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The Apple Harvest  
or Art in Latvia 1945 -1995 between  
personal and ideological time

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Helena Demakova

## The Apple Harvest or Art in Latvia 1945 -1995 between personal and ideological time

### **The Soviet apple and the Cézanne apple**

In 1948 when discussing the works of Latvian artists in the Museum of Latvian and Russian Art, the writer M. Rudzītis said: "One may paint an apple, but it must be a Soviet apple ....."<sup>1</sup> At the same time and for future decades, in the Latvian provincial town of Tukums, the artist Leonīds Arins had devoted himself to evaluating space through colour i.e. he worked within the paradigm of 'Cézanne's absolute painting'.<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase, one could say that his interest was not in the Soviet apple, but rather in the 'Cezanne apple'.

The first post-war decades (1940's - 1960's) were not just a tragic, but also a strange time. Then, in the fine arts, there existed the pronounced, ideologically dictated, canon of Socialist Realism in parallel with the echoes of the pre-war traditions of classical Modernism.

1944 saw rapid changes in the overall view of Latvian art. The foundations of these had already been laid in 1940 when the independent state was occupied by Soviet armed forces and subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union. An order from the Latvian SSR Soviet of People's Commissars had already established the Administration of Art Affairs whose management included by no means average artists. By January 1941 the Administration received a list of 120 themes to which the Soviet artist

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<sup>1</sup> CVORA (f 230, apr. 1, 1. 112, pp 1-3, additions in Russian) quot. from Nodieva, Aija. "Uz saulaini tAli, uz sniegotiem kalniem ...", // Karogs, Riga, 1989. No.1, p.181.

<sup>2</sup> see Leonīds Ariņš, Catalogue. Tukums museum, 1994.

should direct his attention including " Theme No. 28: The 1905 revolution in Russia. A rally. The orator is held high on the workers' hands. Red flags; or Theme No. 120: The RK(b)P CC Politburo inspects a large new construction".<sup>3</sup>

War and the occupation of Latvia, this time by the forces of fascist Germany disrupted the flow of personal time even more. Some artists adapted again to the new situation i.e. their lifestyles were dominated by a pronounced escapism. A few artists went to war, each on his chosen front, others, for example Felicita Pauluka (then still Janke), the Jewish yet to be star of Latvian drawing, were forced into hiding from the Germans and yet others left for Soviet Russia. The biggest changes, however, came with the Soviet re-occupation. The advancing Soviet forces led many eminent artists to flee to the West (for example V. Purvītis, L. Liberts, V. Tone, A. Annuss and others). On the other hand, a relatively large number of artists of Russian and other nationalities arrived from the Soviet empire.

The introduction of the Soviet system was immediate. Power was now in the hands of the Central Committee of the CPSU and membership of the Artists' Union was a prerequisite of exhibition work. The question is, did all artists regard this as a tragedy? Undoubtedly not, because the artist was suddenly given a guaranteed material existence. The espoused conviction of bourgeois Latvia's old master, Prof. Vilhelms Purvītis, that an artist should, alongside his creative work, find security in a 'normal occupation' seemed redundant in the new order if, of course, he went along with the ruling directives. And those that did go along formed the majority. The cultural weekly 'Literatūra un māksla' (Literature and Art) in 1947 published a survey of artists' planned works! Here we see that the cream of Latvian art has planned to paint the shock workers of a sock factory (A. Belcova), Maxim Gorky at the Riga seaside (E. Kalnins), portraits of political workers (O. Skulme), a sculptural portrait of Stalin (T. Zalkalns) or a female gymnast (K. Zemdegis).

Russification, like a millstone, had beset the 'fraternal Soviet republics' and went hand in hand with the new ideological nightmares of the new socialist order. The Baltic states had at least been spared during the 20's and 30's. Now, even the minutes of the Artists' Union executive meetings were often in Russian. Likewise, many of the preserved inventories of Artists' Union collections of 'those days' are in Russian. The 'progressive art of the

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<sup>3</sup> Nodieva, Aija, op. cit. p. 178.

Russian people' was propagandised.<sup>4</sup> Thus the changes affected the whole of the artist's public existence. If he wanted to exhibit, he had to become a member of the Artists' Union and its executive, which was subordinate to the Communist Party Central Committee diligently controlled its members' 'correctness'.

