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Giving Expression to Contemporaneity – Photography in Lviv in the First Half of the 20th Century

Institutions and Unions

The importance of Lviv as an administrative as well as scientific and cultural centre, growing steadily since the 19th century, was also evidenced by the progress observed in photography and related creative media (photomontages, films). The variegated ethnic composition of the population in Lviv and the surrounding area was a factor stimulating general development, but also creating tensions; nevertheless, up to the Second World War a status quo was upheld, initially in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and after the Great War in the Polish state. The continuity of progress in the period in question is confirmed by the uninterrupted functioning of scientific research and cultural institutes, whose commitment to the advancement and maintenance of diverse forms of modernity was manifold. Photography was amongst the most important of them, and it provided a relatively neutral platform for aspirations of various social groups to meet.

Scientific and artistic practices often derived support from the Lviv Polytechnic, where, for instance, photosensitivity of chemical compounds was examined on a systematic basis. This tradition was started by Lviv-based pharmacist Teodor Torosiewicz, who had been publishing research reports from 1820. When the Technical Academy was established in Lviv,¹ the chemistry of photography was investigated by its professor (from 1872) and rector August Freund,² and his successor Stefan Niementowski. Concurrently with Freund, Bronisław Radziszewski, considered to be the founder of the Polish Photochemical School,³ was active at the University of Lviv. Radziszewski's studies were significantly expanded by his assistants (notably Julian Schramm). From 1921 to 1931, the Lectureship in Photography at the Polytechnic was held by Henryk Mikolasch, an eminent fine-art photographer and researcher working on gum bichromate techniques and colour photography. Until 1939 the institution – renamed as the Institute of Photography – was headed by Witold Romer. His doctoral dissertation *Studium wywoływania wyrównawczego* (Chemistry Department, Lviv Polytechnic, 1936) drew from the Institute's long tradition of scientific research. In 1931, Witold Romer devised an innovatory tone-splitting technique, isohelia.⁴ The discovery was related to his endeavours to come up with a technique for printing maps drawn by his father, Eugeniusz Romer, in the Książnica Atlas Printing Works. Reducing tonality in the photographic image to areas of medium lightness was an equivalent of the hypsometric method in cartography, where terrain relief is represented by sections of graded homogenous colour. As a method of objective synthesis of chiaroscuro, isohelia had scientific importance, but it also found its way to fine arts

¹ It was founded in 1844, renamed as the Polytechnical School in 1877, and as the Lviv Polytechnic in 1920.

² From 1861 to 1868, he worked as a teacher in Tarnopol, where he also ran a photographic studio.

³ E. Tchórz: *Początek i rozwój fotochemii na ziemiach polskich*, [in:] *Materiały sesji naukowo-technicznej*, Wrocław 2000, pp. 191–199.

⁴ In 1932, he published articles concerning his invention in German and English press.

producing impressive effects, mostly in the creative output of Witold Romer, who exhibited numerous works executed in this technique from 1932. Upon the outbreak of war, Romer's position was taken over by Jan Neuman, whose work was mostly concerned with colour filters until his tragic death in June 1941.

Photographic societies for professionals or artists performed an essential role in initiating and perfecting various activities. Founded in 1891, the Photographic Art Enthusiasts Club in Lviv, the first association of that kind in Poland, served as the prototype. In 1903, the club changed its name to the Lviv Photographic Society (LTF), with Henryk Mikolasch (1872–1931) and Józef Świtkowski (1876–1942) as its most prominent members. The Society's achievement was well-known throughout Europe. Since 1894, the group staged regular exhibitions of fine-art photography, and in 1895 it began publishing the first photography magazine in Poland,⁵ more followed soon.⁶ Henryk Mikolasch's *Album fotografów polskich* [Book of Polish Photographers], 1905, was the first publication of this type, comprising works by 42 photographers (including 15 from Lviv). In 1910, together with Józef Świtkowski, he also published *Polskie słownictwo fotograficzne* [Polish Photographic Vocabulary] in an attempt to provide a unified professional terminology. In 1903–1939, Józef Świtkowski released 10 photography textbooks for professionals and amateurs; he also edited photography journals published in Lviv, and authored a great number of articles devoted to techniques applied in photography and its aesthetics.⁷

