

Kvet Nguyen

Cultural Identity and Otherness

Abstract

Kvet Nguyen (Hoa Nguyen Thi) – born 1995. She completed her master's degree in photography at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Her bachelor's thesis received the second-place award at the World Biennial of Student Photography in 2019, and in the same year this work was exhibited at the fjúžn Festival. In 2018, she was a finalist in SLOVAK PRESS PHOTO in the category for students and young photographers under the age of 26. She completed study stays at Plymouth College of Art in England and the prestigious Royal Academy of Art in Netherlands. Her works have been exhibited both in Slovakia – OFF Festival (2017, 2020), in the Nitra Gallery (2020), in Banská Štiavnica (2020), in Artapiešťany (2020), and abroad – in the Netherlands as part of a collective exhibition (2020), in Poland in Galeria Promocyjna, Krakow (2017) and at the presentation of photo books in Poznań (2017), in France at LIVRE PARIS (2019), in Belgrade, Serbia at a group exhibition (2019). Kvet Nguyen deals with the themes of otherness and identity not only in her art projects, but also tries

to talk about it outright and open a discussion in interviews or other platforms. For example, in 2018, she prepared, together with the newspaper Denník N, a report on the story of the Vietnamese in Slovakia, which was recently awarded a Journalist Award (Novinárska cena). Kvet Nguyen also collaborates with artists from other disciplines. Together with Kristína Uličná she created the ADP project and subsequently the book ADP – a critique of the condition of boarding houses. The book was a finalist for the National Design Award in 2018 (Národná cena za dizajn). Together with Lucia Gamanová, Oleksandra Bakushina, Paula Malinowská and Eva Takácsová, she founded the civic association “päť a pól”, which is covered by the project VŠVU DIARY (DIÁR VŠVU). The aim of the civic association is to support young artists and thus also to support cultural awareness in Slovakia.

Key words

Identity. Migration. Other-ness. Personal history. Postcolonial. Slovak-vietnamese.



Kvet Nguyen, Selfportrait, 2020

Artist’s Statement in
Collaboration with Denisa
Tomková

I consider art as a form of presenting my thoughts and ideas about the world, within which I can reflect on the past, present, or refer to the future. It is a kind of dialogue with the world/audience¹. My parents are Vietnamese migrants who came to Slovakia before the Gentle Revolution. For me, these two contrasting worlds are the basis for thinking and the starting point for further work. In my artistic practice, I most often deal with my cultural identity and otherness, with the phenomena of migration, and I relate to the family past, which was partially transferred to me, because most of my family lives in another part of the globe, and at the same time I approach post-migration issues. I also turn to history, where I find common denominators with the present. My work and private life are very intertwined and are inseparable parts of my life. In my private life, I often deal with work and artistic matters².

For me, artistic research begins

with an event in life that I analyse for a long time, or which I return to in my memory. If this “bothers” me enough, it develops to the process of searching other sources, stories or texts that are similar. I am looking for a similarity so that in the end I can make a summary transformed into a visual or object result. Another important step is publishing and exhibiting the work – and getting a reciprocal reaction from the audience. The subsequent dialogue with them closes the circle of artistic research, which I can use next time. One of the functions of art is storytelling that have probative value, especially after a certain time – years, decades. I use art as a tool to point out social crises or phenomena, I put myself in the position of a person who represents a community. I do not limit myself to a distinct style. The only moment common to all my work is the thought process and photography. Even though I study photography, I have recently come across a kind of objectness – I feel the urge to come out of the flat photographic medium into space. An important aspect in my work is coming back to history, to the memory of the family, nation, or the world history, it is a source of evidence for something that has happened. The historical events that shaped me begin with the migration of my parents to Slovakia but continue back to the American War or French colonization, which formed today’s Vietnam. Without these events, I would not be who I am. I identify with my national identity

when we call it Vietnamese-Slovak³. I see the increase in nationalist and neo-fascist tendencies that may threaten minorities, including mine (Vietnamese), as one of the main socio-political problems today. There are conspiracies and misinformation that lead to the division of society and contribute to hatred of minorities. Art cannot be apolitical because it concerns people and is created by people. And human is part of the community, society, the country where politics is present. Politics concerns me as the daughter of migrants, and at the same time Vietnamese, who do not have political freedom in their home country.

