

# art for entertainment

#1.

In exhibitions like *The Baltic Contemporary Art Biennial*, artists and their work are necessarily perceived as representatives of particular nations and cultures. Since even the most scrupulous selection and well-defined criteria cannot avert a certain contingency of choice, any attempts to discover a sort of panorama of Baltic art in the work presented are bound to fail. In exhibitions like *Sybaris*, the artwork is meant to represent some general trends in contemporary art. Again, the sceptical part of one's soul keeps repeating that sometimes trends cannot be found anywhere but in the minds of critics and that art rarely fits well into the curators' conceptions. Still, it is hard to rid oneself of the desire for some more distanced perspective that might reveal general patterns and a global context that, hopefully, exist in contemporary art. As far as I can see, one of the functions of the events like *Sybaris* is to make us think about the interrelation of the local and global in art, general and specific, and reflect on this relation in a unambiguous way that is possible only when you find yourself wandering around the exhibition and looking at works of art. In Latvia, the last few years have been quite favourable for this kind of reflection, at least as far as local art is concerned. We have had a number of exhibitions that tried almost systematically to survey the major developments and historic periods of Latvian art in the 20th century. To name just a few, *Modern Painting of Sixties* (summer 1999), *Symbolism and Jugendstil in Latvian Fine Art* (spring 2000), *Meantime: Art of 1990s* (winter 2001) - all of them were notable for their attempts to represent the particular time or style in as many manifestations as possible. The necessity for such exhibitions was quite evident - a disappearance of ideological constraints that characterized cultural life in the Soviet Union was the major reason for a re-examination of the past. It is interesting that even when one thinks about art created before the Second World War or after 1991 when Latvia broke away from the Soviet Union, the subject of the strange society we used to live in keeps popping up. It is a perspective we cannot yet escape.

In addition to historical context, one notes the permanent influence of Western art on what Latvian artists did here. While today we would deny that one can make a distinction between „Western“ and „Latvian“ art, such a juxtaposition is certainly meaningful for the art of the Soviet Latvia and maybe even of the first part of the 20th century. The presence of global or rather Western trends is obvious in the works of Latvian painters or sculptors, still, it seems that, in the past at least, these trends were adopted having been calmed or „normalized“ in a way. I am not able to fully explain why. Most likely, one should look for a complex of causes and circumstances. In any case, visions of symbolists have quite often been transformed into simply pretty pictures, cubist experiments into decorative patterns, and Pollock's action paintings into a background for images of bathers.

#2.

Contemporary Latvian art seems quite international. Especially because it is rather hard to find some distinctive trends or, quite the opposite, „wrong moves“ in the art of today. Certainly it seems possible to describe some part of contemporary art as „hedonistic“ or „sybaritic“. If I were to define these terms, I would say they express certain *attitude towards* works of art, namely, art with „sybaritic“ qualities when one does not expect from it anything but entertainment. I think it is an attitude that is characteristic of consumers of

art, not so much artists themselves. Therefore, even those artworks that are intended as sublime, politically committed, or ironic of consumer culture, can turn out to be „sybaritic“ because the public perceives them as „just entertaining“ and produced for consumption just like TV shows or electronic toys.

No doubt, there are artworks that are not really meant to be anything more. For art critics such works can seem quite perplexing. On the one hand, they appear completely vain, on the other; they certainly can be enjoyed. Unless one wants to prescriptively determine what is and what is not art, one has to treat them somehow, for example to characterize and evaluate them. Unfortunately, not every category that is common in art criticism or aesthetics fit well. So one should borrow some notions from TV fashion shows where quite often everything is described as either „sexy“, or „gorgeous“, or „very feminine“. While they do not seem to tell very much about the object they are ascribed to, a certain clarity of attitude can be found in them, and it seems, there is no big demand for anything else. They are easy to use and can be applied interchangeably. Nevertheless, concepts that seem more suitable for contemporary art and particularly „sybaritic“ art are „the interesting“ and its opposite „the boring“. While both are widely used to describe artworks, neither of them is really legitimised by „experts“. The reasons for such discrimination are not easy to explain. „Well, that's *interesting*‘ may mean, ‘That does attract me, but I cannot tell why’, as well as, ‘Leave me alone, there's nothing really great about that, it's *only* ‘interesting’. So all kinds of great and not so great things alike can be described as ‘interesting’ [. . .], and this makes the notion too amorphous to be suitable for a decent philosophical analysis.”<sup>1</sup> Most likely the same reasons make it unsuitable for art criticism. Still, because they are not obviously related to the idealistic perception of art (with its stress on the genius, capacity to recreate beauty, presence of the sublime and transcendent in works of art), „the interesting“ and „the boring“ are categories that can be useful for those who do not feel comfortable with the idealistic conception. „Sybaritic“ art does not really fit into this idealistic conception, and we evaluate it first of all for its capacity to attract our attention. So, the interesting and the boring can be a good start for the thematization of this art.

