Revealing invisibility: Interpreting social and behavioral aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic through student documentary photography

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Abstract: Life for the population in the Czech Republic came to a standstill in spring 2020 due to measures enacted in relation to the Coronavirus epidemic: a travel ban and closed borders, the cancellation of physical lessons at all types of school, the closure of stores except those securing basic necessities, radical restrictions to free movement of people. This unprecedented situation became the inspiration for creative work by students at the Studio of Advertising Photography at Tomas Bata University in Zlin. Since joint work in the studio was not possible, the students were given their assignments as part of the Digital Photography classes in the form of a document reflecting the social situation during the Corona crisis. Selected visual narratives, or photo novellas, are a methodical component of arts-based research, meaning the use of art artefacts and imagination for a more complete knowledge of this mode of social reality. Verbal commentary complements the images' topic by interpreting the main themes of the selected photographic images: Easter festivities without religious services, sewing facemasks and covering faces, newly discovered meanings of borders and emptiness, the social role of meals in family life. The Coronavirus crisis has revealed the hidden opportunities of a new way to see and discover again how to evaluate our everyday life, something which in the haste of each ordinary day can become subconscious routine.

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I. Introduction: Spring 2020 in the Czech Republic

This exceptional and extraordinary situation has revealed things which normally remain hidden. Besides the virus itself – invisible to human by the naked eye – and the danger it brings with it, the global Coronavirus pandemic has also revealed many other things. Some of what it has revealed is fascinating. In some places, this tiny invisible entity has managed to entirely stop the accelerating gears of human civilization, and in other places it has slowed it down considerably, something not even the largest team of scientists, protestors and activists or politicians have managed. Something which used to seem impossible has become possible – if probably only for a short time. Conscious of all its negative consequences, individual tragedies and society-wide problems (disasters), it is useful to attempt to take a look at and investigate the opportunities it has revealed. Prerequisite to pedagogical exploitation of this extraordinary situation in the area of art is principled possibility of visualizing the ordinary points of view which are normally concealed. In our case study, this applies primarily to photographical capturing hitherto completely unknown differences.

Due to the entirely new situation in regard to COVID-19, individual and community life was sharply and radically restricted in many countries around the world in spring 2020.[1] The approach of governments in different countries differed significantly in terms of the degree and force of measures taken and how much freedom was given to the population to manage the pandemic. Some countries chose relatively loose measures (no or moderate blanket bans on public events, only individual schools closed), while others chose stricter measures (closure of schools in certain regions, mass gatherings of over 500 people) and still others took very strict measures (essential quarantine of entire country, or lockdown). The Czech Republic was one of the countries in which measures were adopted very fast in their strictest form.

The Czech government adopted a number of measures and regulations which impacted citizens' individual and group rights and freedoms in an entirely unprecedented manner. This manifested itself both within the community and in terms of the individual behavior of the country's citizens.

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[1] The completely unprecedented social situation also leads to a rethinking of social relations and new forms of community life and communing. See, for example, reflections on the emancipatory subjectivity of many: Halligan, Benjamin, Alexei Penzin, Stefano Pippa, and Rebecca Carson, eds. *Politics of the Many: Contemporary Radical Thought and the Crisis of Agency*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

Hygiene regulations and prohibitions, restrictions to movement and the closure of borders inevitably led to a rapid drop in economic output. The pandemic of disease was also reflected in a pandemic of economic recession, and a fall in prosperity resulting in the expected economic crisis.

Let us first go over the timeframe and substance of these measures, in particular in regard to how university students experienced them. It should also be noted, however, that sources of information are significantly limited: there are no local academic writings as yet which describe the situation. As a result, this summary is based mainly on standard sources from journalism and political declarations.[2]

Measures putting restrictions on people's lives were adopted over time. First (9 February), options for international contact and cross-border travel were reduced, especially in regards to countries with high incidence of the disease (China, later also South Korea, Italy). Subsequently, any travel across Czech borders was banned, and it was impossible to leave the country, with few exceptions. Measures at state borders led to complete isolation at state borders, a new experience over the past thirty years, and a totally unfamiliar one for the generation of university students: state borders reacquired their clear and distinct form.

Other measures were adopted restricting cultural and community life. From 10 March, theatre, music, film and other art performances, sports, cultural, religious, association, dance, traditional and similar events and gatherings, exhibitions, festivities, fairs, tastings, markets and trade fairs were all banned, whether public or private, if exceeding 100 people at one time.

Two days later, the Czech Republic declared a state of emergency across the entire country due to the threat to the population's health as a result of Coronavirus. According to Czech law in force, a state of emergency is a national crisis measure declared in the event of a serious situation which threatens lives, health or property or internal order and security to a significant extent. It can last for up

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[2] In particular, Czech Government Regulations of 12 March 2020 no. 194 on Declaration of a State of Emergency, no. 198 on a Crisis Measure Banning Entry into the Czech Republic and Travel to High-Risk Countries, no. 199 on Banning the Organisation of Cultural, Sports and Other Events with the Participation of More than 30 People, no. 201 on the Prohibition of School Attendance at Primary and Secondary Schools and Universities, Educational and Leisure Activities in Education; of 13 March 2020 no. 203 on Banning Entry of Foreigners and Departure of Citizens of the Czech Republic Abroad, no. 208 that Prohibits Presence of the Public in Selected Establishments and Markets; of 14 March 2020 no. 211 on Banning Retail Sales and Services; of 15 March 2020 no. 215 on Banning Free Movement of Persons; of 18 March 2020 no. 247 on the Use of Respiratory Protective Equipment; and other Czech Government Regulations extending the adoption of these measures for a longer period of time and the gradual easing of these measures, especially after 25 May 2020.

to 30 days, and longer with the consent of the Chamber of Deputies. The state of emergency was extended to 30 April, and then to 17 May 2020. A state of emergency restricts the following (in addition to the already mentioned measures at the state borders and regarding trips to and from abroad and also in addition to restrictions in transportation and the operation of public and local authorities):

- School attendance and educational events: with effect from 11 March, a ban on the personal presence of pupils and students in elementary, secondary and higher education institutions was implemented. Teaching was suspended, libraries were closed, self-study was enacted, and communication was permitted only via telephone and e-mail. For both students and higher education teachers, this situation was a totally unfamiliar experience requiring moving from direct teaching to the use of solely information technologies, e-learning support, communication via e-mail and teaching systems or social communication (e.g. via Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom).

