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Socialism's Future Anterior:

On Zofia Rydet's Photographs of Polish Interiors, 1978-90

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Art History

by

Joanna Szupinska

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Socialism's Future Anterior:

On Zofia Rydet's Photographs of Polish Interiors, 1978-90

by

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Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor George Baker, Chair

This thesis considers Zofia Rydet's unfinished photographic project *Sociological Record* (1978-90), in particular the section called "People in Interiors." During the last decade of Communism in Poland, Rydet traveled around the Polish countryside, talking her way into village homes so she could photograph inhabitants amid their possessions. Understood by authorities at the time of its making as a useful sociological survey, closer consideration exposes complications. Employing formal analysis, theories of photography, and social history, the essay argues that the project infiltrates and works against the contemporaneous political and social apparatus. Taken as an exemplary case study, *Sociological Record* demonstrates how art can subvert governmental narratives while ostensibly working within them, unraveling late Communism's claims from the inside.

The thesis of Joanna Szupinska is approved.

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George Baker, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

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Introduction

A young professional couple sits in their modern living room one evening in Gdańsk, Poland, in 1980 (fig. 1). Otherwise fashionably dressed—she in a full skirt and legwarmers, he in corduroy pants—they both wear leather slippers at home. The photograph finds them in the middle of things: a tea table holds the remnants of dessert for four served on floral china; the top of the sugar bowl still rests on the *meblościanka* behind them; and a vase of flowers has similarly been displaced from the table to stand beneath the television.¹ A large seashell rests atop the wooden television set, perhaps in accordance with the superstition that shells and stones dispel harmful electromagnetic waves. A Russian *samovar* takes pride of place beside a Western silver tea set. Books piled high and fingerprints on the cabinet, as well as the disarray of the dessert on the table, only heighten our awareness of the tidiness of the room; the details suggest an apartment in use without amounting to messiness. To one side a television broadcasts the thriller *The Man Who Haunted Himself*, which was likely running throughout the course of the social visit.² A face, that of the British actor Roger Moore, looms incongruously from the screen, a third presence in the room. All along, a *lektor* (reader) delivers a deadpan voice-over translation, transforming the drama of Moore's acting into clean information. The scene suggests harmony and restraint through matching visual pairs—the flowers on the plates and linen tablecloth, the upholstery of the chairs and couch, the couple's matching summer shirts and identical chairs—that nevertheless turn uncanny as we note the similarity between the man's mustache and the actor's onscreen. All three faces look directly toward the photographer.

¹ Popularized in Poland in the 1970s and '80s, *meblościanki* are the wall-to-wall shelving units valued for maximizing storage and display in tight apartments.

² Roger Moore appears in the British psychological thriller *The Man Who Haunted Himself* (1970, dir. Basil Dearden).

This picture is one of thousands of domestic Polish scenes captured between 1978 and 1990 by the photographer Zofia Rydet (1911-97) as part of a massive photographic project that came to be called *Sociological Record*.³ Rydet photographed dozens of interiors like this one throughout the same region, and likewise elsewhere across the socialist nation. Singular or in groups, subjects appear seated near the center of each frame. Using a wide-angle lens and strong flash, Rydet records as much domestic surround as possible.⁴ In their systematic framing, the pictures lend themselves to forensic readings. Scrutinized, the living spaces and the objects contained therein reveal important aspects of social history. We evaluate the sitters' clothes, hairstyles, and hands and feet for clues into their daily lives, work, personalities, and beliefs. By some accounts, Rydet's premise called for the documentation of every home in Poland.⁵ Together the pictures amount to a veritable archive of domestic life in the last decade of Communism in Poland.

³ Rydet left behind some 27,000 negatives, only a fraction of which she printed in her lifetime. Sebastian Cichocki, "Art Beyond Art," *Object Lessons: Zofia Rydet's Sociological Record*, ed. Krzysztof Pijarski (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 32.

⁴ For the interiors, Rydet used 35mm roll film and a Praktica, a single lens reflex camera produced in Dresden, part of the German Democratic Republic within the Eastern Bloc. She attached a wide-angle lens and mounted an external flash to the top of her camera (see fig. 3). She also traveled with a Yashica that accommodated medium format film with which she documented "certain details or portraits of a particular person." This essay focuses on the 35mm work. Zofia Rydet, Letter to Krystyna Łyczywek, Rabka, July 28, 1978. This and all correspondence accessed via Zofia Rydet Foundation website unless otherwise noted. This passage and all translations from Polish are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ See for instance Rachel Wetzler, "Zofia Rydet," *The Keeper*, eds. Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell (New Museum, 2016), 232. The vast majority of the project, however, is devoted to rural subjects, with a particular focus on families living in traditional old houses, ever more scarce as the decade (and Rydet's project) progressed. Cities proved to be more challenging because the relationships Rydet cultivated with her subjects shifted there. In Warsaw and Kraków, she did not feel comfortable "barging" into homes in quite the same way. "In the cities I only enter those homes whose inhabitants invite me. This is much more complicated because both they and I are specially prepared for it. Those homes are utterly different. If they are families with some tradition, then the objects found there have their own style and tradition, their history and value," she said, going on to complain, "The photographing is much more labor intensive, it takes more time, I have to adjust to the pace of the inhabitants' lives..." Rydet quoted in Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography 1970-1990* (Szczecin: Voivodeship Council; and Warsaw: Association of Polish Art Photographers "ZPAF," 1990), 33-37.

In many ways, this photograph supports the official narrative of the Polish People's Republic in the moment it was taken. Made in Gdańsk in summer 1980, we can discern no signs of that city's famous labor strikes that would take place that August, nor can we detect signs of the powerful Solidarity movement that would lead to the downfall of the Eastern Bloc a decade later.⁶ Instead, the picture presents—at a surface level, at least—a well-kempt couple in their modern apartment, effectively endorsing the government's message of an enlightened and prosperous nation. Every citizen reaps the benefits of post-war Poland's progress, it apparently declares. As First Secretary Edward Gierek characterized the previous year,

The fundamental national problems have been resolved: we've established just borders and permanent guarantees of independence, sovereignty, and security based on reliable alliances—above all through our alliance, friendship, and collaboration with the Soviet Union. Basic social developments, industrialization, and urbanization have ensured the widest popular masses—the entire nation—civilizational and cultural advancement and new dignified living conditions.⁷

Taken superficially, Rydet's photograph endorses Gierek's characterization of dignity for the masses. The home appears neither impoverished nor decadent. The subjects' relaxed poses, their welcoming expressions, and the remaining slices of cake on the table imply an easy generosity afforded by personal comfort. The books and the absence of religious iconography suggest education and secularism. The presence of Roger Moore shows they had access to the popular culture of the west, while the *samovar* points east, evidencing a casual cosmopolitanism.⁸ Indeed under the Communist government, Rydet enjoyed respect from authorities, winning prizes for her photography and maintaining a university teaching position. But understanding this

⁶ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 1108.

⁷ Edward Gierek (1913-2001; First Secretary, 1970-80), then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) of the Polish People's Republic, in his public address during Pope John Paul II's visit to Poland in 1979. Quoted in Aneta Zelek, "Żeby Polska rosła w siłę..." *Świat Biznesu*, number 6-7, 2017.

⁸ These details echo Gierek's leniency toward Western culture, cultivated during 22 years living in Belgium, and willingness to pay lip service to the Soviets, as evident in the quote above.

photograph as wholly aligned with the propaganda of the day requires suppressing the peculiar tension that Moore's expression, his too-closeness, adds to the scene.

If we consider *Sociological Record* as a whole, any impression of a secular, classless, and content socialist society quickly erodes. In another photograph from the same year, made in a similarly urban setting, another young couple sits posing in their house slippers, modern furnishings all around them (fig. 2). A plate of fruit and a baby's crib suggest fertility, if not quite abundance. Instead the subjects appear cramped in their modern apartment, compressed into a room the width of their bed, overwhelmed by even the modestly sized furniture that leaves only a narrow passageway along the middle. Where Roger Moore's visage haunts the first image, here a baby doll peeps up out of the crib, a small third face gazing directly toward the viewer. In contrast to the Gdańsk couple whose body language gently gravitates to center until they touch at the elbows, here, despite the limited space, the man and woman lean away from one another, preserving a visible distance between them. Above the crib, tucked into the bottom left corner of a framed picture, a small portrait of Pope John Paul II infuses the room with religion and, considering the year, a suggestion of anti-Communist political views.⁹ Indeed, *Sociological Record* as a whole aligns with Gierek's narrative of modern Poland only on a first glance. Certainly the presence of anti-Communist signs explains why, in addition to the approval of authorities, Rydet also garnered the accolades of independent artists who defied the government.

