

LAYERING LIGHT

On the photographic records of Jiří Šigut

The modern world is the domain of the image, and photography has played a central role in expanding and reinforcing its rule. Photography is capable of creating the illusion of three-dimensional space quickly and cheaply, its image is detailed and easily reproduced, and the act of taking a picture can be automated — all of which are important characteristics in the modern age. In this regard, painting cannot compare to photography, which is apparently one reason why in the late 19th century it set out to explore different ways of seeing and visualizing the world.¹ As an eminently modern medium, photography soon took on a privileged position and came to be considered not art, but a technical means for producing a direct record, an objective picture of the world.

Even in the early 21st century, photography is still generally considered a neutral medium that offers a simple eye-witness view of the world, even though scientists long ago realized that the outcome of an experiment depends on who performs it, and countless artists and theorists have pointed out that photography assigns the world a visual order characterized above all by linear perspective. We frequently form our image of the world on the basis of photographs — to a certain extent, photography has changed how we approach personal experience and memory and the role of the imagination in areas not easily accessible to the human eye. All too often, we forget that a photograph is not a specific snapshot of the world at a specific moment in time, but that it is a unique representation with its own rules. As Canadian media theorist and cultural critic Marshall McLuhan pointed out: it is not the mediated information but the medium itself that is important, since it shapes our perception.²

One constant feature of the photographs of Jiří Šigut is his interest in the formational characteristics of photography as a medium — not in the limited technical sense, but within the broader cultural contexts into which each medium enters, at the very least because it represents a distinctive expansion of the human senses.³ Since the beginning of his artistic career, Šigut has questioned the usual way in which we have understood man's relationship to photographic technology, which is still in the process of defining the basic characteristics of the photographic medium. In this view, the photographer is not a technocrat trying to cajole the medium into producing an image representative of his idea of visible reality and how it should be represented. He does not hold a straightforwardly dominant position; instead, his role is merely to create the most basic conditions necessary for the use of the photographic medium. Šigut determines the start and end of his long exposure times and the physical limitations of the photographed subject in a relatively random manner. Even when he was still using a camera, the aperture and focus were basically set at random as well. However, he consciously influences neither the photographed reality nor the manner in which he captures it on film. Rather than creating a technically commensurate or visually impressive image, it is his job to humbly participate in the process of recording the world on film. This process can be considered to form the core of all of Šigut's work.

With this in mind, the photographs of Jiří Šigut represent an almost phenomenological exploration of the very foundation of photography, a meeting of nature with culture and technology. The natural creation of "light drawings" is captured using tools specific to photography — it is a kind of photograph of a photograph. The medium is not forced to create an image according to the artist's demands; instead, Šigut creates the conditions under which the medium reveals its own basic laws, its own grammar and dynamics. His works are records of the fascinating mystery of their creation, which can be described in scientific terms although it is far more important to experience this mystery in person. The mystery is not stripped of its impenetrability; it is respected, and can therefore be perceived as such.

Šigut's work (collaboration) with the photographic medium produces not conventional photographic images, but phenomenological records of the visible world (of visible events in the world). No record can be considered worthless or aesthetically uninteresting; each is a natural and important part of the work, which is why he keeps them all. The visible world (event) is not captured as a frozen moment; instead, his long exposure times allow him to record it as an endlessly changing phenomenon. Šigut's photographs do not attempt to control reality or to force a purely human order onto it; instead, they approach light and the world with a sense of respect. As a result, they depict reality in the form that it chooses for itself, in the manner that it wishes to be seen.

Reality in Jiří Šigut's photographs is expressed as light; in fact, it could be argued that reality is light. "All things that are, are lights," (Omnia, quæ sunt, lumina sunt) wrote John Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century, and this statement would seem to describe Šigut's artistic starting point as well: Reality is different concentrations of light; existence is a game of light and shadow. There is no such thing as absolute darkness; the visible world (visible events in the world) can thus be recorded even with a covered lens, which was the conceptual idea behind Šigut's *Record of One Day, 29 March 1986*. Of course, this photograph should above all be considered an expression of its creator's interest in the possibilities of the photographic recording of time, the passage of which Šigut visualizes using long exposure times in order to record layers of light.

Unlike conventional photography, which generally tries to conceal the use of photographic techniques, Šigut's works emphasize the use of such techniques and the artist's physical presence in a particular place. In his early works, the exposure time was determined relatively randomly — but purposefully so — on the basis of specific but entirely ordinary human activities, states, or situations: *12 Minutes of Rain, 25 June 1986*; *The Time Between Two Doses of V–Penicillin when I Was Sick in October 1987, 1 October 1987*; *Transport by Bus No. 56 from Poruba Station to Aleš Square; 25 December 1988*; *Meeting 17 Pedestrians; 24 February 1991*. After Šigut stopped using his camera in the 1990s and instead began placing light-sensitive paper directly into the (natural) environment, the specific space and situation and the relationship between the work of art and its (co-)creator took on a special importance.

