

Following the Invisible Hand:

The Role of Photo Clubs, Magazines, Exhibitions, and Curators in Latvian Photography, 1960–2000

Alise Tifentale

We are used to art history that revolves around the “great masters” and their amazing achievements. Although at times useful, such a style of writing history tends to overemphasize the role of individuals and underemphasize the role of institutions, peer networks, and support mechanisms that make the achievements of those individuals possible. From a sociological perspective, such institutions organize and structure every field of creativity according to the general rules of an “art world,” which, as defined by culture sociologist Howard S. Becker, means “the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.”¹ Such “art worlds” form around all kinds of creative practices, and each of them has its own geographical scope and lifespan. This essay aims to identify some of the most influential institutions and establish their role in shaping the local “art world” of photography in Latvia over the second part of the twentieth century.

The Latvian National Museum of Art joined this “art world” of photography only recently when it started to add photographs to its collection. The foundation of the museum’s photography collection was laid by a gift of photographer Inta Ruka (b. 1958) in 2009–2010—a large collection of prints by Egons Spuris (1931–1990). At the time of writing this essay, almost ten years later, the museum has already formed a notable collection. It does not yet include the works that were the most visible in Latvian photography during the Soviet era, especially the 1960s and 1970s. It focuses on the work of photographers whose names became well-known mostly in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s—after the restoration of Latvia’s independence from the Soviet Union. By preferring these works, the museum reflects and solidifies one idea about the type of photography that is worthy of the status of an art work, currently shared by most art professionals in Latvia. Most images that represent Latvian photographic art

of the 1950s and 1960s, however, do not fit this idea because they were made in completely different socioeconomic circumstances and cultural context. Among the reasons that hinder an adequate evaluation of these circumstances and contexts is general confusion about the local history of photography during the Soviet era and especially about the radically different institutional frameworks within which this art form evolved over the course of these decades. This essay will outline that influence hoping to clarify a few misconceptions and to inspire some interest in recognizing the historical specificity of artistic legacy which is currently left outside the museum's collection.

International *fotoclubismo* of the 1960s

It was within the photo-club culture of the 1950s and 1960s that modern photographic art was born. Photography clubs as informal organizations had existed since the late nineteenth century, but after the end of World War II the photo-club culture was expanding at an unprecedented rate on a global level. The significance of photo clubs as major venues for exhibiting photography as an autonomous art form was relevant not only within the Soviet Union, part of which Latvia was back then, but also elsewhere in Europe, in Latin America and Asia. The most important clubs of the 1950s and early 1960s brought together professional photographers, photojournalists, artists, and amateurs. These clubs were the only public spaces where photography could exist as an autonomous art form. In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, the term “photo club” became more associated with amateur activities and less—with an infrastructure for artistic practice, which it was before. Because of this shift in the meaning, most of the works that characterize Latvian photography of these decades have been—and continue to be—overlooked and misunderstood only because it emerged from the photo-club culture. None of the art museums in Latvia currently collect such works on a systematic basis, and the significance of these works in the local art history is still to be established.

Brazil provides one positive example of studying this photo-club culture and recognizing its historical specificity. Historians of Brazilian photography use the term *fotoclubismo* to describe the creative culture prevailing in the photo clubs of the 1950s and 1960s (from *foto clube*—“photo club” in

Portuguese). One of the best-studied examples of such clubs in Brazil is a São Paulo-based photo club, *Foto-Cine Clube Bandeirante* (FCCB). Although founded back in 1939, it took a central role on the Brazilian avant-garde art scene during the 1950s, encouraging experimental modernist, semi-abstract or entirely non-representational photography. Within the past two decades, numerous books and journal articles as well as extensive museum and gallery exhibitions have examined in great detail the lives and careers of photographers and artists affiliated to FCCB.² Because of the generous support from the local “art world”, the works by FCCB members are quite well-known internationally and recently have been included in the most prestigious photographic art collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

