

Pavel Baňka: Proximity

Prague City Gallery

House of Photography, Revoluční 5, Praha 1

10 October 2017 – 7 January 2018

Opening Hours: Tuesday – Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Exhibition Curator: Martin Mazanec

African-American youths posing on the hood of a car, on the porch, in the stairs, a group of boys in the park, photographs of families, Ester Krumbachová and Věra Chytilová with friends in a photographer's studio, mothers and daughters outside a house, in a garden, at the seashore, in a living room. Tomáš Hrůza and Andrea Průchová, Michael Jackson's double, Pavla Sceranková with her daughter, photographs of neighbors in Benice, a woman in Havana, Markéta Kinterová with her daughter, children in a street in Plovdiv, the photographer's lifelong partner Jindra Viková and daughter Markéta.

Pavel Baňka's exhibition *Proximity* offers extensive insight into previously unseen photographic series created between the late 1970s and the present, charting the artist's ventures into a type of portraiture with a social subtext. *Proximity* is not a systematically compiled picture of society, nor is it a form of sociological or ethnographical research, but rather *simply* a record of the encounters between the photographer and his subjects "at home" in various parts of the world where the artist has lived or stayed for longer or shorter periods of time.

Pavel Baňka represents a highly unique and individual figure within Czech photography of the past four decades, openly embracing a close connection to amateur photography with a corresponding breadth in terms of his "photographic quests," as he likes to term the multiplicity and diversity of his creative talents, of which teaching and editorial activities have always formed a large part.

The theme of the exhibition derives from what began as his personal photographic diary, *From My Life* (1957–2017), which encompasses Pavel Baňka's early excursions into the medium, photographing his family, to which he has added current notes and snapshots from his mobile phone. The exhibition thus represents the results of long-term work by the artist in and with his archive, in many cases incorporating the artist's original prints. The present selection respects Pavel Baňka's desire to work with multiplicity as a motif in contrast with the stark installation, in several parts of the exhibition suggested as a means of concentrating on detail, or on the theme of the exhibition itself. Ultimately, this is neither family nor friendship, but rather the artist's desire to find specific encounters, of sharing a moment, of eye-contact.

What connects the dozens of photographs – a diary, a testimony of their time, or simply a memento of travels – is the direct gaze of the photographic subjects. The settings are improvised photo-studios, stitched together by the photographer from haphazard fabric or plastic sheets at jumble

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sales (1984–1987), set up in a community youth center in the United States (1987) or in the present day, with visitors in the artist's home in Benice and other places of the various activities of Pavel Baňka and his friends (2013–2017). Pavel Baňka's way of taking photographs draws on the tradition of the photographic studios of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia, suppressing any hallmarks of authorship, and instead being engaged in the recording of improvised situations. A counterpoint to this approach is represented by his series photographed outdoors, where he to a certain extent also reveals the influence of classical American documentary photojournalism and street photography. By lighting shots with a reporter's flash bulb and using large-format cameras, he achieves in seemingly improvised snapshots a similar degree of precision as in his studio photographs.

The record of a brief and intense moment of concentration in the instant of shared eye-contact reveals Pavel Baňka as a photographer who is not a fly-on-the-wall observer, but on the contrary an active participant in diverse settings, situations and relationships, winning the trust of his sitters across his intimate records of selected people. The focus is turned towards the photographer, who himself initiates most of the photographs, thus heightening the moment of the encounter. "It is a process of transcending solitude, a mode of silent dialogue," says Baňka in describing his approach, revealing a very personal and little-known part of his extensive body of work.

Martin Mazanec

The present exhibition and the forthcoming book, both entitled *Proximity*, are dedicated to a theme that has continually fascinated me across various stages of my work to this day: portraits of the people closest to me, but also of people far removed from me. These are inquisitive probes into the "Family of Man" which I feel as a natural extension of my own family. Our place and situation within this greater human family is shaped by a myriad of accidental points of intersection. We could easily have been born to someone else, in a different country, in another race, into poverty or riches, into a different class in terms of education or possibilities in life. But our lives are nonetheless unique and irreversible. It is perhaps my awareness of this that attracts me time and time again to revisit the principles of human relationships, something that throughout all of its history, photography – thanks to its peculiar ability to pick up a telling detail from among the chaos and confusion of the tumultuous march of human lives – has always known how to capture, in order to preserve the moment for those who will come after us. I was not, however, seeking to document situations, actions or events. On the contrary, it has been portraits that often speak to me far more eloquently about the time in which they were made: faces, expressions, gestures, the way the photographed couples or groups touch and interact, the subtle hints of emotional bonds that these photographs allows us to divine. This is why I have been drawn to this form of photographic documentation right from the beginning.

This in fact goes all the way back to the time when I still pursued photography as an amateur, an enthusiast – a kid who sought in photography the satisfaction of his curiosity as well as desire for intimacy. Later, when photography has already become my professional calling, I liked to revisit this initial and amateurish impulse. At the same time, the local photography scene at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s seemed to me to be lacking in exactly that mood so typical of the interwar photography studios at the time of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia, when the depiction of the human face, the portraiture of both individuals and families was pursued at a high level of craftsmanship. Since I was a child I have loved old family albums. Gazing at the faces I could see the time they were created coming to life in my mind, inflaming my imagination, inciting me to imagine the scenes beyond the picture.

