Vitality and Change in Lithuanian Photography

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Vitality and Change in Lithuanian Photography

Brothers Cerniauskai
Aleksandras Macijauskas
Sniguole Michelkeviciute
Romualdas Pozerskis
Romualdas Rakauskas
Vaclovas Straukas
Antanus Sutkus
Vytautas Ylevicius

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Front Cover: Untitled, ATLAIDAI/Lithuanian Pilgrimages series, Romualdas Pozerskis
On Lithuanian Photography, A Historical Event
by Algimantas Kezys

Lithuanian photography began in the year 1854 when the daguerreotype specialist Rubenstein from Warsaw, setting up his studio on Vokieciu Street. By 1863 several studios were operating in the city of Vilnius, including that of Sveikovskis, known for his portraits and scenes of the city of Vilnius. Abdonas Lorzunas’ atelier was closed by order of the Russian General N.M. Muraviov for producing documentary portraits of the freedom fighters who fought in the 1863 uprising against the Russian occupation of Lithuania. The portraits found in his studio were destroyed, and Lorzunas was deported. By end of the 19th century, more and more studio photographers started moving outdoors, photographing the Lithuanian landscapes and cityscapes. J. Cechovicius was the first to mass-produce and commercially distribute photographs of the city of Vilnius, while S. Feris is credited with pioneering the social photography of the city marketplaces.

At the beginning of the 20th century and especially after World War I, the photographic activity in Lithuania gained stature and prestige. In 1933 the Society of Amateur Photographers (Lietuvos Foto Megeju Sajunga) was founded. During the short period between the two World Wars, when Lithuania enjoyed independence from Russia, there were feverish developments in photography, both artistic and commercial. A number of devoted practitioners emerged as artists documenting the life and sites of the newborn state. This group included:

Janas Bulhakas (1876-1950), poet, painter, writer and publisher of booklets on photography, was an avid photographer, noted for producing sensitive scenes of the city of Vilnius and the lakes of Narutis. During his lifetime Bulhakas made some 100,000 photographs of Vilnius and Lithuania. His works were used in many magazines and publications. Bulhakas is credited with being one of the first teachers of fine art photography on the European continent. From 1921 to 1939 he taught artistic photography at the University of Vilnius, published a number of volumes of his photographic work and wrote several books on the history and theory of art photography in Polish. In 1922 a collection of his photographs of Vilnius was published in a Lithuanian edition. During the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania (1940-41), Bulhakas’ studio and archives were nationalized. His collections were destroyed by fire during the second Russian advance into Vilnius in July 1944. After World War II Bulhakas settled in Poland where he died in 1950.

Balys Buracas (1897-1972), a high school teacher and an ethnographic enthusiast, devoted his spare time to travelling across Lithuania photographing the countryside people, their artifacts, architectural sites and folk art works. His output totals over 11,000 photographic plates and negatives. For his photographic contribution, Buracas was awarded a gold medal in the Paris International Exposition in 1937. Buracas is considered by some to be the prototype for a Lithuanian photographic tradition. This tradition consists, to a large extent, in the documentation of authentic ethnographic subjects — the country people, their hand-built primitive architecture, ancient cos-
tumes and artifacts. In 1921 a volume of 160 reproductions of Buracas' photographs was published in Vilnius. The stature of this photographic collection of ethnic persuasion has now been recognized by experts. Its influence has gained importance, especially among those interested in developing the concept of a genuine and distinctive school of Lithuanian photography.

Vytautas Augustinas (b. 1912), photojournalist and art photographer, filled the pages of the magazines and newspapers published in Lithuania before World War II. Besides photographing the beautiful landscapes and monuments of historic and architectural importance, Augustinas was a sought-after photographer to document events of cultural and social life, as well as official state functions of independent Lithuania. He published a selection of his photographs in a volume entitled *Lithuania*, which came out in the United States as a second edition in 1955.