The physical side of this relationship was addressed by the highly interesting *An Attempt at Sleep, 21–22 July 1992* and by two works titled *Sleep*, (15–16 May 1992 and 20–21 July 1992). In these photographs, Šigut acquired the image not through the use of mechanical technology, but organically contributed to its creation with his own body. The image is created not by a short exposure or by "blinding" the light-sensitive paper; instead, it takes shape gradually through the paper's direct contact with the artist's body and the moonlight. The subject of corporeality also dominates Šigut's *4D Photograms* and his original *Spermagrams* (both from 2004–2010), which record how a substance representing the most intimate expression of physical love glows with an inner light when exposed to an outside light source.

Although the ritual dimension of art was always important for Šigut, it plays an especially central role in the creation of his "natural" photographic records, as evidenced by the many accompanying texts summarizing his (primarily physical) experience of (co-)creation. The "photographer" is exposed to the same conditions as the light-sensitive paper, except that the paper is ruthlessly exposed to the light while the person is at the mercy of the physical world. Oftentimes, it is an initially trying physical experience, but it represents a necessary part of the path towards spiritual transformation. Without losing his individuality, the participant experiences the fundamental unity of all of reality: "I strip naked beneath the rock. Small, sharp splinters prick the soles of my feet. I pick up a few in the palm of my hand. They crumble. I manage to at least partially chew one and swallow it. With closed eyes, I notice how quiet and safe this place is. Warmth rises through my body up from the soles of my feet. I feel like I must have been here before. Right here, in this place. The warmth rising from my feet is greater and greater. I open my eyes and lift my head towards the sky. Everything around me is slowly spinning. The movement continues to increase in speed until it all suddenly comes to a stop, and the spiral of the treetops and the contours of the rock face shower me with amniotic fluid." (Úliště — "The Frog" Rock Formation — night of 3–4 August 2005)⁴

The ritualized reception of a raw experience of the world, which for Šigut is closely linked to the act of (co-)creation, resonates with the mystical impression given off by his photographic records. It should be emphasized that they create this impression more easily than conventional photographs that work with the paradigm of negative/positive. As unique records of the direct effects of light, they are unreproducible and are thus characterized by what Walter Benjamin called their specific "authenticity," their "here and now."⁵ They radiate a Benjaminesque aura inseparable from a work of art in the traditional sense. Photography can thus return to the cultic origins from which, in Benjamin's view, it was separated by technical reproducibility. Šigut uses this modern medium in a manner as old as art itself — as a creative act, as ritual invocation, and in order to record a lived experience. This process involves more than mere art, it is a *grand jeu*, a "high-stakes game" that touches on the most fundamental questions of existence and the meaning of life. The objective is not to create a work of art, but to be able to authentically participate in the endlessly changing sequence of events that we call reality, and to record this experience no matter what form it takes.

questions bring to mind desire
questions for meaning bring to mind the desire to see
and so the answer is the sense of sight
after all, both darknesses that hide the path
the darkness behind me and the darkness before me
offer no other promise
so let them fulfill this one —
and I will ask no more what is beyond the eyes
what is in that darkness

or will I ask all the more?⁶

Emil Juliš (1967)

Jakub Guziur, 2015, for book *Jiří Šigut: Práce / Works 1985–2018*
(translation: Stephan von Pohl)

1 See Nikolaj Savický: *Renesance jako změna kódu — O komunikaci slovem a obrazem v italském rinascimentu*, Prague, Prostor 1998, pp. 187–188.

2 See Marshall McLuhan: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*, Brno, Jota 2000, pp. 252–253. Czech translation by Irena Příbylová and Martin Krejza. (Original English title: *The Essential McLuhan*).

3 Ibid.

4 Jiří Šigut: *Záznamy / Records 1992–2008*, Ostrava, Concept 2008, p. 38.

5 Walter Benjamin: „Umělecké dílo ve věku své technické reprodukovatelnosti“, In *Výbor z díla I — Literárně-vědné studie*, Prague, OIKOYMENH 2009, p. 301. Czech translation by Martin Ritter. (English: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*).

6 Emil Juliš: „Touha vidět“ (Yearning to See), In *Pod kroky dýmů*, Most, Dialog 1969, p. 58.