

# FROM PRECISE OBJECTIVITY TO THE BORDERLAND OF REALITY – REFLECTION ON STEFAN WOJNECKI'S EARLY WORKS<sup>1</sup>

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## THE STEP FROM WHICH IT ALL STARTED

1957, Poznań, the salon of the Polish Photographic Society. Already at the doorstep of the seat of the Society located at Paderewskiego Street, under the lucky number seven, there is an atmosphere of energetic preparations. Entering this space saturated with artistic fever means a clash with an exceptional number of pictures. Everything is surrounded by a heterogeneous, black-and-white mosaic of genres and the possibility of interpreting the 'modern' idiom. Five hundred and twenty-one photographs by Polish authors, from which a selection should be made<sup>2</sup>. However, a critical and insightful eye quickly recognizes that this diversity is only apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> This article would not have been possible without the heartfelt support of Professor Stefan Wojnecki, who not only agreed to give me an extensive interview, but also gave me numerous materials and reproductions from his private archive. I am truly grateful to this outstanding artist for a very warm welcome and for sharing his knowledge, experience and memories with me.

<sup>2</sup> Sixty-six works by thirty-nine Polish authors were finally accepted for the exhibition *A Step into Modernity* (Poznań, 1957). In addition, ninety-three works by forty-two photographers representing eleven other countries were also presented: Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, East Germany, West Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Great Britain and Italy. See: *Wystawa fotografii... 1957.*

The vast majority of artists chose not to exceed the safe pictorial<sup>3</sup> landscape formula of interwar origin, sanctioned by the environment. Countless sentimental images of nature reflected in the sheets of water or luminous impressions depicting winding country roads and alleys surrounded by high poplars have been submitted for the exhibition. These photographs were characterized by a deliberate blurring of contours, wide tonal range and soft drawing. Against the background of these ethereal, painterly visions, only two works proudly manifested the desire to concentrate on the world of objects and the reality of the concrete. Contrary to the majority of the proposals submitted to the exhibition *A Step into Modernity* (*Krok w nowoczesność*)<sup>4</sup>, Stefan Wojnecki's (b. 1929) works were characterized by brutal realism and abstracting the essence of everyday life. Surprising graphics, lack of soft taint,

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<sup>3</sup> Pictorialism – a trend in artistic photography that flourished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the aim of which was to give the photograph the character of a painting. The main postulate of pictorialists was their opposition to sharp images faithfully representing the reality. As a result, they accepted strong interference in the photographic print, giving it a unique character. The final effect of this free artistic expression was to confirm that photography should occupy the same place in the pantheon of art as other fields of artistic creation. In interwar Poland, pictorialism which came from France (as propagated by Robert Demachy or Constant Puyo) took on a special meaning, as it became an important element of the programme formulated by the ‘father of Polish photography’, Jan Bułhak (1876-1950). The concept of ‘native photography’ acquired the role of a well-established theoretical proposal in the minds of his contemporaries. Socially engaged photography, emphasising the beauty of the country, was consistently popularized in Polish literature. The solid intellectual background gave it a stronger position than that which is associated with the (usually short-term) popularity of certain stylistic forms. The rapidly progressing supremacy of this Polish, ‘indigenous’ pictorialism, based on atmospherically blurred images with a patriotic function, could not be easily overcome by foreign, uninvolved modern photography.

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition of Artistic Photography *A Step into Modernity* (May-June 1957) was organized by the Polish Photographic Society in Poznań and was presented in the salon of the Polish Photographic Society (7 Paderewskiego Street). Bronisław Schlabs was the exhibition’s commissioner. Apart from Schlabs, the Selection Committee included Zygmunt Obrąpalski, Fortunata Obrąpalska and Janusz Kubanek.

an unprecedented clarity of details – already the first works of this artist drew attention in the photographic environment of the 1950s. Suggestive, clear and expressive prints persuasively demonstrated their identity, breaking with the still present sense of inferiority of the medium of photography in relation to other fields of art. The participation of this outstanding artist in the Poznań intellectual ferment cannot be overestimated, as he contributed to the crystallization of avant-garde attitudes, so important for the post-war changes in Polish photography.

