

**Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai, eds. *Exposed Memories: Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory*. AICA: International Association of Art Critics: Hungarian Section: Distributed by Central European University Press, 2010, 193 pp.**

Reviewed by Katalin Kádár Lynn, Senior Researcher, ELTE.

Anthologies are difficult to review. Even a well-edited volume with a unifying theme can evidence dramatic differences among the essays in writing style and in the level of scholarship. If, like *Exposed Memories*, the work also includes essays translated from another language, the quality of the prose should also remain consistent. Thus, anthologies can challenge not only the editors but also the reviewer.

The essays in this anthology, supplemented by two later additions, were initially presented at a conference at the Goethe Institute in Budapest organized by the Hungarian section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in conjunction with the International Association of Word and Image Studies (IAWIS) (November 10-11, 2006).

Edited by the noted Hungarian art critic Zsófia Bán and fellow art critic and historian Hedvig Turai, *Exposed Memories* has the unifying theme of private and collective memory, as revealed through family pictures. Each essay shows, in some way, how families and memory—indeed, even the process of remembrance—are affected by historic events. The book's jacket quotes Svetlana Boym, professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard, who characterizes the work as an “interdisciplinary exploration of the estranging effects of family pictures at the cutting edge of the study of visual culture and the politics of representation.”

In the editors' words, from the Introduction, “Within the recent general discussions of cultural and historical memory, in Europe the extension of the family known as the European Union has drawn special attention to the problems of belonging, homeland, exile, and homecoming, as well as language, trauma, and memory. ... We believe that the notion of family best expresses the problems of belonging, be it belonging to a people, a nation, or any other type of family” (VII).

The book's essays are prompted by acts of memory that took place in Central and East Europe after 1989. These acts, according to Bán and Turai's Introduction, “are meant to interpret and reinterpret the past, often focusing on topics and events that previously had been considered taboo for collective memory (such as the role of national politics in the Holocaust, Stalinism or 1956)” (IX).

The three essays in the first section, “Photo as Autobiography”, analyze photographs and artifacts in order to weave family or community narratives. These are compelling slice-of-life stories rooted in specific time frames. In “Incongruous Images: ‘Before, During and After’ the Holocaust” Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer discuss whether or not images local street photographers took of the Jewish population in Cernăuți, Romania during the interwar/early war period mirror the history of the onset of fascist control. In “Beguiled by Loss: The Burden of a Third-Generation Narrative” Nancy K. Miller chronicles the photographic and material memories of her Russian-American family, the most compelling of which involves a mysterious box of curls of hair whose origin she never discovers. Are they her great-grandfather's severed *payess* or someone else's lovingly preserved locks? Jay Prosser uses family photos to chronicle his

grandfather's history in "The Baghdadi Jew and His Chinese Mistress". Born in Bombay to a Jewish family from Baghdad, he settled in Singapore with his common law Chinese second wife. They had a family together but did not marry until 1965. Prosser's focus is on his grandparents' visible transformation as she becomes less Chinese and more Western, and he sheds his robe and beard—no longer a Baghdad Jew.

The second group of essays, "Photo and Text", begins with Heinz Ickstadt's "History, Narration and the Frozen Moment of Photography in Richard Powers' *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*". The complex narrative of Powers' novel is based on a photograph taken by August Sander just before the outbreak of World War I. Ickstadt quotes Powers as saying that "the great amounts of historical narrative that photo ignited in my brain," made him quit his job and write the novel (his first)" (56). To this reviewer, that statement seems to speak more strongly than any other to the power of the visual image to influence us. Ickstadt writes that the past brought back to life as a reconstruction of memory is always "a *memento mori*—a re-embodiment of mental images of people we once saw and touched now long gone" (55).

