

AGNĖ NARUŠYTĖ

THE  
AESTHETICS OF  
**BOREDOM**

LITHUANIAN PHOTOGRAPHY  
1980 – 1990



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*To my parents*

‘If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1973), pp. 83–109 (p. 91).

## Preface and Acknowledgements

The idea of linking photography and boredom came to my mind when Alvydas Vaitkevičius, our History of Photography lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, showed us grey photographs of the duller places of my home town Vilnius in the 1980s, which was then under Soviet occupation. Normally I would not have looked twice at them, but they were the creations of such 'serious' Lithuanian art photographers as Vytautas Balčytis, Alfonsas Budvytis, Remigijus Pačėsa and Algirdas Šeškus, suggesting to me that boredom was a curtain behind which a message was hidden that neither I nor our lecturer could fully comprehend. We simply lacked the theoretical background as photography was not then considered to be 'worthy' of further serious study. The enigma that the photographs created did not disappear however; it only became more entrenched over time, prompting me to seek answers.

It was spring 1993; I was sitting on a bench in Sereikiškių Park, Vilnius, and thinking of how it might be possible to relate the photography of the 1980s to postmodernism (which was the topic of my BA dissertation). I was unexpectedly approached by a man who happened to be the writer Pranas Kutkaitis. He was attempting to sell his new paperback book titled *Boredom. A Novel of Short Stories* (such was the time – the capitalist system of book publishing and distribution was then in its' infancy). I do not remember what

we talked about, but only remember that when he left, the book with the author's dedication remained in my hands. While leafing through it I suddenly realised that the boredom of the photographs haunting me was not just a 'curtain', but also the expression of a particular attitude, a medium to send a message and a mode of existence in Soviet society. Yet I still had to find out why the boredom permeating the photographs affected the spectator in such a particularly strong manner.

The opportunity arose in 1996 when I suggested the subject of the aesthetics of boredom in Lithuanian photography as a topic for my PhD thesis at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, and Dr Alfonsas Andriuškevičius agreed to be my supervisor. His support, understanding and rigor did not allow me to deviate from my chosen course and it helped me to bring this challenging project to completion. This book is a result of that long process of research, doubt, disappointment and discovery.

Many other people, however, helped me on the way and I would like to thank them here. First of all, I am grateful to all the academics who participated in my PhD viva for their valuable critique, discussion and advice : Prof. Habil. Dr. Kęstutis Nastopka, Dr. Lolita Jablonskienė, Dr Laima Laučkaitė-Surgailienė, Prof. Habil. Dr. Vytenis Rimkus, Dr. Raminta Jurėnaitė, Dr. Rasutė Žukienė and Prof. Habil. Dr. Antanas Andrijauskas, I am also grateful to the Union of Lithuanian Art Photographers, to its chairman Antanas Sutkus and office staff: Stanislovas Žvirgždas, Rima Kiubaraitė-Sutkienė, Jonas Ramoška, Palmira Bartkuvienė and Ieva Mazūraitė-Novickienė,



who always provided assistance with information and scanning and allowed me to use their photographic archive and library. Another institution which aided in bringing this book to completion was the Lithuanian Art Museum. While working as a researcher of its collection of contemporary photography, I had the opportunity to become better acquainted with my subject. A department of the museum, the Contemporary Art Information Centre, and its chief curator Lolita Jablonskienė and head Rūta Pileckaitė supported my work and helped with professional advice. J. A. Greimas Study Centre (Vilnius University) had an indirect, if especially significant influence on this book, particularly through the seminars on semiotics in visual studies which were held by Kęstutis Nastopka, Saulius Žukas and Arūnas Sverdiolas. And, of course, I thank all the photographers whose work I discuss in this volume because I have always felt their understanding and interest in this project: Alfonsas Budvytis (A.A., special thanks to his widow Rima Mačiulytė and ex-wife Aldona Budvytienė), Vytautas Balčytis, Remigijus Pačėsa, Algirdas Šeškus, Violeta Bubelytė, Algirdas Darongauskas, Aleksandras Ostašenkovas, Vidmantas Ilčiukas, Alvydas Lukys, Saulius Paukštys, Gintautas Trimakas, Gintaras Zinkevičius, Giedrius Liagas, Raimundas Urbonas (A.A.), Remigijus Treigys, Vitas Luckus (A.A., special thanks to his widow Tatjana Luckienė - Aldag), Antanas Sutkus, Aleksandras Macijauskas, Algimantas Kunčius, Romualdas Rakauskas (A.A.) and the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov. All of them have benevolently allowed publishing their photographs free of charge. I would also like to express especial debt to the photographers Vytautas Balčytis