Kazys Daugela (b. 1912), an engineer and teacher, became an art photographer documenting life around him in the pre-war Lithuania. After the war, as a refugee, he produced a memorable series about the plight of the Lithuanian Displaced Persons in camps in West Germany. An impressive volume of his photographs, *Isėviai is Lietuvos* (refugees from Lithuania), featuring the life of the refugees in post-war Germany, was published in 1992 in Vilnius. Now a resident of the United States, Daugela continues photographing his countrymen here as well as other subjects worthy of his artistic eye, with a view towards participating in photographic contests and exhibits.

After World War II, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union for the second time, photographic activity in Lithuania was notably diminished. The artistic output was non-existent for more than a decade. The photography produced under supervision of the State was stale, artificial and consciously embellished to project the “bright” side of life under communism. It was years later that these dire conditions were lightened, and the freedom of expression, to some degree, restored.

In 1958, the first exhibition by photojournalists was organized in Vilnius. Prizes for best pictures were awarded, and first prize went to V. Stanionis from the town of Alytus. After the initial success, it became clear that some kind of association for working photographers would be needed to promote artistic expression. The photographers' section was established within the framework of the Association of Journalists. In 1959, another exhibition of photographs was curated and a catalog was published, the first photographic publication since the end of the war. A group show representing the best artist photography in Lithuania was subsequently sent abroad, visiting Prague, Bucharest, Berlin and Paris. Soon afterwards the National Committee of Photographers, with local chapters in the provinces, was established within the Association of Journalists. There followed annual and semiannual shows, in which names of individual photographers began to emerge. L. Ruikas, R. Rakauskas, M. Baranauskas, A. Sutkus, and I. Vaicekauskas became torchbearers of artistic photography.
in Lithuania at that time. A number of local photographers took part in these shows who were not members of the Association of Journalists, creating the impetus to form an independent chapter of artist-photographers, which was first organized in Kaunas in 1966. It was spearheaded by V. Jasinevicius, under whose leadership the Kaunas group organized a show and published a catalog. In this publication, the novel view of photography as an art form was stressed (this was about the same time as when the question of photography versus art was debated in the United States.) Rationalizing that photography was, after all, a legitimate form of artistic expression allowing the photographer to express on film his views and emotions in a subjective manner, the new group of independent photographers in Lithuania took a bolder stance against the imposed and stale documentation promoted by the officialdom. Among these bold pioneers, we find the names of soon-to-become masters of Lithuanian photography: A. Macijauskas, V. Butyrinas and V. Luckus.

The first solo exhibitions also came into being in Kaunas. These shows did a lot to promote the notion that photographs were being respected as works of fine art. The Kaunas group gave shows to out-of-state photographers, including those from Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and Warsaw. It also started organizing annual exhibitions by the photographers from the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), which eventually became traditional events called The Amber Country, exhibitions that are continued to this day.

In 1968 the photographers of Vilnius joined the Kaunas group’s venture by producing a memorable show of the four best known artists — R. Rakauskas and V. Naujikas from Kaunas, and A. Sutkus and A. Kuncius from Vilnius. This show was accepted for exhibition at the Lithuanian Art Museum in Vilnius meaning that photographs were finally accepted by the officials as works of art. The doors were opened for a wider international exchange — Lithuanian photography exhibitions went to Canada, Argentina, France, Holland, Belgium and Poland, as well as in the republics of the former Soviet Union.