Photo parlours were frequently owned by documentarians, photographers involved in artistic movements, and educationists. One of such versatile figures was Teodor Szajnok (1831–1894), a co-founder of the Photographic Art Enthusiasts Club in Lviv, and the author of travel photography books as well as a photography textbook. Edward Trzemeski's (1843–1905) establishment also enjoyed high reputation; after 1905 it was run by his daughter together with her husband Rudolf Huber (1875–1942). Huber was an eminent portraitist, a member of the Lviv Photographic Society until 1939, and received many honourable mentions at exhibitions. Marek Münz (1878–1937) gained fame for his documentary pictures of Lviv; from around 1900 he operated various photography parlours and contributed to pictorials published in Lviv. Photographers were assisted by entrepreneurs active in the field: Władysław Borzowski and Edmund Brodkowski not only traded in photography equipment, but also produced photography magazines and brochures (Brodkowski built cameras by himself and participated in photography shows). Jan Bujak, a well-known constructor of photographic and surveying appliances,⁸ managed his own photography parlour and laboratory in Lviv from 1908 up to the Second World War. He was also an LTF member, and publisher of Mikolasch's research reports amongst others.

In 1930, on Stefan Dmochowski and Aleksy Balicki's initiative the Ukrainian Photographic Society (UFT, UFOTO) was founded in Lviv; with time its branches were established in Stanisławów and Tarnopol.⁹ The UFT organised annual exhibitions of Ukrainian amateur

⁵ Monthly "Przegląd fotograficzny".

⁶ "Kronika Fotograficzna" (1898–1899), "Wiadomości Fotograficzne" (1903–1906), "Miesięcznik Fotograficzny" (1907–1911 and again in 1924–1931).

⁷ From 1921 Józef Świtkowski taught a course in photography at the Chair of Classical Archeology, University of Lviv, available to all students. They included, amongst others, Jarosław Słoniewski, Ludwik Zaturski and Bronisław Kupiec.

⁸ In 1936 he established the Factory of Surveying Devices in Lviv. After the war he was active in Katowice.

⁹ In 1937 it had 169 members (including 137 from Lviv). Since 1924 photography sections were formed in

photography, and published the “Svitlo i Tin” monthly since 1933. Similarly to the exhibitions, the magazine mostly promoted travel photography and Ukrainian folklore. When it came to aesthetics, Polish sources were often consulted. According to Stefan Szczurat,¹⁰ one of the leaders with the UTF, the elder members looked up to Henryk Mikolasch, but the younger ones esteemed first of all Jan Bułhak, who worked in Vilnius. Excerpts from his *Estetyka światła* [Aesthetics of Light] were reprinted in “Svitlo i Tin” in 1936, and in 1939 Robert de la Sizeranne’s *La photographie est-elle un art?* Notable Ukrainian photographers included Eugene Chraplyvy, Stefan Dmochowski, Julian Dorosz, Danylo Figol, Roman and Jarosław Maślak, Aleksander Moch, Jarosław Sawka and Volodymyr Tarnawsky. Figol’s work seems particularly interesting as it tends to break with the convention of pictorial folkloristics; his photographs are bold compositions of dynamic forms. Julian Dorosz was also an important figure; in 1931 his photography and film textbook was released. He made documentary films about Hutsuls and country life, he also played a part in popularising filmmaking in Ukrainian circles. They were in touch with Polish filmmakers (first of all with Miron Trusz and Roman Turyn), and some Ukrainian photographers participated in the activities undertaken by the Lviv Photographic Society.

In spring 1931, the Technical Amateur Photographers Group by the Mutual Aid Society of the Lviv Polytechnic Students was formed. The group organised photography courses, competitions and exhibitions of student photographs with the assistance of Witold Romer, who was instrumental in accepting many of the group’s members to the LTF. Since 1933, the Group staged yearly shows presenting its members’ works, and in 1936 it put up the First National Exhibition of Academic Photography (50 of 78 exhibiting photographers were students of the Lviv Polytechnic). The next year, 130 of the displayed works were selected to be presented in Zagreb and Naples. Within the Group the leading roles in organisational and creative matters were occupied by Henryk Bielski, Leon Lutyk, Mieczysław Kołodziej, Tadeusz Maciejko and Józef Treszka. Architecture student Tadeusz Maciejko (1903–1979) stood out due to his innovatory approach to buildings and expressive designs of posters based on photomontage. Dynamic compositions and a style modelled on modernist avant-garde were also preferred by Mieczysław Kołodziej and Leon Lutyk.

