

The Apple Harvest or Art in Latvia 1945–1995: Between Personal and Ideological Time

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The Soviet Apple and the Cézanne Apple

In 1948 when discussing the works of Latvian artists in the Museum of Latvian and Russian Art, the writer Meinhard Rudzītis said: 'One may still paint an apple, but it must be a Soviet apple...' At the same time, in the provincial Latvian town of Tukums, the artist Leonīds Āriņš had devoted himself to a decades-long project of evaluating space through colour, working within the paradigm of 'Cézanne's absolute painting.'²² To paraphrase, one could say that his interest was not in the Soviet apple, but rather in the 'Cézanne apple.'

The first post-war decades (1940s–1960s) were not just a tragic, but also a strange time. Then, in the fine arts, there existed the pronounced, ideologically dictated, canon of socialist realism in parallel with echoes of the pre-war traditions of classical modernism.

1944 saw rapid changes in the overall view of Latvian art. The foundations of these had already been laid in 1940 when the independent state was occupied by Soviet armed forces and subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union. An order from the Latvian SSR Soviet of People's Commissars had already established the Administration of Art Affairs whose management included by no means average artist. By January 1941, the Administration received a list of 120 themes to which the Soviet artist should direct his attention including 'Theme No 28: The 1905 revolution in Russia. A rally. The orator is held high on the workers' hands. Red flags;' or 'Theme No 120: The RC(b)PCC Politburo inspects a large new facility.'²³

War and the occupation of Latvia, this time by Nazi Germany disrupted the flow of personal time even more. Some artists adapted again to the new situation, i.e. their lifestyles were dominated by a pronounced escapism. A few artists went to war, each on his chosen front, others, for example Felicita Pauļuka (then still Janke), the Jewish star-to-be of Latvian drawing, were forced into hiding from the Germans and yet others left for Soviet Russia. The biggest changes, however, came with the Soviet reoccupation. The advance of Soviet forces led many eminent artists to flee to the West (for example Vilhelms Purvītis, Ludolfs Liberts, Valdemārs Tone, Augusts Annuss and others). On the other hand, a relatively large number of artists of Russian and other nationalities arrived from the Soviet empire.

The introduction of the Soviet system was immediate. Power was now in the hands of the Central Committee of the CPSU and membership of the Artists' Union was a prerequisite of exhibition work. The question is, did all artists regard this as a tragedy? Undoubtedly not, because the artist was suddenly given a guaranteed material existence. The espoused conviction of bourgeois Latvia's old master, Prof. Vilhelms Purvītis, that an artist should, alongside his creative work, find security in a 'normal occupation' seemed redundant in the new order provided, of course, the artist complied with the ruling directives. And most did. The cultural weekly *Literatūra un Māksla (Literature and Art)* in 1947 published a survey of the works artists proposed to make. In it we see that the cream of Latvian art had planned to paint the shock workers of a sock factory (Aleksandra Beļcova), Maxim Gorky at the Riga seaside (Eduards Kalniņš), portraits of political workers (Otto Skulme), a sculptural portrait of Stalin (Teodors Zaļkalns) or a female gymnast (Kārlis Zemdegis).

Russification swept the 'fraternal Soviet republics' and went hand in hand with the ideological nightmares of the new socialist order. The Baltic states had at least been spared during the 20s and 30s. Now, even the minutes of the Artists' Union executive meetings were often in Russian. Likewise, many of the preserved inventories of Artists' Union collections of 'those days' are in Russian. The 'progressive art of the Russian people' was propagandised.⁴



Otto Skulme
*Lenin with the Latvian Riflemen
in the Kremlin, May 1, 1918, 1957*
oil on canvas, 160 x 195*
coll. of Museum of Art 'Arsenāls,' Riga

Thus the changes affected the whole of the artist's public existence. If he wanted to exhibit, he had to become a member of the Artists' Union, and its executive body, which was subordinate to the Communist Party Central Committee, diligently controlled its members' 'correctness.'

The Arts Fund, itself subordinate to the Artists' Union but a constituent of the USSR Arts Fund, regularly bought works shown at exhibitions. Ministries of Culture annually signed huge numbers of contracts to buy works on the strength of artists' sketches and these surrogates filled the collections of state art museums. A large part of the previous decades' artistic wealth was considered to be harmful, i.e. bourgeois nationalist, and was stored in special collections. Access to these was only by special permission and of course the ordinary viewer had no chance of examining the works therein. Only towards the end of the 80s did these works appear either on permanent display or at exhibitions. There is archival evidence of the physical destruction of several 'especially dangerous' works.⁵ The late 40s and early 50s saw re-registration within the Artists' Union – a purge, in effect. The official line in the press was that there existed 'an unwelcome phenomenon... that is work at "two easels." This can also be observed in the youth. They paint one state commission, ostensibly fulfilling the demands of socialist realism but another work follows the direction of formalism with its different methods – old methods which artists were using twenty years ago. Often, artists will tell you it is just dabbling. I, on the other hand, think that it is a conviction that "tomorrow's art is formalism." If that is the case then they are trying to preserve a bourgeois nationalist tendency in a Soviet society.'⁶