Local talent in the provinces followed suit. The Photography Club of Siauliai (established in 1966) became very active and innovative. It started organizing "Photo Weeks" which were conventions with a wide ranging agenda of talks by experts, shows, and press conferences. The prime mover of this activity was A. Dilyis, a photographer and an avid collector of photographic memorabilia. He started gathering old pieces of photographic equipment, long forgotten photographs, no longer needed publications, and other "garbage," storing it all at his house until there was no more room left for living quarters. In 1969 the collection took on the name of museum and became, in 1976, the first officially recognized national museum of photography in the former Soviet Union.
It must be noted again that most of this activity took place in the towns of the provinces, which takes us to the city of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The Vilnius group decided to test the strength of Lithuanian photography on a grand scale. In 1969 it produced a show by the nine best-known photographers (“9 Lietuvos fotografai”) and took it to Moscow. The press called it a “triumph.” The reviewers used the show to proclaim again and again the validity of photography as an art form, extolling some of the exhibited works as being “world class.” They pointed out the distinction between the thematic and the aesthetic aspects in the pictures, and that the “true spirit” of photographic art consisted in the perfect balance of the two. And there were voices announcing the establishment of the “Lithuanian Tradition” in this newly discovered art. The following photographers participated: A. Sutkus, A. Macijauskas, R. Rakauskas, A. Kuncius, M. Barnauskas, R. Ruikas, V. Butyrinas, V. Luckus and A. Miezauskas.

That same year, on the initiative taken by this group, the Cabinet of the Ministers of Lithuanian SSR adopted the resolution “Concerning the Establishment of the Lithuanian SSR Photography Art Society,” by which the Ministry of Culture was obligated to subsidize the activity of this society. A. Sutkus was chosen as its president. The administrative body at first consisted of three paid staff members, but later the number was increased. During the first four years of its existence, the society organized more than 100 exhibitions both locally and abroad. There were group and solo shows in Lithuania, and international exchange programs were expanded and well attended.

The existence of a State supported Society of Artistic Photography was not only a first, but it was also unique in the entire former Soviet Union and it accounts for the success the Lithuanian photographers have enjoyed both nationally and internationally. By 1978 the Society had 326 members and candidates. The Board of Directors consisted of 13 persons, and the executive branch employed 35 qualified members. The Society boasted of producing over 100 exhibitions annually. Over the years it brought home more than 450 national and international awards, medals and honorable mentions credited to its artists.

The political and social upheavals of the early 1990s brought substantial changes in the artistic communities in the entire former Soviet Union, including Lithuania. But the Society continues its existence despite the drastic changes from centralized to free market economy in the now independent Lithuania. The staff is temporarily reduced, as the membership does not feel the strong pull of the centralized management. The name has been changed to the “National Association of Lithuanian Photographers,” which at the present time is headed by the professional photographers Stasys Zvirgzdas and Vitalijus Butyrinas with headquarters in Vilnius. The exhibition of Lithuanian Master Photographers at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, IL, has been supplied in part by this association and by individual photographers.
The main participants in the exhibition are the following:

**Aleksandras Macijauskas** (b. 1938) studied philosophy and then worked in a machine-tool plant for many years before becoming a professional photographer. Since 1969 he has been winning awards not only in his native Lithuania, but also in other parts of Europe, including former Czechoslovakia (1969), former Yugoslavia (1973), France (1975), Switzerland (1978) and elsewhere. His works are in the collections of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; Musee Reattu, Arles, France; Musee d’Art et d’Histoire, Fribourg, Switzerland; and the University Art Museum of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, San Francisco Museum of Art, and the International Center of Photography, New York. His best known essays are “Lithuanian Village Markets,” “The Veterinary Clinic,” “Summer,” “Parades,” and “Footprints in the Seashore.” Selections from these series were published in a monograph, *My Lithuania* (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991).

Macijauskas is a keen documentarian of life around him. He developed a style of realism imbued with highly charged emotional and intellectual content. By using wide and superwide optics, Macijauskas was able to elevate mundane and otherwise conventional objects into the sphere of the surreal and the allegorical. He knows the people he is photographing, who in turn provide him with wonderful opportunities to bring out the best in their personalities and their way of life.

**Romualdas Pozerskis** (b. 1951) studied electrical engineering at Kaunas Polytechnical Institute, graduating in 1974.

Influenced by his photographer friends Virgilijus Sonta and Aleksandras Macijauskas, Pozerskis did not even start working as a professional engineer. He decided to become an art photographer during his last year as a student at the Polytechnical Institute, where in 1973 he had his first exhibition of photographs. Two years later, in 1975, he won an award at the Arle’s International Exhibition of photographs in France and was invited to have a one-person show at Arles the following year. Soon his works travelled to other countries, including Poland, East Germany, Italy and the United States, where he won awards and medals. His first book of photographs, *Atlaidai/Lithuanian Pilgrimage*, was published by Loyola University Press in Chicago in 1990.