- Retail and services: from 14 March all stores were closed with the exception of stores selling groceries, sanitary and drugstore goods, pharmacies and establishments selling medical aids, fuels and some other exceptions. The public were also banned from being present in catering establishments, except those not serving the public.

- Free movement of persons: from 16 March, people were only allowed to leave their homes in precisely specified circumstances, such as for travelling to work or for business, essential travel to see family members and loved ones, or to purchase food and basic needs, travelling to the doctor or in order to take care of urgent official matters or to go to the post office. From 19 March, in addition all people were banned from being present or moving outside their home without protective equipment covering their airways, i.e. without a facemask, respirator, scarf or other mouth covering to prevent the spread of droplets. From 24 March, only a maximum of two people could be in publicly accessible places at one time unless they were members of the same household or doing their job. Separation of at least 2 meters had to be maintained when in contact with other people.

During the second half of April, some measures were gradually eased, with a marked turnaround after 25 May 2020. Nevertheless, in summary this roughly two-month long intensive isolation and restrictions to movement, social life, study and the economy was a completely new experience which university students in the Czech Republic and many others encountered for the first time.

II. Coronavirus in the curriculum

But what does this situation mean for the options of pedagogy and learning? How can such radical social changes be transposed into the sphere of art education? Questions about the link between personal freedom and social restrictions – not only in terms free movement and gatherings, but also of health and hygiene standards – lead to contemplations as to what will be considered normal and how to interpret freedom and democracy, and what it all means for pedagogical and curricular practice.[3] Enormous changes were noted in the whole field of digital pedagogy and teachers' digital skills.[4] From the very beginning of the pandemic, the implementation of online education and limitation of laboratory and practical training associated with online education had obvious impact on medical education as well.[5,6] This impact was also quite evident in the form of the internationalization of the curriculum in the context of higher education.[7]

However, what impact or reflections of this situation offers art education? Surprisingly, we have not yet been able to find any relevant article dealing with this topic, despite the fact that art has always been and will always be a certain mirror of social changes. In essence, it is impossible to imagine time-related situations that would not be reflected in the arts. Art teaching helps to reflect situations of constant violent conflict, where it can serve as an independent type of therapy, political imagination, and perception of otherness.[8] Critical thinking and reflection is an integral part of art education, especially in situations and experiences related to a wide range of people.[9]

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[3] Goodson, Ivor F., and John F. Schostak. "Curriculum and Coronavirus: New Approaches to Curriculum in the Age of Uncertainty." *PROSPECTS: Comparative Journal of Curriculum, Learning, and Assessment* (2021): 1-17.

[4] Greenhow, Christine, Cathy Lewin, and K. Bret Staudt Willet. "The Educational Response to Covid-19 across Two Countries: A Critical Examination of Initial Digital Pedagogy Adoption." *Technology, Pedagogy & Education* 30, no. 1 (02// 2021): 7-25.

[5] Newman, Noah A., and Omar M. Lattouf. "Coalition for Medical Education-a Call to Action: A Proposition to Adapt Clinical Medical Education to Meet the Needs of Students and Other Healthcare Learners During Covid-19." *Journal of Cardiac Surgery* 35, no. 6 (2020): 1174-75.

[6] Kopp, Adam R., Sharon Rikin, Todd Cassese, Matthew A. Berger, Amanda C. Raff, and Inessa Gendlina. "Medical Student Remote Econsult Participation During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *BMC Medical Education* 21, no. 1 (02/22/ 2021): 1-10.

[7] Sá, Maria José, and Sandro Serpa. "Cultural Dimension in Internationalization of the Curriculum in Higher Education." *Education Sciences* 10 (01/01/ 2020): Art. 375.

[8] Cohen-Evron, Nurit. "Students Living within Violent Conflict: Should Art Educators "Play It Safe" or Face "Difficult Knowledge"?". *Studies in Art Education* 46, no. 4 (07/01/ 2005): 309-22.

[9] Readman, Mark, and Jenny Moon. "Graduated Scenarios: Modelling Critical Reflective Thinking in Creative Disciplines." *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education* 19, no. 2 (2020): 167-83.

We are therefore trying to fill this gap, despite the fact that we approach the topic and its processing from the "outside". We will report on the exercises assigned to the students of photography, which we however did not initiate or organize, nor did we take part in them in the studio where the classes take place. Our field of study stands apart from the teaching of photography (our field of specialty is philosophy, pedagogy, and digital design), but after acquainting ourselves with the results of the students´ reflections, we would regret leaving this social probe without a broader and deeper response.

III. Methical context

In order to discover the perception of the social and behavioral aspects of the state of emergency due to the Coronavirus in the Czech Republic through the eyes of university students, we use an exercise implemented in spring 2020 by students of the third (last) year of undergraduate studies at the Study of Advertising Photography at the Tomas Bata University (UTB) in Zlin. UTB is a public university-type of tertiary school, with six independent faculties (departments), located in the regional city of the Region of Central Moravia and is named after the founder of the shoemaking factory in Zlín, Tomáš Baťa (1876-1932). It offers the study of technical and technological subjects, economics, informatics, humanities and medical disciplines, as well as the arts, including photography. The study programs emphasize professional proficiency both in classical and digital technology as well as development of reactive solutions for artistic and advertising projects. During their studies, the students will acquaint themselves with the main genres of photography, such still life, product photography of glass and porcelain (china), nude acts, portraits, architecture, landscape or fashion photography, and will learn a broad range of techniques.

As we have already mentioned, we, as the authors of the article, were not directly involved in this seminar assignment, but we took the information over from the statements of the actors themselves, the students. According to this information, the assignment was initially planned as part of the study of an accredited field. Rather, it was conceived as an improvised reaction to the impossibility of working in the studio (workshop), where the students would learn the basics of lighting and work with cameras and other technology. The class attendance restriction rendered it impossible to require technically perfect photographs from a fully equipped studio and probably led to assignments lacking a thoughtful context or idea. Moreover, because this particular teacher focuses on documentary photography, he probably expected a document of an unexpected situation that cannot be prepared in advance. Thus, the works merely served as fulfilment of the given subject in

an improvised way, without the possibility of work in the studio, and therefore were left unnoticed in the quantity of other similarly conceived files which were not further processed. Nevertheless, according to our perception, they deserve reflection, as they not only testify to individual approaches to fulfilling the assignment, but especially underline the different aspects of the social situation described above.

