

## Photographic Research in Lithuania: Between Reflection and Restoration

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The discourse of Lithuanian photography is being 'pumped up' so strenuously, with a great number of theoretical works and albums appearing lately, that there is a fear that it will explode! Just joking; it is not going to explode, but it requires some effort to get acquainted with at least part of this discourse. It seems that researchers of Lithuanian photography are trying to make up for the long Soviet period, when photography had to prove that it was an art form deserving special study.

I will focus on four substantial works that have appeared in the last several years. These works provide a kind of frame for the research on Lithuanian photography, both in the historical (covering the Soviet period and the present, i.e. the processes that took place after the regaining of independence in 1990), and methodological respects (different viewpoints are offered).

The top place on the list is occupied by the book *The Aesthetics of Boredom in Lithuanian Photography*, by a photographic researcher of the middle generation, Agnė Narušytė, and published in 2008.<sup>1</sup> This book

is one of the most successful attempts in independent Lithuania to introduce a certain generation or group of photographers (artists) with a specific world outlook and aesthetic ideology in regard to the discourse of art history and theory. The book is also important in that it draws a clear historical and ideological boundary between the classical or humanistic school of photography of Lithuania (Lithuanian SSR) (LSF), covering the period from 1969, when the Photographic Society of the Lithuanian SSR was established, to the middle of the 1980s, and a new generation of photographers with a different way of thinking and vision of the world. Narušytė unites the work of some photographers who made their debut in the 1980s under the concept of the *aesthetics of boredom* (or *social landscape*), having a certain nihilistic undertone. Certainly, this concept covers a large variety of controversial phenomena of the late Soviet period, as well as a wide emotional range, but the researcher consciously brings it together under the symbolic epithet of boredom.<sup>2</sup>

Through a comparison with the nucleus of the classical LSF, Narušytė suggestively describes the formation of the qualitatively new photographic tradition, which seems to deconstruct the humanistic principles

1 A. Narušytė, Nuobodulio estetika Lietuvos fotografijoje. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2008. Published also in English: A. Narušytė, *The Aesthetics of Boredom: Lithuanian Photography 1980–1990*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2010.

2 The fact that this epithet took root is also proved by a thesis recently submitted in another professional field, history (T. Vaiseta, Nuobodulio visuomenė: vėlyvojo sovietmečio Lietuva (1964–1984) [The society of boredom: Lithuania in the late Soviet period (1964–1984)]. PhD thesis. Vilnius, 2012), in which the Soviet period from 1964 to 1984 is also defined by the concept of *boredom*.

of the LSF, and takes quite a different direction (sometimes approaching conceptualism), its high period being the main representatives of the aesthetics of boredom, and the basic features of aesthetic ideology. The book is tastefully and aptly illustrated, creating a contextual precedent for a unique phenomenon in Lithuanian photography, against the socio-political and socio-cultural background of the late Soviet period.

I will also discuss three books on photography that have appeared quite recently in the framework of the same project. The first is *The Person in Lithuanian Photography. Changing Attitudes at the Turn of the 21st Century*, by a photographic researcher of the young generation, Tomas Pabedinskas.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of the book is contemporary Lithuanian photography. Like Narušytė, Pabedinskas chooses the classical context of the Lithuanian (Soviet) school of photography as the background of the book, particularly emphasising the *most typical* features of *humanism* in the representatives of this school. Against this background, he places the characters that he is most interested in: the work of several photographers of the youngest generation, who made their debut in the early 21st century. He refers to the relation of the human image with identity change, and tries to show how radically the young artists departed from the LSF and its world outlook. Placing in opposition the humanistic (classical) LSF and the contemporary – social – tradition in photography, Pabedinskas demonstrates how thoroughly in the last decade the humanistic origin has been deconstructed into a great many social constructs, in which fixed meanings and humanistic (national, cultural, sexual etc.) identity seem to disappear.

On the other hand, by giving too much attention to the clichés of humanism (of the LSF) and almost excluding the intermediate generation (called the generation of *the aesthetics of boredom* and analysed by Narušytė in her book), which was extremely important for Lithuanian photography, and consciously building a rather straightforward oppositional scheme, Pabedinskas unavoidably finds himself a captive of other – oppositional – clichés. In this way, he involuntarily creates the phenomenon of a certain group of young photographers as a ‘negative’ dependent on the clichés of the LSF (humanism vs. cynicism, ideologisation vs. de-ideologisation, identity vs. deconstruction, multifacetedness and assertion vs. negation, etc.).

