THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

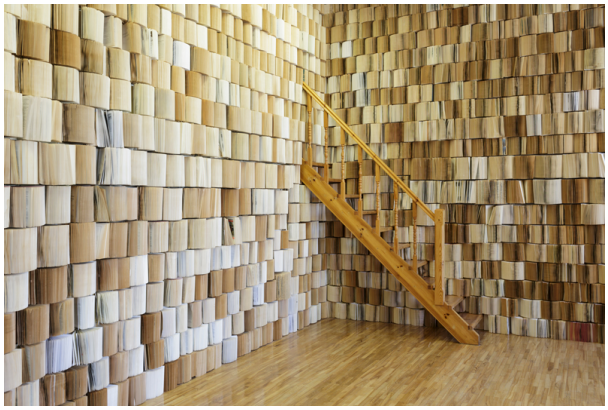
ArtSeen September 4th, 2018

The First Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA): Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More

by Joyce Beckenstein

The Riga Biennial Foundation | JUNE 2 – OCTOBER 28, 2018

A white cargo crate sitting on a pier in Andrejsala—Riga, Latvia's port—emits ghastly thrashing noises; an imagined someone or something inside sends booming echoes along the otherwise tranquil quay. This work, The Sacrifice (2018), by Estonian artist Jevgeni Zolotko, is a humorous metaphor for the first Riga Biennial's (RIBOCA) theme: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More, a reference to the title of Alexei Yurchak's book about the collapse of the Soviet system. Set amidst seedy Soviet-era warehouses, the convulsing container confronts colossal tourist cruise ships with irony and wit, reverberating in tune with the confinement and isolation imposed by a past era; restless histories muffled and shrouded through time; stories yet to be told.



Nikos Navridis, All of old. Nothing else ever... 2018 (detail). Installation, books, sound
Variable dimensions. New commission for the 1st Riga Biennial. Courtesy the artist and Bernier/ Eliades Gallery, Athens/Brussels. Photo: Andrejs Strokins.

Lithuanian-Russian-born Agniya Mirgorodskaya founded the Riga Biennial to focus attention on underrepresented contemporary Baltic artists, her vision shaped and developed by chief curator Katerina Gregos. Mirgorodskaya chose Riga because it sits on the cusp of an East-West divide, a crown jewel for warring European potentates since the early medieval period. Latvia declared itself "liberated" from Russia by Nazi troops in 1941, and was then ceded to the Soviet Union at war's end. The subsequent "Russianizing" of the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania), each with their own indigenous languages and cultural traditions, remains a thorny issue, particularly since Putin-led Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 left these NATO countries uncertain about their future in an environment of unstable commitments.

When I spoke with Mirgordoskaya about her launching a biennial in a politically fragile city, which is nevertheless undergoing a vibrant economic and cultural renaissance, she frankly discussed her greatest challenge: her father, a wealthy Russian businessman, who funded the effort. She said, "That made people suspicious and we met with considerable resistance."

Diplomacy was key: she and Gregos engaged local partners in planning related events and workshops, and included Latvians and other Baltic workers on their team; 24 of the 104 participating artists live, work, or were born in the Baltic states; all artists were paid. Gregos dispersed works throughout eight venues in this beautiful walking city, providing visitors a historical tour of Riga's architecture—its legendary Art Nouveau apartments and grimy reminders of Soviet-era neglect. Each site and its accompanying artwork relate to a biennial theme, radiating a global dialogue from a regional place, which is important because, as Gregos told me, "A biennial is about place.... One must look from inward outwards." To that end, the results of this effort are as significant for what regional artists choose to say out loud as for what they've just begun to whisper.

Erik Kessels, The Human Zoo, 2018. Site-specific photographic intervention, New commission for the 1st Riga Biennial, Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andrejs Strokins. RIBOCA1, Riga, Latvia, 2 June—28 October 2018.

