

During the First and Second World Wars archives of many Latvian photographers were destroyed or disappeared. In the early 21st century a number of hitherto “unknown photographers” works were found. Their works were hidden in the attic, buried under ground or during war chaos found new owners. These newly discovered authors is a huge contribution to Latvian culture. Hopefully in the future we will find archives of the 19th and 20th century photographers that we do not know yet.

19th century

In Latvia, the first news about the emergence of photography was published in German magazine “Rigasche Zeitung” in 1839. The same way as all around the world, unsuccessful painters were the first who started to take photographs. Educational reading was only in Russian or German.

Because of the serfage, Latvians had weak awareness of their own national identity until the 1860s.

In 1859, as a protest against poor living conditions and excessive land fees Latvian peasants tried to destroy potato fields by spreading unknown bacteria. Around four thousand people were killed. To stop the catastrophe photographer Roberts Bordhards (1830-1917) was sent to Ireland to take photos of potato fields and gather information about the unknown bacteria. The problem was solved before he arrived and his trip was perceived as useless. Bordhards did not seize the opportunity to document the traditions in Ireland. All he brought home was photographs with potato fields. This can be explained with the dominant tendency and interest to focus on issues of state’s domestic policy.

1900 – 1940

In turn of the 19th and 20th century the biggest part of Latvian photographers focused on documentation of the rural life. One of the most known is Mārtiņš Buclers (1866-1944) who founded Latvian Photographic Society, stated to publish magazine “Stari” and organized exhibitions at Photographer’s hill in Sigulda. Buclers developed scientific and ethnographic program to document old buildings, tools and farm works. In honor of this ethnographic photography Latvian play writer Jānis Spalva (1835-1940) wrote a play “Blooming rose” (1929), but photographer Mārtiņš Kalniņš (1881-1970) wrote a fragile sentimental song “Pictorial photo” (1925) which was played each year at Photographer’s hill.

Meanwhile in Riga several commercial photo studios were opened. These studios specialized in portrait genre. Many of them lied to their customers that it is possible to take a photo of a relative who has passed away or that a photography can show the person’s equivalent not only his actual appearance. In that way the salons made wild clames and sold portraits of other costumers.



Futurist Kārlis Kalnbērzs

Photography archive of Kārlis Kalnbērzs (1892-1938) was found in 2006, in Ogre district. The finding became a sensation because it proved that futurism was a part of Latvian history of photography. A diary of Kārlis Kalnbērzs was found together with this archive. It is a unique witness of his life and personality. This autobiographical record includes erotic poems and twenty-five drawings made in style of supremacy. In his diary, Kārlis Kalnbērzs writes about his experience with drugs, travel to Russia, meeting with Russian poets Vladimir Majakovski (1893-1930), David Burluk (1882-1967) and Igor Severjanin (1887-1941). He also met Latvian painter Gustavs Klucis (1895-1938). As the diary shows, Russian futurists, who were admired by Kārlis Kalnbērzs, never accepted him as a part of their company. He was accused of his provincialism and fascist position.

Although a relative of Kalnbērzs, Mārīte Sīle, characterizes the artist as a very helpful, lowly and shy intellectual of the village, the diary proves that he had a bohemian lifestyle.

Kārlis Kalnbērzs had a hard and poor childhood. His father was a woodcutter and died in a work related accident. Kalnbērzs kept father's ax on his desk to keep his memory alive. Mother of Kalnbērzs died a year after labor.

The artist tried to hide from the reality in his photography. He made his vision of future and included it in his photography. Kalnbērzs loved speed, noise and cars. Unfortunately in his village were only few vehicles. Sometimes he stand at the train station for hours and looked at passing trains.

Futurism aesthetics or so-called "photodynamic" can be seen in works of Kārlis Kalnbērzs. The author used optical methods, double exposure and a montage of a number of negatives. He consciously experimented with imperfections of photo technique of that time. For example, he asked his models to move a little bit, or when taking a picture of landscape, he slightly shook the camera. One of his aims was

to disassemble droop of the photography.

In 1938, after the orders of Joseph Stalin Kārlis Kalnbērzs was arrested and died in prison.



1940 – 1990

There was no freedom of speech in Latvia after the Second World War. Latvian intellectuals were under the pressure of ideology. Photographs had to show idealized image of political leaders and honor the ideals of political and social communism. Latvian photographers continued to work in the style of decorative pictorialism.