Artistic Attitudes in Photography

The first three decades of the 20th century in Lviv were dominated by views formed at the beginning of the century. Their sum and substance was provided by Roberta de la Sizeranne’s essay *La photographie est-elle un art?*, translated into Polish and published in Lviv in 1907.¹¹ It discussed the basic rules of so-called pictorialism, or guidelines on composing the photographic image in accordance with academic traditions of creation. It is true that pictorialists respected newer trends, such as postimpressionism, symbolism, and even expressionism,¹² and valued individual expression, yet their innovative spirit faded in the light of the emergence of avant-garde art. Pictorialists were very much in favour of documenting daily life. In Lviv, that was done by amateur photographers as well as professionals collaborating with the press. As a result, some valuable archives were built up, frequently

Ukrainian social organisations in Lviv; they were also formed in Kiev and Odessa but were soon discontinued by Soviet authorities.

¹⁰ S. Szczurat: *O ukraińskim ruchu fotograficznym*, [in:] “Nowości Fotograficzne”, Bydgoszcz, 1937, no. 1, pp. 25–29.

¹¹ This comprehensive essay was published in Paris in 1900 and its Polish version appeared in the compendium *Podstawy kultury estetycznej* (Lviv 1907).

¹² This can be seen, for instance, in the work by Warsaw-based photographers Marian and Witold Dederko.

offering novel aesthetic solutions. Among the most important collections of this kind is the one by Józef Kościeszka Jaworski, a painter and photographer from Warsaw, whose photographic work in 1912–1922 was commissioned by the Archive of the City of Lviv.¹³ Many extant photographs from the years of the First World War and soon after were taken by Marek Münz and Ludwik Wieleżyński. The latter had a number of photo parlours in Lviv since 1913, and from 1941 to 1944 was employed in the Archive of the City of Lvov, where he recorded wartime destruction brought about by WWII.

When it came to artistic matters the tenor was set out by Henryk Mikolasch, who promoted in Lviv circles the ideas forwarded by Sizeranne. He taught a photography course at the Lviv Polytechnic, obligatory for architecture and surveying students; it was called “art photography,” and covered documentary, aerial and “painterly” photography.¹⁴ Mikolasch boasted scientific achievement in experiments with colour nature photography and gum bichromate techniques; he also compiled an extensive documentation of wildlife in the Carpathian Mountains. The pictures served him as models for watercolours, which he would also exhibit.¹⁵ In 1924–1927 Mikolasch worked with an assistant, Zbigniew Bieniawski (1899–1963), an air force pilot and architect, also dealing with aerial survey, who was later succeeded by architect Jan Neuman (1900–1941). Having run a Lviv portrait studio with him for a few years, from 1925, Janina Mierzecka (1896–1987) considered herself a student of Mikolasch. Admirers of his aesthetics included Adam Lenkiewicz (1888–1941), a distinguished documentarian of Lviv, an LTF member and even president, who in 1930 obtained a concession to conduct photography and film courses.¹⁶ A similar pictorial attitude was adopted by Stefan Pazirski (1888–1927), a graduate of the Lviv Polytechnic and an LTF member. In 1929 the LTF issued a brochure celebrating Mikolasch’s jubilee, in which Jan Bułhak and Józef Świtkowski argued for traditional strategies of pictorialism,¹⁷ and criticised modernist photography for its glorification of the aesthetic aspect of industrial products as well as eccentric methods of depiction. Świtkowski heralded a revival of authentic art via spiritual potential of photographers.¹⁸ Tadeusz Cyprian (at the time from Poznań) was the only one to advocate departure from the traditional aesthetics of “noble” techniques and implementation of modern silver bromide prints and dynamic small-format photography.¹⁹

¹³ In 1911–1918 he had a studio in Łyczakowskiej Street. See: J.B. Kucharska: *Dokumentacja fotograficzna Lwowa Józefa Kościeszki Jaworskiego z lat 1911–1918*, [in:] *Dawna fotografia lwowska 1839–1939*, Lviv 2004, pp. 186–196.