Stefan Wojnecki overthrew the sanctioned ways of perception, using the power of *verismo*, immanently inscribed in the photographic medium, in a surprising manner. Thus, he defied a generation of pictorialists, who considered the precision of the camera to be a soulless, automatic factor that needed to be overcome (e.g. through the so-called noble techniques) in order to achieve an image of artistic status. Rejecting atmospheric symbolism, Wojnecki focused on discovering the unexpected aspects of ordinary objects. He explored the mechanisms of everyday life and penetrated the world of commonplace things. Two of his works, *Immersion Heater* (*Grzałka*) and *Slide Rule and Stone* (*Suwak i kamień*), presented at the exhibition *A Step into Modernity*, perfectly illustrate how the Poznań artist skilfully juggled with the ambiguity of the category of ‘realism’, reaching for the best traditions of New Reality (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Paradoxically, thanks to very simple measures, such as appropriate approximation of the lens to objects rather devoid of any metaphorical connotations, Wojnecki managed to obtain ambiguous, almost poetic compositions.

In the case of the work *Slide Rule and Stone* Wojnecki used his education in physics and skills of an engineer, consciously giving the glass graphic plate the function of a negative and thus obtaining an extremely sharp image. The contours, the surface texture, the digits and the markings sharply emerge and attack the eye like Buñuel’s razor.

From today’s perspective, this photograph may seem like a documentary because of the way it was shot: the lens has been positioned almost perfectly parallel to the photographed surface. As a result, there is no spatial depth, the objects are static against a dark background. When confronted with this work, the viewer’s imagination may activate a vision of a workshop with an archaeologist, who meticulously measures and documents the relics of the past. Meanwhile, in this photograph, Wojnecki juxtaposed

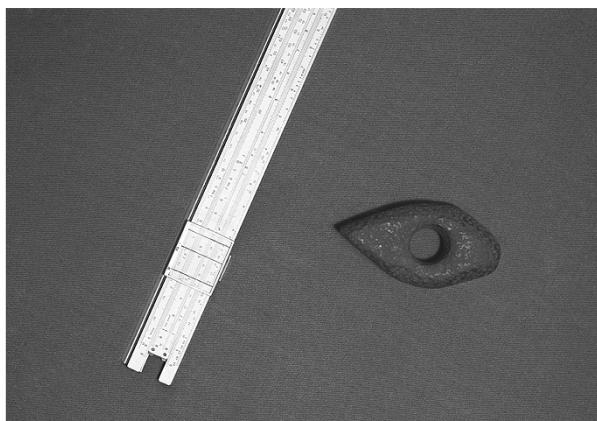


Fig. 1. Stefan Wojnecki, *Slide Rule and Stone*, 1957 (photograph-positive)

the prehistoric stone, product of human hands, with the most modern at that time, hard to access, calculation tool – a logarithmic slider. We see the eternal motif of confrontation between culture, focused on cultivating tradition, and science – focused on the future. The archaic meets the symptom of modernity. At the same time, however, the relativity of all categories relating to the issue of time can be seen here: they turn out to be impermanent and constantly changing. Wojnecki focuses on one of the strangest words known in language, according to Wisława Szymborska. The artist supports the opinion of the Polish Nobel Prize winner expressed in a very meaningful phrase: ‘When I pronounce the word Future, the first syllable already belongs to the past’ (quoted after: Nyczek 2000: 46). The product of the latest technology will soon become obsolete and will be replaced by more advanced solutions. On the other hand, a product which is an emblem of material cultural heritage will gradually gain in value due to its unique nature, as a testimony to the transformation of civilization.

The use of the strictly defined objects constituting the work *Slide Rule and Stone* – this untypical still life – suggests, in the narrative layer, the possibility of interpreting this photograph in the context of the opposition: old – new, although this motif does not exhaust the wide range of interpretations of the analysed photograph. Wojnecki demonstrates the ripe fruit of his reflection, derived from the achievements of the ‘front guard’, the first harbinger of which were the futuristic ‘words in freedom’ – a catalyst for