If we return to the observations on the art scene of Latvia, I think it would not be wrong to claim that one cannot find „sybaritic“ art here as a clearly recognizable trend, although exhibitions like *Loop* (autumn 2000) that contained works of a group of art students or *Baltic Security!* (winter 2000-2001) in Arlanda airport seem to show certain characteristics of true „sybaritic“ art - a capacity to provoke our curiosity, make us smile, entertain us independently of the „deeper“ meaning we should see there, according to critics and artists. Notwithstanding some exceptions, Latvian art lacks the necessary conditions for „sybaritic“ art to flourish. „Sybaritic“ art needs a public, or rather consumers, who are interested in art, but do not expect to get much more than entertainment from it. I do not think we have such a public yet. Fifteen years ago exhibitions were visited by people who looked for an alternative to the dominant ideology, nowadays most of them do not feel such necessity, but they do not perceive art as a kind of amusement either. There are different reasons why people visit galleries and museums, but usually not because they expect to see something entertaining, intriguing, pleasantly shocking. Maybe we should wait for a couple of scandals related to art? Maybe we lack internationally known artists who could be perceived as stars? Certainly for „sybaritic“ art to exist, the expectations of those who perceive it have to change somehow.

#3.

At the same time, there are indirect and, one even can say, paradoxical ways „sybaritic“ art exists here. I think one place to look for „sybaritic“ phenomena is the art that aims to

blend artistic and non-artistic activities.

The 20th century brought artworks into the „white cube“ of the gallery and the 20th century took them out of it. I cannot think of any other period in art history that has experienced such abundance of pure „gallery art“ that is made for short period exhibition, is rarely seen outside museums and galleries, and sometimes does not survive the closing of the show. At the same time, many artists, some of whom called themselves dadaists, futurists, surrealists, situationists, members of Bauhaus school and Fluxus group, tried to widen the notion of art and blend artistic and non-artistic activities. Interventions and performances, *détournement* and *dérive*, site-specific artworks and environments - all of them have been used to make art and everyday life overlap. Joseph Beuys once said: „To be a teacher is my greatest work of art.“<sup>2</sup> If the same were claimed by, let us say, Rembrandt, one could easily discard it as a bit of fancy and hyperbolic way of speaking, just like we would not take a claim by some writer that his books are his children at face value or by my dentist that her work is equal to Michelangelo's. But in case of Beuys, one allows at least for a possibility that these words were meant to be understood literally, because in contemporary art any professional, commercial or political activity can turn out to be an artwork.

Although this very inclusive conception of artwork is fairly recent, aesthetic categories have been ascribed to seemingly non-artistic phenomena some time before the new developments in 20th century art. There have been a number of artists and philosophers who tried to apply aesthetic values beyond the realm of art and its canonical forms and subjects. Such attempts are usually rooted into great reverence for art and unwillingness to reconcile oneself with the fact that aesthetically pleasing experiences can be rather rare and are often mingled with onslaughts of ugliness, universal dullness and everyday routine. And sometimes the reaction to these shortcomings is disposition to subject everyday life to the same principles that make works of art enjoyable.