While each of Rydet's photographs gives up some uncanny element—the face on the television, the doll in the crib—their potency is diffused in their presentation as a grid (see fig. 4). Systematically executed, uniformly composed, and displayed in rows, together the photographs suggest more an objective bureaucratic survey than fine art photography. Indeed as

⁹ Pope John Paul II (Karol Józef Wojtyła, 1920-2005; Pope 1978-2005), known for his commitment to reuniting Europe, became a symbol for undermining Communism in his native Poland. Davies, *Europe*, 1079.

documents, Rydet's photographs do convey a great amount of information about their subjects, about home life, about Poland in the '80s. One might imagine the usefulness of *Sociological Record* for ethnographers, historians of vernacular architecture, or indeed, sociologists, as the title suggests. But despite the many visual details they offer, without additional information Rydet's photographs remain opaque. Presented without captions, the pictures ultimately stand alone, not as photojournalism, but as art objects.¹⁰ This paper argues that *Sociological Record* only masquerades as a scientific survey in name, methodology, and form. By doing so, the project mimics for subversive ends the language of the communist state. By harnessing the inherent characteristics of the photographic medium, Rydet infiltrates and works against the contemporaneous political and social apparatus.¹¹

In what follows, after briefly introducing the artist's practice as it led to her conception of *Sociological Record*, I interrogate the uncanny sense of time in these photographs. Made well within living memory, they picture a lost past as well as a lost future. In the two-stage theory of Marxist-Leninism, the Soviet Bloc was speeding toward Socialism, surpassing the capitalist West by accelerating history.¹² And yet this dominant Soviet narrative of a utopian future was destined to be replaced in the '90s by neoliberal capitalism. Made on the cusp of these time travels, Rydet's photographs bring together the fantasies of timeless country life with the historically embedded moments that photography uniquely captures.

¹⁰ Although she did not title her individual photographs, Rydet did keep notes. I have included details such as names, places, and dates when available.

¹¹ In theorist Giorgio Agamben's terms, an apparatus "produces" its subjects, "purports to be useful," and has "the capacity to capture, orient, [and] determine [...] living beings." Giorgio Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?," *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford University Press, 2009), 11-13.

¹² Geoffrey Hosking, "Introduction" and "Soviet Society under 'Developed Socialism,'" *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 15-34, 363-401.

I next consider the power of the photographic document as well as the medium's expressive capacity. Through a comparison with the work of Eugène Atget, and by drawing on the work of American art historian Molly Nesbit, I demonstrate that photographs do not constitute knowledge, but nevertheless they aid the viewer toward it. Through photographic documentation, *Sociological Record* offers a wealth of visual information about domestic life in the final decade of Communism in Poland. Moreover, through the immense accumulation of images, the standardization of composition, and her systematized working practice, Rydet's project harnesses the language of the bureaucratic survey. In so doing, the photographs allow for a comparative study and thus divulge the unevenness of modernization and what German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch has termed "nonsynchronicity." By scrutinizing one single photograph, I demonstrate how through the inherent automatism of the camera, Rydet shows interiors that belie the government's propaganda.

But to view *Sociological Record* as merely a series of transparent quasi-dispassionate documents would be to willfully disallow the surrealism of the compositions. The tension between significance and visuality, the documented social content and its aesthetic articulation, everywhere reveals itself, from individual frames to the construction of orders through the thousands of images.¹³ Drawing on American art historian Carol Armstrong's parsing of the intentional "flaw" in the work of Diane Arbus, I identify the uncanniness of Rydet's images. Her harsh lighting, dark corners, and crooked framing lend the images a deskilled aesthetic.¹⁴ Finally,

¹³ French philosopher Jacques Rancière has argued that the photograph is uniquely capable of functioning as both document and artwork. "The 'objectivity' of the medium ... masks a determined aesthetic relation between opacity and transparency," he writes. "It consists in the relation between presence and absence, in the double relation of a visible form to a signification and an absence of sense." Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the photographic image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2009), 12.

¹⁴ When preparing prints, Rydet used narrower dimensions to crop out the darkest corners, but we cannot completely discount the characteristic effect of vignetting that nevertheless persists throughout. Sebastian Cichocki, phone conversation, March 25, 2019.

in considering French literary theorist Roland Barthes's notion of mortality as it is inscribed in every photograph, I analyze *Sociological Record* as a trace of the people pictured but also of a whole society on the brink of irrevocable change, haunted by its various imagined futures and pasts. The photographer herself recognized this aspect of her pictures, concluding, "that the idea was also to catch something that was fading away. I soon noticed that these huts were quickly vanishing, they were changing dramatically."¹⁵

Viewing the pictures now, several decades removed, we see in them the changes of the near future. The Berlin Wall would come down in 1989 and the first free democratic elections would be held in Poland in 1991, after which Leszek Balcerowicz's neoliberal policy of "Shock Therapy" economics flooded the market with international products, and even the poorest subject's relationship to consumerism—and therefore to the domestic interior—was forever changed.¹⁶ Made in a time and indeed a Republic that no longer exists, not only can we read in Rydet's project fleeting traditions and a context that has vanished, but we also perceive in it the encroachment of a future reality. By drawing on the work of Nesbit, Armstrong, and Barthes, as well as recent scholarship on the artist's practice and her own writings, I aim to show how Rydet harnesses both the documentary and expressive attributes of photography to create a subtly insubordinate body of work that haunts us even today.

Before the Record

Although her work garnered recognition during her lifetime and posthumously, Rydet remains a somewhat enigmatic figure. Variably described as an amateur photographer and "the greatest

¹⁵ Rydet quoted in Anna Beata Bohdziewicz "Zofia Rydet o 'Zapisie socjologicznym'" (interview, August 1988), *Konteksty*, No. 3-4, 1997, 192-198.

¹⁶ Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Volume II, 1795 to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 505-506.

Polish woman photographer,”¹⁷ she is best known for *Sociological Record*, a project around which difficulty also persists: is it an archive? A documentary project? A conceptual artwork? A sociological, ethnographic, or typological survey? An *obsession*?¹⁸ And, why did she embark on such an ambitious and sprawling project so late in her own life? Born in 1911 into a bourgeois Polish family under the Austro-Hungarian Empire in present-day Western Ukraine, she survived multiple regimes, displacement, and two world wars (see fig. 5). In her 86 years, Rydet lived under empire, communism, and democracy, and under Nazi and Soviet occupation. According to family biographers, she wanted to study at an art academy but yielded to her parents who sought a more traditional education for their only daughter.¹⁹ It was in the years leading up to the Second World War, working at the Orbis Travel Agency run by her brother Tadeusz, that she made her first photographs using a camera he lent her. She began by photographing children in the surrounding villages (see fig. 6). But it wasn’t until after the war that she could finally commit herself more seriously to photography.²⁰ By the end of the 1940s, Zofia and her parents had settled in Gliwice, a city in the Upper Silesia region of Poland.²¹ There, already in her late

¹⁷ See Adam Mazur, “Perhaps the Greatest Polish Woman Photographer: Problematics of Research into the Life and Art of Zofia Rydet,” *Object Lessons*, 69-92.

¹⁸ Considering carefully the question of the project’s status, Abigail Solomon-Godeau draws comparisons to the work of Eugène Atget (whose production, by contrast, “was entrepreneurial”), Garry Winogrand (“as artistic project”), and Vivian Maier (“a private obsession”), ultimately proposing the term “survey.” Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Artist, Oeuvre, Corpus, and Archive: Thinking through Zofia Rydet’s *Sociological Record*,” *Object Lessons*, 225.

¹⁹ Maria Sokół-Augustyńska and Anna Bujnowska, “Kalendarium,” *Zofia Rydet: Zapis socjologiczny, 1978-1990*, ed. Wojciech Nowicki (Muzeum w Gliwicach, 2016), 291.

²⁰ During the war Zofia continued to work in the one-time Orbis office, which under Soviet occupation (1939-41) was transformed into an inn, and then under German occupation (1941-44) was refashioned as a consignment shop. *Ibid.*, 293.

²¹ In 1945, Gliwice (Gleiwitz) became part of Poland’s “recovered territories.” From these parts and others in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, millions of ethnic Germans and German citizens were expelled west across the new border into Germany. Norman Davies, *God’s Playground*, 101.

