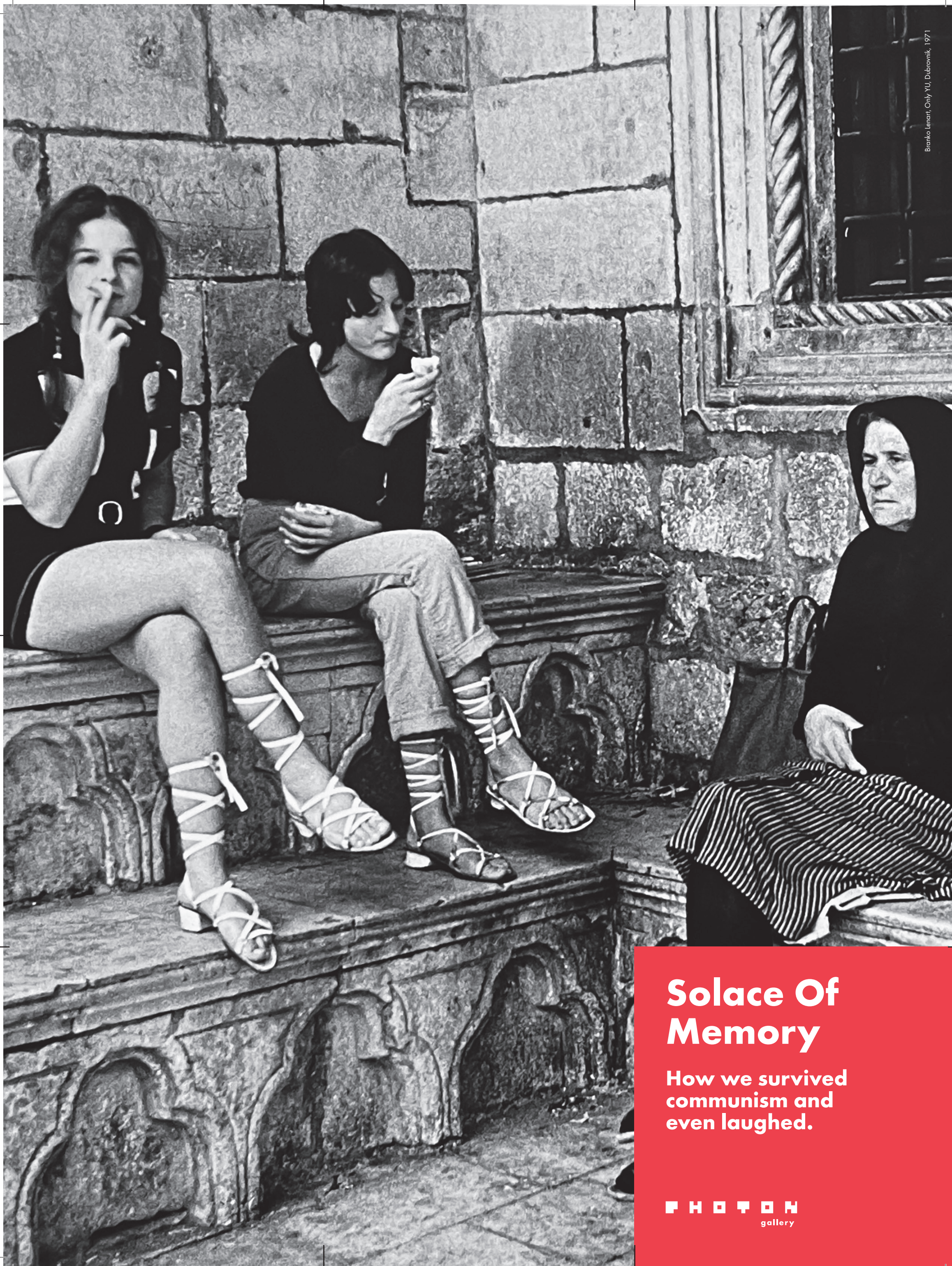


Branko Lenart, Only YU, Dubrovnik, 1971



## Solace Of Memory

How we survived communism and even laughed.