As part of lessons (seminars in Digital Photography), they (students) received the following task, with regard to the new situation: Create a series of photographs on the topic "Corona…". The concept, method and style of photography was free, so it could be a report, social document, document, architecture, exhibition, medal, etc. Students were required to submit 10-20 photographs of any format at least 15x20cm in size, in digital form. The series had to be coherent and the author's intention had to be clear from it, with the option of a short text being added to it.

Regarding the ethical aspects of this research, it should be emphasized that we did not seek permission from an ethical committee, as we did not work directly with human subjects (no intervention was implemented), but with their works of art. The photographic works were created in the context of university learning, where the authors are exclusively adult individuals. They provided their photographs voluntarily, with written consent (in Czech language) allowing their publication through a journal publication. Also, other communication, especially concerning the reflection of the artefacts and the subsequent feedback, was conducted strictly in the mode of voluntary and freely declared involvement.

As the objective of the assignment was merely pragmatic for the purpose of fulfilling the credit requirements, no further use of the artefacts was expected, e.g., in the form of an exhibition, we selected examples which were put together in the form of visual narratives. This allows us to comprehensively view the Corona crisis, as perceived by the students through sharing their photographic series. Namely, visual narratives and visual storytelling allow not only visual perception, but also research of certain methods of social models or schemes.[10] Visual narratives are a sequence of photographs put together in order to share the maximum amount of information in each of set of photos created and shared as a uniform meaning of the story told. Methodologically, we present the outputs of photographical exercises and subject the visually carried contents to a deeper verbal interpretation, thus expanding the

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[10] Harper, Douglas. "Reimagining Visual Methods: Galileo to *Neuromancer*." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 717-32. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publiations, 2000.

pedagogical project and teaching practice into further dimensions. We are building on social research connecting research and art which is perceived in various aspects as arts-informed research,[11] arts-based research[12] and scholartistry,[13] making use of art artefacts and imagination to gain more comprehensive knowledge of the chosen area of social experience. Thus the study chooses to go beyond the borders of positivism and technical rationality, as expressed mainly through words and figures, to achieve a more holistically understood knowledge and deeper understanding of human behavior by also involving the image and visualization. Specific aesthetic components manifesting a sensual cognition utilized in the process of revealing sense and significance are anchored in the medium of photography. By interconnecting the outputs of the documentary photographs, with which anybody did not work with further, with their deeper ideological analysis, we intend to underline their pedagogical interpretation opportunities in art education, which is not (according to the students) very common in the studies at the UTB.

The application of photography in social research has a long history, in particularly within sociology, anthropology and ethnography. A problem, however, which is closely related to the use of photography is the method of display which cannot be value-neutral. Even expending all efforts to ensure methodological objectivity, it is the researcher and their biases given by the objective of the research that dictate the method of display. In this way, photography is often used as a tool promoting the perspective of privileged social groups with power, such as colonizers over less powerful and respected social groups, such as native peoples.[14] Beginning in the 1940s, photography and graphic imagery were used not just to illustrate and provide support to scientific findings as had previously been the case, but also directly in the mode of collecting research data and its analysis within visual anthropology. A classic example of the approach primarily using photography to document social reality and perceive the displayed individuals and communities as the object of study, for example, is the "Balinese Character" study.[15] In the 1950s

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[11] Cole, Ardra L. "Arts-Informed Research: A Transformative Methodology." *Baltic Journal of Psychology* 11, no. 1/2 (2015): 21-27.

[12] Thornquist, Clemens. "Material Evidence: Definition by a Series of Artefacts in Arts Research." *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 14, no. 2 (2015): 110-19.

[13] Shanks, Michael, and Connie Svabo. "Scholartistry: Incorporating Scholarship and Art." *Journal of Problem Based Learning in Higher Education* 6, no. 1 (01/01/ 2018): 15-38.

[14] Harper, Douglas. "On the Authority of the Image: Visual Methods at the Crossroads." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research.*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 403-12. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 1994.

[15] Bateson, Gregory, and Margaret Mead. *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*. New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1942.

it was demonstrated that photography could be used not just to document, but that it also had the power to support research beyond mere illustration, also to record direct observations, or as an aid during interviews.[16] While the researcher creates photographs from the world experienced by respondents, the displayed subject (or member of the displayed community) interprets the image. Photography allows us to acquire more specific information through more empathetic expressions, it stimulates reinstatement of the means of expression, submerged feelings, it opens the doors to memory through the emotions of forgotten moments – in a manner pictures also dictate the content of an interview. Thus, in our interpretive report on the pedagogical project of photography becomes a third party in between the informant and the researcher with the pictorial content and its importance specified and checked, reducing areas of misunderstanding. Its procurement, however, is to some extent subject to uncertainty, the record is open uncontrollable happenstance, and so to some extent analytic reasoning and reflexivity are based on intuition of extra-sensitive intelligence, which first notes behavioral subtleties.[17] Incorporating photography within a research interview, i.e. discussing images, is defined as photo elicitation.[18] This is a process in which it is not just more information which is evoked and acquired, but also information of a different type, the polysemy quality of the image evoking deeper elements of human awareness.[19] Photo elicitation, photo interviewing, photo voice[20] and participatory photography are different names for the use of photography, whether realized by an external photographer, the researcher, or the respondents themselves, in combination with an interview. It is a widely used method which has also been applied in education,[21] journalism,[22]

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[16] Collier Jr., John. "Photography in Anthropology: A Report on Two Experiments." *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 5 (1957): 843-59.

[17] Collier Jr., John. "Visual Anthropology's Contribution to the Field of Anthropology." *Visual Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (11// 1987): 37-46.

[18] Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th Edition ed. Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2016.

[19] Harper, Douglas. "Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 13-26.

[20] Wang, Caroline. "Photovoice: A Participatory Ation Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health." *Journal of Women's Health* 8, no. 2 (1999): 185-92.