At that time the Artists' Union expelled 50 members, a further 21 were demoted to candidate status and prominent artists were sacked from their positions at the Art Academy. 'Cheap formalist' was the label given to the likes of the painter Rūdolfs Pinnis (1902–1992), who at one time had trained in Paris and now carried on the traditions of Cubism and Fauvism; the water colour painter and elegant master of the metaphor Kurt Frīdrihsons (1911–1991)⁷; the expressionist landscape artist Ansis Artums (1908–); Oļģerts Jaunarājs (1907–) who would later become an abstract painter⁸; Jānis Pauļuks (1906–1984) the expressionist figuralist, who used a Pollock-like touch and a drip technique⁹; and others. The dates behind the names are significant in that these artists, who carried on the painting tradition of classical modernism, lived or are still living a long life. Some of them would, from time to time, rebel too noticeably and would be denied exhibitions, but Kurt Frīdrihsons found himself in a Siberian prison camp from 1951–1956 because of his passion for French culture and his membership in the informal, so called, 'French Group.' However, all these and other masters whose creativity was tied to the avant-garde currents of the first half of the century and who carried on painting in their own styles, nevertheless strove for a place in the ordinary exhibition process and membership in the official artists' organisation. One has to be extremely careful when evaluating the first post-war decades because their unequivocal and generalised interpretation has created many myths that are, in fact, hard to substantiate.

Naturally, in relation to the Baltic States, which had enjoyed a period of classical modernism, we cannot talk about the unequivocal stylistic dictate of socialist realism. Even the influence of salonism in the Latvia of the 30s reduced the pressure of the official style of the Soviet state of the late 40s. This, in effect, was a continuation of the Russian 19th century *Peredvizhniki* tradition with a heroified and ideologically allegorical content. Another view that emerged in the 90s in Latvia, seemingly in contrast with Western-held stereotypes, is that culture and art in Soviet times were spheres of 'conscious protest' and that all who participated, with few exceptions, did so in the cause of truth and the nation. Of course this view is nothing



Jānis Pauļuks
Felicitā ar avīzi, 1945
oil on canvas, 116 x 100
coll. of Museum of Art 'Arsenāls,' Riga



less than myth creation driven by the need for self-justification. Among the artists of the day there were some very fine gradations whose exposure has, to date, not merited a single monograph. Of the following there can no doubt; the majority of works of artistic merit, on whose base the myth of an exceptionally distinguished Latvian school of painting rests, belongs to the above-mentioned artists (Jānis Pauļuks, Rūdolfs Pinnis, etc.) and their contemporaries. They were painters who worked in a certain, recognised style, with their own palette and temperament and whose oeuvre was officially exhibited. To this day their approach continues to find new followers.

After Stalin's death and especially during the 'thaw' of the 60s, the press carried numerous reviews praising artists whose work contained perceivable Expressionist and Fauvist elements. In no sense were they

nonconformists. They simply painted and their work was bought. They were not bent on regurgitating instilled nightmares as were the careerists, whose motto was: 'The path of literary and artistic development is laid out in the Party Programme.'¹⁰

It is interesting to note that, in this nightmarish world, one found not only distinguished mediocrities, but also some fine colourists. To this day we can see still view the afterglow of Cézanne's apple, albeit in a simplified and more sensual form, in the 1954 work by the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic Honoured Artist, Chairman of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union, Leo Svemps. Concurrently, we can read in the press of the day, scores of well-worn phrases churned out by the ideologues and given to him to read, amongst them the likes of: 'In landscapes one should portray nature as changed by Soviet man.'¹¹ The artist himself held several positions (with intervals in the 1950s) and was showered with various honours. He did, however, manage not to paint ideological works, just expressive landscapes, still lifes, and the occasional portrait. Alongside him there were, naturally, true socialist realists both in terms of form and content. It is worth noting that the ones who had least problems with changes of political system were the academic painters.

One example of an 'academic' was the Latvian Art Academy professor Jānis Roberts Tillbergs, who had painted parade portraits even in the 30s during Ulmanis' authoritarian presidency and also after 1945 being an acceptable court painter under both regimes. We do not know how pleased he would have been to learn that, some ten years after his death, his granddaughter married the budding artist Oļegs Ozoliņš. He adopted his wife's maiden name, and, as Oļegs Tillbergs, the organiser of provocative performances and installations, became the most notorious enfant terrible of Latvian art in the 80s and 90s.

