

THE INTERRELATION OF CHAIN LINKS

This probably is your first interface with art from distant LATVIA. And, supposedly, only few will have a comprehensive notion of this country and its people. Therefore, prior to addressing art topics directly, a sketch of its historical context should be provided, as art never and nowhere develops in isolation from them.

Latvians belong to the small group of Baltic nations which is one of the more ancient branches of the Indo-European tree. This is a small group that in addition to Latvians includes only Lithuanians and Old Prussians. Of those, the Old Prussians have long disappeared in the mills of assimilation. These two living nations together with the Finno-Ugric Estonians inhabit the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Since ancient times that they have been in historical and cultural contiguity with their big Germanic and Slavic neighbours. Christianity entered Latvia from the west in the 13th century. It was then that the 700 years long German presence in Baltics, (known at time as Livonia) began. In 1201 the Bishop Albert founded the city of Riga which soon, in the next millennium, will turn 800 years old. Riga of today has a population of approximately 900 thousand (total population of Latvia – 2,5 million), and it is a modern, industrial and western-looking city with architectural features characteristic of German culture.

The great change in artistic development was marked by the beginning of the Gorbachov era. In the spring of 1984 the first conceptual and programmatic exhibition took place in St. Peter's Church in Riga, i.e. where things were called by their real names without any Soviet-type ideological camouflages and reverences. The exhibition stirred a great interest in the community and panic in official circles (it was closed before the appointed time and reviews in mass media were prohibited). However, it was already impossible to stop the avalanche. Very soon censorship was radically restricted. This meant a full creative freedom which, of course, was immediately put to good use. Latvian art converged with common trends and tendencies of Western art and as such saw its first recognition in 1989, in the Kunsthall Berlin with the exhibition *Latvian Avant-Garde* organised by NGBK (Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst). It revealed a vital and radical variety of contemporary artistic expression, which was not only a result of revolutionary social changes but a product of evolution that emerged due to a long fermentation process in a Soviet climate.

Here in Sarajevo is one of the greatest classics of that period who already back in 80s announced himself with unusually powerful works in the field of installation. It is OLEGS TILLBERGS. He started his participation in art life as a night guard at the Latvian Art Academy. His active spirit and intelligence brought him to studies at the Design department of same. The practised study exercises laid groundwork for his success with installations which at that time were seen as unconventional and produced a rather shocking effect upon the public. Olegs used large-size scrap iron from metal factories, coarsely hewed stones, a heap of Russian army boots... Later the artist's work shows elements of a monumental technogenous environment, airplane engines, wheel constructions, parts of a hull. Whatever material was used by the master, it always possessed a monumental trait and an extraordinary, even tragic dramatism and emotionality that cohered with the decline of the whole Soviet Empire and collisions of post Soviet society. Eventually these general lines grew into reflections of common humane problems. After re-establishment of Latvia's independence, Olegs Tillbergs gains a considerable international recognition. Among the achievements is also the *Ars Fennica* Great Award received from the hands of the First Lady of Finland. The award's gratuity is spent to purchase some used MIG military jets and written-off ships from the retreating Russian army. This also is material for coming installations. Olegs Tillbergs is the first artist who has participated in the major international art event – the São Paulo Biennial. There he displayed a gigantic work in a self-invented automobile lubricant "painting" technique. The list of Olegs Tillbergs

international exhibitions is rather dense and his installations have been viewed by art admirers in many parts of Europe. This artist is one of the most energetic personalities in the Latvian contemporary art scene who enhances his talent with excellent craftsman's skills and experience in many fields.

With the 90s came the new generation of artists who remembered the Soviet system only from under-the-table perspective. For the young the new situation is an organic environment and each striver finding his own place in it through his initiative and energy and not anymore as a resident of Olympia admired by society, but as an active business partner and participant. Probably also MIKELIS FIŠERS – the second Latvian participant of the Sarajevo exhibition – can be considered as one of this new generation. He also makes installations, environmental objects, paintings and drawings, however here one can sense a completely different approach towards art than is evident in the work of Olegs Tillbergs. Mikelis Fišers is a distinctly expressed social artist. His material is not so emerged in the technical media of art work, but in the mode of expression – provocation, challenge, being bizarre. He rummages in society as a nasty boy with a poker who chases ants about in their ant-hill. The titles of Fišers' art work and exhibitions as well as the titles of art reviews, characterise very well his creative activities: Reveille of Apocalypse, Sex'n'Spaceship, Technoparty, Anti-humanoid Spirit, Ecstasy Pills... Fišers always invites scandals and conflicts with the "proper society" and establishment. Fishers in his art is also a hooligan, who, like a wolf in the forest, performs to a certain degree the role of nurse. His art questions and taunts approbated norms.

The two artists who grew up and developed in different ages, nevertheless belong to the same chain as its two different links. There is a certain succession and development that links not only different cultural epochs in Latvia. There is a fulfilled gearing with art processes in the whole Europe and even the world created in local mentality. After having a closer look it will turn out that we are spiritual relatives also with the artists working in Sarajevo. Also Bosnia will appear much closer to Latvia than it seems when counting and measuring kilometres. We all are Europeans.

Janis Borgs