[21] Dempsey, John V., and Susan A. Tucker. "Using Photo-Interviewing as a Tool for Research and Evaluation." *Educational Technology* 34, no. 4 (04// 1994): 55-62.

[22] Smith, C. Zoe, and Anne-Marie Woodward. "Photo-Elicitation Method Gives Voice and Reactions of Subjects." *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 31-41.

tourism studies,[23] gender and cultural identity[24] and communication and social change research.[25,26]

Usually, photo elicitation is used as a basis for a much deeper and more meaningful interview than could be achieved with mere verbal questions without support from images. Our method is different, however: we aren't using an interview or feedback in this report on the interconnection of the Corona crisis and photography education. Demonstration of the polysemy quality of images can also be used in empirical research as another method than just as the basis for enriching an interview. Photography then stops being merely a prompt in the interview and becomes a separate principle and a distinct method of expression which can then be analyzed as data for research. Respondents or students then record their experience or perspective on the world they live in to the camera, through photography documenting and sharing their own reality,[27] thus partaking in the process of empowerment education.[28] In our study, we shall also be leaving the procured photographs for symbolic interpretation of the images themselves, supplemented by only textual commentary. The pictures do not serve to deepen in the interview, but rather speak for themselves in the style of visual narratives or photo novella. Methodologically, then, this study is not anchored in the positivist ideal of objective science, but rather in the phenomenological and hermeneutic understanding of the experience of the authors – students of photography.[29,30] Thus we acquire testimony which can help to culturally construct an understanding of the social and behavioral

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[23] Scarles, Caroline. "Where Words Fail, Visuals Ignite. Opportunities for Visual Autoethnography in Tourism Research." *Annals of Tourism Research* 37, no. 4 (2010): 905-26.

[24] McIntyre, Alice. "Through the Eyes of Women: Photovoice and Participatory Research as Tools for Reimagining Place." [In English]. *Gender, Place and Culture* 10, no. 1 (03 / 01 / 2003): 47-66.

[25] Singhal, Arvind, Lynn M. Harter, Ketan Chitnis, and Devendra Sharma. "Participatory Photography as Theory, Method and Praxis: Analyzing an Entertainment-Education Project in India. *Critical Arts* 21, no. 1 (01 / 01 / 2007): 212-27.

[26] Singhal, Arvind, and Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty. "Pencils and Photos as Tools of Communicative Research and Praxis: Analyzing Minga Perú's Quest for Social Justice in the Amazon." *International Communication Gazette* 68, no. 4 (08 / 01 / 2006): 313-30.

[27] Wang, Caroline. "Photovoice: A Participatory Ation Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health." *Journal of Women's Health* 8, no. 2 (1999): 185-92.

[28] Wang, Caroline, and Mary Ann Burris. "Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation." *Health Education Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1994): 171-86.

[29] Pain, Helen. "A Literature Review to Evaluate the Choice and Use of Visual Methods." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 11, no. 4 (09/01/ 2012): 303-19.

[30] Wall, Kate, Steve Higgins, Elaine Hall, and Pam Woolner. "'That's Not Quite the Way We See It': The Epistemological Challenge of Visual Data." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 36, no. 1 (2013): 3-22.

aspects of the state of emergency due to Coronavirus as experienced by university students in the Czech Republic in spring 2020.[31]
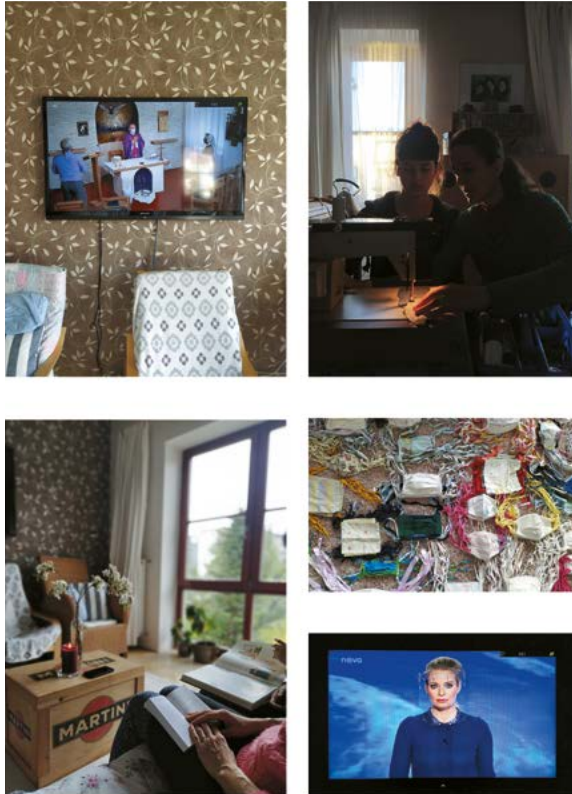
IV. Student outcomes[32]

Figure 1
Author: Debora Loučková

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[31] An interesting suggestion from an anonymous reviewer relates to the question of how the restrictions on movement and social contact during lockdown have transformed the way amateur photographers take and share images on social media. While our paper looks at how photography students reflected on this particular time, the aforementioned suggestion would require a follow-up paper focusing on how the crisis situation transformed everyone into photographers.

[32] The authors of the photographs permit the publication.

Author's statement: "This series documents the days of lockdown in our household. We were consumed by fear of the unknown like most people. Overnight, we closed ourselves off to the outside world. In between devouring negative reports from around the world and disinfecting food from Rohlik.cz, we sewed face-masks. The entire house was filled with something between panic and excitement. As believers, our family experienced our first celebration of the greatest festivity of the year – Easter – without our friends and the Catholic community. We watched live broadcasts of mass on television, and read from the Scriptures together. It took time for us to realize that not everything about the entire situation was bad, and to begin to take that on board."

Figure 2
Author: Daniela Martinová

Author's statement: "The Corona series shows a discotheque venue which is closed due to the Coronavirus pandemic. These rooms which in ordinary circumstances are packed with hundreds of people now sit empty and they become a mere storehouse."