and Algimantas Kunčius, with whom I have spent hours in conversations and discussion. These sessions have been pivotal to the development of my own understanding of photography.

I am especially grateful to Malcolm Stewart, the editor of the English version of this book, who has spent a lot of time making my translation readable.

Finally, I have to express my indebtedness to my mother Ona Narušienė who took over the care of my children during this busy period and has been the best grandmother to them. I also wish to express gratitude to my father Jurgis Narušis who has a PhD in physics and has helped me with advice from the point of view of hard sciences. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

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## INTRODUCTION

A peculiar tendency could be observed in late 20<sup>th</sup> century art: the tendency to avoid meaning, and to baffle viewers with patently empty works of art and indulge in boredom. It seems that artists related to various movements: minimalism, conceptualism, Fluxus, Pop Art as well as Soviet alternative art circles, followed the imperative of John Cage published in 1949: ‘The responsibility of the artist consists in perfecting his work so that it may become *attractively disinteresting*.’<sup>2</sup> One of the key figures in the art of the period, Andy Warhol, was obsessed with explorations of boredom and openly declared: ‘I like boring things.’<sup>3</sup> The attraction of boredom appeared quite pronounced within the art world and it spread, contrary to the expectations of common sense: there were numerous exhibitions where nothing was exhibited and concerts where nothing was performed and nothing happened. This kind of art also reached the Soviet Union where alternative artists began organising empty actions and exposing the most banal aspects of Soviet life through their deliberately boring works. Their interest in boredom turned into a spontaneous opposition to the dominating aesthetics and ideological restrictions. The movement in Lithuanian photography that was started in the early 1980s was part of this trend: it was filled with everyday, insignificant objects and dull, empty spaces, which were presented monotonously. Until now this tendency has been explained only in terms of the local photographic

<sup>2</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (London: Marion Boyars, 2004), pp. 64, 88 – emphasis added, A.N.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Warhol, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up*, in ‘Boredom’, in *Dictionary of Quotations*, <<http://www.quotationreference.com/quotefinder.php>> [accessed 5 September 2007] (para. 6 of 10)

tradition. In this book I would like to inscribe Lithuanian photography into a wider context, the context of the 'aesthetics of boredom' and suggest that the photographers' choice of monotony, everydayness and meaninglessness was a part of a more general turn in art.<sup>4</sup>

The peculiarity of this turn – the deliberate construction of a 'boring' work of art has puzzled researchers. Lacking the usual aesthetic criteria, they have sought new categories for their interpretations. Those categories are 'the aesthetics of poverty', 'aesthetics of indifference', 'aesthetics of indeterminacy', 'mundane aesthetics', 'aesthetics of silence', etc. For instance, Mora Roth has labelled the taste for meaninglessness and visual emptiness found in the work of such artists as John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg as 'the aesthetics of indifference'. She discussed indifference in terms of its cultural and political context in the United States as a form of resistance to the hegemony of abstract expressionism and also to the political reprisals against real or imagined communists at the beginning of Cold War.<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan meanwhile wrote of 'the aesthetics of silence' in which artists and writers avoided saying something meaningful and destroyed the foundations of art, yet also brought about a new kind of art that questioned ideas about the human mind and offered new conceptions of language.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Jonathan D. Katz pointed out that the refusal to speak was not just a gesture of indifference or silence, but a 'performance of silence', an evasion from expressing the self and meaning, or 'indecisiveness' over what to say when the subject was constantly in the process of being 'read' by the other. In such a situation an author

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Larsen has pointed to there being a common ground between U.S. and Soviet radical photography in the 1970s – early 1980s in his article: 'Subversive Photography: U.S. Theory Meets Soviet Practice', in *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art*, ed. by Diane Neumaier (Rutgers: The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 193–205.