I have approached these topics for example in works: Reframing Possibilities (2020), where I link the colonization history of Vietnam with my presence⁴, A Citizen by Fluke (2018) helped me realize not only the fluidity of my identity⁵, in Former Stories – New Histories (2018) I analysed the family archive and found the space of diasporas as a variable and analyse having

home in two places⁶, my work Apples and pears is allowed to be mixed here (2020) referred to the visual representation of different identities and nationalities using food material⁷, and finally in the series Memoryless, Borderless and Nameless Space (2019) I referred to my own feelings and experience as a stranger in my homeland⁸.

The text was written in collaboration with Denisa Tomková (2020), originally published on secondaryarchive.org.

Artist’s Statement

I don’t remember how I decided whether to apply to the Academy of Fine Arts, but in January 2014 I suddenly stood in front of a building on Drotárská cesta and passed the entrance exams. They accepted me. After a year of studying in Banská Bystrica, I packed up and settled in Bratislava. It was an important step in my development, because until then I had never dared to pay so much attention to the individuality of my person. In the previous university, we were in grades en masse, which is typical in Slovakia. But the individual approach of studying at VŠVU, and the gradual acquisition of knowledge

and the connection of meanings in the context of my identity, finally allowed me to fully manifest myself.

Identity is the central theme of my work today. For the first time, I processed a shot of mine during a stay abroad at Plymouth College of Art, where Citizen by fluke was created. I first came across post-migration and post-colonial theses when I responded to the notion of family and dissected the distance relationship between my sister and her children. When I was filming our videophones, my parents in the living room with two grandchildren and I with a camera in my hand, I realized all the differences that will be more difficult for an uninvolved viewer, even “exotic”. I was afraid to point out this unusualness, I was afraid it would lead to criticism and questions: from trivial (Why do we have a furnished apartment as we should?) to more striking (Why do we raise children that way?). I was also worried about whether subtitles were an acceptable form of reading for the audience. Only today can I describe the feelings of that time. It was only with the passage of time that I realized that they were caused by the suppression of my own subjectivity, and at the same time by not understanding what my family went through to be where it is.

The output was audiovisual work. It showed how my nieces had a long-distance relationship with their mother and how they communicated with her via a tablet. I then began to think about how we came to the “decadence” of the family, whether

it was my sister’s fault, or on the part of our parents, whether it could be otherwise if we talked openly about relationships at home.

That’s where it all started. This topic connected us through dialogues. We talked about the mistakes that both parties might have made, and at the same time thought about the future of my nieces, whom we raised together; hoping to have better prospects, without consequences. How the second generation will perceive the past of their ancestors without its knowledge, I addressed in my bachelor’s thesis. I was wondering how I didn’t actually remember my own family. The fact that for a long time I lacked basic knowledge of Vietnamese history, because I was busy studying the Slovak one. Although learning two or three languages at once seemed quite manageable, I could no longer absorb a lot of information from two countries. At the same time, my parents urged me to focus on school, which meant an absolute focus on the official curriculum. If I were led to self-study of my origin, I have no doubt that I would do so – as I am trying to do now. But I started late. As a result, I didn’t even remember my own grandmother, let alone other details that concerned the country itself.

In the work A memoryless, borderless, nameless space I responded to these shortcomings. Using light and cardboard, I created a photograph: an image of an imaginary landscape that no one knows, but at the same time seems

1 See: JACKOVÁ, A.: *KVET NGUYEN: Povazujem sa za Slovenku, ale som hlavne človekom*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://www.fjuzn.sk/komunity/kvet-nguyen-povazujem-sa-za-slovenku-ale-som-hlavne-človekom>.

