

REVIEWS LONDON

Zofia Rydet

The Photographers' Gallery

By Marzena Jarczak



Zofia Rydet, Podhale, 1984, gelatin silver print, 9 3/4 × 11 3/4". From the series "Sociological Record," 1978–90.

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Presenting a project as monumental as Zofia Rydet's "Sociological Record," 1978–90, conceived as an attempt to document every household in Poland and ultimately comprising some 27,000 photographs, inevitably opens the field to multiple curatorial options. The London exhibition featured just over one hundred prints made during the artist's lifetime—a rare opportunity given that only a fraction of her archive was printed before her death—accompanied by video, notebooks, and books from her other photographic series. This presentation shifted attention away from scale and toward the core of Rydet's working method, from the act of photographing to her strategies of classification.

Rydet began working on "Sociological Record" in 1978, at the age of sixty-seven, when she had already established herself as a photographer within the Polish art scene. As documented in Andrzej Różycki's film *The Infinity of Distant Roads. Zofia Rydet Observed and Overheard, A.D. 1989* (1989), shown in the gallery, her method was deliberately direct. She knocked on doors, introduced herself, shook hands, complimented her hosts, and searched for what, within a given interior, she instinctively found worth capturing. She portrayed people alone or in groups, positioned against a chosen wall, using flash, wide framing, and deep focus. Every detail of the living space functioned as a psychological extension of self: from the visual mirroring between a small girl in the foreground and a doll in the background (*Podhale*,1984), to the monumental cross mounted on the facade of a modest concrete house (*Brzezinka, Upper Silesia*, 1989).

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Rydet didn't beautify. The photos show interiors where a single room may serve simultaneously as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom, shared by people, poultry, and stored potatoes (*Kasinka Wielka, Podhale*, 1983). They also register economic hardship, for instance an elderly woman with almost completely worn-out shoes (*Biały Dunajec, Podhale*, 1984). As Allan Sekula noted in "Reading an Archive. Photography between Labour and Capital" (1981), archival projects often pursue completeness and coherence through compulsive accumulation, yet remain internally contradictory. Meaning is detached from context, while an empiricist model of truth prevails through systems of order. Rydet counteracted the potential chaos by organizing her photographs into thematic series such as portraits within domestic interiors, facades of houses, decorated windows, or recurring portraits of Pope John Paul II.

The selection at the Photographers' Gallery foregrounds these serial structures, revealing how Rydet examined personal space. The project may be situated within the lineage of sociologically oriented photographic practices from the 1970s onward, as well as that of earlier typological projects such as August Sander's "People of the Twentieth Century," 1892–1954.Yet "Sociological Record" is not, as a whole, a search for an essential or ultimate notion of Polishness. While the material allows for ethnographic and sociological readings, Rydet neither covered the entire territory of Poland nor documented all ethnic and social groups, nor did the archive engage with the political contexts at the time. This knowledge should be kept all the more firmly in mind when, as in this exhibition, only small fragments of the work are presented, in this case focusing on photographs from rural parts of the country.

If echoes of Edward Steichen's vision of a universal human experience in "The Family of Man," which traveled to Poland in 1959–60, can be discerned, Rydet's project is ultimately more idiosyncratic. Her method, in which observed reality is ordered according to shared motifs, serves less to homogenize than to amplify difference and bring out variation. Even the simplest portraits from the series "Women on Doorsteps" register individual choices of posture and dress, while many photographs could belong simultaneously to several series, suggesting that life resists stable classification.

At the same time, traces of romanticization are difficult to ignore. In Różycki's documentary, Rydet remarked that the poor people she photographed always seemed happy. In her view, photography "prolongs life to some extent." It is telling that she committed herself to a project impossible to complete within a single lifetime. By photographing the here and now, she was producing images destined for later—when neither their content nor her ability to take another photograph would remain.

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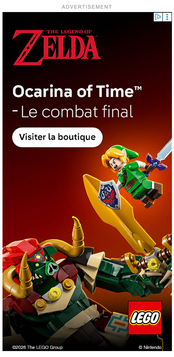
Cy Twombly, Staten Island beach, New York, ca. 1951. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg, © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

APRIL 2026

VOL. 64, NO. 8

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