30s, she continued to teach herself photography.²² In the 1950s, she joined the Gliwice Photographic Society, enrolled in a photo course in Katowice, and set up a darkroom so she could develop film and make prints at home (see fig. 7-8).²³ She traveled regionally, honing her craft on photographic excursions. After the death of her parents in 1957, she embarked on international travel, continuing work on a project about childhood.²⁴

Rydet began gaining acknowledgement in the 1960s with her first solo exhibitions—from the photo club in Gliwice, to Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw, to her first international show in Bucharest—quit the stationery store she ran, and began teaching photography in the industrial architecture department at the local polytechnic university.²⁵ Art historian Adam Mazur remarks on the mysterious nature of her success:

She evolved from an amateur photographer, becoming perhaps the most important female Polish photographer, respected by critics, sought after by museums, and awarded by the state authorities. This was unusual, especially if one takes into account the history of the family, resettled from the eastern lands of the Kresy [borderlands], whose social class was not “politically correct.”²⁶

Despite her inconvenient bourgeois background, she managed to endear herself to the authorities, allowing her the privilege of a passport. Adding to the open questions, art historian Abigail

²² For a couple of years in the mid-1940s, she and her fiancé (identified only by his first name Zbigniew) traveled together by car on daytrips around the countryside, presumably while she practiced her photography. According to Zofia Augustyńska-Martyniak, Rydet’s great-niece and vice president of the Zofia Rydet Foundation, he backed out of the marriage because “the photography and her family were too important for her.” Sokół-Augustyńska and Bujnowska, 294; Email correspondence with Zofia Augustyńska-Martyniak, March 28, 2019.

²³ Sokół-Augustyńska and Bujnowska, 294.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 295-296.

²⁶ Mazur, 77-79. In a footnote he cites numerous recognitions bestowed by communist authorities such as the “Meritorious Cultural Activist Badge of Katowice,” 1968, and mentions additional honors and medals awarded at exhibitions and competitions in Poland and abroad. Mazur, 79, note 22.

Solomon-Godeau emphasizes another mysterious aspect of Rydet's artistic career, remarking on the photographer's success within Gliwice's otherwise all-male photographic milieu.²⁷

Rydet's first major project, *Mały człowiek (Little Man)*, 1952-63, culminated in an artist book in 1965 that includes photographs taken throughout Poland and the eastern bloc—Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia—but also Egypt and Lebanon. In it, she shows the complexity of childhood rather than simple innocence, and attempts a thesis of universality through the inclusion of those international subjects (see fig. 9-12).²⁸ The project is organized in fifteen themes rather than by geography or date, including sections like “Joy of Living,” “Dramas,” and “First Friendship”—a technique she would continue in *Sociological Record*.

We might deduce that this thematic organization crystalized after Rydet saw the exhibition *The Family of Man*, which traveled around Poland in 1959-60. By numerous accounts that exhibition made a strong impression on Rydet for its humanist content (see fig. 13).²⁹ Conceived by photographer and curator Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955, *The Family of Man* included over 500 photographs by nearly 300 photographers, interspersed with poignant quotations about humanity across history.³⁰ Rather than didactic texts, American poet Carl Sandburg provided an expressive narration. Rydet had long been photographing children, but the photo book *Little Man* represents the first instance in which we witness her shaping that content using techniques reminiscent of *The Family of Man*: in addition to the fifteen thematic sections included within *Little Man*, we can detect her work with order,

²⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 236.

²⁸ Karolina Lewandowska, “Note from the Publisher of the New Edition,” *Zofia Rydet: Mały człowiek* (Archeology of Photography Foundation, Warsaw, 2012), np.

²⁹ Mazur, 82.

³⁰ The project featured quotations from Abraham Lincoln, James Joyce, William Shakespeare, and others. *The Family of Man* (1955), ed. Edward Steichen (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015).

arrangement, and scale.³¹ She prints photographs as full-bleed two-page spreads, or repeats an image to bring the viewer successively closer to a particular face. And whereas Steichen had Sandburg, Rydet used the words of educator Janusz Korczak—a sure tactic for preempting any sentimental reading. As the director of an orphanage in Warsaw during the Second World War, despite opportunities to save himself, Korczak famously perished during the Holocaust alongside the children under his care.³² By including fragments of his writings, Rydet haunts her photographs of happy children with the trauma of a war they never experienced first-hand.

In the 1970s Rydet continued teaching, traveling, and winning photographic awards, concentrating her artistic production on post-surrealist photomontages (see fig. 14-15). Like *Little Man* that preceded it, *Świat uczuć i wyobraźni (World of Feelings and Imagination)*, 1975-79, manifested in a photo book organized in thematic sections, from “Birth” and “Motherhood” to “Obsessions” to “Hope,” that amounted to a project about the human experience.³³

Throughout her career, Rydet hewed to some major photographic movements in Poland, oscillating between the extremes of social documentary and expressive styles of photography,

³¹ In the years to follow, we see a continued interest in the organization of her photographs into books and exhibitions along thematic lines. In a letter to photographer and journalist Krystyny Łyczywek, Rydet critically compares the exhibition *What is Man?* to *The Family of Man*. The former, organized in 1965 by the Austrian photo editor and theorist Karl Pawek as the first in his “World’s Fair of Photography” exhibition series, was conceived as directly influenced by *The Family of Man*. Having seen *What is Man?* in Kraków, Rydet reflects in the letter that it was made up of “very good photographs, perhaps better than in [*The Family of Man*], but as an overall exhibition, worse. I do not feel in it a continuous thread. Rather than an epic about humanity, I read in it a series of novellas about individual people.” From these remarks we can deduce that she strived for grand narratives in her own work, and was more concerned about the whole than the individual image. Zofia Rydet, letter to Krystyna Łyczywek, dated January 20, 1968.

³² *Little Man* is interspersed with the writings of Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit), the educator, pediatrician, children’s author, and advocate who during the Holocaust chose to accompany the 190 orphans under his care to the Treblinka extermination camp, where they perished together in 1942. For more about the life and work of Korczak, see Adir Cohen, *The Gate of Light: Janusz Korczak, the educator and writer who overcame the Holocaust* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994); and on the legal revision of his date of death from 1946 to 1942, see Anna Gmiterek-Zabłocka, “Sąd zmienił datę śmierci Janusza Korczaka. Prawda historyczna zwyciężyła,” *Gazeta Wyborcza Lublin*, March 27, 2015.

³³ Urszula Czartoryska, *Świat uczuć i wyobraźni Zofii Rydet* (Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1979).

but consistently worked within an almost literary form that allowed for themes within themes, sub-series within larger series.

In those same years, she also conceived the beginnings of what would become *Sociological Record*, the project in which she brought together the documentary practice of *Little Man* with the collage aesthetic and surreal sensibility of *World of Feelings and Imagination*. Finally, after retiring from her teaching position at the polytechnic in 1977, in 1978 at age 67, she embarked on a project so ambitious she feared she would never complete it (see fig. 16). She retained her strategy of working in themes: alongside “People in Interiors,” the core of *Sociological Record* and the focus of this study, the project grew to include additional sub-series like “Landscapes,” “Professions,” “Women on Doorsteps,” “Houses” (exteriors), “Myth of Photography” (photographs people display in their homes), and “Presence” (pictures of Pope John Paul II) (see fig. 17-21). This last series, which features pictures of the Pope within a variety of domestic arrangements, manifested in a photo book in 1988 (see fig. 22).³⁴ But when it came to the overall project *Sociological Record*, although Rydet left behind notes and work prints, she never did produce a final selection.³⁵

In Rydet’s writings, we can detect the artist herself grappling with defining the significance of the work. Reflecting on the documentary value of the photographs but also her artistic aspirations for the project, in a letter to the photography critic Jerzy Buszy in 1982, she writes,

For the first time really, I am convinced of the value of what I am doing, because I know that the value of this document is very great. [I have documented] fifteen

³⁴ Józefa Hennelowa, *Zofia Rydet: Obecność* (Wydawnictwo Calvarianum, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, 1988).

³⁵ Although only about 1% of her prints have been seen publicly, thousands of prints are stored in her archive. Until the end of her life Rydet continued to work on a cohesive presentation of *Sociological Record* that would include about 200-250 prints in various formats and sizes and arranged in grids. Sebastian Cichocki, phone conversation, March 25, 2019.

regions of Poland, not only interiors, but I have done also various other series. [...] I never stressed the typically utilitarian nature of the Record; on the contrary, I claim that this document goes beyond its framework and can be variously interpreted. And who knows if it won't be the best thing I leave behind.³⁶

The openness to interpretation she describes may have been strategic. Living in Communist Poland, Rydet needed to work without attracting the attention of the authorities. If she was perceived as undermining the official national narrative, itself always changing, her work and she herself could face unpleasant consequences. “The whole series was supposed to have a totally different title, but I don't remember what it was,” she reflected a decade into the project. “I think it was Urszula Czartoryska who came up with *Sociological Record*. But this is not an academic work; I don't want to do it in a scientific way.”³⁷ As director of photography at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Czartoryska was an important ally for Rydet and other free-thinking artists, and expertly savvy in navigating the bureaucracy of state institutions. The name *Sociological Record* reinforces the notion that Rydet's images amount to a useful scientific archive. This title, suggests filmmaker and writer Marlaïne Glicksman, was at the time of the project's inception,

a bit misleading—perhaps even purposely so, considering Rydet's images challenged the all-prevailing myth that all were equal under Soviet-style communism. Perhaps the title itself was an umbrella whose radius circumscribed the project's breadth and focus, while also affording Rydet some shade from authorities, who might deem the diversity depicted in her pictures a bit dangerous.³⁸

By using the title *Sociological Record*, the project was positioned to dovetail with “sociological photography,” a rising genre of photojournalism sanctioned by the authorities. By invoking the

³⁶ Zofia Rydet, Letter to Jerzy Buszy, dated February 3, 1982.

