

Rīga's New Underground Scene in Arnis Balčus' Documentary Art Photographs

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Abstract

This article aims to show how documentary-style art photography can be used in the sociological study of a relatively closed and transgressive subculture. The example of the article is the current Rīga new underground music scene centred around punk and DIY. The pictures selected as samples are from the book *Scēna* by photographer Arnis Balčus, published in early 2024. The article includes excerpts from sociologist Jānis Daugavietis's conversation with Arnis Balčus about photographing this scene, as well as interpretations of this phenomenon. Alongside a visual-ethnographic analysis of the scene, a close reading of the photographs was carried out by lead author and the young people seen in the close-ups in two of the photographs. The visual codes that can be read in these photographs demonstrate how the Rīga scene is part of the global punk subculture and reveals its connections with similar scenes in nearby foreign countries. Reading the pictures on a micro level, we see both the creativity of the young people and their anxiety. The article demonstrates that documentary art photographs can serve as research data, which can be either a subject of analysis in itself or a tool for formulating new research questions or hypotheses.

Keywords: Rīga's new underground music scene, sociology, photographic method, documentary art photographs as research data, Arnis Balčus

Introduction

"My personal opinion is that photography can be a very important means of collecting ethnographic documents, and that to leave it untapped is not only an unpardonable neglect but also a serious crime in our circumstances." (Buclers 1925: 1) Following the example of this Latvian photographer, photographic industrialist and publisher of a century ago, we have turned our attention to documenting Rīga's so-called new underground scene (often just "scene" or "scēna" in Latvian), including through the use of photography as an art-based research method.

Can photography be used in the process of research in other social sciences, not only as an artefact collected or created for the purpose of adding to the corpus of cultural heritage? Whether photography as research data is a legitimate tool in sociology was questioned by Pierre Bourdieu in the mid-1960s (Bourdieu 1990). Photography has always been used to study the world and, as Howard Becker points out (1974), its invention coincides with the birth of sociology. Both these authors also attest to this in their academic practice, publishing a relatively large number of photographs in their most important works (*Distinction* and *Art Worlds* respectively).

Several photographic methods have been described and used in the disciplines of visual sociology and anthropology (see Harper 2002; Holm 2020; Langmann, Pick 2018a). At the same time, the publication of photographs in academic research is rare, except for selected illustrative purposes. The systematic use of photographs in publications is nowadays mainly restricted to visual methods publications (Holm 2020).

Our initial idea was to base the article on photographs, adding as little text as possible, and not even explaining or commenting on what the photographs show. This would have placed virtually the entire burden of interpretation on the reader. Punk and other close musical subcultures have existed for half a century, so their codes are well-known to both insiders and researchers in the field. Therefore, we wanted to give the reader only visual material, primary rather than secondary research data. However, in the process of writing, listening to the editors' suggestion, the article took the form of a rather traditional research paper, which included only three of the fifteen photographs originally selected. While we can assume that there are people with knowledge of the history of punk rock and other close subcultural genres who

possess the ability to decipher the canonical visual codes of these communities, this is not the same as having expertise in contemporary Latvian underground music.

This led to an adjustment in the original aims and objectives of the paper. Keeping the main aim – to give a photo-ethnographic insight into Rīga's new underground music scene with documentary-style photographs – the article proceeded with a methodological discussion on the use of documentary art photography for sociological research. Without delving into the long-standing issues of the (im)possibility of producing photographs that objectively reflect reality and the influence of the positionality of the photographer and the analyst on the final results of the research, we ask more pragmatic questions. Assuming that documentary art photographs of a relatively closed and marginal community can be useful for sociological research, we ask: in what ways?

The subject of this article is Rīga's new underground music scene, which can be considered to have started in 2019 (Daugavietis 2022). It is a scene grouped around punk and genres close to it (such as hardcore, gothic, indie, extreme metal, etc.) and DIY ideology. This music community, the largest and most active of its kind in Latvian history, has all the main attributes of a scene: shared space, shared places, shared identity, and of course its own music (bands) and fan base (Daugavietis 2023b).

Three photographs of this scene taken by photographer Arnis Balčus in 2023 and published in the book *Scēna* (2024a) are used as research data in this article. They are particularly useful for ethnographic purposes because of the photographer's style: sharp and well-lit, they allow even small details to be seen clearly. In addition, Arnis Balčus is the only professional photographer to have systematically documented this highly spectacular scene. The photographs for this article have been selected to show the visual codes and bricolages that are both typical of this scene in Rīga and at the same time seem to distinguish it from similar scenes in other places and times.

The first objective of the article is to show and interpret the main visual characteristics of the scene through photographs. One of the typical features of this scene seems to be its

focus on DIY modifications of the body, clothing and accessories. Arnis Balčus has publicly stated the following thesis several times: "The body is in most cases the only thing they have power over, and it becomes not only a way of asserting their identity, but also a tool of protest." (ISSP 2023) What else can one see in the photographs, even if they are taken with the aim of artistically selecting and highlighting the most striking, though perhaps not the most typical, cases in the scene? In this article, we use photographs not only to show how visual style relates to specific musical genres and even to other scenes, but also as a means to formulate research questions and hypotheses for further research. This already relates to the second objective of the article – to try to understand in what other ways these photographs can be used for the purposes of research in which they are not merely research data to be used for qualitative or quantitative analysis.

Methodologically, this approach is closest to grounded theory, where "photographs are used as a way of answering or expanding on questions about a particular subject" (Suchar 1997: 34). The premise of the article is that documentary-style photographs (both their taking and their analysis) can help to study and better understand the functioning of a given music scene, even if – as in the case of Arnis Balčus – the photographs mainly capture "backstage" (not the backstage of live venues) or "off stage" (Goffman 1956) moments rather than performing music on an actual stage.