Conceptualist – Toms Rozenbaums

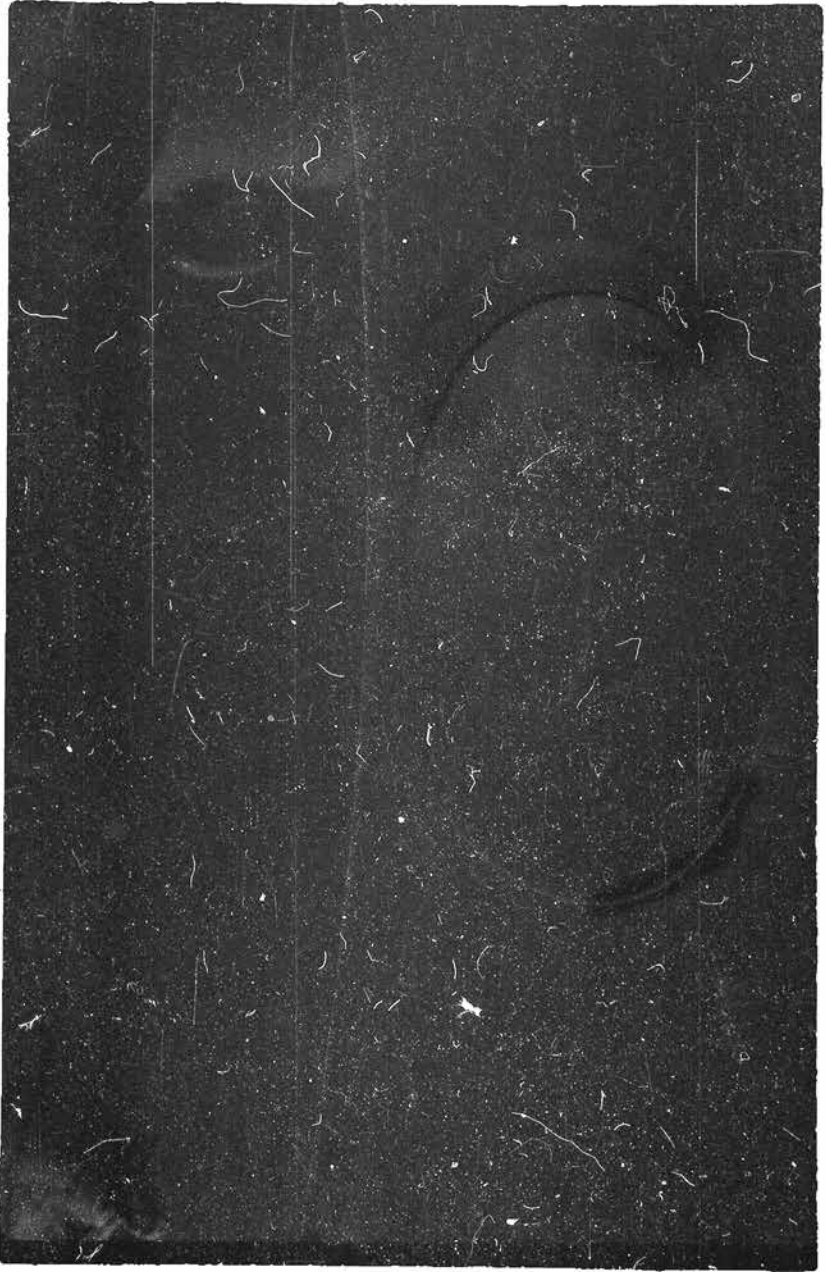
Works of Toms Rozenbaums (1934-2014) were accidentally found in 2007, during construction works in Liepāja. Chest with photographs was buried close the Rozenbaums's home. The artist himself did not want to comment the situation.

The finding suggests that Rozenbaums was the only representative of Latvian conceptual photography of that time. Even if during the Soviet time Rozenbaums did not have a chance to exhibit his works in galleries, he organized small and secrete exhibitions for narrow range of people in his flat. His works has a conceptual purity and clearness of expression. Some art critiques describes Rozenbaums's works as a reaction to the absurd political situation, but actually his works has a deeper philosophical subtext.