2 See: VASILKO, T., ŠIMÍČEK, V.: *Z Vietnamu do Tvrdošoviec: Susedov sme naučili robiť pho, oni nám nosia slivovicu* (reportáž). [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://dennikn.sk/1439133/z-vietnamu-do-tvrdosoviec-susedov-sme-naucili-robit-pho-oni-nam-nosia-slivovicu/>; VASILKO, T.: *Prečo by sme sa mali zaoberať tým, že sme iní?* (debata o Vietnamcoch na Slovensku). [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://dennikn.sk/1454640/preco-by-sme-sa-mali-zaoberat-tym-ze-sme-ini-debata-o-vietnamcoch-na-slovensku/>.

3 See: *Fotografka Kvet Nguyen: Slovenkou alebo Slovákom môže byť aj niekto, kto vyzerať inak*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://fm.rtvs.sk/rubriky/z-vysielania/fm/225093/fotografka-kvet-nguyen-slovenkou-alebo-slovakom-moze-byt-aj-niekto-kto-vyzera-inak>; *Večera s Havranom*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/14084/182876#130>.

4 See: Kvet Nguyen. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://www.sodagallery.sk/online-nguyen>; *Reframing Possibilities (Kvet Nguyen)*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://www.artsteps.com/view/5ebd35545c5b804287ab6af4>.

5 See: *A citizen by fluke*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://kvetnguyen.net/SW_a-citizen-by-fluke>.

6 See: *Former stories – new stories*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://kvetnguyen.net/SW_FS-NH>.

7 See: NGUYEN, K.: *Fotoprojekt: Tu sa môžu miešať jablká a hrušky*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://www.fjuzn.sk/kultura/fotoprojekt-tu-sa-mozu-miesat-jablka-a-hrusky>.

8 See: *Memoryless, borderless and nameless space*. [online]. [2021-10-13]. Available at: <https://kvetnguyen.net/SW_MEMORYLESS-BORDELESS-NAMELESS-SPACE>.

familiar. It resembled the shore, the sea and the sand. I also dealt with memory as such, unclear and uncertain, fluid and non-fixed. I returned to the question of identity, and considered how these events were actually part of me. When I look at my work as an ensemble, it is based on one theme, each of which touches on a nuance that I have not discussed before.

I paid attention to archived photographs in the project Former stories – new histories. After finding several albums containing photos of our large family, as well as later images that were captured after arriving in Slovakia, I realized what a utopian model of life you live when you change your natural habitat to a foreign city. The stories created by the migrants’ parents and ancestors are suddenly interrupted. The members who left for a better life therefore disappeared from the photos in this conceptual series, which also changed the captured Vietnamese environment. Their new history began to date in Europe – I mixed the photos taken here with the Vietnamese ones – non-figurative and collage-like – into one large installation, which was supposed to resemble a small universe.

After this work, I came to a realization that photography is an important aspect of our family life. Of course, they became primarily a monument and a reference to what was happening at a certain moment. Every year, as a family (I note, at least 30 people), our family met in front of the lens for the anniversary of my grandmother’s

birthday. Forever memorable to me is the drapery that hangs over people’s heads, with an inscription celebrating Grandma’s age. After the migration, however, photography also became a means of communication. My parents did not practice it themselves, but my uncle, who came to Slovakia shortly after his father, did. I didn’t understand at first why I found so many photographs of Uncle Nam in our former living room: leaning on a bed smiling into the unknown. On the other hand, there were fascinating shots of palm trees or other trees whose names I don’t even know; I first met the face of my cousin on a photograph. The contrast between these photos and those of my uncles seemed strange to me. Then I understood: the film has at least 24 to 36 shots, which my uncle probably tried to take so that he could develop and send them to Vietnam as soon as possible.

I recently came across the question why we try to keep foreign and old photos. Maybe it’s a way to survive the past. Maybe it’s just a pure need to get to know a second home and understand your own and personal history. Maybe it’s just my curiosity and urge to search for the truth. However, I can certainly say that my relationship with the medium of photography changed just when I started thinking about it in this light. Archived photos have a nostalgic value for me and I always find new knowledge, which I postpone for later, or I ask questions at home. They are a tool that allowed me to start talking about hidden places in family and collective memory. When

looking for answers the questions about the history of Vietnam, when neither my parents nor other text sources helped me, I found an archive of colonial photographs.

