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The Baltic Pavilions at the Venice Biennale: Neither Foreigners nor Locals

August 6, 2024

Author Žanete Liekīte



Edith Karlson, 'Hora lupi', 2024. Estonian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Anu Vahtra.

With a self-ironic nod towards the event's colonial and nationalistic undertones, this year's Venice Biennale is entitled 'Foreigners Everywhere'. The main exhibition, curated by historically the first queer and Latin American Venice Biennale curator Adriano Pedrosa, strives to bring to light marginalised practices. While provocatively raising questions about representation in the art world, the creative direction of this year's Biennale is sticking to rather tired and overused methods of curation, and sometimes enforces exclusion under the pretence of inclusion. So where does the Baltic region fit into this landscape? The short answer is nowhere. But it's not necessarily bad news.

One of the shortcomings of 'Foreigners Everywhere' lies in its attempt to lump together a diverse array of practices under the label 'outsider', as if queer, indigenous and artists from the Global South all fit into the same box. This approach exacerbates the very issue it seeks to address, by failing to celebrate artists' unique characteristics, and instead perpetuating their marginalisation. Therefore, this year it's particularly gratifying to see individual artists use the national pavilion's scale to convey their unique visual train of thought, rather than to create a sanitised, politically correct collective voice to inclusively cater for everyone, but ultimately speak for no one in particular. A 'one-size-fits-all' message. Moreover, 'Foreigners Everywhere', featuring 331 artists, most of whom are deceased, felt like a disappointing echo of Cecilia Alemani's 'Milk of Dreams' at the 2022 Venice Biennale, where the curator strikingly paired historically overlooked artists' works with contemporary artists.



'Foreigners Everywhere', 60th Venice Biennale, 2024. Photo: Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

Despite the best efforts, in the name of inclusion, Pedrosa has respectfully excluded a significant number of European 'outsiders'. It begs the question: who is 'foreign' enough, in defiance of mainstream Western codes, to secure the artistic inclusion of this year's biennale? Viewed through the lens of Baltic origins, shaped by a post-Soviet legacy that has always felt somewhat alien and out of sync with dominant Western cultural narratives, this biennale might just prompt a reevaluation of what it means to be a 'true outsider'. Referencing a question the Latvian art historian Megija Milberga put to Adriano Pedrosa when the curator was giving a guest lecture at NYU: 'Why were no artists from Ukraine included in an exhibition focused on the migrant and refugee experience?' Pedrosa replied with a counter-question: 'Why Ukraine? There are many other countries whose artists are not represented, and I am more concerned about that than about Ukraine specifically. For instance, I am more worried about the lack of representation of artists from Senegal or Thailand.'¹¹ This brings to mind the 'reverse mermaid' sculptures by the Estonian artist Edith Karlson, because it seems that we're 'neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring'.

In this year's biennale, for us in the Baltic, being 'neither here nor there' might be precisely the point. In stark contrast to the main exhibition, the Baltic pavilions this year present a delightful twist, eschewing the ethno-trend bandwagon in favour of their own distinctive rhythm. Our idiosyncratic region, which has historically been a 'hit or miss' affair in Venice, presents something refreshingly different this year. The three pavilions vividly and powerfully showcase distinct artist practices, steering clear of socio-politically overloaded, calculated and worn-out narratives that often overshadow individual artistic practices.

Inflammatory foreigners

Appearing more aligned with the otherworldly ambiance of the previous Biennale's 'Milk of Dreams' than the ethnographical scope of 'Foreigners Everywhere', the Lithuanian artist duo Pakui Hardware and the postwar avant-garde artist Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė present a stunning union of old and new worlds. This exhibition is curated by Valentinas Klimašauskas and João Laia. The feverishly pulsating pavilion, entitled 'Inflammation', is off-site in the Chiesa di Sant'Antonin, a church hosting an exhibition for the very first time. It is a large-scale installation, which the artists describe as 'more of a state of mind or body than a show'.^[2] This year's Lithuanian pavilion reprises an exhibition initially shown at the Museum of Applied Arts and Design in Vilnius in Lithuania nestled within a pseudo-Renaissance architectural setting. While the installation remains basically the same, the shift to the church's architecture lends it a slightly different mood.



Pakui Hardware and Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė, *Inflammation*, 2024. Lithuanian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art. Photo: Ugnius Gelguda.

Pakui Hardware's usual focus on the plasticity of bodies and their interplay with medicine and technology finds a layered conversation with the paintings of the Lithuanian artist Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė, who once dissected the Soviet Union period's techno-utopian medical dreams. The installation evokes an oversized nervous system, revealing the explosive effects of societal structures on both its natural and synthetic counterparts. In a nightmarishly mesmerising scenography, the sacral architectural backdrop of Chiesa di Sant'Antonin forms a haunting support for this apocalyptic narrative, conjuring up catastrophic visions of our future.

The exhibition architecture is created by the Lithuanian architect duo Petras Išora-Lozuraitis and Ona Lozuraitytė-Išorė, whose set-up captures the fragility and volatility of our times. The landscape is formed with plastic dunes, born from the plastic recycling process, each ridge and valley a

testament to our synthetic future. Rožanskaitė's work provides a counterpoint to Pakui Hardware's techno-organism of fused aluminium and glass sculptures by weaving a human thread into this cosmic, dystopian tableau. Her paintings evoke bodily horror, portraying individuals ensnared in hospital beds, enveloped in medical unease and physical agony. Rožanskaitė employs saturated colour combinations and distinct contours, creating a contrast in her paintings that, in this setting, seems to radiate with a surreal, almost radioactive glow. As beams of light strike Pakui Hardware's glass sculptures, they come alive, igniting in a fiery effect. This interplay creates a resonant harmony between the painting and the installation, a play of light and colour that intensifies the exhibition's eerie mood.



Pakui Hardware and Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė, *Inflammation*, 2024. Lithuanian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art. Photo: Ugnius Gelguda.

One of the main references for the exhibition is Rupa Marya and Raj Patel's book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* (2021). They discuss chronic inflammation as the legacy of everything inscribed in your body, not just in your lifetime, but through the lives of our ancestors. Inflammation, a response to unhealthy conditions, reflects accumulated traumas and the history of oppression. Accordingly, extending this idea, we see inflammation's effects not only on human health, but on communities, social structures, and the planet itself. From this perspective, for the artists, the theme of the exhibition, namely 'foreigners', are the 'foreign bodies', the inflammatory particles causing the infection. If we consider it, the earth is inflamed, and the culprits are us humans ourselves. It is a rather unexpectedly unifying exhibition narrative: our collective misdeeds are equalising us as a race, transcending ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality.

The dawn of mankind

Another distinct site-specific installation in sacral architecture evoking post-human themes is presented by the Estonian Pavilion. Entitled *Hora lupi* and created by the Estonian artist Edith Karlson, it is located in the crumbling 18th-century Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Penitenti. As the exhibition text informs us, the title *Hora lupi* means 'hour of the wolf'. It 'refers to a mythical time before dawn, when things arise and disappear, an hour of deep darkness, but also of transformation', as well as the time of night, when most births and deaths are believed to occur. The installation features over 300 sculptures crafted from a diverse array of materials, including clay, concrete, jasmonite, terracotta, and more.



Edith Karlson, 'Hora lupi', 2024. Estonian pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Anu Vahtra.

Entering the pavilion through its dusty façade, you are greeted by a hauntingly surreal sight: an altar flanked by massive concrete giants grappling with a serpentine creature. The sculptures are so seamlessly incorporated, it feels as if these eerie figures, locked in eternal struggle, were built together with the church itself. As you proceed deeper into the installation, a gaping hole in the floor reveals the Venice canal seeping in. Right next to this aqueous breach lie three reversed mermaid figures, their human torsos incongruously capped with fish heads and extending into fish tails, and the site is accompanied by a ghostly ethereal tune. Possibly, a sardonic nod to Venice's struggle against the encroaching waters.



Edith Karlson, 'Hora lupi', 2024. Estonian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Anu Vahtra.

Passing by three weeping women, you enter a 'future-memorial' room, where human masks, hand-crafted clay self-portraits, made by people from the artist's circle, line the walls. These are references to 14th-century terracotta sculptures from St John's Church in Tartu, and seem to come straight out of the Hall of Faces from *Game of Thrones*. There is also a cabinet of horrors, brimming with found animal skulls transformed into otherworldly relics by a slick enamel glaze, accompanied by terracotta monster sculptures made by the artist's son. Karlson has created a beautifully strange confluence of stark reality and fantasy, where the present flows into the past with a ghostly, unsettling grace.



Edith Karlson, 'Hora lupi', 2024. Estonian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Anu Vahtra.

The architecture has been the artist's primary inspiration, merging so seamlessly with the works that they appear to grow from the church's very foundations. 'Sometimes it's maybe even hard to understand where the church begins and my work ends,'^[3] Karlson told Artsy. The church becomes a metaphor for the crumbling state of mankind, a world in decline, and our fleeting grasp of spirituality and morality. In a way, Edith Karlson shares a thread of this post-human world setting with Pakui Hardware, yet with completely different visual story-telling tools. Where Pakui Hardware speculates on potential futures of a world continuing down its current path, Karlson uses animal forms and anthropomorphic figures to symbolise human nature's primal impulses. Her work seems to suggest these very impulses could be what ultimately lead us to those dystopian scenarios. The installation carries a palpable sense of doom and mourning, yet it is imbued with an unsettling divinity and strange excitement. There is a recognition that the old world has vanished, and it is all right to weep. Yet in the midst of this sorrow, there is a subtle sense of something new taking shape.

Paintings that refuse to sit still

If any pavilion could embody a quintessential Latvian personality trait, it is Amanda Ziemele's installation representing the Latvian Pavilion, entitled *O day and night, but this is wondrous strange ... and therefore as a stranger give it welcome*. A hurried visitor might easily overlook it, as the artworks are deliberately introverted, subtly tucked away from the casual gaze of those passing through the Arsenale. To fully engage with the exposition, one must interact with it: walk around, peek inside, and allow it to reveal itself. Ziemele embraces the inversion of colours, presenting the outside as the inside. She challenges the notion that there is a 'wrong' side to artwork, suggesting instead that both the interior and the exterior of a house, or an artwork, are equally valid. Amanda Ziemele's 'creatures' are shy only at first glance, and reveal their 'true colours' when one gets 'a

well-rounded view'.



Amanda Ziemele, 'O day and night, but this is wondrous strange... and therefore as a stranger give it welcome', 2024. Latvian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Culture project agency INDIE. 2024. Photo: Līga Spunde.

The large-scale paintings showcase unique architectural qualities. Functioning as vibrant entities, each with its own mood, they appear to move, wrap, fold and stretch, creating a dynamic interplay with space. They can envelop the viewer, offering a form of shelter, shell or sanctuary, or engage with them in various other ways. A new cosmology emerges from Amanda Ziemele's distinctly unique style, one which is always unmistakably bearing her creative signature. These 'curious giants', as the exhibition architect Niklāvs Paegle dubs them, are anything but static: 'Newcomers to this world, trying to exist.' Ziemele emancipates the painting, eliminating the concepts of background, front and back. The environment itself transforms into the artwork, forming a new, collaborative landscape where every element of the painting participates in a dynamic interplay. Even if the backs of the paintings mimic the windowpanes of the Arsenale, they are not tied to a place, or even a pose. These works will adapt effortlessly to different environments, folding into various shapes and forming new landscapes.



Amanda Ziemele, 'O day and night, but this is wondrous strange... and therefore as a stranger give it welcome', 2024. Latvian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Culture project agency INDIE. 2024. Photo: Līga Spunde.

