

## ***The Nineties - Nosy, Noisy, Shifting***

As if returning from a long journey *in the reverse side of the Looking Glass*, people rub their eyes and try to look at the world without the customary deformations. Being tightly embraced in the lethargy of the Soviet rule for 50 years, this is how the Latvian society could be pictured in the early 90s when the long-awaited awakening has finally befallen. Artists are among those who venture to glance at the other side of the looking glass well before the reversal of the *worlds*. Moving in the marginal zones of *chess squares*, they succeed in regaining a self-sufficient creative space as early as in the 70s and 80s, assuming that no official ideological game rules apply to their territory. The so-called king of Hippies Andris Grīnbergs and his like-minded colleagues organise performances and actions documented in photo series. The dimension of personal time refers also to the hyperrealists Miervaldis Polis, and those whose works were stylistically close to hyperrealism - like Bruno Vasiļevskis and Imants Lancmanis. This period sees the development of the tradition of abstract painting and appearance of a number of kinetic environmental objects. Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš founded the *Workshop for Restoration of Nonexistent Sensations* that realises multimedial art projects, which, being envisaged as *exercises of private language* for a limited group of people, significantly and irreversibly affect the development of Latvian art.

In the late 80s, the annual event *Days of Art* evolves into an important platform for creative activities where the artists start exploring non-conventional exhibition areas by increasingly capturing various zones of public space.

The turning point in the development of Latvian art is marked by 1984, when approximately 100 artists show their works in the St. Peter's Church, in the exhibition titled *Nature. Environment. Man*. The exhibition, however, is open only for a few days, as the censors of the Soviet ideology find it to be too freethinking and degrading the morale of the Soviet people. Nevertheless the infection from the destructive virus of the *wrong art* has spread. Non-traditional art forms see a rapid development, installation art widely asserts itself and manifestation of conceptual thinking in artists' work becomes particularly essential.

In 1988, Latvian artists make their first, serious appearance *outside home* with a convincing presentation in the exhibition *Riga - The Latvian Avant-garde* in *Kunsthalle* of West Berlin. There is no reason for diffidence anymore, for the late 80s see the emerging of a self-assured and bold group of artists, later referred to as the trespassers of traditional art.<sup>1</sup> Ojārs Pētersons, Andris Breže, Juris Putrāms who now are already to be listed among classics, produce expressive large-scale series of screen prints and expand their art boundaries in the field of installation. The "orange"<sup>2</sup> irony of Pētersons', *object-trouve* by Breže as well as the expressive large-scale graphic art function as a critical comment to the constructions of the existing order. Installation becomes the dominating form of expression in the hands of the distinguished master of metaphor Oļegs Tillbergs. Through using ideological symbols and employing his acute sense of objects' materiality, the artist creates a poetic and symbolically charged series of work. The insatiable painting of Aija Zariņa reaches beyond the frames of painting and, by devouring the exhibition space, erupts into an aggressive explosion of freethinking that confirms the "demise of the controlling influence of ideology" and turns away from the "tradition of national painting". Along with Aija Zariņa, several other young women artists who dynamically use large format canvases and explore new forms of expression enter the Latvian art scene, which gives rise to the opinion of the "feminisation of Latvian painting".<sup>3</sup>

The provocative search for new forms, usage of ambivalent metaphors, presence of irony in the artists' work like litmus paper indicate the overall frustration vibrating in the air and the imminent resistance to the socio-political system established by the Soviet ideology.

