

The expansion of the notions of art in Latvia with regard to the social and political changes of the 1990s

■ Within the framework of this essay I'll deal only with what happened in the 90s. I shall not focus on style but on the influence of the socio-political environment, background, network and circulation on art that, in such a social paradigm, we may regard as contemporary.

I. The first and main factor that was different from the previous period was the beginning of the free circulation of information in the 90s; this was information of all kinds, economic too that began to form real market relations. Does the beginning of the spread of information and its gaining a foothold now mean that our artists are interested in the same themes as in the West? Yes and no. In art in Latvia we were joined to the themes characteristic of the general world art scene by our own stories - about ourselves, about the state, about some specific place and its history, and about fictitious events charged with local meanings. However, a kind of fear of over politicisation or direct acceptance of social problems persevered throughout the 90s. In my opinion, the most interesting Latvian contemporary artists are not asocial. On the contrary, their fortune or misfortune (let history be the judge), is the aestheticisation and "tasteful" arrangement of the work of art, or, however paradoxical it may sound, the art project with the most radical expressions of content. A similar view, in this case about Estonian art, has often been proposed by my colleague Sirje Helme¹, but I think that the Estonian conceptual projects, of all kinds, are far more direct in their expression.

I can't help feeling that the characteristic physical harshness of large towns does not lead to direct depiction because of the local temperament that regards directness as traditionally spiritually tasteless. With that comes the need for metaphorical "packaging". Thus subjects that are commonplace in the West - violence, AIDS, informative ecological projects, research into the tensions of sexuality, informative projects that would be related to Soviet genocide and the holocaust - are lacking here. Of course there are exceptions, like the digital project *Bloody TV* by the F5 group on Latvian Independent Television. I do not wish to claim that aestheticised projects are less communicative; quite the opposite, they are as they are precisely because of these social ties in which art nevertheless functions as something "arranged". Of course there have been exceptions and they were, in the main, to be found in the field of aesthetic practice related to documentation.

Concerning free circulation of information, the patriarch of our avant-garde, multi-media artist Hardijs Lediņš, in 1992 had the following, in my opinion, very wise words to say: "I think our greatest mistake is that we take a theory, chaos, postmodernism or other, and we begin **to make** these phenomena using the main features we know... Although what we really should be doing is, creating something regardless of the prevailing theory. And, if it fits into some theory, then that's fine, if it doesn't - even better. Because it is possible that thanks to your work, someone else may come up with a completely new theory."²

I myself am quite sceptical whether a completely innovative art current could be spawned in Latvia. However, I do completely agree with our patriarch of the avant-garde in his conviction of the uniqueness of every place when he says, "I think that any geographical point is able to generate everything. Completely everything that it is possible to generate. For example; I can take a digital cassette recorder and be at a particular point, at the Horn of Kolka, say. I sit there for 24 hours and record all the sounds that are there. Now the sounds of this point on a world scale will be an absolute, constant and eternal value. It will be a document from this point, important for the whole world. And, as it is not possible to document every point, then the value of this point increases all the more."³

I think Gints Gabrāns' 1994 work *Art is not Meant to Be Eaten* relates well the situation regarding the circulation of information in the 90s. Gastronomically real pizzas in a hermetically sealed environment - on shelves behind glass - slowly moulding during the *Culture of Life* exhibition in the Riga Stock Exchange. The arrival of the traditions of Duchamp in a culture where pizzas are relatively new, in a quite sealed space too, where beautifully made consumer products/objects of pleasure are turning to mould. (You can see that it is another metaphor in our art, because it's not just the edible that rots.) Yes, that was the context of all our broad art, at least at the beginning of the 90s. Both art and theory in Latvia were and continue to be proportionally, so to say, "twins from one egg".

Some of the readers will probably remember the exhibition *Forma Anthropologica* in Tallinn at the beginning of 1992, arranged by three of us, the Estonian Ants Juske, Lithuanian Raminta Jurėnaitė and myself.⁴ At the time the works on show demonstrated the visible accents of the art environment of the time quite precisely. This was the first joint conceptual exhibition by all three Baltic states since the restoration of independence and not only that: it was organised by curators, which was not a self-evident thing in those days. These days I'm not troubled by any nostalgia for the beginning of 1990s, which in fact were relatively quiet due to the lack of petrol. On a trailer towed by an East German *Multicar*, we brought the fuselage of a Russian *TU144* plane to Tallinn. This was part of Oļegs Tillbergs' installation *Catastrophe in the Cloister. Drawing in the Edge of the Sea*. For several hours on the way, we did not see a single other car. You could only buy petrol at black market prices and this was the most expensive item in our essentially very large exhibition project.