One of the most important creative centres for Latvian photography in the 1960s, no doubt, was the Photo Club *Rīga*. Established in 1962, it had evolved into a notable actor of the global photo-club culture by the mid-1960s.³ The club was committed to creating an environment where camerawork could develop as an art form at a time when the professional, official art world did not welcome photography. In the 1960s, the club was a significant creative hub attracting the most remarkable personalities. Their works shaped the idea of art photography of that time. One of the central figures in the club was Gunārs Binde (b. 1933), who gained recognition in the early 1960s with his series of dramatic and expressive portraits, most notably the one of the well-known theatre director Eduards Smiļģis (1965). He developed an original method of staged photography, reminiscent of Italian Neorealism (*neorealismo*) and French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*) in cinema. Employing this method, the artist’s ideas were materialized through a synthesis of staging, directing, acting, and documentation. Other key members of the Photo Club *Rīga* in the 1960s included Jānis Gleizds (1924–2010), the master of pictorialized female nudes, Valters Jānis Ezeriņš (b. 1938), the local pioneer of abstract photography and solarization (or the so-called Sabatier effect), and Gunārs Janaitis (b. 1934), a portraitist, culture photojournalist, and active promoter of photographic art.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, a new generation of photographers, then in their thirties, claimed their creative ambitions in the club. Wilhelm Mikhailovsky (1942–2018) was among the most visible and most prolific photographers of that generation. In addition to his artistic explorations, he authored numerous

portraits of actors, artists, poets, and writers as well as documentary projects about Riga and Latvia. Mikhailovsky created a series of visionary tableaux, inspired by humanist pathos, religious mysticism, and at times by contemporary political or cultural processes. His fine art works, although diverse, have several features in common, such as dramatic, existentialist narratives and symbolic or allegoric imagery. The use of photographic techniques such as photomontage was extremely significant, especially in the *Humanus* series (1969–1981). His works were highly visible at that time, and they characterize one important trend in the Latvian photography of the 1970s. Works like his should be studied and their local cultural specificity recognized. These works were also known internationally: Mikhailovsky's images as well as works by several other members of the Photo Club *Rīga* circulated in the exhibitions of the world's leading photo clubs, including exhibitions organized by the abovementioned FCCB in São Paulo.⁴

The importance of the works of Latvian photographic art produced within the local photo-club culture of the 1960s and 1970s lies in the conscious examination of photography as an art medium and using it for the creation of highly subjective, personal visions that clearly aimed at departing from the mainstream language of the official press photography and photojournalism of the time. Its most typical example is *The Republic in Photographs* photo chronicle that was prepared centrally by LATINFORM, an information agency functioning under the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) and the Council of Ministers of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. LATINFORM produced editions of *The Republic in Photographs* photo-chronicle in the form of folders containing several photographs accompanied by a brief introduction and captions. The names of individual photographers did not appear; all work was attributed to LATINFORM. This chronicle was distributed to newspaper editorial offices on a regular basis and provided illustrations to national and regional press. Most of the time, those photographs epitomized the official visual culture of the Soviet Union, which was optimistic and positive, dynamic and energetic, focused on the might and progress of Soviet industry and agriculture, and absolutely out of tune with the artistic sensibilities of photographers and artists who frequented the Photo Club *Rīga* meetings.

At the global level, one of the strongest motivating forces behind the booming photo-club culture during the 1950s and 1960s was the absence of other outlets and institutional structures open to circulating and discussing photography as a recognized art form. At that time, this was a familiar situation across the world, with a few outstanding exceptions such as the U.S., the U.K., and West Germany. While art academies, museums, and galleries provided painters, sculptors, and other established artists with an infrastructure for exhibitions, collections, publications, and forums for professional critique, photographers were forced to rely on photo clubs and their salons for all those functions. Participating photographers shared a belief in autonomy and the importance of photographic art, although its form and content was flexible and differed from country to country, even from city to city. These differences need to be fully acknowledged. We should look for what was unique to and characteristic only of Latvian photographers, not for what was similar to what their contemporaries did in São Paulo, Moscow or New York.