Pozerskis won early acclaim for the series he did on motorcycle cross-country races, entitled “Victories and Defeats.” His later projects included “Old Towns of Lithuania,” “Gardens of Memory” (about old Lithuanian cemeteries), and cycles depicting the ill and confined. Pozerskis stays close to that of his teacher and mentor Aleksandras Macijauskas. Both being realists in their approach to photography, they never deviated to abstraction or manipulation of the real except for their dexterity in capturing the “decisive” moment which condenses into a nutshell the various vicissitudes of life and play. Pozerskis is interested in people, especially in their unguarded moments which he hunts with precision and the human touch.
Antanas Sutkus (b. 1939) became a full-time photographer in 1958. From 1960 to 1962 he worked as a reporter for Literatura ir Menas (Literature and Art) and from 1962 to 1969 for Tarbybine Moteris (Soviet Woman). Sutkus was an independent photographer with a studio in Vilnius, and was one of the most active members of the Photography Art Society of Lithuania. From 1969 to 1974 he acted as the president of the organizing committee; from 1974 to 1980 he was a member of the board; and from 1980 to 1990 he served as president. He is the recipient of over 60 awards and medals both in Lithuania and abroad. He is the author of at least 15 volumes of his photographs, including books about the landscape of his native land; the city of Vilnius, its capital; and the people of Lithuania. Sutkus has explored the rivers, lakes, woods, sand dunes, towns and seashores of Lithuania both on foot and from the air. The unabashed beauty of the country is his main source of energy and sustained inspiration. The portraits of the people of this land come hand-in-hand with the pictures of the places in which they live. If one would look for a single word to describe the character of Sutkus’ imagery, it would probably be the word “portraitist.” But the word should be understood as inclusive of both the portraits of people and, by analogy, the “portraits” of the land. They both come under the same heading forming one single unit in this photographer’s work.

Romualdas Rakauskas (b. 1941) studied journalism at the University of Vilnius and worked as an illustrator for Nemunas magazine, which is published in Vilnius. He co-authored several books of photography including Vilniaus siokiadientai (Weekdays in Vilnius) (1965) for which he won a prize from the Association of Journalists in 1966; Sis Krastas vadinasi Lietuva (This Country is called Lithuania) (1970), and Tarybu Lietuva (Soviet Lithuania) (1976). In 1976 he published his own album Kaunas (The City of Kaunas).

Rakauskas won numerous prizes and awards at international exhibitions of photographs including the thematic shows “The Man and the Earth” (1973) and “The Man and Work” (1976) in Slupsk, Poland; a gold medal in “Human Interest ’73” (former Yugoslavia); silver medals in the exhibitions “The Amber Country 2” (Baltic States, 1971) and “The Golden Eye ’75” (former Yugoslavia); and other prizes in Berlin, Moscow, Zagreb, Paris and elsewhere. In 1976 Rakauskas was awarded the title of The Artist Photographer by the International Federation of Artists and Photographers (AFIAP) based in Paris.

Brothers Algimantas and Mindaugas Cerniauskai are co-authors of all their photographic work. They sign their pictures as “Broliai Cerniauskai” (Brothers Cerniauskai) skipping their first names. The elder, Mindaugas, was born in 1942 in Lithuania. In 1948 the family was deported to Igarka in Krasnojarska region. Algimantas was born there in 1953. After 10 years in exile the family tried to return home but was not allowed to live in Lithuania. They settled temporarily in Latvia and returned to their homeland illegally in 1958. Mindaugas took courses in the techniques of cinematography, graduating in 1965. Algimantas studied in the Vocational School of Vilnius specializing in photography. They both work as professional cinematographic techni-
Sorrow, Snieguole Michelkeviciute