<sup>5</sup> See Moira Roth, 'The Aesthetic of Indifference', in *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* ([n.p.]: G+B Arts International, 1998), pp. 33–47.

<sup>6</sup> See Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 3–34; Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, Studies in Language and Literature series (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).



1. Vytautas BALČYTIS. *Vilnius*. 1979.  
Toned fiberbased silver print.  
15.1 x 15.1 cm

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this book has been to show how boredom as a metaphor can be productively used for interpreting works of art. On the one hand, the easily identifiable signs of situational boredom help us, the viewer, to position aesthetics in the everyday: monotony, banality, mundane spaces, the slowing of time and the lack of events. On the other hand, from 'boring' situations these artists create aesthetic experiences, i. e. they turn something that we understand as negative into positive. The causes of permanent boredom, the lack of meaning and intentionality in a world that has lost the transcendental origin of meaning, are transformed into an indeterminacy of meaning and an openness to endless interpretation. As an escape route out of facing up to the temporariness of existence, boredom can also be used to express a certain social-political attitude: a performance of detachment from social reality.

The aesthetics of boredom inverts traditional effects of art by creating subtle, and often barely noticeable, aesthetic experiences from the 'almost nothing' of daily life, which traditionally only frames aesthetic events. The possibility of aesthesis neither hides nor changes visual banality, monotony and the familiar appearances of art; aesthesis emerges in the very 'boredom' which draws attention to the spectator's everyday reality and even affects it. The fact that an aesthetic event can be discovered in an apparently meaningless image is a source of wonder which prompts the spectator to explore the image and question its boredom. In a way, the aesthetics of boredom offers strategies to overcome boredom in life.

The spectator's role is crucial in the aesthetics of boredom. Only an intentional and competent spectator can penetrate the initial effects of monotony



and banality and reach other, more profound, layers of meaning. Firstly, he or she has to read the signs of opposition to the tradition of representation which offers new models for understanding art. The indeterminacy of meaning encourages intuitive perception, involvement in the process of creating meaning, and tarrying in front of the work of art. The intentional slowing of time allows photographers to realise in Western art some principles of Eastern aesthetics, such as the possibility of enlightenment through a work of art. When the spectator's tarrying in front of an image which is banal, empty, mundane and lacking any clarity or event, is understood as a necessary element of aesthetic experience, perception acquires the existential dimension. Through the signs of boredom the spectator is led to reflection when his or her indifferent, inauthentic worn-off daily existence is replaced by an awareness of existence which then becomes 'authentic'.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century art and photography the aesthetics of boredom formed in various countries as a reaction to social / political / ideological contexts and the dominating trends in art. In the 1950s, American artists opposed the hegemony of abstract expressionism and included their daily environment and its accoutrements into their works; they also replaced expression with monotony. Furthermore, affected by Eastern aesthetics they promoted emptiness, chance, and the artist's 'doing nothing', as well as focusing on uneventful intervals of slow time and the indeterminacy of meaning. Similar processes began in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, with the political 'thaw', but alternative art here, first of all, opposed ideology and the obligatory idealisation of official 'social-realist' art. Monotony, banality and boredom acquired here the meaning of social alienation and became a spiritual alternative to the regime; with indeterminacy of meaning becoming a disguise that allowed ideas to be suggested which could not be said publicly. Chance and the slowing of time served to define the limits of artistic and photographic expression, as well as relationships with reality; this made the processes in Soviet art closer to those in Western art.

Lithuanian social landscape photography of the 1980s was part of the alternative Soviet art movement, and was thus, at least at the beginning, closer to this context. Through its emphasis on boredom it also showed signs of detachment from the social-ideological environment, criticised the unifica-

tion and de-aesthetisation of life and obscured meaning in photographs. Yet it also picked up the Western tendency of implementing Eastern thinking through the signs of boredom and awakening the spectator's intentionality and awareness of existence through emptiness, chance and slowed time.

