

I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ

Artist-technician: **Sophie Thun**

Curator: **Zane Onckule**

Archivist: **Līga Goldberga**

Collections: Estate of Zenta Dzividzinska, photographs by Zenta Dzividzinska from the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art and the future Latvian Museum of Contemporary Art, photographs by Sophie Thun from private collections

Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga

July 15 – September 12, 2021

Exhibition opening: **July 14, 6-9pm**

I don't have a date of birth. It is unknown.

I was born during the war, and I was registered about a year later, when nobody remembered when I was born. The date is approximate.

ZDZ

*I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ** is both exhibition and performative act—sign of a kinship that exposes the hidden, the unknown and the unconscious. Focused on the work of Zenta Dzividzinska, a fearless, marginalized, and system-defying artist whose work, in the course of her lifetime, was written off as not particularly valuable, the exhibition uncovers her neglected oeuvre. Simultaneously, the exhibition is contemporary artist Sophie Thun's tribute to the preceding generation of women artist(s) that affirms their legacy and shows continuity in their efforts to create, exhibit and be respected within changing, but still constraining, hierarchies.

Zenta Dzividzinska (1944-2011), or ZDZ, was one of the most interesting and creative young artists in Riga in the 1960s. However, she had to wait for more than 30 years before she could have her first solo exhibition. Photography was a critical means of self-expression for her; by experimenting with its specifically indexical attributes—framing, angles, movement—Dzividzinska began a practice of documenting everyday life. Her works are characterised by a strong graphic conditionality, particularly with regard to the experimentation with composition and tonality, as well as the use of original techniques for choosing subjects and motifs that were radically unconventional for Latvian photography at the time. Instead of garnering recognition and respect, however, Dzividzinska's radical work was met with disdain. Her peers, largely consisting of heterosexual male spectators, considered her work unprofessional. In the face of expectations of women at the time, her "norm-correcting" (Šteimane, 1999) portrayal of women, and her subversive proto-selfies, were viewed as "ugly". Dzividzinska's work wasn't even appreciated by her family, who deemed her a "failed" artist.

Most of Dzividzinska's photographs were not printed during her lifetime, or had limited exhibitionary prospects given the traditional narrative and aesthetic criteria that museums and photography clubs of the 1960s abided by. Cultural institutions deemed her approach to work as too ethically concerned, "diametrically opposed" (Svede, 2004) to the principles of the Soviet system. In recent years, however, museums and private collections locally and internationally have started acquiring small collections of Dzividzinska's photographs. Most of her work (including photographs, negatives, contact prints, notes and un-systematised and unreviewed documents) was held in temporary storage in an industrial area in Riga until this exhibition.

Guided by the aforementioned, *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* is conceived as an experimental contribution to preserve and interpret the legacy of Dzividzinska's para-feminist art practice. The exhibition centres on a dialogue between Austrian artist Sophie Thun (b. 1985) and Dzividzinska in the only way possible—through archival practice. During the course of the exhibition, Thun, an experienced photo lab technician who works in a similar intellectual and emotional register as Dzividzinska, will live in Riga and work in a black-and-white photography laboratory installed in one of the exhibition rooms. Together with an archivist specially assigned to the project, the artist will access, review and print the still vaguely known material from Dzividzinska's archive.

Analogue photography is a medium with a high production cost, but with a much lower "market value" compared to other media. Moreover, works by women in the medium of analogue photography typically sell for less, have less gallery exposure, and possess a slimmer chance of being included in museums and private collections. In order to support and finance the creation of their uncompromising art, both Dzividzinska and Thun have had to find additional avenues for sustaining their practice. Dzividzinska worked as a graphic designer at the state-owned company *Māksla* from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, while Thun continues to work as an exhibition photographer, mentoring aspiring photographers and developing film for established artists. Both Dzividzinska and Thun make art largely "on the side", during their so-called "free time", be it in a family kitchen (Dzividzinska) or in the "erotic fantasies" (M. Vuković, 2019) which denotes the hotel rooms Thun frequent. Thun's interest in this condition of being in an "in-between-space", in which she is an artist, a lab technician, and an assistant (to mostly male photographers) can be interpreted as her mak-

ing conscious leaps between the hierarchies of the art world and the *real* world. Physical and mental labour, as well as the presence or absence of control, is what drives the work of artists like Thun and Dzividzinska.

The exhibition *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* is therefore not about producing “new” work based on an idea, but instead about the material aspects of Dzividzinska’s practice left behind in the quest to uncover new images. For the exhibition, Thun will break the guiding principle of her practice to represent a medium or reality in its original size. (Typically Thun matches the natural size of an object or subject in a photographic image to its actual size, while producing contact prints for unclear images). In this case, Thun will adapt to Dzividzinska's printing technique where scale and proportions were bound only to the size of available paper or time. The result will evoke the notion of portraiture as Thun recreates Dzividzinska’s technique with her own “imprint”, i.e., the indexical marks left by the rings of the artist-technician's hands.

***I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* includes photographs by Thun and Dzividzinska from museums and private collections, as well as a series of new works by Thun—among them, a full-scale trompe l'oeil color recreation of the exhibition venue and photograms with Dzividzinska's work checklist, a scene of production of a functioning black-and-white photography lab, and an improvised work desk for the archivist. Finally, a growing display of prints by Thun will be produced out of Dzividzinska's negatives.**

At the end of the exhibition on 12 September, which would have been Dzividzinska’s 77th birthday, the archive will return to the warehouse. Stored in a new state of order, the material aims to attract well-equipped future researchers and scholars to engage and expand on the work that was begun during *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ*. Thun, who shares a reality of the “optional” nature of the artistic practice with Dzividzinska, will produce her own works in-between or during “after hours” of the exhibition to then bring them to her studio and reveal to a new public in other occasions.

* The exhibition’s title, *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ*, is a combination of the title of Dzividzinska's second solo exhibition *I Don't Remember a Thing* (Latvian Artists Union gallery, Riga, 2005) with the title of an article by art historian Alise Tīfentāle (“Entering the Elusive Estate of photographer Zenta Dzividzinska”, *MoMA Post*, March 2021), which explored the artist's work and legacy. The abbreviation “ZDZ” in a reference to the artist’s preferred signature, which came about from her frustration at people’s inability to pronounce her Polish sounding surname.

Further information about Dzividzinska and her archive can be found on www.artdays.net.

Sophie Thun will spend one month in the ISSP residency in Riga and will teach a masterclass to ISSP students. This project was produced in collaboration with Phileas – A Fund for Contemporary Art.

Biography

Sophie Thun (b. 1985) is an artist working primarily with techniques of analog photography. Her practice is often site-specific and characterized by an exploration of the relationship between the artist’s physical labour and the presentation of the photographic work. Raised in Warsaw, Poland, she lives and works in Vienna, Austria. Thun studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, before graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Recent solo and duo exhibitions include: *Stolberggasse*, Secession Vienna, 2020; *Extension*, c/o Berlin, 2020; *Interiors of Photography*, with Mladen Bizumic, Camera Austria, Graz, 2019; *After Hours* at Galerie Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, 2019. 2020 she finished working on the film *This year's girl* with İpek Hamzaoğlu and Laura Nitsch. Thun has been awarded the *Outstanding Artist Award* from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Arts in 2021 and the working grant from DZ Bank, Frankfurt, in 2019/2020. Thun is represented by Sophie Tappeiner gallery in Vienna and her newest body of work will be presented at Liste Art Fair Basel in September 2021 followed by a solo exhibition at the gallery in December 2021.

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