The many subjective documents of the 1970s

The 1970s up to the mid-1980s was the last time when the photo club was the milieu of the creative vanguard of photography in Latvia. After that, the role of photo clubs was gradually taken over by the professional art infrastructure, including publications, exhibitions, and curatorship. A prominent photographer who emerged from the creative environment of the Photo Club *Rīga* was Egons Spuris (1931–1990). He was a key figure on the photography scene of the 1970s and 1980s in Latvia, a highly respected photographer and teacher who inspired the next generation of photographers. He became the creative leader of the Ogre Camera Club, located in a small town not far from Riga. Among his students were Inta Ruka (b. 1958), who was also his spouse, Andrejs Grants (b. 1955), and others, many of whom were to become notable photographers during the next decade. Urban environment as such was not an especially popular subject matter in Latvian photography before the series titled *Proletarian Districts of Riga in the 19th and Early 20th Century* (1970s–1980s) by Spuris. He took the photographs for the series in the backyards and streets of the historic part of Riga that was built mainly as housing for workers

during the rapidly growing industrial city in the late 19th and early 20th century. Spuris knew well this part of the city, largely unknown to the outsiders, because he himself lived there. Typical to this series is the neutral or even distanced observation that leads to strong, at times almost abstract, compositions of geometric shapes and planes. There is no distinct narrative. The narrow backyards, enclosed by blind brick walls often five stories high, are mostly devoid of human presence. Unlike Hilla and Bernd Becher and their followers—the so-called Düsseldorf School of photography, Spuris did not follow the conceptual method of cataloguing or archiving.

To describe his work, Spuris used the term “subjective document”, most probably borrowed from the Czech photo criticism of the mid-1970s. At that time, one of the very few sources of up-to-date information about photographic art available in Latvia was the *Fotografie* magazine, published in Czechoslovakia in a special Russian language edition, produced for distribution in the USSR. The contradictory nature of the term “subjective document” reflects the inner struggle of the photographer: how to describe a practice that is neither pure “art” (subjective) nor pure record of visual reality (document), but incorporates elements of both?

Spuris was not alone in that struggle. This was the era when documentary imagery claimed its place in photography exhibitions. For example, at a time when travel outside the USSR was highly limited, occasional exhibitions of travel photography provided an opportunity to see the world vicariously. One of the very few photographers who were allowed to travel abroad was Jānis Kreicbergs (1939–2011), a notable Latvian fashion photographer and also a member of the Photo Club *Rīga*. His exhibition titled *Impressions from a trip to the United States* (1979) that took place in the club was especially well-attended—newspapers reported that 30,000 people had seen it, which is a respectable number of visitors, comparable to the attendance of solo shows of popular painters in the main art museum of Riga in the 1970s.⁵ His photographs of the U.S., although documentary in nature, were also highly subjective. Despite their reportorial nature, most of these images clearly conveyed Kreicbergs’ signature style. Even a random street scene in midtown New York in his interpretation looks like a stylish fashion photo no less bold than images by Helmut Newton.

Photography exhibitions in general were popular in Soviet Latvia in the 1970s. Large photography shows, especially if they were international, attracted wide audiences. One example was an international photography exhibition, *Woman with Camera* (1977), organized by Kreicbergs. The list of participants from numerous foreign countries (exhibition comprised 220 works by 77 photographers from 11 countries, according to the catalogue) and the noble aim of showcasing work by women photographers attracted viewers. Besides, such exhibitions provided a pretext for exhibiting a few pictorial female nudes as well. From today's perspective, such practice evokes criticism and disapproval due to the obvious objectification of the female body. Back then, however, such exhibitions were perceived by many photographers (and arguably also viewers), male and female alike, as a liberating alternative to the asexualized and gender-neutral dominant imagery in Soviet press.

New wave of the 1980s

A major shift in the role and perception of photography in Latvia took place against the background of the political events of the mid-1980s. The second half of the 1980s was characterized by terms such as *perestroika* ("reformation" in Russian) and *glasnost* ("openness" in Russian) that signaled the crisis of the Soviet regime and its eventual downfall. In Latvia, the idea of restoring the country's independence (established in 1918 and lasting until the Soviet occupation in 1940) dominated the public debate. Visual arts were also discussed in terms of current political and social changes. *Perestroika* in the arts partly meant a denial and neglect of the artistic heritage of the Soviet era, searching for anything new just because it was "new." The concept of *glasnost*, in its turn, shaped discussions about art as a dichotomy of "lies" and "truth," where the Soviet past in general was associated with "lies" and the new, present-day situation—with a revelation of "truth." The concepts of *perestroika* and *glasnost* came up for discussions on contemporary Soviet photography exhibitions and publications at the end of the 1980s, but they typically focused on Russian photographers.⁶ However, we need to acknowledge that this overarching discourse also profoundly influenced Latvian art scene, and especially the structure and functions of the "art world" of photography.

