



Anna Reich: The grass outside our homes

November 11, 2017 – February 4, 2018



Cpl. Schroeder, 2008 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 24 x 32 inches
From the series *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*

As we approach all the transitions in our lives, we inevitably begin to imagine what life will be like when things change. From the first day of school to the last day of school, from the beginning of adulthood and first jobs to relationships, from illnesses and losses to planning for retirement and beyond, we plan for, we dream of, and we pretend what the next shift will bring to us.

While everyone faces momentous decisions and great challenges in life, few things can compare to the moment when, voluntarily or not, someone enters the military during a time when large numbers of personnel are heading into combat. However, it is an especially important moment when someone makes the decision to enlist knowing that the result of that decision will be a trip into a war zone.

It was a group of such decisions that drew the attention of Anna Reich in 2008. While in college, she knew a group of young men from her hometown who had just made the decision to enlist; they made the decision knowing that either Iraq or Afghanistan would be their likely destination. Though operations in Afghanistan had begun seven years earlier, the numbers of U.S. military personnel had been continually increasing. In 2009, the number would double from 34,000 at the beginning of the year to 67,000 at the end. The number would increase to 100,000 by the end of 2010. Troop levels in Iraq remained constant in 2008, and then began decreasing over the next two years.



Algimantas, 2015 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 16 x 22 inches
From the series *Lithuanian Afghanai*

Concerned for the safety of the enlistees and trying to understand as fully as possible their expectations, Anna began working on a photography series she later titled *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*. This series documented them enacting scenes born both from their experience of war through films, photographs, and history and from their realistic understanding of what lay ahead for them. After fitting them with authentic World War II fatigues, Anna worked with the young men to create images representing their thoughts—both their hopes and their fears.

The work on *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* deeply impacted Anna. She writes, “The experience of making this work motivated me to volunteer at VA hospitals in Boston and Chicago, specifically at the Psycho-social Recreation and Rehabilitation Centers, where I spent 18 months (20+ hrs/week) teaching coping strategies and reassimilation skills to veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries, and combat-related psychological disorders.”

Anna’s most recently completed project is an outgrowth of this continuing concern with war veterans. She received the support of a U.S. Fulbright Research Grant and a Robert Rauschenberg Artist As Activist Grant. The resulting photographic project, *Lithuanian Afghanai*, examines the lives of Lithuanian Veterans during the Soviet War in Afghanistan from 1979-1989 and through their reintegration into

Lithuanian society. For three months, Anna interacted with 22 veterans in their homes and throughout their daily routines to create images that provide an intimate and unvarnished portrayal of their reality.

To give the Lithuanian veterans an opportunity to speak beyond their portraits, Anna interviewed them about their war experiences and their lives after returning home. Each of these statements is presented in the gallery along with the portrait. Presented here are three excerpts from the portraits illustrated in this brochure:

Dalius Didika: "The first year I did not think about the war at all. I would not talk about it. With time, I realized what could have happened. We were really lucky. When I did talk about the war, I would then dream about it—almost like it was a movie. Little is helpful, but things are easier when you can help someone else. Things are very different now. Between 1987 and 1991, veterans were very popular; but now everyone has forgotten about us. We just want acknowledgment. Not all wars are righteous. Every war has injustices. This war was not our choice. Our sacrifice should still be acknowledged."

Jonas Vaitkūnas: "I had many nightmares for the first 6 months after returning. It was always as though I was dying. I started doing sports again and tried to have a normal life. I had to go back to Afghanistan one year after I returned. The militias wanted to send 3 people. As fate would have it, I ended up not going. One of the other men who went had to come home early, because he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Of course, given the choice, I would have skipped that part of my life. It was a pointless war. The war lost many lives. Many people were injured. All of that was meaningless and unnecessary. It was a big mistake for Russia to go. No one really asked us."

Algimantas Baranauskas: "When I got out of the army I had already finished my studies so I just went to work. By the next year, I was married. The first year was difficult. I drank a lot and had many bad dreams that would make me wake up and need a cigarette. When I drank, all I wanted to do was fight."

The title of this exhibition, "The grass outside our homes," is the loose English translation of "Trava u doma," the title of a famous song from the Soviet Union about a cosmonaut missing his home. As Anna explains, "The veterans in Lithuania loved this song—it came out in 1983 and they



Iconic Portrait, 2008 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 24 x 32 inches
From the series *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*

understood the lyrics on a very personal level because of their lengthy deployments. In addition to US veterans empathizing with Lithuanian vets missing home while on deployments, the title also connects to the project *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* because the enactments were staged in the fields and hills around my home community and participants went on to serve in the military."

Anna Reich's ability to conceive a photographic project and then to work intimately with her subjects produces powerful results. We know that Anna's primary concern is for the physical and psychological well-being of those who fight on foreign soil for their countries. But she uses her camera to maintain as strong a sense of objectivity and authenticity as possible, as she explores the emotional, even vulnerable stories told by soldiers. Photographs from battlefields have been common since the Civil War. Through these carefully composed photographs, Anna Reich brings us closer to the too often untold personal stories before and after conflicts.

Anna Reich is Assistant Professor of Photography at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD.



Ben, 2009 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 24 x 32 inches
From the series *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*



Jonas, 2015 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 16 x 22 inches
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