Returning to the first post-war decades though, it must be mentioned that, alongside the official and semi-official artists there lived and worked others who were either refused membership or expelled from the Artists' Union in the 1940s and early 50s. Even up to the 60s it had not crossed their minds to become involved with the official structures. One of them, Leonīds Āriņš, who is also exhibited here, was to write in his diary: 'I've been lucky really. There's no street or museum named after me and I'm neither "highly honoured" nor a "people's artist."¹²

Another lone individual of the time (also participating in this exhibition) is Georgs Šēnbergs who never exercised even a minimum of self-censorship. Only in the 80s do we see an appraisal of his work taking place. The solitary life of these not particularly conceptual adepts led them to undertake profound searches within painting itself. Their colouristic renditions, with origins in the 20s and 30s, complement the gesture with strictly analytical research. As in the parallel

Leo Svemps
Still Life, 1954
 oil on canvas, 70 x 100
 coll. of Nina Ozoliņa

Western movements of the 40s and 50s we see here the introduction of conceptual moments in the seemingly subjective plane of the painting.

A true revelation was Zenta Logina's (1908–1983) first solo exhibition in the late 80s, which, sadly, came only after her death. Until then she had been known as a textile artist, but now the unprepared viewer was confronted with a torrent of abstract expressionism. Most of Latvia (even those with an art education) has still not heard of the artist's name and her inclusion in our exhibition will come as a surprise to many. Logina's personal time was absolute. Her work, done day in day out, was only for herself. Why would a person of pensionable age, suddenly begin to paint abstracts in the mid-sixties knowing that they would never be shown?

In the mid 60s, as we should remember, there appeared cracks in the iron curtain. Art literature, if only from the other socialist countries, was creeping in and this was decidedly more liberal than the available Soviet material. It may be said that the Polish magazine *Projekt* had considerable significance in the 60s and 70s for certain circles in Latvian art. However, many of these magazines, though carefully read, simply became sources for the accumulation of useless information. On the other hand, artists like Zenta Logina used the power of their talent to assess seriously the possibilities of abstract expressionism and, using its wide range, to tackle the painting tasks they saw as essential.

During the 60s, some Latvians were given the opportunity to travel to the West. This Western experience combined with an insight into Abstractionism and Pop Art began to be reflected in Latvia despite the prevailing conditions. Out of it came the very unusual imagery of Lidija Auza. The abstracted 'coolness' of its figuralism was complemented by an exceptionally temperamental and courageous textural covering.

One of the state's most officious art theoreticians and functionaries Ojārs Ābols was also given the chance to travel abroad and his fate is a typical example of how a Soviet apple exploits the opportunity to become just an apple. ('Ābols' means 'apple'). Ābols, who had for years painted countless symbols of the Soviet nightmare and written the most dogmatic and anti-formalist drivel, now began to paint metaphorically abstract pieces, attempted, quite adequately, to analyse the art processes in Latvia and, in later years, to review developments in the West.

As previously mentioned, a history of post-war Latvian art has yet to be written and therefore it cannot be rewritten. What we have consists of prefaces to albums of reproductions, chapters in various volumes of essays, and press articles written by many Soviet 'art theoreticians' without a single comprehensive monograph on the situation of art as a whole. This is not to say that all that has been written is worthless and untrue. It is simply that these countless literary efforts all toe the official line. The measure of quality we have adopted in this exhibition, the 'convertible value' of the artist's work, was absent in previous decades.

One could, I suppose, in this context just mention something which was supposed to be important once upon a (Soviet) time, i.e. the announcement by official art critics in the 60s of a new trend in Latvian art – the so called 'harsh style.' These by no means harsh artists obediently and profitably produced figural and expressively thematic pieces. Their colouring and composition did indeed differ from the canon of socialist realism. This manner of painting, not without its merits, was the platform for a new, official artistic elite. This elite was certainly more submissive and canonical than those old masters (Jānis Pauļuks, Rūdolfs Pinnis, Leo Svemps, Konrāds Ubāns etc.) whose creativity or learning process had their origins in the independent Latvia of the 1920s and 30s.



Lidija Auza
Sabile, 1962
oil on cardboard, 77 x 92
coll. of the Artists' Union of Latvia



Biruta Delle
Who was Odd in the Olive Grove..., 1977
 oil on canvas, 120 x 140
 coll. of the Artists' Union of Latvia

Newton's Apple and the Horse Apple

Perception of the other, in terms which were not purely personal, came to Latvia later than it did in the West. The unrest of the sixties, of course, did not physically manifest itself locally, but its resonance, in the sense of how one perceived life, was felt later, in the seventies. The painter Biruta Delle, who may justifiably be regarded as one of the most original representatives of existential painting in Latvia, wrote in the preface to her catalogue: 'I walked into a café in Valņu iela [a small street in Riga old town. H.D.] Good grief! The café was called the 'The Goat.' The French group was sitting at the far tables. I want to escape, but another group calls me and asks me to join them. These were people of a completely different kind. Uniformed in long hair and jeans. I too dressed that way. And so I slipped into the 'The Goat' as if it was home. They all called us 'Beatniks.'¹³ This 'French group' was not the one mentioned when referring Fridrihsons' deportation in the 50s. It was a group of young artists active at the end of the 60s and early 70s, represented here by Bruno Vasiļevskis and Imants Lancmanis, who were initially brought together by a common interest in 20th century French painting. Later, the tendency to rationalise led them to the precise co-ordinates of conceptualism. Their entry into the general Latvian art scene was relatively sudden. We can compare this suddenness with the popular story in science history of the apple falling onto Newton's head thus inspiring his theory of gravity. The conditions, just as in Newton's day, were ripe.

