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A daring jump from the famous Mostar bridge in pre-war Yugoslavia of the 1980s heralded the beginning of Nihad Nino Pušija's photographic journey. Tito's effigy on the brick wall of a building, before which the bridge-jumpers dive into the water below, seeming to soar through the air for a fraction of a second as light as swallows, symbolic of a time in which the multi-ethnic country felt like it was one. Further back in the narrative flow of his photographs, we find portraits of Tito in the background as people dance at a party, or in a bakery, but not necessarily as an idol, rather as representative of more carefree times which found their demise amidst fatal hostilities.

The first photographs in the book transport us back to a still peaceful time when states divided and hostile today coexisted side by side. It was a land that had a formative influence on the childhood and youth of the photographer, who was born in Sarajevo in 1965. Only a few photographs and pages further on, we find pictures of destruction, not only manifest in the urban architecture, but also in the faces and bodies of the people depicted there. Pušija's photographs taken in 1992 Bosnia during the brutal civil war show one phase in the photographer's forced migration, which took him through many stops along the Balkan route, ultimately bringing him, like so many others, to Berlin. Along with them came many Roma families who were among the first victims in the former states of Yugoslavia, as they were torn apart by war. Pušija continued to follow their fate over the years, both here and there. Refugee homes, Germany's confusing residential status *tolerated*, ghettoization, Roma settlements in Western Europe, and deportation into an uncertain future are the key components in the terminology of an ignored community. But Pušija, who ironically did not find out about his own [previously kept secret] Roma roots until living in Germany, also looks with his camera into faces that, despite everything, convey vitality and self-confidence.

Although the collection of photographs presented here covers thirty years, it is not to be understood as a resumé or a survey of works. The photographs have been composed to form a narrative that reflects Pušija's own biography and, at the same time, they reveal to us aspects of his interests as a visual artist and documentary photographer, as well as his intellectual focus. He wanted to become a photographer like his grandfather, studied Journalism and Politics at Sarajevo University and started working for the independent Bosnian daily newspaper *Oslobođenje* in 1986. Following an extended stay in London, he continued working for the paper as a freelance photo journalist.

If, in German, the proverbial thread running through a narrative is a red one, then the common thread running through this book is certainly blood red, not only metaphorically speaking. With few exceptions, Nihad Nino Pušija's focus is directed at the murkier depths of human existence. The sad desperation of people rejected, expelled for ethnic and religious reasons from the country they saw as their homeland, is visually tangible. What also comes across clearly, however, is the dignity with which they face up to the adverse circumstances – the ill-begotten work of others – they find themselves in, countering their fate with both defiance and a spark of hope. Many Kurdish people have become politically active, taking to the streets to campaign against the repression of their organisations, fighting for the right to self-determination, not only in their divided homeland, but also in Germany.

Robbed and expatriated, the people we see are stranded in a society that does not necessarily look upon them kindly. Personalities mentally and otherwise wounded, forced to assert themselves in a foreign environment, seek a way out in machismo, aggressiveness or isolation. Others appear to find a certain comfort by turning to religion, whether in a deeply-rooted Catholicism that had never gone away, enjoying an upsurge again, not only in Eastern Europe, or in Islam. The religious rituals in black-and-white and colour are impressive testimonies of an escape from the depressing reality of this world into the irrational promises of a hoped-for otherworld. Saudi Arabia and Qatar used the desolate

post-war situation to expand the sphere of influence of the radical Islamic doctrine of Wahabism. The result was close proximity between lascivious styles of dress and the full-face veil, not only a bizarre moment of disparity, but perhaps also a motif depicting new conflicts soon to be upon us?

Diversity in both cultural and sexual identities is a freedom seen by many as a threat. Bearing this in mind, many of the poignant moments that Pušija was able to capture with his camera are all the more impressive. Invested with a great deal of trust by the people who are his photographic subjects, his pictures also show the magnificence of the transsexual body with opulent wigs, the self-confident celebration of a beauty that exists in otherness.

Pušija's look at his subject is characterised by a deep empathy for his fellow humans. The complex result of violence, destruction and annihilation that people inflict upon one another when they use blind fury, but also cold hate fired on by racism and sexism to define other people as *different*, in an attempt to justify deportation or cramming them into ghettos, manifests itself in Pušija's photographs. Most of the photos collected here convey a low-key mood that is interrupted from time to time, for example, by the selection of pictures from his journey through the USA. And yet, years later, these photographs are also shrouded in an air of melancholy, because they bring back to life a culture that has disappeared, one that has already been *recorded over* several times, as it were.

Pušija also found a great deal to photograph in Berlin, discovering niches in the city where the emptiness of asphalted surfaces appears oddly staked out by firewalls. He recorded in photographs the last remains of the *Palast der Republik* [former seat of parliament in East Berlin] – a building of historical importance for the GDR – before it was finally razed to the ground, a decision motivated by ideological considerations. The concrete columns come across as portents of transformation. Change is necessary, but not everything new is better, just as the word *reform* has come to be more a threat than a promise nowadays. And so, here we have a melancholic, even sad moment, that goes hand in hand with an unfeigned look at old age and death,

the oncoming of which is announced in the body and the face of every one of us eventually. At this point there is no pretending, camouflage is no longer possible, it's all just a matter of time, and a short time at that. Far removed from any kind of *fake news*, perhaps even occupying a rare position of truth, the end of the book gives us Gerd Kasischke, a Kreuzberg factotum who used to be known as *The Honk*, in contemplative mood. With one leg shorter than the other and always dressed in a skirt, the Art Brut artist was a ubiquitous sight for many years as he limped through the streets of Kreuzberg. Portrayed by Nihad Nino Pušija in *Café Morena* on Spreewaldplatz, he seems to be looking back at his life and, figuratively speaking, at the journey shown in this book. It is a touching picture that prophesies an end approaching and which, deep *down there where the spirit meets the bone*, as Miller Williams so fittingly describes in his wonderful poem, strikes a chord that resonates in a place outside of the boundaries of knowledge and the conscious mind.