

# The Self

Personal Journeys to Contemporary Art:  
the 1960s–80s in Soviet Latvia

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Riga  
2011

**The Self. Personal Journeys to Contemporary Art: the 1960s–80s in Soviet Latvia**  
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## Contents

- 9 Introduction by Jan Grevstad,  
Ambassador of Norway to the Republic of Latvia
- 11 Introduction by Sarmīte Ēlerte,  
Minister of Culture of the Republic of Latvia
- 12 Introduction by the compiler. Image and text – dialogues on non-  
conformism in art
- 15 **Helēna Demakova.** The significance of memory  
in the study of Latvian contemporary art
- 35 Archive documents
- 56 **Jānis Borgs**  
Jānis Borgs: interview by Ieva Astahovska
- 96 **Ojārs Ābols**  
Jānis Borgs on Ojārs Ābols:  
interview by Vita Birzaka. Introduction by Inga Bunkše
- 109 **Boriss Bērziņš**  
Laima Slava on Boriss Bērziņš:  
interview by Vita Birzaka. Introduction by Stella Pelše
- 124 **Auseklis Baušķenieks**  
Zigurds Konstants on Auseklis Baušķenieks:  
interview by Vita Birzaka. Introduction by Stella Pelše  
Ingus Baušķenieks on Auseklis Baušķenieks:  
interview by Vita Birzaka
- 152 **Maija Tabaka**  
Maija Tabaka: interview by Līga Lindenbauma, Māra Traumane,  
Vilnis Vējš. Introduction by Antra Priede
- 164 **Imants Lancmanis**  
Imants Lancmanis:  
interview by Līga Lindenbauma
- 182 **Bruno Vasiļevskis**  
Maija Tabaka on Bruno Vasiļevskis:  
interview by Vita Birzaka. Introduction by Helēna Demakova
- 199 **Miervaldis Polis**  
Miervaldis Polis: interview by Stella Pelše
- 215 **Māris Ārgalis**  
Anda Ārgale on Māris Ārgalis.

	Interview by Raimonds Kalējs. Introduction by Anita Vanaga
225	<b>Ilmārs Blumbergs</b>
	Ilmārs Blumbergs: interview by Ieva Astahovska
246	<b>Andris Grīnbergs</b>
	Andris Grīnbergs: interview by Anda Kļaviņa
264	<b>Aija Zariņa</b>
	Sandra Krastiņa on Aija Zariņa: interview by Helēna Demakova.
	Introduction by Elita Ansonē
	Edgars Vērpe on Aija Zariņa: interview by Helēna Demakova
295	<b>Hardijs Lediņš</b>
	Kaspars Rolšteins on Hardijs Lediņš:
	interview by Helēna Demakova. Introduction by Anda Kļaviņa
310	<b>Egons Spuris</b>
	Andrejs Grants on Egons Spuris: interview by Līga Lindenbauma
	Inta Ruka on Egons Spuris: interview by Sniedze Sofija Kāle
	Egils Spuris on Egons Spuris: interview by Sniedze Sofija Kāle
350	<b>Andrejs Grants</b>
	Andrejs Grants: interview by Inese Baranovska
364	<b>Inta Ruka</b>
	Andrejs Grants on Inta Ruka: interview by Alise Tifentāle
377	Works of the artists represented in the book
425	Bibliography
441	Interviewers and text authors
444	Participants of the talks
446	Index

The notes indicated by numbers are given by the interviewers, the notes indicated by stars - by the scientific editor Stella Pelše and compiler of the bibliography Aivija Everte.





## **INTA RUKA**

### **Andrejs Grants on Inta Ruka: interview by Alise Tifentāle**

22 October 2010

Inta Ruka (b. 1958) is a photographer, has achieved great success in documentary photography and especially portrait genre. She has created wide scope series – 'My Country People' (1983–1998), 'People I Have Met' (1999–2004), '5a Amālijas Street' (2004–2008), etc.

The creative development of Inta Ruka in the 1980s is connected with the young generation that was defining itself in the photography of this decade – “the ‘new wave photo people’<sup>1</sup> – characterized by turning to the image system based on documentary material. The documentary as “non-manipulated”<sup>2</sup> realism or “uncompromising realism”<sup>3</sup> opened new ways of development for photography that turned away from the principles of image making and aesthetics cultivated in the Latvian photographic art during the previous decades.