¹⁴ Documentary and fine-art photography were also jointly covered at courses run by Józef Świtkowski at the University of Lviv, and by Jan Bułhak at the Vilnius University.

¹⁵ Mikolasch studied chemistry and pharmacy in Lviv, but briefly also painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. However, he encountered problems when he attempted to exhibit his pieces. When in 1926 he wished to put on display his watercolours along with the photographs, the owners of the venue, the Society of Fine Arts Enthusiasts in Lviv, objected.

¹⁶ Lenkiewicz, a graduate from the Polytechnic and the University of Lviv, founded a branch of the Polish Tatra Society in Lviv in 1921, and was active in the Carpathian Skiers Association.

¹⁷ Joint publication: *Niektóre zagadnienia fotografii polskiej*, Lwów 1929.

¹⁸ Although he held no university degrees, Świtkowski was broadly educated; he was also a real expert in parapsychology and published many books in this field, including *Okultyzm i magia w świetle parapsychologii* (1939).

¹⁹ Tadeusz Cyprian came from Podolia, his first photographs were presented in Lviv in 1913, where he attended a secondary school. After 1925 he worked as a judge in Poznań.

Modern art, presented in Lviv in 1913, 1917, 1918 and 1920–1922 – at exhibitions by futurists, members of the Polish *Formizm* movement and expressionists – found its expression in the photographic domain in 1929, when the Artes Association of Visual Artists was founded, integrating various forms of contemporary art. Shows staged by the group included, aside from dominant paintings and prints, photographs, photomontages and photocollages reflecting avant-garde strategies in artistic trends, conveying a newer and broader view of the possibilities offered by the medium of photography, even though controversial for a wider public. The founders of the group included Jerzy Janisch, Aleksander Krzywobłocki and Mieczysław Wysocki; they soon invited others to join, Ludwik Lille, Margit and Roman Sielski, Ludwik Tyrowicz, Otto Hahn, Mark Włodarski (Henryk Streng), amongst others. In 1930–1932 the group held 11 exhibitions (including 6 in Lviv), then their collaboration weakened to finally stop in 1935. Aleksander Krzywobłocki (1901–1979) was the only Artes member to deal mostly with photography,²⁰ he had studied architecture in Lviv, and learned to take pictures at a course conducted by Henryk Mikolasch. The way he used the skills was radically different from what his teacher believed in. Since 1930 Krzywobłocki adopted the surrealist style for a series of photographic portraits and staged outdoor scenes with figures. He was even more committed to creating photomontages and photocollages, combining fragments of photos depicting mostly architecture and sculpture. His fantastic compositions reveal influences of both surrealism and constructivism,²¹ demonstrating first and foremost the architect's unbound imagination. Krzywobłocki presented his architectural projects of disciplined modernist design and carried them out as an architect and historic buildings conservation officer.²² Numerous surrealist photomontages were also executed by painter Jerzy Janisch.²³ During the activity period of the Artes Association, similar pieces were also produced by Margit Sielska, Marek Włodarski and Otto Hahn, who were mostly active in the field of painting. Manfred Grossberg, a freelance, created photomontages commenting on social matters, published by “Chwila,” a Lviv newspaper.

Around 1930 many Lviv photographers began to produce works mirroring the progressive modernist style in art, which combined modified pictorial tradition with a new approach to documentary photography in a most intriguing fashion. One of them was Jan Neuman, who created since 1929 photo compositions depicting close-ups of radio equipment and scientific appliances, as well as cycles of anti-war photomontages. He thus referred to avant-garde photomontage and the aesthetics of constructivism and expressionism, while trying to play by pictorial rules. In 1930–1931, Neuman enrolled in an advanced photography course in Vienna, then moved to Warsaw to finally return to Lviv in 1939. Władysław Bednarczuk (1904–1944) was another photographer who excited attention with his expressive pieces, first of all with his performance *Konstrukcja*, which proved an outstanding success at an international show in Montevideo in 1930. Having trained in photographic studios since he was a child, Bednarczuk obtained special consent for attending Henryk Mikolasch's photography courses, and as a teenager made self-portraits with expressive underpaintings and montages, which could have been inspired by exhibitions of avant-garde art in Lviv. His best-known works, aside from

²⁰ See: catalogue of the solo exhibition *Aleksander Krzywobłocki: Fotomontaże*, Wrocław 1975.

