

ahorn magazine

Interview with: Andrea Diefenbach

Andrea Diefenbach (born 1974) lives as a freelance photographer in Wiesbaden. In 2006 she finished her studies in photography at the University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld. In 2007 she won the Wüstenrot award for documentary photography for *AIDS in Odessa*.

1. It is incredibly difficult to talk about the work you've done with AIDS in Odessa.

It's hard to find something to add to the writing that you've included in the book, where you tell us every single story of your subjects. Your approach to the subjects is very quiet. It seems that you possess a large amount of patience. It's almost like you tried to listen to the person in front of you, to understand the place he/she lives in, before taking out the camera and shooting the photograph.

How did the project start? Did you find some particular troubles on your way? In particular, I guess, it must have been quite controversial to begin with this project.

The Odessa-project was my exam from the photo-school in Bielefeld. So there was a bit of time-pressure, first in finding a subject and then doing the project in about two months.

When I was reading about the AIDS-epidemic in Ukraine I was surprised, I didn't know that there is an AIDS-epidemic inside of Europe. When I did some more research, I knew soon that I would like to do a project about it.

I decided to work only in one city, choose only a few people and do little stories about them – instead of trying to capture “the whole thing” – people, hospitals, drug-using, the work of NGOs... I thought it would tell more if I only show few people and really try to understand their stories.

I started to search for people with the help of two small NGOs in Odessa, but found it important also to get in touch with people who were not in contact with a NGO, because most HIV-positive persons in Ukraine are not. It was two months continuous seeing and searching people. – With some people it was easy to work, they were always happy to see me. Usually I came for a visit and we just talked and I took pictures. With others it was more difficult – about five even stopped and I couldn't go on seeing them. I really learned to get a bit more passionate and stopped trying to force things. Don't ask me how often I was sitting somewhere with Maxim, my interpreter, having coffee and thinking about a “Plan B”, because someone didn't show up, opened the door or answered the phone.

2. In the introduction of “Aids in Odessa”, the photographer Boris Mikhailov stated: “Why is it that, again, foreigners are better able to represent us than we ourselves can?” You worked on this project with the consciousness of being a foreigner. How much has this condition affected your way of working? Do you think that you have worked with more distance and rationality?

I have the feeling it made a big difference that I came from another country. On one hand, people trusted me a lot and were very open – they were not afraid that I would have any prejudice against them other than Ukrainian people often have against HIV-positive people.

On the other hand I think I kept some inner distance, even I came very close – because it was not my own country – I didn't have to switch between my normal life and them – I was there for ten weeks and did nothing else, but somehow knew, I would leave. I guess sometimes it was much harder for my interpreter than for me.

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3. Your representation of AIDS victims is full of empathy. We don't have to be afraid to see cruel images in your book. The photographs touch us deep inside, reflecting a feeling much more intense than pain. The words, on the other side, are a perfect explanation of what we can't see. Would you like to tell us something about the relationship between images and text in your book? How much is it important for you to tell us every single story? How did you find your subjects; was there any kind of selection?

I tried different ways with text and pictures – in the first dummy the text was even in the back of the book. I wanted that the pictures could develop an own feeling – but at the same time the stories are very important for me. I did the project to tell something about the AIDS-epidemic, it was not to take nice pictures only.

So the text had to be more present, it was too complicated always to look back and forth if you really wanted to read it – and besides I wanted that people read it. But captures I found too disturbing again. So I ended up with the text in front of each chapter, hoping it can drag you even more inside the book if you read it, and doesn't disturb the rhythm of the pictures if you don't.

And yes – I selected people, where I found the story and the person interesting. But sometimes I started with the feeling this is maybe only an "okay" person – and then took some of my best pictures or what happened together with this person made it a strong story. And the other way around, too – there were people I found so very interesting and important for the story... and in the end I didn't use the pictures, because it was all only medium.

©Andrea Diefenbach, Nanasha from *Aids in Odessa*©Andrea Diefenbach, Nanasha from *Aids in Odessa*

4. At the end of the book we find the story of "Tanja and Jura". This series shows us: Tanja's empty bed; Tanja's death; Jura that survives to his significant other. Until this story we were never concretely faced with death, even if we felt its presence throughout the book.

Which is, in your opinion, the role of the photographer in telling a story concerning death and sufferance? How did you feel as an observer?

I started taking pictures of Tanja about six weeks earlier, when suddenly her condition got worse. I found it important to follow her story even beyond her dead – how could I have stopped seeing her – and besides of this Jura was still there... It was hard in a way taking these pictures and I was also pretty involved at this point. Me and Maxim were almost the only people Jura could talk to and helped him doing the last things for her in the hospital. That made it more difficult personally, but I knew he agreed that I take all these pictures. In the end I took pictures in situations, I wouldn't have thought before that I would or could.

The whole Odessa-project is about death – there were two other people dying while I was there – so it was important to show it somehow. But I prefer not to show everything only for showing it.



© Andrea Diefenbach, Tanja from AIDS in Odessa



© Andrea Diefenbach, Jura from AIDS in Odessa

5. Looking also at your other works we see that you were always interested in social issues and aware of catching particular human experiences. You have a documentary attitude but in your photographs there is always your personal touch. How is AIDS in Odessa related to your previous work? How did you arrive to this point? Could you tell us something about your background and how did you start with photography?

As many others I started pretty early – taking pictures and working in the darkroom of my grandfather at the age of 14 maybe. I did an apprenticeship as photographer after school, but this was at the studio of an advertising photographer. After working mostly as assistant, I started studying photography. Only then I began with documentary – and did nothing else anymore...

It is true many projects during my studies led somehow to *AIDS in Odessa* – one of the last things I did in school was a story about a woman suffering from Cystic Fibrosis. That was when I understood that what I can do best, is working close to people – since then I think about this more, when I am choosing my projects.



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6. How do you start a new project? What are you working on right now?

Often there is something sticking in my mind for months or years – most of the time, I start with it then sooner or later. After the Odessa-story I did only magazine-assignments for about a year. But since last year I am working on a story about labor-migration – it's a project about departed families: the children left behind in Moldova and their parents working mostly illegally in Italy. I came to this through an assignment – a “typical” Moldova-story about women trafficking.

About one third of Moldova's working population has left the country to work abroad trying to ensure a better life for their families; mostly there is no other possibility to earn enough money. The cash flow from migrants to their families is already double the state budget. The consequences of migration in such large numbers can be seen all over the country. Especially in the villages the population consists of old people and young children whose parents went abroad.

I decided to look behind all the big statistics of migrants and remittances and accompany some families. How are the children living alone or with relatives, how the parents, how do they feel, how do they communicate – there is this incredible mini-bus-system – and it's also a story about homeland, missing ...

Interview by Anya Jasbär and Daniel Augschöll