Reflection was making its way into art. Reflection that would, in the Latvian case right up to the early 90s, be combined with powerful imagery. Alongside the overwhelming quantity of salon works, the old masters and their adherents' exercises in colour, the new conditions saw the appearance of new thinking and new stylistics. One could, with certain reservations, classify these into three trends.

Firstly, the above mentioned French group's brightest artists were known for their strict analytical exploration of space, dimension, light and context. On a pictorial plane, the reflected fragment of reality was consciously organised in a way that excluded the element of chance. Here, a closed context, 'built' by the artist himself, was explored and its subsequent aesthetic clarity laid claim to a certain objectivity. The mastery of pictorial space was rooted in the artist's ethical hierarchy. Its keywords could be 'nature,' 'one's own and other histories' and 'the rational view.' The culmination of this detached view was, just as it had been in the West, hyperrealism or superrealism, whose most prominent representatives in Latvia were Miervaldis Polis and Līga Purmale.

These artists 'arrived' later than the members of the French group. Their work, then and now, features an interest in fiction and narrative (theatrical) production. It paradoxically combines pure stylistic hyperrealism with the elements of transavant-gardism. Even though all the above mentioned artists' works were seen at that time in nation-wide group exhibitions, their lifestyles and attitudes toward the art process in Latvia and the world were highly 'personal.'

The second trend that had its origins in the 1970s has been accurately described by the Latvian artist and art theoretician Jānis Borgs: 'The search for modern forms in the sixties and seventies led Latvian art down the paths of moderate Expressionism and even Surrealism. At the same time it sharply reinforced metaphorically figurative thinking and produced revelations of a pathetically social content reaching into intimately meditative or, if you will, reflections on general human philosophy...'¹⁴

Thus much original talent blossomed in the 70s, and their rationally constructed paintings

(Leonīds Mauriņš et al.), graphic pieces (Ilmārs Blumbergs et al.) or sculptures (Ojārs Feldbergs) formed their overall narrative and figural image out of complementary, intuitive, fragmentary elements. The influence of Surrealism is significant with Latvian artists often adapting its Polish variety. Individual mythology, which in the West was loudly proclaimed with installations, found its local variation in the form of easel painting with an emphasis on a harmonised synthesis.

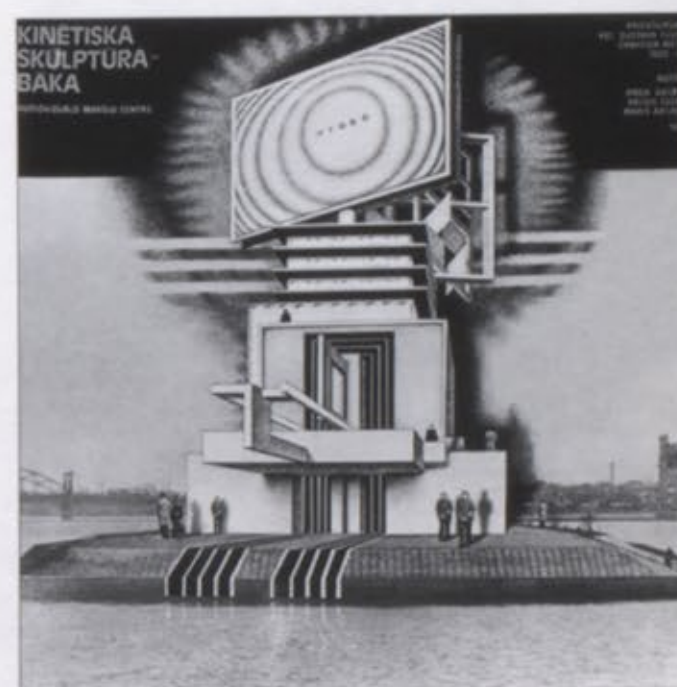
The third trend could be traced to 1920s Constructivist origins with visible signs of minimalism. Works of this nature were officially legitimised because of their closeness to the applied arts and especially the blossoming design of the 1970s. Behind the 'cloak' of applied art, environmental art or even architecture, long cherished conceptions were being directed towards 'poetry and construction.'¹⁵ In 1972, in the old stock exchange building in Rīga, there was the significant 'Svētki' (Festivities) exhibition, which boasted the works of 49 authors. The critics of the day had no problem in publishing the following view: 'The authors' scientifically based concept of the perception of space using sound, sight, articulation, and a kinetic sense is worthy of notice. This is a problem for science and psychology and will have to be solved by them. We can only discuss the world of the artistic image that has been locked away in these boxes. But here thoughts differ. Some see the exhibition as purely decorative, some as fine art.'¹⁶

The young environmental artists (Valdis Celms, Jānis Borgs), as well as some more traditional artists (Māris Ārgalis) turned their attention to the legacy of Gustavs Klucis, the Latvian born artist who worked in Moscow. Projects based on his drawings were realised and exhibited in the second half of the 1970s. However, in the late 70s, the hunt for the 'ideological enemy' in the Brezhnev era of stagnation also took its toll on the art world.

