

## **INSIDER/OUTSIDER: AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIA NIMCOVA**

by Joanna Heatwole and Masha Ryskin

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Multi-media artist Lucia Nimcová approaches a cultural document of interior life in her native Slovakia and bordering countries. Her sensitive and complex bodies of work portray people within a shifting cultural mix, particularly women in Eastern and Central Europe. Born in 1977, Lucia Nimcová is an internationally known photographer and installation artist. Her work has been exhibited in galleries in museums both throughout Europe and in the United States and is in numerous public and private collections.

Nimcová studied at a secondary school for the arts in Slovakia and at the Institute of Creative Photography in the Czech Republic and, later, at the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Nimcová's first major body of work, "Instant Women" (2002-2005) gained wide national and international recognition for the artist, including a grant from the IVO (Institute of Public Affairs) for a Pictorial Report on the State of the Country. A documentary project about women in Eastern and Central Europe, "Instant Women" is a series of large-scale colour photographic prints that presents women finding their identity, tradition, domestic roles, change and encroaching western culture and materialism.

In 2006 she finished project RUSYNS - Lost Homes, focusing on the cultural heritage of the Rusyns, an ethnic group that the artist belongs to. In the project Rusyns (2005-2006), archival and contemporary images merge with maps, songs and videos. A book under the same title was published by CEE PhotoFund as part of the project.

Nimcová's most recent project, UNOFFICIAL, is a more personal reflection on the recent changes that have swept through her hometown. In UNOFFICIAL, Nimcová examines the effect that these changes had on the people not only on a material level, but on a deeper, personal one. Based on the archival photographs, the project speaks to the artist's personal connection with the place and her deep understanding and empathy with the people.

Nimcová is a recipient of numerous awards, including the ECB Photography Award (Germany), Leica Oskar Barnack Award (Germany), Fotografia Baume and Mercier Award (Italy) and Kasahara Michiko Prize (Japan). In addition, she has received grants from institutions such as the Ministry of Culture of Slovak Republic, Center for Contemporary Arts in Slovakia, Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore. Her other recognitions include the Koninklijke Ahrend n.v. Fellowship, the Netherlands (2008) and the Joop Swart Master Class, the Netherlands (2004).

In addition to her own practice, Lucia lectures and gives workshops internationally. She has curated a number of exhibitions and participated in a number of international residency programs, including Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten (Amsterdam, 2008) and International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) (New York, 2008).

Nimcová's work defies categories—it appears in different lights as both documentary and fiction, photojournalistic and archival, contemporary and traditional. Through the eyes of a young person of a minority culture, Nimcová uses her alternative perspective to observe people on the edges of cultures as life—politics, age, time, fashion, gender, body images—shifts around them. Her work is deeply empathetic and goes far beyond stereotypes.

**MASHA RYSKIN and JOANNA HEATWOLE: Your passion for your subject matter must stem from personal experience and history, how did you initially get involved with photography?**

LUCIA NIMCOVA: I was born in a small town in the eastern part of Slovakia. I have never forgotten where I came from. My childhood is a source of many themes and topics for my current work. Though nobody in my family had anything in common with art or culture I started to take photographs when I was nine years old. It was a lucky coincidence. I had been attending many courses when I was a child: from literature to marksmanship. But large photo prints on the walls of our family friends' flat (amateur photographer) fascinated me most. He was the first one to loan me a Vilia camera for the school trip to the zoo. So, I have been taking pictures for a quite long time and I started to study it formally since I was fourteen. I have run through many things. But the most important was always the joy.

**MR/JH: You mentioned in a recent interview online that your videos have a static quality, and your photographic images are very still as well. In some ways even in comparison to the archival pictures they appear to be “still lifes” or otherwise stationary even in comparison to the archival pictures. How do you analyze this quality as the artist?**

LN: In all my previous works I have tried to look at all the things around me as subjects, or at least as some kind of subjective moments, which I found important for me.

In UNOFFICIAL, I was thinking of many people and situations as objects, which exist in some kind of a parallel to my world and time, but I perceive them rather as monuments, memories of past that I am passing by everyday, so they became obsolete. It is freakier when you realize that you yourself have become a “living” monument without noticing. Many people from my project UNOFFICIAL are not living a real life—they live life according to their memories. That fascinated me. Finding new objects at every cultural event obsessed me. These people had the same poses and attitudes, moves and gestures as the persons I knew from archives. I started to think about the possibility of observing and learning to identify people of the past and try to document them. You can feel it. My aim was not to produce good photographs. On the contrary, I tried to photograph with similar rhythm and energy as the subjects had—nothing more and nothing less. In the end I was forced to use video, because with photographs I was not able to capture all their qualities and without video I would be too critical. I was fascinated by that strange world and I have tried to bring the monuments to life. Maybe only for few minutes, they have exercised for me.

**MR/JH: The Toilet Ladies are immobile for the most part, and you commented on that earlier. They have nothing else to do while life goes on nearby them. What do you feel about the subjects—what is**

**the mood of the project for you? Your approach is intuitive, but how much is it about them and how much is it about you and your connection to that theme?**

LN: Imagine you have spent all your life building and working for some ideal, some utopia, and you did it almost for free, mostly for free, just for the sake of your children's future. And now your children look at you, as if you were a lunatic, and if not that, at least that you were dreaming and that you should definitely wake up. But you either do not want to, or feel it is better to dream than to live in reality.

I have photographed Toilet Ladies at places where you would expect people to be happy, near lakes or the sea, at different tourist locations. I was interested in the ladies who are so close to this nice life, but still far away. They have become actors in a badly written play and now they have to act till the end. I think, whoever has been poor before is now even poorer. And those rich back then are not millionaires either. So, if this is the result of your whole life struggle, than you do not have many reasons to be very happy.