the development of subsequent trends in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art (Gazda 1978: 120-125). The title of the work itself – in theory exclusively descriptive and informative, attempting to describe the image neutrally and indifferently – contains a certain avant-garde perversity (Śliwiński 2004: 6). Two alien and incompatible objects meet in this title, as in the legendary Dadaistic ‘game’ consisting in subjecting oneself to the will of chance in juxtaposing subsequent words or elements of a collage (see: Richter 1986). The Poznań-based artist plays a game with the viewer, winks at the viewer, like the artists from the dada circle, full of youthful bravura. Various styles seem to coexist in Wojnecki’s work. The artist enters into a dialogue with the avant-garde, creatively reinterpreting the pluralistic language of imaging, which is its effect. Apart from the Dadaistic perversity, in the case of this photograph one can also sense the echoes (filtered through surrealism) of the ‘definition’ of beauty by Comte de Lautréamont, who claimed that beauty is ‘an accidental meeting on the dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’ (quoted after: Bréchom 1973: 148). Wojnecki emphasizes not only the status and meaning of individual objects, but above all he builds tension between the photographed objects, provoking the viewer’s imagination to discover unexpected meanings in the surrounding reality. This raises the question whether the artist is problematizing (thus confirming Peter Bürger’s [1984] theses), or maybe continuing (or rather, as Stefan Morawski put it – complementing [after: Wilkoszewska 2006: 8]) the activities of pre-war movements. In this essay I only allow myself to stress that Wojnecki takes up the theme of a certain unrealistic specificity of imaging; the genetic relations between the language of Polish post-war photography and the surrealist trend are still an open chapter in our native art history, which needs to be elaborated<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, the transparent world of still, seemingly inertly arranged objects acquires a fascinating exoticism thanks to a thoroughly thought-out composition, full of directional tensions. The viewer’s gaze begins its journey

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<sup>5</sup> Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska (2005), among others, wrote about the inspiration with surrealism in the work of Zdzisław Beksiński and Jerzy Lewczyński, who, like Wojnecki, operated in the 1950s in a language marked only by a certain echo of surrealistic origin.

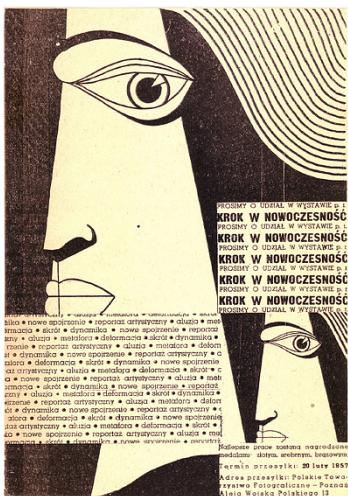


Fig. 2. An element of visual identification of the exhibition *A Step into Modernity*

in one of the so-called strong points<sup>6</sup> of the photograph – the beginning of a clear path of mathematical divisions and markings, diagonally crossing the frame. It resembles a snapshot of a comet's ethereal fire, which will disappear in a moment, as promised by the stone tear next to it. The whole gives the impression of a creative reinterpretation of the symbol of an almond-shaped eye, looking uncertainly into the future, the motif of which was the basic element of the visual setting of the above-mentioned exposition *A Step into Modernity*.

Both works by Stefan Wojnecki presented at one of the most important post-war Polish photographic exhibitions were based on antagonistic juxtapositions. In the case of the *Immersion Heater*, the artist juxtaposed the forces of nature – the two basic elements – with an element of the world of technology. The coiled line of a shining industrial device is surrounded by dancing, shaking air bubbles, which vibrate as if ‘on command’ of the rising temperature of the water. Formless substances are materialized in the photograph thanks to the use of an uncomplicated home device. The liquid, the colourless and the ethereal are formed; the transparent

<sup>6</sup> For more information on how to shape composition in photography: divisions of the image sections and the principle of direction, see: Wójcik 2007: 37-41, 64-69.

depth becomes haptic. In the photograph, the artist manages to depict the water and the air set in motion, and at the same time, he sublimates the meaning of the title heater. He creates a visual poem in honour of the manifestation of 'reality of the lowest rank' (Kantor: 2005: 17) and in a masterful way expands the area of photographic art to include what was wrongly considered ugly or devoid of expression. An uninteresting object unexpectedly changes its status thanks to a gesture of artistic legitimacy. Wojnecki blurs the boundaries between everyday life and 'high culture'; the common denominator of both photographs is the need to use and restore meaning to matter, previously defined by society as common or average.