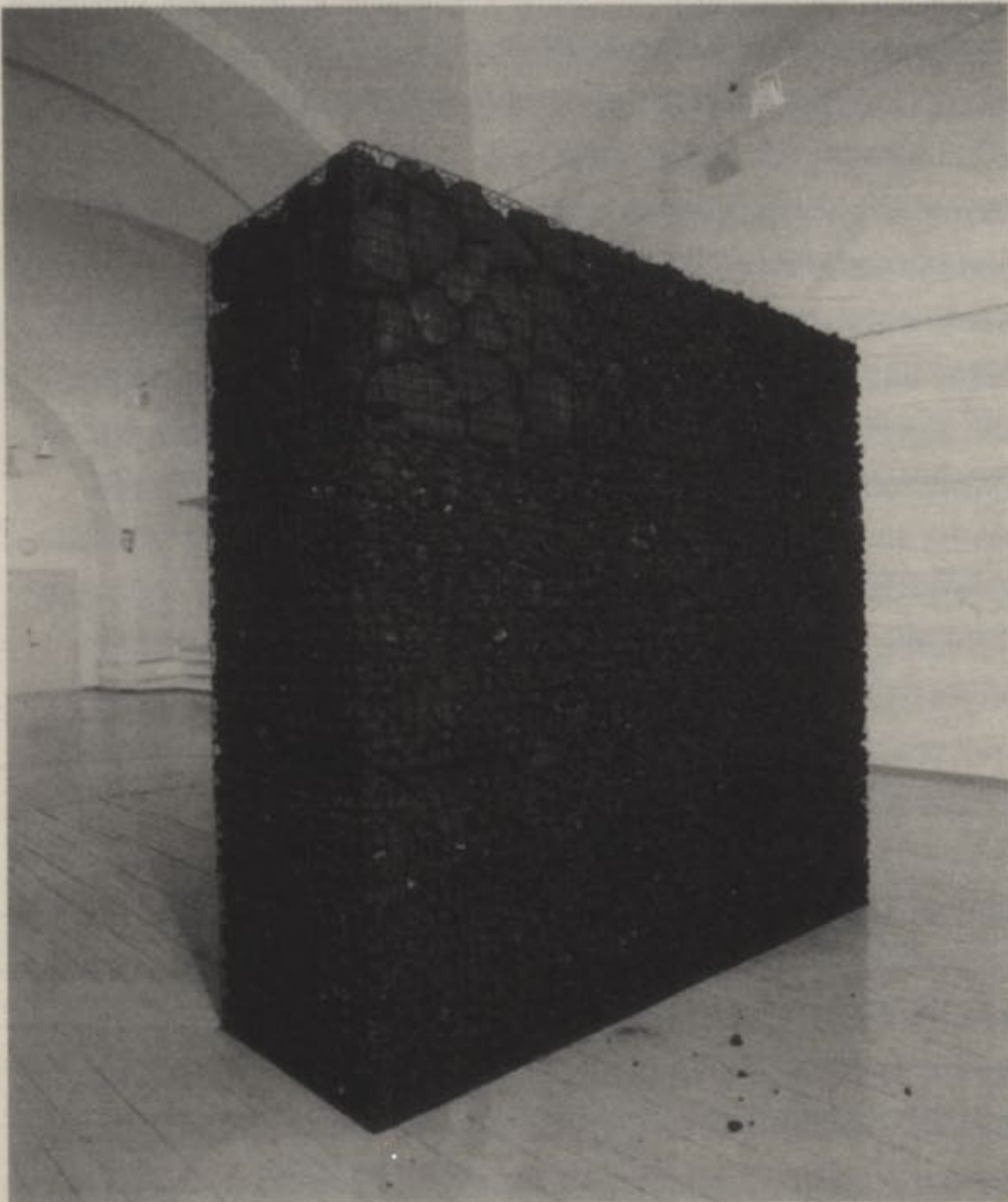
Art actions and exhibits in public space that within the framework of the Days of Art were showed in the pedestrian underpass at the railway station and the Philharmonic Square are best to characterise the socially critical intonation of the time. Oļegs Tillbergs, Sarmīte Māliņa, Segejs Davidovs, Ojārs Pētersons, Kristaps Ģelzis and other participants showed the distorting mirror of reality meant to irritate the passers-by, amuse the public and raise panic among the authorities. The action *Cages* (1987, the Philharmonic Square in Riga), for example, ended even better than expected. The militia officers pulled the participants of the action out of the cages where they were lying and the chairman of the Artists' Union even had to defend the artists against the arbitrary activities of the militia. Other media, too, were used as a forum for expression, as, for example, the most progressive press publication of the time *Avots (Source)*, which regularly published texts and illustrations of critically disposed artists.