Most typically, documentary photography, including street photography, unposed genre scenes, and portraits was understood as the bearer of “truth”. The previous generations’ interest in staged photography, photomontage, and pictorial effects was interpreted as “lies”, and almost all photographic art from the 1960s and 1970s was quickly marginalized and excluded from curatorial or art-historical discourse. The 1980s was also the decade when photography began to be perceived as part of the contemporary art establishment in Latvia. This shift was initiated by a new generation of photographers, whose aspirations and ambitions were backed up by their contemporaries—art historians and curators. It was no longer the windowless basement-level communal room of the photo club, but rather the white cube of museum exhibition halls and contemporary art galleries where the most important photographic events started to happen.

When exactly this shift took place depends on whom we ask. Art historian Laima Slava has observed that photography became a legitimate medium for professional visual arts already in the early 1980s, the turning point being a solo exhibition by photographer Andrejs Grants in Riga in 1983.⁷ Art historian and curator Helēna Demakova meanwhile locates the acceptance of photography into the contemporary art scene almost ten years later and links that process with the work of photographer Valts Kleins (b. 1960), particularly his *Thief of Time* solo show in Riga in 1991 and the inclusion of his series *We Want, We Wish* in the Baltic Sea Biennale in Rostock in 1992.⁸ In *We Want, We Wish*, portraits of orphaned children were accompanied by short answers, in the children’s own handwriting, to the question on what they wanted the most. As another equally significant event, Demakova mentions the *Quality ’92* exhibition that she curated in Riga. Images by photographer Gvido Kajons (b. 1955) in that exhibition were displayed alongside with works by avant-garde artists from Latvia Andris Breže (b. 1958), Leonards Laganovskis (b. 1955), and Vilnis Zābers (1963–1994), as well as one artist from Estonia—Leonhard Lapin (b. 1947). The fact that photographs were included in an art exhibition as equal to other artistic media signaled by itself a major breakthrough on a local scale.

“New wave” was a term that Demakova introduced to describe the work by Kleins, Kajons, Grants, Ruka, and a few other photographers emerging “mainly from the VEF and Ogre camera clubs” in

the 1980s.⁹ Their work was based on a documentary approach, and they created large thematic collections. In both aspects, they were opposed to the majority of photographers of the 1960s and 1970s, who typically produced single, free-standing works and were keen to experiment with staging, post-processing, and other creative methods aimed at achieving unusual pictorial effects. Another significant difference was the new wave photographers' dedication to capturing ordinary everyday life. Even in the titles of their work, they avoided art-historical references or phrases in Latin that the previous generations of photographers often preferred. For example, Andrejs Grants, one of the most well-known new wave photographers, since the early 1980s, had been continuously working on several series with down-to-earth titles such as *Around Latvia* and *Colleagues, Friends, and Acquaintances*. Grants, who graduated from the University of Latvia with a law degree in 1978, was affiliated with the Ogre Camera Club from 1978 to 1987 under the creative leadership of Egons Spuris. His most significant contribution is the influence his teaching has had upon the generations of Latvian photographers who grew up in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

Nevertheless, the phrase “documentary approach” needs some clarification in this context. After decades of imagined and real censorship, Latvian photographers in the late 1980s and early 1990s were finally “freed to picture even the ugliest truths,”¹⁰ as art historian Mark Allan Svede has rightly noted. Most of the new wave photographers, however, never pictured any especially “ugly” truth. Their type of realism was highly aestheticized and romantic. Their understanding of “documentary” most of the time had nothing to do with the harsh sociopolitical criticism found in the work of their Western contemporaries such as, for example, Susan Meiselas and other *Magnum* photographers.

