

Dino Kužnik

**This
Must Be
the
Place**

PHOTON

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Dino

Must

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Place

Dino Kužnik: *This Must Be the Place*

Razstava *This Must Be the Place* predstavlja izbor fotografij, ki jih je Dino Kužnik ustvaril v desetletnem obdobju svojega življenja v New Yorku. Če je v seriji *Shaped by the West* raziskoval ameriško krajino in mitologijo »Amerikane« skozi perspektivo popotnika in opazovalca, se v novem projektu njegov pogled obrne navznoter, v prostor vsakdanjega življenja, ki je skozi desetletje postal njegov dom. Avtor se je namreč ustalil v New Yorku, zato *This Must Be the Place* predstavlja logično nadaljevanje njegovega prejšnjega projekta, motiv potovanja se umakne iz ospredja, vprašanje prostora pa nadomesti kompleksnejše vprašanje pripadnosti.

Kužnikova ameriška izkušnja se je začela s selitvijo v Kalifornijo leta 2013, ki je pomembno zaznamovala njegovo umetniško in osebno identiteto. Projekt *Shaped by the West* je izhajal iz njegovega odnosa do simbolov ameriške kulture, ki jih je poznal iz otroštva, ter njihovega soočenja z realnostjo življenja v Združenih državah Amerike. Pomemben del te izkušnje je predstavljal dolgotrajen proces pridobivanja umetniškega vizuma, ki je vplival na njegov pogled na Ameriko, ne več kot oddaljeni ideal, temveč kot kompleksen prostor možnosti, omejitev in notranjih protislovij. Izkušnja vizuma obenem odpira vprašanje razmerja med osebnim občutkom pripadnosti in formalnimi mehanizmi, ki posamezniku omogočajo, da v določenem prostoru živi, dela in si v njem ustvari dom. V času zaostrovanja ameriške protimigracijske politike to vprašanje dobiva dodatno aktualnost. *This Must Be the Place* nadaljuje to raziskovanje, vendar iz bistveno drugačne pozicije. Ne gre več za pogled tujca, ki Ameriko opazuje skozi okno avtomobila in potuje po njenih simbolnih krajinah, temveč za pogled človeka, ki se je v njej ustalil in postopoma postal del prostora, ki ga fotografira.

Razstava je zasnovana kot pripoved v treh delih, ki vzpostavljajo tri različne relacije med avtorjem in mestom. Te se razlikujejo tako po stopnji njegove osebne vpletenosti kot po načinu fotografskega gledanja. Od neposrednega beleženja lastnega življenja prek opazovanja mestnega vsakdana do bolj premišljene in kritične obravnave urbanega prostora

fotografije razkrivajo postopno spreminjanje Kužnikovega odnosa do New Yorka ter vzporedni razvoj njegovega fotografskega jezika.

Prvo relacijo zaznamuje neposredna osebna izkušnja mesta. Zgodnje, spontane fotografije beležijo prijatelje, intimne odnose, nočna pohajkovanja, stanovanja in prve izkušnje življenja v New Yorku. Nastajale so neposredno, brez izrazite težnje po formalno premišljeni kompoziciji, z energijo nekoga, ki vstopa v novo okolje in ga šele odkriva. Zaznamujejo jih radovednost, nepredvidljivost in občutek svobode, značilni za obdobje prihoda in vzpostavljanja novih odnosov. Fotografija je tu tesno prepletena z življenjem samim; manj je sredstvo analize mesta kot neposreden zapis bivanja v njem.

V drugem delu se razmerje med avtorjem in mestom spremeni. Kužnik stopi iz neposredne osebne izkušnje v pozicijo opazovalca in se vrne k ulični fotografiji, svoji prvi fotografski ljubezni. Pogled postane širši in bolj odprt za naključja vsakdanjega življenja. V ospredje stopajo odnosi med ljudmi in prostorom, nenamerne koreografije ulic, humor, nenavadna srečanja ter majhne vizualne metafore, ki nastajajo v ritmu mesta. New York se tu vzpostavlja kot družbeni prostor, fotografija pa kot način njegovega pozornega opazovanja in interpretacije.