The Arts Fund, itself subordinate to the Artists' Union but a constituent of the USSR Arts Fund, regularly bought works from exhibitions. Ministries of Culture annually signed huge numbers of contracts to buy works based on artists' sketches and these surrogates filled the collections of state art museums. A large part of the previous decades' artistic wealth was considered to be harmful i.e. bourgeois nationalist and was stored in special collections. Access to these was only by special permission and of course the ordinary viewer had no chance of examining the works therein. Only towards the end of the 80's did these works appear either on permanent display or in exhibitions. There is archived evidence of the physical destruction of several 'especially dangerous' works.<sup>5</sup>

The late 40's and early 50's saw re-registration in the Artists' Union - a purge in effect. The official line in the press was that there existed "an unwelcome phenomenon..... that is work at 'two easels. This can also be observed in the youth. They paint one state commission, as if fulfilling the demands of socialist realism but another work follows the direction of formalism with its different methods, old methods which artists were using twenty years ago. Often, artists will tell you it is an 'arts kitchen'. I, on the other hand, think that it is a conviction that 'tomorrow's art is formalism'. If that is the case, then they are trying to preserve a bourgeois nationalist tendency in a Soviet society".<sup>6</sup>

At that time the Artists' Union expelled 50 members, a further 21 were demoted to candidate status and prominent artists were sacked from their positions at the Art Academy. 'Cheap formalist' was the label given to the likes of the painter R. Pinnis (1902 - 1992), who at one time had trained in Paris and now carried on the traditions of Cubism and Fauvism; the water colour painter and elegant master of the metaphor K. Fridrihsons (1911 - 1991);<sup>7</sup> the expressionist landscape artist A. Artums (1908 - ); O. Jaunarajs

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<sup>4</sup> The plenum of the organising committee of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union. // *Literatūra un māksla*, Rīga, 1945, 26th January.

<sup>5</sup> see *Literatūra un māksla*, Rīga, 1988, 16th September.

<sup>6</sup> "Izskaut formālisma paliekas Latvijas padomju tēlotāja mākslā", speech by Comrade A. Lapiņš (shortened) // *Literatūra un māksla*, Rīga, 1951, 11th March, No. 10

<sup>7</sup> Lapiņš, Artūrs. "Latviešu tēlotājas mākslas attīstības ceļi" // *Literatūra un māksla*, Rīga, 1948, 14th March, No. 11.

( 1907 - ) who would later become an abstract painter;<sup>8</sup> the expressionist figuralist, who worked with a Pollock touch and a drip technique, J. Pauluks (1906 - 1984);<sup>9</sup> and others. The dates behind the names are significant in that these artists, who carried on the painting tradition of classical modernism, lived or are still living a long life. Some of them would, from time to time, rebel too noticeably and would be denied exhibitions, but K. Fridrihsons found himself in Siberian prison camp from 1951 - 1956 because of his passion for French culture and his membership of the informal, so called, 'French Group'. However, all these masters and other similarly, whose creativity was tied to the avant-garde currents of the first half of the century and who carried on painting in their own styles, nevertheless strove for a place in the ordinary exhibition process and membership of the official artists' organisation.

One has to be extremely differential when evaluating the immediate post-war decades because their unequivocal and generalised interpretation has created many myths that are, in fact, hard to substantiate. Naturally, in relation to the Baltic States, which had enjoyed a period of classical modernism, we cannot talk about an unequivocal stylistic dictate of socialist realism. Even the influence of salonism in the Latvia of the 30's reduced the pressure of the official style of the Soviet state of the late 40's. This, in effect, was a continuation of the Russian 19th century *peredvizhniki* tradition with a heroified and ideologically allegorical content. Another view that emerged in the 90's in Latvia, seemingly in contrast with Western held stereotypes, is that culture and art in Soviet times were spheres of 'conscious protest' and that all who participated, with few exceptions, did so in the cause of truth and the nation. Of course, this view is nothing less than myth creation driven by the need for self-justification. Between the artists of the day there were some very fine gradations whose exposure has, to date, not merited a single monograph.

Of the following there can no doubt; the majority of works of artistic merit, on whose base the myth of an exceptionally distinguished Latvian school of painting rests, belongs to the above mentioned (J. Pauluks, R. Pinnis etc) and their contemporaries. They were, then, painters who worked in a certain, recognised style, with their own palette and temperament and whose oeuvre was officially exhibited. To this day new followers are being moulded.

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<sup>8</sup> Abols, OjArs. "Piezīmes par divām izstādēm" // Karogs, Rīga, 1948, No. 9, p 957.