One of the then brightest personalities in Latvian art, Māris Ārgalis, had his career destroyed. Up to 1980, this artist, who had a pronounced intellectual bent and fanatical perseverance, devoted himself completely to the investigation of various models and systems through graphic images and drawings. His field of work was in the interaction of art and science, acknowledging both the achievements of minimalism in art and psychoanalysis in science. From 1980 the artist was denied the chance to exhibit and his 'personal time,' which had been already sufficiently personal in the eyes of officialdom, became totally 'personalised.'

Disregarding the regular waves of reaction that were typical of the early 80s and which laid the foundations the inevitable 'perestroika,' the 70s should be seen as a generator of many powerful impulses in the most varied walks of life. It was precisely in the 70s that one saw the formation of an alternative culture, a culture that began to overcome the confines of the narrowly personal. The first rock concerts were being staged, poetry rich in subtext was widespread and there was enormous interest in the theatre (in those days people used to queue all night for tickets). Stage design and poster art were no longer utilitarian, but had become a vehicle and forum for new conceptual declarations. 'Flower children' organised photographed performances and in society, (i.e. the Latvian part, because it must be remembered that almost half the population was and still is, formed by immigrants), there was a reawakened interest in the legacy of the past, which the Soviet system had tried to erase from the nation's collective memory. One may, in part, agree with the view that: 'powerlessness, the inability to assert oneself legally, engendered on the one hand, either apathy or aggression and, on the other, a whole complex of spiritual and intellectual camouflage. This was oddly similar to the official routine where any event or information became almost irrational in its coded system.'¹⁷

One has to take into account though, that many quests with their origins in the 70s, (we are referring here to our point of interest – personal time), have a pattern of completeness – oddly



Leonīds Mauriņš
*Variation on the Theme of Rachmaninov's
Composition 'Spring Waters', 1976–1978*
oil on canvas, 130 x 180
coll. of the Artists' Union of Latvia

Valdis Celms, Māris Ārgalis, Anda Ārgale
*Kinetic Sculpture-Lighthouse. Centre
for Audio-Visual Arts. Proposal based on
Gustav Klucis' graphic sketch 1922–1924, 1978*
gouache, graphite,
indian ink on photograph, 90 x 90
coll. of Māris Ārgalis



Ieva Iltnere
Three Girls, 1994
 oil on canvas, 340 x 190

enough, when examining the achievements of many personalities, one comes to the conclusion that they had indeed realised their creativity.

Side by side with the more radical conceptual investigations in the late 70s and early 80s, we can see some new and already 'brightly crystallised' existing talent in painting. One of these, also participating in this exhibition, is Boriss Bērziņš, whose artistic biography began in the late 50s together with the artists of the official Soviet elite-to-be. He too, as did many of his colleagues, received the highest recognition, albeit in the latter half of the 80s, from the Soviet system – honorary titles, a studio, a professorship. Notwithstanding the above, his time as a painter is remarkably personal. He never sought any special honours, those were bestowed upon him by the 'immediate context.' Over the years it seems that the special talent of this wise, mild mannered figure has been a kind of 'justification' for all the surrounding mediocrity – 'Just look how we're in step with Soviet times yet we can still manage to respect the loner too!' In his diary, the already mentioned artist Leonīds Āriņš, wrote about Bērziņš with naive wonder: 'Boriss Bērziņš' brown still life in the exhibition "Autumn '76" is absolutely flat. It is so unique and of such craftsmanship, the like of which I haven't seen anywhere else in the world. He is the only one in our art who deserves to be called world class.'¹⁸ Elsewhere in the diary he does admit that Bērziņš' painting does owe some elements to Rothko and Braque, but 'nothing stands in total isolation – all we can hope for are great achievements.'¹⁹ If we accept that the measure of great art is its ability to develop the art process itself, then Bērziņš' influence has yet to be determined. In any case, his almost monochrome oeuvre (browns, yellows, dark greys), which reduces depicted objects to simply a means of creating the pictorial plane, can be regarded as his personal contribution to some wider tradition of Western contemporary art.

