



# MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE



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## Review | Daily Life: Photography from Lithuania at Philadelphia's Print Center



Algirdas Šeškus, *Meilės lyrika, Lyrics of Love*. 1975-1977. Daily Life: Photography from Lithuania on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia.

### Review by Lev Feigin

Tucked away on a quiet side-street in the heart of Philadelphia's historic Rittenhouse District, the Print Center is hosting *Daily Life: Photography from Lithuania*, a bracing, one-of-a-kind exhibit that anyone who loves photography should see.

On view is the work of two generations of Lithuanian photographers spanning fifty years: from the Soviet 60s through the present.

The artists are curated in identical triptychs: three unframed inkjet prints with an inch-thick white border held by round magnets, the photographer's name stenciled above the work on the whitewashed wall.

The older and younger artists mingle together. I started with the three contemporary color images of Donatas Stankevičius from his series *On the Bus Stop* (2011). Thick-ankled, dejected babushkas, burdened by satchels and their Soviet past, wait for buses amid splashy Reebok and Gucci shelter ads. The photographer's gaze is sociological. From one bus stop to the next, his camera works up interesting, but somewhat predictable, social juxtapositions: East vs. West; old vs. young; drab daily life vs. seductive iconography of global capitalism. The contrasts are stark but familiar; the faces of the women, interchangeable. I moved on to the next triptych.

And suddenly I entered a new conceptual universe. Before me were the black-and-white prints of the so-called Lithuanian school of photography, works by older artists who came into their own in the 60s and 70s and ushered in an underground revolution in Soviet photography that earned them international renown.

In Algirdas Šeškus' *Lyrics of Love* (1975-77) a young man sells flowers in the street. He wears a suit and a wool cap. In one hand he holds a bouquet, while his other hand is tucked inside a trouser pocket. His face is cast downward. His eyes are closed. Behind him lies an open telephone booth. To the left, the back of a white Soviet car. To the right, another man begins to cross the street from under the shadow of trees. It's a chilly Baltic summer day. And you can feel it.



Arturas Valiauga, *Buvau pas Stepą, kalbėjomės apie gyvenimą, I dropped in on Stepas, we talked about life*, 2002. *Daily Life: Photography from Lithuania* on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia

As the photograph slowly opened to me, I saw its subtler layers of detail. A wicker basket with flowers rests on the footsteps. A conversation takes place in the shadows of the leaves. Dark trousers rhyme with slanted tree trunks. I wanted to unfurl that moment in Soviet-era Lithuania, to see what would happen in the next second, to watch a hidden neo-realist film frozen within its instant.

By the time I got to Antanas Miežanskas and Rualdas Pozerskis, I was in love with the visual syntax of the Soviet-era Lithuanian photographers, their jarring wide angles, stark graphic contrasts, and a sense of the absurd tempered by pathos.

In Romualdas Požerskis' photograph, a dirt-covered sewer worker clammers out of a manhole in a hardhat like some sci-fi monster. Across a yard, a small child gazes back at him with wonder. In another image, a middle-aged woman sunbathes in a concrete courtyard with a cardboard lid over her face. In Aleksandras Macijauskas's portrait – one of the finest on view – a lonesome man smokes with his profile to the viewer while behind him, a round-cheeked boy peeks out and smiles from under the cavernous darkness of a tarpaulin.



Romualdas Rakauskas, *Šiokiadieniai, Weekdays*, 1963-1967. *Daily Life: Photography from Lithuania* on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia.

The images of the artists do not resist the Soviet occupation. They are oblivious to it. They are outside of the dicta of Soviet officialdom extolling harvesters at collective farms and record-setting factory workers. Russian language signs hang over a kiosk and are printed on street water dispensers. Soviet Volgas are parked on the sidewalks. Yet their presence is incidental. Each shutter release is a testament not to political, but to existential freedom: the freedom to have direct access to the real, to do away with all mediations between the self and the world of appearances, to bear witness to what is in a fresh, new, original way.

At the center of many of the photographs is the individual whose life-world is inhabited by the lens. Here, on the sidewalks of Vilnius and Kaunas, in backward villages forgotten by time, the language of European photography — think, Henri Cartier-Bresson — transcends the formalism of the decisive moment and seeks communion: radical empathy with one's countrymen, with children, with the old, the marginalized, the off-kilter, the peasants. The images are at the intersection between philosophy — some of the photographers were philosophers by training — and poetry. Each captured moment is a metaphysical struggle to de-Sovietize the visible and redeem it through the viewfinder.

Antanas Sutkus, one of the key figures of the Lithuanian photography school, captures an old woman with daisies who sits by a glass window glancing off to the side. Bare winter branches and electrical wires reflect in the glass through which we see the preoccupied faces of a man and two women. A passerby's blur testifies to the passage of time. The old woman's expression is grief-stricken, the corners of her mouth are turned down, her hand is clutched into a fist, the leather of her boots and bag gleams dimly in the lower half of the image. But this woe is invisible to everyone but the artist and us. Only we can bear witness to her sorrow, to the whole of her biography condensed in her face.

John Berger once wrote that “most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man made.” His words ring true in the two rooms of the show, but these Lithuanian artists invite us to discover ways of seeing that teach us how to transcend oppression – at any historical moment.



Romualdas Požerskis, Lietuvos senamiesčiai, *Old Towns of Lithuania*, 1976-1982.  
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