The photographer monumentalizes his private microcosm, relativizing our perception habits. A seemingly insignificant, trivial and usually unnoticed object, in the artist's vision quite unexpectedly acquires dignity, 'causative power', and can also become an object of visual admiration. The borders between the *sacrum* and *profanum* are blurred, as in the *Grey Eminences of Rapture* (*Szare eminencje zachwytu*) by Miron Białoszewski. The photographer emphasizes the flickering ambiguity of the heater, and the master of the pen – the 'depth' of a colander spoon. 'A poet is a wordmaker who does not trust words, who attacks the existing linguistic compounds, cuts right through them and organizes new word associations' – Julian Przyboś's (1959: 8) comments about the Białoszewski turn out to be valid also in the context of the bold solutions proposed by Wojnecki. The artist 'is surprised' by the objects and aims at disturbing the *a priori* established hierarchies, which in turn refers to the ideas of such theoreticians as Bruno Latour (2005) – individual, seemingly silent objects turn out to be active actors of the social scene, causing certain effects.

## BREAKING WITH THE CONVENTIONS

The work entitled *Tree*, dating back to 1959, proves that Wojnecki not only revalued the meaning of the sphere of banal objects, but was also able to extract a new visual quality from the motifs that had already been familiar. In the photograph mentioned above, the branches emerging from a thick trunk are completely abstracted from the context that originally accompanied them. On the positive, which is much bigger than the final intended image, the photographer painted (removed) all the unnecessary details of the background by hand using ink. Thanks to the later reproduction



*Fig. 3. Stefan Wojnecki, Immersion Heater, 1957 (photograph-positive)*



*Fig. 4. Stefan Wojnecki, Tree, 1959 (photograph-positive)*

of the modified work (but in a smaller format), the artist consciously maintained excellent quality, sharpness and clarity of forms and blurred the traces of retouch. In this way, a fragment of nature, so far captured by Polish photographers in a charming and melancholy way, acquires a depressing character.

Wojnecki creatively reverses (in a pessimistic way) the traditional symbolism of the tree, usually associated with the axis (understood as the source and beginning) of life (see: Eliade 1975). Manual intervention and black paint allowed him to obtain a strong contrast between the main motif and the background devoid of any information, thanks to which the final effect is a perfect example of the functioning of the so-called negative areas – places (apparently) empty, unfilled, yet extremely important for the creation of the visual image. Naked, leafless branches, the bark marked by ugly bulges, emerge from nothingness. Confronted with this unique vision of an inhabitant of a gloomy, mysterious forest, and led by an incomprehensible instinct – we want to touch the rough texture. The uniquely illuminated, unnaturally whitened tree seems to be almost on fire. The many branches should guarantee its vitality, but they are devoid of flowers or fruit. The tree is probably already withered, like a dead coral thrown to the shore. Or maybe fossilised in stillness like a paralysed old man, burdened with experience?

The characteristic feature of Stefan Wojnecki's early work is the combination of avant-garde means of creative expression with ambiguous symbolism implying existential content. This is how, for example, the work *Gauze (Gaza)* can be interpreted. It was made with the use of the non-camera technique of luxography (Latin: *lux* – 'light', Greek: *gráphein* – 'write'), often applied by the artist. The enlarger cassette, usually containing a negative, included only a fragment of the material whose image was directly projected onto the photographic paper. In this way a unique, individual record of the momentary appearance of the object was created – the artist 'imprinted' its trace. Thus, the image was created without the use of the camera, but exclusively due to manual measures and meticulous staging in the darkroom.

Thanks to a specific arrangement of the object and achieving a small depth of focus, the photographer has built several spatial plans and a spectacular perspective. The convexity of the intricately bent gauze makes it appear as almost moving or undulating. By registering the shape of an ineffective object in such an unusual way, Wojnecki undertakes a sophisticated polemic with traditional photographic genres. Penetrating the fibres, the structure of the material brings to mind close-ups in which the whole frame is filled

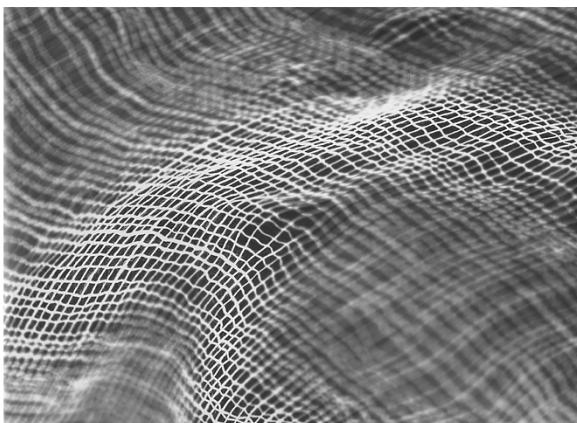


Fig. 5. Stefan Wojnecki, Gauze, 1959 (*luxography*)