<sup>9</sup> "Ceļā uz jauniem pasniegumiem" (Leo Svemps' shortened review at the 1st Congress of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union) // Karogs, Rīga, 1951, No. 3, p 255.

After Stalin's death and especially during the 'thaw' of the 60's, the press carried numerous reviews praising those artists whose work contained perceivable expressionist and Fauvist elements. In no sense were they non-conformists. They simply painted and their work was bought. They were not bent on regurgitating the taught nightmares as were the careerists, whose motto was "The path of literary and artistic development are laid out in the Party Programme".<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that, in this nightmarish world, one found not only distinguished mediocrities, but also some fine colourists. To this day we can see still view the afterglow of Cézanne's apple, albeit in a simplified and more sensual form, in the 1954 work by the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic Honoured Artist, Chairman of the Latvian Soviet Artists' Union, Leo Svemps. Concurrently, we can read in the press of the day, the strings of well-worn phrases churned out by the ideologues and given to him to read. Amongst them the likes of "In landscapes one should portray nature as changed by Soviet man".<sup>11</sup> The artist himself held several positions (with breaks in the 1950's) and was bestowed with various honours. He did, however, manage to avoid painting a single ideological work, just expressive landscapes, still lifes, and the occasional portrait. Alongside there were, naturally, true socialist realists both in form and content. It is noticeable that the ones who had least problems with changes of political system were the academic painters.

'Academics', such as the Latvian Art Academy professor J. R. Tillbergs painted parade portraits even in the 30's during Ulmanis' authoritarian presidency and also after 1945 being an acceptable court painter under both regimes. We don't know how pleased he would have been to learn that, some ten years after his death, his granddaughter married the budding artist Olegs Ozolins. He adopted his wife's maiden name and as Olegs Tillbergs, the organiser of provocative *performances* and installations, became the most visible *enfant terrible* of Latvian art in the 80's and 90's.

Returning though to the first post-war decades it must be mentioned that, alongside the official and semi-official artists there lived and worked other masters who were either refused membership or even expelled from the Artists' Union in the 1940's and early 50's. Even up to the 60's it hadn't crossed their minds to become involved with the official structures. One of them, Leonids Arins, who is also exhibited here, was to write in his diary:

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<sup>10</sup> see for example Zemzaris, Uldis. "Pēc atklāšanas runas"// Padomju Latvijas komunisti, Rīga, 1963, No. 4 or

Zemzaris, Uldis. "Lai sirds pieder komunismam"// MAksla, Rīga, 1963, No. 1

<sup>11</sup> "CeĶA uz jauniem sasniegumiem"op. cit. p 260.

"I've been lucky really. There's no street or museum named after me and I'm neither a 'highly honoured' nor a 'people's artist'".<sup>12</sup>

Another lone individual of the time (also in this exhibition) is Georgs Sēnbergs who never exercised even the minimum of self-censorship. Only in the 80's do we see an appraisal of his work. The life of these not particularly conceptual adepts led them to more profound searches within painting itself. Their colouristic renditions, continuing from the origins of the 20's and 30's, complement the gesture with strictly analytical research. Just as in the parallel Western movements of the 40's and 50's we see the introduction of conceptual moments in the seemingly subjective plane of the painting.

A true revelation was Zenta Logina's (1908 - 1983) first solo exhibition in the late 80's, which, sadly, came only after her death. Until then she was known as a textile artist, but suddenly the unprepared viewer was confronted by a torrent of abstract expressionism. Most of Latvia (even those with an art education) has still not heard of the artist's name and her inclusion in our exhibition will come as a surprise to many. Logina's personal time was absolute. Her work in art, day in day out, was only for herself. Why would a person of pensionable age, suddenly, as we now know, begin to paint abstracts in the mid-sixties knowing that they would never be shown?

In the mid 60's, we should remember, the vacuum in information created by the iron curtain was leaking. Art literature, if only from the other socialist countries, was creeping in and this was decidedly more liberal than the available Soviet material. It may be said that the Polish magazine 'Projekt' had considerable significance in the 60's and 70's for certain circles in Latvian art. However, many of these magazines, though carefully read, simply became sources for the accumulation of useless information. On the other hand, artists like Zenta Logina used the power of her talent to assess seriously the possibilities of abstract expressionism and, using its wide range, to tackle the painting tasks she saw as essential.

During the 60's some Latvians were given the opportunity to travel to the West. This Western experience combined with an insight into Abstractionism and Pop Art began to be reflected in Latvia despite the prevailing conditions. It gave us the very unusual pictorial signature of L. Auza. The abstracted 'coolness' of its figuralism was complemented by an exceptionally temperamental and courageous textural covering.

