

Promises and Possibilities: Visual arts in Estonia and Latvia

> Intro

The research trip to Estonia and Latvia lasted a few days – first in Tallinn and afterwards in Riga, as planned (three full days in Tallinn and almost two days in Riga).

The scheduled visits in Tallinn (Center for Contemporary Arts, KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn Art Hall, Estonian Academy of Art, Non Grata Art Container, the Estonian Artists' Association galleries: Hobuspea and Draakoni, private gallery of contemporary art Vaal) gave us a more or less detailed idea regarding the contemporary visual arts scene of the city/country.

The visit to Riga on the other hand, perhaps due to the program (Latvian National Museum of Art, Arsenal, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, Riga Art Space, RIXC Media Space), or perhaps –and mainly– due to the lack of time, left rather incomplete impressions regarding the profile of contemporary art in Latvia.

I was compelled to see this experience as a whole, making comparisons between the two countries and reaching common evaluations; my main concern was to investigate how the two countries deal with organized visual memory within state museums or within experimental activities with educational and promotional/exhibitional goals and expectations.

> Tallinn, Estonia

In Estonia the situation has certainly taken its course and steadily evolves so that there is a 'natural' response to the needs for recognition in the international visual arts community.

The **Center for Contemporary Arts (www.cca.ee)** (run at the time of the trip by Johannes Saar), has established a dynamic system of archiving and documenting the Estonian contemporary visual arts scene –which was presented to us during our visit– and its exhibition program includes emblematic exhibitions of foreign creators mostly, so that current international issues are highlighted.

During our visit we had the chance to see two exhibitions organized by Tallinn Art Hall, directed by Harry Liivrand: an exhibition dedicated to Orlan and to the whole procedure of her work, presenting documents of the various stages of the administration of changes, at the Tallinn Art Hall; and the exhibition "The Performing Man - Heikki Portaankorva, Heikki Mäntymaa" at the Art Hall Gallery.



On the other side, **KUMU (www.ekm.ee)**, a contemporary art museum open since 2006, is an architecturally interesting recipient (designed by Finnish architect Pekka Vapaavuori) that gives emphasis to its educational role alongside its exhibition programming. The museum has already documented the 'modern' circumstances and has begun to include in its great memory important moments from the situation of the last decade's visual arts in the country. The trust that the museum shows to young curators for the organization of programmes and activities, as far as the exhibitional and educational programming is concerned, is one of the Museum's very positive traits.

On the educational side, the **Estonian Academy of Art (www.artun.ee)** seems to follow the international educational trend that also involves applied arts elements in the study of fine arts, emphasizing on art and new technologies, as well as on the areas of design and communication. Its critical and non-academic

position on the approach of the historical visual arts archive –with all its stereotypes–, as well as of the different aspects of contemporary visual arts practice, shows an educational programming that promotes art and technique as the liberating powers for a society that constantly improves its profile in the European and global map.



Academia Non Grata, is already well known outside of Estonia; a non-governmental institution, a kind of free art school, that offers residencies to artists from different disciplines, and focuses on performance activities. ANG is based at the Non Grata Art Container (www.artcontainer.ee) in Tallinn and at the Non Grata House in Parnu.

> Riga, Latvia



Riga on the other hand is a city with unique architecture and with prominent the delicate dignity of art nouveau, that has invested its dynamic presence as contemporary art centre in the future.

It is obvious that cultural policy in Latvia promotes the importance of state-of-the-art infrastructure for the archiving of texts –library– and for dance, music and the visual arts –music

hall, contemporary art museum– for the country’s capital, as its heart and brain.

I must admit that the three models that present the city’s plans for change can be seen as both a great expectation and a political bet for Riga, Latvia, and its true affiliation to the West. It seems however that this expectation goes hand in hand with a lot of uncertainties, as it is a rather academic expectation, topped up with the need to preserve the past.