Pabedinskas avoids analysing the ideological aspects of the Soviet period or contemporary social commission. If he had paid attention to these aspects, it would have become clear that in their work the young photographers, like the representatives of the classical LSF, often carry out a socio-ideological commission typical of their time, often without realising it, and are very similar in this respect.

In any case, Pabedinskas introduces relatively new names to the photographic discourse and suggestively reveals some features of the world outlook of contemporary young (and some older) Lithuanian photographers.

The second book is *Nihil obstat: Lithuanian Photography in the Soviet Period*, by a photographic researcher of the middle generation, Margarita Matulytė.<sup>4</sup> Matulytė’s monumental study is rich in facts and offers a wide panorama of Lithuanian photography of the Soviet period and its collisions.

3 T. Pabedinskas, *Žmogus Lietuvos fotografijoje. Požiūrių kaita XX ir XXI a. sandūroje*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2010.

4 M. Matulytė, *Nihil obstat: Lietuvos fotografija sovietmečiu*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2011.

The structure of the book is contextual with regard to the exposition of thought and the presentation of iconographic material, and is composed according to the principle of contextual socio-ideological and socio-aesthetic invasions, rather than a one-directional curve, and the sum of these invasions constitutes a historically and politically conditioned history of Lithuanian photography. The researcher presents a wide ideological context (of photography) of the Soviet period, with digressions into the development of photography in inter-war independent Lithuania, which was brutally stopped, and the already mentioned generation of *the aesthetics of boredom* of the 1980s, i.e. the late Soviet period.

On the other hand, there are some problematic aspects in the methodological guidelines of the book. In Lithuania, the constructions of art history are quite often built on the rather simplistic model of the aesthetics of the mythical or imaginable West, which supposedly was the sole guiding light for photographers (or artists) in the Soviet period and constitutes part of the phenomenon of 'inner resistance'. However, though the image of the Western world was undoubtedly important, in Lithuanian art research of the last twenty years (as in the book under discussion) this aspect is often deliberately overemphasised. Analogues are sought in Western photography or art at all costs, but very little or no interest is taken in the parallel processes of the ideologisation of photography which were taking place in the countries of the Eastern bloc, let alone the context of the republics of the SSSR (of course, in this case, this was determined by objective circumstances: the language barrier). It seems that when speaking about the Soviet or even post-Soviet period, we absolutise and turn into universal methodological facts what we wished to be (*have*

*been*), instead of trying to find out *what* and *how it really was*. Actually, it should be said that Matulytė does present some fragmentary data on the photographic processes in the neighbouring Baltic republics, Russia and some Eastern European countries, but these are exceptions rather than the rule.

The book contains some facts that shed light on the cultural system (of photography) of Lithuania and even some revealing insights. However, the chapters of the book dedicated to the classical period of the LSF and concrete representatives of that school, particularly the 'father' of Lithuanian photographic art, Antanas Sutkus, arouse certain doubts. For some unknown reason, Matulytė's methodological system involves conscious manipulations. In other words, in morally problematic places (related to active careerist collaboration of the LSF, and particularly its 'patriarch' Sutkus with the Soviet system), Matulytė's contextual analysis turns into *historical relativism*. It seems as if the author of the book sometimes draws conclusions that are convenient for her (or for certain representatives of the LSF).

The concept of *alter-reality* as an alternative reality to Soviet ideology in the photography of the LSF, devised by Matulytė and binding the book together, also provokes some doubts. It is not clear if it describes a phenomenon that really existed in the Soviet period, or is merely, to use the terms of psychoanalysis, an attempt to rationalise one of the *idéés fixes* that got into our heads after the regaining of independence in 1990.

Thus, Matulytė's book is comprehensive, contextual and rich in factual and iconographic material, but it is somewhat impaired by the insertions of historical and ideological relativism.