Tretja relacija je bolj analitična in kritična. Kužnik se vrne k premišljenim, minimalističnim in pogosto skoraj izpraznjenim kompozicijam, značilnim za njegov prepoznavni vizualni jezik, ki ga je razvil v seriji *Shaped by the West*. Tokrat ta formalni pristop prenese iz odprte krajine ameriškega Zahoda v urbano tkivo New Yorka. Arhitektura, mestna infrastruktura, urbani robovi in vsakdanji elementi okolja postanejo nosilci širšega razmisleka o mestu. Po več kot desetletju življenja v Združenih državah so te podobe zaznamovane z izrazitejšo kritično distanco: New York ni več idealiziran, temveč opazovan in preizpraševan skozi neposredno izkušnjo življenja v njem. Fotografije tako odpirajo vprašanja družbenih neenakosti, potrošniške kulture, kapitalizma in položaja posameznika znotraj kompleksnega urbanega sistema.

Tri relacije do mesta skupaj izrisujejo postopno transformacijo avtorjevega položaja, od prišleka in tujca do nekoga, ki je v New Yorku vzpostavil svoje življenje in ga lahko imenuje dom. Pogosto pravijo, da človek po desetih letih postane pravi Newyorčan, vendar Kužnikova

dela to navidezno preprosto idejo pripadnosti zapletajo. Bolj ko mesto postaja domače, bolj večplasten postaja tudi njegov pogled nanj. Začetno navdušenje se umika poznavanju, poznavanje pa prinaša refleksijo in kritično distanco. Avtor tako ostaja opazovalec tudi takrat, ko je že postal del okolja, ki ga fotografira.

V tem protislovju se vzpostavlja ena osrednjih idej razstave *This Must Be the Place*: ustaliti se in nekam pripadati ne pomeni nujno tudi dokončno prispeti. Izkušnjo priseljence zaznamuje dvojnost, v kateri lahko prostor postane dom, ne da bi povsem izgubil občutek tujosti. V aktualnem ameriškem političnem kontekstu, ki ga zaznamujejo zaostren odnos do priseljevanja ter ponovna vprašanja o tem, kdo lahko pripada in pod kakšnimi pogoji, ta dvojnost presega zgolj osebno izkušnjo. Freudov pojem *unheimlich*, nedomače oziroma tuje znotraj domačega, ponuja eno od možnih izhodišč za razumevanje tega položaja. New York je za Kužnika hkrati domač in tuj, njegov in ne povsem njegov; prav ta vmesni položaj pa mu omogoča, da mesto sočasno doživlja od znotraj in opazuje z določeno distanco.

Naslov *This Must Be the Place* lahko tako razumemo manj kot dokončno ugotovitev in bolj kot izraz negotovosti, ki spremlja iskanje lastnega mesta. Beseda »must« namreč v sebi nosi tako prepričanje kot dvom, kot da si mora posameznik vedno znova potrjevati, da je prispel tja, kamor sodi. V tem smislu razstava presega Kužnikovo osebno izkušnjo New Yorka in odpira univerzalnejše vprašanje doma kot nečesa, kar ni nujno vezano na kraj izvora ali formalni status, temveč se vzpostavlja skozi čas, odnose in vsakodnevno bivanje. Prav možnost, da smo nekje hkrati doma in nekoliko tuji, postane prostor, iz katerega Kužnik fotografira.





The exhibition *This Must Be the Place* presents a selection of photographs taken by Dino Kužnik over the course of a decade he spent living in New York. While in the series *Shaped by the West* he explored the American landscape and the mythology of “Americana” through the perspective of a traveler and observer, in this new project his gaze turns inward, toward the space of everyday life that has become his home over the past decade. Having settled in New York, *This Must Be the Place* represents a logical continuation of his previous project; the motif of travel recedes from the foreground, and the question of space is replaced by the more complex question of belonging.