The money for this first joint Baltic project, *Forma Anthropologica*, some 50 000 Latvian rubles mainly for petrol, we obtained from the *Auseklītis* company. Who would have imagined then, that in the second half of the 1990s, the owner of the company, Valdis Krisbergs, would be sitting in jail for fraud on a grand scale? At the time one letter from the president of the Artists' Union was enough and Krisbergs poured the money into my black leatherette briefcase saying: "Take it, children!" It's crazy, but I have fond

memories of him. What the Latvian side of the exhibition was short of I covered by exchanging 100 DM I had earned somewhere in the West, and this was enough to pay for the hotel expenses of all six Latvian artists in Tallinn. Now, the most recent joint project, *Baltic Security!*⁵, that opened in December 2000 at Arlanda airport in Stockholm, was mainly funded by the *Swedish Institute and yahoo!* and for financial reasons there was no way I could expect large and new works **from all** the artists. I mention *Forma Anthropologica* not just to show this leap in social time and to tell you that large exhibitions didn't require huge resources because at that time money still didn't have any particular value, well not for those like us who didn't plan to go into business... I also mention *Forma Anthropologica* because among the exhibition's generally paradigmatic works one stood out like a white sparrow by its new informative nature. This was Juris Boiko's video installation *2 x 4 Portraits of Andy Warhol* and I think it was just this type of work that introduced the Baltic countries art of the 1990s in the informative sense. With the 1990s we obtained information about theory and its protagonists⁵, about technologies and wider contexts, as we would say now, real time on-line. To quote an interview with Ojārs Pētersons from the early 1990s, "we can say quite simply that we really became *zapadniks*. Our path, leaping over Eastern Europe at whose end we are, lead immediately to the West."⁶



Martin Ratkins, Video Mix for Soja Project, 2001.

II. The second factor influencing new production of art was the reaction to the former ideology that grew into a critique of ideology in general. This strategy had already been adopted in the late 80s by Leonards Laganovskis who, in the 90s, lived for quite a long time in West Berlin, occasionally exhibiting in Riga too. After ten years of curating, my favourite project is still the *Quality '92* exhibition held in 1992, in the Exhibition Hall *Latvija*. Few will still remember that the so-called quality mark - the *znak kachestao* - was one of the greatest Soviet absurdities. It was awarded by the government to what it considered to be good products. Five artists participated in *Quality '92*" Apart from the aforementioned Leonards Laganovskis, there was the Estonian Leonhard Lapin with his series *Malevich-Molotov*, Vilnis Zābers with a graphic series *Identification of the horizontals*, based on his father's amateur photos of the 1950s; there were the enlarged photos of images of Riga at the end of the 80s by Gvido Kajons that showed the absurd context of these "quality marks". And then there was Andris Breže with his typically Soviet bread trays. Each bread tray contained a story that, among other things, was formed by the object's social history. **The making of stories, referring to objects and using them in their works, was a favourite expression of our artist's social, yet at the same time poetic, gestures in the first half of the 90s.** Here, one of the leading lights was the aforementioned installation master *par excellence*, Oļegs Tillbergs. One of his most programmatical works was *Waiting for the Berlin Train* for the *Zoom Factor* exhibition of early 1994. He used an array of mechanical railway timetables, typical of Soviet stations with such destinations

as Brjansk and Brzgulsk. He then commissioned many small works by Latvian artists, specifically for this format, and placed them within the machines in the plane. The whole installation was finished off with huge barrels for pickling cabbage obtained from the army. With hindsight, I would claim that, among other things, Tillbergs predicted well the expected and actual public alienation because of market relations, and this work now seems like a warm illusion about physically perceived artists' unity.