As mentioned above, this is the largest scene of such musical genres in the history of Latvian underground music. Soviet Latvia's cultural policy was very intolerant towards rock music, which is one of the main reasons why the first Latvian punk bands started to appear only in the first half of the 1980s, and in that decade they were few in number (Daugavietis 2018). Even in the post-Soviet years, the Latvian punk scene has never been as big and vibrant as the current one discussed in this article. This applies both to the quantity (of bands, concerts and festivals, and audience) and to various qualities, such as the visual (Daugavietis 2023b). As we know from our fieldwork, it is at the same time distinctly local (centred in Rīga) but also global, as most of the symbolic values it embraces have their origins in international metropolises. It also has regional

links with similar underground scenes in nearby countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Finland). The scene is well documented in Arnis Balčus's photographs and is highly spectacular. These are the reasons why the so-called new underground scene of Rīga has been chosen as the subject of this article.

The paper includes a methodological description of the approach, a theoretical conceptualisation of the scene, a description of the data acquisition and a close reading of selected photographs. Close reading of these photographs is performed by the lead author Jānis Daugavietis, and is based on knowledge gained not only from researching this scene since 2021, but also from being involved in Latvian underground music since the early 1990s and subsequently studying music subcultures at academic level. The reading of the photographs also includes descriptions and commentaries on the images by the persons depicted. This is followed by general conclusions regarding the approach, material and objectives of the paper. The article concludes with a conversation between Jānis Daugavietis and Arnis Balčus about photographing this scene, in which the photographer speaks first-hand about his artistic and exploratory approach to capturing this scene.

The novel feature of the article lies in its use of art-based documentary photographs in sociological research of an academically understudied topic (Latvian underground music). Thus, the convergence of these two research practices and traditions can inspire the study of other relatively closed communities using a similar approach.

Approach

The research data for this article was collected using art-based documentary photography (Becker 2005 [1998]; Langmann, Pick 2018a; Suchar 1997). The rationale for its use in historical research and the social sciences was described in 1940 by the American economist and photographer Roy Stryker and the agricultural historian Paul H. Johnstone: "His [Mathew B. Brady] Civil War photographs convey graphic impressions of important scenes and incidents with a vividness that could never be attained by verbal description alone." (Stryker, Johnstone 2019 [1940]: 324) Our approach is similar: to capture and illustrate the underground scene through

documentary photographs, focusing later in the analysis on deciphering their typical visual codes. The object of the research is the current scene in Rīga centred around the punk genre and DIY aesthetics. Using the photo-elicitation method and close reading, a reflexive approach was used in the selection and analysis of the photographs.

The approach to the analysis of the study should be seen as a two-part process, the first being the taking of the documentary art photographs, and the second being the researchers' work on the qualitative analysis of the selected photographs, involving the subjects of the photographs in the interpretation process.

The first part of the process can be called an art-based research method. It can also be seen as classic social science fieldwork, where the researcher (in this case, the photographer) goes into the field in the natural habitat of the research subject. In this case, Rīga's new underground scene, the fieldwork takes place mainly at concerts and festivals. The photographer most often captures two types of images: groups of people in action (e.g. a crowd of listeners in front of a stage or a group of friends smoking outside a music club) or portraits. The second type is close to the methodology of portraiture which was "first introduced by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) in an effort to blend social science research doctrines with aesthetic inquiry" (Langmann, Pick 2018a: 18). Asking for permission to photograph the "models" results in a photograph with both the relatively active, conscious participation of the subject and the requisites of the natural environment of the object of study. Thus, the strength of this method is described as its ability to "contextualise the depictions of individuals and events and emphasize interpretation of reality from both the researcher's experiences and the subject's portrayal of their experiences" (ibid.).

The second part of the research process is the analysis of the collected research data (in this case, photographs). Our approach is qualitative and we combine it with the photo-elicitation method, where "analysis does not only recognise the participant as a source of data but also as a source of analysis" (Langmann, Pick 2018b: 120), and it is actually a form of interview, where the people in the photos are asked to tell and explain what they see in the images.

The aim of this study is not to draw clear conclusions or to construct a theoretical model of the object under study, so the final interpretation of the photographs has been undertaken in the spirit of a reflexive approach. Visual social scientist Sarah Pink defines it as follows:

Ethnographers themselves are part of the contexts in which photography, video and other digital and analogue media practices are already experienced and understood in particular ways. How individual ethnographers approach the visual in their research and representation is inevitably influenced by a range of factors, including theoretical commitments, disciplinary agendas, personal experience, gendered identities and their visual and digital skills and cultures. (Pink 2013: 47)

The research data for this article consist of three photographs by the photographer Arnis Balčus from his book *Scēna* (2024), selected by the sociologist Jānis Daugavietis. Both authors have been involved in various subcultures for a long time (20–30 years), in different ways and to differing degrees, from direct participation to documentation and research. Our position is therefore characterised on the one hand by a long-standing interest in the subject and a certain amount of insider knowledge; on the other hand, however, we cannot claim that this is an insider approach. Rather, we are in a field that is difficult to define, between outsider/insider positions (Bennett 2003; Breen 2007; Hodkinson 2005), and our view can be called an intersectional “insighter” ethnography (Sharp 2021). As can perhaps be concluded from our conversation (see below, at the end of the article), we can accept Kahn-Harris’s statement (2007: 5) about his position in relation to the extreme metal scene he studies: we are “sympathetic outsiders”.

