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The Private Life of Latvian Photos

Jānis Borgs, Art Critic

Private. Latvian Contemporary Photography

20.08.-18.10.2009. Exhibition Hall *Arsenāls*, Latvian National Museum of Art

There is a school of thought that the Golden Age of Latvian photography was in the 1960-80s, when our star photographers were in the ascendant and finding fame around the world. The abatement, even decline, that followed was unfortunately characteristic of the first decade of Latvia's restored independence. This was not only due to the demise of the Soviet state-nurtured photo clubs and centralised state support. The change of socio-economic regimes coincided with a generational shift and a radical new aesthetic position that came with it, as well as changes in artistic criteria and the technical environment of photography. The previously cohesive community of photographers was rent by philosophical differences, former unity was dispelled by reigning commercialisation. It seems that now we only view the term Riga school of photography in historic terms. But history has not concluded, and there has also been a promising continuation. The major exhibition *Private*, which showcases Latvian photo art and was inspired by cultural contacts with Moscow and the East in general, is now running for several months in Riga at the *Arsenāls* exhibition space. Although this initiative was originally directed towards Russia, it has turned out to be a rewarding affirmation of the energy of our younger generation of photographers, and even a certain renaissance. It could be joyfully declared that "reports of the death of Latvian photography have been greatly exaggerated".



Romāns Korovins. Untitled. From the series *Garden by the Sea*. Inkjet print. 2005-2007. Courtesy of the author

Its rebirth in the 21st century has taken place in many different contexts, as traditional photographic activities as well as experiments with new technologies and expressions of multimedia art... Perhaps in comparison with the old tradition and the monumental solidity of the Riga school, this current trend could seem somewhat marginal. However, over time its combined energy has resulted in a perceptible emergence of the first indications of a new school or the signs of a new tradition. It is probably too early to tell if this will grow into a "new wave" of Latvian photography. But there is no denying that positive artistic potential is developing. An escape from the protracted diffuseness of our photographic art was achieved through its condensation, which over a longer period of time has been actively promoted by various Riga galleries and the Contemporary Arts Centre, as well as curatorial activities, such as, for example, the publication of the first Latvian art photography journal 'Foto kvartāls'. The photographic soil has been purposefully cultivated, and now the harvest can be enjoyed. The exhibition *Private* is to some extent the culmination of these efforts, or perhaps the first milestone on the new road and the credit for its successful establishment is due to the exhibition's curator, Editor-in-Chief of 'Foto kvartāls' Alise Tīfentāle.

Private brings together the work of seven photographic artists: Alnis Stakle, Zenta Dzividzinska, Vilnis Vītoliņš, Inta Ruka, Arnis Balčus, Romans Korovins and Gunārs Binde. The guiding concept is defined in the exhibition's title. It is a private perspective, perhaps even a counterpoint to many other photographic possibilities - social, propagandist, commercial, entertainment... The diversity of artistic concepts and technical approaches adopted by the participating artists is surprising. However, at the same time, a specific relationship and conceptual harmony that gives the exhibition a sense of unity, even tradition, has been achieved. The individual differences of the artists harmonise together here as a unified rendition by a choir.

The introduction to the *Arsenāls* show - works by Romans Korovins, apparently "soapdish" produced photos printed on A4 sheets, may upset hardened purists of photography. And their peevishness could intensify upon seeing the amateurishly careless collection of photo documents in the exposition by Arnis Balčus. Both authors, as if demonstratively, completely ignore professional technical principles. For many people, until now these have been sacred cows, and including such works in a photo exhibition will induce horror and scorn in those of a more conservative bent. However, young photographic artists have a tendency to reject professional snobbism, aiming to prove the accessibility of photography and stressing the unique value of all photographic documents. Even something that anyone can do has its worth and contains certain cultural information. As in the Rod Stewart song - "Every picture tells a story..." Moreover, their exhibits push out the boundaries of photography by bringing in other artistic forms. They include various installation objects and audio-video portrayals that enhance the total photographic message. Korovins' depictions of garden allotments and the holiday mood of petty bourgeois pastimes reveal a very familiar aspect of the Latvian existence and mentality. The hay in the exhibition space is not an extravagant gesture, but rather it is an archetypal symbol of the agricultural tendencies inherent in every Latvian. Although this Latvian is now an urban dweller, he sometimes likes to take on the role of a Chekhovian *dachnik*. And what may seem merely private here actually turns out to be a social problem, even some-thing like priorities during election time. Could it be that for Latvians the vegetable patch is all too often in first place?