Notwithstanding the socially critical inclinations of the artists, only a few of them were really pursuing *social art*, among which were Leonards Laganovskis and the group LPSR Z (Normunds Lācis, Vilnis Putrāms, Māris Subačs, Artis Rutks, Vilnis Zābers). These artists demonstrated their drastic works in the magazine *Avots* and in various actions and exhibitions. In their activities LPSR Z occasionally involved also Miervaldis Polis whose *alter ego*, having transformed into a golden man, walked the streets of Riga and together with Vilnis Zābers sold sunflower seeds in the city centre next to the Monument of Liberty.

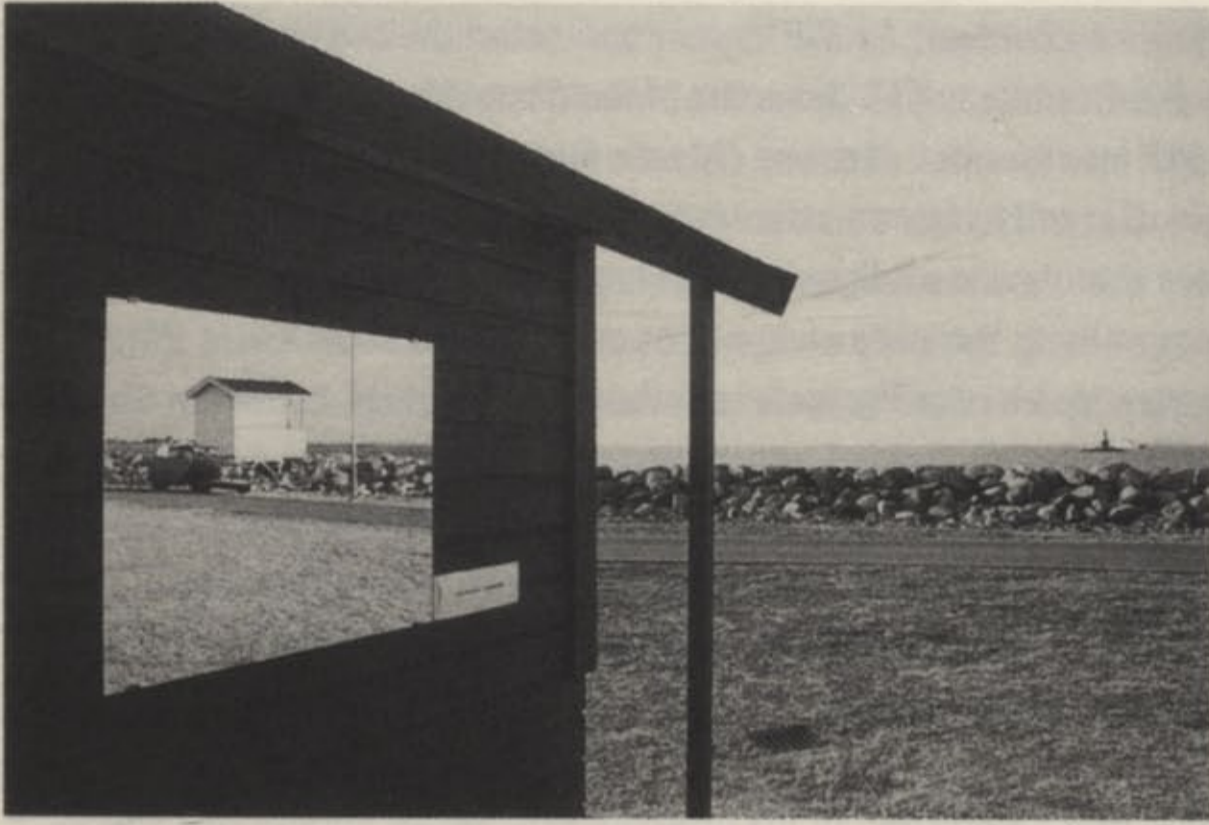
In 1991 Latvia gains the status of an independent country and fairly soon parts with the load of Soviet legacy. Human mind surprisingly quickly deletes memories of the time when one could feel the breath of the omnipotent observer on the back of one's neck, when frank conversations could be heard only in kitchens behind accurately closed windows and one of the symbols of the admired capitalism were bananas that the parents occasionally brought home after having stood in long queues. Many people in Latvia are haunted by the weird feeling of having had two lives - one, which happened once upon a time and is preserved only in memories and stories, and the other - ongoing today.