They seemed strange to me in something. They had a nostalgic touch, which I found in my own archives. In addition, thanks to them, I quickly understood how much evil was done during the colonial period in the former French Indochina. Here a kind of connection arose with people and a place I didn’t even know. I wanted to know what had happened, and at the same time I felt the nameless dark feeling that the photos carried. Roland Barthes called it a punctum. A painful feeling of “remembering” was activated, when I put together a broken past to be able to understand the present and its traumas.

During my studies, I got to see the ups and downs of photography. This is one of the reasons why the focus of my visual strategy lies outside of documentary photography, which could indicate objectivity in its image. For me, photography is too literal to talk about the truth. Although it is said that photography has the power of thousands of words, it does not have the ability to really talk. It is just a distorting image that helps to interpret and at the same time is the interpretation itself. My outputs therefore consist of conceptual photography, structured mostly scenographically and content-wise, because many of the addressed subjects are not tangible, and because photography does not function as evidence for

me. For a long time, as humanity, we considered the photographic shot to be absolutely true. Although we still work today, we are aware of its ability to manipulate credibility. This misconception of a flawless official document also contributed to the creation of hatred of otherness. The text was originally written for author’s diploma thesis.

Kvet Nguyen (Hoa Nguyen Thi)

Kvet Nguyen (Hoa Nguyen Thi) born 1995 is a Slovak-Vietnamese visual artist based in Bratislava, Slovakia.

CV

2019 - 2021

Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, SK
Master studies – Department of Photography and New Media (Studio Photography – reality – construct led by Jana Hojstričová and Olja Triaška Stefanovič)

2019 - 2020

Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, NL
Department of Photography 2015 – 2019
Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, SK
Bachelor studies – Department of Photography and New Media (Studio Laboratory of Photography led by Ľubo Stacho, Studio Photography – reality – construct led by Jana Hojstričová and Olja Triaška Stefanovič)

2018 *Plymouth College of Art, UK*
Department of Photography 2014 – 2015
Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, SK
Faculty of political science and international relations 2008 – 2014
Grammar school Nové Zámky, SK
with focus on foreign languages

Solo exhibitions

2021 *Mutual otherness, SODA Gallery, Bratislava, SK*
Archive of returns, ČEPAN Gallery, Trnava, SK
2020 *You are allowed to mix apples and pears here, POP-UP exhibitions, Pohoda on the Ground, Trenčín, SK*
Reframing possibilities, SODA Gallery online
Reframing possibilties, Artapiešťany, Piešťany, SK
2019 *Tu sa môžu miešať jablká a hrušky, fjúžn festival, Art Café, Banská Štiavnica, SK*
Tu sa môžu miešať jablká a hrušky, fjúžn festival, Onakô tattoo, Bratislava, SK
memoryless, borderless, nameless space, fjúžn festival, Kalab, Bratislava, SK

Group Exhibitions

2021 *lArchive of returns/Exhibition The Earth beneath our feet, Zlín Youth Salon, Regional gallery of fine arts in Zlín, CZ*
You are allowed to mix apples and pears here/

Exhibitions “Coexistence crisis”, Ján Koniarek Gallery in Trnava, SK
A collective psyche/ Exhibition “The Burn before the Burn-out:” The Promethean False “Promise”, Karlín Studio, Prague, CZ
2020 *Reframing possibilities/ Exhibition “Safe, hidden”, Nitra gallery, Nitra, SK*
You are allowed to mix apples and pears here/ Exhibition “Mother Tongue”, The Grey Space in the Middle, The Hague, NL
2019 *Memoryless, borderless, nameless space/World Biennial Exhibition of Student Photography, SRB*
fragility of being, Kvaka 22, Belgrade, SRB
Photobook ADP (in collaboration with designer K. Uličná), LIVRE PARIS (book fair), FR
2018 *A citizen by fluke, SLOVAK PRESS PHOTO, Bratislava, SK*
Publication “TRUST” (in collaboration with photographer A. Kurjaková and designer L.Gamanová), fjúžn Festival, Bratislava, SK
2017 *Photobook “ADP”, OFF_ FESTIVAL, Bratislava, SK*
Photobook “ADP,” Uniwersytet artystyczny w Poznaniu, PL
Selection of photographs/ theprintsplace, London, UK
“Decadent tradition,” Galeria Promocyjna ASP, Krakow, PL