Scene

“Scene” is a term used both in vernacular (everyday) language and in the social sciences, where it is understood quite similarly. In this case, which outsiders tend to refer to as “Riga’s new underground scene”, the community itself uses the term “scene” for self-identification. Since 2021, a few popular Instagram meme accounts

focusing on this scene have emerged, with the word “scene” in their names. The first were @latvianscenedaily (Latvian Scene Updates); @scenas.shitposting (LV scene memes and stuff) and @dzeltena.scena (The yellow press of the scene). (Daugavietis 2023a)

This article adopts and uses the conceptualisation of the term “scene” by communications scholar Will Straw. The scene consists of three basic elements: performers, support facilities, and fans (Straw 1991). Both broadly and more concretely, the scene is grouped around some shared symbolic values (in the case of music, a genre), and is rooted in a specific geographical space and limited to a specific time. While virtual scenes can be discussed, and do exist (Bennett, Peterson 2004), most often music scenes are strongly tied to a geographical centre, most often a large city or even a metropolitan area.

In the context of the social science tradition, this approach to the scene is in line with the sociology of culture and art, which analyses the symbolic products of culture in a broader context, focusing less on the works of art themselves and other symbolic values than on the surrounding environment. These include Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu 1993), Howard Becker’s notion of “art worlds” (Becker 1982) and Richard Peterson’s cultural production perspective (DiMaggio 2000; Peterson 1976). The scene approach also fits organically into actor network theory (ANT), developed in the 1980s by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law and Madeleine Akrich (Law 1992). One of the conceptual innovations proposed by ANT in the study of different kinds of social aggregates (they use the metaphor of a “network”) is that networks are made up of all kinds of objects, not only people and the relations between them, and immaterial objects (such as values, ideas, prejudices, dreams), but also material objects (such as planets, buildings, land, water, various mechanical devices) (Latour, Woolgar 1979). These theories and approaches thus add value and legitimacy to the use of photographs in social analysis, not only because they already become the object of the study and part of the object of study, but also because the material things that are immediately visible in photographs (e.g. people, their clothes, accessories) are indicative of the social community under study, whether

we call it a scene, a network, a group, a world or a field.

Another term often used to describe underground or non-mainstream music is “subculture”. Compared to “scene”, it is a more theoretical and empirically difficult concept to grasp. The main objective of researchers using this concept has always been to understand why different subcultures emerge and exist, from the studies of criminologists and sociologists of the Chicago School almost 100 years ago to the different tastes and lifestyles of the postmodern (sub) cultural approach. Simplifying the rich history of music subculture research in the social sciences, it can be argued that to this day there are two quite different interpretations of such phenomena: class oppression and aesthetic preference theses. The first tradition, which has Marxism as one of its philosophical foundations, explains the emergence of youth subcultures in the paradigm of class struggle, and sees them as the symbolic resistance of the youth of an oppressed class (Hall, Jefferson 2006; Hebdige 1988; Shildrick, MacDonald 2006). The second tradition, the postmodern, sees subcultures as basically the taste preferences of young people (and not only young people), which are fluid and changing, and not so closely tied to any particular socio-economic factors or structures (Bennett 1999; Frith 1981; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton, Weinzierl 2003).

Data

Arnis Balčus calls himself a documentary photographer who often creates series dedicated to specific themes and conceptual ideas. These are not only artistic, but also research projects, and one of the ever-present motifs is the preservation of the photographed objects and phenomena (as cultural heritage). To describe Arnis Balčus’s creative path, and in particular this photographic project and its subject, it is appropriate to quote Bourdieu: “Practice freed from the family function is encountered amongst the least integrated subjects and often appears as a form of the expression of deviance. It is most often defined by the refusal of the norms [...]” (1990: vi).

Although Arnis Balčus is the only professional photographer who has systematically documented this scene, the common virtual thesaurus of photographs of this scene is much broader. Two short-run photobooks by Tina Ērenpreisa and one calendar using young people (musicians and fans) from the scene as models have been published in print (2021, 2022, 2023). The rest, photographed with smartphones, digital and analogue cameras, live only a digital or analogue life, mainly in personal social network profiles or home archives. While sharing digital photographs is not uncommon in the scene, temporary cloud storage platforms, research data repositories or sustainable archives are rarely used for this purpose.¹

Arnis Balčus has been photographing Rīga’s new scene since 2021. He uses a digital camera with flash, mainly at public events (concerts, festivals) and in public places. The large body of digital images, comprising many thousands of shots, is stored in a personal archive. Arnis Balčus has also regularly posted photos of the scene (and videos taken with his smartphone) on his social media accounts, most notably on his Instagram account @arnisbalcus. In autumn 2023, the ISSP Gallery in Rīga hosted a two-month-long photo exhibition of Arnis Balčus’ photographs with around 150 photographs, and there have also been several scene-related public events organised by the photographer himself (concerts by scene groups, poetry reading, discussions, etc.) (ISSP 2023). In early 2024, Arnis Balčus published a 240-page A4 photobook, *Scēna*, with around 200 colour photographs.

The photographs selected for publication in this article are those that read as much as possible of the visual categories characteristic of the scene as developed in previous and ongoing research and fieldwork by Jānis Daugavietis using other methods: audio and video documentation, just being around and other types of participatory observations, interviews (semi-structured biographical interviews with key figures in the scene), statistical accumulation and analysis of concert and Instagram data (band followers, scene meme profiles), diary (fieldwork notes), etc. These visual categories have been conceptualised in the spirit

¹ Among the rare exceptions are Katrīna Līva Dalbiņa’s (<https://failiem.lv/k.lllv>, last accessed 7.10.2024) galleries of photographs of scene events, as well as the data collected by Jānis Daugavietis during the scene research fieldwork deposited in the Zenodo repository.

of grounded theory, which shows the DIY work of scenesters with regard to their visual appearance.