The former Faculty of Biology at the University of Latvia, today a museum teeming with formaldehyde-preserved creatures and taxidermic wildlife, is an apt venue for a group of artists who mine the Anthropocene epoch for signs of human folly and obsolescence. Vintage museum displays provide intriguing backdrops for Dutch artist Erik Kessels's The Human Zoo (2018), a series of photographs inserted discretely within exhibition cases, connecting human experience to the behavior of surrounding zoological specimens—a parakeet alighting upon the eyeglass frame of a startled old woman is juxtaposed with an avian flock clinging to their perches. American artist Mark Dion's A Tour of The Dark Museum (2018), a creepy Wunderkamma, requires visitors to navigate with flashlights a pitch-black labyrinth filled with plastic-wrapped skeletons, shards of old chemical bottles, and everyday detritus. It leads to a phosphorescent menagerie of "extinct" creatures aglow like ghosts from an archaic past.

Stelios Faitakis, The New Religion, 2018 (detail). Site specific installation (6 monumental wall paintings, mixed media on aluminium composite panels) Approx. 433 × 186 cm each wall painting. New commission for the 1st Riga Biennial. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Stelios Faitakis

Greek artist Nikos Navridis worries about the obsolescence of knowledge as "a logical way of thinking shifts to a digital way of doing." For his installation All of old. Nothing else ever ... (2018) he constructed an adjacent library with books restored next to the naked shelves of the old biology library, their spines facing inward, their pages splayed open, beckoning to be read anew. By contrast, Greek painter Stelios Faitakis finds the demise of spiritual insight and passion to be troubling. His The New Religion (2018), a beautiful series of panels painted in the narrative style of Byzantine art, portrays the deity Science accompanied by saints and demons, all of them iconographic protagonists in a mash of Latvian history and myth that ends in chaos when "knowledge" eclipses intuition, the soul's mentor.

The abandoned industrial-age Bolshevichka Textile Factory serves as the venue for Belgian artist Maarten Vanden Eynde, who shares his fellow artists' prognostications about the fate of this Anthropogenic era. His Cosmic Connection (2016) fast forwards to a post-apocalyptic world where a satellite dish cradling a miniature city, made of dismantled and dysfunctional computer parts, alludes to

a fizzled technological age. Its placement by this defunct factory can be read as a metaphor for the futility of human ingenuity.

A short distance away, history seeps through old newsprint beneath thin and peeling paint in the once-lavish residence of Latvian architect Kristaps Morbergs (1844 – 1928), a compelling venue for personal and social histories. Latvian artist Kristaps Epners's installation, Forget Me Not (2018) recalls the friendship between his father and the poet Miervaldis Kalninš, who in 1971 left Latvia to work in construction and as a filmmaker in Siberia. Two videos—one consisting of a grainy and vintage film that Kristaps edited from film clips taken by Kalninš and his friend, Verners Zālīte documenting years spent in Siberia; another by Epners, depicting Kalninš more recently, happily adrift in a rowboat—accompany a vitrine of Kalninš's letters and a pressed forget-me-not. His personalized perspective contrasts the hardships of a Soviet intellectual's life with the relatively carefree and simple lives of Siberian peasants.

Epners's personal archive provides a poetic refrain for the hard-news montage of renowned Lithuanian-born filmmaker Jonas Mekas. For Lithuania and The Collapse of the USSR (2008), Mekas filmed actual newscasts from his home television, in the United States, about the Lithuanian struggle for independence. His compelling documentary series of talking heads, including Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US President George H. W. Bush, provides a chronology of reportage from a time when we trusted televised news.

Which brings us to the whispers.

Most of those whom I met have, or remember, parents or grandparents who lived through the Nazi occupation; many grew up during Soviet rule and witnessed its demise and subsequent struggles for independence. Yet beyond the Baltic artists engagement with contemporary issues of technological, environmental, and occasional historical documentaries, there is scant coming to terms with the impact of history on the present cultural psyche. Nor is much said about hot-button subjects for so many Western countries, such as racial conflicts or current feminist and gender identity issues. Why, I wondered, were these bold themes, past and present, hardly addressed by Baltic artists selected for this exhibition, and only peripherally covered in a smattering of works by the remaining contingent of international artists?

I asked Gregos. Reiterating her opening biennial remarks, she said that she did not set out to "check all the boxes." Her catalogue essay clearly states, "The Biennial is regional in its geopolitical focus, but global in its examination of the issues that concern us all." Working outward from the perspective of Baltic artists would effectively limit the range of this biennial's themes, if the participating artists are truly representative of the regional art community. But one wonders why huge global conversations don't appear to have trickled down to regional levels. It's indeed hard to parse the reasons why such conversations are seemingly stunted here.