Wayside Shrines, Vytautas Ylevidus

Vaclovas Straukas (b. 1923) came into prominence as a photographer late in his life. He studied the Lithuanian language and literature at Vilnius Pedagogical Institute. His artistic inclinations led him to be a singer and a soloist, winning awards in concerts and competitions. He joined a theatrical studio where he tried his luck in acting. He reached a point where he was under consideration to become a comical actor. Then he moved to a small provincial town where he worked as a teacher in different schools in Samogitia region. He tried his hand at writing verses, composing songs, reciting, and taking part in stage performances as he searched for his true self. When a mishap led to the loss of his voice, Straukas, the actor, singer and reciter finally turned to the camera. It was the camera that made Straukas speak again, disclosing his lyrical soul and romantic ideas about life. As a photographer he created a memorable series “The Last Bell” presenting the well dressed students on the last day in school. He also photographed Lithuanian landscapes and seascapes, concentrating on the region of Klaipeda, the seaport of Lithuania, where he lived. Soon followed exhibitions in foreign countries including former East Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, the United States and others. In 1971 Straukas was awarded a silver medal at the Baltic exhibition of photographs “Gintaro krastas 2” (The Amber Country 2).

Vytautas Ylevicius (b. 1930) studied environmental sciences at the University of Vilnius graduating in 1955. While conducting research on the rivers, lakes and swamps of Lithuania, Ylevicius began photographing the Lithuanian countryside. In 1971 he published his book Tėviesė (Homeland). He had numerous one-person shows, including those in Vilnius, Kaunas, Panevėžys (Lithuania), Erfurt (Germany), and Wrocław (Poland). In his exhibition “Buciuoju Lietuvos zeme” (I kiss the land of Lithuania) (1990), Ylevicius exhibited one hundred prints celebrating the glory of the land he loves. Currently he teaches photography at the Vilnius Pedagogical Institute.

Snieguole Michelkeviciute (b. 1953) studied electro-engineering at the Kaunas School of Technology, graduating in 1979, after which time she worked as an electrician at a local construction company. Since her student years, Michelkeviciute has been an avid photographer, taking pictures in her spare time and occasionally exhibiting them. She had her first one-person show in Kaunas in 1974. Between 1984 and 1994, her works were shown at international exhibitions in Moscow, Tartu (Estonia), Zelona Gora (Poland), Zaragoza (Spain), Riga (Latvia), and Prague (Czechoslovakia). In 1993, Michelkeviciute had a retrospective exhibition at the Photography Museum in Siauliai (Lithuania), showing 120 works. In 1994, she won first prize in the Soro Art Exhibition at the Modern Art Center in Vilnius for her series “Male Nudes: A Woman’s View.” Since 1992, Michelkeviciute has been employed by the Photographers’ Art Association of Lithuania as the director of its Photography Gallery in Kaunas.
Is there anything in Lithuanian photography that would make it, in some mysterious way, unique or distinguishable from the photographic expression found in other ethnic groups? Can one talk about Lithuanian photography as having a “tradition?” The honest answer would probably be no. The very universality of the medium and its presupposed preoccupation with the real, precludes speculation about claims for the uniqueness of one group of practitioners over another.

Although the body of work produced in Lithuania in the last century is considerable, it is still too early to talk about a coherent and time-tested set of stylistic standards which would delineate the contours of an ethnic tradition. Judging from the works presented in this exhibition, it would be more accurate to point out the elements of strength in Lithuanian photography rather than talk about the characteristics of its traditions.

