

PRUT

On the riverbanks, workers gather sand to sell it as construction material. The water is full of mud and it is shallow, revealing layers from the topography of the area. Beyond the riverbed, a barren expanse, a closed horizon of hills. It could be an image from anywhere, anytime - the wheelbarrow is pulled by a horse, the workers' hands clutch on piles of sand, from the water to the dry shore. Somewhere in the village, or further afield, in the nearby towns, the collected river-sand will be sold per kilogram and it will feed a new wave of constructions, rendered into recognizable images of prefabricated materials and unfinished concrete steps – walled-in trees, a nature that is impatient and invades postponed plans.

Matei Bejenaru's photographs follow a narrative of the transformation of the Romanian rural space, choosing to capture images from the villages along the Prut River, motivated by the socio-economic context of the area and the close personal connection for the artist born in the local county, Suceava. Matei Bejenaru engages in a continuous communication with the people living in the villages, travelling for days in a row, sometimes in winter, on New Year's Eve, to their homes.

Prut is a long-term documentary photography project that is based on the social practice of the artist to interact with the subjects, paying close attention to the ethical aspects of their representation. The images stray away from photojournalistic sensationalism, bringing out objective and nuanced information on the dynamics of the Romanian rural world and its ongoing changes that tend to go unnoticed. Matei Bejenaru's photographs often depict people and the environment in which they live and work. There is no specific analytical way of reading the photographs, yet they relate closely to the natural landscape and how it has been altered, to the types of housing, the subsistence farming and agriculture and to the new forms of economy and trade that have flourished in the area during the past few decades.

The images bring together seemingly distinct concerns of the artist, obviously oriented towards a visual poetics of the photographic image, with a painterly quality expressed through the medium of analogue photography. The medium further enhances a relational aesthetic pursued by the artist in his extensive social artistic projects.

The camera with a large 8x10 lens, balanced on a tripod with which the artist easily stands out, does not catch "stolen" images, but rather carefully mediates the relationship of trust between the artist and the subject. Thus within the images of the Prut project, there is a striking visual lyricism, similar to that of Walker Evans, or Dorothea Lange. There are mysterious compositions consisting of vanishing points and constructions alienated from their environment as in the photographs of Alain Ceccaroli made within the DATAR project to fly over to the French rural landscape of the 1980s. Matei Bejenaru shares with Alec Soth the same preoccupation with making narrative paintings, offering both a high degree of artistic complexity and a comprehensive picture of reality captured on photographic film.

Since 2011, the Prut project has been collecting hundreds of photographs that are forming an ongoing archive of images with portraits of villagers, their habits and homes, the way the rural landscape continuously negotiates its terrain with its past and the effects of local neo-capitalism. In 2018, a first selection of images was presented in a traveling exhibition in Iasi and Bucharest, further seeking to complement the project with anthropological and social studies, with a deeper knowledge of the Romanian village, beyond stereotypes and limitations, which appear to be just lines in the sand.

Text by Cristina Stoenescu and Matei Bejenaru