PHOTOH  
gallery



# Solace Of Memory

## How we survived communism and even laughed.

International group exhibition.

Around thirty years ago, major social changes took place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). During that time, some countries of the former socialist bloc also declared their independence. Slovenia was among them. On the occasion of celebrating thirty years of independence, we in Photon asked ourselves how photography recorded the time before these turning points – in the lives of ordinary people. With this exhibition project, we are not interested in fateful historical events and great personalities, but we want to offer an insight into everyday life and present some contradictions of the social system that built on a utopian vision of the future. To revisit the “family albums” of the former socialist countries, we are presenting some important photographers from the CEE region, who documented life in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. All of them, even with different formal and aesthetic starting points, share a subjective and often humorous view of banal and absurd everyday life.

Similarly to other creative fields in the socialist part of Europe, social criticism in photography was adapted, camouflaged and transformed into forms and genres that were acceptable for publication. The reality of everyday life, and thus of culture, was determined by the ruling ideology with state propaganda, where the expression of criticism and ridicule of the authorities were not considered artistic values. Adherence to the rules of social status in the established hierarchy (e.g., Party affiliation, cooperation with certain state institutions), and related political rituals and economic privileges on the one hand, and considerable lawlessness and relative economic poverty of most people on the other, were frequent topics of socially sensitive authors, including photographers at this exhibition. There are visible differences between photographers who come from “harder” socialist (current “Visegrad”) countries with, for example, three authors who took images of the former Yugoslavia (Lenart, Korošin, Plešnar). Regardless of the systemic nuances between the countries on the east side of the Iron Curtain and ex-Yugoslavia, the images from the exhibition, be it documents of places, people, things or events, are placed in the general, collective memory of decades of social order. However, the exhibition also evokes completely individual memories that spontaneously take us back to the past, many to the time of our/their childhood and youth, in short, everything that is today a source of nostalgic memory of those times for a lot of people.

Social documentary photography was a widespread genre in the second half of the 20th century, but the socially engaged photographers in the West and the East often tackled such topics in different ways. Especially with photojournalism, photography has become for many creators and writers about photography, a relevant medium for mobilizing public opinion and promoting social change. In contrast to the more socially engaged photographers in the West, who often used photography to illuminate injustices, inequalities, marginalized groups, etc., the engaged-critical attitude which would explicitly emphasize social anomalies through the photographic image, was in European East in those days difficult to express due to media censorship. Of course, many photographers who created in the field of social documentary photography did not even intend to contribute to social change with their images, but were interested in the subjective, often poetic aspect of ordinary people’s lives. Both facets also considerably apply to the works and series presented by the participating artists. The majority of them use an approach where the subjective interpretation of reality comes first, while the socially engaged aspect is often present in the ironic, sometimes even sarcastic undertones of the portrayed.

The project was inspired by the book “How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed” by Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić, from whom we also borrowed the subtitle of the project.

Curated by Dejan Sluga

# Participating photographers

**Andrzej Baturó** (PL),  
**Vladimir Birgus** (CZ),  
**Janez Korošin** (SI),  
**Branko Lenart** (AT),  
**Zora Plešnar** (SI),  
**Anton Podstraský** (SK),  
**János Szász** (HU),  
**Lenke Szilágyi** (HU).

**Andrzej Baturó** (PL, 1940-2017) was a photographer, organiser of many important photo events, publisher, director of the FotoArtFestival and founder of the Foundation Centre of Photography, both in Bielsko-Biala. As a photojournalist, he did not want to photograph the usual orchestrated and scripted media events. Instead, he turned his camera towards the urban environment and country villages, the everyday life of the everyday people. His work could be defined as reportage or social documentarism with strong »subjective touch and personal vision«

**Vladimir Birgus** (CZ, 1954) is an important figure on the Czech and European photography scene, where he plays several roles, ranging from photographer to photo historian and teacher. A number of high-profile projects are connected with his name, in particular the comprehensive exhibitions and books on Czech Photographic Avant-garde, 1918-1948 and Czech Photography of the 20th Century, which have promoted Czech photography internationally. Birgus’s photography from the 1970s and 1980s has a lasting historical validity as a subjective document of the period. But these photos also carry a universal message for the individual and society.