A possible answer considers Mirgorodskaya and Gregos's courage and success in overcoming the resistance they faced as they waded into Riga's sociopolitical waters. The curatorial strategy of "not checking all the boxes" provides also a political defense: one can avoid charged subjects that the region may not be ready to embrace—a prudent choice for Gregos, who quietly reveals her sensitivity to the need for a more expansive dialogue among Baltic artists through a careful selection of works by international artists whose exhibitions deal, albeit obliquely, with regionally absent themes: Neo-Nazism, women's rights, gender, and identity issues.

Consider Dear Vladimir Putin (2017) by German videographer and photographer Sven Johne, a video portrayal of a retired German man who rehearses a personal address to the Russian president. As the man showers and meticulously dresses he bemoans Western powers, asking Putin to help restore a totalitarian state and bring back "justice and order." This video generalizing scary Neo-Nazi concerns also taps Baltic-state fears of Russian intervention.

Dutch-American Alexis Blake, curious to learn what feminism meant in Latvia before implementing her latest dance iteration of Allegory of the Painted Woman (2012 – 15) at the Latvian National Museum of Art, spoke with Soviet-era women artists in Riga. "Some laughed because my inquiry didn't relate to women's history in former Soviet society; platforms for discussing contemporary gender inequalities are few and under-supported," she told me. Transcending overt feminist issues, she universalizes womankind's struggle with gender stereotypes. Two dancers interpret the gestures of iconic female figures as male artists have traditionally portrayed them throughout history. They begin by calling out names: Maddalena … Susanna … Giuditta … and then assume their familiar art-historical poses. In sequential movements, the dancers internalize these identities then struggle to exorcise their demons. They finally walk away, down the staircase, towards the exit.

The conversation about LGBTQ issues finds a likewise universalized narrative in Anne Duk Hee Jordan's intriguing work on the subject. Her art/science installations, Ziggy and the Starfish (2016 – 18) and Changing Sex in Ecology (2018), approach gender alternatives as Mother Nature orchestrates them. Associate curator Solvej Helweg Ovesen included these works at Art Station Dubulti, the venue for Sensorium: A Laboratory for the Deceleration of the Body and for a New Politics of the Senses, exhibits that put viewers in touch with their five senses. Ziggy and the Starfish invites audiences into a darkened tent to "float" on waterbeds and watch a video of marine sex life. This immersive installation with a waterbed channeling human sexuality connects intellectually to Ecology, a documentary-research exhibit (done in collaboration with Pauline Doutreluingne) outlining gender diversity and transformations as they proliferate among all life forms. Jordan's work summarizes much of what this biennial as a whole has to say—about technology, history, time, the speed of change—and what it whispers about human sexual identities.

It is important in assessing contemporary Baltic art, to keep in mind that the United States and many Western nations emerge from histories and cultures with very different perspectives and experiences: The Nest (2018), by husband and wife Latvian artists Katrina Neiburga and Andris Eglïtis, is a case in point. Raised during the hardscrabble Soviet era, they scavenged "like crows" throughout the city to feather their outdoor "nest" with discarded tram rails, street lights, and power poles to support a giant egg-shaped tent, a shell for a swamp housed within. A concrete chair and hippopotamus share the weedy pool, and floating computer screens serve as stepping-stones. In the United States today, the "swamp" represents a scummy political environment that needs to be drained, but Neiburga and Eglïtis's work has nothing to do with this. It is rather an ecologically fueled, updated iteration of The Toilet (1992) by Russian artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov—a recreation of a public toilet furnished as a comfortable home with dining table, cabinetry, a sofa, and children's toys. These young Baltic artists suggest ways of similarly cobbling from waste a home in which to make the best of what's left of the natural world.

We await RIBOCA II in light of the impact the international presence within this regional biennial has on Baltic artists. Will the whisper become a shout?

CONTRIBUTOR

Joyce Beckenstein

Joyce Beckenstein is a writer living in New York.