

Riga Photography Biennial 2016

RIGA, LATVIA

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It is always a visual and intellectual pleasure to visit Riga, with its art nouveau architecture on Albert Street, uniformed guards protecting the Freedom Monument, and lush parks that line the Daugava River as it loops through this romantic city. As Riga is the largest city in the Baltics, its arts and culture scene appears to be more advanced than most of its neighboring metropolises, yet there is still room for progress in certain fields—one of these being photography. As I revisited the unique city, I was greeted by one of Riga's leading curators, Inga Brūvere, who graciously guided me through cobblestone streets to visit particular venues of interest, such as her curation for the 2016 Riga Photography Biennial, *Restart*, and other satellite events. As we walked together through the city center by foot on a spring day, Brūvere explained that Latvian photography had previously been perceived more as a recording and archiving tool than a contemporary art form within the Baltic art scene—partially due to the fact that, according to Brūvere, Riga's photography departments, museums, and cultural institutions place emphasis on photography as a means to document history and our given era using nonfiction and factual modes of expression to reflect more digestible versions of reality.

Brūvere's group exhibition *Restart* was the foundation for the biennial, representing an international cluster of notable photographers who attempt to push the boundaries between and among art and photography while also incorporating media such as text, audio, and cyber networks. In her introductory text for the exhibition catalog, Aiga Dzalbe comments:

The main idea behind *Restart* can be described as a necessity to deepen the understanding of our world, by highlighting its dialectical connection with the past and the future. We can all but fantasize whether the future influences today, whilst attempting to guess what will be the shape of our future memories. Meanwhile, we can be certain that the past is not just a shadow of our "here and now" consciousness, even more so—memory's purpose is to help us orient ourselves in future situations.¹

The exhibition focused not only on how each artist can be viewed in terms of our current era, but on how the works presented relate to a larger continuum of time, space, and memory—one in which a shared consciousness connects diverse individuals across borders, regardless of nationality. *Restart* was not interested in photography as a vehicle for "universal truths" through straightforward documentation or mid-twentieth-century objectivity; rather, it attempted to present photography as a medium in which the unreal, dreamlike, and fantastical thrive and can be seen through one's singular frame of reference. Dzalbe quotes from Susan Sontag's 1977 essay "The Image World": "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality. . . . Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. . . . Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement."² Select photographers have instead opted to incorporate their memories and dreams to create pathways toward a more remarkable future. The exhibition was unconventional: visitors crossed paths with multiple examples that veered far from the norm of photographic expression, and there were multiple works that spoke to the phenomenon of post-internet art as well as sculptural and literary experimentation.

Restart occurred in one of Riga's most popular spaces: Rīgas Mākslas Telpa (Riga Art Space). The exhibition was not designed to display creations in a specified sequence; instead, its layout allowed visitors to move freely through the show in any direction, contributing to an amorphous, liberated atmosphere. All works maintained their own creative trajectory, and visitors were left to decide on their own which form of expression suited them and why. Brūvere forfeited the explanatory text that often accompanies works in a group show such as this one, believing that the imposition of superfluous explanations limits the critical space necessary for viewers to solidify independent conclusions.³

Photography is not only a tool for documentation but also a craft for exploring the imagination. Some works spearhead a movement toward expanding the medium so that future artists can follow through with their own ideas less influenced by the weight of the past. Such is the case with Argentinian-born Spanish artist Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), a nearly five-month scripted performance

on Instagram and Facebook comprised of 175 photographs, several of which were on view at Riga Art Space. In the performance, the artist pretended to move from a small town to a city, chase dreams of fame and fortune, inevitably go off track, run out of money, secure a sugar daddy, start doing drugs, get plastic surgery, become depressed, have a breakdown, and return to her parents' house in a cycle of exploitation and despair. The work uses the language of the internet to highlight the construction and performance of femininity and our perceptions of authenticity, both online and in "real life."

Another potent work was Meggy Rustamova's video *Invitation to the Voyage* (2014), which emphasizes the blurry space between fact and fiction by inserting oversized, yellow Post-it notes into video sequences to blot out or conceal parts of the frame such as a face or important visual component. This act of erasure pushes viewers to confront their assumptions about traditional narrative and shifts the focus to the unsaid—that which is obstructed from view or consideration. The camera moves from images of the artist's childhood, to her academic life, to romantic pursuits; observers should pay attention to what they might be projecting onto Rustamova's images, for she aspires to relieve us of forced or standardized perception.

Polish artists Agnieszka Polska and Witek Orski presented the video *Guns* (2014), based on a true story related to Warsaw's 1968 student protests in which the Polish government attempted to drill holes into historical guns archived in the city's Military Museum out of fear that students would obtain the guns and use them as weapons. The film is entrancing: the guns with holes slowly spin alone or with their counterparts on a split screen through intense, saturated filters. The drilled holes are magnified—their black holes can be viewed at close range. Visitors could make connections between our minuscule existence and a world that easily spins out of control.