Ziemele's installation is following the Shakespearian thread from Edwin A. Abbott's 1884 novella *Flatland. A Romance of Many Dimensions*, published under the pseudonym A Square. This classic science fiction work aims to stretch readers' imagination beyond their conventional 'dimensional biases'. Through strange occurrences that bring him into contact with a host of geometric forms, Square experiences Spaceland (three dimensions), Lineland (one dimension), and Pointland (no dimensions). As he contemplates the audacious possibility of a fourth dimension, a notion so radical it threatens to shatter his two-dimensional existence, he is swiftly ushered back to his flat, familiar plane. For now, Amanda Ziemele remains unreturned to flatland, and can safely proceed the daring leaps beyond the confines of a two-dimensional painting. The installation is offering an insight into a multi-dimensional world, where the dimensions of each of the objects are 'variable depending on the point of view.'⁴¹

The curator Adam Budak fervently contextualises Amanda Ziemele's abstract painterly process through Shakespearean meta aspects. This undoubtedly adds layers to Ziemele's abstractionism, and further extends the notion of her boundary-defying painting forms. However, it is hard to forget that Budak delivered a 20-minute speech at the pavilion's opening, while the artist herself may have spoken for two minutes. Therefore, regarding the curatorial framework of the exhibition, there's a nagging suspicion that also here are proportions that might be somewhat askew. Reading the exhibition text, it is easy to get tangled in this curatorial thread, blurring the line between the artist's voice and the wishes of the curatorial eloquence.

If one is searching for a unifying thread in the Baltic pavilions, one would be hard-pressed to find one, since their differences are more pronounced than their similarities. Yet if a collective idea must

be discerned, all three have expressed an unwritten mutual agreement that a new order must (or inevitably will) take place. When it comes to the Venice Biennale's self-conscious theme of decolonising biennales, these pavilions seem blissfully indifferent. They might, however, offer a few hints about what happens when you try to reinvent the wheel with a relic of a framework. Perhaps it will: a) cause the entire concept to crumble like an old church; b) demand the presence of multi-dimensional out-of-this-world entities; or c) require full-blown inflammation to sweat out the problem before anything can be done.

^[1] M. Mīlberga, *M?ksla un saz??oti t??eri*, Satori, 2024: <https://satori.lv/article/maksla-un-sazaloti-tigeri>.

^[2] Pakui Hardware on representing Lithuania at the 60th Venice Biennale: <https://artreview.com/pakui-hardware-on-representing-lithuania-at-the-60th-venice-biennale/>

^[3] Jameson Johnson, Casey Lesser, *The 10 Best National Pavilions at the 2024 Venice Biennale*, Artsy: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-best-national-pavilions-60th-venice-biennale>

^[4] Dimension indications in the exhibition map of Amanda Ziemele's installation.

The Vicissitudes of Desire

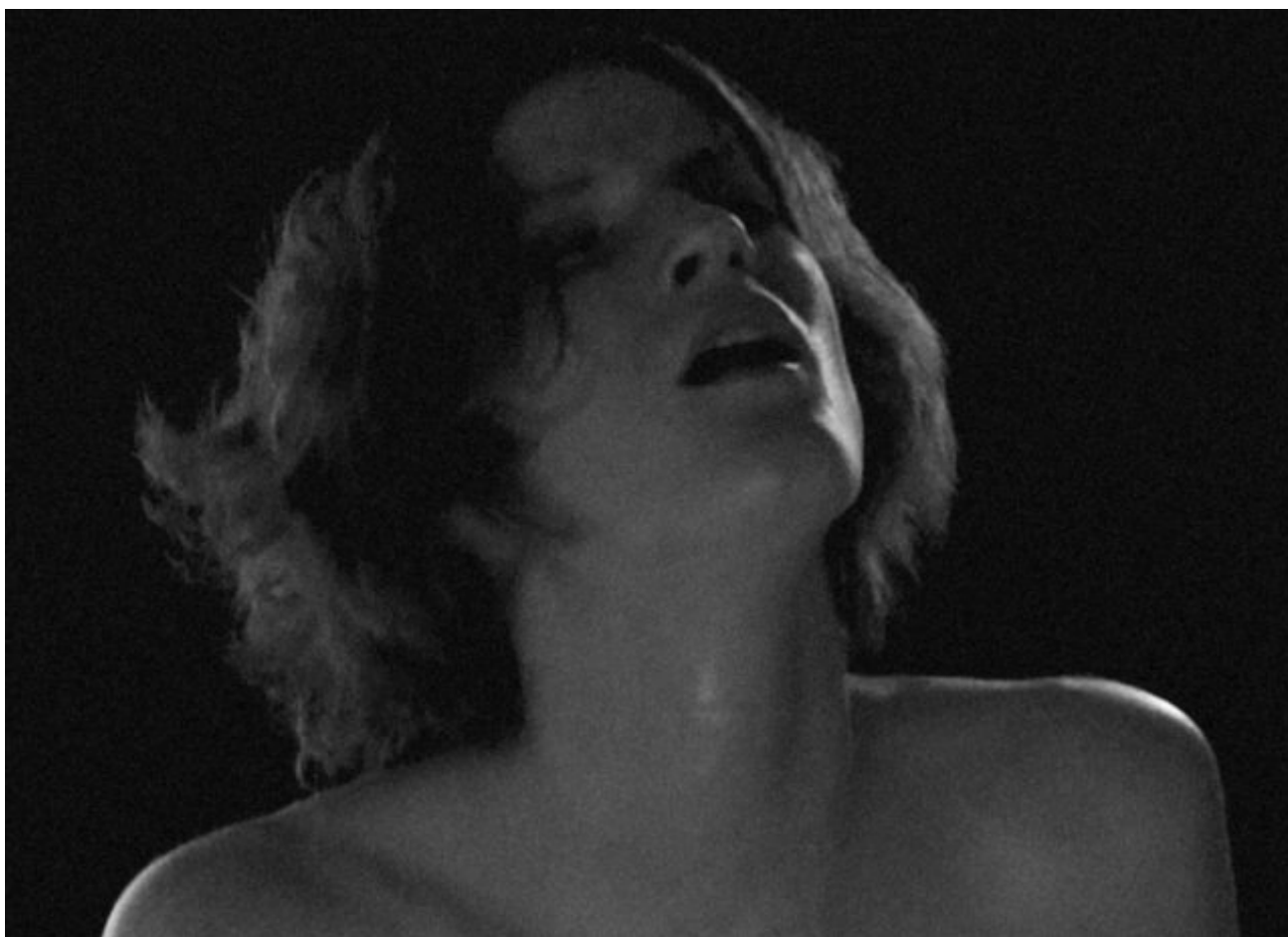
August 8, 2024

Author Santa Hirša



Rasa Jansone. Diptych from the series *Your Foot on My Hand; Always, Raphael*. 2024

The recent exhibition, *In the Name of Desire*, presented at the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA) from April 27 to July 28, was the first attempt to retrospectively grasp the diversity of the themes of sexuality and sensuality in the history and present day of Baltic (but mostly Latvian) visual art. The text accompanying the exhibition emphasises the need to highlight queer art, 'uncomfortable topics', non-normative sexuality, the phenomena of otherness and desire, feminist strategies, critiques of the objectification of the female body, and also motifs of narcissism and fetishism. Bringing together such diverse sub-themes in a single exhibition is quite a bold undertaking, especially if one seeks to articulate it as a dialogue with classical art history, thus far dominated by a patriarchal heterosexual understanding of the sensual. The common denominator here is the concept of desire, which allows sexuality and sensuality to be considered in broad categories, evoking associations with a psychoanalytic interpretation of artistic images. However, even after repeated viewings and a careful reading of the curators' comments, the overall message of the exhibition never becomes clear. Sexual themes and nude images seem to be merely collected without a clear conceptual backbone and almost every work invokes a different discourse of sexuality, with the ideas behind the exhibition branching off into many paths that never cross.



Dace Džeriņa. Liberation. 2002.

The team behind the exhibition consists of professionals from different disciplines. Līna Birzaka-Priekule has worked as a curator at LNMA for several years and is now head of the Office of the Culture Minister. Igors Gubenko is known as a philosopher, while Laura Brokāne has curated various cross-disciplinary cultural projects focusing on socially sensitive topics. This diversity of experiences and backgrounds presumably allows the team to eschew well-worn trajectories of curatorial storytelling, as well as expands the possibilities of perspective and interpretation with insights and methods derived from other disciplines. However, at a time when many are captivated by the position of authority held by the curator, one must also be aware of the risks inherent in assuming an 'outsider' perspective. In Latvia, the role of the curator is still often understood at the practical level of manager and producer or text author but, at the same time, another extreme is gradually emerging, where curatorial work is entrusted to public figures, intellectuals and opinion leaders who attract attention to a project outside the art world by virtue of their popularity. This trend risks de-professionalisation and the loss of professional standards as without knowledge of the internal dynamics of contemporary art, the results often tend to be naive. For example, generally known things may be presented as new discoveries and artworks may simply be misinterpreted or visually illustrating the concepts they're exploring.

The curators of *In the Name of Desire* repeatedly emphasise the institutional importance of the exhibition venue. Commenting on the exhibition, curator Igors Gubenko calls it a continuation of the 'institutional critique' initiated by Elita Ansons's curated exhibition on feminist art *Just Don't Cry!* at LNMA in 2023. On one hand, shows at LNMA have so far been mostly oriented towards retrospective, canonising exhibitions and the cult of indisputable geniuses, whereas larger group exhibitions have most often been based on highlighting genre or stylistic phenomena without engaging with the insights and perspectives of contemporary theories in the interpretation of art. However, the overwhelming desire of the curators to bring erotic and, so they claim, taboo art into

the museum is not a critique of the museum as an institution (not to mention that this is an inaccurate use of the term) but rather a confirmation of its importance; an institutional glorification of the museum. Do less common themes and phenomena really only acquire general value when they are exhibited in a state museum? Does this not exaggerate the role of the museum in the process of determining what's valuable? Can this be applied at all to contemporary art, where institutions of a different format tend to play a much greater role?



View of the exhibition In the Name of Desire. Photo: Kristīne Madjare



View of the exhibition *In the Name of Desire*. Photo: Kristīne Madjare

Two other thematically similar exhibitions are taking place in the Baltics this summer and other museums, such as those in Berlin, are currently hosting several exhibitions on sexuality—Andy Warhol's *Velvet Rage and Beauty* at Neue Nationalgalerie and *Sex: Jewish Positions* at the Jewish Museum—suggesting the topic is very current beyond the Baltics as well. In Tallinn, it's *Elisarion: Elisār von Kupffer and Jaanus Samma* at Kumu Museum, while in Vilnius it's *We Don't Do This* at MO Museum. In terms of vision, thematic framework and organisation, *We Don't Do This* is almost identical to *In the Name of Desire*: three Baltic curators, Rebeka Põldsam, Inga Lāce, and Adomas Narkevičius, have created a chronological retrospective of the relationship between sexuality, society and art in Baltic art. While *We Don't Do This* is more focused on the Soviet period and its post-socialist reverberations, *In the Name of Desire* is dominated by works from the past couple of decades and historical material is dealt with only episodically and often presented with an emphasis on how outdated it is.

In the Name of Desire begins with a wonder room (i.e. a cabinet of curiosities), comprising a rotating installation of sculptures created for the exhibition by the artists Hanele Zane Putniņa and Anna Ceipe. It consists of copies from the museum's collection of classical and impressionist sculptural nudes, as well as representations of naked female bodies in the style of modernism and socialist realism. By marking these various works as objects aimed to satisfy the male gaze, the authors simplify the meanings that nudity, the body and the nude can have in art history. Moreover, neither this work nor the whole exhibition differentiates between nudity as an erotic object arousing sexual urges, as a means of exploring form or as an allegorical symbol of the values of antiquity (which also includes motifs of male nudity and homoeroticism). A more comprehensive discussion of the typology of nudity and an emphasis on its various meanings would be an important contribution not only to research on the subject but also to public education. This is particularly important as absurd censorship scandals over artistically ambiguous depictions have become a regular occurrence in Latvia. Interpreting any nudity as erotic, *In the Name of Desire* paradoxically comes close to the rhetoric of conservative forces that see sexual undertones everywhere.