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<sup>12</sup> Ariðø, Leonids. op. cit. p 23.

One of the state's most officious art theoreticians and functionaries O. Abols was also given the chance to travel abroad and his fate is a typical example of how a **Soviet apple** exploits the opportunity to become just an apple. (English translation of 'Abols' is 'apple'). This person, who had for years painted countless symbols of the Soviet nightmare and written the most dogmatic and anti-formalist drivel, now began to paint metaphorically abstract pieces, attempted, quite adequately, to analyse the art processes in Latvia and, in later years, to review developments in the West.

As previously mentioned, a history of post-war Latvian art has yet to be written and therefore it cannot be rewritten. What there is consists of prefaces to albums of reproductions, chapters in various volumes consisting of different articles and press articles written by many Soviet 'art theoreticians' i.e. not a single comprehensive monograph on the situation of art as a whole. This is not to say that all that has been written is talentless and untrue. It is simply that these countless literary crumbs all toe the official line. The measure of quality we have adopted in this exhibition, the 'convertible value' of the artist's work, was absent in previous decades.

One could, I suppose, in this context just mention only in one sentence that what was supposed to be important once upon a (soviet) time, i.e. the announcement by official art critics in the 60's of a new appearance in Latvian art - the so called 'harsh style'. These, by no means harsh, artists obediently and profitably produced figural and expressively thematic pieces. Their colouring and composition did indeed differ from the canon of socialist realism. This manner of painting, not without its qualities was the platform for a new, official artistic elite. This elite was certainly more submissive and canonical than those old masters (J. Pauluks, R. Pinnis, L. Svemps, K. Ubans etc) whose creativity or learning process had their origins in the independent Latvia of the 1920's and 30's.

### **Newton's apple and the horseapple**

Perception of the **other**, which is not purely personal, came to Latvia later than in the West. The unrest of the sixties, of course, did not physically manifest itself locally, but its resonance, in the sense of how one perceived life, was felt later, in the seventies. The painter B. Delle, who may justifiably be regarded as one of the most original representatives of existential painting in Latvia, wrote in the preface to her catalogue: "I walked into a café in Valžu iela (a small street in Riga old town. H.D.) Good grief! The

café was called the 'Goat'. The French group was sitting at the far tables. I want to escape, but another group stops me and asks me to join them. These were people of a completely different kind. Uniformed in long hair and jeans. I too dressed that way. And so, I slipped into the 'Goat' just as if it was home. They all called us 'Beatniks'".<sup>13</sup> This 'French group' was not the one mentioned at the time of Fridrihsons' deportation in the 50's. It was a group of young artists at the end of the 60's and early 70's, represented here by B. Vasilevskis and I. Lancmanis, who were initially united by a common interest in 20th century French painting. Later, the tendency to rationalise led them to the precise co-ordinates of conceptualism. Their entry into the general Latvian art scene was relatively sudden. We can compare this suddenness with the popular story in science history of the apple falling onto Newton's head thus inspiring his subsequent law of gravity. The conditions, just as in Newton's day, were ripe.

**Thinking** was knocking at art's door. A thinking that would, in the Latvian case right up to the early 90's, be combined with powerful **imagery**. Alongside the overwhelming quantity of salon works, the old masters and their adherents' exercises in colouring, the new conditions saw the appearances of the new thinking and the new stylistics. One could, with certain provisos, classify these into three trends.

Firstly, the above-mentioned French group's brightest artists were known for their strict analytical exploration of space, dimension, light and context. On a pictorial plane, the reflected fragment of reality was consciously organised in a way that excluded the element of chance. Here, a closed context, 'built' by the artist himself, was explored and its subsequent aesthetic clarity laid claim to a certain objectivity. The mastery of pictorial space was rooted in the artist's ethical hierarchy. Its keywords could be 'nature', 'one's own and other histories' and 'the rational view'. The culmination of this distanced view, just as in the West some short time previously, was hyper or superrealism, whose most prominent representatives in Latvia were Miervaldis Polis and Līga Purmale.

These artists 'arrived' later than the masters of the French group. Their work, then and now, features an interest in fiction and narrative (theatrical) production. It paradoxically combines pure stylistic hyperrealism with the elements of transavant-gardism. Even though all the above-mentioned artists' works were seen at that time in nation-wide group exhibitions, their lifestyles and attitudes toward the art process in Latvia and the world were highly 'personal'.

