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Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More

Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, Riga

2. June - 28. October 2018

Review Article in [Swedish](#) 29.06.18

## Everything May Come To an End

By [Jacquelyn Davis](#)



[Sputnik Photos](#), Lost Territories Archive, 2008-16.

For the first Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, curator Katarina Gregos has chosen to view Latvia as ‘the center of the world,’ where other regions and nationalities become satellites. This is refreshing, for the Baltics have previously been considered to have a peripheral status.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the region has consistently redefined itself, and this metamorphosis also applies to art. In her introduction, Gregos notes that Europe faces the threat of misguided nationalism, pushing the world into a melancholic state. With so much change comes the impression that society remains unprepared for what lies ahead. Gregos admits that many recent biennials have focused on history and what has been lost, so in Riga she wants to highlight the present and near future.

The title of RIBOCA1 – Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More – is borrowed from Alexei Yurchak’s eponymous book from 2006. In the curatorial concept, Gregos states: ”Yurchak discusses the collapse of the

Soviet Union and one particular characteristic that defined it: the sense that although the Soviet system was felt to be permanent and immutable, its demise was at the same time perceived as completely natural. The shock of being thrust into a new order came only later. The title of his book suggests the slippery nature of change, that what may seem eternal can suddenly come to an end.”

Gregos argues that change is constant and that individuals sometimes ‘wake up’ to experience a sudden break in consciousness. One point of this biennial is to highlight the tangent and schism – while simultaneously reflecting on how change is interpreted in relation to our lives. In short: nothing is to be taken for granted, since much can be flipped or torn apart at any time.



Mark Dion, A Tour of The Dark Museum, 2018.

## INCREASED PRIVATE FUNDING

The focus on present-day change is detected in the event’s newly commissioned works – no less than 49 of 114 being new – exhibited in nine venues, in addition to site-specific interventions and sculptures dispersed throughout the city. Most of the artists originate from Baltic or Scandinavian countries (approximately a third come from Baltic countries and 70% from the entire Baltic region), with exceptions reaching out to Western Europe, the United States, Argentina, South Africa, Russia, etc.

In the past, funding for large scale Baltic-based events could easily be connected to an economic exchange between the Baltics and Scandinavia. Although one can still trace a lineage of economic cohesion between these regions, this event is founded by Agniya Mirgorodskaya, a Lithuanian-Russian graduate of Sotheby’s Institute of Art, and – unapologetically – sponsored by her family. As part of the set-up, approximately 60 journalists, myself included, were sponsored to attend the opening.



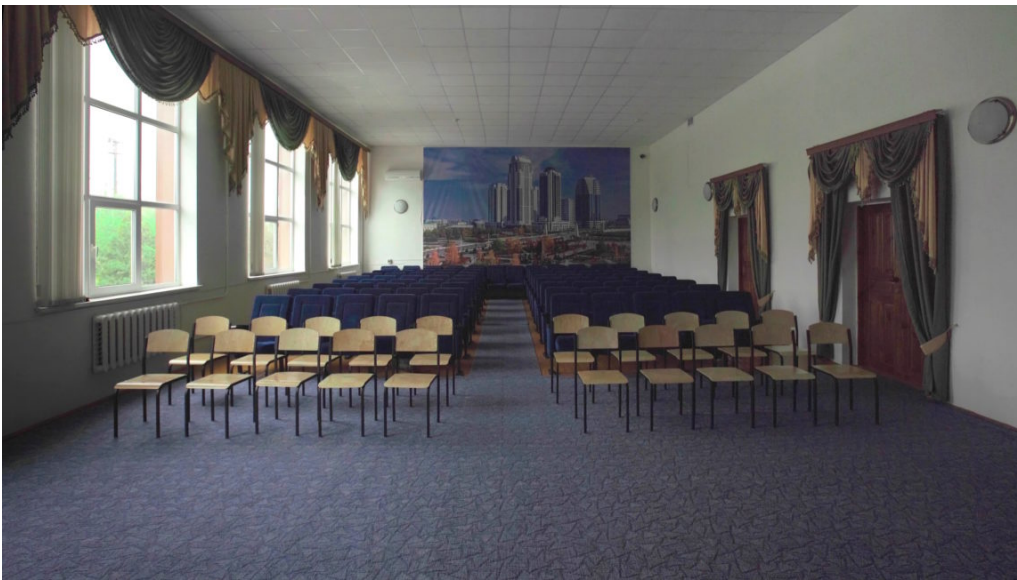
The Agency of Singular Investigations, The Flower Power Archive, 2018.

