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Art as a Threat

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Latvia



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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

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.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

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.

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.

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Art as a Threat

In Latvia contemporary art activities have only evolved undisturbed during the past ten years. Ideology regulated artistic expression during the period of Soviet occupation. Of course, some artists did live in their own personal space and didn't succumb to the dictates of the time. These individuals, however, were bursts of light whose trajectories influenced the next generation of artists.

Conceptual art appeared only at the beginning of the 70s with alternative cultural events. "Flower children" organized happenings, performance art and staged photographic session. At this time the first hyperrealistic paintings were created.

At the beginning of the 80s, a new, active generation of artists arrived on the art scene. This generation manifested itself in periodic exhibitions. The artists' works coincided in form with the German Neo-Expressionists and the Italian Transavant-garde. They are characterized by large formats, dynamic brush strokes and of local color. The appearance of women artists working in a similar direction led art critics to describe the "feminization" of Latvian painting. Aija Zarina is considered the most brilliant personality in this group of women. To this day the artist who has achieved international acclaim continues in her search for the clear essence of form and the perception of emotion.

A milestone was reached in 1984 with the opening of the exhibition Nature. Environment. Man. at St. Peter's Church. Approximately 100 artists, representing many generations and artistic directions, participated in the event. This was the first time that the general public was introduced to installations. The event lasted only two weeks and was ordered closed by Communist Party officials.

An interesting and separate phenomenon of the 80s was the multi-media group “Workshop for the Restoration of Non-Existent Sensations”. The group’s leaders, Juris Boiko and Hardijs Ledins, ascertained the possibilities of “approximate art” by creating events, environment and music installations and by staging photography sessions.

It is no wonder that this group formed the basis of the first serious Latvian contemporary art parade abroad –the exhibit “Riga – Latvian Avant-Garde” that took place in West Berlin in 1988. The curators of NGbK (Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst) upon arrival in Riga were met with “internationally convertible” contemporary art. The participants of the exhibit included a no less brilliant informal group of “border crossers” (Ojars Petersons, Kristaps Gelzis, Andris Breze and Juris Putrams) with their large format silk screen prints. General metaphoric images refreshed by grotesque characters were created in a Neo-Expressionist style.

Traditional exhibit convention was transgressed. Artists began to create works in the urban environment. In the Art Days of 1986 and 1987 exhibitions took place in the Riga train station pedestrian tunnel, Philharmonic Square, the Old City and other parts of Riga. The artists, themselves, were the media.

In the 90s, the previously mentioned artists started to master space by creating metaphoric installations. One of the most outstanding authors of poetic installations is Olegs Tillbergs. He successfully combines narrative expression with rationalism and ties it to the material used.

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 brought about a series of transformations in the economic and social life of the nation. The paradigmatic changes in contemporary art were characterized by the arrival on the art scene of a young, intellectually centered generation that included such artists as Eriks Bozis, Gints Gabrans, Anita Zabilevska, and Andris Frīdbergs. These artists manifest contextualism utilizing the possibilities offered by new media. In the vein of process thinking, these artists don’t attempt to offer any precise answers. By creating works that are provocatively non-compulsory and which provide the possibility to study the perception of space, they manifest the spirit of the age and the atmosphere of the place.

During the past few years, Soros Contemporary Art Center – Riga (SCAC) annual art exhibits have become some of the most important contemporary

art events in Latvia. These exhibits are developed around a unified concept. The participants are selected through a competitive process based on submitted proposals. SCCA-Riga annual exhibits have taken place in an exhibit hall (Zoom Factor 1994) and a gallery (The State 1994). The artists have also placed their objects in the urban Riga setting (Memorial 1995) and in the pastoral landscape of Pedvale Open Air Museum (Geo-Geo 1996). The last SCCA-Riga exhibition project, Opera, took place in Riga's largest theater. The heart of the exhibit was propelled into the realm of process art.

Kaspars Vanags and his confreres popularize sub-culture, trend-culture and alternative art phenomena (Open 1995, Biosport Inc. 1996, etc.) by creating musical and installation projects in empty buildings and music clubs.

Thematic activities take place in the club Slepenais Experiments (The Secret Experiment) which is open to the creative endeavors of young artists. The club's curator Inga Steimane organizes a series of exhibits. The unifying element of these exhibits is the artists chosen media – photography. In 1997, Inga Steimane and some young women artists founded LN Women's' League Project. Works connected with feminist polemic are created through collaborative effort.

Rasa and Raitis Smiti, founders of The Electronic Laboratory along with other young artists, explore the possibilities of Internet and computer graphics in Latvia.

It isn't easy for artists to exhibit their projects because the only organization that facilitates the development of modern art is SCCA. Latvia doesn't have a permanent contemporary art exposition. The Latvian Museum of Art only collects art that reflects a traditional interpretation of art. Art Galleries which are mainly concentrated in Riga focuses on commercial exhibitions. Occasionally conceptual contemporary art exhibitions are made in the galleries Daugava, Bastejs, Riga Gallery, Ivonna Veiherste's Gallery and Gallery of the Latvian Artists' Union. Thus, one of the characteristic features of the contemporary Latvian art scene is its expressed centralization. Only few conceptually based contemporary art exhibitions are organized in the Gallery Laipa in Valmiera, in Talsi Regional Museum, in Pedvale Art Park near Sabile and in the city space of Jelgava. Periodicals dedicated to culture – LMM and Maksla + rarely publish professional discussions or analytical articles about contemporary art issues. A new art magazine under the title Studija (A Studio) has appeared on the art scene of Latvia. The magazine contains essays on artists and the most important

art undertakings in the Baltic region. Although until now there has been published only one issue it already traces a certain tendency, characteristic also of the previously mentioned *Maksa* + - lack of serious analytical essays which makes to think of the incapability of professional art critics. Most significant publications have been contributed by Antra Klavina, Stella Pelse, Ivars Runkovskis, Inga Steimane. However, these publications are occasional and do not really make a discussion space for contemporary art. The most competent among the art experts is Helena Demakova - a contemporary art historian and curator of innumerable exhibitions whose book on contemporary Latvian art will be published soon. It will reflect the trajectory of the development of contemporary Latvian art. Only recently has the Latvian Academy of Art incorporated progressive tendencies in its teaching methodology. The Ministry of Culture is also providing hope through its projects to improve the situation in the field of contemporary art, facilitate artistic creativity and counter the notion popular in a segment of society that "this art doesn't correspond to traditional Latvian thinking; it threatens the national identity"¹.

¹ Demakova, Helena, "The Apple Harvest or Art in Latvia 1945-1995: Between Personal and Ideological Time", *Personal/Time. Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1945-1996* (catalogue). Warsaw, The Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1996, p. 19.