Inta Ruka and other then young photographers were those who at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 90s attracted attention of the curators of art exhibitions. One should mention in this context the contribution of Helēna Demakova, Vid Ingelevics<sup>4</sup>, Philip Legros<sup>5</sup>, Barbara Straka<sup>6</sup> and other curators. If you look through the first important exhibitions of Latvian photography in the West, the late 1980s–early 1990s, you’ll always find the name of Inta Ruka in the list of participants, also the names of Andrejs Grants, Egons Spuris, Gvido Kajons, Valts Kleins.

Documentary series or cycles united in style and contents, high demands as to the technical presentation of photography – all these formal aspects are

1 A phrase of Helēna Demakova used to describe mostly photographers of the VEF and Ogre photo studios. (See: Demakova, Helēna. “Let’s have a picture taken! When you’re dead I’ll have something to look at.” In: *Inta Ruka. Mani lauku ļaudis = My country people = La mia gente di campagna*: [catalogue]. Comp. by and editor-in-chief Helēna Demakova. Riga: Soros Centre for Contemporary Art-Riga, 1999, p. 22. Published in connection with the participation of the Republic of Latvia in the 48th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art of the Venice Biennale.

2 Zelmenis, Mārtiņš. *Vērojumi un piedzvojumi astoņdesmitajos gados* (‘Observations and Experiences in the 80s.’) In: *LatFoto*: [online]. Available : <http://www.latfoto.lv/latvijas-foto/1170-vrojumi-un-piedzvojumi-astodesmitajos-gados.html>.

3 Kļaviņš, Eduards. The story of Inta Ruka and her photoportrait stories. In: *Stories. Storytellers*. Editor-in-chief Helēna Demakova. [The catalogue of the exposition of Latvian Republic. Biennial of Venice. 48th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art.] Riga: Soros Centre for Contemporary Art-Riga, 1999, p. 14.

4 Vid Ingelevics (b. 1952) – artist, writer and curator. Lives and works in Toronto. He was a curator of two important exhibitions of Latvian photographers in West in the beginning of the 1990s: participation of twelve Latvian photographers in the exhibition of East European authors *L’Annee de l’Est* in Lausanne, Switzerland (1990) and exhibition ‘Latvian Photographers in the Age of Glasnost’ in the gallery ‘Toronto Photographers Workshop’ Toronto, Canada (18 May–22 June) that traveled up to 1993 to some other galleries in Canada.

5 Curator Philip Legros together with Helēna Demakova organized an exhibition ‘Five from Riga’ (*Fem fran Riga*) at *Kulturhuset* in Stockholm (27 September–3 November 1991). The artists Aija Zariņa, Ojārs Feldbergs, Ojārs Pētersons, Oļegs Tillbergs and photographer Uldis Briedis took part in it.

6 Barbara Straka (b.1954) – German art historian, curator of the exhibition ‘Riga-Latvian Avantgarde’ (*Riga-Lettische Avantgarde*), 1988–1989 in West Berlin, Kiel and Bremen.



typical of Inta Ruka's photographic work already in the 1980s. The author's special look at things and the choice of themes complement the above mentioned. When analyzing Inta Ruka's photo series 'My Country People', Helēna Demakova writes that "it is not a collection that can be described simply in "realistic" and thematic terms. It is however, a broad and clear manifestation of an ethical position"<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, as Mark Allen Svede has pointed out, in this series one can feel also "quasi-anthropological shape"<sup>8</sup>. The milieu in which such an approach developed should be largely connected with the Photo Studio *Ogre*, already legendary in our days, and equally legendary photographer, Inta Ruka's teacher and also husband Egons Spuris<sup>9</sup>. Andrejs Grants was also active in *Ogre* studio at that period and during the following years; the photos of both photographers were exhibited together frequently<sup>10</sup>.

When inviting Andrejs Grants to the interview I wanted to learn about the context and conditions under which there could arise a new trend of photography in Latvia of the 80s and develop such talents as Inta Ruka.

*Alise Tīfentāle: Do you remember how did you get acquainted with Inta?*

Andrejs Grants: I think that Inta was a novice in the Brikmanis' VEF studio<sup>11</sup> and she had come to *Ogre* studio in the beginning of the 80s. It was such documentary photography of life, it was evaluated and Egons<sup>12</sup> saw this potential. I looked at those works with great interest. Inta saw the people to share her views, later her friends in the *Ogre* studio, where she transferred her creative laboratory with time to. Then she was a shy, country-type

7 Demakova, Helēna. "Let's have a picture taken!...", p. 25.

8 Svede, Mark Allen. On the Verge of Snapping : Latvian nonconformist artists and photography. In: *Beyond memory : Soviet nonconformist photography and photo-related works of art*. General ed. Diane Neumaier. New Brunswick, New Jersey; London : The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2004, p. 243.