The third book is *The Society of Photographic Art of the LSSR: A Network of Image Production*, by a representative of the

young generation, Vytautas Michelkevičius.<sup>5</sup> Michelkevičius chooses the activity of the Photographic Society of the Lithuanian SSR<sup>6</sup> (from 1969 to the collapse of the Soviet system) as the object of his research. It should be noted that, like Narušytė and Matulytė, he also explores the Soviet period but, unlike his colleagues, rejects the model of 'inner resistance'.<sup>7</sup>

Michelkevičius analyses the Photographic Society as the disposition of the medium: 'a network connecting the discourse, institution, and various regulatory rules and stipulations' (p. 28), where the characters are not only individuals, but also objects and phenomena. The Photographic Society is regarded as a certain character in the system of the (Soviet) network of interactions, performing certain (self-)legitimising actions or roles. In this case, the author relies not on the psychological analysis of the intentions or imaginings of separate individuals, but on a scheme of institutional

totality, in which the system 'knows what happened and how, and what is going to happen and how'. This methodological approach does not distinguish the categories of 'aesthetic value' or 'psychologism' in the general socio-ideological power network as privileged, and thus the processes of the institutionalisation of the Photographic Society of the LSSR, the building of its own discourse or, simply speaking, integration in the network of the Soviet system, are shown.

However, in one chapter Michelkevičius does try to discuss the rhetoric of aesthetic-psychological 'resistance' (as if apologising for his quite insolent method of dissecting the LPS). In this chapter, the tempo and rhythm of the book get slightly out of sync but, fortunately, this does not have any impact on the general structure. Thus the book is important in that it is one of the first attempts to *de-idealise* and *de-mythologise* the phenomenon of the Lithuanian Photographic Society (in contrast to the attempts of Narušytė and Matulytė to *re-idealise* and *re-mythologise* certain generations and groups of photographers), and to take a more sensible look at it.

The book is interesting in its presentation of iconographic material. The cover unfolds into a 'map' of Lithuanian photography and a scheme of the most common features of photographic humanism. Michelkevičius also composes the book according to the principle of three 'exhibitions' of visual material. The right side of the book is meant for looking, and the left one for reading. The first 'exhibition' consists of archival photographs from the daily life and activities of the Photographic Society, and the second part presents posters from the period under discussion, introducing the aesthetics of the spread of photography. The third part is comprised of the photographs published in

5 V. Michelkevičius, *LTSR fotografijos meno draugija – vaizdų gamybos tinklas*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2011.

6 Interestingly, in different stages of the preparation of the book, various 'specialists' kept trying to eliminate the letters LSSR. Michelkevičius had to fight to keep these letters in the title of the book. The funniest aspect was that the presented arguments did not concern any 'methodologies' or new rules of language usage, but had to do with the fact that all representatives of the Photographic Society potentially practised 'inner resistance' during the Soviet period. Why should we bring all that back from oblivion and impose all these LSSRs and similar things of the past?

7 In the books by both Agnė Narušytė and Margarita Matulytė, some generations (groups) of photographers from the Soviet period, despite all their methodological differences and certain concessions, are presented in the light of 'inner resistance' to the Soviet system. Though this key motif of the formation of the image of artists and photographers in the Soviet period is partially correct, it is often turned into the one and only universal. This view was typical of Lithuanian art research in the 1990s and most of the 2000s. The views on art, photography and culture of the Soviet period of younger art critics (and/or historians) who have started their career in recent years is generally becoming more ambivalent and is less connected with moral imperatives, as the direct relation to the Soviet period and its artists is becoming weaker, or may even be absent for some of them.

the almanac *Lithuanian Photography*, which was one of the key publications representing Lithuanian photography in the Soviet period.

In terms of the formal aspects of the book, the impact of the discourse of photographic art, as broadcast and controlled by the Photographic Society of the Lithuanian SSR, on mass consciousness (implied by the author) still seems somewhat doubtful. It naturally raises questions about press photography, which was more suggestive in this respect and probably had a strong influence on both the genesis of the LPS and on TV, which gained increasingly more importance over time. These aspects are hardly addressed in the book, and thus one gets the impression that the role of the Photographic Society of the LSSR in the system of Soviet Lithuania is somewhat overemphasised.

It appears that a forceful wave of a (culture) renaissance of the Soviet period has recently been on the rise in Lithuania, in which two approaches seem to be taking shape. The first approach can be symbolically called *reflective*, and comprises attempts to dissect the Soviet period with unbiased instruments. The second approach is *restorationist* or *discursive re-Sovietisation*, concealed under the same 'methodology of unbiased dissection' and trying to implant the ideas of 'recharging the matrix', blotting out and confusing the ethical aspects, in other words, *historical* and *political relativism*. The contemporary discourse of art (including photography) research in Lithuania seems to be gradually splitting into these two approaches, which are struggling over the legitimisation of different conceptions of historical memory.