This exhibition presents only one kind of photographic style practiced in contemporary Lithuania. The experimentalists, the abstractionists, and surrealists are not included. The show concentrates on the documentary, the human interest approach. The uniqueness of this style (if there is such a thing as uniqueness in documentation) lies in the area of subject matter rather than in the peculiarity of esthetics. The authors in this show are genuinely patriotic Lithuanians following in the footsteps of their predecessors — people like Jan Bulhakas or Jonas Buracas — who criss-cross the country photographing its cities, its lakes, the people and their everyday work. The fact that most of the working photographers in Lithuania today have had the misfortune of having been ostracized from the influences of the Western world for most of their active years as photographers also contributed to their immersion in photographing subjects close to their home. Their “backyard” mentality paid off. In their photographs there is the feeling of familiarity, the joy of discovery, the challenge of finding something new in the old and the familiar, the sense of urgency to preserve the passing moment as something precious and worth saving. One phrase that would best summarize the approach these photographers are using is probably this: They are in love with their own roots, and they treasure their own ethnicity which in their estimation is unique, holy and pure. This attitude embodies the feeling that includes romantic and uplifting overtones. In their works there is no trace of any kind of negativity. The conscious downgrading or malicious expose of the ugly and the evil is notably lacking even in the subjects that would allow and sometimes demand a different interpretation. The people of Lithuania are portrayed here as dignified in their sufferings, un conquered in their political defeats, conscious of their inner strength as members of the human race, struggling for survival and for decency in the harsh world in which they live.

Algimantas Kezys, the exhibit curator, was born in Lithuania. He came to the United States in 1950 to study and is a passionate photographer. He has exhibited his work at the Art Institute of Chicago and at a number of American and European museums. He operates a small gallery that represents Lithuanian artists worldwide.
Vitality in Lithuanian Photography

In the opening moments of Lithuanian expatriate Algirdas Landsbergis’ 1959 play, Five Posts in a Market Place, the commentator, a wise observer in a small, nameless country under totalitarian control, sets the scene. “It is our century,” he announces. “Recognize the rot and rust?” There they are, scar­ring the landscapes of battlefields near and far and corroding the world’s collective conscience. Rot and rust, war and genocide, and unparalleled social and environmental destruction. It is our century, and we cannot disown it. In a recent poem by Vilnius–born Czesław Milosz, the 20th century itself awakens, “as if from a heavy slumber/And asked, in stupefaction: ‘What was that?/How could we? A conjunction of planets?/Or spots on the sun’.”

Belief and disbelief charge through our era with equally persuasive claims. Ours is a time of pride, it is a time of shame. Faith and cynicism are not mutually exclusive. The photographs in this collection, so filled with confidence in humanity, also whisper, under their breath, of despair. Lithuanians must live with such contradictions. Theirs is an old country, with a history nearly as long as the millennium, yet it is also newborn — newly untethered, breathing independently, at last taking possession of its native talents. In the spring of 1990, Lithuania became politically independent, but for centuries its people had already exercised a stubborn, spiritual independence, an endurance linking Lithuanians on foreign soil and at home on the shores of the Baltic.

That spirit has become legendary — a deep internal resource as precious and radiant as the country’s rich lode of amber, as the photographs here attest. Few, if any, focus directly on the rot and rust, the wounds, weaknesses or wrongs. Rather, they celebrate beauty, life, the land, and faith in God and in the future. They exude an unwavering determination to seize this life and not let its very essence be stolen, even as its trappings are trounced by hostile forces. “Optimism means a way of life, not just jolly people,” asserts the photographer Aleksandras Macijauskas, accounting for the unabashed vitality in his pictures, as in the culture he represents.

These photographs focus on the fundamental loci of life — the home, the school, the place of exchange, the place of worship, the land. By concentrating on the basic, everyday rhythms of living (as opposed to glorifying the political superstratum that is supposed to dictate those rhythms), the images serve as valuable documents of Lithuanian self-determination and self-definition. That, in itself, gives such seemingly benign photographs a subversive cast. They defy the delusory optimism of socialist realism to favor instead the authentic humanism of the Lithuanian spirit — earthy, intimate, and steeped in tradition.