The beginning of the 1980s was noteworthy for the appearance of a new and active generation of painters. This generation was, in the following ten years, to manifest itself in Latvia, as a widely recognised group and is represented here by its most individual personality – Aija Zariņa. When assessing the work of the group and that of the painters who were stylistically close to it, critics write of the 'feminisation' of painting.²⁰ True, there was and still is a considerable number of active and prominent women in painting, but to call it a social phenomenon of the Baltic States would be unfounded.

The new trends in Latvian painting of the 80s had many counterparts in the rest of the world, for example German Neo-Expressionism and the Italian Transavant-garde. The work of the new painters can, in general, be recognised by the large formats, overall expressive spreads, and dynamic rhythms of the paintings, the pronounced chiaroscuro contrasts achieved by the use of local colours and figural compositions. Mythological themes dominated and still dominate (an apt contribution to the spirit of the age!) as do figural messages, whose generalised images permit the introduction of a definite mood of deep thought or philosophising in their interpretation. In the context of local art, their work differed in the scope of its gestures. However, we can talk of a personal view in this, seemingly very personal, tendency in only a few cases. Even though the work of these artists shook the self-righteousness of the official 'academics,' it was still absolutely prey to socialist market forces – not in the ideological sense, but in its relationship with society.

The most visible of these artists (i.e. those who were included in the local hierarchy of values), except the ever-independent Aija Zariņa, enjoyed the patronage of the Communist Youth League. They were given all sorts of honours, prizes, grants, and obtained the highest prices for their works. For many of them this meant a life free of material worries. This art was not 'dangerous' because it was recognisable and could even be manipulated on the level of criticism.

Looking back on the past ten years, we can see that this generation of painters is now, in these early stages of capitalism, starting to feel economic and psychological discomfort. This can be recognised as the, historically well defined, affirmation of a decadent layer in a degenerating society.

Aija Zariņa has rejected the academic overtones, characteristic of her closest colleagues. In the last fifteen years, her talent has evolved toward clearer sense of form and a marked intensification of emotion. Despite a ban on exhibiting in the 80s, the twists of fate and history have given Zariņa an international reputation, rare for any Latvian artist. In very recent years, another artist from the above mentioned group to have made a similar 'jump' is Ieva Iltnere. In contrast to Zariņa's sensual and precise forms, Iltnere's work is recognisable by its meditative peace, its conceptually weighed out theme and the paintings' surface.

The 80s saw 'developed socialism' claim to be a true society, though one in need of reconstruction. Anyone with any sense could see it was the Soviet nomenklatura's last ditch attempt to hold on to its privileges. To a large extent it was successful. The governments of recently independent countries, including 1990s Latvia, all include ex-nomenklatura members. In the art world too, the nomenklatura artists have preserved their, if not economic then 'spiritual' status because it was still nurtured and protected these last ten years.

Regardless of later developments, the mid 80s were a time of marked liberalisation in cultural life. Obviously, people tend to forget that, even in 1990, libraries had 'special collections' and, as late as 1988, one needed KGB permission to travel to the West. Despite that, there was an ever increasing influx of information and a growing critical ethos. Even though the 1984 large scale 'Nature. Environment. Man' exhibition (which, by the way, saw the first interdisciplinary works and installations) was closed prematurely, and the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR closed down an unopened group exhibition in 1985²¹ the process was irreversible. Artists were turning to what is known in the international art world as the language of contemporary art, encompassing both the ranges of form and content.

As late as the 1970s, the KGB was interrogating two Latvian schoolboys – Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš. They had published the hand-written, and unsanctioned, magazine *Zirgābols* (*Horse Apple*). Boiko was denied the opportunity to study at the Riga Secondary School of Applied Arts. However, the KGB could not predict the future of these two. They could not foresee that these youngsters would become knowledgeable in post-modernist theory, adepts of 'approximate art,' founders of the multimedia group 'Workshop for the Restoration of Non-existent Sensations,' and adventurers in music, poetry, video and staged photography. Their achievements in personal time have been accumulated in the fortunate present, if one can call those people who have informal and creative disciples fortunate. At that time there was no question of publicity; just for their own enjoyment they organised ritualised events – walks to the Riga outskirts, readings in foreign languages, and wrote novels in verse...

It was no wonder then that the basis for the first, serious venture of contemporary Latvian art abroad ('Riga – The Latvian Avant-garde' West Berlin, 1988) was just this group.²² When the West Berlin curators from the NGbK art society²³ first came to Riga, they were greeted by an already developed art world, which met the criteria of 'international convertibility.' Side by side with the 'approximate postmodernists,' there were other, no lesser interesting, artistic personalities.