³⁷ Rydet quoted in Bohdziewicz, 1988.

³⁸ Marlaïne Glicksman, “Répertoire, 1978-1990: Zofia Rydet at Jeu de Paume,” *American Suburb X*, October 14, 2017.

field of sociology, the title *Sociological Record* encourages attention to the state of the lives of Rydet's subjects, their physical frailty and domestic squalor, as I demonstrate in the next sections of this essay.

But even as her work was valorized as social photography, it also diverges from that model. A brief consideration of two photographers with whom she was grouped will help us understand the dubious relationship between *Sociological Record* and “sociological photography.” As the genre gained recognition, Rydet was included in exhibitions such as *The First All-Poland Review of Sociological Photography*, Bielsko-Biała, 1980.³⁹ Rydet's photographs were displayed there among contemporaries like Paweł Pierściński, who chronicled the daily lives of steelworkers. In *Welder*, 1968, Pierściński employs asymmetry to deliver drama, sparks flying into an arc that cuts diagonally through the composition (fig. 23). His photographs recall more closely Rydet's *Little Man* than the de-skilled framing she uses in *Sociological Record*. Curiously, although the exhibition was otherwise organized chronologically, Rydet's project was also included in a section of the exhibition that featured earlier precedents for sociological photography. And here, her interiors resonate completely. Presented alongside the 19th century ethnographic types of Karol Beyer, widely considered the father of Polish photography, *Sociological Record* appears as if it, too, was made in an earlier era. In one photograph of a peasant family made around 1866, a family of four poses looking toward Beyer's camera, framed Jesus and Black Madonna hanging on the wall behind them (fig. 24). Aside from their clothing, this well could be a scene from *Sociological Record*. Rydet's similar compositional strategy, employed over a century later, recalls Beyer's pseudo-ethnographic gaze. Included in two discrete sections of the exhibition—with a group of

³⁹ Krzysztof Pijarski, “To see a society, to show a community: ‘Sociological Photography’ and Zofia Rydet's ‘Record’” (lecture), Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2016.

contemporary documentary photographers, and with early photography, where strangely her project found more likely comparisons—*Sociological Record* is tied to a time and place on the one hand, and yet floating free of history on the other.

By employing the title *Sociological Record*, Rydet thrust the project into the discourses of sociological photography. But text (such as a title), Barthes insists, can not only “amplify” or “provide a stress” to photographs, but go further still to invent “an entirely new signified which is retroactively projected into the image, so much so as to appear denoted there.”⁴⁰ By intimating that the project hews to the social sciences, the title suggests a research-based process with measurable outcomes, a use value that resonates positively with the rhetoric of the State.⁴¹ The language of the (useful) bureaucratic survey would be strong enough, Czartoryska may have wagered, to protect the reality that the pictures themselves catalogue from legibility by those who would threaten the project. And yet the political opposition also appreciated the project. Stressing what he calls the under-researched “political dimension” of Rydet’s work, Mazur mentions the inclusion of selections of *Sociological Record* in independent, politically underground, “church-related exhibitions organized by the anti-communist opposition” in the 1980s (see fig. 25).⁴² How is it that this sprawling, unwieldy project concurrently garnered the respect of these opposing forces?

The photographs Rydet made for *Sociological Record* offer a mass of material worth re-consideration today. Having lived a life that spanned a century of dramatic political and social

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message” (1961), ed. Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 27.

⁴¹ While Socialist Realism never fully took hold in Poland and was abandoned as official doctrine in the mid-1950s, throughout the Communist years art production persisted in a liminal state between state control and free expression. See Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, Reaktion Books, 2009.

⁴² Mazur, 70.

changes, she spent her 70s documenting life during a turbulent decade in a country on the cusp of yet another major societal shift. We can perceive in *Sociological Record* a sense of urgency in Rydet's use of a hand-held camera, the multiple villages she visited on each trip, and the insistence and speed she exhibited with her subjects—after all, she had to document them before both she and they disappeared forever.

In the Village

Large prints of Jesus and Mary buckle in their frames, the harsh light of Rydet's camera flash grazing their mannerist depictions (fig. 26). A water line runs above the top of the frames, disappearing into a seam of the traditionally constructed wooden wall.⁴³ A carefully hung straw mat edges the picture frames along the bottom. Around the religious pictures, a domestic scene unfolds: an open door leads to another tidy room, while further to the left we glimpse the gleaming tiles of a traditional antique stove. We can locate ourselves in the living room, the kitchen, the primary space of congregation—perhaps also someone's bedroom. Shrouding ensures cleanliness and presentability: a striped textile covers the folding couch, matching oilcloths protect the tables, plastic sheeting blankets the floor. Photographed in 1979 in the Polish village Łapsze Wyżne, not far from the border with Slovakia, at the center of the composition a young man leans back in a chair, smiling, a comb in his right hand and his left cheek in the other. He wears a wristwatch, a buttoned shirt tucked into fashionable blue jeans.⁴⁴

⁴³ The traditional method of caulking involved stuffing rope or wood chips into the seams before sealing them with gypsum or another hardening substance. For more about the various traditional wall constructions visible in *Sociological Record*, see Marian Pokropek, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1976), 86-88.

⁴⁴ In those years, Western-style jeans were worn as a status symbol. They were available only at Pewex (the "Internal Export Company"), a national chain of shops devised—in 1972, under Gierek—to help pull the Republic out of foreign debt. They sold imported goods as well as highly desirable Polish goods otherwise designated for export. The prices were inflated, and the shops accepted only foreign currency. Tom Junes, "Facing the Music: How

Caught mid-gesture, he neither poses for the camera nor is unaware of its presence. Is he at ease, or feeling bashful? On the television set beside him, an announcer wearing a light suit appears onscreen, but our subject looks toward the pack of cigarettes on the table, butts already accumulating in the cut crystal ashtray set beside a vase of artificial flowers.

Rydet's process would not have allowed the subject any time to prepare himself or his home for the shoot. Given the opportunity, would he have removed the sheeting from the floor? Did he instinctively grab the comb as he agreed to sit for a portrait? After inviting herself into a house, Rydet worked quickly, not allowing her subjects time to protest.⁴⁵ In a conversation published in 1990, the photographer explained that upon entering a home, she discerned at once a focal point,

I enter the home, look around carefully, and I immediately see something beautiful, something unusual, and I compliment it. The owner is pleased that I like it, and then I take the first photograph. Everyone has something in his house that is most precious to him. If I manage to notice this, then this person submits at once. I take advantage of this moment. I ask [my subject] to have a seat [...] in front of the main wall, the most interesting one, the one most decorated with pictures and tapestries, and I take the photograph.⁴⁶

Employing distraction and flattery, Rydet cajoled her subjects into submission, and speed enabled her to record the people as she had encountered them. According to Anna Beata Bohdziewicz, a photographer and friend of Rydet's who accompanied her on several photographic excursions, Rydet's shoots were over within fifteen to twenty minutes, only after which she would get to know her sitters through long conversations.⁴⁷ By this process, Rydet

the Foundations of Socialism Were Rocked in Communist Poland," *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 243.

⁴⁵ Anna Beata Bohdziewicz, "Traveling through the Villages of Podhale" (1988), *Object Lessons*, 56.

⁴⁶ Zofia Rydet quoted in Krystyna Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography*, 1990.

⁴⁷ "Rydet's approach in *Sociological Record*," reflects Glicksman, "worked because of the Polish countryside's tradition of *Czym chata bogata, tym rada*: its humble, open-door hospitality." The expression signifies, "you are

traveled from village to village every summer for thirteen years exposing many rolls of film, and devoted the colder months to developing and editing in her darkroom. “She wanted to eternalize her sitters in their everyday clothes, dirty and worn out from hard work,” reflects Bohdziewicz. “It seemed that she felt such an image showed best the truth about them.”⁴⁸ But far from poverty or dirty clothes, the truth she found here lies in abundant symbols of prosperity: a large, recently constructed home full of new furnishings and a young man in Western-style urban clothes. Perhaps family working abroad sends American dollars from Chicago, or he himself has traveled to work for foreign wages that translate into such a comfortable house and chic clothes.⁴⁹ Still, the covered floor—protecting pristine carpeting, perhaps?—demonstrates an awareness that these luxuries are not easy to come by.