The artists whose creative talent evolved in the nineties, too, did not particularly seek references in the past. Furthermore, they dissociate and distance themselves from the social problems of the world and avoid any political discourse. They use other language of signs, characterised by quotations, contextuality and examination of perception. A group of artists (Gints Gabrāns, Andris Frīdbergs, Miķelis Fišers, Anita Zabiļevska) with a quite different programmatic pursuits, made their entry into the Latvian art scene in 1984 with the exhibition *Culture of Life*. Voluminous flow of information, familiarisation with art processes and art theory, emerging symptoms of consumer society bring about another space for culture of life where the young artists have to find their own land-

marks. Gints Gabrāns' and Andris Frīdbergs' art features the elements of pop art, gives references to art classics and proposes a new way of communication. Gints Gabrāns makes the viewers choose between: smoking / not smoking (the exhibition *State*, 1994), putting one's head into the hole or not (*Stairway to Heaven*, the project *Opera*, Riga, 1997), taking the knife or not (*Knife to cut up your arse with*, 1995, The Pedvāle Art Park), touching bare electric wires or not (the exhibition *Misfits*, 1995, Vilnius), participating in the action proposed by the project *Riga Dating Agency* or not (in collaboration with Monika I. Pormale, 2000). In its turn, the sound installation of Andris Frīdbergs' placed in one of Riga's parks and reproducing sounds of dog barking mixed with the rhythms of popular melodies, switches on only when approached by a passer-by (*Joseph's Dogs Watching Paik's Ducks*, the exhibition *Monument*, Riga, 1995).



Andris Breže, Crni kvadrat / *Black Square*, 1997.



Anita Zabiļevska, *Pejsaž / Landscape*, 1994.  
Instalācija / *Installation*

Miķelis Fišers is concerned with creating a new mythology. The artist makes large-scale paintings and objects using signs characteristic of sub-culture and registering mystified messages about the aliens. Anita Zabiļevska inquires into matter of perception through video as the main medium of expression and looking for painterly formal solutions, while her camera impassively records the landscape or a fragment of urban environment. Particularity of her work can be described by Merleau-Ponty' thesis "Seeing - it is thinking in special circumstances".

Ēriks Božis is preoccupied with the problems of perception, too, but unlike Zabiļevska's discreet suggestion that the viewer takes the viewpoint of the author, Božis wiles his viewer into the trap of his work and at times even seems to be amused by the viewer's bewilderment. Ērik's works are made as deformations and transformations of contextual environment, which sometimes are discerned only when juxtaposed with the dimensions of space used by humans or when collating the image generated by the artist with the original prototype. An example to the above mentioned are his telephone cabins, which are either raised too high to be reached by people (exhibition *Monument*, Riga 1995) or enlarged by some 25% (*Museet Projekt*, Stockholm).

The role of Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Riga (SCCA-Riga) and, later, the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art cannot be overestimated in terms of their contribution to the development of contemporary art processes in Latvia. Initially, the SCCA-Riga is the only institution providing financial support to contemporary artistic activities. It has established also the tradition of annual art exhibitions. These exhibitions usually become the most noteworthy art event of the year, enabling artists to make new works. To date, there have been realised seven large scale art projects: *Zoom Factor* (1993) at the Exhibition Hall *Latvija*; *State* (1994) in Riga and Rundāle, *Monument* (1995) in the city space of Riga; *Geo-Geo* (1996) in the Pedvāle Art Park; *Opera* (1997) at the Latvian Daile Theatre; *Ventspils Transit Terminal* (1998-1999) in Ventspils and *Contemporary Utopia* (2001) at the Exhibition Hall *Arsenāls* of the State Museum of Art and Eduards Smiļģis Theatre Museum.