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I pieced together an improvised studio in the barn adjoining our house, an old farm on the outskirts of Prague, in Benice. Once a year together with my wife Jindra and then-teenage daughter Markéta, we held flea markets for our friends and neighbors. During these occasions I made photographic portraits of individual sitters as well as of groups of families or friends. At this time I already had support from Polaroid, which had purchased some of my photographs for their collections and in return paid me in amazing black-and-white stock, both positive and negative. This enabled me to present the instant small-format snapshots to the people I photographed, while also fixing the negatives to develop later in the darkroom and print in any format of my choice.

In 1987 I was invited to join an artist-in-residency program in the United States, at the Light Works Center in Syracuse, New York. It was there that I chanced upon the Dunbar community center, a place where parents took their children to after-school classes. These families were mostly from the local African-American community. I photographed there with a large-format camera, often using a big, powerful flashlight so as to remain free from using a tripod or studio lighting.

One year after that, during my sojourn in Cuba, I photographed a similar subject matter, but this time I did not have the Polaroid stock and therefore used sheet film, having to constantly change film holders, etc. This kind of work was much slower. I photographed mostly children and families as well as students at the art school to which Jindra and I had been invited to visit. The next series that was important to me was the collective portrait of striking students I photographed during the Velvet Revolution in late 1989. The students had occupied the universities, spending their nights there. They represented to me a crucial part of society at the time. I also drew on my sense that I could best capture history by photographing faces, rather than doing reportage.

All of these things became an inseparable part of my work in photography, although I would often abandon the subject for years at a time, focusing on other areas of my photographic quests. But I always kept returning to photographing people, both those close and distant to me, and those I would have liked to know better, but for the relentless race of time. I have often wondered what stories lay behind these faces.

One series I have developed over a long period of time is *Mothers and Daughters*. At first I photographed in black-and-white, but starting in the late 1990s, I switched exclusively to color. I used medium-format cameras and color negatives. This was a new adventure for me. I brought my experience and long-term habit of photographing the mother and daughter of my own family to other families, first locally and later also in Poland, the United States, and China. Our daughter grew up and naturally started to live a life of her own. I missed her and perhaps subconsciously these photographs were a search for a surrogate daughter. But at the same time this game of playing a dad taking snapshots of his girls for the family album was something I enjoyed tremendously.

In the past four years I began to revisit the theme of improvised photography studios, along the lines of our former jumble sales at the farm in Benice. The interconnecting moment is the similarity in the relationships between photographer and his sitters. This is a sort of game where the photographer may serve as the director of the *mise-en-scène*, but where the protagonists are free to improvise their scenes.

I have also attempted some “re-makes”, that is, going back in time (family portraits, mothers and daughters). I am fascinated by the factor of time, visible in the faces, but also in the changing roles of the family members. Daughters become mothers, sons become fathers. Dependency changes as well, with the children taking charge over time, taking on the role of the protectors their parents had been to them. Photographs are akin to minuscule probes into time, into people’s lives, into the subtle

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nuances that a human face unwittingly expresses, and which perhaps for this very reason are the silent reflection of our personal history.

Pavel Baňka, August – September 2017

Pavel Baňka was born in Prague, where he continues to live and work. He has pursued photography professionally since the late 1970s. From the beginning of the 1990s he has also been active as a lecturer, influencing generations of artists in this capacity. For several years he served as the head of the Studio of Photography at the Faculty of Art and Design at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. He regularly lectures at universities in the UK and the USA. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Fotograf* magazine. His work is represented in both private and public collections, including the Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi, Belgium; George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, USA; Art Institute of Chicago, USA; and Paris Audio Visual, France. His photographs are often shown in galleries, museums and festivals worldwide.

Pavel Baňka: Proximity

Curator: Martin Mazanec

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Venue: House of Photography, Revoluční 5, Prague 1

Term: 10 October 2017 – 7 January 2018

Tuesday – Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Entrance Fee: CZK 120 full (adults) / CZK 60 reduced (students) / CZK 30 (senior citizens)

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ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM:

Guided tours with Pavel Baňka: 29 October at 5 p.m.; 7 December at 6 p.m.

Art workshops:

Friday, 10 November 2017, 3 p.m. – 6 p.m. **Improvised Photo-Studio I**
House of Photography (workshop for senior citizens)

Sunday, 12 November 2017, 3 p.m. – 6 p.m. **Improvised Photo-Studio II**
House of Photography (workshop for senior citizens)

Saturday, 18 November 2017, 3 p.m. – 6 p.m. **Improvised Photo-Studio III**
House of Photography (workshop for children and families)

Saturday, 2 December 2017, 3 p.m. – 6 p.m. **Improvised Photo-Studio IV**
House of Photography (workshop for children and families)

The series of “Improvised Photo-Studios” are workshops held in a photography studio set up directly in the exhibition, furnished with the artist’s authentic set-up and equipment. Visitors will have the opportunity to enter the intimate space and process of capturing the photographic image. The feedback will focus on the theme of the photographic portrait. Portrait photography with a social context forms the overarching aspect of the exhibition – including the interaction between the individuality of the artist and the person photographed. In terms of visual form and also communication, the workshop looks at impulses such as emotional mood, acting naturally vs. stylization, and the expressiveness of the sitter. Works on exhibition will be analyzed in terms of both form and content. As part of the group work, each participant can try the role of the sitter or take on the role of the photographer-observer. Selected workshops will be held with the participation of the artist Pavel Baňka, who will photograph portraits during the course of the workshop.

Interactive tours of the exhibition for all types of schools and other age and interest groups , offering space for reflecting on the experience of the exhibition through the participants’ own creative work. The duration of the program as well as thematic focus are adjusted to the specific advancement level and requirements of each school.

In addition to the above-mentioned events, other educational activities will also be held focusing on other groups of visitors such as the disadvantaged and parents on maternity and/or parental leave and their children.

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