Significantly, in his affluence the subject has not left behind traditional architecture, even as he embraces modern appliances and fashion. Furthermore, if here we discern a television set, modern furniture, and other mass-produced objects in a traditionally constructed but new home, the larger project only magnifies and multiplies such juxtapositions. In the photographs made in the countryside, Jesus, Mary, and Pope John Paul II proliferate exponentially, at times appearing numerous within a single scene (see fig. 27). The prominence of mass-produced items in some scenes gives way to folk architecture, handicraft, and traditional dress in others, while most of the photographs contain some combination of modern and traditional elements. Though the

welcome to any of the wealth of the home.” Rydet steadfastly sought the shots she wanted, and she defied any reluctance she detected in her sitters by coercing them to enact the tradition of hospitality. According to Bohdziewicz, “When people didn’t want to let her in, she used to tell them that she took these pictures for the pope.” By these accounts, it was the photographer’s conviction in her project that drove her to talk her way into each house, no matter what she had to say to convince her hosts to let her photograph them. Marlaine Glicksman, and Anna Bohdziewicz quoted in Glicksman.

⁴⁸ Bohdziewicz, *Object Lessons*, 57.

⁴⁹ Tom Hundley, “The Golden Yoke,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 15, 1998.

Communist propaganda of the time would have us believe the population lived in a harmonious classless society, “People in Interiors” reveals a spectrum of material wealth and poverty.

This non-synchronicity captured in individual photographs demonstrates the irregular reshaping of domestic life over the course of the century. In another poor household, we find a mother and her four children perched on the edge of a folding couch (fig. 28). Behind them, the religious picture—Jesus praying at Mount Olive—takes the higher place above a vernacular woodland scene. Mass-produced lace curtains on the right and a mid-century modern credenza on the left call attention to objects such as an electric iron, glinting drinking glasses, and framed family photographs. The exposed wooden beams of the ceiling and a wicker crib, situated alongside the trace where a traditional old stove once stood, harken to an older time. Two runners placed next to each other to form a makeshift carpet cover the aging linoleum flooring, curling up at the evenly spaced nails along its seams beneath the subjects’ feet. The home-done haircuts of the two youngest children heighten the stylistic choices of the older girls: a ring and asymmetrical bangs on one, and a fashionable perm and toenail polish on the oldest.

Meanwhile in the city, an elegant older couple poses for Rydet in their apartment, their body language compressed as befitting a higher class (fig. 29). Potted plants line a large window, and a Victorian lampshade and framed family photographs populate a shelf. Above the sitters, a stylized painting features a folk couple wearing traditional Cracovian costumes, frolicking in a meadow. Rural life is cast as a timeless constant. *Sociological Record* shows various realities of the countryside, as we have seen, but those are complicated further by the presentation of this fantasy of folk life that places peasantry both elsewhere and in some other time, predating sophisticated culture and yet concurrent with it. “The foundation of the nonsynchronous contradiction is the unfulfilled fairy tale of the good old days,” writes Ernst Bloch to describe the

effects of uneven modernization in Germany during the inter-War period. “Here there is a past which, in places, is not only not past in terms of classes, but not even completely redeemed materially.”⁵⁰ Just as it had in Germany half a century earlier, the unevenness of modernity registers in Rydet’s photographs. We discern it in her recording of this couple, so tied to their time and place by the documentary capacity of photography, alongside the painting, which construes a romantic fiction of peasantry. The two pictures—the (true) photograph, the (fictional) painting in the photograph—create a tension much as the real villagers of Rydet’s photographs undo the fantasy of the painted villagers here.

In this way, the sheer quantity of images amounts to a sort of archive cutting through time but also across notions of urban and rural life. Although the artist intended the final project to consist of thematic groupings, because of her advanced age—and perhaps because of the difficulty of the project—she never completed it.⁵¹ But in its forever unfinished state, and precisely because it includes people of all ages, scenes from wealthy homes and poor ones, and urban, suburban, and rural dwellings, *Sociological Record* as an archive can be used comparatively.⁵² Indeed, as she worked with the images, Rydet herself began to see the value of her photographs as historical documents. By 1982, she recognized the importance of amassing many views and many details,

⁵⁰ Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics” (1932), trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique*, No. 11 (Spring 1977), 25.

⁵¹ Along the lines of her earlier work, the groupings she was working on were thematic rather than regional or chronological. In spite of this more poetic and less didactic vision for her work, geography is the organizing principle curators most often use to display her photographs. Sebastian Cichocki, phone conversation, March 25, 2019.

⁵² In his essay on the emergence of the photographic criminal archive, Allan Sekula observes that the archive becomes useful “on the basis of mutual comparison, on the basis of the tentative construction of a larger, ‘universal’ archive that zones of deviance and respectability could be clearly demarcated.” Although the photographs of *Sociological Record* were amassed as working material for a never completed artistic project, it nevertheless remains true that the sheer volume allows for comparison among classes. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 14.

I still think about how good it is, what a blessing that I have my photography. I now work all the time on the *Record*. The more it grows, the more I believe and want to believe that it will have great value. Now I know for certain that the greatest value in photography is not artwork, which fades, but its content, its role as a document. In making these prints I am delighted myself at what I have managed to capture, so many details that speak of the people of our time.⁵³

In her acknowledgement of the photographs as visual records, Rydet appreciated the great amount of information they carry about their subjects, rural homes, and life in Poland. In the case of “Women on Doorsteps,” for instance, “I always ask the ladies of the house to stand by the entrances to their homes, and based on those you can tell where the pictures were taken: if the woman is taller than the doorway to her hut you know at once it’s Podhale, while if the door frame is far above the woman’s head, it’s Silesia.”⁵⁴ By the accumulation of so many photographs, she seems to say, we can draw comparative conclusions not only between north and south, but poor and wealthy, rural and urban, 1978 and 1990. With access to such a wide sample, we might imagine the usefulness of *Sociological Record* for ethnographers, historians of vernacular architecture, or indeed, sociologists, as the title suggests. By the inherent automatism of the camera, Rydet records the facts of interiors that belie the Polish government’s Communist propaganda. *Sociological Record* shows us poverty, religiosity, and a coveting of western commodities where these realities are said not to exist.

Documents of Simple Inequality

A comparative reading of interiors, as enabled by the photographic archive that Rydet built during her work on *Sociological Record*, recalls Eugène Atget’s album *Intérieurs parisiens*. Created around the turn of the previous century, Atget marketed his albums as reference

⁵³ Zofia Rydet, Letter to Krystyna Łyczywek, January 12, 1982.

⁵⁴ Joanna Kubica, unpublished interview with Zofia Rydet for *FOTO* magazine, 1987.

material, for instance to be used by artists who could paint from the photographs.⁵⁵ His intentions aside, the images retain documentary value. Atget's album of interiors, according to Molly Nesbit, "might have its basis in the technical signs but it nonetheless promoted a crude practical vision that saw an apartment as a sign of one's place in society."⁵⁶ One photograph of a hat maker's bedroom, she points out, includes a hat perched on a candelabra and a workbasket of materials in front of the fireplace, evidence of the occupant's trade (fig. 30).⁵⁷ In addition to identifying specific objects, the arrangement of space can be parsed for class signifiers as well. As photographer and theorist Allan Sekula points out, quoting the German critic Camille Recht, "the proximity of a 'nuptial bed and an unavoidable chimney flue,' provided grimly comic testimony of everyday life in an exploitative social formation."⁵⁸ In such ways, according to Nesbit, "The entire album fell out around the class difference [...] there were those who had wealth and those who did not."⁵⁹ By recording these differences, Atget's work shows "simple inequality, imbalance."⁶⁰ Along similar lines, we can scrutinize the objects and arrangements within the photographs that make up Rydet's archive. Through her images we can draw conclusions about class and life conditions, as I demonstrate next by excogitating the details of a single photograph.

⁵⁵ Although she worked in an artistic context, exhibiting her photographs in galleries and museums, Rydet, like Atget, did not refer to her photographs as art. In 1990 she told the artist and filmmaker Józef Robakowski, "It has never really mattered to me whether people call me an artist, to call this art. It seems to me that the power of the project comes from the fact that I'm doing something that is useful, that I can somehow have an impact on other people. [...] What I care about is the power behind what I do." Zofia Rydet in Józef Robakowski, *Interview with Zofia Rydet*, 1990.

⁵⁶ Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 122.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

⁵⁸ Sekula, 60.