Kužnik’s American experience began with his move to California in 2013, which significantly shaped his artistic and personal identity. The project *Shaped by the West* stemmed from his relationship with symbols of American culture, which he had known since childhood, and their confrontation with the reality of life in the United States. An important part of this experience was the lengthy process of obtaining an artist visa, which shaped his view of America, no longer as a distant ideal, but as a complex space of possibilities, limitations, and internal contradictions. At the same time, the visa experience raises the question of the relationship between a personal sense of belonging and the formal mechanisms that enable an individual to live, work, and make a home in a given space. At a time when U.S. anti-immigration policies are becoming increasingly stringent, this question takes on added relevance. *This Must Be the Place* continues this exploration, but from a fundamentally different perspective. It is no longer the view of a stranger observing America through a car window and traveling through its symbolic landscapes, but rather the view of a person who has settled there and gradually become part of the space he is photographing.

The exhibition is conceived as a narrative in three parts, each establishing a different relationship between the artist and the city. These differ both in the degree of his personal involvement and in the manner of photographic observation. From the direct documentation of his own life, through observations of everyday city life, to a more thoughtful and critical examination of urban space, the photographs reveal the gradual

transformation of Kužnik’s relationship with New York and the parallel development of his photographic language.

The first relationship is marked by a direct, personal experience of the city. Early, spontaneous photographs document friends, intimate relationships, nighttime wanderings, apartments, and his first experiences of life in New York. They were created spontaneously, without a pronounced tendency toward formally considered composition, with the energy of someone entering a new environment and just beginning to discover it. They are marked by curiosity, unpredictability, and a sense of freedom—characteristic of the period of arrival and the formation of new relationships. Here, photography is closely intertwined with life itself; it is less a means of analyzing the city than a direct record of living within it.

In the second part, the relationship between the artist and the city changes. Kužnik steps back from direct personal experience into the role of an observer and returns to street photography, his first photographic love. His perspective becomes broader and more open to the serendipities of everyday life. The focus shifts to the relationships between people and space, the unintentional choreography of the streets, humor, unusual encounters, and small visual metaphors that emerge in the rhythm of the city. Here, New York establishes itself as a social space, and photography as a means of its attentive observation and interpretation.

The third series is more analytical and critical. Kužnik returns to the thoughtful, minimalist, and often nearly empty compositions characteristic of his distinctive visual language, which he developed in the series *Shaped by the West*. This time, he transfers this formal approach from the open landscapes of the American West to the urban fabric of New York. Architecture, urban infrastructure, urban edges, and everyday elements of the environment become vehicles for a broader reflection on the city. After more than a decade of living in the United States, these images are marked by a more pronounced critical distance: New York is no longer idealized, but rather observed and scrutinized through the direct experience of living there. The photographs thus raise questions about social inequality,

consumer culture, capitalism, and the individual's place within a complex urban system.

These three perspectives on the city collectively trace a gradual transformation of the author's position, from newcomer and outsider to someone who has established a life in New York and can call it home. It is often said that after ten years, a person becomes a true New Yorker, but Kužnik's works complicate this seemingly simple idea of belonging. The more familiar the city becomes, the more multifaceted his perspective on it becomes. Initial enthusiasm gives way to familiarity, and familiarity brings reflection and critical distance. The artist thus remains an observer even after he has become part of the environment he is photographing.

This contradiction gives rise to one of the central ideas of the exhibition **This Must Be the Place**: settling down and belonging somewhere does not necessarily mean having finally arrived. The immigrant's experience is marked by a duality in which a place can become home without completely losing the sense of being a stranger. In the current American political context, marked by a hardening stance toward immigration and renewed questions about who can belong and under what conditions, this duality transcends mere personal experience. Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*—the uncanny, or the foreign within the familiar, offers one possible starting point for understanding this situation. For Kužnik, New York is at once familiar and foreign, his and not quite his; it is precisely this in-between position that allows him to experience the city from within while simultaneously observing it from a certain distance.