Zoom Factor (curator - artist Juris Boiko) also marked the beginning of a new institutional framework in Latvian contemporary art. The Soros Center for Contemporary Art - Riga was established in 1993 and *Zoom Factor* was the first of six annual exhibitions by the SCCA. Looking back at its seven years of work, one can say that it was one of the central axes of contemporary art around which there was communication. We were lucky in that the director was the well known avantgardist of his day - Jānis Borgs - a large and tolerant personality, who never failed to defend publicly the ideas and mission of contemporary art exceptionally well. He is credited with the profound words once said in a discussion in the press that it won't be art that saves the world, but thinking will. It was only in the middle of 2000 that contemporary art in Latvia received official state support, unless we also count our first official participation in the Venice Biennale in 1999. In the summer of 2000 the Soros Center for Contemporary Art - Riga became the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and, apart from the Soros Foundation - Latvia, it is also supported by the Latvian state and the Riga City Council. Even though the new centre is a thorn in the eye for many, its foundation is nevertheless one of the great achievements of the 90s.

As I said, instead of a political critique, what we saw coming onto the modest stage of Latvian art were commentaries about ideologies and the media strategies that enforced them. In 1996 visitors to the State Museum of Art were treated to *Virtuale*, an excellent exhibition by Kristaps Ģelzis. Its imagery told of the loss of reality and the tempting power of simulation.

The young artist Līga Marcinkeviča is one of the most original exceptions in the overall picture of our new art because she is not afraid of asking tough questions relating to the formation of opinions and prejudice. The new medium of digital video, with its expressive potential, can strengthen the documentary basis of a work of art in greater relief. The intelligent critique in her work approaches the hero image as cultivated in the media. For her 1999 film *Two in One. Things that People do not Wish to See*, Marcinkeviča used three realistic and grim subjects - a slaughterhouse, the acned face of a young girl and the face of an old woman. To these she added sound borrowed from popular soap operas. Use has often been made of the heightened strategy and aesthetics of advertising and it really is a particular phenomenon of the 1990s in Latvia. For the record it is worth mentioning several works. The art duo of Gints Gabrāns and Monika Pormale founded a real introduction bureau and advertised in the press, inviting people to have their photos taken. The introduction bureau functioned as an intermediary between people from Latvia who wanted to meet foreigners for serious purposes, and potential respondents. The result was a surprisingly expressive gallery of photo portraits. It illustrates not only certain communications mechanisms but also reflects the visions of a better life held by a section of society.

Throughout 2000, I made a point of following the KANT project in the magazine *Rīgas Laiks* (Riga Times). Every month a full page would have a picture and a quotation

from Kant. There was considerable public reaction to the image of three tampons whose arrangement of colours reminded one of the colours of the Latvian flag. The quote from Kant went as follows: "Patriotic can be called that way of thinking, when everyone in the state (including its leader), regards community as his mother's lap and his country as his native soil." The KANT project was run by three young people who had studied philosophy - Kaspars Rolšteins, Jurgis Liepnieks and Ilmārs Šlāpins. Although they all now work in public relations, they have been and still are tied to creative work - journalism, music and other things. The project aimed to demonstrate that the questions of boundaries is only a question of perception. The boundaries between an intellectual product - the writings of Kant - and a low intellectual product - an advertisement - don't really work in the sense that one can't prove which has the greater meaning. Let us remember Proust, who said that you can gain more meaning from an advertisement for soap than from Pascale's texts. The KANT project is an intellectual attack, a provocation. **At the end of the 1990s conscious mixing of contexts became popular. Incompatible contexts were compared to produce a new meaning. The toolset for one field was applied to a different one.** For example, economics was researched using the tools of grammar and the tools of game theory were used in many other fields. KANT is a multimedia project with definite aims - to examine what happens when advertising images are overlaid with something completely untraditional for advertising, in this case quotes from Kant.

It is becoming increasingly common for the critique of ideology to be substituted by intellectual games "feeding" witty research into perception producing original models of aestheticised mini-laboratories. Ēriks Božis is one of our most outstanding communications and perception "laboratory assistants". One of his most recent projects was for the *Baltic Security!* exhibition in Arlanda. This shows an open bird cage going round and round forever on a baggage conveyor and it is called *Encycling*.