9 "It seems that a vital composite of the special attraction of the studio were the conversations in these surroundings. They could pretend to certain intellectualism, artistic values, and, certainly, creative spirit was ruling there. Energism of the personality of Egons Spuris determined suitable voltage". (Slava, Laima. *Andrejs Grants. Photographs*. Riga: Neputns, 2002, p. 6.)

10 The photographs of Inta Ruka and Andrejs Grants have been exhibited several times in common exhibitions – for example, in the exhibition 'Inta Ruka and Andrejs Grants' in Helsinki, Turku and Pori (1988–1989) and the exhibition of the same title in Tallinn (1993); both authors have organized exhibitions 'Travel from Liepāja to Balvi' (1999) and 'Latvia. The Changing and Constant Reality' (2000).

11 VEF Photo Studio, leader – photographer Gunārs Brikmanis.

12 Egons Spuris.

girl, had finished tailors school not long ago. Later followed eternal talks about photography in the studio... I had forgotten such an episode but Inta reminded me – there was some party at Egons' place, his relatives also present and his acquaintances. They had said – how very uninteresting talks, only about photography. But it really was a fact that the only topic of conversation was photography, the latest photos were shown if somebody had more than five pictures ready. In those times communication was very important as it was information exchange at the same time. It was not like today. We learned one from another very much having no other access to information, only a little bit from abroad. And influenced each other. That was a field less exploited today. If one has no outer information, people learn within their own circle. Whether it is good or bad is not important, everything has changed today. There is much information in the net at present but then it was a way to obtain information. Now there is an opposite extreme when there is no contact with more experienced, as it is the teacher who shows the ways, tells to drop odd details, he sees one's promising potential.

A.T.: *There was a phrase in the article about the Group A<sup>13</sup> by Helēna Demakova – "Inta is the only genius among us".*

A.G.: I think it was Mārtiņš Zelmenis who said it. Inta is such a "virgin nugget" fairly speaking, no doubt about it.

A.T.: *What are her creative ways, properties, methods that make Inta Ruka's photos so special, that differentiate her style from other authors?*

A.G.: Possibly the fact that she is a woman is of importance as a man will never show such subject in that way, he'll show it in some other way. He will not allow himself such cordiality. There are coming along with it religion-like qualities that are more tended to oneness, ascertaining not to things that are typically contemporary and reflect the state of our present intellect. Not exchanging proofs of our estrangement. Such profoundness.

A.T.: *How does it manifest in her work, concerning the photographic means of expression?*

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13 Demakova, Helēna. The Ideal and Real Space of the Group A. *Māksla*, No. 4, 1991, pp. 56–63. Cited after Demakova, Helēna. The Ideal and Real Space of the Group A. In: *Different Conversations. Writings on Art and Culture*. Riga: Department of Visual Communication, 2002, p. 24.

A. G.: The inner qualities make it visible. There exist formal means, but not only they. I would like to speak more about those aspects that can't be explained rationally. In fact, it occurs with every serious author – the phenomena that are embedded deeper in the material. I look at such works as an expert, thinking which works by the Latvian authors I would buy to make a collection of Latvian photography. It is very difficult to speak about the upper part of this triangle<sup>14</sup>. Tarkovsky – who in some degree induced me to draw this triangle – also speaks much about symbols, but he admits that as an image appears – it simply exists or does not.

*A. T.: Maybe it is a paradox but the term 'image' was also used by the photographers of previous generations in the 1960s and 70s. Can you explain your own conception what an image in photography is?*

A. G.: I'll ask – where the distinction is? A symbol can be analyzed intellectually but an image is suggestive, associative. If one speaks about American photography then it would be nearer the school of West Coast<sup>15</sup>.