View of the exhibition *In the Name of Desire*. Photo: Kristīne Madjare

Because of its thematic similarities, the exhibition at MO Museum unfortunately only highlights the shortcomings of *In the Name of Desire*, diagnosing wider problems in Latvian curatorial approaches and methods. The main difference is *We Don't Do This* discusses sexuality and gender dynamics as a cultural-social phenomenon, while *In the Name of Desire* is dominated by physiologically literal sexuality, lacking broader cultural-historical contexts. *We Don't Do This* explores not only the physical but also mental relations between sexuality and power in the field of visual culture, while *In the Name of Desire* focuses on the attributes of sexuality—nudity, pornography and genitalia. The exhibition at MO Museum searches for areas where the histories of sexuality and art intersect, encompassing well-known and revealing lesser-known art historical phenomena, while *In the Name of Desire* is fragmentary and centres on separate highlights (which are often intriguing), as if the overall direction of art history, era-specific aesthetics, visual discourses, cultural-political demands, and conditions dictated by taste and tradition did not exist. Successful retrospective exhibitions both highlight the unknown and allow us to better understand and notice new meanings in well-known history. Finally, while the curatorial methods of *We Don't Do This* are based on research and theories of gender representation, those of *In the Name of Desire* operate with free associations and subjective interpretations. The use of theories is often arbitrary, based on the associations they evoke, rather than actually reading the artworks in new ways through this theoretical framework.

This impression is reinforced by the repeated misuse of art terms—for example, invoking 'institutional critique' to mean the introduction of themes hitherto alien to the museum or applying 'aesthetics of the decisive moment' to staged photography—which the curators seem to employ based on the associations they hold rather than their professional meaning. Consequently, the exhibition often contains glaring inaccuracies on the research level. The differences between the exhibitions in Riga and Vilnius are also inadvertently marked by their titles; the title of the MO Museum exhibition consists of a complete sentence with a historically specific reference, while the phrase 'in the name of desire' embodies the incompleteness that prevails in the exhibition. On the other hand, this indeterminacy can also be seen as a prelude to a larger future project that will

continue the work this exhibition has started.



Vika Eksta. From the photo series P. 2019.



Rolands Kaņeps. Portrait of a Young Philanderer. 1984

In the Name of Desire is dominated by figural and figurative art, images and stories, and quite literal narratives. Metaphors and subtext which characterised, for example, the early contemporary art of the 1990s, are absent, as are conceptual art practices. In the context of 20th-century Baltic art history, photography was one of the main mediums in which homoerotic and heteroerotic narratives were expressed and this sphere is hardly represented in the exhibition. It is, of course, neither possible nor necessary to cover everything but the choices made here are not entirely convincing. Interestingly, the exhibition text puts a particular emphasis on its openness to new media and photography (according to the curators, this openness parallels being open to different sexual identities). First of all, the exhibition is actually dominated by traditional media; secondly, this formulation seems simply old-fashioned, with the curators themselves inventing a non-existent problem and once again emphasising the issue of form without explaining how the choice of medium can influence the content.

The selection of artists represented in the exhibition is also inconsequential and lacks uniformity. Several artists whose work vividly and consistently embodies the subject of the exhibition are represented only by a handful of works and disappear into the overall mass. This is the case with Andris Grinbergs, whose performances and videos from the 1970s not only included overt sexual acts but also served as a striking example of sexuality as an expression of individual freedom in opposition to the puritanism of Soviet power. The same can be said for contemporary artist Sabīne Vernere, whose work strives to observe female sexuality and record this observation, creating a radically new relationship between the subject and object of representation. In contrast, other artists who have only episodically dealt with the subject or whose role in the Latvian art scene is quite marginal are represented with a much larger number and volume of works. All in all, this creates odd accentuations and only further muddles the already unclear message of the exhibition.



Sigismunds Vidbergs. The First People (The First People, Creation of Eve). From the series Erotica. 1918.

A similar problem can be observed with regard to historical material, with less expressive, even salon-like art singled out from a set of similar phenomena: the exhibition showcases Sigismunds Vidbergs' prints from the first half of the 20th century while the queerly erotic self-portraits of his contemporary Kārlis Padežs would seem like a better fit; a soft-spoken allegory is picked out from Kristians Brekte's scandalous oeuvre instead of his *Madonnas of Rīga* series dedicated to sex workers. At times, one ends up having the feeling that the curators, rather than highlighting the diverse and the different, are continuously focusing on stereotypes and are more eager to denigrate existing visual history than to create new versions and highlight the lesser known. This is not about privileging specific artists but rather about having a balance that fits the dynamics of the art scene and reflects the ideas and processes of art in relation to the bigger picture, its rhythm and direction, highlighting what is most important.

The show's perspective on the representation of the female experience is also problematic, repeating stereotypes about women's art as softer, more empathetic and caring. The painter Felicita Pauļuka is presented as the wife eclipsed by the fame (and the physical abuse) of her husband, the painter Jānis Pauļuks, and nothing more is said about her as an autonomous creative personality, thus continuing the rhetoric of the male genius. As part of the exhibition, Felicita Pauļuka's 1973 nude *Žanna II* has been printed on the coffee bean packaging of the Kalve Coffee roastery, repeating the usual patriarchal capitalist techniques in which the female body is objectified for advertising purposes. However, there are also counter-examples in the exhibition, such as several works that represent the experiences of the LGBT+ community, including photographs by Veronika Šleivytė and works by Mētra Saberova, Anna-Stina Treumund and Mare Tralla. Interestingly, it's women who have the strongest and most personal visual stories in the exhibition. Perhaps they are more memorable because they are not reduced to theoretical clichés, instead speaking about 'other' forms of sensibility and the vulnerability and fragility of sexuality through authentic experiences.

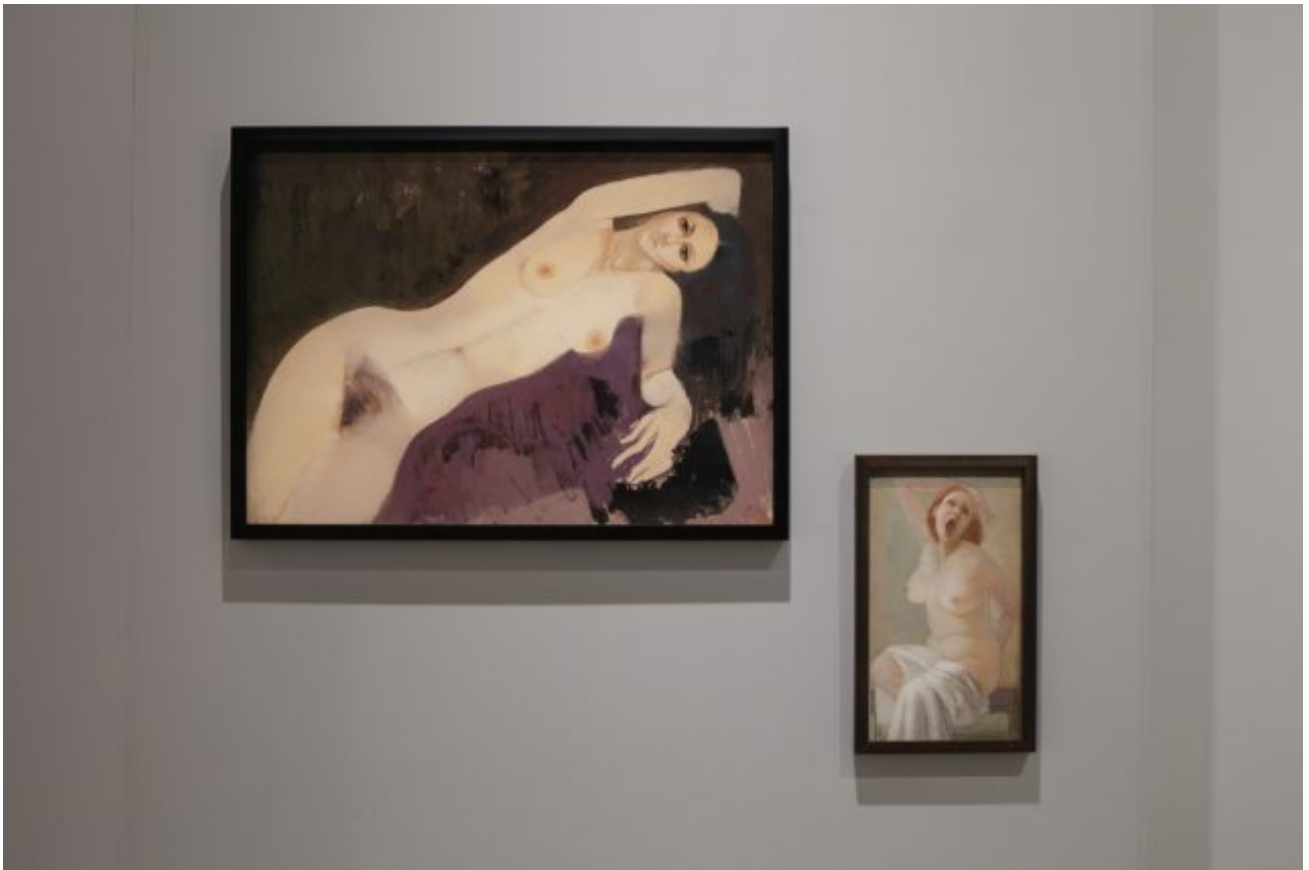


Veronika Šleivytė with Laura Andreskaitė, 1935.



Anna-Stina Treumund. Gerda. 2007.

On the whole, queer desire is the most successful section of the show and probably the entire exhibition should have been dedicated to it, without the uncertain flings into the fields of normative sexuality. The same can be said about episodic turns to Lithuanian and Estonian art, which is only glimpsed in the exhibition. I fully share the artists' view that artistic diversity goes hand in hand with broader human rights and the values of an inclusive society. Cultivating these values in creative processes is as important as in everyday life and that's exactly why addressing socially sensitive topics requires an approach that is twice as sensitive and thorough as the handling of topics to which society is already accustomed.