²¹ An insightful article on the origins of photomontage was written by Debora Vogel, *Genealogia fotomontażu i jego możliwości*, [in:] “Sygnały”, Lviv, 1934, no. 12.

²² First in Lviv, and since 1946 in Wrocław, where he created consecutive cycles of his photomontages.

²³ In 1934 a novel by Alina Lan, *Kometta Halleya*, featuring Krzywobłocki and Janisch's photomontages, was published in Lviv.

self-portraits, are heroised portraits of labourers at work. In 1936, Bednarczuk organised the First National Exhibition of Workers' Photography²⁴ in Lviv, inviting staff members of photo parlours. The formulation of the exhibition programme was reminiscent of socialist manifestoes, provoking widespread criticism.

Socially involved in spirit, but uncontroversial in terms of politics, was Janina Mierzecka's work *Ręka pracująca* [Working Hand]. The artist, whose pictorial portraits and landscapes won positive recognition, was asked by her husband, a dermatologist, to document deformations of human hands in people following various occupation, which she began doing in the late 1920s. In her memoirs²⁵ she wrote of producing about 300 such documentary records. From 1931 her photographs were put on display at scientific meetings,²⁶ and with time even at photography exhibitions as they corresponded with contemporary trends of socially engaged art. In 1939, Książnica Atlas published *Ręka pracująca* with 60 plates each containing two photographs depicting hands.²⁷ The book encouraged Mierzecka to devote herself to scientific photography, considered by many to be the most valuable part of her output.

A modern approach to photography was developed by Witold Romer – the inventor and propagator of the isohelia method – creating dynamic compositions with clearly defined tones. From his debut at a 1926 exhibition, he kept impressing audiences with his subtle treatment of chiaroscuro as well as perfect operation of colours in gum bichromate techniques. Incorporating industrial themes into the scope of his work, he went to Upper Silesia in 1928, but also photographed Lviv and its surroundings, recording architecture, landscape, ethnographic motifs and daily life scenes.²⁸ In 1937, he effected the foundation of the Lviv Film Club by the LTF where activities of this kind had been undertaken before. The most interesting films in the Club were made by Adam Lenkiewicz (*Karpaty Wschodnie*, 1930, *Po kołędzie*, 1934, amongst others), Witold Romer (*Woda oraz Lwów miasto działu wodnego*, 1937), as well as Ludwik Zatorski, Andrzej Progulski, Włodzimierz Puchalski, Tadeusz Maciejko and Tadeusz Porębski. The practical and theoretical aspects of film were also the subject of interest in other Lviv circles, mostly connected with the University and the Polytechnic.²⁹ Adam Lenkiewicz was a pioneer of filmmaking, conducting film courses in the 1920s and making films during his motorcycle rides. In February 1932, a film club Awangarda (run by Bolesław Lewicki) was established in Lviv; in 1933-1934 it published the magazine "Awangarda." Some people associated with the Orion film studio³⁰ were also active (including Witold Słoniewski, Edward Olszaniecki and Miron Trusz); they cooperated with Jarosław Słoniewski, a photographer, filmmaker and inventor.³¹ They made newsreels and experimented with the medium, initially under Lenkiewicz's guidance and later on their own. Film enthusiasts often met at the studio of

²⁴ To celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Photographic Workers' Society.

²⁵ J. Mierzecka, *Cale życie z fotografią*, Kraków 1981, pp. 126–129.

²⁶ In 1935, she received the silver medal at the Dermatological Congress in Budapest.

²⁷ *Ręka pracująca*, text by Henryk Mierzecki, photos by Janina Mierzecka, 250+75 copies.

²⁸ Many of these photographs are still in the family archive of negatives.

²⁹ B. Gierszewska, *Kino i film we Lwowie do 1939 roku*, Kielce 2014.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 264–268.