Figure 3
Author: Pavel Hála

Author's statement: "Corona – Short photo series is a kind of documentation of the current situation within the Czech Republic. Closed borders with neighboring countries, empty airport car-parks. A coffee dispenser is suddenly a facemask dispenser. People have to respond quickly and face an entirely new situation which we have never experienced here before."
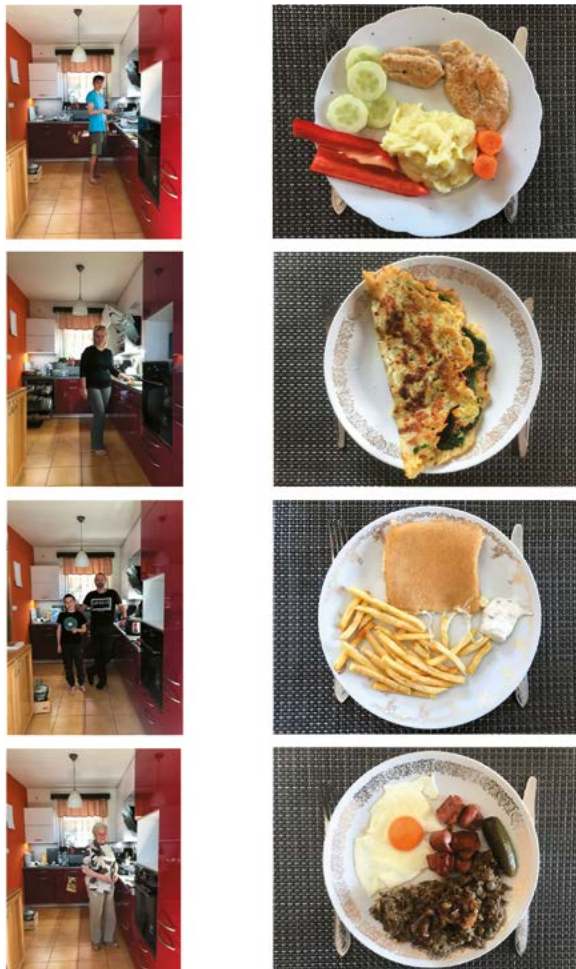
Figure 4
Author: Rozálie Jirásková

Author's statement: "I took photos of the state in my parents' household. There are 6 of us, so after some time we had to work out what to eat when we are all at home every day. We divided up work and every day somebody else did the cooking. This is closely related to the Coronavirus, because under normal conditions mum or grandma would cook. Cooking meals is a daily obligation, but also an activity which one can enjoy when stuck at home all day."

V. Discussion: A revealing invisibility

At this point, the article could be ended, provided that we were satisfied with the dimension, in which the UTB used them. However, it seems to us that the pictorial documentation contains even deeper layers of information which can be interpreted more accurately. Based on the students´ photo narratives and their own verbal descriptions, as authors, we attach four generalizing themes testifying to the distinctive dimensions of the Covid quarantine, otherwise concealed to the superficial view.

The way we approach the interpretation can be briefly described in this methodological paragraph. Its characteristics show the influence of the phenomenological approach to philosophy,[33,34,35] hermeneutic appreciation of rituals, myths, and arts,[36] and emphasis on the distinctive value of symbols.[37,38] Interest in images as a visualized component of information is in this case documented in the form of photo narratives of the Coronavirus period which is characterized by the restriction of individual freedoms and optional interpretation of artefacts as a way of translating subconscious levels of experience indicated in the visual material into verbal means of conscious communication. We assume that the symbols used, both visual and verbal, refer to or represent[39] a denotation, which is not only the experience of the creator of the image per se but also a reflection of the social situation expressed by means of the photo narratives. Such reference can be interpreted not only literally (photograph of a monitor in the living room depicting a scene of Christian worship as a denotation of a religious ceremony), but mainly metaphorically (inability to attend religious events). For the analysis of the contents, we use the support of a specialized publication, while leaving room for interpretation that is open to liberal associations, i.e., sharing of all the impressions and associations that the visual imagery evokes.

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[33] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008.

[34] Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

[35] Patočka, Jan. *Body, Community, Language, World*. Translated by Erazim Kohák. Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1998.

[36] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[37] Eliade, Mircea. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Translated by Philip Mairet. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

[38] Jung, Carl Gustav. *Man and His Symbols*. London: Aldus Books, 1964.

[39] Goodman, Nelson. *Jazyky Umění: Nástin Teorie Symbolů* [Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols]. Translated by Tomáš et al. Kulka. Praha: Academia, 2007.

The validity of the hermeneutic interpretation of selected photographic shots was supported by the triangulation of researchers (authors of the text) and creators (authors of the photographs), who were sent the interpretations for approval to make sure that they do not deviate from their intentions. During the compilation of the final text, all the particulars of research ethics were respected and consent to publishing was obtained from the authors of the artefacts and statements. However, ideal research objectivity guided by positivist ideals cannot be reached, as one of the limits is, e.g., the fact that it does not involve all the students participating in the assignment as part of their art education, because the students were volunteers willing to take part in it. Thus, reflection of the work of other students would necessarily result in the expansion of themes, their interpretations, and therefore the overall message of the study. One can also consider a symbolically rich expression as a limit exceeding a rational proof of unambiguous formulations. However, we deliberately choose the polysemantic characteristics of symbols that significantly enrich the overall meaning of the students´ work, thus the understanding both of the pedagogical practice of documentary photography and the socially constructed messages that we reveal through verbalization. Namely, the aim of hermeneutics – contrary to the ambitions of positivism – is not objective measuring and generalization of the results into a revealing explanation, but a deeper understanding of partial segments of the studied reality, i.e., in our case, the social consequences of the Corona crisis seen through the optics of the students´ photo narratives in the context of the studies of photography.