First is the clothing, often a combination of styles from different subcultures (e.g. punk, goth, black metal), and frequently torn, dirty and old. Secondly, the accessories that complement the clothes, very often DIY, for example, DIY drawings and patches, badges, pendants, paper clips, buckles, chains, spikes, beer bottle/can parts, ammunition belts. Thirdly, the direct modification of one's physical body (organs, limbs, skin), for example, tattoos, piercings, self-scarring, vein cutting, and moshpit trauma. Fourthly, the excessive use of facial make-up or even complete face painting. Fifthly, paying special attention to one's hair, not only extravagant haircuts and hairstyles, but also by controlling (or not controlling) hair on other parts of the body. Sixth, the (non)display of one's gender and sexual identity, using all the attributes described above.

Ethical Considerations

Although all three photographs included in this article are reprinted from a previously published book, ethical explanations are required here. Informed consent was obtained in two steps for the people in the close-ups in two of the photographs published in the article (Figures 1 and 3). During the production of the manuscript, following the photo-elicitation method, they were asked to comment on and explain what they saw in the photographs. Later a draft of the paper was sent to all twelve people (all of whom are adults – 18 years or older under Latvian law) in the close-ups in photos 1 and 3 after the first round of peer review, asking four questions, explaining that the journal is open access and will be available electronically forever:

Do you agree to the use of these images for this article? Do you need to anonymise your name/nickname more (if it is there at all)? Should controversial cases be softened or deleted altogether in the article (the journal is particularly concerned about conjectures and interpretations of mental problems and self-inflicted wounds)? Maybe there is something else in the article that is questionable and needs to be corrected?

All accepted the use of these photographs; no one wanted more anonymisation or pseudonymisation; no one objected to the issue of mental health and self-harm and our interpretation, but directly emphasized that these topics should not be hidden or censored, because they are serious problems in the scene. Some of them suggested small technical corrections to the article, which we incorporated.

A separate comment is needed on the mental health hypothesis. The fact that some scenesters may have health complications of this nature can be assumed by seeing various details of their visual image and reading their codes. Although it is only a hypothesis, because even a professional specialist (a physician) does not diagnose using only visual methods, mental health problems are one of the constant themes in the scene discourse. Some of the scenesters communicate openly about it not only internally, for example by posting Instagram stories from mental health institutions they have been to, but also in public discussions and even in interviews with national media.² By pointing out this dimension of the scene, we want neither to glorify nor to stigmatise it, but rather point to the need to study it, saying that the scene is perhaps one of the safe places for such young people because it is more tolerant and accepting than other social communities.

One of the young people in the photographs, after reading the manuscript, replied:

In my opinion, self-harm and similar negative manifestations should not be softened – no matter how unpleasant or unacceptable these things may seem to the average reader, they are (unfortunately) part of everyday reality, part of the mutual understanding of the community. To tone it down or delete it would kinda take away some of the super-powerful emotions and choices that plague people in the scene community outside of gigs.

Close Reading of Photographs

Everyone in this photo is my friend. I'm in this picture too, but only partly. On the left you can see my leg, I was sitting next to Lauma, who was wearing my shirt. It was a very fun evening. Before the concert, Vents, who is the

² The references will not be shared here to protect the privacy of those involved.

lead singer of Maxxima, undressed and we painted him with colours of different origins. He was like a mud man with his look, plus he wore a mask, and a bulletbelt. (Raivuha)

Vents also starts with the same words, “All my friends are there [...]”.

This can be called “the core group” of the scene at the moment. Not everyone in it made it into the frame, but if you include them, the group would be no bigger than ~15 young people (their age is around 18–25). We’ve heard some people as young as 23 say they are too old for the scene. Structurally, this group consists of some older friends and some younger couples. Some of them play in bands themselves (Maxxima, Depustūtes), some organise events, release a punk comix zine *Caurums Žogā* (“Hole in the Fence”) (since 2024), or do other creative and DIY activities. Most of them belong to the Latvian-speaking community, and communicate with each other mainly in Latvian, with some English.

The photo was taken in the Old Town (Riga), on a street a dozen metres from the Depo music club, which is by far the most frequent venue for the scene. This place, which is actually the entrance to another club (where senior dance nights are held), is handy for sitting and chatting on its steps. During the Depo concerts it is always occupied by the “scene” (so-called “Depo kids”). Often, many of the young people never even enter the Depo club itself, especially in summer.

The picture was taken during a concert in the “20 minutes of fame” series. These are Depo concerts where the club invites new bands to play and debut without any special selection; each band is given 20 minutes. Each of these gigs features several bands and the entrance fee is minimal (1 euro if you have previously marked yourself as “going” on the Facebook event). Since these concerts are filled with bands from all different styles, scenes, non-scenes and other cities, the young people of the scene studied in the article do not even go to listen to many of them. This was just another event where only one out of five bands was “their” band. Maxxima debuted. Two of this trio, belonging to the scene’s core group, are not pictured, as they are

most likely getting ready for a performance – getting dressed (more accurately, undressed) and painted.³ Most of the people in the photo were on the Depo stage the previous summer with the noise-impro band-project Adatu Čurātāji (“Needle Pissers”), after which the club owner expressed his displeasure and reluctance to see them there again (maybe that is why the Maxxima members only signed up under completely new pseudonyms and wore their friend’s DIY balaclavas during the performance). On the trash can on the upper right of the photo, you can see the Adatu Čurātāji logo that one of the band members had put on a few months ago.

If it weren’t summer, most of the people in the photo would be wearing classic DIY crust punk patch pants. In terms of visual aesthetics, this punk sub-genre is one of the most visible in the scene. While tattoos, piercings, dreadlocks and heavily worn clothing are also typical of other subcultures, crust is one of the dominant styles in the scene. T-shirts, patches and stickers, as well as other paraphernalia such as the bulletbelt, show that extreme metal (thrash, black, death) is also close to these young people.