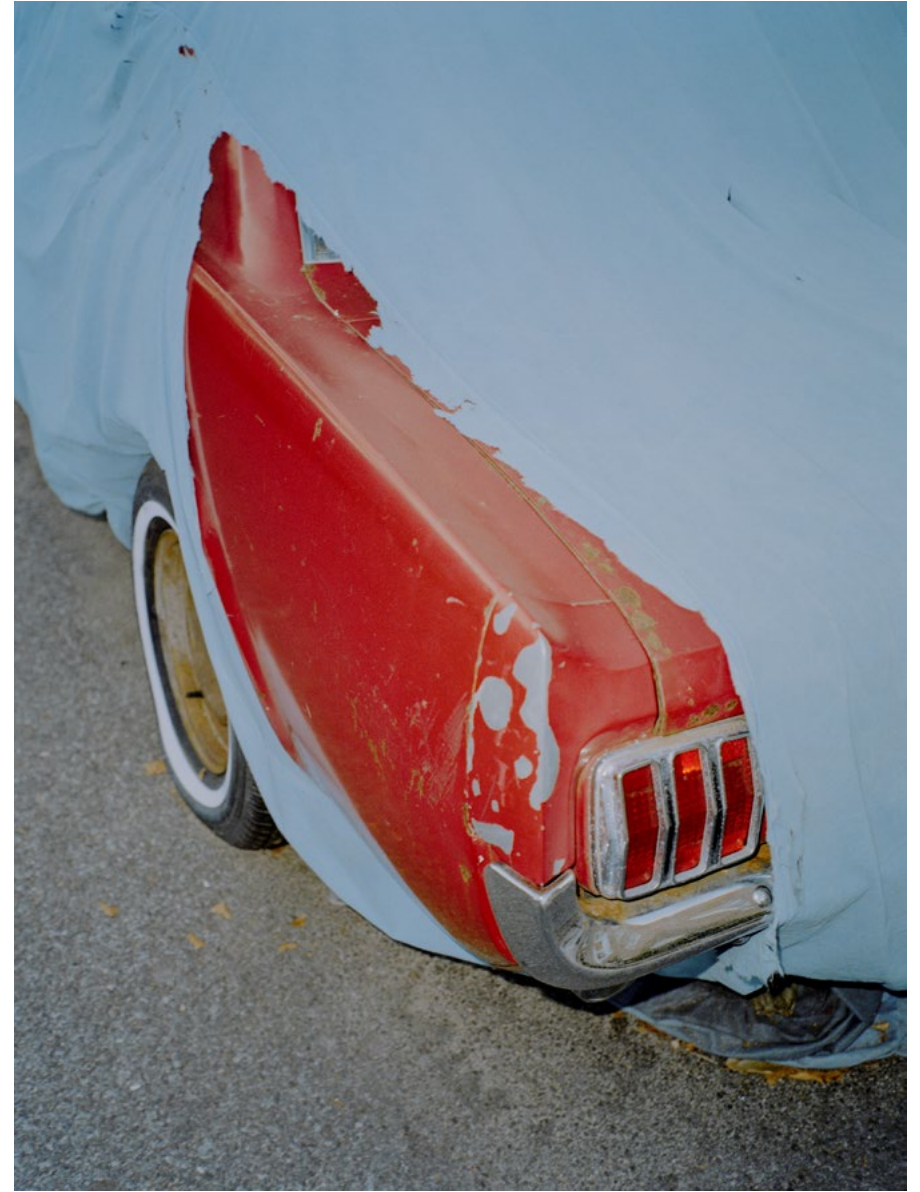
The title *This Must Be the Place* can thus be understood less as a definitive statement and more as an expression of the uncertainty that accompanies the search for one's own place. The word "must," after all, carries within it both conviction and doubt, as if the individual must constantly reaffirm that he has arrived where he belongs. In this sense, the exhibition transcends Kužnik's personal experience of New York and raises the more universal question of home as something not necessarily tied to a place of origin or formal status, but rather established through time, relationships, and everyday life. It is precisely the possibility of being both

at home and somewhat a stranger in a place that becomes the space from which Kužnik takes his photographs.













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