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<sup>13</sup> "Biruta Delle. Gleznas" (catalogue) // Rīga, JAĶa sēta, 1991, p 7.

The second trend that had its origins in the 1970's has been accurately described by the Latvian artist and art theoretician Janis Borgs:

"The search for modern forms in the sixties and seventies led Latvian art down the paths of moderate expressionism and even surrealism. At the same time, it sharply reinforced metaphorically figurative thinking and produced revelations of a pathetically social content reach into those of the intimately meditative or, if you will, reflections on general human philosophy.....".<sup>14</sup>

Thus, much original talent blossomed in the 70's, whose rationally constructed paintings (L. Maurins et al), graphic pieces (I. Blumbergs et al) or sculptures (O. Feldbergs) narrative, figural overall image was formed from mutually complementary, intuitive, fragmentary elements. The influence of surrealism is significant ..... adapting its Polish variety. Individual mythology, which in the West was loudly announced by installations, found its local variation in the form of easel painting with the emphasis on a harmonised synthesis.

The third trend could be characterised by 1920's constructivist origins with visible signs of minimalism. Works of this nature could be officially legitimised because of their closeness to the applied arts and especially the blossoming design of the 1970's. Behind the 'cloak' of applied art, environmental art or even architecture, long cherished conceptions were directed towards "poetry and construction".<sup>15</sup> In 1972, in the old stock exchange building in Riga, there was a significant exhibition 'Svētki' (Festivities), which boasted the works of 49 authors. The critics of the day had no problem in publishing the following view; "The authors' scientifically based concept on the perception of space using sound, sight, articulation, and a kinetic, vestibular sense is worthy of notice. This is a problem for science and psychology and will continue to be solved by them. We can only discuss the world of the artistic image that has been locked away in these boxes. But here thoughts differ. Some see the exhibition as purely decorative, some as fine art".<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Borgs, Janis. "Pretspēku sprieguma dziedāta māksla. Ieskats avangardisma attīstībā Latvijā"// Rīga, lettische Avantgarde (Catalogue). Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, 1988, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> see Abols, Ojārs. "Laiks, telpa un poēzija"// Literatūra un māksla, Rīga, 1972, 19th February.

<sup>16</sup> ibid.

The young environmental artists (V. Celms, J. Borgs), as well as some fine artists (M. Argalis) turned their attention to the legacy of G. Klucis, the Latvian born artist who worked in Moscow. Projects based on his drawings were realised and also exhibited in the second half of the 1970's. However, in the late 70's, the hunt for the 'ideological enemy' in the Brezhnev era of stagnation was also successful in the art world.

One of the then brightest personalities in Latvian art, Maris Argalis, was creatively crushed. Up to 1980 this artist, who had a pronounced intellectual trait and fanatical perseverance, devoted himself completely to the investigation of various models and systems through graphic images and drawings. His field of work was in the interaction of art and science, acknowledging both the achievements of minimalism in art and psychoanalysis in science. From 1980 the artist was denied the chance to exhibit and his 'personal time', which had been already sufficiently personal in the eyes of officialdom, had now become totally 'personalised'.

Disregarding the regular waves of reaction that were typical of the early 80's and which laid the foundations of the inevitable 'perestroika', the 70's should be seen as a generator of many powerful impulses in the most varied walks of life. It was precisely in the 70's that one saw the formation of an alternative culture, a culture that began to overcome the confines of the narrowly personal. The first rock concerts were being staged, poetry with rich subtext was widespread and there was enormous interest in the theatre. (In those days people used to queue all night for tickets). Stage design and poster art were no longer utilitarian but had become the vehicles and forum for new conceptual declarations. 'Flower children' organised photographed *performances* and in society, (i.e. the Latvian part, because it must be remembered that almost half the population was and still is, formed by immigrants), there was a reawakened interest in the legacy of the past, which the Soviet system had tried to erase from the nation's collective memory. One may, in part, agree with the view that "powerlessness, the inability to assert oneself legally, engendered on the one hand, either apathy or aggression and, on the other, a whole complex of spiritual and intellectual camouflage. This was oddly similar to the official routine where any form of event or information, in its coded system, became almost irrational".<sup>17</sup>

One has to take into account though, that many quests with their origins in the 70's, (we are referring here to our point of interest - **personal** time),

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<sup>17</sup> Osmanis, Aleksis. "Par daġAm tendencēm XX gadsimta 80. gadu latviešu glezniecībā"// Doma-2, Rīga, Latvijas MAkslas muzeju apvienība, 1994, p 119.

have a pattern of **completeness** - oddly enough, when examining the achievements of many personalities, one comes to the conclusion that they have indeed realised their creativity.