⁵⁹ Nesbit, 123.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

It is a warm day in 1984: sunlight illuminates white lace curtains shrouding a large window (fig. 31). A woman wears only a thin housedress, her feet bare against the modern patterned *wykładzina* (carpeting). Again, nearly every surface of the cozy interior is covered with differently textured fabrics and pictures, the woman wrapped, as Rydet would say, in a domestic “cocoon” arrangement.⁶¹ Is it a “cocoon” from which a metamorphosis is destined to follow? By reflecting the contents of the room, a mirror in the corner adds further visual stimuli. In some ways, the scene recalls nineteenth century interiors. Considering modernity as it manifested in the private spaces of Paris a century earlier, the philosopher Walter Benjamin writes,

The interior is not just the universe but also the *étui* of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance; in these, the traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior.⁶²

By photographing the “*étui*,” the casing, that is an indexical record of this woman’s life, Rydet records another trace, photographically doubling it for preservation.

The interior demands inventorization. One cannot look at Rydet’s photographs without seeing the interiors, without taking in the aesthetic choices of the subjects. The tablecloths, bedspreads, carpets, curtains, even the woman’s dress fill the scene with dotted flowers, graphic leaves, and scrolling vines. These geometrically rendered organic symbols stand in contrast to the living nature also visible here: houseplants and cut flowers on tables and potted creepers garlanding the ceiling, and the bright leafy landscape beyond the hut. Here, in the village, culture and nature meet so closely. As the woman’s toes splay on the mass-produced flooring, so too the other natural organisms—plants, landscape—compete with artifice.

⁶¹ Rydet quoted in Cichocki, *Object Lessons*, 33.

⁶² Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 39.

The subject, awkwardly seated on a stool, looks directly into the lens of Rydet's camera. Six years into the project, by this time Rydet had honed the process by which she unhesitatingly invited herself into home after rural home, promptly taking pictures. What can we possibly know about this woman? We may base preliminary conclusions on information jotted in Rydet's notebooks and on negative sleeves about an otherwise untitled photograph, and in her narration of her process over the years to follow. From these sources, we might glean that she encountered Helena Opyt (née Maciata) in the woman's home on ul. Miłośników Podhala in Biały Dunajec, a scenic village in Poland's mountainous southern region, but not much else. Instead, we must look to the photograph as a document to deduce additional information. A patterned Persian-style tapestry hangs on the wall directly behind the sitter, serving as a backdrop for religious icons and pictures.⁶³ The largest picture depicts Jesus followed by sheep in a pastoral landscape, knocking at the proverbial door.⁶⁴ Framed, the picture is centrally located at the top edge of the wall hanging. Additional smaller depictions of Christ and the Virgin Mary are displayed in a punctuated but approximately symmetrical arrangement, evenly dispersed across the field of the rug. One framed picture that appears not to be a Catholic symbol but perhaps a Buddhist deity, is hung at the top right corner, just outside the edge of the patterned tapestry. The picture is an outlier, serving a decorative rather than devotional purpose. In this way, the Persian rug motif

⁶³ Carpets were hung to insulate homes from the cold, and in city apartment blocs added much-needed soundproofing as well. In the Polish context, Persian carpets have been popular luxury items since the sixteenth century. A particular style of Persian rugs from Isfahan prized by Polish nobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries featured elaborate silk weavings embellished with gold thread. These came to be known internationally as *tapis Polonais* (Polonaise carpets). Decorative carpets quickly became signifiers of affluence throughout Europe, and by the nineteenth century, wealthy farmers and urban dwellers also adopted them in their homes. During the Soviet era, whether in the city or the village, such a carpet would code as a status symbol. See Murray L. Eiland, "Rug and Carpet," and Editors, "Polonaise carpet," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, updated May 25, 2018.

⁶⁴ "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," said Jesus. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." Revelation 3:20.

has seemingly become a sort of religious space, an altar reserved for Catholic symbols. The bottom third is left bare to accommodate the bed and anyone who sleeps in it.

Notably there are two visible iterations of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (see fig. 32). At the upper right hangs a rendition or photograph of the icon in its current state at Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa. For centuries venerated as the protectress of Poland, the image of the icon carries both religious and patriotic symbolism,⁶⁵ especially in the wake of the politically inflected visit in 1979 of Pope John Paul II to the shrine at Jasna Góra.⁶⁶ Rendered in paintings, photographs, and reliefs, the Black Madonna appears frequently throughout *Sociological Record*, suggesting a broadly religious and politically motivated population. Here, in addition to the photograph mentioned above, hangs another, strikingly different, image of Matka Boska Częstochowska. At the central point of the rug which creates a halo of Persian-style ornament around the object, clad in a Greek Orthodox-style *riza* (revetment), the icon nevertheless remains identifiable by the characteristic scars on her right cheek, damage caused by Hussite raiders in the fifteenth century (see fig. 33). Manufactured during the Soviet era and equipped with an electrical plug, this version of the picture was apparently designed to be backlit.⁶⁷ Beneath the holy image the object features the words *Pod Twoją obronę uciekamy się* (“We fly to Your patronage”), the first line in a popular prayer to the Virgin. Intended for a broad popular audience, this particular devotional object appears in several of Rydet’s photographs,⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Here I wish to stress that patriotism for the nation is distinct from—and, under Communism, often in direct opposition to—the State. See Pijarski, “Seeing Society, Showing Community: ‘Sociological Photography’ and Zofia Rydet’s *Record*,” *Object Lessons*, 156.

⁶⁶ David A. Andelman, “Pope Calls on Polish Government For Guarantee of Religious Liberty,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 1979, A1, A8.

⁶⁷ Anna, “Stary obraz Matka Boska Częstochowska podświetlany PRL,” *Sprzedajemy.pl*, March 15, 2018.

⁶⁸ The object, apparently manufactured in two sizes, is visible in domestic scenes documented as part of *Sociological Record*. See images in Wojciech Nowicki, *Zofia Rydet: Zapis socjologiczny, 1978-1990* (Muzeum w Gliwicach, 2016), 69, 75, 81, 92, 101, 124, 125, 137, 244, 264, 268, 272.

and today can be obtained inexpensively on the secondary market.⁶⁹ In this kitsch object, we discover a Polish communist government that acquiesces to—but Russifies through the *riza*, and modernizes through electrification—an important symbol of traditional Polish religiousness and patriotism. In this way, the object represents the confluence of the real forces at work within Poland under Communism.⁷⁰

In addition to religious devotion, *Sociological Record* reveals a fascination with Western products. In the photograph from Biały Dunajec, the cacophony of patterned surfaces gives way to some especially valued objects. Signs of a child or children proliferate. Two single beds line the edges of both visible walls. How many people live here is unclear. Across from the sitter, a baby’s crib is reflected in the mirror, a sheet or blanket draped over one side suggesting the crib is in active use throughout the day. A cartoonish inflated cat and a smaller boy on wheels are two discernable toys tucked in the corner where the beds meet. To the left, a tricycle is visible beneath a table. Four dolls are arranged in a semicircle, as if sitting together, on one of the beds. Curiously, two of them are black dolls, likely from Western Europe or the United States, suggesting that a family member or friend sent or brought them to Poland from abroad (see fig. 34).⁷¹

Two display towers of Italian *Tic Tac* candies stand as another sign of contact with the capitalist world outside of the Soviet Bloc (see fig. 35). These cheap plastic commodities are

⁶⁹ See Edyta, “obraz Matki Boskiej Częstochowskiej, starocie, PRL,” *Sprzedajemy.pl*, June 3, 2018; and Osoba prywatna, “Święty obraz Matki Boskiej Częstochowskiej Maryja PRL Maria. Matka,” *OLX.pl*, May 29, 2018.

⁷⁰ The production of such an object could be used to demonstrate the government’s appearance of openness. *The New York Times* summarizes the situation, “The Polish Constitution formally guarantees religious freedom. But in practice, according to church leaders, that freedom is sharply circumscribed by an array of restrictions from censorship of religious publications to limitations on the religious education of children and the training of priests.” Andelman, A1.

⁷¹ China or bisque (unglazed porcelain) dolls were popular in Europe since the mid-1800s, and later were manufactured using hard plastics. Germany and England were major producers of dolls.

positioned in a place of honor above the television set. In her collection of essays *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* published shortly after the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulić describes the daily realities women experienced under Communist regimes. Living part-time in Sweden and therefore enjoying unfettered access to commercial products, the author recalls traveling around Central Europe,

[I]n Sofia, my friend Katarina saw my package of tampons in her bathroom and asked if I could leave it for her. [...] For a moment, I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry. I sprinkled Eastern Europe with tampons on my travels: I had already left one package of tampons and some napkins, ironically called 'New Freedom,' in Warsaw (plus Bayer aspirin and antibiotics), another package in Prague (plus Anaïs perfume), and now here in Sofia...⁷²

The everyday disposable and consumable products Drakulić carried during her travels—sanitary napkins, basic pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics, all easily obtainable in the West—elicited great desire in her Central European hosts well into the first years of democracy and supposed freedom. In Rydet's photograph, the *Tic Tac* towers stand on opposite ends of the television set, arranged symmetrically to create a tableau of sorts. Placed centrally between them, we can make out a small model ship amid other indiscernible knick-knacks. "The focal point in the village hut is the television set, which is on all day. There are generally few books. What is most precious (most often a portrait of Pope John Paul II) goes on top of the television," reflected the photographer.⁷³ As the "focal point" of the home, anything within visual proximity of the television would also frequently be gazed upon throughout the day, creating a constant, if peripheral, presence.⁷⁴ In *Sociological Record*, television sets often appear in corners, with

⁷² Slavenka Drakulić, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 30.

