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VIKA EKSTA

FUNERAL RITE IN SLOBODA

“Around a dozen years ago, my aunt Zoņa passed away. At the time, I had recently started taking photos. I was infatuated with the great photographers of the Magnum photo agency – mostly men of French, Jewish, and Anglo-Saxon origin – who created photographic stories under the agency's aegis, which was established in 1947, documenting life and conflicts across the world. Magnum photographers arrived at the scene as neutral observers to capture the dramas of others through their lenses, then returned to Paris, where they analysed the collected shots, looking for the most successful compositions. I was consumed by the idea that my mission was likewise to document life as objectively as possible. Armed with a 35mm camera and a few rolls of black-and-white Ilford film, I attended the funeral, thinking about how Cartier-Bresson might have seen it.

It was freezing, there was snow on the ground, and the farmstead where Zoņa had lived could not be reached by car. The priest and people who wanted to pay their respects arrived at the farmstead. Then the coffin and all the funeral wreaths were brought outdoors. The procession started its journey to the graveyard. To deliver the coffin, it was first carried by hand, then placed on a sledge drawn by a horse. Having covered the more remote part of the journey in this manner, the procession arrived at a place reachable by car, where a minivan was already waiting. The coffin was lifted into the van and brought to the graveyard. This was followed by the traditional Catholic funeral rite, which included the reading of prayers, the singing of psalms, the recitation of the last words, the digging of the grave, the covering of the coffin with soil, the laying of flowers and wreaths on the fresh grave, and a group photo of the relatives. A symbolic funeral meal took place in the car park next to the graveyard, where the departed was remembered by eating pasties and drinking a glass of spirits.

The enumeration of activities constituting the funeral rite has the air of dry anthropological research, analysing the actions performed by people in a specific culture to bid farewell to the departed and to bring order to the world in which those who remain will continue to live. Now it seems that participation in Zoņa's funeral while assuming the cold, analytic gaze of a neutral observer instead of the role of an involved relative was my way of rising above the gloom and temporarily pushing away the grief. And, despite having no office in Paris, I decided that I could print these photographs right here at the photo laboratory RTJN ANNAS 2.”

On view until July 18th

Vika Eksta works with autobiographical narrative and existential subjects, as well as research of life in the Latvian countryside. Vika works in photography, video, performance for camera and audio-visual archive research. Vika is the recipient of 'ADC Young Guns', 'FK Portfolio', and the 'Seeking the Latest in Photography!' Award at the first Riga Photography Biennial. Her works are in the collections of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Latvian Museum of Photography, 'VV Foundation', and 'SEB Bank'.

The Riga Photography Biennial (RPB) is an international contemporary art event that focuses on the analysis of visual culture and artistic representation. The term 'photography' in the title of the biennial is used as an all-embracing concept encompassing a mixed range of artistic image-making practices that have continued to transform the lexicon of contemporary art in the 21st century. The Riga Photography Biennial—NEXT offers visibility and provides a platform for promising young artists, helping them announce themselves to a broader audience and context. The Riga Photography Biennial—NEXT 2025 program, running from 24 April to 6 July, presents a wide-ranging program of exhibitions and educational events, giving the floor to emerging artists and curators from the Baltic and other countries who have addressed aspects of the theme 'invisible but present'.

For more information: www.rpbiennial.com

Curated by **Astrida Riņķe**

A documentary film about reproducing the works in this exhibition in an analogue photo lab by **Kristians Fukss**

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