiai žodžiai: fotoknyga, fotoknygos menas, NoRoutine Books, Gytis Skudžinskas, Vilma Samulionytė, Aurelija Maknytė, Arūnas Kulikauskas, Ieva Balode.

Menininkai Vilma Samulionytė ir Gytis Skudžinskas 2014 m. įkūrė nepriklausomą leidyklą „NoRoutine Books“ (dar vadinamą „Nerutina“). Iki 2021 m. pradžios išleista 15 fotoknygų ir viena knyga be vaizdų. Leidybos ir dizaino rutinos programiškai vengiantys leidėjai kiekvieną knygą suvokia kaip mediją, kurios ypatybės, materialumas ir specifinė kalba yra prasmės kūrimo įrankiai. Visada išlaikoma 99 egzempliorių riba padeda pristatyti knygas kaip retus, kolekcionuojamus artefaktus. Be to, tai reiškia, kad knygos yra vertingi objektai ir jas skaityti reikia lėtai, patiriant malonumą, ilgai šifruojant pranešimą, kurį perteikia knygos struktūra. Siekiant pademonstruoti, kaip veikia toks skaitymas ir kaip konstruojama prasmė, straipsnyje analizuojamos penkios leidyklos knygos: Gyčio Skudžinsko *Albumas*, Aurelijos Maknytės *Burning Slides*, Arūno Kulikausko *Photoobjects*, Ievos Balodės *Invisible Images* ir Vilmos Samulionytės *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag*.

„Skaitant“ šias penkias knygas stengiamasi parodyti, kokią vietą jos užima fotoknygų leidybos ir kritikės Lesley A. Martin pasiūlytoje taksonomijoje, kurioje ji įvardija tris kategorijas: iš archyvinių fotografijų kuriamus naratyvus, reikšmių dėlionės ir „barokinės fotoknygos formas“, priartėjančios prie menininko knygos žanro, bet panaudojančios fotografijas. „NoRoutine Books“ dizaineris Skudžinskas eksperimentuoja su raiškos variantais ir kiekvieną knygą konstruoja kaip unikalią formą, kuri geriausiai tinkama ja pristatomo kūrinio idėjai išreikšti. Pasitelkdamas fotoarchyvus jis ne tik kuria daugialypius naratyvus, bet ir knygą kaip medijos teoriją,

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apmąstančią kintantį fotografijos statusą skaitmeniniame amžiuje. Šiose knygose pasakojamos istorijos yra eliptiškos ir paliekančios daug erdvės skaitytojo-žiūrovo kūrybiškumui. Skaitytojas įsitraukia į istorinių galvosūkių sprendimus ir atranda užkoduotas reikšmes atlikdamas knygos struktūros numatytus performatyviuosius aktus. Tokių knygų skaitymas suteikia išrišimo malonumą ilgai klajojus knyga kaip žemėlapiu. O kartais jos kaip „slapto duomenų aplanko“ studijavimas sukrečia egzistencinėmis įžvalgomis, kurių knygos autoriai galėjo ir nenumatyti. Leidyklos „NoRoutine Books“ fotoknygos skaitytojo patirtį praturtina tikroviškumo ir intymaus, asmeniško pasakojimo pojūčiu. Tai leidžia įsiminti kiekvieną knygą, nepaškęstančią šiuolaikybės vaizdų ir artefaktų sraute.