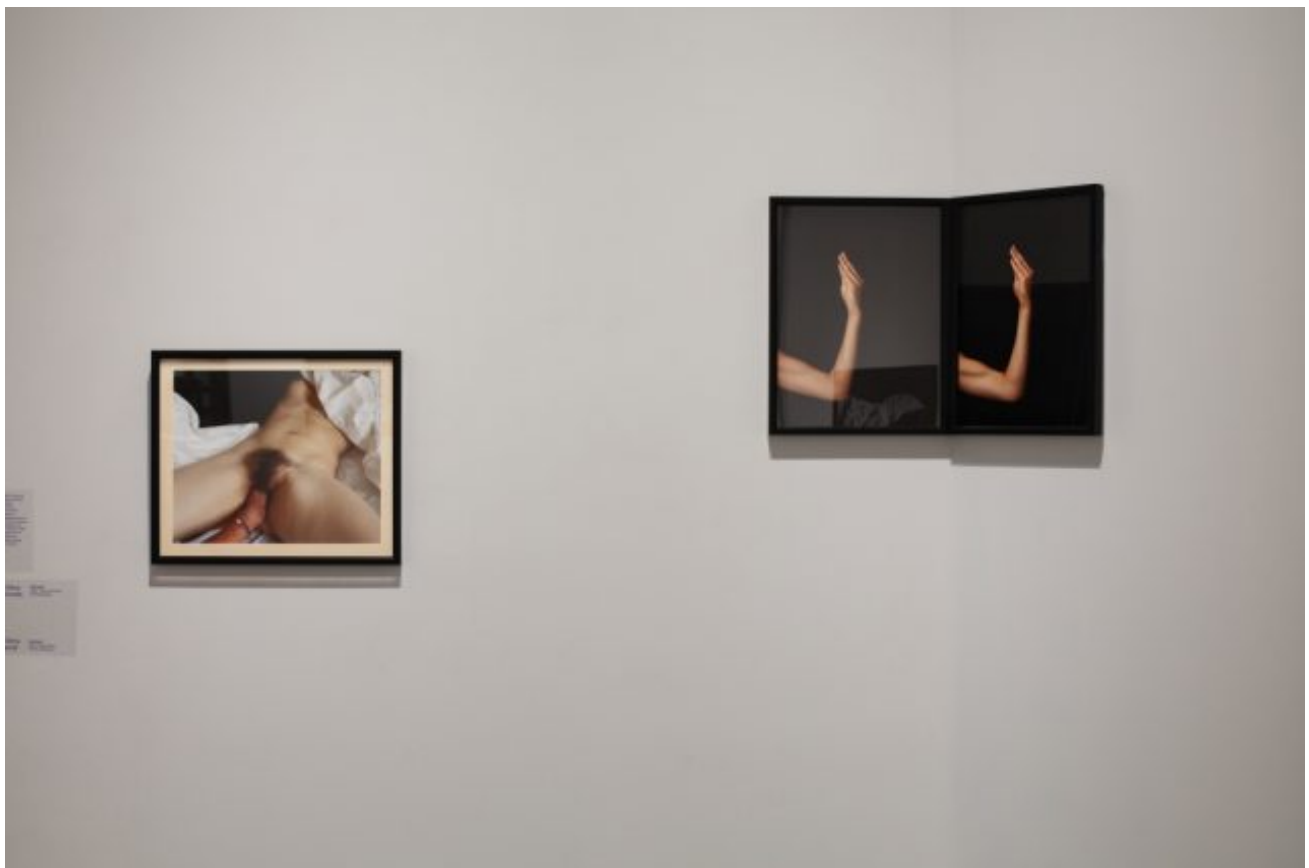
View of the exhibition *In the Name of Desire*. Photo: Kristīne Madjare



Anna Malicka. *Study of a Boot*. 2024. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Anna-Stina Treumund. Princess Diaries II/ Who Wouldn't Like to Be a Queer-Feminist Artist in a Post-Soviet Country. 2014. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.Madjare.



Anna-Stina Treumund. The Origin of One Possible orgasm. 2014. Anna-Stina Treumund. Die Hard. 2015. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Brenda Jansone. Shame. 2020. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Daiga Grantiņa. Untitled. 2019. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Konstantin Zhukov. Black Carnation. Part Three. 2024. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



View of the exhibition In the Name of Desire. Photo: Kristīne Madjare



Kristians Brekte. Pride. 2012. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Sabine Vernere. SAVAGE. 2018. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Jaanus Samma. Pieces of Antiquity. 2020. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.



Vika Eksta. From the Photo Series P. 2019. Photo: Kristīne Madjare.

‘As a human being, I am just a temporary home for potential beauty.’ Interview with Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir

August 20, 2024

Author Aistė Marija Stankevičiūtė



Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir. Photo: Bon Alog

Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir is an artist, musician and composer interested in storytelling and creating engulfing experiences within spaces, often inspired by the mundanity of everyday life. In her works, she uses relational aesthetics and methods of institutional critique to interrupt and criticise normative narratives and show her subjects from a new angle.

Through a variety of media—performance, moving image, installation and music—Hildur Elísa employs normalised human behaviours and experiences critically, displacing them into an artistic context. By placing these mundane, everyday happenings in unconventional and absurd scenes, she aims to challenge the collective understanding of our heavily constructed social reality, reflecting on our ability to create new meaning and reforge reality, always asking ‘why’ and ‘what if’.

I met Hildur for a chat in her studio at SODAS 2123, where she is currently in residence. Against the roaring background of passing planes, we talked about delicate cakes of sound, the cutting silence of the 9 to 5 office and methods of turning grief into music.



Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir. Photo: Bon Alog

Aist? Marija Stankevičt?: How would you introduce your practice?

Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir: I usually work with music and performance, and I am constantly dealing with normative narratives. I think the way I approach my subjects is heavily influenced by Ármann Helgason, who was my clarinet teacher when I was a teenager. He encouraged me to look at the music I played from different perspectives and take time to enjoy seeing each phrase in a new light. He used to talk about music as a beautiful, delicious cake where playing each phrase was like taking a different slice out of the cake and carefully examining it and all of its individual ingredients from every angle before putting it back. Every slice is unique but together they create a tightly woven narrative; they form a unified whole, the cake. This idea, or way of thinking, has followed me into my practice today as well. I really enjoy isolating small details, flipping them around and examining them closely from every point of view until I find something interesting or unusual. Often, these are mundane, everyday things that have become displaced or distorted through the process, allowing me to see them from a new perspective. This act of 'cake watching' has truly taken over my mind.

AMS: That's a very interesting way of thinking about sound, through this very material and edible thing.

HEJ: Yes, but we kind of eat sound. We consume it, it goes through us like food and if it's particularly delicious, we remember it.

AMS: And you have this opportunity to choose your flavour every time, sometimes the cake goes bad... Is this image still guiding you through your practice?

HEJ: It is the North Star of what I do.



Fanfare, frequency of immediacy or nuna strax. Photo: LNDW Studio

AMS: *Your work is very detailed; now I'm starting to understand it even better, with this analogy of the cake.*

You graduated from the Sandberg Institute with your artwork, 'Fanfare'. What was it about?

HEJ: I was looking at everyday things around Amsterdam and I made performative compositions from them. I had a hard time getting into the final exhibition because I didn't resonate with the space we were in; I don't usually make material things so it took me a long time. I started looking into spatial interventions or ways of interrupting and interacting with the space, small explosions that would burst through the exhibition space once a day. I made three performances, each inspired by different aspects of the city soundscape. One was inspired by trucks backing up, one by the bike traffic in Amsterdam, which is quite intense, and then another one by ruminations from a stroll in the park. I wrote the performance inspired by bike traffic for a small ensemble of seven people; we were yelling things you hear in traffic and singing ambulance sounds, interacting with the space and the audience. I made everyone colourful costumes, almost a bit silly looking, just to make it not too normal, to flip the script a bit. Then there was one inspired by trucks backing up and women gossiping: in it, two women walked backwards through the entire exhibition space, holding a bag of flowers between them, while repeatedly singing a composition that mixes sounds of trucks reversing with a solemn hymn-like part. Each time before repeating the composition, they looked at each other and laughed in an unhinged way, suddenly snapping out of the lament-like chapter before resettling into the sound of trucks. For me, it was interesting to mix a feminine trait with the sound of something that isn't stereotypically feminine, twisting this aspect with the laughter that gets gradually crazier throughout the performance, allowing the performers free reign to experiment and have fun with it. So even after a challenging beginning to the creative process, it turned out to be a really good experience.

Each piece had a very simple entry point—I was just looking at the city soundscape from different angles and being inspired by women carrying bags between them from the grocery store.



Fanfare, frequency of immediacy or nuna strax. Photo: LNDW Studio

AMS: *So you're not really changing the natural way of how people live.*

HEJ: I'm just extracting surprising elements from everyday things that people don't usually look at or pay attention to.

AMS: *Do you usually work with bigger groups of people?*

HEJ: Yes, I find it fascinating to work with others and get them to perform for me.

AMS: *It's very much about trust, right? Is it the same group or do you change the people once in a while?*

HEJ: It's almost always a new group. Well, I do have my trusted ones I really like working with and keep inviting back. For example, in *Fanfare*, there were two people I'd never met before and I found it very exciting.

AMS: *How do you start and guide yourself through the process to the final performance?*

HEJ: I don't sketch a lot, which has always been my Achilles heel. I might write down a couple of sentences or words but I don't draw or experiment with materials. I'm not very good at this. Usually, an idea for a piece just pops up, very clear and detailed, and I know what I want to achieve and how to do it. But there is almost no process. It's in my mind until it's fully realised in front of me.

Maybe that's why I bring performers in, to give me this twist because the process itself is so straightforward. When other people perform the pieces, they become something different. I lose control a bit and then it becomes more beautiful, not so 'strictly mine', as it's interpreted by other people.



Seeking Solace – performed by Bryndis Guðjónsdóttir and Guja Sandholt

AMS: *You're adding different flavours to the cake!*

Your other work, 'Seeking Solace', it's about corporate life. Do you make connections with your own way of working as, in a way, you are the boss and there are different ways of guiding your team? Do you find something familiar in this corporate way of thinking and leading the group?

HEJ: I think it's just something everyone can relate to. Life sometimes just happens to you and one day you have this mini reality check and realise 'It's been three weeks since I last checked in with myself'. That was the starting point.

I was working an office job during COVID. I managed a youth centre and I would have these imposter syndrome moments where I'd look very professional in front of two computer screens with Excel open in one and emails on the other but inside, I'd be freaking out thinking 'Wow, people see me and think I'm something cool but I'm just a little baby, small and worried, afraid and scurried, and I have no idea what's going on.'

I got into TikTok during the pandemic, which is a black hole of material. But I also found it quite interesting that people are just scrolling on their phones, maybe at work, looking at these people online just baring their souls and sharing deeply personal confessions with the world. You don't have this in real life. You sit next to someone at work but you don't have these intimate moments with

them, even though you see them every day.

AMS: *Did the 'Seeking Solace' lyrics come from the office?*

HEJ: Some of the lyrics were inspired by the videos I watched on TikTok, some of the lyrics came from me, but I'm also quite good at picking up what other people say, at collecting phrases.



Seeking Solace – performed by the Fo stbræður

AMS: *Do you think your work can make a change? Of course, it does, even if it's only a thought in another person's head, but I mean...*

HEJ: If I could break down capitalism with a performance? (Laughs) Well, that would be a dream!

For me, if a work resonates with one person that's enough. I'm not doing this to change the culture of work and I don't think people who are in charge of this culture would ever go see a performance like this. But I hope it at least shifts someone's perspective or validates their feelings, allowing them to think 'Okay, I'm not the only one who has absurd, intrusive thoughts.'

I think this piece could also be set in artists' studios, where people work independently in super organic and free-flowing spaces but are still having crippling self-doubts.

AMS: *Your earlier work, Concerto for a Toy and a Pool, is the opposite of corporate—it's playful and about leisure. Now, you've left the office and gone to the pool. Could you tell me more about*

this one?

HEJ: It relates very closely to the cake and looking at it.

I was thinking about quitting clarinet; I couldn't continue because it was too much for me somehow, I wanted to do something more creative. Years later, I was thinking about classical music and how it has this definitive structure. At least the old classical music. Back then, I was living in Switzerland and I had done some German courses before coming as not everyone spoke English so I had to try my best to speak German and there was a month when I just sounded like a child. No matter which language I speak, it always comes back to the Icelandic já (Eng. 'yes') and one of my professors thought it was so funny and kept poking gentle fun at me because in Icelandic we sometimes do it on the inhale.

Because Swiss German sounds very different from German, I started thinking if Swiss German is like a viola concerto, a bit darker and softer, and High-German is a violin concerto, very elaborate, fast and sharp, then I would just be like a drowning toy instrument, and that's how I thought of the toy in a pool. In that piece, while performing on the toy instrument, I'm also struggling to stay afloat. My face has to be underneath the water but I can't sink at the same time because I have to be able to breathe through the instrument, it's a balancing game. But it really came from thinking about classical music retrospectively and this comment about language.



Konzert für Spielzeug uns Schwimmbad. Photo: Juliette Rowland

AMS: *Is humour an important ingredient in your cake?*

HEJ: Yes, very. But I also think this is how I was raised. There is something funny about everything, you take the cake and if you look at it from a certain angle, you'll find humour there. You can see it in these moments or glimpses but it's not necessarily there when you look at the whole thing. When you take it out of context, you can see that reality is absurd and everything is a bit surreal but you

also see that everything is just what you make it. Nothing is real or set in stone, which I think is both a very relieving and important viewpoint; that nothing is unalterable.