**Janez Korošin** (SI, 1935) became a member of Fotoklub Ljubljana and Fotogrupa Šolt (later Fotogrupa Ljubljana Šolt) in 1968. His extensive body of works covers a great variety of motifs, however, main focus of his series are works that capture glimpses of Ljubljana’s urban life. His camera captured random scenes or portraits of individuals from everyday urban life, the majority of photographs were mostly made in the 1970s and 80s at different social events. These works highlights the artist’s subtlety in composition and mastery in creating the atmosphere indicative of original creative approaches and new visual solutions.

**Branko Lenart** (AT, 1948) was born in former Yugoslavia and later migrated to neighbouring Austria with his family at 6 years of age. In 1968 he became a member of the avant-garde art society Forum Stadtpark, that later grew into Camera Austria. His oeuvre sits between documentary and conceptual art photography. He dedicated his attention to the margins of society, be it the members of urban counter-cultures at the time or to the social conditions in the country and the peripheries. This genre of photography became to be known as “subjective topography”.

**Zora Plešnar** (SI, 1925-2020) was the most prominent Slovenian female photographer of the 1970s and 1980s. She joined the Fotoklub Maribor in 1968, and two years later – as the only woman – took part at the defining exhibition of the Maribor Circle photo group, which aspired towards avant-garde modernism. Within three decades of creative work, she enriched Slovenian photography with excellent black-and-white series, where her photographs expand into the surreal and imaginary. The real here and now of her reflections, clouds, hills, or an emerging city, is universal and timeless, in touch with the dreamlike dimension, which passes freely between the external image and the inner experience.

**Anton Podstraský** (SK, 1939-2007) was one of few Slovak photographers to succeed in fully capturing the other face of life during “real socialism” - the final phase of development of the communist system before its ultimate decline. Throughout most of the 1960s, he worked as the photographer for the Slovak Film Studios and he published film photographs. In the mid-1970s however, Podstraský began to work as freelancer and his photos appeared in newspapers and magazines. He rarely participated in the activities of the photographic community and the whole of his work remained practically unknown to the expert and general public until recently.

26. 8. – 24. 9.  
2021  
Ljubljana

1. 10. – 20. 11.  
2021  
Vienna

**János Szász** (HU, 1925-2005) graduated to become a lawyer but found himself ‘disqualified’ to practice law under the Communist regime so he turned to photography. His body of work created from the late 1950s through the 1970s, epitomizes the artistic vision and innovation of photographers active in Hungary during the years of Communism. Working in the tradition of Hungarian greats such as André Kertész and László Moholy-Nagy, János Szász’s images are notable for their experimentation with radical perspectives, formalist compositions, and stark, black and white contrast printing.

**Lenke Szilágyi** (HUN, 1959) has been participating in domestic and foreign photography scene since from early 1980’s, when she took pictures of the clubs, concert venues and the figures of progressive art. Since 1985, she worked as a stand photographer for the films of Miklós Jancsó, Zoltán Kamondy and Ildikó Szabó, and as a photographer for theatrical productions and archives. In her later photo projects, she depicted the hopes and despairs of the time, witnessing and documenting the fall of Communism and Post-Soviet realities not only in large centers but also in the provinces.

### Photon - Center za sodobno fotografijo

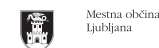
Trg prekomorskih brigad 1  
1107 Ljubljana  
T: +386 59 977 907  
E: info@photon.si  
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Odprto: pon - pet: 12.00-18.00

### Photon Gallery

Zieglgasse 34  
1070 Vienna  
T: +43 660 255 3551  
W: photogallery.at  
Open: Tue - Sun: 12:00 - 17:00  
Mon: closed



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