

¹⁶ A Dialogue Between Consideration and Thought

The works of Ēriks Božis offer interesting evidence about the free, fresh way in which the traditions of Conceptual Art can be treated today. The artist's work usually involves making alterations to permanent fittings in the exhibition room or the urban setting, which can be interpreted as critical interference with public space and with visual assumptions about how art is experienced. But this demonstrative aspect is soon lost behind the works themselves, primarily because of their great sense of humour. This alone is proof enough that when it comes down to it, where Ēriks Božis is concerned, entirely different dimensions apply. What we find at the heart of this artist's works is first and foremost a torpedo attack on our perceptions, albeit one that comes creeping on velvet paws. The artist takes as his point of departure continuous research into optical phenomena and the mechanisms of the photographic representation of reality. This is not done in a didactic or demonstrative fashion, as in Op Art or Kinetic Art, although, in other respects, his work is not that far from them in terms of content. The treatment of optics and conceptual traditions in his installations creates reality traps in which the observer, initially without being aware of it, briefly loses contact with the terra firma of normal perceptions.

For his first individual exhibition at a museum in the West, Ēriks Božis increased the normal dimensions of a telephone box by a quarter. This enlarged telephone box, periodically fully functioning, was erected in a very specific context in the urban space: at Hötorget in Stockholm. Sculpturally, the enlargement is in itself a nice, ironic act, telephone boxes being industrially manufactured objects found only in strictly standardised sizes, laid down by the industry for specific reasons. There is no distinction between users of telephone boxes and exhibition visitors in this work. They notice the unusual dimensions of the box as they enter it, slowly and discreetly. Then they gradually realise what has happened to the public service apparatus in which they are standing. Ēriks Božis uses this sort of time-lag and double-take systematically in his works. But once the observer has become aware of this, he experiences a dialogue between observing and thinking, which aside, from the humour of the sculpture, is the actual purpose of the work. Reality is anything but self-evident and objects and dimensions in our post-modern, urban environment are determined merely by arbitrary decisions. Numerous artists in recent years have taken objects from everyday life and given them a slight twist. Critics often tend to refer to Marcel Duchamp's *Ready Mades*, but most of these works have less to do with life than they might at first appear. The *Ready-made* aspect scarcely plays any part for Ēriks Božis. Rather, his work involves the construction of an exact, ambiguous optical situation. The telephone box enlarged by a quarter stood in the corner of a square, and was positioned close to two other telephone boxes of normal size. It was positioned in such a way that when seen in the foreground, it seemed especially large, but when seen behind the other two telephone boxes it appeared to be of normal size, because of the change in perspective. Seeing this simply created and "disturbed" urban setting, and understanding it as such, we find ourselves shifted into an all-encompassing way of thinking about modern reality urban settings. This all encompassing dimension of observing contemporary situations is where Ēriks Božis' main interests and true potential for development lie.



Instrument. Blandteknik, förstoringsglas/Instruments. Mixed media, magnifying glasses, 50 x 150 cm

18 As an installation artist or sculptor Ēriks Božis is self-taught; he has consciously avoided the academic education of the post-communist art system in his native country. He has however had intensive training in photography, and his whole oeuvre can be seen as a reflection on photographic reality. This also applies to the work in Stockholm. Seen in conjunction with normal telephone boxes, the enlarged version is, one might say, "zoomed", as if enlarged by a telephoto lens. Photographic and optical strategies are discernible in most of the work that Ēriks Božis has produced in recent years. As part of a group exhibition in Finland, he set up a plastic magnifying glass in a supermarket and invited visitors to look through it. At the *Multilingual Landscapes* exhibition in Vilnius in 1996 he presented the same object in different sizes in display cases, in such a way that visitors were made to think they were seeing an optical illusion, which in fact they were not. At an exhibition in Riga during the summer of 1998 he divided the exhibition space into two with a wall in which he put two doors. One was opened by a doorkeeper whenever a visitor approached, whereas the other was regularly opened automatically, regardless of if a visitor approached it or not – it was opened "for invisible people".

The work for which he is best known in his native country is a "monument" of a special kind. It was created in 1995 for the exhibition with same name in the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Riga, and consists of a commercial set of three public telephone boxes arranged in a triangle. The telephone boxes were placed on a base far higher than usual, at the inaccessible height of about five metres. The Latvian capital suddenly had three public telephones that were out of reach to users. Instead they were visible from further away than usual. Here again, the work is constructed in an intelligent and many-sided way. The extra-high base, which transforms the open telephone box into a monument, merely carries through in real life what one would see optically when viewing a telephone box through the extreme wide-angle lens of a camera. Raising the telephone boxes also makes them visible from a distance. To passers by in the urban environment, they therefore look as if they have been captured by a telephoto lens. The observer's two incompatible optical sensations are in constant conflict. The artist explains in his humorous way that in the alienated telephone he has discovered the ideal monument for our age; a monument that all can see from far away which is about a communication act that ultimately proves impossible.

If Ēriks Božis stirs memories of the early Concept Art of the late sixties and early seventies, this is largely because of his simple, obvious material. The first conceptual artists also worked with simple things that had a direct impact on everyday situations, to bring art back to reality from the artificiality of Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism. On this level, Ēriks Božis has obvious affinities with the original driving force behind Conceptual Art. But the content and direction of his work is focused elsewhere, in attacks on perception and on the dictates of reality. The laconic forms adopted by Ēriks Božis may perhaps be reminiscent of the profound observations of early Existentialism. The artist however maintains that his starting point is always with visual facts, not philosophical concerns.

One particularly successful example of this was his work at Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg for the biennial *Manifesta 2* in the summer of 1998. Ēriks Božis appropriated two stuccoed rooms, which other artists had rejected as impossible to work with. He blacked out both rooms and erected flat light-boxes in front of individual stucco mouldings, which repro-

duced photographically the mouldings behind them, but stood out a little from the wall. The image was literally standing just in front of the real object, which was made to appear utterly unreal by the absurd element in the decor. As so often with Ēriks Božis, the arrangement was poetic. Neither of the rooms had ever been used for a work of contemporary art before. This gave them a very fresh feel, despite their old-fashioned style of decoration. Ēriks Božis' installation transformed them aesthetically into a refined and poetic laboratory of perceptual instability, with a versatility that dispelled any trace of didacticism and formalism.

Ēriks Božis one of the most promising young artists from the former Communist countries whose career, from his training at the College of Applied Arts in Liepaja to his current exhibitions, has only to a certain extent been influenced by Soviet reality and so is largely free of the forms of style that either affirmed or reacted critically to that reality. Conceptual Art has already been cited as having inspired the medium and the elements of his idiom, and this is not as far-fetched as might at first appear. The generation to which Ēriks Božis belongs has spent the 1990s familiarising itself with the formal and practical traditions of modern art in the same way as young art students have done in the West, but with an incredible wealth of information, in quite different circumstances. In Ēriks Božis' case, there is no fundamental distinction to be drawn between his work and that of colleagues of his own age in the West. The late nineties have witnessed the extraordinarily positive phenomenon of interesting young artists from parts of the world hitherto ignored by contemporary art receiving international attention and working alongside and on equal terms with their peers in the West. Ēriks Božis is one of the outstanding examples of this trend.

Robert Fleck