Besides the documentary approach, thematic series, and rejection of narrative, the new wave photographers often avoided heightened contrast, a feature that was employed by most photographic artists of the 1960s and 1970s. The best example of that avoidance is the *Theme 011* series by Gvido Kajons, a notable new wave photographer, who graduated the Riga Polytechnic Institute in 1979. The series belong to a broader genre of street photography. *Theme 011* can be interpreted as a subtle critique of the late Soviet society, characterized by his focus on weary, poorly dressed, often elderly people in

dilapidated and run-down urban settings. Formally, this series embodies the virtuoso use of sophisticated tonal gradations of cool greys within the monochromatic black-and-white scale, characteristic to Kajons and other new wave photographers. The attention to the tonal gradations arguably signified the “truth” factor attributed to these photographs, as opposed to the “lies”—the increased, manipulated contrast preferred by the previous generation. Yet, both are subjective aesthetic choices that characterize a specific historical moment and particular cultural context in which the respective photographers worked.

The influence of the new wave resulted partly from Demakova’s curatorial efforts and partly from the photographers’ self-promotion. For example, the new wave gained visibility and claimed status of an art form for photography in the pages of the *Avots* magazine—the avant-garde intelligentsia’s media of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Latvia. In 1987, the first year of the magazine, feature articles were dedicated to photographers most of whom we would classify as the new wave: Gvido Kajons, Gints Bērziņš (b. 1968), Inta Ruka, Viesturs Links (b. 1956), Oļegs Zernovs (b. 1962), Mārtiņš Zelmenis (b. 1956), Valts Kleins, and Roberts Auziņš (b. 1947). With the exception of Auziņš, they belonged to the same generation and were enthusiastic enough to promote each other’s work. Out of eight articles, three were signed by Grants, two by Kleins, and one by a fictitious name suggesting a possibility that this could be either of them. In the following years, however, such features did not reappear in *Avots*—either the list of worthy photographers had been exhausted, or the editorial focus of the magazine had shifted towards other topics. The discourse on photography in *Avots* in 1987 was rather simple: documentary photography was welcome; any artistic intervention in the photographic imagery was not. Grants, for example, described work by Kajons with phrases such as “technocratic rationalism” in 1987.¹¹ No doubt, the selection of photographers in *Avots* in 1987 marks a significant trend in Latvian photography. This trend involved also “uncompromised realism,” as art historian Eduards Kļaviņš formulated it later, in 1999, when writing about Ruka’s photographs.¹² The values of this new wave, however, are not universally applicable across the decades. The new wave was relevant only in one historically specific time period. We should not look either for “technocratic rationalism” or “uncompromised realism” in works made before and after the 1980s, but rather recognize the uniqueness of art that reflects its own time and place.

Soviet exotica circa 1991

Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Western publishers and curators became especially curious about art and photography from the USSR. For example, the friendship of a Latvian-American photographer Ulvis Alberts (b. 1942) and Jānis Kreicbergs resulted in several magazine publications and group exhibitions of Latvian photography in the United States. Vid Ingelevic, a Canadian artist, writer and curator of Latvian descent, organized the participation of twelve Latvian photographers in a group exhibition by 100 photographers from Eastern Europe, *L'Année de l'Est* (The Year of the East), in the *Musée de l'Élysée* photography museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1990. Ingelevic also curated the exhibition titled *Latvian Photographers in the Age of Glasnost* in the Toronto Photographers Workshop, 1991, that traveled to several other art galleries in Canada until 1993.

Starting from the late 1980s, works of the new wave photographers were showcased in numerous exhibitions in museums and galleries in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada. Philippe Legros and Helēna Demakova co-curated an exhibition, *Fem från Riga* (Five from Riga), at the *Kulturhuset* in Stockholm in 1991 where works by photojournalist Uldis Briedis (b. 1940) were displayed along contemporary art pieces by artists Aija Zariņa (b. 1954), Ojārs Feldbergs (b. 1947), Ojārs Pētersons (b. 1956), and Oļegs Tillbergs (b. 1956). In 1991 another important exhibition took place in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in Santa Barbara, California—*Comrades and Cameras: Photographs from Latvia and Other Soviet Republics*. Works by 24 photographers from Latvia were included, and among them were the leading new wave photographers. Finally, in the same year, Latvian new wave photography was featured in the exhibition titled *Changing Reality: Recent Soviet Photography* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC. In the accompanying publication, two of Ruka's photographs from *My Country People* series were reproduced—she was the only photographer from Latvia whose works were illustrated in this book.¹³