⁷³ Rydet quoted in Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography*, 1990.

⁷⁴ Communist authorities saw access to television and radio broadcasting by a broad population as advantageous, enabling controlled, propagandistic messages to reach large audiences, and were inclined to make them attainable.

elaborate arrangements of knick-knacks all around, as seen here. In the project's considerable volume of repetition we can discern the common practices of arranging domestic space at the time. Here these plastic *Tic Tac* towers, curious display objects for brand-name Italian candies, occupy that zone of admiration above the television.

The display of special packaging thematically weaves through urban and rural scenes in *Sociological Record*. Along these lines, in a photograph taken in the southern Polish city of Gliwice, a young man sits surrounded by music and sports posters, and ephemera from car races (fig. 36). Arranged carefully above the doorway behind him, we see a row of empty liquor vessels: eight full-sized bottles, and three small souvenir bottles, the sort one buys in a hotel bar or on an international flight. Behind the Iron Curtain, when there was no concept of competing brands, packaging was functional if at all existent. In a country where packaging was not burdened with selling products, the variable boxes, bottles, and labels of foreign goods would have been attractive, even exotic, and the production values impressive; it would have been a shame to discard them. Thus the mass-produced packaging of the west was inscribed with aura when encountered in the eastern bloc.

By photography's automatism, Rydet captured all those things she saw but also those she overlooked. All of these details—wall coverings, pictures, television sets, toys, and knick-knacks—reveal a history and suggest personal values. If we consider the candy packaging or whiskey bottles, arranged with care alongside religious images, we may glean that consumerism and piety were not at odds in Poland but indeed congruous. Glicksman reflects on the particular historical value of Rydet's photographs, writing that, "The state glorified the simple working man embodied by the country folk. Yet it preferred not to focus attention on the distinct values,

Agnieszka Jeżyk, "Inventors of Easy Symbols: The Artist Versus the State" (lecture), part of the course "Personal is Political: Cold War Central European Culture, 1945-1989" (University of California, Los Angeles, April 9, 2018).

pride, and individuality of the Polish countryside—which was also a bastion of Catholicism when religion was seen as resistance under communism and worship an almost revolutionary act.”⁷⁵ By conveying personal values through her subject’s domestic accumulations—in which we can interpret religious worship, expressions of Polish nationalism, and the seemingly disproportionate enjoyment of whatever small Western commodities came one’s way—the creation of *Sociological Record* itself emerges as a documentary act of political resistance.

A Flawed Record

Having considered the documentary value of *Sociological Record*, let us now acknowledge that in those same details that tell us of faith, or class, or isolation from the global market, we also find an opacity of meaning, the destabilization of easy binaries, and the uncanniness of photographic “punctum.” In a village south of Kielce in 1979, a woman sits on a chair in front of a bed (fig. 37). Pictures and a mirror pitch down toward the subject. Religious images take pride of place, hung higher than a wedding portrait, a small calendar, and a *makatka kuchenna* bearing the slogan, “Lord, bless this home.”⁷⁶ Bearing wooden floors and an exposed ceiling, the traditional home has been updated with patterned wallpaper and new radio and television set. A bulging wardrobe spills out garments, a pot and an umbrella stashed on top. As a bare document, as I explore above, the photograph preserves a record of daily life. It stands as a testament to tradition, faith, and poverty. And yet, without additional information, the photograph remains opaque. In the moment of shooting, how well could Rydet have foreseen the timid look of the

⁷⁵ Glicksman.

⁷⁶ Popular during the Soviet era, *makatki kuchenne* are decorative linen kitchen tapestries featuring printed or embroidered aphorisms. The *makatka* visible here must have been mass-produced as it appears repeatedly throughout *Sociological Record*.

toddler, who looks down into its pillow as it tugs on a comforter, or the woman's own silhouette, reflected in the switched-off television set?

In an instance of what Barthes refers to as “the photographic paradox,” the image offers the viewer vast information about the woman and the interior while nevertheless remaining infinitely mysterious.⁷⁷ We can plainly perceive the plaids, stripes, and florals filling the room, the religious pictures hung on the wall. We see, too, that the woman wears a wedding band, but little other adornment, and an apron and slippers with her summer dress. Her limbs are muscular and she sits solidly, her knees apart. Can we deduce from these perceived details some additional truths? Perhaps these textiles are fashionable, or perhaps she prefers them, or perhaps they are simply necessary and happen to be available in these styles. Perhaps she is religious, she is married or widowed, and she spends long hours doing physically taxing working. But we can never trust with certainty these second-order truths as we can, with great conviction, the first. We cannot know from the picture alone even basic facts like this woman's age, occupation, or the size of her family, to say nothing of perceiving an interior life of thoughts, memories, or feelings.⁷⁸

A viewer's quest for facts will be further hindered by Rydet's refusal to affix even basic captions to her pictures, instead presenting whole selections simply as “People in Interiors,” with

⁷⁷ Barthes posits the photograph as “a message without a code,” a “continuous message” consisting of both “denoted” and “connoted” messages. The denoted message—“a mechanical analogue of reality,” the “first-order message”—claims an authority of truth for the photograph. Meanwhile the connoted message—culturally dependent, “second-order message”—complicates any presupposition of objectivity. Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 17-20.

⁷⁸ According to Łyczywek, Rydet's refusal to record conversations with her sitters amounts to a grave lost opportunity. “It's a shame you haven't recorded them, your documentation would be more complete,” Łyczywek pressed her in an interview. “I know, after all, that these people don't let you leave their homes so easily, that you have to hear their confessions, especially since these are often elderly, sick, and lonely people who are happy that someone takes an interest in them. Such descriptive commentaries would add life to the pictures.” But Rydet brushed her off, “Unfortunately, I have no time for that, but every picture has its data: year, full name, location.” Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography*, 1990.

no names, places, or dates to guide a sociological reading. Text risks overwhelming pictures. A caption “comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image,” writes Barthes.⁷⁹ It “loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, and imagination.”⁸⁰ Rydet avoids such “rationalization” by refusing to provide textual information. Despite her claims of her archive’s documentary value, in her absent captioning she heightens the tensions between the photographs’ denotative and connotative properties, suggesting no singular holistic truth can be known of any one of them. Thus she ensures the project remain open to reinterpretation from vantage points outside of the author’s. By inhibiting the viewer’s reliance on textual facts, Rydet encourages aesthetic readings.

As we have seen, Rydet created photographic doubles of interiors—themselves “étuis” or indexical records of domestic life. We cannot look at her photographs without seeing that casing. But the inverse is also true: we cannot see the interior or the sitter’s aesthetic choices without looking at Rydet’s photograph and *her* aesthetic choices. We cannot be blind to the effects of her strong flash and wide angle lens in favor of seeing the details of a person’s home. Indeed the whole archive is tied up in the defining characteristics of dramatic lighting and the slight distortion of space. Working quickly allowed Rydet to capture her sitters before they thought better of participating, but the speed also required her to work intuitively. This process imbues the pictures with their de-skilled quality. Early in the project she gave up on using a tripod for the “People in Interiors,” resulting in the “slightly out-of-kilter symmetries” that American art historian Carol Armstrong perceives in the photographs of Diane Arbus.⁸¹ Arbus, she writes,

⁷⁹ Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

⁸¹ Rydet describes her equipment and working method during the first summer in a letter to Łyczywek, mentioning the use of a tripod and making audio recordings. (Later, she largely abandoned these.) Zofia Rydet, Letter to Krystyna Łyczywek, Rabka, July 28, 1978.

worked in “a mode of ‘composition’ structured around the flaw—the defect in symmetry and centeredness, the difference within sameness, the detail that disrupts balance.”⁸² Considering *A husband and wife in the woods at a nudist camp, New Jersey, 1963*, Armstrong describes how the double tree trunk echoes the pose of the couple holding hands, and how Arbus uses that element in the middle ground to push the couple just off center (fig. 38). Armstrong also calls attention to various details such as the woman’s ’60s haircut and long fingernails, the man’s hairy legs and slightly protruding ears. Such details, she writes, disrupt and undo binary gender differences precisely by heightening the viewer’s awareness of other differences, thereby “deprioritizing” gender.⁸³ Along these lines, in the seeming sameness of *Sociological Record*, virtually every image gives up some such “flaw”—whether an off-center subject or imperfect framing—likely compositional outcomes of Rydet’s hand-held method. In contrast to the vacant, carefully aligned interiors composed by Atget, which as we have seen lend themselves to scrutiny for social signifiers, Rydet’s off-kilter shots of people in interiors deprioritize any impulse to organize her pictures strictly by class.