#### AVOIDS CONFRONTATIONAL WORK

It is suggested that viewers follow a specific trajectory which begins at the former Faculty of Biology at the University of Latvia. American artist **Mark Dion** sets the bar high with the site-specific installation *A Tour of the Dark Museum* (2018), in which one moves within pitch-black corridors with only a flashlight to discover curious objects and animal skeletons. Some are displayed under black lights which tinker with the imagination, mixing emotions of abandonment, discomfort and paralysis. In a similar spirit, Swedish artists **Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson** present *Encyclopedia* (2015–2017), an overwhelming fictional text work collecting details of animal mutations made extinct by humanity. A cabinet-as-archive consisting of numerous cards stands alone in the room, harboring the artists' discontent with collective irresponsibility and the environmental crisis.

In the second venue, the residence of architect and patron Kristaps Morbergs (1844–1928), one finds works by **The Agency of Singular Investigations** (Stanislav Shuripa and Anna Titova), such as *The Flower Power Archive* (2018), which is a commissioned archive about an underground organization which was part of the resistance during the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet period. The organization used parapsychology and less clearly defined methodologies with a focus on how plants influence their political milieu – again partially true, partially speculative.





Aslan Gaisumov, *People of No Consequence* (still), 2016.



Aslan Gaisumov, *People of No Consequence* (still), 2016.

In contrast, Russian artist **Aslan Gaisumov** lets us share in the very real historical disaster where half a million Chechen and Ingush people were deported by Soviet authorities to central Asia in 1944. For his stark video *People of No Consequence* (2016), Gaisumov tracked down remaining survivors and gathered 119 of them for a quiet assembly in a community house in Grozny.

Gregos emphasizes that this biennial does not primarily focus on post-Soviet change, a topic which has often been the focus of regional exhibitions post-1989, but rather on present and future challenges. In this context, Gaisumov's work appears to be an outlier compared to its lighter, playful new commissions. In general, RIBOCA1 avoids works which engage with specific present-day disasters, instead highlighting positions which are more inquisitive and less confrontational.

## FROM THE MELANCHOLY TO THE ASKEW

In the third venue, Andrejsala, a former industrial port, one encounters Swedish artist **Johanna Gustafsson-Fürst**'s eerily lit engraved glass sculptures *The Week Has Eight Days* (2015) which are next to Belgian artist **Alexis Destoop**'s dystopian two-channel video installation *Phantom Sun* (2017). Whether it be the aesthetics or the nature of each work's subject matter, the placement of these two works in the biennial's narrative side-by-side was successful. Both artists approach that which is destroyed or lost – time, civilization, community – and from a grave distance.

The former Bolshevichka Textile Factory provides strong experimental works by Latvian artists, such as Ieva Balode and Andrejs Strokina, while The Sporta2 Square venue provides works which appear to be quirky and askew. At the square, one encounters Danish artist Hannah Anbert's Sacred Work Fashion Collection (2016–2018), where the line between haute couture and proletarian, military or uniform dress code are blurred to provide hybridized variants which question form and function. Russian artist Taus Makhacheva fills a large room with voices in a haunting sound installation, where speakers are clustered on tripods, telling haphazard fragments of epistolaries to those close enough to listen.



Johanna Gustafsson Fürst, *The Week Has Eight Days*, 2015.

## RECHARGING THE SENSES

Reaching the height of RIBOCA1's momentum, Art Centre Zuzeum provides an impressive panoply of works, ranging from Hans Rosenström's introspective sound piece *Mikado* (2018) to Ariane Loze's two videos *Impotence* (2017) and *Inner Landscape* (2018) to Valio Tchenkov's carnivalesque paintings in his elevated series *Private Zoo on Stage* (2018). In the 'blue room' of Kanepes Kulturas Centr, Rebecka Katz-Thor and Petra Bauer exhibit *And All Is Yet To Be Done: The Grammar of Feminist Organizing* (2018) which is wallpaper illuminating early 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish women assembling on their own volition – an act once considered subversive due to strained political and civil rights. Such works emphasize ranging sentiments, such as the possibility of dissonance, alienation and insanity when confronted by rapid change, as well as the

incorporation of certain anarchistic methods as response to the madness affecting one's psyche or political reality.