If one compares the attempts to fuse art and everyday life by contemporary artists with those by artists and thinkers of the previous centuries, I think one can notice a difference. Contemporary artists use different aspects of everyday life for their artistic purposes, quite often rather critical of this life. For example, in December 2000 the Latvian groups of „activists“ called *Primitive* (Katrina Neiburga and Peteris Kimelis) and *Open* (Kaspars Vagnags, Mikelis Fisers *et al.*) opened a shop where one could obtain little portions of kombucha mushroom - a symbiotic culture of yeast and vinegar bacteria which supplied with tea and sugar produces a drink called kombucha tea. In the shop, there were no special signs indicating that the customer had entered a place where art was shown - just a stylish shop where one could acquire kombucha mushroom. Of course, the project was intended as a comment on consumer society and how it was operated. Just to illustrate the difference between contemporary artists and „classics“, I will quote the 19th century aesthete Walter Pater. In the Conclusion of his book *Renaissance*, he writes: „A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.“<sup>3</sup>

Though here I mentioned just two examples, I think that it wouldn't be inaccurate to claim that for the 19th century Romantics, the Aesthetic Movement in Britain, philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but not for the 20th century avant-gardists, the fusion of art and life was first of all an *ethical* ideal. Ethics teaches us how to harmonize our actions with our values, for example, how to harmonize our animal treatment practices with con-

demnation of cruelty. And the ethical problem of aesthetic life is how to harmonize the value of aesthetic experiences with what one does and how one lives. To fuse art and everyday life means here to live according to aesthetic values. In a way this can be called hedonism and sybaritism, nevertheless, it is hard to find anything similar in contemporary art. The project by *Primitive* and *Open* is not sybaritic art in this sense. It does not follow the principles of aesthetes; the project could rather be described as social art. And it is not „sybaritic“ in the sense I used the notion previously, because it is meant to change people's perception of themselves and their society and does not aim simply to entertain. At the same time it is „sybaritic“ because many customers did not realize that the whole business was conducted with a tongue-in-cheek attitude and was not just another shop or advertising campaign. People enjoyed the project - they drank kombucha tea, watched the „commercials“ about it, took samples of kombucha home in order to grow it, they even lined up in front of the shop in the mornings before the opening. So, the project was perceived by most of the public as interesting and fascinating without real understanding of what was it about and, therefore, it can be called „sybaritic“. Paradoxically this project can be considered „sybaritic“ art because it is not perceived as art.

#4.

I think artists presented at the *The Baltic Contemporary Art Biennial* from Latvia - Kristaps Ģelzis, Anta Pence and Dita Pence, Inta Ruka - cannot be considered representatives of „sybaritic“ art. Their works are rather critical of consumer culture or entertainment industry. At the same time, they are also not too critical. That is another characteristic of Latvian art. I think one was able notice that at a prominent exhibition at Riga, namely, *Contemporary Utopia* organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art in the spring of 2001. Works by Kristaps Ģelzis and Anta and Dita Pence that are presented at the *Biennial* were shown at first at *Utopia*.

The exhibition was in a way surprising. Utopias are notable for their splendour - both the positive and negative visions are vivid and grandiose, contrasting with the reality we know. They do not usually present simply good and beautiful but the Good and the Beautiful; similarly, in antiutopias we do not find simply evil and ugliness but the Evil and the Ugliness. However, the works in this exhibition displayed little of the splendour one could expect. Visions there were rather self-restrained, ironic and softly critical. It seems to me the curator Frank Wagner aimed for something more, some of the works by foreign artists were highly critical of the society - the consumer society - they lived in. Unfortunately, there is no reason for us in Latvia at this moment to feel particularly deceived by consumer culture, we rather enjoy it. Our history reminds us of itself again.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk claims that for today, the most characteristic name for utopia is success.<sup>4</sup> I think in our society, this is a far more significant utopia than the one offered by revolutionaries of 60s and anti-globalisation movements for example. But one of the attractive features of „sybaritic“ art is its constant link with success. Success is one of the indicators of the amount of pleasure and entertainment „sybaritic“ art brings. So, I think in its own, paradoxical way Latvian art is bound to move towards „sybaritism“. Perhaps artworks presented at *Sybaris* without the context of their creation will become just a pure entertainment... And a road to success...

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from a paper „The Interesting: Precondition of the Modern Culture“ presented by Ieva Kolmane at the *XVth International Congress of Aesthetics* in Japan, not yet published.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Tom Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*. (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 220-221.

<sup>4</sup> Fabrice Zimmer, *Peter Sloterdijk: 'L' utopie a perdu son innocence*, Magazine littéraire, no 387, mai 2000, p. 56.