V.1. An invisible God

The Latin phrase Deus absconditus, meaning a hidden or invisible God, described the Judeo-Christian idea of the general inscrutability and hidden nature of God. God is inimitable, nobody has ever seen Him, He is elusive to man except through Faith. This idea is professed in the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament (Isaiah 45:15), although within the Czech context a revealing invisibility has another nuance of meaning: the Czech Republic is one of the most atheistic countries in the world. In contrast to the neighboring countries of Poland, Slovakia and Hungary where roughly 80 % of the population is religious, the figure in the Czech Republic is just 20 %.[40] The figures are even

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[40] Paleček, Antonín. "Sekularizace V Pohledu Inter- a Intragenerační Transmise: Čr Ve Srovnání Post-Komunistických Zemí Střední Evropy." *Czech Society / Naše Společnost* 13, no. 2 (2015): 13-26.

larger for young people between 16 and 29 years of age, 70 % of whom never attend religious services and 80% of whom never pray, and only 9 % of whom profess religion, whereas this figure for young people is 83 % in Poland and 99 % in Israel.[41] This does not mean that the Czech population does not experience deeper dimensions in their lives. There is a very active presence of various spiritual tendencies and expressions, with non-religious spiritual aspects seen, for example, in respect to the construction of spiritual health,[42] or experienced in winter camping activities.[43] Atheists can also recognize Christian values, realized in the phenomenon of love, as a very positive good.[44]

Nevertheless a Christian, here a young Christian in particular, in a cultural environment shaped in this way needs, perhaps more than in other countries, to find strength through the community of fellow believers. And the Easter period is all the more significant, as the most important liturgical festival of the entire Church year, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One component of gathering together to celebrate mass is the ceremony of the Eucharist, commemorating the Last Supper, when bread and wine are taken in a shared faith in Christ's presence. Easter usually involves ostentatious celebrations, processes and full churches, and shared joy. The Czech government's measures also cancelled church services, all ceremonies, and the ability to take Holy Communion was temporarily ended; the first time without friends and the Catholic community. Celebrating mass only through television (pic. 1), reading from the Scriptures together (pic. 1). Nevertheless, the joyous news of the Gospels declares that anywhere where two or three people come together in Jesus's name, He too is there with them (Matthew 18:20). Invisibility revealing the strength of Faith. We must point out that, unlike in the USA or Poland, where participation in the mass via television is quite common, the situation in the Czech Republic – certainly with regard to the aforementioned specifics of extremely low religiosity – is rather marginal, used in case of illness or other obstacles to personal participation in the mass.

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[41] Bullivant, Stephen. *Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops*. Twickenham, UK: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, St Mary's University, 2018.

[42] Jirásek, Ivo, and Emanuel Hurych. "The Perception of Spiritual Health Differences between Citizens and Physicians in the Czech Republic." *Health Promotion International* 33, no. 5 (2018): 858-66.

[43] Jirásek, Ivo, Pavel Veselský, and Jiří Poslt. "Winter Outdoor Trekking: Spiritual Aspects of Environmental Education." *Environmental Education Research* 23, no. 1 (2017/01/02 2017): 1-22.

[44] Jirásek, Ivo. "Christian Instrumentality of Sport as a Possible Source of Goodness for Atheists." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2018/01/02 2018): 30-49.

The whole matter carries many meanings and themes, from the hygienic requirements for the common worship and the sacrament of communion, to the theological dimension of "spiritual communion", i.e. "communio" without the Eucharist and without physical presence. The fundamental theological questions about the nature of the mass, however, go beyond the main focus of our text.

V.2. *Losing face*

The face speaks before language, in the face of another we see his nakedness, exposed and defenseless, the helpless exposure to death, screaming the appeal: "Don't kill me!"[45] The face bears the most markers of human individuality, uniqueness of personality. The facemask (pic. 1 and 3) has become a symbol of the Coronavirus crisis, the most easily accessibly protective equipment. The facemask covers much of the face, with only the eyes available for contact and non-verbal communication with others. We have to imagine and surmise the missing visual information, opening space for fantasy. Covering and revealing is erotic in nature, referring to the Biblical store of Adam and Eve's fig leaves (Genesis 3:7) and various perceptions of nakedness saturated in culturally-based and contradictory meanings. Nakedness has been perceived in terms of naturalness and culturally-based superiority (e.g. in Ancient Greece), or in contrast in terms of sin, disgrace and shame (for a servant, prisoner or slave), it has played a sacral role (the nakedness of the king or priest in ancient Mesopotamia), and today it is saturated with sexualisation and pornification processes.[46,47] In a face-mask covered face, we see different levels and layers of the person, their energy, paradoxically we acquire perhaps a more holistic view, although it is more the result or construct of our intuition awakened by missing visual information. At the moment, we mean ordinary interpersonal communication and gatherings under normal conditions in the Czech Republic, i.e., in the center of Europe, in Western society. Masks play a completely different role in different periods and cultures, e.g., in theatres and arts, in healthcare and medicine, in religions (e.g., burqa in Islam), etc.

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[45] Lévinas, Emanuel. *Být Pro Druhého (Dva Rozhovory)*. Translated by Jan Sokol. Praha: Zvon, 1997.

[46] Jirásek, Ivo. "Smysl Vizualizace Lidského Těla: Různorodé Významy Nahoty." *Filosofický časopis* 58, no. 6 (2010): 863-83.

[47] Jirásek, I., G. Z. Kohe, and E. Hurych. "Reimagining Athletic Nudity: The Sexualization of Sport as a Sign of a 'Porno-Ization' of Culture." *Sport in Society* 16, no. 6 (2013): 721-34.

As we are all different, and we also respond differently in critical situations, this has been expressed in regard to facemasks. Enthusiastic volunteers sewing facemasks at home as a gift to those in need (pic. 1) and the rapid market transformation of coffee vending machines into vending machines for facemasks (pic. 3) are both different expressions of the same situation. While for some they represented a feeling of protection and safety (regardless of the disputes over their effectiveness), for others they aroused a feeling of danger. We see in the varying responses to a facemask-covered faces a dislike in Western culture: it seems that an uncovered face is a symbol of freedom of the individual, openness and likely also transparency, safety (I do not have bad intentions, I don't have to cover myself, I am a free citizen and society accepts me as I am). Covering the face and hiding under a veil is a mark of separating the profane from the sacred, a mark of religious, sexual or social status.[48] Despite these controversies, facemasks have been accepted in many countries, and worn with discipline for a long period. It can be claimed, then, that they have served us very well both at a symbolic level where they have led to a change in behavior (realization of the severity of the situation, acceptance of extra hygiene measures, social distancing), and also according to many experts as an actual functional barrier preventing the spread of infection.

Another visual symbol of this era has been faces emitted by digital screens – the faces of doctors, nurses, paramedics and everyone else on the so-called "front line", politicians at press conferences, television newsreaders (pic. 1), and even priests taking services (pic. 1). Thanks to the latest technologies, we have managed to overcome social distance and remain in close contact. We have also managed to truly realize that even the best technology cannot replace physical human closeness. And it has also demonstrated a new vulnerability – a dependence on on-line connection.