The state agency “New Three Brothers” (established in 2005) is responsible for the planning, fundraising, design, construction and equipment of the Latvian National Library, the Rīga Concert Hall and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The **Contemporary Art Museum** (to be located in a former power plant at the location Andrejsala) will give emphasis on art from Latvia and the Baltic region. Due to the fact that the building is not ready yet, the preparation that has begun in 2005, with the organisation of the museum’s collection by a committee of international experts in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, is exhibited in different countries/spaces (such as the tribute to Latvian art at the European Commission headquarters in Brussels last May and at the European Central Bank in Frankfurt last summer).

In Riga the research trip team visited the **National Museum of Art (www.lnmm.lv)** (main building), through which we were guided by the Curator Irena Buzinska. It is a museum of modern art, which, as was mentioned, participates also in the now of contemporary visual arts, through temporary exhibitions and activities.

The major exhibition taking place in the city at the time of our visit, “**The Mythology of Sovietland. The Socialist Realism**” at the Arsenal Exhibition Hall (branch of the Latvian National

Museum of Art, curated by Elita Ansone), dealt with a historical reference to the visual arts adventure during the period of socialist realism and the Russian occupation. The significance of such exhibition is accentuated, when one considers that the renaissance of contemporary art in Latvia was developed simultaneously with the desire for independence from the Soviets. References of this kind are undoubtedly of positive nature; sometimes however, stressing the reconstruction and the reduction of the past goes against the promotion of the present and the opportunities of competitiveness with contemporary visual art versions and their dynamics around the world. It is in any case important that exhibitions of this kind create a reconciliation with periods of art that have been attacked in the past. It seems that this tendency, now that things are on a steady course towards the West, is a view generalised in the Baltic countries.

At the recently opened **Riga Art Space (www.artspace.riga.lv)** we saw the individual exhibition of Jaan Toomik, an Estonian artist of star status. It seems that for now, this public space (with rich educational programs, and an art library) will cover the gap until the museum opens.

At the **Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (www.lcca.lv)** we met with contemporary visual artists from Latvia who already enjoy an international reputation.

It is indicative that the priority for realization is about to be given to the Library, secondly to the Music Hall, and as a third choice to the Museum of Contemporary Art. This kind of order in the organization of collective cultural memory shows an obvious conservatism of political will, at least as far as the culture of image is concerned.

I believe that the creation of a contemporary art museum in Latvia is an investment of major importance. I am sure that it will be act as a catalyst for the determination of the country's creativeness and that it will help decisively towards **the international recognition**. Of course, it is not by chance that the design of this museum was given to a world known architect, Rem Koolhaas.



Model of the Contemporary Art Museum in Riga, designed by Andrejsala-Rem Koolhaas-OMA Stedebouw BV

> Comparative findings

The main target of the research trip was to gather information on the contemporary visual arts scene of these two countries of the Baltic, so that the emergence and promotion of local original forms of artistic expression in the field of visual arts are made possible.

Both Estonia and Latvia show the common interest of areas of Europe that were characterized by the great social and political changes of the previous century. Their very recent inclusion in the EU in the beginning of the 21st century makes more plausible the dialogue with the visual art creation of these countries, so that outlets with international recognition are given to their undoubtedly rich dynamic.

Besides, as peripheral countries at the northern extreme of the European family, they positively question the perception on contemporary art, through an almost “anti-globalized” artistic

creation, through their effort to place their mark on the international cultural map, preserving elements from their multifaceted national tradition at the same time.

Most of the works presented to us, I would say, are characterized by a contradictory controversy of issues. In most cases, parallel narrative themes are detected in multiple layers. A need for internationalism instead of localism, a mix of elements from tradition and modernity, urbanism and world culture, reality and fantasy, the private and the public, are juxtaposed in a game of ideas and references. In the diversity of approaches we see the oppositions between pop culture, critique of lifestyle, advertisement and the aesthetics of consumerism, even in the perceptions of new age. In most of the works artistic practice seems to doubt strictly predetermined hierarchies.