with naked human skin<sup>7</sup>. The convexity, which is the central element of *Gauze* reminds us of the subtle way of showing selected, most imaginative aspects of the female body, typical of the act. The lyrical depiction of nudity in photography often led to a sophisticated association of fragments of anatomy with the natural unevenness of Mother Earth's terrain. The presentation of carnality was often based on connotations with a female element hidden in a panoramic, mountainous landscape. The reversal of the natural distribution of white and black, as well as the reduction of semitones, characteristic for luxography, introduce an element of anxiety to Wojnecki's work. The bright pore net presented by the artist takes on a vanitas character. Instead of sensuality, Wojnecki creates with virtuosity a metaphorical reference to a decaying corpse. This feeling is intensified by the title of the work, which refers to the material used primarily to stop bleeding and dressing wounds. The dadaistic idiom contained in the technique of luxography<sup>8</sup> is used to present the biological theme characteristic of post-war art (see: Morris 1993).

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Zbigniew Dłubak's intricate realizations.

<sup>8</sup> This method was known from the very beginning of photography (which is confirmed by the works of William Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins), but it was Man Ray who fully explored the artistic potential of this technique.

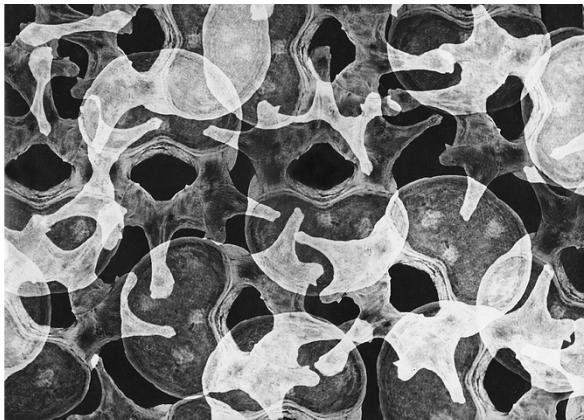


Fig. 6. Stefan Wojnecki, *Vertebrae*, 1958 (*luxography*)

*Vertebrae* (*Kręgi*), also created using luxography, manifest their association with the subject of a dysfunctional, dead human organism in a more ostentatious way. In this shocking ‘lesson of anatomy’, man is reduced to an emblematic fragment: the inner flesh, usually hidden under the surface of the muscles. The selected element of the skeleton is multiplied, thus creating a kaleidoscopic blaze of forms tightly filling the frame. Traces of human remains partially overlap. The points of contact are less exposed to the process of illumination, and as a result, they are brighter, which makes the representation more nuanced in terms of value. From among translucent tissues with a porous structure, spots of the ideal black of the illuminated photographic base emerge. The multiplication of a single motif alleviates the ‘fear of emptiness’.

The Latin source of the term ‘abstraction’ (*abstractio* – ‘detachment’) acquires a special meaning in the context of this photograph. The bone (although undeniably burdened with biological concreteness) becomes a contribution to the creation of a vision that breaks with the traditional category of *mimesis*. The vertebra is a component devoid of its original context, isolated – i.e. detached from man. In the history of photography, the unusual configuration of the camera’s gaze has often been used to create images that refer to non-representational art. Examples include the works of Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) or Brassai (1899-1984), who showed the uncanny

visual potential of the surrounding reality, reducing it to an abstract model<sup>9</sup>. The clearly pessimistic, existential character of these works includes them in one artistic tradition, together with Wojnecki's *Vertebra*. However, Siskind and Brassai, when selecting and framing fragments of façades of destroyed buildings or remnants of advertising posters on fences with great expertise, used different means of expression than the artist from Poznań. Wojnecki was more and more interested in the free creation of a photographic image. This dictated the choice of luxography as a working method to create the poignant image of human remains scattered at the bottom of the ocean.