These images are bold declarations of presence and persistence. They embody, in the words of photography editor Leah Bendavid-Val, a deep faith in photography and an attempt “to replace political fiction with photographic fact.” Cutting through generations of foreign occupation and oppression to identify the basic currents of life has been a struggle for pho-
It has been a question of spiritual survival but on a more mundane level, it has also been a matter of learning to express oneself without a full range of options, due to the regime’s tight control over information and culture. One of the characters in Landsbergis’ play, a man formerly devoted to the gentle, traditional Lithuanian art of wood carving and now a revolutionary fighting to liberate his country, points out, “Look at our typewriter. We can write almost nothing with it anymore; it lacks the letters ‘m’ and ‘o.’ The same has happened to me, to all of us.”

Lithuanians have, at times, had to do without their entire language, as when the printing of books in Lithuanian was banned for 40 years during the intense Russification period of the late 19th century. Or from the time of Soviet annexation to just a few years ago, when the singing of the Lithuanian national anthem was prohibited. But there are always ways of communicating even forbidden thoughts, and the artists and writers of the former Soviet Union have struggled valiantly to overcome the crippling force of censorship. After a time, however, censorship often ceases to be only external. As the Lithuanian writer Tomas Venclava lamented of his compatriots in a 1979 letter, “Ultimately, people grew accustomed to everything: to obligatory parades, mandated friendships, a special language that was diametrically opposed to what they really meant to say ... No one knows if a culture preserved in this manner will be worth anything.”

That tension between rhetoric and leadership, promise and reality, canned hope and the real thing — where is it in these pictures? Perhaps in the Brothers Cerniauskai’s image of a lone dog on a stark field, an apt symbol of isolation and deprivation, scavenging for the means of survival. Perhaps in the photograph of masks for sale by Macijauskas; who, living under Soviet control, did not at times have to wear one? Maybe it is there, metaphorically, in Romualdas Pozerskis’ image of a pair of horses with two masters. Pushed, pulled and prodded in different directions, the horses remain stagnant. And it can easily be seen, subliminally, in the eyes of Antanus Sutkus’ young pioneer boy. In a frozen, melancholy moment, the boy becomes living proof of the genetic memory of pain, of oppressed generations trapped in glowing amber.

Lithuania has been trampled on, writer after writer reminds us. The country and its people have suffered, but their wounds lie beyond the frame of most of these pictures. Photography, with its clear, rectilinear boundaries, has always worked as an art of omission, and what is left out often becomes as important as what is put in. Those political functionaries methodically excised from Soviet history books are as important for having been eliminated as the others are for having remained. Purging someone from the picture is a frail but symbolically powerful way of denying them their place in history. The opposite also proves valid: being recorded photographically is akin to being inscribed in the book of time, of having a place, of being perpetually present. The portraits here are not just neutral observations, but positive affirmations.
This is what gives these photographs value, beyond their aesthetic interest. They are declarations as much as they are documents. They chronicle and they testify. They do not tell the whole story any more than Eugene Atget captured every nuance of Paris, August Sander preserved every face in Germany or Robert Frank spoke about all Americans. Absent here are any signs of Lithuania’s decimated Jewish community — an unsavory chapter of the country’s history left untold. Also missing are the marks of degradation that Soviet control wreaked upon the Lithuanian landscape. In this exhibition, we see no pollution, only the unsullied land, just as we are introduced only to Lithuania’s unsullied spirit, not its dark, dangerous side. We see Vytautas Vyčievičius’ monuments to faith and memory, the Brothers Cerniauskai’s homages to the integrity of the individual, and most vibrant of all, the marketplaces of Macijauskas. Punctuated by timeless postures and pitches, unadulterated by pristine packaging and generic labeling, this is where deals are made with the eyes and the hands, rather than receipts and invoices. This is a place of confrontation, choreographed by experience and character. These photographs bring us directly to the heart of a world where people dance atop the rot and rust of our century.

Leah Ollman
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Leah Ollman has a master’s degree in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She is currently writing art criticism for ArtNews and the San Diego edition of the Los Angeles Times. She recently curated “Camera as Weapon: Worker Photography Between the Wars,” a travelling exhibit organized for the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego.

Notes


5. Landsbergis, p.21.