The legible logos of bands and events show the use of the scene’s own merch (Pidari, Humanicide, MOFX), but the scene’s contacts with similar underground scenes in neighbouring countries are also apparent. The T-shirt of the Tallinn black/death band Goatsmegma or the sticker of the Vilnius crust/death/grind band Strangulatorius (on the red bottle) were most probably obtained at their concerts in Riga or by seeing them at a Lithuanian or Estonian underground festival. The second photo shows the patch on the battle hat of the new Tallinn punk band Keskkool.

One of the characteristic and distinctive features of this already quite spectacular scene is the excessive face-painting. In this picture, only two of the girls have relatively intense facial make-up. The predominant facial beautification is colouring with elements of black metal, early punk, gothic and hippie styles. Before getting into the core group, the girl in the top right corner of the picture always came to concerts with a full face of make-up, and in a different style. This is

³ See Balčus’s Instagram video: https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cu6ZMXU5fPZ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA== (last access 27.09.2024).

Figure 1. 20 minūtes slavas, Depo [20 minutes of fame, Depo], 19.07.2023 (Balčus 2024a: 66).





Figure 2. 20 minūtes slavas, Depo [20 minutes of fame, Depo], 19.07.2023. (Balčus 2024a: 166)





probably one of the techniques for newcomers to the scene to make their desire to belong to this community particularly clear. Once you have gained this acceptance and recognition from the group, it is no longer rational to put so much effort into the detailed beautification of your face, which can so easily get lost or damaged (in the rain, sweat, moshpit).

The same girl can be seen to have a badly scarred arm. This is one of the signs and symbols that is easy to see and sticks strongly in the visual memory. Some young people in the scene do not hide such scars and perhaps even deliberately show them. There are several young people in the scene with extremely scarred hands. However, only the use of statistical methods would tell us whether their proportion here is higher than in other social groups, communities or society as a whole.

The second picture shows the same day and event, but no longer off stage, but in front of the stage itself – in the moshpit. Maxxima is performing and several of the people from the previous photo are now in the audience. They have not only come to listen and support their friends, but they are doing it ultimately – by moshing. Two of them are wearing “band merch” – plastic bags from the cheap supermarket chain “Maxima”.

One of the big values in this scene is moshpit. The band members interpret a good moshpit during their set as success: “[...] that was and is the main thing I want to achieve when I perform, so that everyone who wants to can have a good moshpit, so that it’s trash but everyone has a good time.” (Vents)

For a part of the audience, whose average age is around early adulthood, it is also a coveted experience. The relatively frequent injuries sustained in the moshpit are neither conscious nor desirable, but at the same time they can be an object of pride.

I am the man on the right with the long hair down and the bloody face. In the middle of the concert, while I was actively running around in the moshpit, a man flew into my forehead and broke my eyebrow. At that moment I didn’t feel anything and didn’t even know that something had happened to me (I could have been a little dizzy), but the other person

couldn’t stop asking me for forgiveness. Of course, I gave a thumbs-up and kept running. I walked out and all my friends were shocked by my bloody face. I kept the ice from the next bar and decided I didn’t want a big scar. So I cycled with Lauma to the medical centre where they put six stitches in me. (Raivuha)

One of the differences between this scene and the Latvian underground music scenes of the past decades is the much higher proportion of girls, both among the musicians and the audience. Here you can see that even in the moshpit about half are girls.

As far as this photo shows, the outfit of the audience is quite eclectic and different from the core group outfit. The classic orthodox punk standard – a punk studded leather jacket and (especially coloured) mohawk – is a rarity in this scene. In the scene, people are often accused of poserism, especially when the only thing you are trying to make stand out is your extravagant appearance.

Kristiāns is one of the central characters in the scene. He attends concerts very regularly and is trying to start his own band; he also makes DIY jewellery accessories and tattoos. He has performed poetry and performances at events organised by Arnis Balčus and is one of the most frequent photo models in the book *Scēna* (Balčus 2024a).

Photo nr 3 was taken at the main scene event, Riga Punk Picnic 2023, held at the open air venue Fukushima, a remote location on Ķīpsala Island in Riga.

It was the last day I had long hair, the next day I cut and dyed the ends red, I’m showing my healed scars there and I’d had a bit to drink. My chin was bloody, because 2 h ago my friend had pierced my dolphin bits (one fell out and had to be re-pierced). I put corpse paint on my face, I was very active doing it at the time, it was my go-to for every punk event. The guitar pick [in the neck] is from the 2022 Calico [authors: scene’s band] concert at the Depo. I made the bone necklace myself out of chicken bones. (Kristiāns)

Since then, his scars and tattoos have grown even more in number.

Figure 3. Kristiāns, Fukušima, 1.06.2023. (Balčus 2024a: 222)



Comments

One of the limitations of this kind of transdisciplinary photographic method and journal publication is the selection of published images, whose reliability as research data is seemingly further undermined by the small sample. By choosing the most striking images (people, images, situations), – a selection that takes place in several stages, starting with what is selected for photographic capture – a distorted picture emerges. Visually, we record and better remember the so-called spectacular subcultures and their most prominent representatives, even though they are a minority. It is a minority not only among all young people but even among their subculture. It is visible in the photographs of Arnis Balčus published here. For example, the completely painted faces, which seem to be one of the most characteristic and distinctive features of Rīga's new scene, are a distinct minority even at the most important scene concerts and festivals.