In the bebeginning of 1960's Rozenbaums created two outstanding photography series – “Untitled” (1963) and “Walls” (1964). Project “Untitled” was made with photo camera “Zenit” with lens cap on. Rozenbaums denied the significance of narrative. The result was a black and little dusty image. These photographs can be interpreted as a citation of Kazimir Malevich work “Black square” (1915), that symbolizes the end or narrative in art. In interview in 2008 Rozenbaums claimed that he admires artistic expression of American artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008).

The fact that in 1953 Rauschenberg erased drawing of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) impressed Rozenbaubs. The gesture of leaving the lens cap on or taking photos of monotony grey walls (project “Walls”) can be perceived as a challenge and denial of photography as a media.

In the end of 1960's artist stopped engaging in photography and devoted his life to gardening and floristic.





Representative of sexual minorities – Jānis Auseklis

Jānis Auseklis (1947) is one of the most significant Latvian photographers of 1970's. He was known as a member of Latvian hippie community "Lakstīgalas" and documented bohemia of hippies and musical culture. He was especially interested in promoting sexual freedom and rights of sexual minorities. Because of his homosexual orientation, State Security Committee arrested him and he was sentenced in prison for one and a half years. In 2004 photo archive of Jānis Auseklis was found and turned out that a well-known Latvian politician was a follower of Jānis Auseklis. After a while newspapers wrote that the politician has bought most of the archive.

Jānis Auseklis raises questions about gender, sexuality, social conventions, taboo and prejudices. The artist had an intension to promote positive perceptions about unusual individuals. Even if sexual topics like torture, sadomasochism and rape are very popular in classical art, Latvian art critiques considers that works of Auseklis are pornographic. This is the most popular argument why these works are not aesthetical.

The aim of the artist was not to stimulate a sexual desire, but to show a different lifestyle, that is not common to the most part of the society.



From 1990 till nowadays

After 1991 when Latvia regained its independence many significant photographers stopped to engage with creative photography and started to develop commercial career. Pictorial decorative orientation of photo clubs began to decline. The new generation of photographers learned tendencies from artists from the West. Subjective documentarism now is mentioned as the leading style in Latvian photography.

Most of the contemporary photographers seek the topic of identity, that is covered by perspective of religion, place, gender or memory.

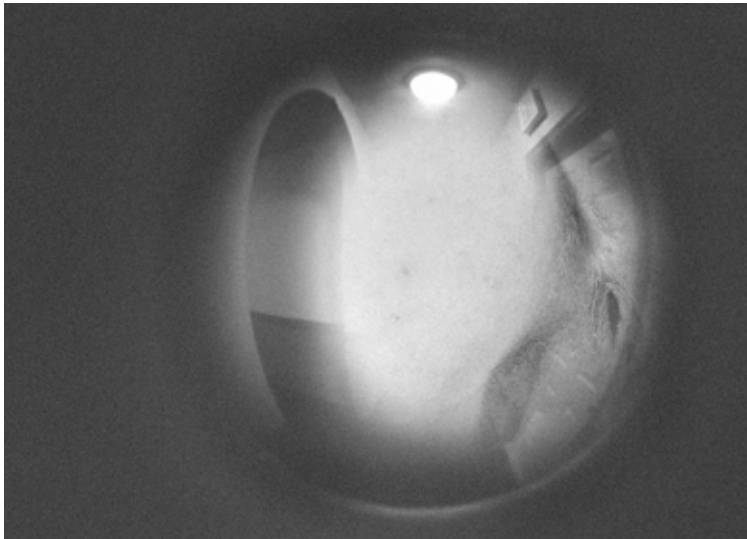


Provocateur Jānis Piparsons

Often nowadays the road to the fame in photography is based on cheap tricks. Jānis Piparsons (1982) can be mentioned as an example to this statement. In 2004, he published a photograph in Russian newspaper showing reproductive organs of president of Latvia. The publication caused a great scandal. It is hard to tell the real intention of this work. It could be a political provocation, or search for fame. According to Russian media, Piparsons explains his work as an art project.

He claims that it was a specific experiment. During time when Piparsons was working in one of the leading Latvian newspapers, he hid a special photo camera in womens' restroom. In result, he could catch a photo with president's reproductive organs while she was attending the toilet. Piparsons explained his action as a protest against bad economic situation and discrimination in Latvia.

The photographer became very popular in Russia, but in Latvia left ignored.



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