Awards

- 2019** *Memoryless, borderless, nameless space*, World Biennial Exhibition of Student Photography, 2nd place
“DIAR VŠVU 2019”
(in collaboration with designer Lucia Gamanová), NATIONAL PRIZE FOR DESIGN, finalist
- 2018** *A citizen by fluke*, SLOVAK PRESS PHOTO, finalist
Photobook ADP (v spolupráci s: Kristína Uličná), NATIONAL PRIZE FOR DESIGN, finalist
DIAR VŠVU 2018 (v spolupráci s: Lucia Gamanová), NATIONAL PRIZE FOR DESIGN, finalist

Publications

- 2021** *dokumentmagazin.sk*
MAGAZINE FOTO/F#40 – A citizen by fluke
- 2020** *FOTOGRAF MAGAZINE/*
Uneven ground (Open call) – Reframing possibilities

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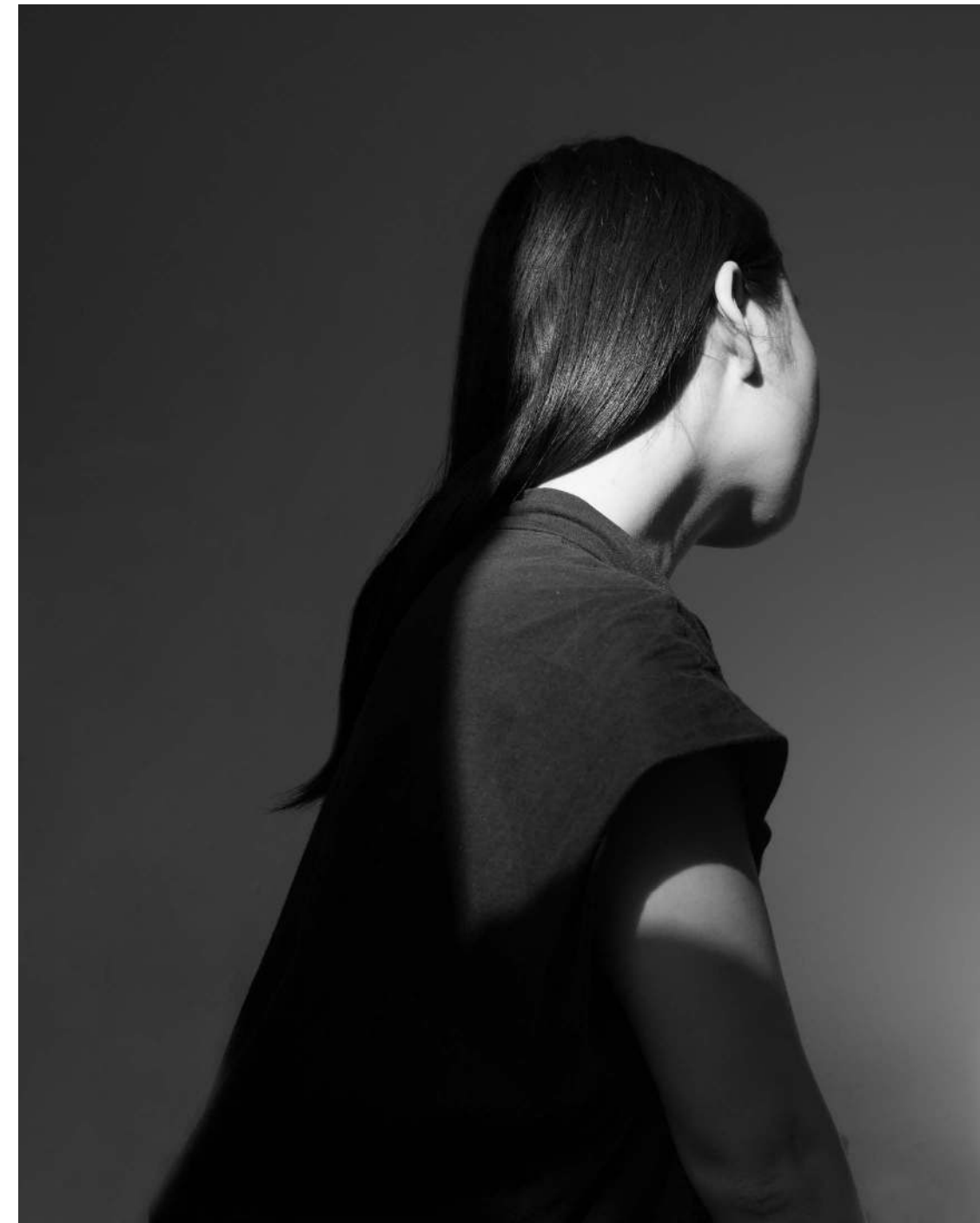
VASILKO, T.: *Prečo by sme sa mali*