³¹ When Słoniewski was a medicine students at the University of Lviv, he learned photography from Józef Świtkowski.

photographer Wanda Diamand, who was also acquainted with artists from the Artes group.³²

Another eminent figure was Franciszek Groer (1887–1965), the head of the Paediatric Department at the University of Lviv from 1919 to the Second World War, and an amateur photographer since before 1910. His early works are perfect examples of pictorialism; however, he had no close relations with Mikolasch; he became an LTF member only in 1938. He achieved success at international exhibitions; he took photos in Lviv as well as during his numerous scientific trips around the world.³³ He was particularly good at recording ephemeral situations, infused with delicate mood and perfectly executed in various techniques. In the 1930s he significantly up-dated the aesthetics of his photographs, making them more dynamic and precise, which brought him closer to the style of both the older and the younger generation of Lviv photographers at the time. Włodzimierz Puchalski (1908–1979), a student of the Polytechnic and the University of Lviv (natural sciences), turned out to be a very intriguing figure as well. He began photographing nature when he was young, and began displaying his works in 1936, to great acclaim.³⁴ He was best-known for his animal portraits suggestively highlighting individual traits of the subjects. Puchalski also made films about nature, and later on became famous as an author of books illustrated with his own photographs.³⁵ In 1936, the LTF accepted a new member, Bożena Michalik (1907–1995), whose works tended to be situated at the intersection of photography and print; she achieved greatest success in Wrocław after the war. Bronisław Kupiec's (1909–1970) career path was similar; when he was a student in Lviv he got interested in film and began collaborating with Witold Romer in 1937, in the Lviv Film Club by the LTF. He soon started working on photography publications at the Książnica Atlas, where Witold Romer initiated production of travel picture postcards in 1937. Special production methods and materials obtained from the most eminent Polish photographers ensured the highest quality at the aesthetic and printing levels. Until September 1939, 2,080 postcard designs were prepared, superb manifestations of patriotic voyages. Works by numerous Lviv photographers became famous and are still here thanks to these postcards (created also by some photographers not mentioned in this text before: Zenon Klemensiewicz,³⁶ Tadeusz Krystek, Roman Puchalski).

With more than 100 members in 1938, the Lviv Photographic Association played the role of the main centre of photographic practices in Lviv and integrated to some extent various environments.³⁷ Annual exhibitions of Polish photography³⁸ were the most prestigious events; two of them were organised within the framework of the International Photography Salons in 1928 and 1932. The LTF cooperated with the local branch of the Tatra Society, the Polish Sightseeing Society, the Carpathian Skiers Association, or the Lviv tourist office in staging

³² A film about a kayak trip taken by the Artes members in the Eastern Carpathians was made - *Styrem i Piną* (1934), directed by Roman Turyn and photographed by Stanisław Lipiński.

³³ In spring 1939 a comprehensive solo exhibition of his work took place in Lviv (301 photographs).

³⁴ In 1933–1936 he was assistant to Witold Romer at the Polytechnic, and in 1938 the LTF organised Włodzimierz Puchalski's solo show titled *Wystawa fotografii przyrodniczej i myśliwskiej* in Lviv.

³⁵ His best-known book was *Bezkrwawe łowy*, originally published in 1951, with more than ten editions.

³⁶ A physics professor at the Lviv Polytechnic, a mountaineer and the president of the Carpathian Skiers Association.

³⁷ In 1938 a conflict arose at the LTF over some nationalist slogans, a number of members of Jewish origin left the Society and established the Jewish Photoclub Society, which never grew in importance. The Board for the Protection of Monuments of Jewish Culture, founded in Lviv in 1925, and the Jewish Sightseeing Society, established in 1926, encouraged compiling photographic records.

³⁸ In 1939, the nineteenth exhibition was organised (the first one in 1903).

exhibitions and sightseeing competitions. Quite exceptional in this category was the show *Piękno krajobrazu Polski* [The Beauty of Polish Landscape], comprising 400 works put on display towards the end of 1937 at the Society of Fine Arts Enthusiasts in Lviv. In 1938 the LTF co-organised a show of aerial photography,³⁹ and in 1939 of maritime photography. A majority of well-known Lviv photographers who survived the war emigrated to Poland within its new borders (mostly to Wrocław and Upper Silesia), or remained abroad.

³⁹ At the Polytechnic, lectures and courses in aerial photography were run by Henryk Mikolasch and Witold Romer (who took aerial photos for the British Royal Air Force during WWII).