

Lucia Nimcova: On Sleeping and Waking

by Clare Butcher

“I like the possibility of photography to have a conceptual, intellectual character,” says Lucia Nimcova. “I am not sure if the results are always understandable for a wider audience, but I do not care. I know why I did it. And it should not matter if I *took* pictures, or if I used found footage. I can also choose to only show the back sides of the photos. If somebody wants to understand, it could lead to a constructive dialogue.”

Nimcova speaks as she and her husband, Romo, prepare for the next constructive dialogue to begin, with the *Leftovers* project (2007–9; a collaboration with Michal Moravčík), which will be shown at the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. That installation presents a number of photographs made between 1980 and 1983 by Marián Kusik, an amateur photographer employed by a chemical factory who took pictures in his free time of children in Hummené, in the northeast of Slovakia (at that time still part of Czechoslovakia)—not incidentally, Nimcova’s hometown. The images in this series derive from Kusik’s personal archive, which he had marked as “leftovers”—that is, photographs that were not useful to those who had commissioned them, whether because of technical flaws or aspects that commissioners considered “non-aesthetic.” For Nimcova, these leftovers—non-historical, private images—serve as a kind of historical evidence, significant for a generation of children who grew up in that region in the 1980s and ’90s, such as herself.

Nimcova has a deep appreciation of the slippages between photography as an event and its operation in private and official life—the ways in which moments in both spheres are captured, some emotionally and some seemingly neutrally, by the snapping of a shutter and final selection. This dialogical, conditional awareness of her medium has a history in itself. Throughout her *Instant Women* series (2003–5), a photographic study of lower- and middle-class women in Central and Eastern Europe, Nimcova moved between similarly complex sets of boundaries dividing public actions and home life, the everyday and the wished-for, modernity and tradition, the mundane and the bombastic. “I was working on [*Instant Women*] for six years,” she says. “[So] I was able to select an archive of my own work after having a lot of experiences as a documentary photographer. Usually I was living the

life of the documented people. I left them to do what they normally do and sometimes I took a photo.” This is an important aspect of Nimcova’s choices, and played into her selections for *Leftovers*: “That’s what I like about Kusik’s archives as well: He left things to be as they are, taken but not used. By selecting them in a certain order and applying a concept, they become ‘documents’ of the past.”

Recently Nimcova has been researching at the Slovak Film Archives in Bratislava, viewing movies that were banned during Czechoslovakia’s “normalization” period, 1968–89—the country’s most stringent era of Communist cultural censorship. Her hours exploring this hidden footage have been “very well spent,” Nimcova says. “I [have] learned a lot about different parallel realities: official life, private life.” A scene in her *Double Coding* installation project (completed in 2010) shows footage of a young woman listlessly surveying the passing landscape through a rain-spattered train window. The shot is from a film *Vítěz* made by Dušan Trančík in 1978, which managed to bypass the national censorship commission (or Tresor), probably because of certain scenes that they might have interpreted as expressing the “poetics” of life under the Communist regime. Nimcova spent a year viewing and deciphering such films—now deemed by film theorists as B-quality and overly romanticized—at the film archives. The young woman on the train is an example, says the artist, of an “official” façade masking an unofficial private existence; the Soviet period was a time when people were, as Nimcova states, “free and unfree at the same time.”

Up, down, side, side; up, down, stretch. Three women, side by side, reenact the daily exercise routine of their younger years in Socialist Czechoslovakia in a video from Nimcova’s multifaceted project *Unofficial* (2006–8). Many of these women still go down to work the fields each morning as the State once compelled them to do. They move together, remember together, and forget certain actions at different times.

“Please, we need no emotions here! Maximum discipline shall demonstrate your good intentions with this State. Just as we learned to listen, please, listen to me for just a moment longer.” These are the words of Zdeněk Červenka, moderator of a 1989 protest during a general strike in Chemko, Strážske (in today’s eastern Slovakia), as cited in Nimcova’s dual publications for *Unofficial* (Zoneattive Edizioni, 2008), written in collaboration with Fedor Blaščák. Yet the name “Zdeněk Červenka” also appears on a

list of agents in the archives of the Czechoslovak State Secret Police. As a potential double agent, Červenka encapsulates the duality of the *Unofficial* project: juxtaposing civil obedience with individual, willful unconsciousness or indifferent relations to overarching structures. Nimcova believes that this duality, this “double-coding” of the self, was a basic symptom of Socialism.

Looking into the archives of state photographer Juraj Kammer, who worked in Hummené in the 1980s, Nimcova discovered that he had made ruthless, and seemingly artless, selections from among his shots of town gatherings and state-sponsored events, printing only what was appropriate for the official line of that moment and leaving the rest of his negatives in the dark, so to speak. For *Unofficial*, Lucia scanned all the materials Kammer omitted and made her own selections of images that would otherwise have been forgotten. She says of these photographs:

In the images I like, there is a lack of any “knowing style,” any preparation. You are *there*. You are not playing any games. It’s just how it is. It’s like when we wake up and go to the kitchen in the morning to prepare the tea and we’re still kind of sleepy. We are just ourselves: we are not “prepared.” These moments are happening all the time in private, but also [in] official and hidden life. I was curious to see if . . . they are also in these double-coded messages, and in what constellations.

Nimcova does not see an artistic “formula” in the discovery of and engagement with somnolent subjects, waiting in archives to be awakened. Rather, her projects show the provisionality (and also the longevity) of the official narratives still active in the world around her. Whether you are staring out a train window in the 1970s, or are a Hummené cultural officer having your picture taken by Nimcova four decades later, “keeping low and not thinking in public,” the artist says, are more than just “leftover” habits in her homeland. Just as the exercising women recall the simple gesture of a side-step as part of a remembered pattern, Nimcova enters her own constructive dialogue with recent memory through images. Her depictions of similarly picturesque public moments and town tropes in the second part of *Unofficial* produces a kind of déjà-vu in which we see how little has changed in the life of this town twenty years after the end of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

Of this second glance at existing archives, Nimcova says:

It's a story in between two stories. The story of one photographer doesn't really make any sense—that he made what he made—if you don't find the other connotation which comes from my selecting, my editing, and generational statement. . . . Why *not* use somebody else's photo and find yourself in it? Especially when you're connected to that past. You cannot go back. At the same time though, things are happening again and again.

It is with a distinct wakefulness that Nimcova carries on this dialogue with the both the front and the back sides of politics and power-games in sleepily transitioning societies. And in that sleepy state, what potential lies in the double take, the hidden and leftover: when we are just ourselves and come to understand that there are stories within stories within stories.

www.luco.sk