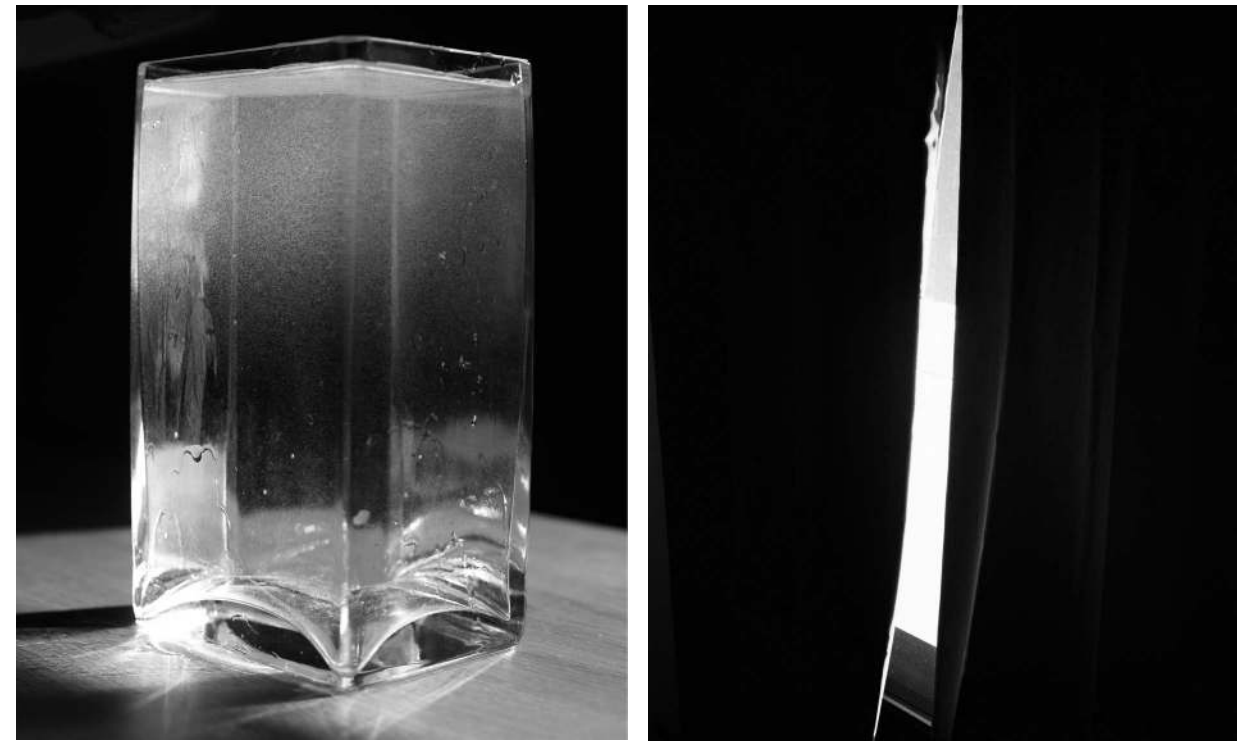
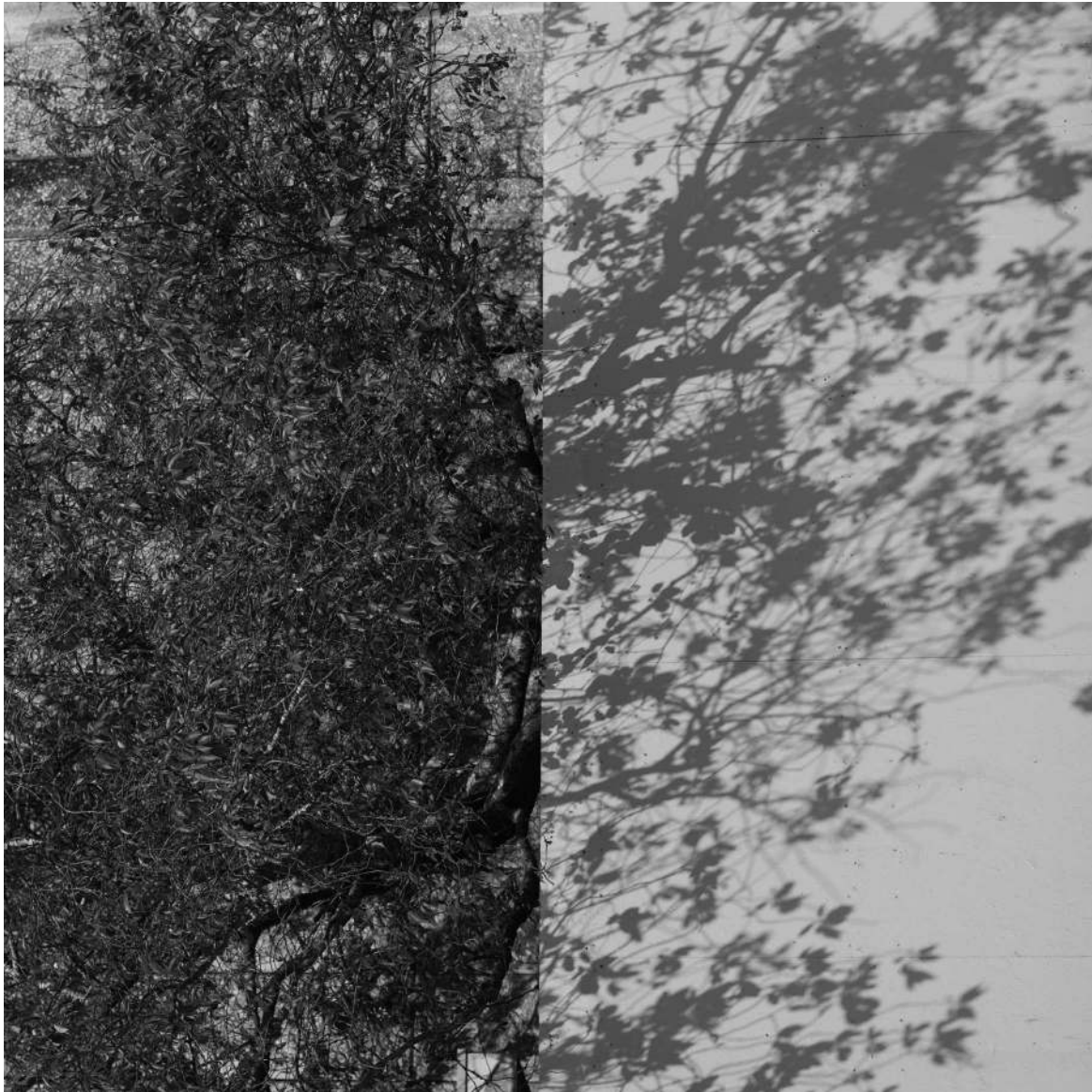
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A citizen by fluke, 2018







Former stories - new histories & Archive of returns, 2019 - 2021







Photography: Ema Lančaričová



Space without memory, without borders, without a name, 2018 - 2019





Reframing possibilities, 2019 - 2020





You are allowed to mix apples and pears here, 2020