V.3. *Borders of emptiness*

In this era of postmodern globalization, we are not normally able to perceive borders as something positive, visible, tangible – we often don't even perceive them: the movement of people, goods and services in Europe has been an obvious convenience for many decades. The virus has perhaps definitively shown that the modern world is a world without borders. Despite their temporary closure and a tendency to seek salvation in closing oneself

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[48] van Gennep, Arnold. *Přechodové Rituály: Systematické Studium Rituálů*. Translated by Helena Beguivinová. Praha: Portál, 2018.

within the fortress of the national state, it is clear that neither the economy nor people will exchange a false feeling of security for freedom of movement. The ban on travel, however, has restored memories of the impossibility of crossing the border (pic. 3). But borders are just gates between states. They needn't be mere limitations, but also delimitations, that is to say to lay down shapes from unbounded chaos. This is how they were perceived by the Ancient Greeks, whose culture was highly "peratic" (peras – boundary, limit), and who appreciated borders as laying down order and harmony: e.g. a sculptor did not create anything original, only removing excess material from an ideal shape which had to be revealed.[49]

Closed borders and gates (pic. 3), closed stores, empty airports (pic. 3), car-parks in front of supermarkets and entertainment premises empty of people (pic. 2) have helped us to appreciate the value of emptiness. Emptiness is omnipresent; it's just that in the common haste of everyday life we are not aware of it. It is every silence providing meaning in the flow of speech, the pause of silence between the sounds of music, the peaceful breaks in the beats of the rhythm, white spaces in the colors of an image, the comforting pauses between inhaling and exhaling, the necessary repose between heart beats, stops in the active course of life, death delimiting our existence... The state of emergency was this kind of pause, pointing to the value of emptiness in our overflowing excess.

Yet our society lives in dread of emptiness. We let ourselves be overwhelmed by the words and images in Facebook posts and getting likes without lingering observation or rumination on the value of what is seen. We fill ourselves with banalities and we cannot concentrate in the excess of stimuli, excitement and information; distracted attention and restlessness leads us to undertake transient activities, the nervous cult of diligence.[50] As such, lockdown could be a kind of enriching refreshment. Only emptiness torn by force of will from hectic overfilled time can give us the peace to settle our thoughts, to their necessary collection so we can assess our own actions, and become aware of what is important in our journey through life. What is hidden under the surface. Whoever does not want peace can become lost in the rush of everyday life, unable to enjoy the depths of life which only come to us at moments of meaningful silence. Silence is a state during which we can finally hear ourselves.[51]

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[49] Novotný, František. *Gymnasion: Úvahy O Řecké Kultuře*. Praha: Gustav Voleský, 1922.

[50] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford Stanford University Press, 2015.

[51] Kagge, Erling. *Radost Z Ticha: Proč Zavřít Dveře Před Hlukem Světa*. Translated by Viola Somogyi. Brno: Jan Melvil Publishing, 2018.

V.4. *Ritualization of meals*

In the rush of everyday life, we do not perceive food as a social event, but as an essential supply of energy. Detached fast food predominates over sitting down together for shared dining. Western society does not recognize modesty and moderation in dining, but rather suffers from excess and wastage.

The daily habit of dining in school and university canteens, in company soup kitchens and restaurants, has been broken. Shared dining and drink and food exchange is a transitional ritual in all cultures, a ritual adopted and with a strong bond to material unity.[52] A set table and banquet have always been a mark of friendship, hospitality, family connection, for celebrations of major events – coming together for the bride and groom, the birth of a child, giving a send-off to the deceased.

The necessity of spending one's time all day long with the family could thus refer to the symbolic importance of food and meals, which modern society has forgotten. Everyday family coexistence has not just involved the consumption of food, but also its preparation (pic. 4). The phenomenon of sharing food, a prehistoric principle shaping human society, has again been strengthened through the sharing of the duty of cooking. We have been able to become more aware of the importance of this service, when one person prepares food for the others (pic. 4). Family dining enriches time spent together, deepens communication and tests the understanding of relations. Food isn't just a material fuel, but it is also endowed with many symbolic meanings, expressed in dreams, stories and myths.[53] After all, even the above mentioned ceremony of Christ's followers, the acceptance of the body and blood of the Lord in the form of bread and wine, is a sign of mystic unity.

V.5. *Is such interpretation valid? Students´ reflections*

The presented interpretations go beyond the usual pedagogical level of art education and therefore open the question as to whether it is not exclusively a voluntarist external view which is not directly related to the work of the authors of the photo narratives. Therefore we asked the authors how they perceived the project, what thoughts led to it, what strategies and themes they chose, but also what they think of the presented interpretations as such, do

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[52] van Gennep, Arnold. *Přechodové Rituály: Systematické Studium Rituálů*. Translated by Helena Beguivinová. Praha: Portál, 2018.

[53] Jackson, Eve. *Jídlo a Proměna: Symbolika Jídla Ve Snech, Pohádkách a Mýtech*. Translated by Věra Stavová. Brno: Nakladatelství Tomáše Janečka, 2004.

they resonate with their objectives, and what diverted their attention from their reflections, and how these more profound interpretations may be related to their pedagogical assignment and development. We managed to get three responses which we present herein. We are sure that they illustrate not only the link between the students´ visual artifacts and the authors´ verbal interpretations, but also point to the hidden dimensions of pedagogical work itself and potential deeper exploitation of similarly conceived assignments and exercises in art education.

1. Author: Daniela Martinová (Figure 2) The spaces I photographed were always crowded with people huddled together, dancing together, talking in a carefree manner, being noisy and drunk. For me, they are the symbolic opposite of the time of the pandemic, where everything subsided out of fear. The society was full of orders and restrictions, but mainly fear of others. That´s why these discotheques and empty spaces appear to me so eloquent. This contrast was the initial impulse to photographing the series. The interpretation of emptiness as something valuable resonates with me. The pandemic did not affect anyone in my family, so I can afford to say that I in a way perceive it as a gift of silence, peace, and enriching emptiness. Personally, I was relieved, because I am an introvert by nature. Before, I did not even realize how much the crowds of people in the streets bothered me and how many personal contacts I could not avoid and was forced to make, because they are common place, so to speak, in today´s world.