The works by Korovins and Balčus mesh in an interesting manner with other art forms, reminding us once again that photography is just one of many technical expressions of artistic thought. It is only a means, not an end in itself. And this leads to musings on the genetic connection between photography and the overall artistic process, also in its historic, pre-photography aspects - for example, by tracking archetypal forms of the artistic message,

In Balčus' photo-biographical account, the private transforms into an incisive social cross-section of the fateful events and developments that Latvia has undergone. Here the photographic message has a decidedly literary, story-telling quality. Looking through a private family album, or a box of photos found in the attic often provides a deeper experience than an aesthetically refined exhibition, where making art is the priority. It is this note that resonates with new force and insistence here. And Balčus, by revealing the private in a theatrical photo exposure of a living room, sorting out supposedly deeply personal matters in a narrative string of images between the sofa, the lamp and the TV, with the use of, at first sight, irredeemably inane and insignificant pictures has turned the documentary power of photography in another, more intensely resonant and emotionally artistic direction. His life together with relatives, uncles, colleagues, trips abroad, exotic women and wives move the viewer to think - good Lord, how those Latvians make the whole world their stage...

The viewpoint of Inta Ruka, our greatest classic photographer, is no less documentary or private. Telling the straight, unvarnished truth by documenting the everyday lives of "ordinary" people has been a characteristic of this artist's work right from the beginning. Here is a great phenomenon: she has created her best art without any artistic pretensions of doing so. Another singularity is that whereas other photographers view themselves and their contemporaries with detached irony, or with the eye of a researcher and cultural historian, or with moralising condemnation and criticism, or poetic ecstasy and idealisation, Ruka is the only author in whose work we feel that she loves her subjects, deeply and naively like a child. Warmth and almost physical emotionality shine out of these images of the residents of 5 Amālijas Street. To a degree Ruka, like Fellini in his time, is above any form of competition, setting her own standards, thanks to the monumental clarity and simplicity of her work. It could be said that in the realm of art photography in post-independence Latvia she has been the most outstanding personality and a factor that allows us to state that the Riga school of photography is still alive, or at least confirm that there is continued succession to it.

Gunārs Binde, one of the great masters of this legendary past, is participating in *Private* with some fully documentary works. However, you won't find his famous artistic photographic images here. Instead, the exhibited works give the impression of leafing through an old note-book or dusty collection of sketches. They are, as always, fascinating. But the public mood emphasised in the works begs the question - where is the privacy here? The unofficial, touristy and private view here comes from the ancient Soviet past. In other words, these are images from the avantgarde photo-film *Hello, Moscow!* made in 1966, in the depths of the Brezhnev era. Considering that the exhibition's first address was today's Moscow, this may have a deeper subtext. It is like a counterpoint between two different ages and a reminder to the shining metropolis of today. We see the never ending hustle and bustle of daily life in the old Red capital. The warm and heartfelt view mingles with mild irony, and even sarcasm that has managed to slip by the censor. The profiles of Marxist-Leninist classicists turn into monstrous grimaces in the folds of a red flag flapping in the wind. The powerful gaze on the face of the monumentally pictured worker's face stands out sharply amidst the range of images. This work is comparable with Rodchenko's art and is given the voluminous title *Krievs* ('The Russian').

It may be difficult for the exhibition public of today to imagine something unusual hiding in these routine, plain images. But it must be remembered that the propaganda canons of the time (and cinema was the main ideological weapon of the Party) demanded a solemn, pompous and often staged rendition of Soviet reality. In this sense, "socialism with a human face" was a great novelty, revelatory and avant-garde, a harbinger of later historic events. A few years later, the proponents of the Prague Spring tried to put into practice "human socialism" on a grander scale, followed twenty years later by Gorby's perestroika reformers. But in the vanguard of this latter movement were the bold and transgressive Balts. And our academic classicist Gunārs Binde was just such an "rebel" at the time.