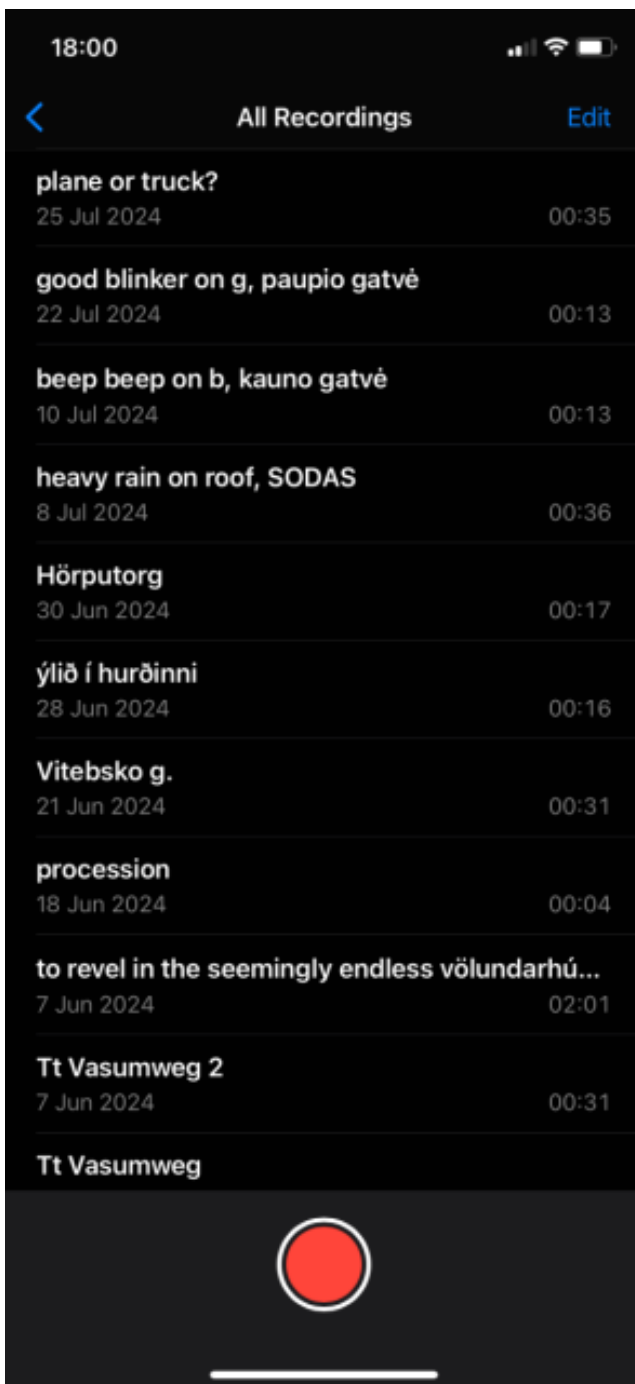
For me, there must be humour in the work, without it necessarily being funny. If you look at it long enough, you'll start seeing the humorous side of it but I'm not telling you a joke.

Laughter is also a natural response to uncomfortable situations or grief, or when you've been crying a lot, your body just defaults to laughter because it needs a break to soothe the nervous system.

AMS: How do you save sounds? Do you have an archive?

HEJ: I make voice memos and record random things, like when the wind sounds good going through scaffolding or if I hear an interesting sound when out and about. I sometimes go back and use elements from these recordings; the chords or rhythm, or the texture of the sound. I have a lot of driving sounds and turn signals on my phone because that was an inspiration for my last piece.

I also use the Notes app a lot to write down what catches my attention. It's important for me to lose the context sometimes—that's why I don't take videos and never record people talking.



Recordings. Hildur Elisa Jonsdottir screenshot

AMS: How different does Vilnius sound compared to Amsterdam, for example?

HEJ: I hear a lot more planes here, so many different aeroplane sounds! I've never lived this close to an airport before and I didn't know they could vary; I hear like 13 different sounds. I hear a lot of cars, aeroplanes and parking noises crushing the gravel. As I'm awake at weird hours. some planes, especially at night, sound like old flying trucks. It's very different from daytime traffic. While in Amsterdam, I hear more bikes and people walking.

AMS: Were you always this sensitive to environmental sounds? Did growing up in a small town have an impact on this?

HEJ: I grew up in Hafnarfjörður, a harbour town just outside of Reykjavík. The whole town is built on top of a lava field and I was lucky enough to grow up next to a big empty one near the ocean, so I was quite close to nature. When I was growing up, there was a maximum of 20,000 people living

there. For Iceland, it's quite big, but in the international context, it's quite small. It took me 5 minutes to walk to the ocean. People would open their doors in the morning and let their kids out, who would then come back when they were hungry or when it got dark. There is a lot of freedom.

When I was a kid, I used to get very overwhelmed at school because it was so loud, to the point that when I got home, I needed at least an hour to chill alone before venturing out again. I didn't even turn on the TV or radio, I just sat and read a book in total silence. So I was quite sensitive to sound as a kid.

It's the same now; I like to have nothing on in the background, no music or anything. I think that's why I like staying awake at night—everything's so silent. The best hours are between midnight and three in the morning. I never listen to anything in these, just enjoy the absolute stillness. I quite like hearing my own thoughts, it's very important for me to have this silent time for internal processing. This is the time when thoughts stand out and then it's easier to catch them.

AMS: *Are you working now on something specific? Do you have any upcoming performances?*

HEJ: The theme of this residency is grieving and funerals. The general theme is festivity and I added the layer of funerals because it's a theme I keep coming back to.

Grieving is such an interesting process, so versatile. It captures the whole human experience and is such a visceral thing to do. It's a very interesting cake to examine.

This time, I'm looking for a way to translate funerals and grieving into sound. Also, I knew there was a strong sonic Lithuanian tradition regarding funerals, the sutartinės form, and that also fascinates me. The last time I was here I did a bit of research into it and went to a choir practice of this tradition. During my time here, I've been studying different traditions of laments and how the grieving process can be translated into sounds and compositions. I've landed on a series in which I try to translate the intimate nature of grief, mourning and the non-linear grieving process into short vocal loops. They're titled hugleiðing i-iii, which can be translated as 'contemplation' or 'meditation', and consist of three distinct cassette loops that can be listened to individually and together, a bit like sutartinės. I've also started composing a piece for solo clarinet titled even if only as the clarinet is used in laments. It's a fun challenge to write something for myself to perform on the clarinet; I'm excited to see what happens when I don't have the added layer and comfort of another performer. I'll present both of these pieces at A Night of Ascending Numbers, which will take place at SODAS 2123 on August 15 alongside works by my fellow residents Kirsty Kross and Mattias Hellberg.



In the studio. Photo: Bon Alog

AMS: *Looking at our conversation and your work in a chronological way, we have work, leisure and death, with a cake for every occasion.*

HEJ: (Laughs) Yes, I'm so interested in humanness, and the fact that we've created this reality everyone adheres to. Most of us take for granted that this is just the way things are and always have been but we made things this way. What if we took one step back and looked at it? I'm very curious about this man-made reality and how it fits human nature very well but simultaneously resists it. That creates very interesting tension points.

AMS: *Yes, and when thinking about death and rituals, it's so hidden.*

HEJ: It's become a taboo but death is such a natural part of life and in different cultures, more Western European traditions, death has become such a phenomenon; no one talks about it, it's swept under the rug. While in Iceland, death isn't that far away. Funerals, of course, can be very sad and they're a safe space where people are allowed to show sadness but they can also be more a celebration of life than mourning of death. As a human being, I am just a temporary home for potential beauty and when my physical body will die, that beauty will go on to something else.

A funeral is such a loving thing to do for someone. Every time I'm at a funeral, the house is packed, everyone you've shared your life with is there. It's not just sad, it's also extremely beautiful. First, you cry together and then, there is a space to laugh together as well. Grieving is such a communal thing, you kind of can't do it alone and it's important to have someone who's going through the same thing alongside you because then you can relieve and validate each other.

I'm interested in the softness and humanness of grief but not the mysticism of it. If you go through it very stiff and strong, it'll most probably break you. That's why doing it communally is so important as it allows the softness; it allows you to sway and oscillate back and forth depending on your needs.

You need the softness to go through grief because when you're soft, you can bend without breaking.



Hildur Elísa Jónsdóttir. Photo: Bon Alog

How Good I Feel with You. 'We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art' at MO Museum

August 23, 2024
Author Ieva Gražytė



Photo by Erika Gablytė

'And now, even with my old body and his old body, when we embrace, everything becomes one. We become one, despite our age. He says he wouldn't want to live without me, after fifty years together. I think perhaps my timidity in life was not so much about protecting myself as it was about protecting the two of us. Both of us.', said Vitalius.

This April, an extraordinary wedding celebration of beloved partners was commemorated at MO Museum in Vilnius. The symbolic ceremony of a couple who have lived together for fifty-two years differed from ten other weddings that took place in the museum not only because of the mature age of the couple but also due to legal nuances. More than twenty-one thousand people witnessed the ceremony, yet the partnership was declared legally invalid. Vitalius and Albinas navigated the perilous Soviet era for homosexual couples but despite the country's regained independence, their rights as a couple remained unprotected. It is not surprising that there is societal resistance to same-sex marriage when, for decades in the region, even people of different sexes 'did not make love'.

The exhibition 'We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art', currently on show at MO Museum, refers to the supposedly non-existent sexuality of the people in the region. Curated by Inga Lāce, Adomas Narkevičius and Rebeka Põldsam, and initiated with a work by Česlovas Lukenskas, the exhibition offers an overview of the culture of sexuality, gender roles and the transformation of these phenomena in visual art in the Baltic region. This region spent a century

under Soviet occupation, during which many things were considered non-existent. The exhibition highlights phenomena whose existence we still ignore today. Consequently, the display avoids a chronological arrangement of works, presenting the Baltic region as a whole without emphasising the fundamental differences most easily observed in legal regulations, since Lithuania remains the only country in the region without the aforementioned same-sex partnership law. The exhibition, of the 'here's what we do' type, highlights areas where space has been left for the culture of sexuality in specific locations, with bodies performing mechanical functions of childbirth, eating, logistics and various work tasks, ensuring control over the expression of sexuality. Therefore, although sexuality was not spoken about, it was depicted in these spaces.