Zsófia Bán's contribution, "Memory and/or Construction: Family Images in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*", offers an interpretation of the German author's highly controversial use of images set in the context of the Holocaust, which is meant to provoke and challenge the narrative. Quoting Ulrich Baer, who argues that there is a "structural similarity not only between the photograph and memory but also between the photograph and trauma, in that they represent the eternal recurrence of something that is no longer there, yet is frozen in time" (68), Bán offers her interpretation of how Baer's premise reflects the collective transmission of knowledge and the maintenance of cultural memory. Bán also brings both Wittgenstein's and Walter Benjamin's observations on photographic images to bear on her thought provoking analysis of the images in Sebald's work. I found two elements of Bán's essay particularly interesting. First, in seeking to explain the alternative vision or alternative "visuality" that is present in Sebald's work, she explores Benjamin's concept of what is "inferred" in photographic images versus what is actually present. And second, she puts forth a notion of negative space in photographic analysis—"the contours of what lies underneath become distinct in the space left blank" (71)—that deserves to be explored more fully in a future work.

The third group of essays, "Private and Public Archives", begins with "Visual Communities of Intimacy: Photography and Immigration" by Rob Kroes, a researcher in immigration history. Examining the role photography played in immigrant lives, he posits that while written correspondence kept immigrants connected to their homeland and could "preserve a sense of intimacy with those who had stayed behind" (77), the photographic images exchanged between émigrés and those at home took the communication to an entirely different level. The photos' main function was to maintain a sense of "visual proximity among family members in spite of geographic distance." This interesting essay also highlights the importance of immigration research and its archival functions. The second essay in this category is Géza Boros's "Photography in the Cult of Memory of the 1956 Revolution", which deals with the "use of photography in the martyr cult of the 1956 revolution in public spaces" (89). Boros's research focused on publicly accessible private and community commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution—sepulchral monuments with photographs and installations that included photographs. Professional soldiers, innocent civilians, victims of retaliation,

all were commemorated in some way and are comprehensively examined in this fascinating essay.

Next, András Bán, an art critic and assistant professor of visual anthropology at the University of Miskolc, offers “A Farewell to Private Photography”. Bán has researched private photography for almost three decades. He summarizes the history of collecting private photos in Hungary and talks of the complexity of amassing such collections in a world that bombards us with media images. Disturbingly, some important information for researchers is omitted. A note on page 113 states that the images illustrating the essay are preserved in the Archive of Private Photos and Films, but no location is given for that archive. Bán also shares a tantalizing reference to 100,000 photographs and accompanying archives from the Education Research Institute (in Hungary) that were lost forever with the collapse of the institute in 1989. Such an enormously disturbing piece of information should have been further explained as to “why” and “how”—after all, the disappearance occurred in 1989 not 1949! Bán’s focus, however, is on exploring the major change of context (rather than the disappearance) of photography as a result of the political and social changes of 1989. In his final pages, Bán introduces a topic that deserves exploration in a future essay: the future of collecting and archiving photographs in the digital age. Computer technology now provides the researcher of private photography with the opportunity not only to preserve the past but also to exercise more complex interpretation and association than was possible in the past.

The final essay in this category, “EVENTfulness: Family Archives as Events/Folds/Veils” by Suzana Milevska, explores the work of Macedonian artist Lijana Gjuzelova, who re-examined the history of her father’s prosecution and execution at the end of World War II in a series of four art projects, “Eternal Recurrence”, developed over a ten year period (1996 to 2006) and presented in slide, video, sculpture and text installations in various venues. Milevska examines the artist’s “unveiling/revealing/re-veiling” (125) of truth using personal archives vs. state archives. For me, this is the least accessible essay in the book, and at times it lost me completely, as in the paragraph that begins, “The complex rhizomatic structure of the an-archived archives defies any linearity in terms of the selection, gathering, historical periodization, and systematization of the images and their authors ...” (128). While I was interested in understanding what she meant by an-archiving (a term not present in the Oxford Dictionary of English, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) and other tantalizing esoteric terms, they also burden her very interesting review of Gjuzelova’s “Eternal Recurrence” installations with distracting complexity.