By photographing and studying this scene with the method of photographic art, Arnis Balčus has one basic explanation and hypothesis about its visual image, which he regularly expresses in public:

The body is the only thing that these young people possess and it becomes not only a means of asserting their identity, but also a tool of protest. Alongside music and art, self-harm, tattooing, gender fluidity, sexual self-determination, and antisocial behaviour are forms of resistance against the feeling of inevitability that one cannot change anything in this world. (Balčus 2024b: 239)

This interpretation is close to the operational hypothesis of Jānis Daugavietis, who explores the scene using social science methods (biographical interviews, participant observation, statistical analysis, netnography, etc.). The study of this scene, including the use of visual methods, provides arguments in favour of the two classic theses of music subculture research: class oppression and aesthetic preference. Although these appear to be quite different interpretations, they should not be seen as contradictory. Firstly, cases can vary: in one, the use of transgressive music and challenging visuals is a protest against a socially subordinated position, such as growing up in a deprived area or in a low-income family;

in the other it is just a middle-upper-class youth playing with different visual identities. Secondly, we can apply the concept of class to youth as a social group. One of the ways in which this “class” can express its anxiety about its future prospects is through the symbolic means of different subcultures.

The photographs show protest and symbolic resistance. In many cases, young people's aesthetic choices (in music, clothing, and behaviour) are so deviant and extreme that they can hardly be explained by aesthetic pursuits and a desire to be different, or by the social oppression thesis. Therefore, subcultures can also be seen as psychological or even psychic deviations from the norm. This is evidenced, for example, by the effects of self-mutilation or obsession with moshpits often seen in photographs. Psychological problems and mental health are an important topic of intra-scene communication, according to knowledge gained through other research methods. When thinking about the theoretical model of the scene, this leads us to include not only places such as music clubs or popular meeting places, but also specific mental health institutions. It should be noted here that these have always been closely linked to the control of dissent, including subcultures such as Soviet hippies (Fürst 2021; Zolneroviča 2025 [in print]).

The tendency of fans of intense and rebellious musical genres (i.e. punk, emo, goth and metal) to transgression is long known and obvious, as are attempts to find a link between the consumption of such music and various forms of psychopathology. When studies have been carried out on the relationship between these two indicators, the most frequent conclusion is that a relationship may exist, but that there is no clear and simple causality between them (see ter Bogt et al. 2021; Hughes et al. 2018; Martínez-Ferrer, Stattin 2019; Varley et al. 2022; Young et al. 2014). Just because there is a higher percentage of depression or self-harm among goths, punks or metalheads, it doesn't mean that this is the result of transgressive music and styles. Such young people are also found in the Riga scene, and often they do not hide their problems. The scene is tolerant and sometimes perhaps even supportive of various unconventional practices, such as self-harm. In a way, integrating into such communities

is also a coping strategy in a potentially hostile society. The various forms of transgression in extreme music are known and accepted (Kahn-Harris 2007), but subcultural researchers (sociologists, anthropologists) do not have the tools to include this aspect in their theories. Psychologists, psychiatrists and public health specialists are responsible for this. Similarly, in the photographic documents of the Rīga scene we see the possible effects of psychopathology, but as a social scientist or photographer we do not have the specific competence to interpret them. At the same time, through photographs and their sociological processing, one can also record and bring to light these kinds of “hidden” histories, but again at the risk of being accused of merely glorifying self-destructive behaviour.

Visual social scientist Sarah Pink (2013) uses the term reflexive awareness. By calling for a reflexive approach, she is not only referring to and discussing the age-old (impossibility of) objectivity, which has been written about, especially in visual sociology, but also accepting that social reality itself and how people perceive it is subjective. The taking, selecting, processing, selecting for publication, publishing, and communicating of documentary photographs is in fact a method driven by subjective factors, producing not only research data, but also a story, hypotheses and even claims. This is not something that should be argued about, but rather reflected in the process of understanding and interpretation.

A second methodological note when using documentary photography as a research method concerns the range of codes needed to decipher visual images (Bourdieu 1993 [1968]). In the case of the codes studied in the article, the thesaurus of codes consists of at least 50–60 years of symbolic values of rock music and its subcultural subgenres (hippies, metal, punk, post-punk, gothic, extreme metal, etc.). Such knowledge can be acquired in various ways, for example through photo-elicitation techniques or through researchers’ prior knowledge, as in this case. It is important to note here that documentary photographs cannot in themselves provide reliably interpretable facts; their analysis is always based on knowledge acquired in other ways.

Howard Becker has made a thought-provoking suggestion: “If we cannot imagine or discover a visual image that embodies our

understanding of a concept, we might take that as a warning that the concept is not explicitly related to its underlying imagery. Looking for an appropriate visual image might help clarify the relationship.” (Becker 1974: 21) While broadly agreeing with this, we also re-emphasise this aspect of the photographic method and the use of photography as research data for acquisition and analysis: it can provide material for new concepts, conceptions, and the generation of hypotheses.

Depending on future research needs and design, we can put forward different hypotheses or research questions based on the analysis of the photographs used in the paper, and apply this to the broader corpus of Arnis Balčus images. If it is a quantitative study, we can ask, for example, whether the gender ratio in the scene is as shown in the photographs, i.e. broadly in line with the age cohort. We can make similar hypotheses about other socio-demographic parameters that appear visually, such as age. Is it as narrow an age group as it looks in the pictures? We could also quantitatively analyse different preferences in musical taste by measuring different kinds of correlations between visual and musical styles, combining them with various other social, political or psychological factors. For example, are the musical tastes of girls and boys in the scene much closer than is traditionally assumed and confirmed in many studies?

In a qualitative approach to research design, the visual images and readings in the pictures would lead us to different kinds of questions, with the hope of answering them with different kinds of methods. For example, this could be an in-depth exploration of the anxiety, transgression and apparent “safe place” in the photographs. Not forgetting the increasing convergence of arts and sciences nowadays, as well as art-based methods and praxis as the starting point of this article, the interpretation of photographs with social science tools can also serve other kinds of purposes and needs, both applied (e.g. systematising and describing cultural heritage) and artistic (e.g. serving as an idea for new photographic art projects).