The photograph *Under the Surface* (*Pod powierzchnią*) could be an excellent example of transfer and adaptation of the modernist tradition of geometric abstraction<sup>10</sup> for the use of photography, as the image is filled with intricate, regular divisions of a repeatable pattern. The idea of reproducing the surrounding reality has been abandoned in favour of the unique creation of an alternative cosmogony. However, the ideal vision of an orderly, almost neoplastic structure is disturbed by the irregular loosening of the formal rigour, and the viewer feels unsettled by the expressive bulges and whirls. The emulsion of a glass negative with a multiplied texture was locally moistened and then heated. After tilting the film, the substance started to trickle down, creating new, but still crippled organisms under the surface of the texture. The artist's manual interference consisting of the deliberate disintegration of the material used bears the hallmarks of self-reflection on the course and character of the creative process. By eroding traditional methods of work, the artist poses a question about the limits of endurance of the convention of the medium itself. Wojnecki declares that this theme in his work is an answer to the self-thematic current of 'generative' art, which searches for identity and studies the very essence of photography. At the same time, however, one can say that the Poznan photographer creates a new iconography of suffering, unique for this medium; as poignant as the one which Andrzej Wróblewski once developed on the basis of visual arts thanks to suggestive gouaches (Lachowski 2013: 238-245).

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<sup>9</sup> To this day, finding and capturing certain geometric patterns from the surrounding reality is one of the classic photographic tasks.

<sup>10</sup> For interpretations of other works by Wojnecki, which use this kind of poetics, see: Kanicki 2015: 73-86.

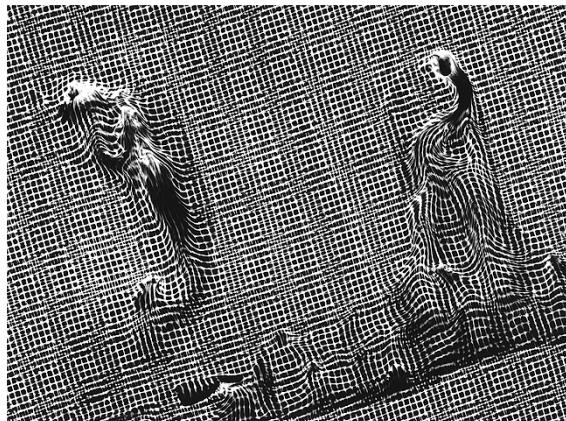


Fig. 7. Stefan Wojnecki, Under the Surface, 1958 (photograph-positive)

A dramatic spectacle takes place, without any explanation, right in front of the viewer's eyes, confronted with the work by Wojnecki entitled *Under the Surface*. The origin of the centrifugal force disintegrating the image remains unknown to us, we cannot read it from the work itself – the lyrical beauty of the apocalypse takes on a universal character. The static, clear language of harmonized geometry is undermined and the image becomes a catastrophic metaphor for the process of destruction. The connotation between the vibration of forms and movement and a negative factor, a symptom of disappearance or disintegration, is also visible in Wojnecki's other works, such as *Indistinctness of Movement* (*Nieostrość ruchu*, 1958), *W kosmos* (*Into Space*, 1958) or *Structure* (*Struktura*, 1962).

## CONCLUSION

Stefan Wojnecki's artistic practice is, in a way, in contrast to the artist's education, because he rejects the rational attitude, characterized by the conviction of the power and cognitive capabilities of human reason. The photographer from Poznań seems to manifest the ridiculousness and insufficiency of precise scientific data in the face of the problems of cognition, penetration into the world of human emotions. Logic cannot cope with the task of explaining and organizing the laws of functioning of the most important phenomena or categories for humanity. By reviving the freedom of photography, rejecting restrictions on the freedom of the medium,

Wojnecki describes the world of human desires and unfulfilled hopes. How to tame and illustrate such a difficult subject as the existential situation of an individual? Stefan Wojnecki's sublime answer is included in his photographs which, on the one hand, balance on the borderline of reality, and on the other hand, make man and his emotions the central element of their narration<sup>11</sup>.

*All illustrations are published courtesy of the Professor Stefan Wojnecki.*

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<sup>11</sup> Wojnecki develops these problems and presents them in a new way in his later conceptual work, which is the main focus of interest for researchers. For more information on the transformations of visual forms used by the artist see: Sobota 1999: 10-15.

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## Summary

The main aim of this study is to analyse the selected photographs created by Stefan Wojnecki in the 1950s. The selected materials diversify and enrich the widely accepted image of the artist, who is known primarily for his later conceptual realizations. The essay attempts to characterize those photographs, in which the individual and his existential situation constitutes the crucial subject. The study is based primarily on the material collected during the interview with the artist himself.

**Keywords:** neo-avant-garde photography, New Objectivity, Polish post-war photography, Stefan Wojnecki