In the first of the essays in the “Family Albums” section, Logan Sisley provides a glimpse into the works of writers and artists who explore the “visual representations” of homosexuality within the context of family albums. “Visualizing Male Homosexuality in the Family Album” examines the hidden message, never expressed, of gay family members in album photos. “So any reading practice concerned with the retrospective account of gay identities must be sensitive to visualization of absence” (139). Sisley relies on Simon Watney’s autobiographical essay *Ordinary Boys* and Christopher McFarlane’s series *This is a photograph of me* to develop his theme and also references Glenn Ligon’s photo-essay *A Feast of Scraps*, which combines gay pornography with family photographs. Next is Ágnes Berecz’s essay “Please Recycle! On Ágnes Eperjesi’s *Family Album*”. Within the context of contemporary art, Eperjesi created a “totally real,

fictional album”, an alternative history, by crafting a series of pictograms using real and imagined collections of images. Berecz observes that the texts accompanying “Eperjesi’s pictures prove that nothing speaks for itself, and an image is always half-empty ...”—meaning that the text clues us to what the eye should see in addition to the image. Berecz also offers vivid examples of how a change in text can change the identity of an image. Eperjesi’s works are not photographs, but they leave us with the sensation that we have viewed photographic images.

The two final essays are grouped under the title “Object/Photo/Reality”. First, Éva Forgács analyzes how the work of artists Christian Boltanski and Ilya Kabakov evolved from their questioning of photography’s reality to creating photography-like installations from trash or found objects. In taking on the same role as photographs, the objects contribute in some way to a questioning of contemporary art. The book closes with Hedvig Turai’s essay “Home Museum: An Installation by Katarina Šević and Gergely László”. The installation consisted of objects recovered from the Šević family’s long abandoned summer home in Croatia. For thirteen years after cessation of the hostilities in the former Yugoslavia, the Ševićs, Serb citizens, could not visit the house unless they obtained a visa. Photographs bear testimony to the integral part the holiday home played in their lives and the trauma of its loss. The Installation evolved from its creators’ “archival impulse” as they cleaned and restored the house. As a historian, I take issue with Turai’s comment that in preserving these objects Katarina also preserved her identity, “for once she was part of a great common Yugoslav past.” In point of fact, the nation that was called Yugoslavia in 1929 was first formed in 1918 as the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs and the Kingdom of Serbia (including Montenegro). Thus the “great common Yugoslav past” was more psychological than factual. Nevertheless, it is clear from the essay that it was traumatic for Šević and her family to have lost access to a house of treasured memory and that witnessing the dissolution of their country was traumatic for all who experienced such a loss.

What makes this volume interesting and valuable are its wide scope of insights, personal histories and analysis and the broad range (from intimate to historical) of texts, art works and photographs that are referenced. Paradoxically, this is also what makes *Exposed Memories* a difficult book to categorize, as it is unclear from the text itself what reader(s) the editors are targeting. Is it specialized university scholars involved in visual anthropology; less specialized but nevertheless well-informed academics; or the general public? Boym says in her jacket notes that this is a book for the general reader as well as the researcher. I would disagree. Some of the essays are so complex, indeed abstruse, that they have no appeal for the general reader. The style of the essays ranges from simple narrative to prose reminiscent of scholarly journals. There’s no indication that the editors intended the work to offer a cohesive body of essays targeting a single audience, but in my view, had some of the more scholarly essays been re-written for general consumption that would have increased the book’s potential for a much larger readership.

I am a historian, not a cultural or literary critic, but I nevertheless found much fascinating reading in *Exposed Memories*, and I can recommend it to a select audience of readers who may be interested in cutting edge research that is emanating from Central Europe in the field of cultural and visual anthropology. The generalist reader who is interested in photography as memory may also find some of the less scholarly essays to be rewarding.