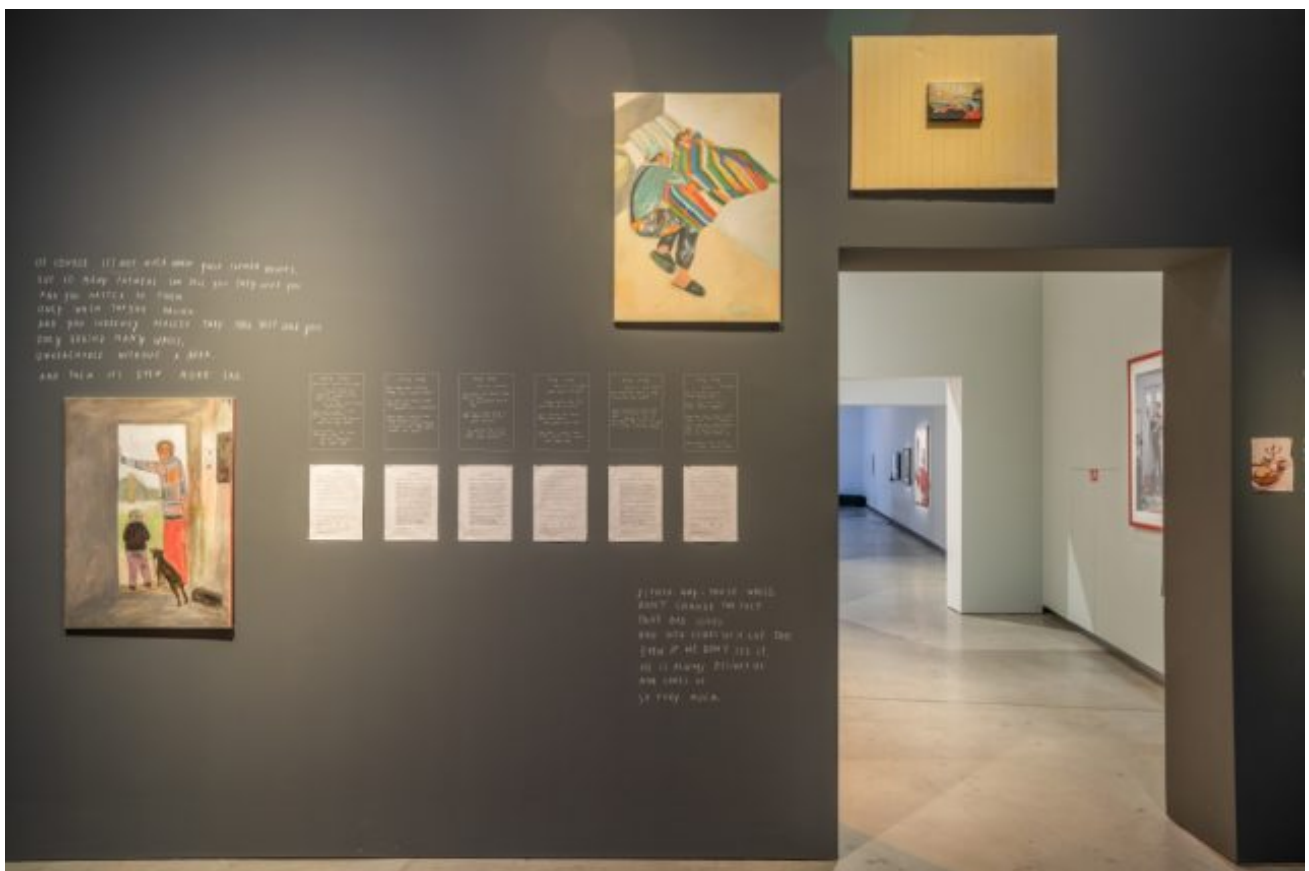
Exhibition view, 'We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art', MO Museum, 2024. Photo by Jonas Balsevičius

According to some people, sexuality related to the body was and still is only as important as it is to reproduction. Therefore, the main place where it is considered decent to encounter it directly, even under not very attractive circumstances, is the doctor's office. It is precisely in this space that the normativity of sexuality is associated with gender and human biological development.

An interview with Dr A. Alekseičikas, the only psychiatrist in Lithuania who openly talks about 'treating' homosexual people during the Soviet era, published at the end of June by Rasa Navickaitė, shocked readers of the Lithuanian cultural periodicals. The transcribed interview is read as a dramatic sketch not so much about the region's history but about today's reality, filled with selective spirituality and flawed logic meant to justify the inconvenient rules of cohabitation. The fact that human sexuality was 'treated' in a psychologist's office underscores that bodily pleasures originate in the mind. The exhibition curators emphasised this by featuring paintings exploring psychological themes by Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė and Loreta Lapienytė at the start of the exhibition, which also offer glimpses into the emotions of medical doctors. It is evident that working with the human body, even in its functional aspects, is not akin to repairing a perfectly regulated machine. Human traits,

including sexuality, were once seen as flaws that hindered the planned economy and are now perceived as obstacles to effective economic progress. In a society of physical training, where we adhere to norms of endurance and power, aiming to function flawlessly like machines, we prioritise training rational and understandable categories of morality and ethics over stretching muscles of feelings. In this context, unproductive sexual relations are deemed unnecessary.

The Soviet regime relied on a surveillance system that permeated every aspect of society. To maintain control over the expression of sexuality, individual sexual expression in public was restricted. Artists depicted people in ordinary ways that did not align with the ideals of Soviet men and women portrayed in propaganda posters. Exhibition curators describe this visual humanity as an artistic fantasy, rejecting the depiction of constrained public spaces and creating an alternative vision. In the 21st century, artists have 'reclaimed' the streets and the life within them through their work, highlighting that street life as a counterculture with unrestricted expressions (including gender) existed even during the Soviet era. People rushed through the streets to work, physically testing their bodies' capabilities. Despite changes in contemporary perspectives, paintings of men in suits or eroticised figures of road workers remain relevant. However, what's fascinating is not the 'timeless' subject of the working man but the opportunity to glimpse a specific kind of masculinity visible only among men and to notice the absurdly frozen time echoing like ABBA's 'Money, Money, Money'. In a world controlled by wealthy men, the almost homoerotic male dominance in workplaces, including the art field, presents an endless tragicomic scenario. The Soviet-era male photo club culture, which repeatedly discouraged female photographers from active creativity, is just one of many past and present forms of male dominance highlighted in the exhibition. Auseklis Baušķenieks' painting 'Typewriter' cleverly illustrates this dynamic by depicting a woman effortlessly transcribing dictated text, nursing a baby and styling her hair simultaneously. The painting, referencing both the interwar and Soviet eras, casually observes the enduring nature of patriarchy and the myriad tasks the multifunctional 'typewriter' must perform.



Exhibition view, 'We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art', MO Museum, 2024. Photo by Jonas Balsevičius



Exhibition view, 'We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art', MO Museum, 2024. Photo by Jonas Balsevičius

The only public places where a person can be nude are recreational areas such as beaches and saunas. These minimally censored spaces for relaxation received considerable attention from Soviet-era artists. Depending on their nature, these spaces were safe havens for women, casual retreats for families, and venues for dates and casual sexual relationships. A wide range of emotions encountered in these places is reflected in the themes of the artworks. This includes the anxiety about one's and others' naked bodies, as seen in the portrait 'Summer Vacation' by Estonian artist Varmo Pirk, which depicts a young man feeling out of place amidst collective merriment. It also includes the exuberance captured in the photographs by Latvian artist Konstantin Zhukov and the pride of the naked men standing next to sandcastles, as documented in Virgilijus Šonta's photographs. The beach is like a miniature of an unrestrained society; a relaxed society that allows itself to indulge in pleasures a bit more than usual.

We live without desire until we feel it, much like we live without being aware of our back until it hurts. Thus, encounters with our own bodies often surprise us. In the eternal opposition between subject and object, it has been decided that objectifying a person is immoral, partly because we all aspire to the same ideal, even if its characteristics change over time and political systems. By identifying ourselves with the ideal and our beloved with ourselves, eroticism is suppressed. This is confirmed by paintings in the exhibition depicting romantic relationships between couples. In these works, bodies do not touch; they are obliged not to provide pleasure and are full of an elevated discomfort that cannot rationally explain the need for intimacy. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in his book 'The Agony of Eros', discusses the recent crisis of love, which arises from the diminishing boundary between object and subject. The achievement-oriented subject primarily seeks comprehensive fulfilment. Individuals who desire the same ideal lose their otherness and thus the ability to be the other as a romantic object. Han talks about the phenomenon of success depression, where the achievement-focused subject sinks into themselves and becomes absorbed without any interest in the object. This is not merely alienation but the end of eros. In an era of artificial insemination,

sexualised artificial intelligence, easily accessible pornography, mechanical masturbation and even faster ejaculation, relationships between the self and the other are perceived as unnecessary, since we can fulfil all social and economic functions ourselves.

However, the closely related categories of enjoyment and admiration, which endlessly touch one another and are born in our spirit through our bodies, are part of comprehensive fulfilment. This is echoed in the exhibition by early findings of visual eroticism: Violeta Bubelytė's self-portraits and Ly Lestberg's sacred body photographs allow the enjoyment of the beauty of aestheticized nudes. Also, Snieguolė Michelkevičiūtė-Masevičienė's male nude photographs let us simply admire the eroticism of the body without triumphant ideal poses. The exhibition also features an observation by photographer Romualdas Rakauskas, author of one of the most famous erotic albums, 'Blossoming', noting that for rural people, blossoming is the busiest time. Thus, to admire blossoms, like bodies, one must have the opportunity to withdraw from economic functions. Just as to experience the pleasure of admiration comparable to moral ideals, one needs precious time.

The exhibition, dense with artworks and complex contexts, explored the enduring issues of bodily and sexual representation in the region, aiming to showcase a comprehensive narrative. The curators' main statement—'the struggle for political freedom does not automatically guarantee social and sexual freedom, equal rights to pleasure, safety and love'—further emphasised the relevance of the artworks. The exhibition posed a fundamental question: 'How could we practise intimacy, fantasise and create relationships differently?'. Through the careful creative practices of photographers Janina Sabaliauskaitė, Veronika Šleivyte and other artists, along with thoughtful curatorial approaches, queerness was used both as a critical perspective and as a mythologised alternative for the vulnerable human. If we, like our bodies, continue to be perceived through the mechanical functions we perform, including economic ones, will we have enough strength left for connection? To truly connect with another, one must feel a need for the other person, thereby acknowledging one's incompleteness. In vulnerability, within that empty space of the curve, the possibility of mutual admiration is born.

With pleasure. ,Bruch'- at Nida Art Colony

August 27, 2024
Author Ieva Gražytė



,Bruch'-, Coast of Pleasures, 2024. Nida Art Colony of Vilnius Academy of Arts. Photography: Laima Stasiulionytė

Please,

Poetry (Gre. *poiesis*) is the purest form of *making*. To make love, pleasure or an absolute disaster, you only need a few well-chosen words. A poetic experience that cannot be comprehended by *reason* is difficult to name other than *pleasure*—a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment.

Denis Diderot, one of the French Enlightenment thinkers best known for his editorial work on the Encyclopedia, which became the Bible of an era, also showed that *reason* is not always in charge and absolute. According to him, any expression made through art was the truth. He believed that truth in art inevitably carried ethical significance, even (or especially) if it depicted the ugliest triumph of evil or the abuse of vital force. This idea was primarily explored and analysed by Diderot within the realm of painting but the theory itself demonstrates the enchanting and mysterious nature of art as a reality not for reason but for pleasure.

In 1773, he travelled from Paris to St. Petersburg to meet the Empress of Russia and his foremost patron, Catherine the Great. Somewhere between Königsberg and Memel, he wrote a poem dramatically depicting the poetic landscape of the Curonian Spit and the author's elemental presence. A ten-page text described the coastline of the region through the mythology of Roman poetry and the eroticism of irresistible, celestial-like forces. The confrontation between the lyrical subject and the uncontrollable force of nature is not simply an allegory of the meeting between a

philosopher and an authoritarian ruler like Catherine but an expression of the unknown and the risk of encountering a potentially hostile environment. It reflects a presence put into words that could only arise from the absolute boredom of unpredictable determination. That is why the prologue based on this poem, like a mockumentary created from well-collected historical facts and twists of destiny, was truthfully enjoyable as a witty actuality in an age of paralysis.

Diderot's poetic reflection on his constantly shifting reality, together with the inevitability of constant changes in the geopolitical and psychosocial reality of the region, formed the sub-dramaturgy of the performance. For two evenings in July, 'Bruch'- (the group behind 'Coast of Pleasures') invited bored sightseers to stop at the travelling cabaret located in the tent of local artist Evaldas Šemetulskis, used as a studio and shabby seaside exhibition space. The event was the prologue of the operetta 'Diderot in Petersburg', which was presented last summer at Theatre Neumarkt in Zurich and happened as an eclectic presence of historical others. 'Bruch'- is a travelling cabaret itself, covering the fields of theatre, literature and higher education. It presents itself as a research and creativity structure that showcases its performative works based on materials from the fringes of cultural history, enabling communication between different perceptions. The historical edges of the Curonian Spit were no exception.



