

***Archive and Conflict. On the Search for Identity
in Photographic Collections***

Barbara Kubska

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Prof. Dr hab. Andrzej Tobis**

SUMMARY

The title *Conflict* refers to the phenomenon of memory conflict, which highlights the dividing lines in how the past is interpreted and evaluated across different social groups. This work centers on the photographic archive of my grandfather, Zygmunt Kubski, who documented one of the most emblematic construction projects of the communist era in Poland—the development of Nowe Tychy between 1954 and 1989. His archive serves as a case study for analyzing this phenomenon, particularly in the context of photography's role as a medium for transmitting knowledge about the past.

The dissertation explores how Zygmunt Kubski's collection of photographs is perceived both within the cultural context in which it was created and in its contemporary reception. I treat this archive—and the activities surrounding it—as a model for reflecting on the past, memory, and the social and political consequences of historical experience. Based on the premise that every memory belongs to a particular collective, I position my own experiences as representative of the collective memory of specific communities of remembrance.

These themes are further developed through engagement with theories and phenomena present in contemporary discourse within the humanities and social sciences. The personal and the theoretical intersect throughout the text, alternately converging and diverging, allowing the narrative to unfold in a non-linear fashion. The structure of the work is guided by affect, which subjectively navigates the cultural and social issues addressed

This approach is inherently selective, embracing the inevitable incompleteness of the image. The theoretical component consists primarily of retrospection and reflection on previous work with the archive, while the artistic component comprises newly created works: a series of collages, a book, and an installation.

In my practice, I engage with Zygmunt Kubski's photo archive in two distinct ways. My personal relationship with the author and his creations guides me along a path

shaped by affect. I am drawn to familiar figures and images that evoke memories. At the same time, I seek to move beyond the main narrative—to include what is marginal and to find new perspectives on what is already known. I look for contexts that challenge the familiar structures I've inherited.

I follow threads of alternative history—stretching the archive, testing it, and re-viewing familiar stories through the lens of photography. For me, the past is a diverse collection of abandoned scenarios, with the potential to reshape how we understand contemporary relationships. To explore this, I juxtapose ambiguous images—those that raise questions about their origins. In my search for context, I draw on illustrations from photography textbooks used by my grandfather. Through these juxtapositions, I suggest the elusive, fluid movement of images within our minds.

In the *Beginnings* chapter, I recount the story of the accidental discovery of Zygmunt Kubski's collection of photographs, held at the Tychy City Museum. I reconstruct the early stages of my engagement with these photographs, focusing on the digitisation process I participated in on behalf of the Image Culture Foundation in 2015. This retrospective, grounded in subjective experience, is also an attempt to make sense of my earlier encounters with my grandfather's photography.

In *City, Photography, Archive*, I begin with an analysis of a single photograph, examining its use in Kazimierz Wejchert's book *Nowe Tychy*, as well as interpreting it through the lens of the photographer's personal experience. This example serves as a case study of how divergent the perspectives on such images can be. In this chapter, I explore what purposes my grandfather's photographs may have served, and what factors influenced their form. I ask whether these images were intended to support the narratives promoted by city planners, architects, and political authorities—or whether they stemmed more from Kubski's own chronicling enthusiasm. I also introduce my book *City, Photography, Archive*, my first creative engagement with the archive. I describe how this project helped me confront my own resistance to the

legacy of communist Poland, as well as to my grandfather's potential role in shaping its propaganda narratives.

The next section, *Transformation Costs*, delves into the concept of cultural trauma, drawing on the writings of Edit András and Piotr Sztompka. Their theories help explain how the trauma of communism—and the subsequent trauma of post-communism—have shaped Poland's socio-political reality up to the present day. As an example of memory conflict, I discuss monuments in the public space of Tychy that have been recontextualised by residents, who ascribe new meanings to these sculptures, thus justifying their continued presence while severing ties with their original ideological context.

I then turn to recent shifts in the reception of socialist realist art, focusing primarily on the exhibition *Cold Revolution: Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959*, held at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in 2021. Finally, I explore the aesthetics of socialist realism in the context of photography, identifying echoes of this style in Zygmunt Kubski's photographs from the 1960s, and drawing parallels with the works of Henryk Hermanowicz and Zbigniew Dłubak.

In the chapter *Searching in the Archives*, I invoke following Carolyn Steedman, the phenomenon of the 'politics of the imagination' and the mechanisms that exploit the fact that the past becomes a source of identity in a selective and imaginary way, and that history is a tool of political persuasion. I analyse Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's project *How to Look Nature in Photos*, the narrative of which consists of photographs from the archives of the Polish Political Police between 1944 and 1989. I also describe my own work, in which I represent the theme of the political entanglement of the Tychy archive for the first time.

Time Not Lost offers a detailed account of the exhibition of the same name, held at the Tychy City Museum in 2022. This was the first retrospective presentation of Zygmunt

Kubski's photographs. I took part in the exhibition in a dual capacity: as a co-curator (together with Ewelina Lasota), responsible for the selection and arrangement of the photographs, and as an artist interpreting the archive. The exhibition served as a pretext to introduce the postwar history of both the photographer and the city he documented. It also became a lens through which to describe the collection, shaped by the curatorial decisions made during its preparation. I reflect on the audience's reactions, which have influenced the subsequent stages of working with the archive.