These exhibitions and publications signal that it is debatable whether the Western curators were

interested in exploring an unknown culture and history or were just curious about “exotic” images depicting the sad state of affairs in the Evil Empire. For example, Latvian, or Soviet photography in general, was never analyzed in aesthetic and formal terms like their Western peers’ work was. Nobody seemed to care about the individual careers of photographers. Not much was said about the specific historical and cultural context from which those photographers had emerged, apart from labeling them “Soviet.” Exhibition *A Meeting with the Soviet Union: A Photographic Dialogue* organized by the Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences in 1989 is a good example of such exoticization. It was one of the first larger exhibitions of photography from the USSR with a notable representation of Latvian new wave photography. The accompanying photo album, published in German and Russian, leaves an impression that the organizers were primarily interested in images that affirmed their worst suspicions about the low quality of everyday life in the USSR.¹⁴ This short-lived recognition from abroad in the form of exhibitions and publications mainly contributed only to confirming the status of “real” artists for the new wave photographers in the local “art world” of photography. It distinguished them from their colleagues of previous generations, whose work was not supported by enthusiastic individuals or competent institutions and thus remained invisible to the Western “helicopter” curators, who had neither capacity nor resources to conduct in-depth research and as a result relied on recommendations from local partners such as Demakova.

Archival fever of the 1990s

Local exhibitions also became important when art galleries as well as some alternative spaces started to organize photographers’ solo exhibitions. Before that, most photography exhibitions were organized by photo clubs, and the curatorial work—including the image selection, sequence and layout of the works, and so on—was done by the photographers themselves. In the 1990s, it was the figure of contemporary art curator who started to promote certain photographers, exhibit their work, and oversee the development of their careers. This process began with Western curators, such as Vid Ingelevic, Philippe Legros or Barbara Straka, and soon the first local curators emerged who were open to working with photography,

most visibly Helēna Demakova and Inga Šteimane.

One of the most significant outcomes of these new developments was almost a symbolic event that concluded the 1990s and the twentieth century: Ruka's photographs from *My Country People* series were showcased in the pavilion of Latvia at the Venice art biennial in 1999. This exhibition, curated by Demakova, also featured pieces by two other artists, Anita Zabiļevska (b. 1963) and Ojārs Pētersons, but the inclusion of works by Ruka was a crucial turning point for the history of Latvian photography. For the first time in Latvia, photography was elevated to the level of high art on such a scale. In addition, it was work by a woman photographer, itself a sign of profound changes in the male-dominated field of Latvian photography.

Ruka's success inspired other women photographers, especially the ones whose earlier achievements had been overlooked or neglected before. Several photographers revisited their archives and published or exhibited images made in the 1960s and 1970s that gained a new meaning and value in the 1990s. For example, the unpretentiously named exhibition, *Black and White*, in the Čiris Art Gallery in Riga (1999) was the first solo show of artist and photographer Zenta Dzividzinska (1944–2011) since the 1960s. In the mid-1960s she was one of the very few women photographers affiliated with the Photo Club *Rīga*. Notably, she was also one of the very few photographers of her generation who was a professional artist—Dzividzinska graduated from the Riga School of Applied Arts in 1966, where Gunārs Binde had started to teach photography. At that time, most other members of the club had no formal training in the fine arts.

Especially significant among Dzividzinska's early work was the *Riga Pantomime* series (1964–1965). Pantomime was popular among the young generation of the 1960s across the world, and many photographers and artists have tried to capture or interpret this art form in their own works. Let us just remember the most iconic example, the final scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966) where the photographer's pursuit of the knowledge of facts is mocked by mimes playing tennis with an invisible ball. Furthermore, the silent art of pantomime held a special meaning in the youth culture under the Soviet regime because it allowed to express feelings and thoughts without words in circumstances

where words could be dangerous. The black and white makeup and costumes of the mimes as well as their exaggerated facial expressions and postures were extremely suitable for capturing dramatic *mise-en-scènes* such as in *Two* from the *Riga Pantomime* series (1964–1965). By further increasing the already high contrast of the image as well as emphasizing the graininess of the print, the artist has created her own subjective, artistic interpretation of the performance. Dzividzinska's works from this series most perfectly embodied the spirit of the time.

