

SUMMARY

As part of my thesis, I created an installation piece “The Anatomy of a Funeral” that is centered around my own staged funeral. Based on the culture of photographing the deceased in Estonia and the depiction of the departed in art by selected authors, I created a photo series where I am in the role of the person in the coffin. The photo series is accompanied by video clips documenting the rehearsal of the performative funeral day, showing the process of creating the practical work.

The preparatory work for the practical part included a survey conducted among funeral photographers, whose responses provide a brief insight into the work of Estonian photographers in the field of funeral photography. The analysis of the responses is grouped under four general questions: who is the client of funeral photography, what are the visual characteristics of funeral photography, how does the work affect the mindset of funeral photographers, and how funeral photography is presented today for the clients. Additionally, I recall my own experiences attending funerals and provide an overview of the photographic documentation of two funerals I have been to.

The survey revealed that in the eyes of photographers, the tradition of photographing funerals will not disappear any time soon, but the work of professional photographers may be influenced by the continuous improvement of built-in camera quality in smartphones. The client for funeral photography is usually a representative of the older generation, who still remembers the tradition of photographing funerals and who may have limited skills in using cameras (in phones). Historically, funerals are captured in images of close relatives and mourners, the deceased in the coffin, expressions of sympathy and farewells, rituals at the cemetery, close-ups of flowers, wreaths, candles, and ribbons.

Photographers described the essence of funeral photography as delicate, serene, and sincere, with the capturing of funerals done with respect and reverence for the deceased and the mourners. The profession of a funeral photographer requires empathy, which paradoxically affects the photographer's emotional state – one respondent found the process of photographing funerals uncomfortable and mentally exhausting. In general, it is

said that photographing funerals is work like documenting any other event. The tradition of photographing funerals has its history, but the previously common analog techniques and printed photos in family albums have been left behind – today, funerals are mainly photographed using digital cameras, photos are being handed over digitally, and only few photographers actively use black-and-white photo editing style.

In the second chapter, I focused on substantive and visual sources of inspiration and the life period that prompted the topic of the thesis, during which I maintained gravesites in the local cemetery as a teenager to earn pocket money. Seeing Andres Serrano's photo series “The Morgue”, I was inspired to find that death can be visually very poetic.

In the third chapter, I describe the process of creating the practical work through its technical aspects, the styling of the subject, and the creation of the spatial installation. The rehearsal of the funeral day is captured in VHS-style video, which serves as the documentary of the performative action, and self-portraits shot on analog film convey the visual language typical of the funeral photography genre and the more poetic visual side of funerals. The video and photo series are part of the spatial installation, which is built around the documentation of my funeral.

The process-based approach preceding the final installation provided insights into the work of funeral photographers, which generated reflections during the preparation of my thesis. I realised that, due to my sensitive and insecure nature, funerals are not events I would want to photograph myself. This made the play-through and documentation of the staged funeral through the genre of funeral photography even more important, as I would not be able to take on the role of a professional photographer at a real funeral. I believe that my created photo series is beautiful and delicate, a commonly shared characteristic of funeral photography, while still retaining the rawness and boldness typical of my style, which is further expressed in the installation.