A central theme of this section is dispossession—portrayed in the official narrative as a necessary stage of progress, counterposed to backwardness and poverty. I present examples of radically different uses of the same images and reveal doubts about the archive's omissions, such as the notable absence of photographs documenting accidents during the city's construction—images that would have been part of the photographer's professional obligations. This section underscores the archive's ambiguity and its fluidity depending on the context in which it is situated.

The theoretical part of the thesis concludes with the chapter *Memory and Potential History*, in which I explore the significance of memory in political transformation and its role in undermining the objectivity and uniformity of historical narratives. I focus on collective memory as a dynamic and often contested space that both co-creates and challenges official versions of the past. These issues are discussed in the context of so-called memory conflicts, with reference to the work of Pierre Nora, Hayden White, and Iwona Irwin-Zarecka—authors who expose the complexity of the relationship between history and memory.

I then explore the politicisation of the archive, engaging with Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, a foundational text addressing questions of power, control, and the ideological dimension of archival institutions. I critically juxtapose Derrida's approach with Carolyn Steedman's counterpoint, which emphasizes the materiality and social function of the archive. In the final section of the chapter, I turn to two key concepts

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introduced by Ariella Azoulay. The first, the *photographic event*, expands the interpretive field of photography to include the circumstances of its creation—its location, witnesses, and the photographer's experience. The second, *potential history*, proposes a way of reading archives that resists treating history as a closed and autonomous system. Instead, it urges us to expose what is invisible, overlooked, or repressed, and to engage with history as something entangled with the present.

The final paragraph of this chapter also serves as a conclusion to the theoretical part of the thesis. Following Clément Chéroux, I emphasize the vernacular nature of Zygmunt Kubski's archive, recognizing its cultural potential and value as an alternative space to official historical narratives.

The artistic part of the thesis consists of three components. The first is a series of ten collages (35 × 50 cm), composed by juxtaposing Zygmunt Kubski's photographs with clippings from photography books found in his home. Here, context is paramount. The photographs—by notable authors such as Bogusław Bromboszcz, Roman Burzyński, Zbigniew Dłubak, Edward Falkowski, Henryk Nawrot, Wiesław Prażuch, Józefa Schiff, Zbyszek Siemaszko, and Zygmunt Szarek—reflect the visual culture of the 1950s and 1960s. They depict the ruins of Warsaw, heavy industry, workers, cityscapes, and portraits of prominent figures. The aesthetic of socialist realism echoes in Zygmunt Kubski's later work, and is expanded by the contexts created through these juxtapositions.

The collages reveal hidden parallels—for instance, wide, empty roads in Tychy awaiting traffic, set against Siemaszko's photograph of Paris streets full of cars. The photographs form visual backgrounds for each other; compositions are repeated, and reality becomes a network of overlapping images. Photography is inseparable from the act of seeing, and the collages aim to make visible what a single image cannot show.

The second element is the photographic book Barbara Kubska, Zygmunt Kubski: *How Distant, How Close* (18 × 24 cm, 512 pages). It consists of 254 pairs of photographs taken consecutively. These pairings were selected by me to represent, as broadly as possible, the full range of themes present in the archive, offering a comprehensive view of the collection. I limited the selection to images taken on 35mm negatives, which make up the majority of the archive. The photographs included in the book account for just over 10% of the entire collection, providing viewers with significant insight into its character and scope.

Both the photographs and the book itself are marked by an austere aesthetic. The book contains no textual commentary, apart from a footer annotation directing readers to the location of the collection—the Tychy City Museum. All photographs are printed at the same size and appear in the original archival order. The book's design reflects the conceptual framework of the project: it has an exposed spine, and the title is embossed in black on rough paper with a subtle woolen texture. The format (18 × 24 cm) is based on a classic photographic paper size. It sits on the boundary between a book and an object, with its physicality—its weight and texture—integral to the project's core ideas.

The final part of the dissertation is an installation titled *How Distant, How Close* (200 × 375 cm), composed of poplar plywood, XPS foam, 52 photographs by Zygmunt Kubski printed in inkjet on baryta paper in two sizes: 15 × 22.5 cm and 22.5 × 30 cm, as well as electronic components. The work takes the form of an exhibition, consisting of three interconnected panels (each 125 × 200 cm), on which the photographs are arranged. The images create a multilayered narrative that can be interpreted in several ways: in relation to neighboring photographs, along horizontal sequences, or as three distinct and consecutive groupings.

The selection originated from an intuitive process. I was drawn to images that felt unsettling, ambiguous, or somehow misaligned with the rest of the archive—pho-

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tographs that disrupted the attempt to uncover an internal logic. A system of illuminated red points adds another interpretive layer. The red dot is far from neutral: it acts as a visual accent that can function as a pointer, an extension of the gaze, or a form of emphasis. At the same time, it evokes the appearance of a target, carrying potentially aggressive or accusatory connotations.

The narratives reveal a system of tensions emerging between the images. One can notice a recurring background character, likely included as a compositional element, although his presence invites speculation; a randomly captured face at the edge of the frame; an abstract form likely resulting from the first, test exposure of a roll of film; and ambiguous, difficult-to-interpret scenes. Among the photographs are also images of members of my family. This interplay of themes and visual layers is especially valuable to me in this work. Looking at the archive becomes its very essence: attempts to grasp the whole, the simultaneity of meanings, the acts of looking, seeing, and perceiving—alongside incompleteness and the inability of images to convey unambiguous meaning. It is about selecting both the representative and the marginal.

The dissertation concludes with photographic documentation of the artistic works that comprise its practical component, offering a visual extension of the theoretical reflections and deepening the exploration of the presented themes.

B. Kubler