Associate curator Solvej Helweg Ovesen organized the biennial's final 'chapter'; a platform meant to appreciate the senses, with the idea in mind that the senses have been deemed insignificant – thereby inhibiting perception. At Art Station Dubulti, one finds Tilman Wendland's *The Sensorium: A Laboratory for the Deceleration of the Body and for a New Politics of the Senses* (2018), where one may smell, touch and taste from the station's laboratories of its collaborating artists **Sissel Tolaas, Anne Duk Hee Jordan and Marisa Benjamim.**



Sissel Tolaas, *beyond SE(A)nse*, 2018.

## CHANGING TIMES DEMAND SPECIFIC POSITIONS

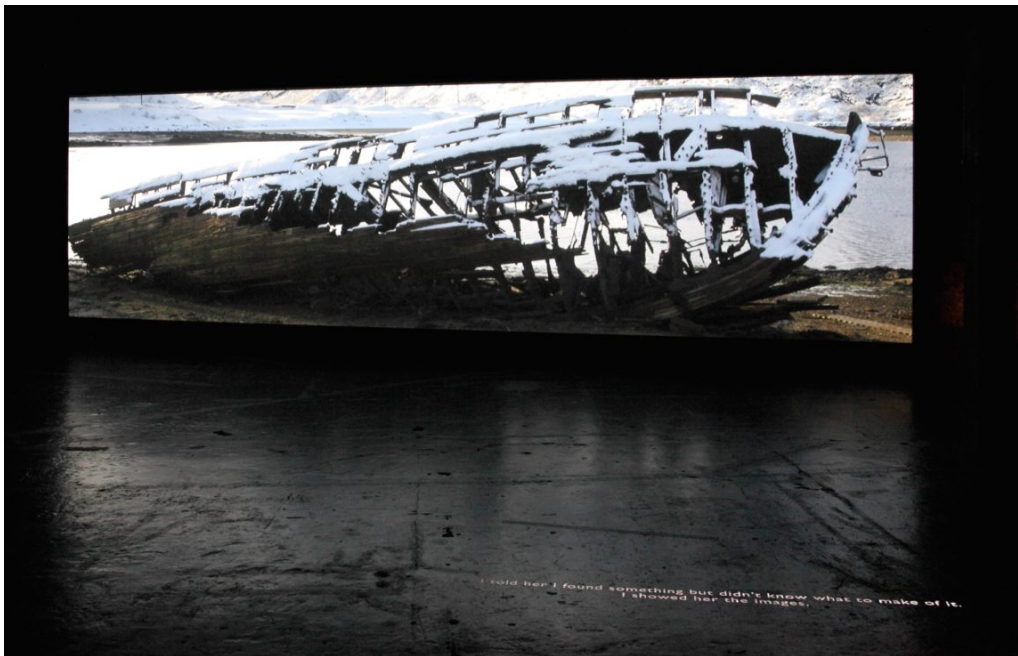
Many works in this perceptive biennial affirm that artists now negotiate positions with an expected level of competition, hyper-awareness and technological advancement – all arguably part of the current status quo for creative production. Linked to plants, animals and humanity, the artists share wide-ranging aspirations to investigate how one might navigate in an anxious world which demands compliance from all.

When energies move from novelty to necessity, an individual's response to such can be paralysing, given that there is little time to appreciate a moment before one is forced to adjust to new requirements or circumstances. This biennial expresses that though change can be a slippery mess, often damaging or deadly, it is also unavoidable and, on some level, a constant factor which some choose to understand or harness.

Many works promote introspection, as well as welcoming narratives and conversations which may lead to sound collaborations and better ideas. With so many new commissions, this biennial cannot avoid being both a response to the times and an opportunity for artists to reveal astute work under Grego's thematic conditions – ranging from the site-specific to the experimental.

We are now in the midst of so many overlapping transitions that curators often seem unsure which transition-as-concern should take precedent. Since this event serves as a starting point for future Riga Biennials it might seem justified that it adopts a somewhat universal thematic position, although this also seems like a strategy to avoid addressing controversial political issues. RIBOCA's that follow should continue to push artistic and curatorial boundaries from its specific regional perspective, and future organizers should heed to adopt more pronounced thematic and socio-political positions so as to avoid repetition, contradiction or platitudes.





Alexis Destoop, Phantom Sun, 2017.

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