Side by side with the more radical conceptual investigations in the late 70's and early 80's, in the fine arts we can see some new and some already 'brightly crystallised' existing talent in painting. One of these, also in this exhibition, is Boriss Bèrzins, who began his artistic biography in the late 50's together with the artists of the official Soviet elite to be. He too, as did many of his colleagues, received the highest recognition, albeit in the latter half of the 80's, from the Soviet system - honorary titles, a studio, a professorship. The above notwithstanding, his time as a painter is remarkably personal. He never sought any special honours, those were bestowed upon him, a wise, mild mannered figure, by the 'surrounding context'. Over the years it seems that this special talent has been a kind of 'justification' for all the surrounding mediocrity - "Just look, how we're in step with Soviet times and we can still manage to respect the loner too"! In his diary, the earlier mentioned artist L. Arins, wrote about Bèrzins with a naive wonder: "Boriss Bèrzins' brown still life in the exhibition 'Autumn '76' is absolutely flat. It is so unique and of such craftsmanship, the like of which I haven't seen anywhere else in the world. He is the only one in our art who deserves to be called world class".<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in the diary he does admit that Bèrzins' painting does have elements of Rothko and Braque, but "nothing stands in total isolation - the nearest we get are great achievements".<sup>19</sup> If we accept that the measure of great art is its ability to develop the art process itself, then Bèrzins' influence has yet to be determined. In any case, his almost monochrome oeuvre (brown, yellow, dark grey), which reduces depicted objects simply to a means of creating the pictorial plane, can be regarded as his **personal** investment in some wider tradition of Western contemporary art.

The beginning of the 1980's was noticeable for the appearance of a new and active generation of painters. This generation was, in the following ten years, to manifest itself in Latvia, as a widely recognised group and is represented here by its most individual personality - Aija Zarina. When assessing the work of the group and that of the painters who were stylistically close, critics write of the 'feminisation' of painting.<sup>20</sup> True, there was and still is a considerable number of active and noticeable women in painting, but to call it a social phenomenon of the Baltic States would be baseless.

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<sup>18</sup> Ariðø, Leonìds. op.cit. p 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ariðø, Leonìds. ibid p 22.

<sup>20</sup> see Osmanis, Aleksis. op.cit.

The new trends in Latvian painting of the 80's had many similar counterparts in the rest of the world, for example German neo-expressionism and the Italian transavant-garde. The work of the new painters can, in general, be recognised by the large formats, overall expressive spreads, dynamic rhythms of the paintings, the pronounced chiaroscuro contrasts achieved by the use of local colours and figural compositions. Mythological themes dominated and still dominate (an apt contribution to spirit of the age!) as well as figural messages, whose generalised images permit the introduction of a definite mood of deep thought in their interpretation or even pretensions to philosophise. In the context of local art, their work differed in the scope of its gestures. However, we can talk of a **personal** view in this, seemingly very personal, tendency in only a few cases. Even though the work of these artists shocked the self-righteousness of the official 'academics', it was still absolutely prey to socialist market forces - not in the ideological sense, but in its relationship with society.

The most visible of these artists (i.e. those who were included in the local hierarchy of values), except the ever-non-conformist A. Zarina, enjoyed the patronage of the Communist Youth League. They were given all sorts of honours, prizes, grants, and the highest prices for their works. For many of them it meant a life free of material worries. This art wasn't 'dangerous' because it was recognisable and could even be manipulated on the level of criticism. Looking back on the (recent) past ten years, we can see that this generation of painters is now, in these early stages of capitalism, starting to feel economic and psychological discomfort. This can be recognised as the, historically well defined, affirmation of a decadent layer in a degenerating society.

A. Zarina has overcome the academic overtones, characteristic of her closest colleagues. In the last fifteen years, her talent has guided the evolution to a clearer sense of form and a marked intensification of emotion. Despite being rejected for exhibitions in the 80's, the twists of fate and history have given A. Zarina an international reputation, rare for any Latvian artist. In very recent years, another artist from the above-mentioned group to have made a similar 'jump' is Ieva Iltnere. In contrast to Zarina's sensual and precise forms, Iltnere's work is recognisable by its meditational peace, its conceptually weighed out theme and the paintings' surface. The 80s saw 'developed socialism's claim to be a society, apparently in need of reconstruction. Anyone with any sense could see it was the Soviet *nomenklatura's* last ditch attempt to hold on to its privileges. To a large

extent it was successful. The governments of recently independent countries, including 1990's Latvia, all have *ex-nomenklatura* members. In the art world too, the nomenklatura artists have preserved their, if not economic then their 'spiritual' status because it was still nurtured and protected all these last ten years.