'Bruch'-, Coast of Pleasures, 2024. Nida Art Colony of Vilnius Academy of Arts. Photography: Laima Stasiulionytė

The performance was presented at the initiative of the Nida Art Colony of the Vilnius Academy of Arts as part of the Thomas Mann Festival. For many years, the rigid festival and its audience have been presented as a macabre ideal of cultural formalism in Nida. The event usually takes place in the architectural wish of the cultural-political German expansion to the east, better known as the house

of Thomas Mann, a poet who declared meaning is always presented in political terms. The history of the Curonian Spit itself is characterised by particularly frequent changes in its national affiliation. The peninsula has become a place of longing for Lithuanians and Germans, a place of the inevitable past and present for Russians, and a place of capitalistic desire to commodify leisure. Indeed, destiny presents its meanings in political terms but the absurd ability to reflect our intimate impotence to inhabit raises not only the question of how to treat the coasts after our time of pleasure but also how to enjoy temporary pleasures in a politically unsafe environment.

The show ended in a farce, described as arising from the boredom of determined existence. A distressing emotional state that arises from constant instability, much like the mechanical, predictable, and aimless actions of combing one's hair or shaving a beard in war, can evoke aesthetic admiration as well as the temptation to interrupt. The geography of this boredom creates fugitive spaces that do not depend on their physical locations. These psychosocial spaces are not indifferent, apathetic or insensitive but rather aware, passionate, enthusiastic and overwhelming. Although simultaneously limited, liminal and uncanny, this prologue was one of those safe transit spaces, similar to lovers' beds or hosts' kitchen tables we tend to dance on.

The grotesque meeting of Diderot, Catherine the Great, Mann's descendants and the personification of the Peninsula was similar to a scene from Mann's short story 'Luischen'. A vivacious party where, at the climax of the event, an intellectual middle-aged white man, as an archetype of respectability, is turned into the drag persona of 'Little Lizzy'. The dotting husband is transformed into a character whose real attire is not the red silk dress or make-up covering the dishevelled face of a lawyer but rather humiliation and misogyny. *She* (Little Lizzy), by convention, is classed as unforgivably idiotic and to be held up to public ridicule and *They* (Little Lizzy and the man underneath), are to be perceived as an ungainly and pathetic ignoramus. Little Lizzy dies together with the clumsy corpse of a man during a musical performance and the political meaning of her truth, which is death caused by humiliation, leaves a proverbial lump in the throat of the reader. Meanwhile, Catherine the Great, played by Lithuanian artist Edvinas Grinkevičius, also known as drag terrorist Querelle, unlike Little Lizzy, deconstructed class power together with the artist New Kyd without the uncategorised species of victimhood or confirmation of already existing categories of the denied, deprived and socially damned. The omniscient eccentricity of characters and performers acknowledged the aesthetics of dependency and the tense distance of desire.

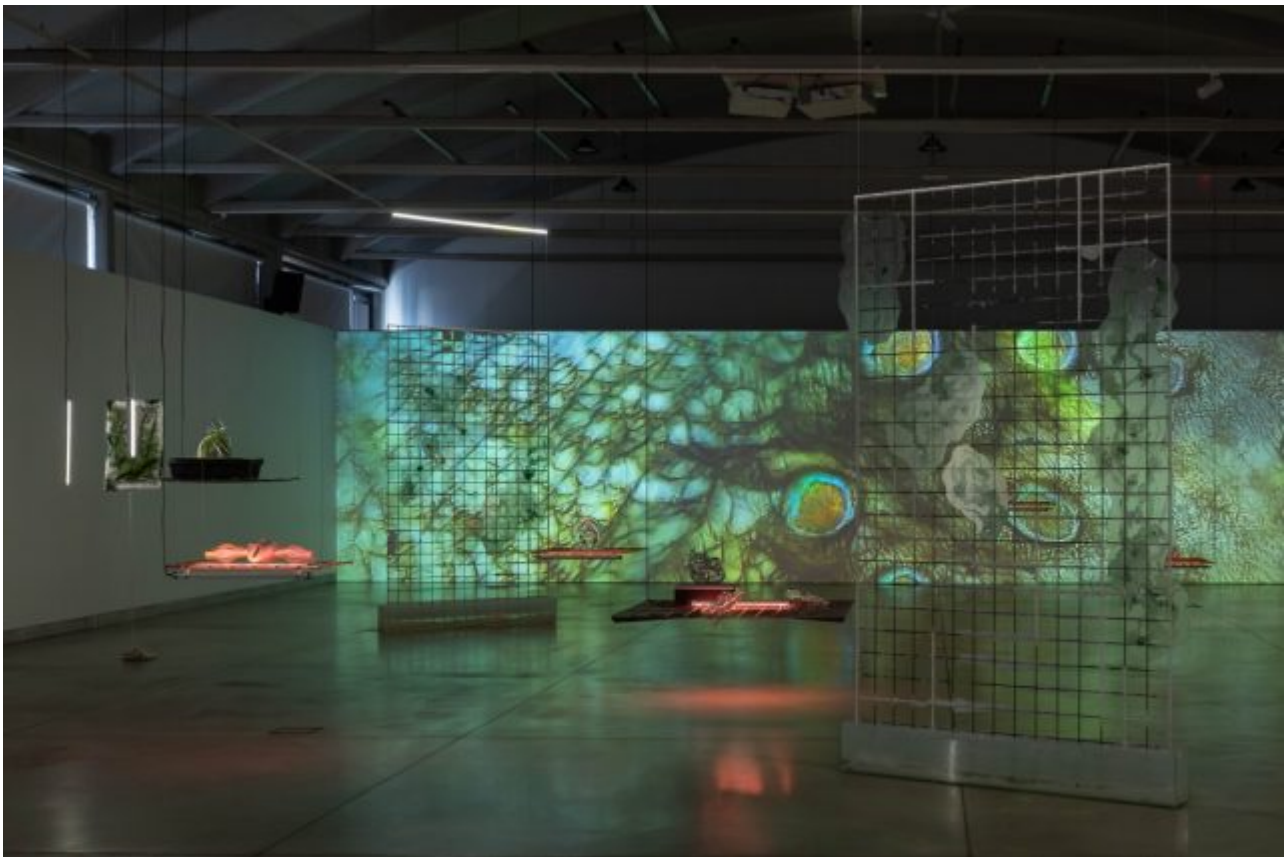
Adrienne Maree Brown, in her book 'Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good', poetically described boundaries as the distance at which you can love somebody and yourself at the same time; the 'Coast of Pleasures' prologue uncovered geopolitical borders as boundaries of historical lovers. Some magnificent intimate stories have fallen among historical events and their individual matters have become the matter of *all*. Although the order of the world is nothing but a taxonomy of someone's sexual preferences, financial deductions and personal ambitions, our destiny rests on the notion that the world is deeply interconnected, such that one small occurrence can influence a much larger, complex system. If not a change of political forces, someone shaking out their bedsheets can, hypothetically, cause a poem.

My pleasure,
I.

Photo reportage from the exhibition 'Cyanoceans' by Kristina Õllek and Tuomas A. Laitinen at the Kai Art Center

August 1, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



Tuomas A. Laitinen & Kristina O llek 'Cyanoceans' at the Kai Art Center. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo

The finale of the first joint exhibition of Kristina Õllek and Tuomas A. Laitinen, 'Cyanoceans', which opened at Kai Art Center at the beginning of the year and received great attention from both the art public and academics, will conclude with exhibition tours by the artists and the curator, as well as a seaside party where sounds will be created by one of the artists themselves.

Tuomas A. Laitinen's and Kristina Õllek's joint exhibition 'Cyanoceans' gives the opportunity to experience different nuances of human perception, to understand complex life forms, to contemplate on the state of nature, and to walk in an environment reminiscent of the ocean floor, accompanied by the movement of the octopus, until August 4th. The salt sculptures in the exhibition hall will be an interesting rediscovery for visitors who have already experienced the exhibition, and the water vapor and the synthetic sounds from the ultrasonic speakers create a special feeling, as if being under water.

The extraordinary exhibition project created a remarkable convergence between art, science, and the environment, and sparked a series of discussions between marine ecologists and biologists as well

as historians. In an interview with Rohegeenius, marine ecologist Mariliis Kõuts pointed out that the state and condition of the Baltic Sea is important for every Estonian to know, and that 'Cyanoceans' highlights the exceptional salinity of the Baltic Sea, the cyanobacteria, and the major problem of Estonians' home sea: eutrophication.

In addition to the important aspects of the Baltic Sea and Kristina Õllek's artworks inspired by them, Tuomas A. Laitinen brings to the mix a complementary view of adaptation and transformation of species through the octopus dialogue with Laitinen's glass sculptures captured at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology. The title 'Cyanoceans' symbolizes both the cyanobacterium, or blue-green algae in common parlance, and the protein haemocyanin in octopus blood, as well as what is more broadly happening in the oceans and seas.

On August 3rd, the second to last day of the exhibition, artists Õllek and Laitinen will give a joint tour at 16:00, and on the last day, August 4th, Anna Mustonen will give a curatorial tour at 14.00. The post-show afterparty will take place on August 3rd at 18.00 at Wambola Surf, where one of the artists himself, Tuomas A. Laitinen, will provide the musical experience.

The art and exhibition tours are in English and free with an exhibition ticket, and the afterparty is free of charge. 'Cyanoceans' will be open at Kai Art Center until August 4th from 12.00 – 18.00.

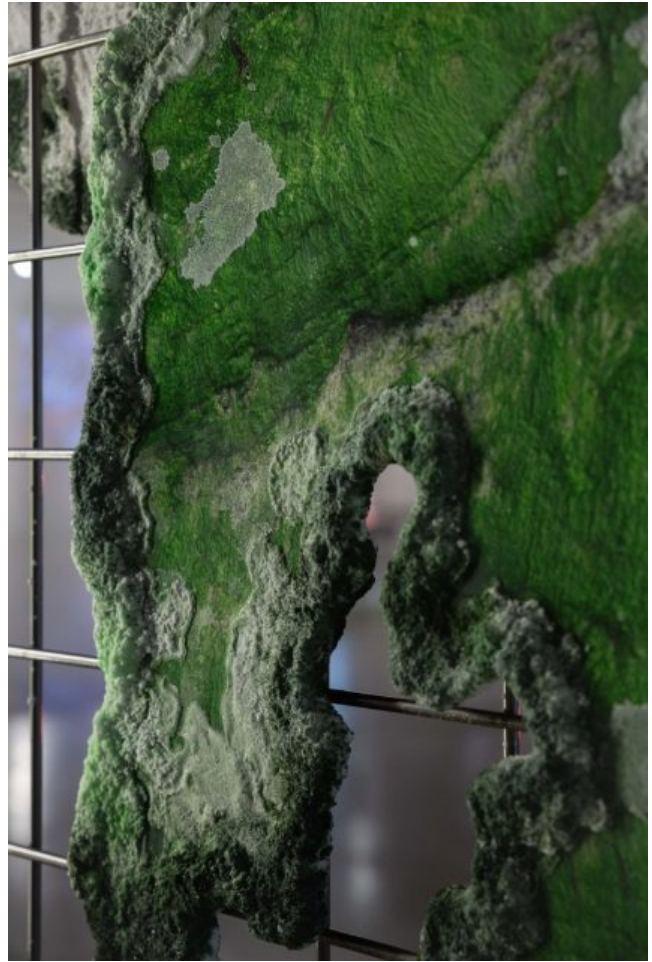
Tuomas A. Laitinen (b. 1976) is an artist who works with moving image, sound, light, glass, chemical and microbial processes, as well as algorithms to explore the entanglements of multispecies coexistence. Laitinen composes situations and installations that inquire into the porous interconnectedness of language, body, and matter within morphing ecosystems. In recent years, Laitinen has been working with questions of ecology, the notion of the extended mind, and processes of knowledge production. The works are often made with translucent and transparent materials in order to find ways to layer and diffract material relations and different epistemological systems.