An important element of the aesthetics of boredom in Lithuanian social landscape photography was its opposition to the humanist approach that dominated until the 1980s. By rejecting idealisation, dramatisation and the commitment to preserve national identity, the young photographers of the day turned to the mundane with its inevitable experiences of boredom as a way of reacting against ideology and unification, while also revealing the artificiality of traditional photography's narratives. Instead of constructing dynamic spaces in photographs they encouraged the spectator to engage in the production of meaning, to learn the subtleties of photographic language and to see the possibility of aesthetic perception in everyday life. All these changes also meant that photography was already being treated not as a record of an event, but as a process which involved the active presence of the subject of enunciation.

Through the signs of boredom, Lithuanian social landscape photographers linked the social and the existential in their works. By emphasising the dreariness and absurdity of their social environment, they raised the issue of existence in a world where meaning was lost. The subject of enunciation brought forth through the various strategies of monotony was often shown to be indifferent to its social environment or to be involved in the process of meditating on emptiness and exploring the limits of the phenomenon of photography. By capturing non-idealised and non-estranged banal objects and Soviet ready-mades, these photographers encouraged authentic perception and openness to phenomena that was free of any preconceived ideas. The empty, closed, transit and chaotic spaces of the city in social landscape photography became spaces for self-observation and meditation. The reality photographed in accidental moments, and the flow of a daily life which was undisturbed by events prolonged the time of photographic perception, enabled the observation of slight changes and movements in the social environment and drew attention towards the present. The aesthetic event discovered by these photographers within the daily life of the city presented a strategy for survival under the conditions of ideological lies.

The aesthetics of boredom presented a critical reading of photographic language and brought some new approaches to it, as well as different ideas about art in Lithuania, ushering in a dialogue between art and photography. The Lithuanian School of Photography lost its dominant position. The social landscape photographers interpreted the phenomena of the world and Soviet art and photography in their own way, and linked Lithuanian photography to more recent tendencies in art.

At the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the aesthetics of boredom is still central to the work of some photographers: Remigijus Treigys, Vytautas Balčytis, Aleksandras Ostašenkovas and Violeta Bubelytė. However, in the broader context of Lithuanian photographic art this is no longer a contiguous, significant or dominant phenomenon. Rather, to the contrary, the work of these photographers is perceived already as singular and marginal, as a tradition that the new generation has come to abolish by choosing social comment, conceptual photography, staged situations or the language of advertisement which is based on visual effects, etc. Some former representatives of the aesthetics of boredom, for instance, Gintautas Trimakas or Alvydas Lukys, are now more interested in reflections on photographic phenomenon, and the aesthetics of the 1980s are no longer significant in their work.

On the other hand, a specific category of 'artists using photography' formed in Lithuania after 1990. In their conceptual projects, these artists use photography as a representation of reality, as a way to produce images without any specific technical knowledge. Most often they are not interested in the aesthetic qualities of photography, or individual expression; daily life and banality often become their subject. Thus, the latter category can be discussed in the context of the aesthetics of boredom, but also in terms of postmodernism and the liberation of art in independent Lithuania.

In short, at the beginning of the 1990s, photography entered the domain of conceptual art. This opened possibilities for further research into the aesthetics of boredom, which would combine a close reading of photographic material with a discussion of new theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The aesthetics of boredom is no longer in opposition to expressionism but to the strategies of advertising. Another direction for future research would be to investigate the manner in which social landscape photography was developed under ideological and institutional pressure.

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This book discusses boredom as an aesthetic category that helps to explain a tendency in late 20th c. art to focus on everyday things, avoid definite meaning or create 'nothing'. The aesthetics of boredom result from a paradoxical situation when aesthetic experiences are created from banality – the very phenomenon that artists try to escape from. Such an attitude of 'indifferent' detachment from Soviet reality formed into a strong artistic statement in Lithuanian photography of the 1980s when photographers not only represented the boring existence in the USSR, but also emphasised the banality of environment and emptiness of space through visual monotony. They replaced the 'decisive moment' with chance and tried to slow the time of the photograph thus focusing on the value of the eventless present moment.

AGNĖ NARUŠYTĖ

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BOREDOM

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1980 – 1990

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