However, regardless of the success of *Two* and few other works in the 1960s, between 1969 and 1999 Dzividzinska gradually distanced herself from the “art world” of photography and focused on her work as a graphic designer. As a result, by the 1990s, her name was completely unknown to the new generation of photographers as well as art historians, critics, and curators. Art historian and curator Inga Šteimane was the first to turn attention to the work of the Photo Club *Rīga* during the Soviet years and begun to conduct archival research at the club. She noticed Dzividzinska's works and encouraged the artist to organize an exhibition. Working together with Šteimane, Dzividzinska exhibited a selection of previously unpublished photographs taken between 1965 and 1969. The images in this show were new prints, dramatically enlarged from the 35mm negatives to the size of circa 120 x 90 cm. This manner of presentation appeared shocking to many because it challenged both the idea about “old” photographs that were expected to be exhibited as small vintage prints, delicate and behind a glass as well as the then dominant idea about fine art prints as numbered editions on archival paper not exceeding the optimum size of 30 x 40 cm or so (as in the practice of most new wave photographers).

The subjects of these images appeared no less shocking—typically, they were snapshots of heavy, often seminude women and small children going about their daily summertime routine in country home settings. This approach was an antithesis to the aestheticized, idealized, and eroticized images of women that the predominant cohort of male photographers had been constructing until then. As Šteimane rightly observed, women in different degrees of undress in these images were not presented as sources of visual pleasure for a male spectator, as expected, but rather as self-contained individuals engaged in their activities and chores, not concerned about pleasing anybody with their looks. Dzividzinska had made

those images as creative exercises and as a form of private diary of her visits to her parents' house in the country. The casual images of her ageing parents as well as her relatives and their small children were not intended to be shown publicly at the time of their making. For the photographic art exhibitions of the time, Dzividzinska made more sophisticated and polished prints like *Two*. Before 1999, it would be unthinkable for private diary snapshots to appear in public in Latvia. But even after their public debut, those images turned out to be too daring and idiosyncratic for the local "art world" of photography, and Dzividzinska's legacy remains largely unexplored.

Another discovery was made in the vast archives of photographer Māra Brašmane (b. 1944), notable portraitist and professional museum photographer, at the Rundāle Castle Museum (1973–1984) and the Latvian National Museum of Art (1984–2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, before and parallel to her professional museum photographer's career, Brašmane took photographs of Riga and its inhabitants, especially a circle of friends and acquaintances—artists, poets, and other creative types that comprised the alternative culture scene of Riga. Her views of Riga are intimate and casual, unlike the image of the city on postcards or in official newspaper photographs from that time. Most of these images had neither been published nor exhibited at the time of their making because photographic art exhibitions were not yet open to that kind of photographic language.

As Svede recounts, "Māra Brašmane believed she was working in the genteel tradition of urban photographers like Brassai when she created the work *Cabbages* in the mid-1960s. A well-stocked shop window, picturesquely unkempt but precisely framed, and understated sense of the surrounding context: this is a benign depiction of city life – comfortable, peaceful, abundant, and so on. But *Cabbages* was barred from exhibition because the censor suspected that, within the image, the presence of a hat that had fallen behind the produce indicated that Brašmane was making a subliminal linkage between heads of cabbage and "cabbageheads", or simpletons. That a nonpatriotic viewer might extrapolate a political message from all this was wholly insupportable."¹⁵ Her early documentary work was first inserted in the art context in 2001 when her photographs were noticed by curator Inese Baranovska. This interest resulted in her solo exhibition, *The City of My Youth* (Riga, 2002), and an eponymous album (Riga:

Neputns, 2005) which sold out almost immediately. Partly a private diary, partly a collection of images to be shared only with her closest friends, Brašmane's archive in the 2000s became the key visual resource about Riga in the 1960s and 1970s.