2. Author: Pavel Hála (Figure 3) Generally, I don´t confront the viewer directly in my works I work in the form of capturing situations created by human, albeit often unknowingly. The human element is therefore indirectly present in the objects I observe. I proceeded the same way when creating the Corona project. Empty parking lots, usually full of people. Closed borders where a maximum of five cars per day pass through or a vending machine distributing masks and respirators instead of coffee. The sequence of images in the series does not matter, as each of them expresses something slightly different, but the unifying aspect is the bizarreness or improvisation of solutions in the battle against the Coronavirus. The attached bibliography reacts to the individual projects, showing the diverse approach of each student. If I look at the bibliography in the context of the texts drawn up in our studio, it is interesting to see how much they can be analyzed. In the case of photography, it is quite common to let images speak primarily for themselves, whether complemented

with a short text or otherwise, for better comprehension of the series. I think that writing texts in general is a problem in our studio, as the students are not used to having to write longer texts, and then they have to write an undergraduate paper containing a certain number of pages after three years of study. Furthermore, I think that when having to write a longer text, the authors often try to add value to the series that may be missing. Therefore, I personally prefer shorter labels rather than longer ones.

3. Author: Rozálie Jirásková (Figure 4) At first, I had a problem working on the assignment, because I left Zlín without a camera and was unable to pick it up due to the Corona situation. Therefore, I was forced to use a film compact and could only see the photographs several months later or use my mobile phone. Due to time shortage, I had to work on the assignment using my mobile phone (whereby taking "artistic" photographs was a problem, so I used it merely for taking snapshots of the moments that caught my attention). For this reason, I got the idea during a week-long visit with my parents to take photographs of the meals prepared by one of the family members, including herself. Once I paired up the photographs with the "cook", it occurred to me that I should apply this principle to other members of my family, as well. I took liking to the fact that the meals prepared by each one of us have something to say about us – not only in the sense of a flat demonstration how the Coronavirus united the family, but also as a way of showing that each of us is an individual who does things in a certain way that makes the differences between us obvious. Speaking for myself, I must say that I can identify with the interpretation of my project. If I had to talk about it myself, I certainly would not have thought about such things, but when I read the text written by another person, I must say that the text corresponds to my interpretation and fits the idea of my series wonderfully. I find it interesting to combine these visual images with the bibliographical references in a broader context. This adds more weight and meaning to the work. I feel that your interpretation goes deeper and its context is broader than is common in our university. It is my opinion, even though art works are, in our school, associated with a concept, not with real scientific sources or real historic events. I feel that the photographs themselves are more of a supplement to the text, rather than the other way around – as is customary in our department, and our study programs guide us accordingly. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that someone is looking for a similar depth in our photographs

as we learn about in the classes of the history of photography and creative arts.

VI. Conclusion

A few series of students' photographs, of course, can never reveal and lay bare all the themes which have surfaced in recent months and drawn our attention. But by looking back at the photographs, the insights listed below can be projected into the photographs, and the images can be experienced even more in a broadened context. The words of the authors of the photographs concerning deeper verbal interpretations of their works thus provide a much deeper insight into the pedagogical process and the possibilities of reflective work with the scanned artefacts in art education.

The sudden loss of security and strict isolation from social contacts has led to the rediscovery of belonging, participation, solidarity, empathy – values which pass many by in our highly individualized society. Where the politically-run state has not managed to secure protective equipment or organize help to those in need, civil society has taken on the initiative: thousands of people voluntarily sewing facemasks, delivering shopping to senior citizens, delivering food to medical workers, etc. Some of the most inspiring moments of the crisis have included people clapping in the evening from windows and balconies to express their appreciation and thanks to the invisible heroes in hospitals, institutions, retirement homes (we had not previously realized how vulnerable our oldest citizens are).

Any situation which leads most of society to come together and work to overcome difficulties unfortunately always has a dark side. In this crisis, we have also witnessed profiteering from protective equipment, attempts at controlling society under the pretext of protecting the population, false aid from China to European countries (as demonstrated by supplies of medical material later demonstrated to be of poor quality and expensive, or secretly purchased from and exported back to the country they originated in). Many ugly things which should never be seen undoubtedly happened behind the closed doors of our homes.

If crises offer the potential for desirable change, what will be revealed this time? More than during previous emergencies, we have been given a perspective on all our engrained daily routines, habits and rules, beginning in our home, to our employment and the entire running of society. Without exception, each of us has been forced to step out of our tried and tested patterns of behavior, and seek out a new path in the resulting space – how to secure sustenance, how to live, how to look after our loved ones... We have

all been forced more than ever before to look into the unknown, the present and the future without any clear outlines.

What can each of us personally imagine or not imagine? What is hidden within an area previously known? We can evidently rely on the potential of human creativity – the response to the pandemic was a number of innovations in research, technology, services, various processes. But will this be enough in the event of other situations which humanity is now threatened with? Environmental crisis, the power of multinational capital and the idea of infinite growth, the rise of artificial intelligence and robotization, fake news and hybrid conflicts... – all this hand in hand with weakened critical thinking and less faith in traditional political parties, and in contrast strengthened populist politicians – this arouses questions over whether it is possible to manage all these new challenges in a different way than we have been doing.

Similarly concerning is the question of under what circumstances we are able to change our behavior more radically. Many scientists have warned of the risk of pandemics for many years, yet the world was unable to prepare – politicians met other demands from voters. Only face-to-face with the pandemic could we protect bare lives and begin to take the threat seriously. The aforementioned challenges are discussed no less urgently, but as for the risk of pandemics, the warnings go unheard – we do not have the courage to change how we live to any large extent.

The Coronavirus crisis has revealed hidden opportunities – what we did not know or did not have the courage to imagine became possible overnight. We should investigate these opportunities. It is our duty to make more use of our imagination. We are firmly convinced that such a process of discovery deepens the thoughts of the authors of the works that visually capture social processes that are not very clear otherwise. At UTB, the connection of artistic imagination and verbal interpretation as part of the pedagogical process in art education is not very common. In essence, the article asks readers whether there the practice is different at other art schools. The final challenge of this text can be an impulse to sharing similar experiences and mutual enrichment of pedagogical practices, not only in the teaching and study of photography.

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