Whatever the developments after, the mid 80's was a time of marked liberalisation in cultural life. Obviously, people tend to forget that, even in 1990, libraries had 'special collections' and, as late as 1988, one needed KGB permission to travel to the West. Despite that, there was an ever-increasing influx of information and a growing critical ethos. Even though the 1984 large scale 'Nature. Environment. Man' exhibition (which, by the way, saw the first interdisciplinary works and installations) was closed prematurely and the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR closed down an unopened group exhibition in 1985<sup>21</sup> the process was irreversible. Artists were turning to, what is known in the international art world as, the language of contemporary art, encompassing both the ranges of form and content.

As late as the 1970's, the KGB was interrogating two Latvian schoolboys - Juris Boiko and Hardijs Ledins. They had published the handwritten, but unsanctioned, magazine '**Zirgabols**' (Horseapple). Boiko was denied the opportunity to study at the Riga Secondary School of Applied Arts. However, the KGB could not predict the future of these two individuals. They could not foresee that these youngsters would become knowledgeable in post-modernist theory, the first adepts of 'approximate art', the founders of the multi-media group 'Workshop for the Restoration of Non-existent Sensations', and adventurers in music, poetry, video and the staged photograph. Their achievements in **personal time** have been accumulated in the fortunate present, if one can call those people who have informal and creative disciples fortunate. At that time there was no question of publicity, but just for their own enjoyment, they organised ritualised events - walks to the Riga outskirts, readings in foreign languages, wrote novels in verse ....

It was no wonder then, that the basis for the first, serious venture of contemporary Latvian art abroad ('Riga - The Latvian Avant-garde' 1988, West Berlin) was just this group.<sup>22</sup> When the West Berlin curators from the

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<sup>21</sup> O. Pētersons, A. BreĶe and J. Putrāms in the G. Ūāilters Memorial Museum.

<sup>22</sup> The exhibition 'Riga - The Latvian Avant-garde' was held in the West Berlin *Staatliche Kunsthalle* in 1988, the *Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof* in Kiel and the exhibition hall *Weserburg*, Bremen, in 1989.

art society NGbK<sup>23</sup> first came to Riga, they were greeted by an already developed art world, which met the criteria of 'international convertibility'. Side by side with the 'approximate post-modernists', there were other, no lesser interesting, artistic signatures.

The informal artist group of O. Pētersons, J. Putrāns, A. Breže and K. Gelzis had been surprising the Riga public for some time with their large scale (200cm x 110cm) screen prints. Together with other, similarly disposed, graphic artists they would either intensify the neo-expressionist gesture by creating generalised metaphorical images, introduce refined elements of pop culture on a graphical plane or create grotesque and paradoxical collages. They had no establishment pretensions earning their daily bread by other means - design and layout work, book illustration etc. Their time was personal only in the sense of the relationship between the outsider and the ruling taste and official hierarchy. It was precisely these people who sought a more effective means of communication with the observer by organising actions in the Riga city environment. Their art too, was actively communicative. Their themes were simultaneously poetically, socially, and even politically charged. 1987 saw a new, exceptionally significant, forum for expression - the magazine 'Avots' (Source). This publication gathered around it, not just like-minded people in the fine arts, but also writers, photographers, critics and publicists (Its circulation in 1987 was 90,000!). Among its artistic contributors were S. Malina, K. Gelzis, O. Pētersons (who are also in this exhibition) and similarly minded colleagues such as the distinguished master of the metaphor, A. Breže. Alongside of perfecting their talent in graphics, these artists found expression in a genre that was to find its full-grown stage in the early 90's - the metaphorical installation. The artists mentioned above, O. Tillbergs and others, persistently developed their powers of spatial and contextual thinking. Right up to the mid 90's, the expressly poetic installation has been dominant. Its rationalism + poetry + unavoidable narrative expression is essentially tied to the materials used. Be they *ready-mades*, specially constructed objects or materials (even colours, such as 'the 'orange' of O. Pētersons) their essence is attachment. The guide-book has often been the artist's depicted image, ethically recognised, yet variously interpretable. The best examples are when the genre in Latvia differs from that seen elsewhere in the world i.e. where the imagery is combined with irony and alternative constructive thought (e.g. some of the works of O. Pētersons and A. Breže); when the sharp social message is encoded in the 'memory' of the materials but they are arranged, like a poem, 'in verse' (O. Tillbergs); when representational problems are examined with the help of material,