Introducing the conversation on the development of contemporary art of the Baltic countries in a time when artistic experience becomes more and more complicated and sophisticated, as the world of art actively converses with more countries and cultures, one could make some general remarks concerning mostly the works' thematic: artists deal with matters of memory, historical heritage and cultural tradition, as well as with the abolition of discrimination between the socialist and the capitalist ideologies. The fact that transitional fractured identities are mentioned on a collective level seems to also affect issues of personal identity. In the examination of identity it is common to find an anthropological approach that examines the consequences of globalization within an international frame, without however marginizing personal particularities owed to cultural or even clearly experiential origin.

Most of the works we saw included references to tradition; one would often discover traces of local stylistic 'iconography' –independent from the materials or the medium used– which were almost always looking to the present, in a problematic of the 'here' and the 'now'.

It was also easy to detect a strongly critical attitude against social developments, whereas elements of introspection were not scarce. Something that must be stressed is the existential search that focuses on the body. The body as an image, as a text to be viewed, belonging to a directed script, the body that transforms and observes itself.

Concerning the mediums that artists prefer, these have to do mostly with new technologies. We saw mostly videos of short or long duration.

Artists from Estonia use mainly new technology in multiple ways, often blurring the boundaries between photography, video, performance and installation. Their works reflect the strong visual character of media culture, or combine the theatrical pose and the production techniques of multimedia for the creation of imaginary areas.

Others use technology merely as a means for the transportation of ideas, adopting an immediate approach in the narration of the everyday.

Documentaristic or hyper-realistic tactics of the media were present, whereas the handmade and the use of labour were absolutely absent.

In some works a vague and indefinable narration existed, although it was capable of provoking creative associations even with ironical humor.

The metaphors and the symbolisms were plenty, so that an experiential, intuitional reading of the work was provoked.

Elements of theatricality or dramatic direction are also present, accessing the technological precision of digital images and photographic techniques, without creating an imposing atmosphere.

In many works realistic and transcendental elements intermingle towards extreme narratives, often combining the macabre and the humoristic, the detached narration and the melodramatic elements of soap opera, the farce and the tragic.

This avalanche of videos consciously competed the avalanche of iconography offered by the mass media. However, it is made evident that art has the ability to convince and to promote social changes, dictating ways of aesthetics, and thus ethics, and at the same time reminding us that art is obliged to continuously reexamine this ability.

> Final remarks

To sum up and to continue with some general conclusions on the visual arts profile of these two Baltic countries (Estonia and Latvia), I would say that visual art production and its problematics introduce questions on various languages and experiences, while artistic practices approach a view of the world spanning from a clearly realistic view to the transcendental/philosophical. Social comments tend to be detached, as the attempt for ritualizing everyday life is successful. The artists are undoubtedly conscious of the special character of their local culture and recognize it. However, any kind of folklore art is far at least from the works we saw. The dispute of cultural stereotypes, as well as a clear inclination towards globalization, but against homogeneity, is an issue for the re-examination of the centre's dominance on the periphery.

In any case, the reexamination and questioning of cultural differences, closes the gap towards the evaluation of common elements that after all concern us all.

A critical approach to public space and its political changes simultaneously with a turn to the issue of private life, personal space and introspection without pretences, may be the focal point that I would keep as a general impression.

I will end this short note with a rhetorical question that was prompted to me by this brief experience in the two countries.

How can artistic practice be defined today beyond geographical boundaries, how is it possible for an artist to maintain the elements of his/her personal identity without being caught into the trap of the folklore or exotic exaggeration? In other words, how is it possible to materialize the sense of authenticity, that even though it recalls memories, it is not degenerated into nostalgia or the need for rejection?

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Works by Latvian artists Liga Marcinkevica (member of the artist's group F5) and Armands Zelcs



Works by Estonian artists Jaan Toomik (top), Ene Liis Semper (right), Kiwa (bottom right) and Mark Raidpere (centre)