The informal artist's group of Ojārs Pētersons, Juris Putrāms, Andris Breže and Kristaps Ģelzis had been surprising the Riga public for some time with their large scale (200 cm x 110 cm) screen prints. Together with other, similarly disposed graphic artists they would either intensify the neo-expressionist gesture by creating generalised metaphorical images,



Juris Boiko
29 *Self-Portraits*, fragment, 1994
mixed media: computer graphic,
photograph, salt, video, 31 x 24



Andris Breže
Column, 1995
 Riga city space, wood, coal, wire, height 600



Oļegs Tillbergs
Joining the Universe, fragment, 1990
 jet engine, video, dung, aluminium plates,
 painting etc., 350 x 2000 x 1500
 Exhibition Hall 'Latvija,' Riga

introducing refined elements of pop culture on a graphical plane or creating grotesque and paradoxical collages. They had no establishment pretensions, earning their daily bread by other means – design and layout work, book illustration etc. Their time was personal only in the sense of the relationship between the outsider and the ruling taste and official hierarchy. It was precisely these people who sought a more effective means of communication with the observer by organising actions in the Riga city environment. Their art, too, was actively communicative. Their themes were simultaneously poetically, socially, and even politically charged. 1987 saw a new, exceptionally significant, forum for expression – the magazine *Avots* (*Source*). This publication gathered around it not just like minded people in the fine arts, but also writers, photographers, critics and publicists (Its circulation in 1987 was 90000!). Among its artistic contributors were Sarmīte Māliņa, Kristaps Ģelzis, Ojārs Pētersons (who are also in this exhibition) and similarly minded colleagues such as the distinguished master of the metaphor, Andris Breže.

Besides perfecting their talent in graphics, these artists found means of expression in a genre that was to reach maturity in the early 90s – the metaphorical installation. The artists mentioned above, Oļegs Tillbergs and others, persistently developed their powers of spatial and contextual thinking. Right up to the mid 90s, the expressly poetic installation has been dominant. Its rationalism + poetry + unavoidable narrative expression is essentially tied to the materials used. Be they ready-mades, specially constructed objects or materials (even colours, such as the 'orange' of Ojārs Pētersons) their essence is attachment. The guide-book was often the artist's depicted image, ethically recognised, yet variously interpretable. The best examples are

when the genre in Latvia differs from that seen elsewhere in the world, i.e. where the imagery is combined with irony and alternative constructive thought (e.g. some of the works of Ojārs Pētersons and Andris Breže); when the sharp social message is encoded in the 'memory' of the materials but they are arranged, like a poem, 'in verse' (Oļegs Tillbergs); when representational problems are examined with the help of material, including, not only actualities, but also the limbo of cultural memory (Kristaps Ģelzis, Sarmīte Māliņa). This achievement by, essentially, a single generation of artists is only regarded seriously by its youngest and most inquisitive artist colleagues. Even in this new age, there is no financial or organisational state (museum) support and that cannot be excused purely on the grounds of a poor economy. (After all, the museums have found sponsors for, to their thinking, more worthy expressions of contemporary, but traditional, art.) The only institution in the country that goes some way to give financial and informative support to non-traditional artists is the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts – Riga, which was founded in 1993. (Of course one must not ignore the remarkable support of private sponsors both in financial and material terms). And, to be fair, without Nordic and Western support, which has enabled many of the above to participate in exhibitions abroad, these artists' aspirations would remain just dreams.

sponsors both in financial and material terms). And, to be fair, without Nordic and Western support, which has enabled many of the above to participate in exhibitions abroad, these artists' aspirations would remain just dreams.

The Latvian National Apple and the Apple Macintosh

The changes brought about by the regaining of independence in 1991 have not just carried with them an optimistic self reliance. Society was suddenly confronted not only with the notions of constant work and the constant affirmation of democracy, but also that of independent thought.

Yes, in the times of 'savage capitalism,' we can talk, completely objectively, about the social shock, especially when it comes to those sections of society that cannot fend for themselves (pensioners, orphans etc.). However, alongside of these real and genuine problems, there has been a torrent of articulated pseudo-problems. Under the new-found freedom of the press, the gates of tormented and complex ridden emotion have been thrown open. The old ideologues have had the ground removed from under their feet; the conditions of overall ignorance have conceived dubious 'prophets' who hide behind the mask of genuine curators of the Latvian identity. Yes, the West is blamed for the quickly adopted sub-culture in music, cinema and pornography, but there are constant verbal attacks on contemporary Latvian art as well. The unrelenting discussion in the press is unprofessional, it is not discerning and it does not relate to the essence and form of each individual work of art. This discussion is centred around one argument: This art does not correspond to traditional Latvian thinking, it threatens the national identity, etc. These processes can also be seen in the other post-communist states and their existence is not just a product of ignorance, but also of a lack of intellectual mobility in the particular country. Against this background of pitiful literary reflection, it is all the more encouraging to see the arrival of a creative and intellectually mature generation in Latvian art in the mid-1990s. This 'arrival' coincides with the increasing use of so called new media – photography, video, computers etc. These 25 year-olds are occupied with the problems of the perception of space, with depiction and perception processes in art itself, and with the compatibility of aural and visual stereotypes. Dominant in various environments, photo, video, colour and sound installations is a clear and easily read statement. There is no place for generalisation, because thought is shown in process. This has no expected resolution, but is an interval in the quest assisted by a seemingly non-compulsory image. As with their colleagues elsewhere in the world, this generation too is diverting from conceptual art (art that is centred around an object using context only as a reference point), to contextual art, where local and surrounding conditions are most important. These are conditions which determine the future work of art. Gints Gabrāns' installations and video installations, Anita Zabiļevska's video and spatial projects, Ēriks Božis' photo installations, the paintings and installations of Barbara Muižniece and other artists' work can all be viewed in this light. It might seem paradoxical that it is precisely these young artists, who, in the age of the Internet might possibly be criticised for impersonality and levelling, are most tied to that wonderfully named phenomenon, local sensibility (sensitivity to manifestations in a local and surrounding context).