<sup>23</sup> Neue Gesellschaft für bildene Kunst.

including, not only actualities, but also the limbo of cultural memory (K. Gelzis, S. Malina). This achievement by, essentially, a single generation of artists is only regarded seriously by its youngest and inquisitive artist colleagues. Even in this new age, there is no financial or organisational state (museum) support and that cannot be excused purely on the grounds of a poor economy. (After all, the museums have found sponsors for, to their thinking, more worthy expressions of **contemporary**, but **traditional**), art. The only institution in the country that goes some way to give financial and informative support to non-traditional artists is the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts - Riga, which was founded in 1993. (Of course, one must not ignore the remarkable support of private sponsors both in financial and material terms). And, to be fair, without Nordic and Western support, which has enabled many of the above to participate in exhibitions abroad, these artists' aspirations would remain just dreams.

### **The Latvian National Apple and the Apple Macintosh**

The changes brought about by the regaining of independence in 1991 have not just carried with them an optimistic self-reliance. Society was suddenly confronted with, not only the notions of constant work and the constant affirmation of democracy, but also that of independent thought. Yes, in the times of 'savage capitalism', we can talk, completely objectively, about the social shock, especially when it comes to those sections of society that cannot fend for themselves (pensioners, orphans etc). However, alongside of these real and genuine problems, there has been a torrent of articulated pseudo-problems. Under the new-found freedom of the press, the gates of tormented and complex ridden emotion are open. The old ideologues have had the ground removed from under their feet; the conditions of overall ignorance have conceived the most imaginable of 'prophets' who hide behind the mask of genuine curators of the Latvian identity. Yes, the West is blamed for the quickly adopted sub-culture in music, cinema and pornography, but there are constant verbal attacks on contemporary Latvian art. The **unrelenting discussion in the press** is unprofessional, it is not discerning, and it does not relate to the essence and form of each individual work of art. This discussion is centred around the one argument: This art does not correspond with traditional Latvian thinking, it threatens the national identity etc. These processes can also be seen in the other post-communist states and their existence is not just a product of ignorance, but a lack of intellectual mobility in the particular country. On this background of pitiful literary reflection, it is all the more enjoyable to see the arrival of a creative and intellectually based generation

in Latvian art in the mid 1990's. This 'arrival' coincides with the increasing use of the, so called, new media - the photograph, video, computers etc. These several 25-year olds are occupied with the problems of the perception of space, with depiction and perception processes in art itself and with the compatibility of aural and visual stereotypes. Dominant is a clear and easily read statement in various *environments*, photo, video, colour and sound installations. There is no place for generalisation, because thought is shown in process. This has no foreseen answer but is an interval in the quest assisted by a seemingly non-compulsory image. As with their colleagues elsewhere in the world, this generation too is diverting from conceptual art (art that is centred around an object using context only as a reference point), to contextual art, to which the most important are the local and surrounding conditions. The conditions which surround the future work of art. Gints Gabrans' installations and video installations, Anita Zabilevska's video and spatial projects, Ēriks Bozis' photo installations, the paintings and installations of Barbara Muizniece and other artists' work can be viewed in this light. It might seem paradoxical, that it is precisely these young artists, who, in the age of the *Internet* might possibly be criticised for impersonality and levelling, are most tied to that phenomenon, so wonderfully named, *local sensibility*. (Sensitivity to manifestations in a local and surrounding context).

Approximately ten years ago Hardijs Ledins, the above-mentioned authority for several of these young artists, wrote an essay entitled 'The spirit of the age and the atmosphere of the place'. The conclusions therein have lost none of their meaning; They are relevant to this exhibition and to Latvian contemporary art in general:

".... In this situation, is it possible to say something essential to, not only oneself and one's friends, but also to wider audience? I think it is possible. And the key could be the use of the dual code, characteristic of post-modernism. One half of the code could gain an important meaning from the local atmosphere - it could be represented in both a literary or semantic form or through local culture and traditions. The other half, in this instance, could be international and expressed in a popular, universally accepted form of language or through new technologies and materials".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lediðø, Hardijs. "The spirit of the age and the atmosphere of the place' in 'Riga - lettische Avantgarde" p 79.