Another factor that furthers the development of Latvian art and is of no lesser importance is the Visual Communications Department of the Latvian Academy of Art. Under the guidance of Ojārs Pētersons, now the classic of contemporary art, a new and

strong generation of artists has evolved. In 2000 they manifested themselves as a group in the exhibition *Loop* at the Exhibition Hall *Arsenāls* of the State Museum of Art. Most visible among them are the members of *F5* group (Martin Ratniks, Ieva Rubeze, Līga Marcinkēviča and others), Dace Džeriņa and the sisters Dita and Anta Pence. The works of the young artists reflect the choice of digital technologies that offer the viewer opportunities of virtual reality permitting the very image to become information. Ojārs Pētersons is called a teacher also by Monika Pormale who has become well known in the context of Latvian art and has rapidly gained international recognition. The project *Riga Dating Agency*, made together with Gints Gabrāns, precisely fits into the context of social art, functioning equally well on both levels - as a great exhibition work that has toured around several art galleries of the world and as a dating agency by virtue of which several Latvian women have found their husbands.

Reality simulation and integration of art processes in social sphere are subjects addressed also by the project *Open* the main ideologist of which Kapars Vanags declares that "with the project *Open* we wanted to promote creativity as a protest to market culture and consumerism". Within this project a number of events have taken place: *Open* (1995), *Biosport* (1996), *Aktuelle Tanzen* (1997) and others, which were staged in old warehouses, workshops of the factory *Dzintars*, the Club *Secret Experiment*, the Spilve Airport and others. Artists who are invited to participate in the activities of *Open* use the language of signs ascribed to subculture and manifest a life style characteristic of a specific social group. One of the most provocative *Open* projects was *Slide shows* that, being a stylistic imitation of commercial clips, gave relevance to social issues and broke into the private space of an unprepared viewer by appearing on television screens during the commercial breaks. The idea of anti-consumerism was convincingly realised in the project *Tea Mushroom* or *The T-Shroom* within which a shop was opened where tea mushroom was distributed and popularised. The shop was well attended proving a successful outcome of the anti-Coca Cola campaign initiated by *Open* and the group *Primitive* (Pēteris Ķimelis and Katrīna Neiburga).

The borders between the space of art and real life become more obscure or disappear altogether. Artists turn their everyday objects into art or make their everyday life become an aesthetic project by developing a special style of dressing and behaviour. Convergence of art and everyday life is evidenced also by the boom of club culture. "The club space is turned into a work of art outside its proper environment, and everything that goes on there becomes art".<sup>4</sup> Involvement of the above mentioned artists' groups *F5* and *Primitive* in club activities, mainly acting as VJs, indicates an expansion of the visual communication space.

Another remarkable actor on the overall art scene is El@b, the Electronic Laboratory led by Rasa and Raitis Šmiti and Jānis Garančs. El@b has grown into an internationally acknowledged centre of new media, co-ordinating several networks. In collaboration with the film studio *Locomotive*, the Baltic Humanitarian Education Centre and other creative initiatives the El@b has established a new cultural media centre RIXC.

"RIXC aims at becoming a meeting point for various cultural spheres, focusing not so much on new media technologies but rather on the potential of these technologies in the aspects of social change and educational and intercultural exchange".<sup>5</sup> The activities organised by RIXC - seminars, conferences, creative workshops and presentations - emphasise the process-generated nature of art and affirm the *tusovka* as being one of the most adequate forms of socialising<sup>6</sup>, and hence become one of the most characteristic features in the ever changing face of Latvian art in the 90s.

\* *tusovka* - a Russian slang word designating an informal get-together, socialising

- 1 Demakova H. Trespassers or Some Theoretical Debate and Historical Facts about the Non-Traditional Art in Latvia. // *Zoom Factor* [Catalogue].- Riga: SCCA-Riga, 1994.
- 2 Almost all the objects and installations made by Ojārs Pētersons are in orange colour.
- 3 Osmanis A. Par dažām tendencēm 20. gadsimta 80. gadu latviešu tēlniecībā // *Doma 2*.-Riga: Latvian Association of Art Museums, 1994.
- 4 Allaste A. Club Culture in Estonia // *Nosy Nineties. Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art of 1990s*.- Tallinn: Centre for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2001.- P. 45.
- 5 Kozlovs N. Media Massage in Riga // *Studia*, 2000.- No.4.- P. 45.
- 6 Vanags K. (t)error // *Studija*, 2000.- No.3.- P. 30.