Approximately ten years ago Hardijs Lediņš, an authority for several of these young artists, wrote an essay entitled 'The spirit of the Age and the Atmosphere of the Place.' The conclusions therein have lost none of their meaning. They are relevant to this exhibition and to Latvian contemporary art in general: 'In this situation, is it possible to say something essential, not only to one oneself and one's friends, but also to wider audience? I think it is. And the key could be the use of the dual code, characteristic of post-modernism. One half of the code could gain an important meaning from the local atmosphere – it could be represented in both a literary and semantic form or through local culture and traditions. The other half, in this instance, could be international and expressed in a popular, universally accepted form of language or through new technologies and materials.'²⁴



Gints Gabrāns
Rock Garden, 1995
 ceramic pots, small stones, 600 x 1200
 Pedvāle Open Air Art Park

* All dimensions given in centimeters.

¹ CVORA (f 230, apr. 1, 1. 112, pp. 1–3, additions in Russian) quot. from Nodieva, Aija, 'Uz saulaini tāli, uz sniegotiem kalniem...', *Karogs*, No 1, Riga 1989, p. 181

² see *Leonīds Āriņš* (catalogue), Tukums museum, Tukums 1994

³ Nodieva, Aija, op. cit. p. 178

⁴ The plenum of the Organising Committee of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union, *Literatūra un Māksla*, Riga 1945, 26th January

⁵ see *Literatūra un Māksla*, Riga 1988, 16th September

⁶ 'Izskaut formālisma paliekas Latvijas padomju tēlotāju mākslā', speech by Comrade A. Lapiņš (shortened), *Literatūra un Māksla*, Riga 1951, 11th March, No 10

⁷ Lapiņš, Artūrs, 'Latviešu tēlotājas mākslas attīstības ceļi', *Literatūra un Māksla*, Riga 1948, 14th March, No 11

⁸ Ābols, Ojārs, 'Piezīmes par divām izstādēm', *Karogs* No 9, Riga 1948, p. 957

⁹ 'Ceļā uz jauniem sasniegumiem' (Leo Svemps' shortened review at the 1st Congress of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union), *Karogs* No 3, Riga 1951, p. 255

¹⁰ see for example Zemzaris, Uldis, 'Pēc atklāšanas runas', *Padomju Latvijas Komunisti*, Riga 1963, No 4 or Zemzaris, Uldis, 'Lai sirds pieder komunismam', *Māksla*, Riga 1963, No 1

¹¹ 'Ceļā uz jauniem sasniegumiem', op. cit. p. 23

¹² Āriņš, Leonīds, op. cit. p. 23

¹³ *Biruta Delle. Gleznas* (catalogue), Riga, Jāņa sēta, 1991, p. 7

¹⁴ Borgs, Jānis, 'Pretspēku spriegumā dziedēta māksla, ieskats avangardisma attīstībā Latvijā', *Rīga – Lettische Avantgarde* (catalogue), Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, 1988, p. 77

¹⁵ see Ābols, Ojārs, 'Laiks, telpa un poēzija', *Literatūra un Māksla*, Riga 1972, 19th February

¹⁶ ibidem

¹⁷ Osmanis, Aleksis, 'Par dažām tendencēm XX gadsimta 80. gadu latviešu glezniecībā', *Doma-2*, Riga, Latvijas Mākslas muzeju apvienība, 1994, p. 119

¹⁸ Āriņš, Leonīds, op. cit. p. 20

¹⁹ Āriņš, Leonīds, op. cit. p. 22

²⁰ Osmanis, Aleksis, op. cit.

²¹ Ojārs Pētersons, Andris Breže and Juris Putrāms in the Gustavs Šķilters Memorial Museum

²² The exhibition 'Rīga – Lettische Avantgarde' was held in the West Berlin Staatliche Kunsthalle in 1988, the Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof in Kiel and the Weserburg Exhibition Hall, Bremen, in 1989.

²³ Neue Gesellschaft für bildene Kunst

²⁴ Lediņš, Hardijs, 'The Spirit of the Age and the Atmosphere of the Place', *Rīga – Lettische Avantgarde*, p. 79