Instead, Rydet’s photographs of interiors stop short of dictating the significance we are meant to glean from them. As we seek order and meaning in binaries—secular and religious, urban and rural, young and old—affective details interject. Could the compositional peculiarities and “accumulation of detail endemic to the photographic medium,” as Armstrong puts it, help us see past binaries?⁸⁴ Perhaps Rydet’s own subcategories are designed to help us break out of her

⁸² Carol Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus,” *October* 66 (Autumn 1993), 33.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁴ Armstrong, 32.

system, scrambling together various subject types in our search for pictures of the Pope, or different kinds of interiors in our search for a chronology.

In one picture, two brothers sit together on a chair, pomade in their identical side-swept hairstyles gleaming by the burst of Rydet's flash (fig. 39). Beside them, a disheveled cherub suggests a carefree exuberance but remains confined to its sculptural pedestal of faux fruit. Like the double tree in the Arbus photograph, this statue pushes the boys off to left of center. The tidy apartment, on a second or third floor judging from the trees outside the window, bears neatly applied wallpaper and linoleum. We are in a modern housing bloc. Secular items join the allegorical cherub and a small photograph of the Pope: a decorative plate on the wall, a doll on the armchair, a model airplane hung from the ceiling. A bottle of vodka tucked in a corner does not escape the camera eye.

Rydet thrilled in such details. In 1988, she described the productivity and revelation of her first summer of work on the project,

The first year was a bumper crop. I [returned home] to Gliwice, I developed it all, I made the first prints, and I was utterly astonished. I often saw the beauty not in the moment of taking the photograph, but later, when I was retouching the prints. I was simply delighted. When I entered a hut I was tense and often didn't see many things, though some I caught in the first instant. So I thought, "yes, this is it!"⁸⁵

Although she posed her subjects and composed the pictures in her viewfinder, the photographer invariably discovered additional details after the fact. The automatic nature of photography, the camera's ability to capture all the first-order information, allowed for the recording of details unbeknownst even to the photographer at the moment, who discovered only later the "beauty" of her photographs—what Barthes calls the "punctum." An "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me," he defines the punctum as both punctuation and

⁸⁵ Zofia Rydet quoted in Anna Beata Bohdziewicz, *Konteksty*.

“sting, speck, cut, little hole ... that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁸⁶ For some, the boys’ similar poses or gazes will leap out of Rydet’s picture: their hands folded in their laps, the older boy’s slight smile. But for others, the punctum will reside in an object or its placement: the very presence of the postcard-sized Pope, or the vodka bottle on the floor.

While the punctum of a detail such as a gesture or particular object can be unique to each viewer, Barthes claims that every photograph shares a universal punctum—that of mortality. The date of the photograph, he writes, “makes me lift my head, allows me to compute life, death, the inexorable extinction of the generations.”⁸⁷ So let us compute. Over the course of the decade that followed the making of this photograph, these boys saw martial law, strikes, and the downfall of the communist regime. Now well into their 40s, they came of age just as a new nation was established. As adults, they contributed to creating a new society without the benefit of a model from the previous generation, who only knew coping strategies for a wholly different kind of society. Our calculations continue: where are they now? Are either of them still living there, or still visiting their parents in this same apartment, updated with new flooring and a flat-screen TV?

Within *Sociological Record*, we witness the inexorable disappearance of both the subjects and their way of life. “The *punctum* is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 26, 27.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 84.

pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence.”⁸⁸ The disappearing domestic scenes of twentieth century Poland only heighten the mortality of Rydet’s thousands of subjects and foretell the end of a political system. “Photography gives me the chance to stop time and overcome the specter of death,” she reflected. “The simplest, most ordinary documentary picture becomes a great truth about human fate, and this is my constant struggle with death, with the passing of time.”⁸⁹ By creating photographs to preserve these homes and people, she attempts in vain to temper her knowledge and ours of mortality.

A Haunted Record

In name, methodology, and form, *Sociological Record* employs the language of bureaucracy so associated with late Communism in Eastern Europe. Categorized as “sociological photography” at the time of its making, it indeed can serve a documentary function. Like Atget’s interiors, we can read Rydet’s *Sociological Record* as an archive of transparent documents that show us the inequalities of the decade. But rather than support the government’s notion of a modern, secular, classless society, or the “dignified living conditions” touted by Gierk, Rydet’s work reveals the lie of the propaganda. Instead, by recording a wealth of visual information about life in Poland in the 1980s her photographs show a broadly religious society made up of citizens who live in a variety of conditions, many indeed in great poverty.

And yet, I can’t shake the image of the couple in Gdańsk (fig. 1). Roger Moore haunts himself, but he haunts us too. The future and the past are everywhere in this nonsynchronous archive as we time-travel through places, desires, politics. *Sociological Record* hardly adds up to

⁸⁸ Ibid, 96.

⁸⁹ Rydet quoted in Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography*, 1990.

the picture of the future that socialism was meant to produce, nor does the West appear as the backward society it was purported to be. Despite Rydet's willingness to indulge bureaucratic language, and the sense that *Sociological Record* amounts to a repository of photographic facts, the surreal nature of these ostensible documents calls for another reading. Like Arbus's photographs of nudists, the "difference[s] within sameness" throughout *Sociological Record* destabilize easy binaries between the urban and rural, or between secular and devout, to reveal the attenuated nature of social status in Poland in this moment. We see in these details an "anterior future" that is the past, a step back from socialism to our present reality.

Figures

All images redacted

- fig. 1** Zofia Rydet, “Ludzie we wnętrzach (People in Interiors),” Gdańsk, 1980
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- fig. 2** Zofia Rydet, “People in Interiors,” Gliwice, 1980
From *Sociological Record*, 1978-90
- fig. 3** Zofia Rydet at work on *Sociological Record*, home of Zofia Huzior, Obidowa village, Lesser Poland Voivodeship, 1988 (photo by Anna Beata Bohdziewicz)
- fig. 4** The artist with *Sociological Record*, Opava, Czechoslovakia, 1989 (photo by Janusz Moniatowicz)
- fig. 5** Rydet family portrait, circa 1913
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- fig. 7** Zofia Rydet and fellow members of the Gliwice Photographic Society, 1950s
- fig. 8** Zofia Rydet in her darkroom, Gliwice, 1980s
- fig. 9** Zofia Rydet, “Między nami mężczyznami (As Man to Man),” images 17-18
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- fig. 10** Zofia Rydet, “Radość istnienia (Joy of Living),” images 28
Poland, 1952-53, from *Little Man*, 1965 (republished 2012), np
- fig. 11** Zofia Rydet, “Obserwujemy was (We’ve Got an Eye on You),” images 90-94
All Egypt, 1962, from *Little Man*, 1965 (republished 2012), np
- fig. 12** Zofia Rydet, “Pierwsza przyjaźń (First Friendship),” images 121-122
left: Albania, 1960; right: Poland, 1960; from *Little Man*, 1965 (republished 2012), np

With a passage from Janusz Korczak, “Among children there are as many bad as there are among grown-ups; it is only that they either have no need or no chance to show it. In the child’s world everything happens just as it does in the squalid world of grown-ups. You will come across representatives of all human types, and specimens of all their ignoble deeds.” (trans. Marek Łatyński)

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From *World of Feelings and Imagination*, 1975-79
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- fig. 17** Zofia Rydet, “Professions,” Chochółów, 1982
From *Sociological Record*, 1978-90
- fig. 18** Zofia Rydet, “Women on Doorsteps,” Anna Stachowiec, 72 years old, Biały Dunajec, 1984
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- fig. 20** Zofia Rydet, “Myth of Photography,” Klikuszowa, Podhale region, nd
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- fig. 21** Zofia Rydet, “Presence,” Kraków, 1984
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- fig. 22** Zofia Rydet, *Obecność (Presence)*, 1988
- fig. 23** Paweł Pierściński, *Spawacz (Welder)*, 1968
- fig. 24** Karol Beyer, “Peasant Family from Wilanów,” Warsaw, c. 1866
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From *Sociological Record*, 1978-90

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From *Sociological Record*, 1978-90

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