III. The third essential reason for the literal explosion "from within" of the locally popular definitions of art has already been partly outlined above. **This is the very rapid introduction of technology and the technology itself becoming a work of art or simply a theme of cultural work.** Processuality, the event in time without a particular result or ending, and non-commercial communication for its own sake has often replaced the work of art as a work. Another important social factor is the adequately broad acceptability of these strategies in fields not directly related to contemporary art. For that section of the audience whose everyday life can no longer be imagined without the new technologies, and in Latvia this is large enough, multimedia events are, paradoxically, associated with "real life". This, however, is a question of stylistics and does not fall into the terms of reference of this essay. Youth sub-cultures, raves and various parties form the environment where the new processuality manifests itself.

The new media cell of workers, *e-lab* is known internationally, especially in the sphere of non-commercial Internet radio. It recently joined with other, mainly alternative groups and centres, and at the end of 2000 became the New Media Centre RIXC.

IV. The fourth essential social factor that has determined the contemporary accents of current art in general is related to the **desire to select information.** The aim of this selection is to form questions or claims into a personal or collective identity. **This is a reaction to globalisation and at the same time it is the consequence of disillusionment,**

and this moment of disillusionment also encompasses dissatisfaction with those models currently offered by the direction of society's development and those responsible for it.

Ethnic, bodily, sexual, subculture and other identities are examined or only touched upon in this art laboratory. During the 1997 annual SCCA-Riga exhibition entitled *Opera*, the central work was the alternative, musically minimalist opera *Rolstein on the Beach*. This was composed by the aforementioned patriarch of avant-garde Hardijs Lediņš and one of the KANT project authors, Kaspars Rolšteins. One of the themes of this opera was local and global relationships. At one moment on stage there was an authentic folk ensemble known in Latvia as the Wives of Suita.

Jānis Mitrēvics work *Bacon for the Whole State* in the 1994 exhibition *State* had a particularly Latvian flavour. In the same year, together with art theorist Ivars Runkovskis, he had an exhibition in the State Museum of Art titled *Jānis Mitrēvics Exhibits Vilhelms Purvītis. Ivars Runkovskis*. Then there is Ilmārs Blumbergs who recently (2000) exhibited a large series of works *LOGI/WINDOWS* that was, in its way, a diary in paintings.

V. Last but not least, I would like to mention the newly reclaimed public space.

It was only the 1990s that finally pulled people out of the decades of the forced tyranny of private life. Public discussion and original private gestures prior to the 1990s were a great rarity. Of course there had been the spring *Days of Art*, but contemporary art in the social environment very rarely became a forum for discussion that was centred around the problems associated with public space itself. In the 1990s the subject began to be developed in larger and smaller projects in the Riga and other city environments. Let us mention the *Monument* exhibition in the city space of Riga in 1995 and *Ventspils Transit Terminal* in Ventspils in 1999. The late 1990s finally saw structured, so-called community art projects that involved the local residents. The summer of 2000 saw the project *Transit Zero* in the former Tsarist and then Soviet naval base of Karosta in Liepāja. This is largely a very run down area and currently a place where the socially unintegrated tend to concentrate. The project demonstrated that contemporary art can also be a powerful means of communication. And on this optimistic note I would like to end this story, which I could continue for many pages on.

1 Helme, S. *Personal Time // Personal Time. Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1945-1996 [Catalogue]*.- Warsaw, 1996, - P.24.

2 Bankovskis, P. Lediņš, H. *Ne acīm redzams, ne acīmredzams // Kentaurs XXI.- Rīga, 1992, Nr. 2. - P. 107.*

3 *Ibid.*- P.106.

4 *Forma Anthropologica* was an the exhibition of the contemporary art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. It took place in Tallinn's Kunstahalle, (then the central exhibition hall of the Estonian Artists' Union), in its gallery and in the Luum gallery.

5 I wouldn't like Juris Boiko's installation to be understood only as a commentary about Andy Warhol. Speaking about the informative character of this work I keep in mind the artist's own statements from an unpublished text. Juris Boiko wrote: "I select local energetical currents - impulses and fix them as signs." (1992).

6 Rudzāte, Daiga. *Ilūzijas, ironija... (Ojārs Pētersons. Galerija Kolonna) // Atmoda Atpūtai. 1991, 27th March. Zapadniks - Russian slang for westerners.*