To summarise the use of documentary art photography in the study of the transgressive underground music scene, three uses should be highlighted. First, photographs can be

seen as legitimate research data, the content of which is available for various kinds of social analysis. Secondly, photographs can be one of the sources of information that help to raise and clarify hypotheses or research questions. Thirdly, photographs can be used as a means of obtaining additional information, for example through the interview process or simply by asking insiders to comment on what they show. A particular characteristic of documentary photographs, especially those of the kind produced by Arnis Balčus, i.e. sharp photographs in which details are well highlighted, is their affective, non-representational dimensions (Rowell 2024).

Jānis Daugavietis Talks to Arnis Balčus About His Photobook *Scēna* (2024)⁴

J. D.: A few years ago, I started to study this scene as well. On the one hand as a sociologist, but also as a historian, and as a melomaniac. I want to research this scene, document it and enjoy it, because I think it is an important social phenomenon and a valuable producer of cultural heritage. There has not been such a large and intense underground music scene in Latvia for at least 30 years. There are some very good bands out there, and even if it is just those bands, I think they should be documented and preserved and supported to some extent.

What is your reasoning, how do you argue that this scene is so valuable that you have to go and put so much effort into photographing, documenting, publishing a book, organising an exhibition and all this other stuff that you've done?

A. B.: Well, it's not terribly far from what you said, but certainly the first impulse was the feeling that this is something so gorgeous and unprecedented that you can't find anything similar in your experience. Then, of course, you start to dig in and study and look and go to events and also to kind of evaluate and see some kind of correlations or some kind of trends.

J. D.: How much do you think the fact that you have not only a Master's degree in Arts, but also a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences in Communication Studies influences your photo-

graphic style? Does this non-arts academic background influence the way you look at the world, the way you photograph?

A. B.: It would definitely give you a broader perspective, it would allow you to interpret what you do not only in an artistic context but also in various other contexts.

J. D.: When you are photographing something, especially if you have a series or stories in mind, do you also think of photography as research? Do you have any research questions, hypotheses?

A. B.: Classically, definitely not, but in a broader context, I think yes. Usually, the process resembles a typical research project – I have a topic and/or a geographic location within which I gather material (take photographs). Then, I select the images and group them to create my argument or artistic statement. Unlike a classical research project, my result can be more abstract, ambiguous, intuitive, personal, and visually challenging.

J. D.: In your photographic practice, how important do you think the differences in social status are in the scene, obviously between you and the young people you photograph? Because photography is communication, and in communication there are always these power relations that are determined by social status, gender, and often age. How do you experience this, if you experience it, when you take photographs? Maybe young people don't even recognise you as a well-known Latvian photographer, at least at first?

A. B.: Well, even now, no. The moment you pick up a camera, you are already in a position of power, and consequently you are already exploiting something, whether it is a landscape, a situation, people. It depends on how we look at it. Yes, and I'm aware of that, and it's not just when I'm photographing a scene, but in general. With a photographer's camera, you are somehow in a position of power, and at the same time you are perceived as a threat.

The camera, as I always say, is my way of opening some doors that I wouldn't open otherwise. I can get to places where I might not have got to without the camera.

⁴ Excerpts from an audio interview about Arnis Balčus' book *Scēna* (Balčus 2024a).

J. D.: If I were to ask you to do a very general and quick content analysis of your photographs, what are the most frequent themes that appear in this book?

A. B.: First of all, it's portraits, people who have been photographed with them knowing it. Most often I approach the person and ask: "Can I take your picture?" 99% say: "Yes." Of course, there are times when they say no, and then I don't take photos either. Secondly, it's events or situations, shots that I've been looking for and capturing. Then there are close-ups of bodies.

In general, I am a photographer who goes to a concert and sometimes doesn't even get to the stage. That happens. So in my case, it's not even a story about what's primarily happening on stage. As a sociologist, maybe that's why you have such a peculiar feeling about this result in general, how valid it is to talk about the music scene. Music dominates there, but we see it as a kind of secondary thing in these images.

In my creative career I have always been interested in marginal things. Probably also in the context of the scene, I'm interested in what's going on out there, in a corner somewhere, where *končiki* (cigarette butts) are thrown or bottles are tossed, or someone is sitting there or ... What happens on stage is the least interesting to me.

You don't need to show an insane amount of facts to tell the overall story of a scene, just a few. [...] Because in this case, too, through these supposedly only a few people, through these relatively small fragments, you can still construct a larger story of what the scene is. Clearly, there is no way to include everything, it is simply not possible, and there is something that has to be given up.

I think there are also people in or around the scene who consider themselves veterans, from about 25 to 50 plus years old. They probably look at these young people as a kind of milkweed that the wind has now blown in in some concentrated way. They think that when the wind turns again, it will blow them away and then they will go somewhere. Then they, the old ones, who are the real scene, will outlive everyone. In that sense, you could definitely say that my interest and my book is about the fluff that was blown in that moment in such a concentrated way.

The whole book is also certainly a subjective view, despite the fact that the source material is

already at the same time a kind of document of an era. This is both an advantage and sometimes a disadvantage of photography. On the one hand we see it as evidence of something that has happened, as a document, but at the same time it can also be a truly artistic installation. In my case, I'm trying to say that it's both, how it's at the same time a testimony to the times and at the same time it's my artistic setting, which is, of course, subjective.

I teach documentary photography, and then this is like a hobby horse for me. I don't think it's possible to have an "objective view" at all. It's just a myth that there is such a thing. We call something that a majority can agree fits their idea of what it might be, something we call objective. Then we call it objective. If the majority cannot agree, then we say it is subjective.

I think there could be an interesting aspect to the research about the role of photography in shaping the identity of this community. Taking photographs and being photographed is a ritual of belonging to this social group, and it is as important as listening to music. In the past, it was exchanged with cassettes, now with Arnis Balčus's pictures in [Instagram] stories.