*A. T.: The spiritual moment is of more essential importance than the one that could be analyzed rationally?*

A. G.: I would say that work is not possible without it. We just spoke with Slusarev<sup>16</sup> about the metaphysical. I did not like to use this word, but it is so much to the point. If there is nothing of that metaphysical in everyday things then there is no real photography. It exists only in the presence of

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14 Andrejs Grants comments to Laima Slava: "I have a theory about layers. There exists a layer of fact, layer of symbol, layer of image. Intellect in the process of formulation gets only to the layer of symbol. One cannot speak verbally about the layer of image, only to surmise these things." (See: Slava, Laima. *Andrejs Grants. Photographs*. Riga: Neputns, 2002, p. 15.)

15 Reference to the principles of the founders of "straight photography" – the USA West Coast society of photographers "f.64". It was formed by Edward Weston in 1932, involving Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and others. Already in 1930 Weston wrote: "Honesty that camera possesses (...) lets one find the nature of reality before the camera so clearly, that the viewer can consider the created picture to be more real and understandable than the object itself". (Weston, Edward. *Photography – Not Pictorial. Camera Craft*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 1930, pp. 313–320. Cited after: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, p. 175.)

16 Russian photographer Alexander Slusarev (1944–2010) stressed the presence of metaphysical aspect in photography in contrast of formalistic approach. For example, he has said: "I do not like Rodchenko. He is absolutely without feelings, but for me feelings are very essential (...) Rodchenko – no feelings at all, pure formalism." (See: Vikulina, Jekaterina. *Metaphysical photography of Alexander Slusarev. Foto Kvartāls*, No. 4 (24), 2010, p. 26.)

the metaphysical. Just like the police photographs can do their specific functions. Make a picture of a head, that's all. But in some turn of that head, if you are looking at that picture in another context, something more is revealed.

*A. T.: You have also made exhibitions together with Inta Ruka. How could you comment on your cooperation?*

A. G.: Friendship and professional harmony, and the idealistic platform also is alike – this subjective document. It simply happened so. We have had two common projects – 'Travel from Liepāja to Balvi'<sup>17</sup> and the *Hasselblad* project<sup>18</sup>. It was interesting for ourselves how you can look at the same place. We did not go to places together, but one can compare in the ready photography what everybody sees. That is simultaneously an experiment and a creative duet.

Still each of us is working by himself. With a thought that the result is under formation, it is to some extent the result for both. It simply means to open one and the same theme. It is like, for example, with 'One Day in Ogre' (*Viena diena Ogrē*). The result is more powerful if you combine this way. The collection was rather good.

*A. T.: To your mind when did photographers in Latvia begin in general to think and work in series, cycles?*

A. G.: I know about myself – since I began to take pictures. Those principles simply came by themselves. I work in three directions: portrait ('Colleges, friends, acquaintances'), 'Impressions' and 'Along Latvia'. Everybody has his code in such a wide sense – imaginative code. And those directions formed in such a way. I understood already in the 80s that it is possible to work thus up to the end of one's days. The names of collections also came up already then.

*A. T.: But it was not a conventional method in Latvia in the 70s and at the beginning of the 80s. Then, in Latvia it was quite a new approach how one could possibly work with photography.*

<sup>17</sup> Exhibition 'Travel from Liepāja to Balvi' was exhibited in the Gallery of the Latvian Artists' Union in Riga in 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Inta Ruka and Andrejs Grants got the stipend of the Hasselblad Foundation in 1998. Their creative work was shown in their joint exhibition of photography 'Latvia. The Changing and Constant Reality' at the Gallery of the Latvian Artists' Union in Riga in 2000.

A. G.: Spuris already had his 'Proletarian Districts of Riga'<sup>19</sup>. This idea already existed then in talks as well – you had a theme to write about to the end of one's days. No need to toss about. That is also interesting – in Spuris' series also the accents can change but the subject remains the same. Simply do what feels closer to you. Inta also began to create her main collection, 'My Country People'<sup>20</sup>, then. At first Inta used the narrow, 35 mm camera. It was more relative, of course – kind of covering series of photos; when she bought *Rolleiflex* camera, 6x6, portrait size, she accepted it organically as her own. I think that it became self-evident that you dig into one theme not in width, horizontally – but in depth. Maybe it is not too correct but you can compare this with agriculture: there exists extensive and intensive agriculture. One can apply the extensive way if there is much land, you cultivate fields one after another and, though the crops are small, there are many fields. The intensive method – when you are concentrated on this one subject, involved in it. I thought that working in such a way opens more widely the thing you want to say. That you do not take pictures of "everything", but of one particular theme. It is important to compile the collection as a whole entity. If you then see one work in the context of other photographs it is clear at once that there is no need to "switch" your own code.