The initial impulse for these archival discoveries of the late 1990s and early 2000s again came from the West, in this case from the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union. At the heart of the Dodge Collection lies the idea about “nonconformist”—unofficial, alternative, underground—art scene that existed beneath the visible, official art establishment of the Soviet era.¹⁶ Key figure was a Latvian-American art historian, Mark Allen Svede, who traveled to Riga on a regular basis to do research as well as purchase works for this collection. Svede's visits urged many artists and photographers to revisit their own archives. Something that they had forgotten or deemed worthless suddenly was desired by a collector in the U.S. Svede's rigorous research and numerous publications about Latvian art and photography contributed to the emergence of a whole new trend in the local art scene, when the curators and art historians engaged in a quest for all kinds of “non-conformist,” “alternative” and “unofficial” art in an attempt to make visible the oppressed art of the Soviet time. Although this process has been highly beneficial for the history of art and photography in Latvia, it has also left a few negative side effects, which we need to address in our future work. While constantly looking for the signs of “non-conformism,” all kinds of “otherness” and everything “alternative,” we have forgotten to define what actually made up the “mainstream” of photographic art of the time.

Institutions and collaborative networks have been highly influential in the field of photography. Behind every “great” photographer are their teachers and peers, institutions that exhibit and publish their images, and professionals such as critics and curators who popularize, condemn or ignore their work. Unfortunately, most of this remains invisible when we encounter a framed print on a museum or gallery wall. One of the tasks of art history is shedding of light on the inner workings of the “art world”—on those mechanisms, processes, and people who make the “great” artists so great. Better understanding of these mechanisms will help us recognize and value all that has been unique to the Latvian photographic art in each respective historical moment.

References

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- ³ *Tīfentāle A. The Photograph as Art in Latvia = Fotogrāfija kā māksla Latvijā. 1960–1969.* – Rīga: Neputns, 2011.
- ⁴ *Milhailovsky's Evening*, for example, was exhibited in the Thirtieth International São Paulo Photographic Art Salon, organized by FCCB in 1973. See: *30º Salão Internacional de Arte Fotográfica de São Paulo.* – São Paulo: Foto-Cine Clube Bandeirante, 1973.
- ⁵ *Anson, E. Latvijas Nacionālā mākslas muzeja izstāžu apmeklētāju rekordi 100 gadus.* [Report "Visitor Records during hundred years of the Latvian National Museum of Art", read at the LNMM centenary conference in 2005] See also: *Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs. Izstāžu hronika. 1905–2005 / Sast. I. Bužinska, V. Knāviņa, S. Krieviņa, M. Lāce, E. Šmite, I. Zelča-Sīmansone.* – Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, 2008.
- ⁶ See, for example, *Photostroika: New Soviet Photography.* – New York: Aperture, 1989.
- ⁷ *Slava L. Andrejs Grants. Fotogrāfijas = Photographs.* – Rīga: Neputns, 2002. – p. 6.
- ⁸ *Demakova H. Robežpārkāpēji jeb daži teorētiski pārspriedumi un vēsturiski fakti par Latvijas netradicionālo mākslu = Trespassers or Some Theoretical Discussions and Historical Facts about Latvia's Non-traditional Art // Zoom Faktors.* – Rīga: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1994. – p. 16.
- ⁹ *Demakova H. "Let's have a picture taken. When you're dead I'll have something to look at." // Inta Ruka. My Country People.* – Rīga: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1999. – p. 22.
- ¹⁰ *Svede M. A. On the Verge of Snapping. Latvian Nonconformist Artists and Photography // Beyond Memory. Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art.* – New Brunswick and London: Zimmerli Art Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2004. – p. 243.
- ¹¹ *Grants A. Gvido Kajons // Avots.* – 1987. – No. 1. – p. 53.
- ¹² *Kļaviņš, E. The Story of Inta Ruka // Stories, Storytellers / H. Demakova, ed.* – Riga: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1999. – p. 13.
- ¹³ *Changing Reality: Recent Soviet Photography / L. Bendavid-Val, ed.* – Virginia: Starwood Publishing in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1991. – pp. 22, 23.
- ¹⁴ *Foto–Annäherung an die Sowjetunion: ein fotografischer Dialog. Projekt der Fachhochschule Bielefeld.* – Hannover: Fackelträger, 1989.
- ¹⁵ *Svede, M. A. "On the Verge of Snapping. Latvian Nonconformist Artists and Photography."* – p. 247.
- ¹⁶ Since the owners' donation in 1991, it is housed in the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.