Photographs are always interpreted. The book *Scēna* can be seen as documentation of the scene, and then my pictures confirm your observations (existing hypotheses), but equally they are my (relatively new) constructions, actively creating perceptions and meanings. If photography (and sharing it on social networks) has some role to play in shaping the identity of this community, both on an individual and group level, it sounds like an interesting research topic. I'm just thinking about it at the moment, that the images are also reference material for the scene. They show the motifs that many people also repeat because they know that's how they are supposed to look (e.g. they kiss specifically, or take typical poses, etc.). The book shows examples of how you should dress and behave if you want to feel part of the scene. Whether I have done this consciously or unconsciously (i.e. how the construct came about) is irrelevant.

If we look at this book, we can already see that colour is not the only thing. That would probably be the primary thing that anyone would see: how colourful it is, how spectacular the young people look, their faces are sometimes painted

too, the clothes are so different, with patches and descriptions. It's all colourful, of course. That is certainly one fundamental part of the book, but there is another dimension, which is that behind the colourfulness there are some of their everyday problems, mainly emotional and mental. And the way they realise themselves. The body, which is

the only thing they have, becomes their platform through which to project themselves, including their tensions, frustrations and stresses. I like to say that it is their protest against the fact that they have this feeling that they cannot change anything in the world.

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Interviews

We reached out to the 12 young people seen in the two close-up photographs twice online (apart from a few brief conversations with them during the concerts), explaining that the following academic article was being written and would include three photographs of them. In May 2024, through a web survey and open-ended questions, they were asked to anonymously or non-anonymously tell us what was seen in the three photographs chosen for the article. Two responses were received. In September 2024, they were all sent a personal Instagram direct message with a link to the manuscript with four open-ended questions (described in the "Ethical considerations" section). We received more detailed comments from four people.

Riia uus *underground*-skeene Arnis Balčuse dokumentaalfotodel

Jānis Daugavietis, Arnis Balčus

Artikli eesmärk on näidata, kuidas kasutada dokumentaalses stiilis kunstfotograafiat pigem suletud ja transgressiivse subkultuuri sotsioloogiliseks uurimiseks. Autorid keskenduvad Riia uuele *underground*-muusika skeenele, mille keskmes on punk DIY-kultuur (Daugavietis 2022). Esiteks võib selliseid fotosid käsitada uurimisandmetena, et sõnastada uurimisküsimusi või analüüsida neid nagu ükskõik millist muud tüüpi andmeid. Teiseks viitab fotode kasutamine kunstipõhise uurimismeetodina kunsti olulistele eesmärkidele – tõsta esile ja jäädvustada ilusat, erilist ja omapärast. Seetõttu on artiklil ka järgmine kultuuripärandi diskursusest tulenev ülesanne – anda Riia uuest *underground*-muusika skeenest fotoetnograafiline ülevaade.

Artikkel algab lühikese metodoloogilise mõtisklusega fotograafiast, mis pakub sotsioloogiale legitiimseid uurimisandmeid, viidates kultuurisotsioloogia klassikutele Pierre Bourdieu'le ja Howard Beckerile, kes mitte ainult ei kirjutanud fotode kasutamisest teadusuuringutes, vaid ka rakendasid neid oma akadeemilistes uuringutes. Kuigi mitut fotograafia meetodit on visuaalsotsioloogia ja antropoloogia distsipliinides kirjeldatud ja kasutatud aastakümneid, on fotode avaldamine akadeemilistes uurimustes haruldane, välja arvatud valitud illustratiivsetel eesmärkidel (Holm 2020). Artikli teoreetiline osa põhineb muusikaskeenede (Bennett, Peterson 2004; Straw 1991) ja subkultuuride uurimisel (vt. Bennett 1999; Frith 1981; Hall, Jefferson 2006; Hebdige 1988; Muggleton 2000), mis ei ole ei ühtne ega ka järjepidev.

Uurimisandmeteks on kolm fotot, mille on 2023. aastal teinud fotograaf Arnis Balčus (avaldatud 2024. aastal autoriraamatus „Scēna”). Fotograafi stiil on etnograafilisi eesmarke silmas pidades eriti kasulik – teravad ja hästi valgustatud pildid võimaldavad selgelt näha väiksemaidki detaile. Artiklisse valitud fotod toovad esile visuaalsed koodid ja brikolaazid, mis on Riia skeenele tüüpilised, eristades seda samas sarnastest skeenedest teistes paikades ja muudel aegadel. Skeenega seotud visuaalsed kategooriad on välja töötanud Daugavietis oma varasemates ja käsil olevates uuringutes ning välitöödel, kasutades teisi meetodeid: heli- ja videodokumentatsiooni, osalusvaatlust, intervjuusid jne.

Fotode analüüsile eelneb üldisem kommentaar dokumenteeritud ja uuritud skeene ning selle ajaloolise konteksti kohta, näidates selle kohalikke juuri ja pärandit, nagu ka kuuluvust rahvusvahelistesse subkultuuridesse. Seejärel järgneb fotode lähilugemine, pöörates erilist tähelepanu visuaalsetele koodidele ja sümbolitele, mida tõlgendavad ja selgitavad nii artikli esimene autor kui ka noored ise.

Artikli kokkuvõttes arutatakse interdistsiplinaarse fotomeetodi eeliste ja piirangute teemal, rõhutades, et dokumentaalfotod on hea teabeallikas, et sõnastada uurimisküsimusi ja hüpoteese, olemata pelgalt kunstilised objektid või kultuuripärandi säilitajad. Artikli lõpetab katkend sotsioloog Jānis Daugavietise intervjuust fotograaf Arnis Balčusega, milles autorid arutlevad nimetatud skeene pildistamise protsessi ja selle nähtuse tõlgenduste üle.

Tõlkinud Brigitta Davidjants