Alnis Stakle from Daugavpils is perhaps the most striking representative of the "artistic" flank in Private. The subject matter depicted in his series *Home, Sweet Home* is seemingly monotonous and trivial: the non-architecture of a marginal small town, the humble homes of simple folk, traditional provincial Latvian buildings. Usually there is some half-tended garden, the usual apple trees, bushes, untrimmed lawns, wire fencing. And that's it, end of story. There are no people in Stakle's works, just a real small town emptiness softened by all-embracing night. The only indications that humanoids are present are the lighted windows in every 'sweet home'. We believe that somebody actually lives there. However, by using long exposures and spooky, occasionally synthetic colouring, the author has achieved the opposite of the promised sweetness. It is rather a Hitchcock-like surrealist vision with undertones of latent horror. A secret criminal drama is hidden in the tragic mood of the images. These works are memorable for their powerful emotional tension, while the 'sweet homes' are apparently under Martian occupation, and the eye seeks the cool metal of a UFO behind some bushes or a picket fence. This powerful, magical vision is undoubtedly reinforced by a fascinating technical solution for the works, with some kind of extra dimension on the plane of the photo that draws the viewer into the whirlpool of a trance. Stakle's achievement is no less hypnotic than the diamonds on the neck of a mysterious beauty.



Zenta Dzividzinska. Photo from the series 'Servitude'. Inkjet print, aluminium.2002-2007

The *Private* artists also include a philosopher of refined sensibility - Zenta Dzividzinska. She also has the role of being a "bridge" between contemporary Latvian photo reality and our photographic Golden Age in the last century. Her series has a prosaic name, *Servitude*, with the banal meaning "an encumbrance on a property." In her black and white photo pages we see one and the same shot - the corner of a garden with some bushes, a woodpile, a shed in the background... This is the "encumbrance" which the artist turns into poetry. Its almost extreme frugality appeals to the highly intelligent viewer. Because there is seemingly nothing to look at here, no unfolding narrative and apparently no visual-dramatic passion vibrating. There is only an intimate, drab, unpretentious landscape, captured from almost the same angle in different seasons and different lights. This is a deeply meditative work which should not be glanced at hurriedly, in passing, but rather contemplated for a long time. Here perhaps there could be references to Buddhist perception, Japanese haiku, the music of flutes and single-stringed musical instruments... In this context, Dzividzinska could truly be regarded as a poet. Unfortunately, it is possible that the visual bustle of her energetic exhibition neighbours does not do her any favours. Her work needs a larger, possibly separate space and peace.

Vilnis Vītoliņš's work in the series *100 rooms* is a particularly notable event for the exhibition, and a big surprise. The concept of the work on its own may not seem very original. Similar photographic studies and documentations of the social environment, depicting people in their natural work and home settings, have been seen before. What is unique is the subject's artistic revelation and the monumental, Rubens or Rembrandt-like scale. The huge size of the works is undoubtedly of importance, as can be seen by the much more modest effect they achieve when reprinted in the exhibition catalogue. The almost

pathological sharpness in virtually all of the details, depths and planes of the photographs leaves a shattering impression. In the busy interior group shot we can even read the text on a bottle of eau du cologne standing on the windowsill! In any event, the author demonstrates technical ability and scope that is out of reach of all the other exhibition participants taken together. There is a feeling as if the US aircraft carrier Nimitz had sailed up the Daugava River amongst the usual little ships. Showing off technical expertise and parameters is not an uncommon activity for photographers. Often enough this is a means of compensating for modest artistic merit. But Vītoliņš has not fallen into this trap. He successfully plays on a peculiarity, if not a vice, of life for many Europeans - living in a crowded "warehouse" of things and junk. In Vītoliņš's photos, this miscellany is covered in a "sauce" of golden light, and gains a fantastic ornamental quality. Like an oriental wall hanging, or a fauvist interior painting by Matisse and Bonnard. The bare document, the social photographic study, becomes a work of art here. This is such an impressive achievement that we can view it as a promise of new Herculean feats of art.

The Exhibition *Private* bears testimony first of all to the vitality of our photographic culture and its ability to develop alongside the massive gravitational pull of commercialisation. Secondly, the ability to overcome the constraints of tradition, to operate in the multimedia environment of contemporary art, both as an autonomous entity and also subordinate to and in context with other forms of artistic expression. Thirdly, the ability to saturate photographic imagery with meaningful content, and act in the revelation of social processes. It turns out that no matter how intimately the theme of art was considered on this occasion, it has once again had forensic examining power in the analytical clefts, cuttings and soundings of the body social... And these will also have significance as cultural-historical documents, which can only be fully evaluated with the passage of time. The exhibition *Private* is in fact nine different statements. But as Cicero once said - *E pluribus unum*.

/Translator into English: Filips Birzulis/

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