Shanghai-based artist and curator Zane Mellupe takes photography in a different direction by sharing her way of "thinking in images," which explores the overlap between photography, art, and mixed media with a focus on image, object, and body. Her works are not confined to one medium; the viewer is delighted by the relationships exhibited. In a process she calls "graphics," the artist experiments with



Invitation to the Voyage (2014) by Meggy Rustomova; courtesy Riga Photography Biennial

encoding methods in which she inscribes conceptual meaning onto an image's name, causing the name either to survive or cease to exist depending on whether or not anyone else adopts the name in question. Other methods the artist uses in her work are "metamorphography," "matography," "relatography," "personography" and "distortionography" (all terms she coined). For instance, Mellupe uses objects like hammers, scissors, and other tools to illuminate nude figures that are directly printed upon them, a prime example of how the artist tests her own concepts to deconstruct the photographic medium.

Another notable contribution to *Restart* was Danila Tkachenko's *Restricted Areas* (2013–15), a series concerning technological progress and evolution. The photographs focus on deserted or abandoned locations that were once significant but are now forgotten utopias. Photographer Uldis Briedis exhibited an older series, *Riga–Vladivostok* (1975), which was taken during a six-month, one-way cycling tour from Riga to Vladivostok to search for Latvian descendants in the Russian Empire who migrated there only to discover broken promises and brutal treatment. Swedish artist Katinka Goldberg displayed the photographic collage *Bristningar* (*Rupture*) (2013–15), which focuses on the line between photography and sculpture using

fragmented body parts and three-dimensional objects, with the prevailing question in mind: How much can one take away from oneself without disappearing?

A number of peripheral exhibitions, lectures, presentations, and workshops took place parallel to *Restart* and over the course of the biennial's interim, accentuating both emerging and established Baltic and European photographers—with priority given to Latvian artists and photography as a multidisciplinary form. Curated by Maija Rudovska, the main symposium, *Image and Photography in the Post-Digital Era*, analyzed the role of the internet and technology on our lives and on the art and photography responding to these influences over the past twenty years. The difference between viewing an exhibition in person versus online was discussed, as well as how image aesthetics are manipulated, perceived, and disseminated during this formative digital era. How the image is preserved and protected in association with technological tools, platforms, and networks to produce a new visual aesthetic dependent on these communicative outlets was also investigated. The rapport between photography and post-internet art was highlighted at the symposium, as it is difficult to differentiate where one ends and another begins in the work of many contemporary artists. Two separate creative workshops were also co-organized by Maija Rudovska, Tuula Alajoki, and NoRoutineBooks (Vilma Samulionyte and Gytis Skudzinskas), exploring the division between public and private as well as sequencing and bookbinding, respectively.

Multiple solo exhibitions highlighted key photographers of both the Latvian and broader European art scenes, including Sarker Protick of Bangladesh, Baiba Rubine of Latvia, Stefan Sava of Romania, and Alexandra Navratil of Switzerland. In his Latvian Museum of Photography exhibition *What Remains*, Protick focused on his grandparents' journey through old age in a yearlong project where he visited them daily, using photography to communicate both with them and with future audiences when words fell short in expressing his emotions related to witnessing their deteriorating last days. In her exhibition *Abreaction* (2016) at Kuldiga Art House, Rubine used a digital camera, photomontage, and video footage to express her search for the deterioration of any perceived inner harmony, as well as the importance of silence when understanding the self. In his exhibition

at Galerija Alma, *The Falling of the Arches* (2016), Sava, a photographer, exhibited his 2015 video work of the same name and an accompanying installation. The displayed video essay incorporates Sava's textual essay, which was threaded into the video itself; it responds to a box of photographs acquired at a flea market in Berlin. Sava examines photographs from the position of someone who was not present at specific historical events—with an awareness persuading the viewer to discover new meanings that are often veiled.

With no shortage of exhibitions and public events to attend, the Latvian art scene was sure to be stimulated during the biennial. And if anyone desired more photography-focused happenings and critical discourse, there were simultaneous and overlapping events in association with Riga Photo Month 2016. In association with Riga's Photography Biennial, visitors could attend in-depth talks with artists such as Protick, Briedis, Margrieta Dreiblete, and Ivars Grāveļs. Creativity is condensed and temporally extreme in the Baltics, occurring in energetic waves, and collaboration happens quickly and organically—even when funding or resources are limited. Artists and curators from Riga possess the ambition and initiative to develop one of the best art scenes in the Baltics, but countries from surrounding regions (particularly Western Europe and the Nordic countries) should work harder to develop a more open-minded and liberated approach to artmaking and creative exchange that is not fiscally driven, reputation-based, or politically stifled. The Baltics would benefit at a more rapid pace if neighboring countries extended a helping hand with increased frequency—relieved of any expectation of reciprocity. To give (as an action in and of itself) has obvious merit.

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NOTES 1. Aiga Dzalbe, "Exhibition Restart," in *Riga Biennial 2016*, exh. cat., ed. Santa Mičule (Riga, Latvia: Jelgavas tipogrāfija, 2016), 14. 2. Susan Sontag, qtd. in *ibid.* 3. Inga Brūvere, conversation with the author, Riga, Latvia, May 19, 2016.