*A. T.: It is not so that a photographer can be noticed only when they are working on just one theme. The most essential is ...*

A. G.: To structure or create a frame.

*A. T.: Looking through the article 'The Ideal and Real Space of the Group A'<sup>21</sup>, where the principles and views of you all as "confederates" are conceptually established I would like to ask you to comment on the concept of "subjective documentary".*

A. G.: What we were doing then and the direction in which Egons was looking was not traditional at those times. The values concealed in the documentary reality used in such a type of photography needed some denotation and formulation. Usually, for people to understand the question

19 Series of photographs by Egons Spuris 'Proletarian Districts of Riga in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century', 1970s and 80s.

20 The work on the collection 'My Country People' was begun in 1983.

21 Demakova, Helēna. 'Ideal and Real Space of the group A' ..., pp. 20–42.

under discussion it is put "in a frame". I think that Spuris was the first who began to use this concept as regards our work in Ogre.

In 1985 Vladimir Birgus<sup>22</sup> from Prague came here. He began to use this term and so it came to be used here. Before it was strictly divided – never were subjective matters put together with the documentary. It was a tradition of the Soviet times: whether there is a documentary photography or an art photo, and documentary should not be linked with subjective. One can work with reality as well, to make documentary reality in the same way as was proved by Egons in full capacity already in the seventies. So the beginning is maybe in the 70s.

*A. T.: Looking back from today's viewpoint it would be a documentary photography presented in the art context as the photos are prepared for exhibiting, not, let's say, for media. But then why you – and other authors of your generation – do not like the term "art photo" so much?*

A. G.: That is because this term "art photo" is so much dragged about and exaggerated. It is also so separated off, that say, "photo from life" or a family photo – though it is done well – it is not that. But art photography... Of course, it was cultivated in the 70s by the so-called art photographers. We all, at least I, tried to distance ourselves. Salon photography was not interesting to me.

*A. T.: What really was this salon photography?*

A. G.: Let us say, the style that was cultivated in the Photo Club *Riga*, with exceptions, of course. It was neither good, nor bad. For example, the portraits where you see people, but they are quite without individuality. Then decorativeness, all those solarisations... One could name also the simplified pictorialism. It uses the classical cliché. Let us say, in music you have a popular song with rhyme "book – cook", "back – sack", etc. There are also mentioned stars and dreams that vanish. It is the same with photography. Such a simplified approach. And if in music, for example, everything is put together clearly, then it is not so in photography. In the West, what we used to call salon photography, is termed the club or amateur photography.

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<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Birgus (b. 1945) – Czech photographer, teacher, photography historian and active publicist.



A. T.: *Clichés envisage repetition, but one cannot unequivocally agree to it about Latvian photography in the 60s and 70s. There were many experiments with form; many authors searched new possibilities in aesthetical field. In those works the form is the contents at the same time.*

A. G.: We cannot oppose to it so strongly – we ourselves have come from there<sup>23</sup>. We went through it, to some extent I as well. Why did I draw those pyramids – maybe to understand where everything is? Symbol reaches only the second level. You look at this work – it has drained already, it has no aftertaste that is called an image and that develops later. The image is that meaning to develop, the essence to develop. We may speak about it when we look at old photo masters – Stieglitz, Weston, Cunningham and to the great masters of Europe who are slowly working with those questions. However, always there exist parallels with those fast things that have no need to be anything more than a symbol – let's say, a broken tree symbolizes broken life. If it is pictured in the middle of a field and the picture is called 'Fate', then it is already art. There are metaphors or figurative meanings. Young girl – beauty, fertility and if her hand is stretched towards wide-angle lens, then there is drama as well.

A. T.: *How would you comment "ideological and visual censorship of the 80s"*<sup>24</sup>?

A. G.: What I was doing did not cross the life standards approved by society. It could be different with the works for exhibitions and this should be kept in mind. I have had only two cases connected with censorship. I had a portrait of a girl who had extended her stomach a bit in the picture, quite humanly, not everybody has a figure shaped by aerobics. Their argument was – the ideal of a Soviet woman cannot look like this. The second episode was when a landscape was declined. It depicted an inflatable hall from which air was being let out. I was made inquiries about it for a long time – where is it, in which place? I asked – what is the matter. No, no, nothing... at last they said: "You know, we are not sure that under the hall there is not any military object. We cannot exhibit this photo." Comical, of course. Another thing was when they squabbled on the street during picture-taking – representatives of the state power and their anonymous helpers.