**MR/JH: In your new material you incorporate your own work with the archive. How has that changed your approach as a photographer? Why is it important to have both? How do they relate to each other and what have you discovered through the juxtaposition?**

LN: If I had started project UNOFFICIAL without archival research, it would have been shallow. Through the archive I have experienced thirty years and thousands of negatives. I selected moments I would have wanted to capture back then, if that had been possible. Without the archive, there would not have been my interpretation, or continuation of something that exists in time, and does not have beginning or end, just a slow transformation. When you begin to work with archives, you can easily see it, for example, you can move to 1930s. Before I was usually working on one project for four to five years. The archive has given me a wider view, but also a labyrinth. The fact that I did not get lost has cost me a lot of energy. But I have learned a lot, for example, the process of editing and researching the importance of particular photographs during a period of time. Suddenly even the most banal details are portraying that period of our history. I have managed to see those, through the remains I feel today.

**MR/JH: Some of your most recent work includes sound elements. In what projects do you think the audio element is most important? What is the relationship between the sound and the images for you? Is there a feeling that you hope that people can understand from the music though they might not understand the language itself?**

LN: I started to use sound in the project RUSNACI / RUSYNS, which was about the life of my minority community, although I did not plan it like that. I am total amateur. I wanted to do something for those people, before I left for Amsterdam, as I feared I would never come back. It was natural to make a photo project, to document how this original culture was disappearing. After year of work I realized that images of Rusyns would survive longer than language and traditional songs. I wanted to capture the vanishing of authenticity. People of my generation rarely speak Rusyn, and I entertain my parents quite a lot when using Rusyn words in Slovak sentences.

I invited theatre group "Farm in Cave" for the opening. They also did research about the Rusyn minority using dance and music. Members of this group do not understand lyrics, but they try to express words through sound and movement. I think many people from my minority were shocked and even cried.

**MR/JH: In the first interview segment back in 2005, we discussed an image that you mentioned had a "hidden sadness," the quality of which might only be revealed through finishing the project. Now that you have moved on from the Instant Women project, do you have any more clarity about that? How does that hidden sadness play out in your other work—do you find that there are images that evoke melancholy or nostalgia? If so, do you have a sense of what that might mean—is it sadness for the people in the images, or for society...or for yourself?**

LN: Instant Women are made in this moment, in a way, that they cannot be finished. There are no particular answers in that work, they are just documenting something that poses questions that are also based also on the knowledge of the receiver. I was naively thinking that everything is clear like it is to me. But with the distance of two or three years living abroad I see different layers and stories. I would like to write them down. It is still open. I was just recently thinking of letting Instant Women rest for some years and if I want to come back after that, I will try to finish those stories. Now I give them freedom to live in the imagination of the viewers. The project is full of hope and expectations.

My recent project UNOFFICIAL is much more critical and clear. I am also less optimistic about people. In Instant Women there is a tension in every moment, tension of decisions. And I am a witness to those decisions. They become almost mine.

UNOFFICIAL is already decided. And the vision that I could be possibly part of that is horrible for me. That is the reason why I document all aspects and remains of that game. So I become a "tourist." I observe through an open door. I try to understand the point but do not want to be a part.

**MR/JH: In your most recent notes commenting on the Rusyns project, you noted that you hoped to inspire the displaced young people in some way. Is there more to say about that? What are the factors that lead to their need for inspiration—is there a particular hope can you give them?**

LN: My grandmother was always telling me: "I can give you bread with butter...but not the wisdom." My condition was that all six young girls and boys working on the project had to be Rusyns. I wanted them to become internal observers of their community. I was shocked by fact they did not speak Rusyn, though they still lived there, while I had been away from my home since age fourteen. Many young people are now ashamed of their origin, and they do not find anything traditional happening around them interesting. They do not have the distance. So many traditions are disappearing and are destined to die.

I began this project with great enthusiasm and energy, but after one year I found I was left alone. With the exhibition installed, before the opening, I cried. I realized many of these things are lost for good and this exhibition is a good example. Despite this, I still believe there are many things to show and say, though people from my minority community do not really seem to be interested.

**MR/JH: In your archive-related work you reflect several cultural shifts: first the communist government influencing (or interfering with or infringing upon) the local culture, and then later, in your contemporary images, there are suggestions of waves of capitalist—Western ideals merging or mixing with local values. Is there a new culture created here, a culture found or lost—or is there this sense that the ‘original’ culture has been continuously affected, but not replaced by contemporary trends? Is your objective to call attention to this original culture that is considered lost?**

LN: The question of authenticity is almost impossible to answer, but I am very occupied with it anyway. I am showing what is going on right now on different levels of our society through small stories from my town. At the same time, I am studying my own identity. What has shaped my thoughts and what will happen to people who will leave and to those who will stay? Transformation is slow, but very important. If that is something that is not interesting to the media, it does not mean that it is not important. Ideologies are shifting, though none of them seem to be working very well. One can say that communists with capitalists' manners are ruling our country, a strange hybrid. We have become a subject of an experiment, we have voted for it. So we got what we wanted. What is it then? Whatever comes next— indifference?

*MASHA RYSKIN is a Russian-born painter, printmaker, and installation artist. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She has participated in a number of artist residencies both in the United States and in Europe, Indonesia, and Costa Rica. Ryskin is a recipient of numerous grants, including a Fulbright Fellowship to Oslo, Norway.*

*JOANNA HEATWOLE is a photographer, multi-media installation artist and freelance writer. She is currently an assistant professor of time-based media at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, NY.*