I think that Inta could have had kind of morose feeling as she was

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23 From photo studio, photo club – A.T.

24 Demakova, Helēna. „Let's have a picture taken!..“ p. 23.

reproached – why do you photograph those poor people constantly? Do we not have enough new buildings? Why those poor ones? But in her works all was tinted a bit romantically – as from her own childhood, as her country people (likely as Spuris in that context made 'Proletarian Districts of Riga'<sup>25</sup>) and it was determined ideologically to get through censorship – a reference to the past, the sacred word "proletarians". It was managed in such a way. If it were a documentary photography depicting the present time one could say that it does not give an optimistic impression. Well, if you presented it in such a way – yes, it could go through. I know that Spuris once had to retouch over one picture of a house party for an exhibition of Photo Club *Ogre* – there was a bottle of champagne on the table, alcohol was prohibited, so he made a coffee-pot.

A. T.: *Could he not retouch it and not exhibit this work?*

A. G.: I know that he liked that picture very much, and it was maybe the lesser violation of truth.

A. T.: *While the Soviet Union was coming down there began quite a different circulation of exhibitions. Did after the exhibition in Lausanne<sup>26</sup> in 1990 you form another approach to your own works having been out of the usual space? New value?*

A. G.: For each one differently but for me nothing special changed. I understood that it is sensible to continue the previous work. The photographs I saw there only confirmed it. In this exhibition I had works from the series 'Along Latvia', Inta – from 'My Country People'.

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25 When making comments on the photo series "Proletarian Districts of Riga in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century" Egons Spuris has written at the end of the 70s: "Workers' quarters appeared in the outskirts of cities – in his novel *Five-storey City* Vilis Lācis called them the "barracks of the proletariat". (...) My own grandfather, too, arrived from the Mežotne District and laid the foundations for my birth and life in these "barracks" until the present day." (See: Bužinska, Irēna. *Egons Spuris. Skaudri poētiskas tēlainības meistars* ('A Master of Acutely Poetic Imagery'). *Foto Kvartāls*, 2009, No. 5 (19), p. 18.)

26 The exhibition of 100 Eastern European photographers *L'Année de l'Est* in the Photo Museum *Musée de l'Elysee* in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1990. It should be mentioned that a doctor's dissertation based on the analysis of the exhibition was defended in Lausanne University. See: Adamczewska-Bolle, Zuzanna. *L'Année de l'Est: une manifestation du Musée de l'Elysee, 1990*. Université de Lausanne, 2009.

A. T.: *At which moment, to your opinion, it was perceptible that Inta's works are demanded, evaluated on international level, that she is not "one of"?*

A. G.: I think it was the fact that Helēna Demakova chose her for the Venice Biennial<sup>27</sup>. That is also a brand. Naturally, it showed everything in quite another size – in a figurative sense. Her work grew more contemporary. I think – if Inta had not gone out on that wide road she would not have begun to work on those big scale photographs that were accomplished in a very modern way and exhibited in Venice. It had a very good resonance there. That gave her immediately the "second breath", sense of ability – to my mind, it was important. And Inta was ready for it.

Later cooperation with the German gallery followed<sup>28</sup>. I think that she fills in such an interesting segment with her classical European-type man, with nostalgia for childhood, etc. To some degree, it is mildly exotic as well – it is more routine for us, but it is a dreamland for Western people in the sense that they have it no more. That adds an extra aesthetical value but does not lessen the importance of her ability to put the right accents and show the points of human approach.

A. T.: *Would it be creating an image from the viewpoint of subjective documentary?*

A. G.: Japanese have such aesthetical categories in poetics – not poetry, but poetics in general. Japanese themselves have a rather morose attitude towards those who try to popularize, that is, who try to speak with Europeans; but one of them explains the term *yugen*: it creates such an existential, melancholic, deepened feeling of the uniqueness of life. So I could formulate it. But he does it in quite a Japanese way: imagine that it is an evening in autumn, days are shorter, it is cold already, frost, the sun is going down, you are sitting, and understanding that it is really in nature and you have such a strange lump in your throat.

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27 The exposition curated by Helēna Demakova 'Stories, Storytellers' at the 48th International Contemporary Art Exhibition in Venice included works by Inta Ruka, Anita Zabiļevska and Ojārs Pētersons.

28 Baukunst Galerie in Cologne.