Kristina Õllek (b.1989) is a visual artist based in Tallinn, Estonia. She is working in the field of photography, video and installation, with a focus on investigating representational processes, geological matter, aquatic ecosystems, and the human-made environment. In her practice, she uses a research-based approach, but within she also incorporates her own fictitious and speculative perspectives. With her work, she raises questions around the relationship between natural and synthetic, original and copy, and understandings of materiality by obtaining a new and reconsidered meaning. She is interested in stretching out the boundaries of what we can see and use as an image and space, especially in the age of rapidly developing and highly manipulative technology. Within her recent projects she has been focusing on marine habitat and the notion of new technologies, including the geopolitical and ecological conditions associated with them.

Photography: Hedi Jaansoo, Aron Urb.



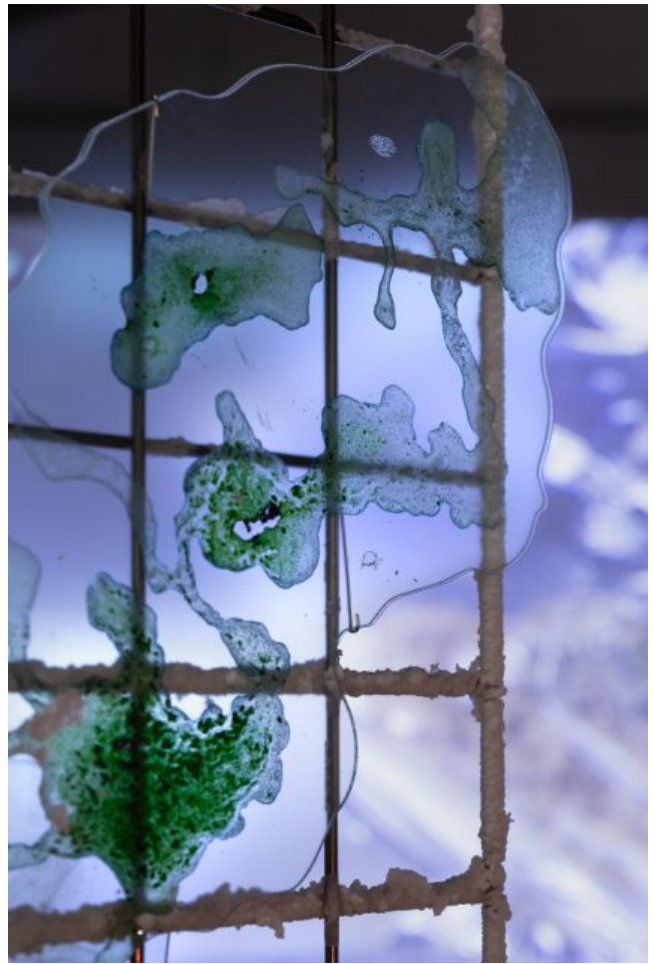
Kristina O Ilek 'Accumulating Waters'. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



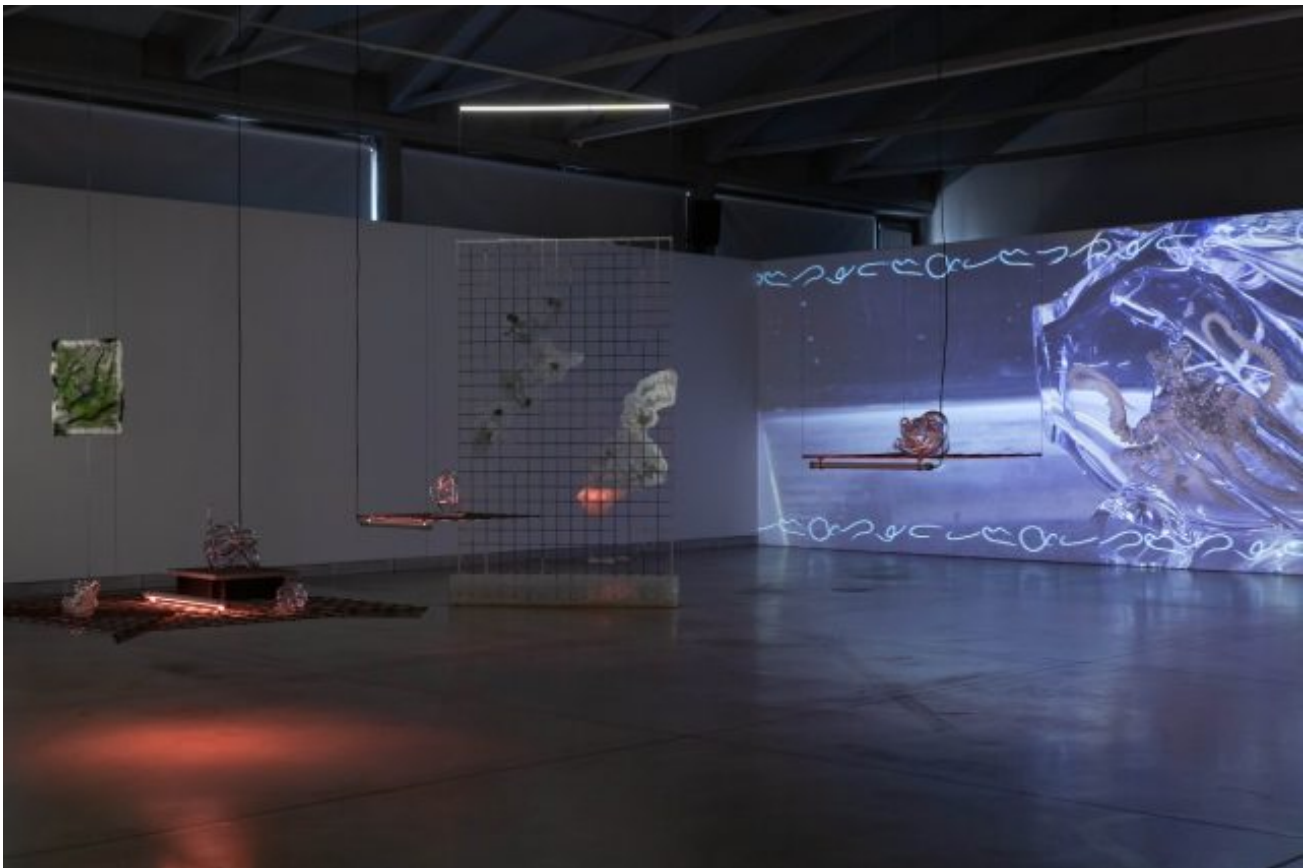
Kristina O Ilek 'Converting Energy and Oxygen (Grid no. 3)' Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Kristina O Ilek 'Converting Energy and Oxygen (Grid no. 3)' Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Kristina O Ilek 'Visibility & Salinity Dynamics'. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen & Kristina O Ilek 'Cyanoceans'. Exhibition view. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen & Kristina O Ilek 'Cyanoceans'.
Exhibition view. Poto: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen & Kristina O Ilek 'Cyanoceans'. Exhibition view. Poto: Hedi Jaansoo



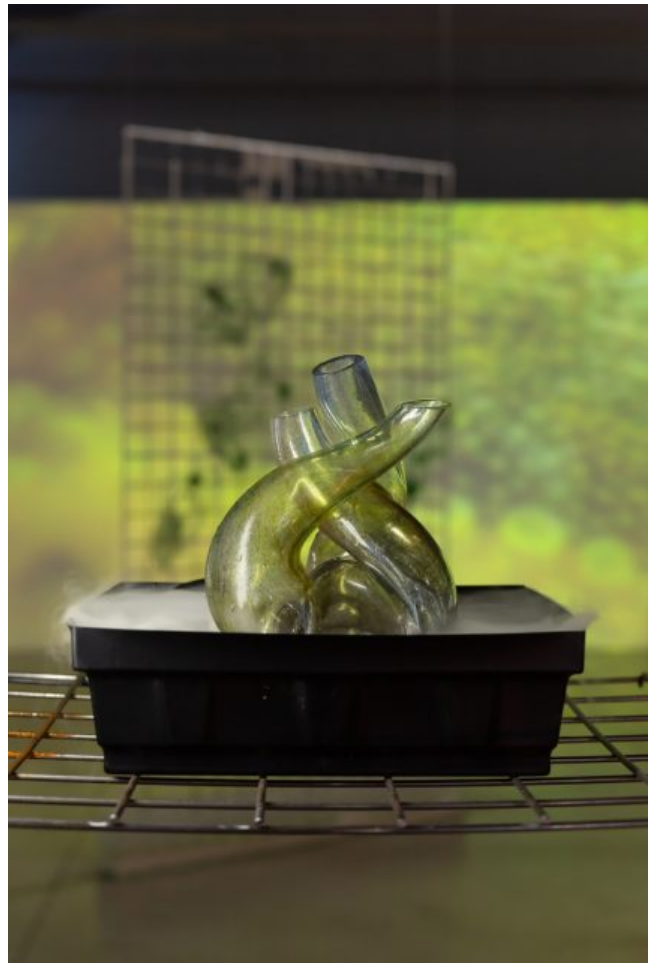
Tuomas A. Laitinen & Kristina O'Leak 'Cyanoceans'. Exhibition view. Foto: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen 'A Proposal for an Octopus #5'. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen 'Protean Sap'. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo



Tuomas A. Laitinen 'Tentare'. Photo: Hedi Jaansoo

Photo reportage from Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'

August 9, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Ingus Bajārs

Featuring artists Annemarija Gulbe and Konstantin Zhukov, the second part of the exhibition cycle 'Contemporary Histories of Photography' is on view at the ISSP gallery in Riga from July 5 to August 16. Part of the Riga Photography Biennial 2024, the exhibition brings together several artists' perspectives and interpretations on the process of writing a local history of photography.

The task of Latvian photography researchers in the 21st century is to construct and deconstruct simultaneously – to fill in extensive blank spots and critically review existing narratives. The exhibition cycle highlights the subjectivity of every version of history and various lesser-known or marginalized aspects of local photography. Contemporary artists have created new works in dialogue with photographers and phenomena from various periods. Their alternative historical interpretations illuminate the diversity of perspectives and offer a departure from a potentially didactic canon.

Annemarija Gulbe's installation highlights roads as symbols in the Latvian landscape, exploring the legacy of photographer, cinematographer, and director Uldis Brauns – both in photography and in his only feature film 'Motociklu vasara' (*Motorcycle Summer*, 1975). Brauns' extensive photographic archive is locally unique in its humanistic reflection of the post-war Latvian environment. Gulbe emphasizes the intersection between documentary approaches and the poetry of montage in

forming a place's identity. Meanwhile, Konstantin Zhukov continues his artistic research on queer histories in Latvia, this time focusing on the Latvian National Opera as a stage, an urban locale, and a community. Referencing Tchaikovsky's ballet 'Swan Lake' and using a soundtrack by the band 'alejas,' Žukovs highlights the unspoken and censored aspects of history – personal stories that are often hidden in family albums or official visual archives, but can rather be read between the lines.

Annemarija Gulbe (1997) works with photography, video and installation. She graduated from the Department of Visual Communication at the Art Academy of Latvia and studied photography at the ISSP School and Andrejs Grants Studio. She is one of the winners of Kim? Open Call (2023), a finalist of the BDO Young Artists Awards (2023) and received the Grand Prix and residency at the contemporary art biennial Jeune creation Européene in Paris (2019) and the FK Prize as best young Latvian photographer (2018). Her most recent personal exhibitions include: *Faith to Believe – or Not* at Kim? Contemporary art center (Riga, 2024), *Under Stone Vaults in Domed Structures* (Kuldīga Municipality Artists Residence, Alsunga, 2023), *Challengeable Heritability* at Look! Gallery (Riga, 2023); *Love Re-search* at the ISSP Gallery (Riga, 2020).

Konstantin Zhukov (1990) is an artist living and working between Riga and London. His creative practice is informed by his research into recorded and oral histories exploring different forms of attachment and sexualities – from homoerotic poetry of the Islamic golden age to the scarcely explored and poorly-documented queer histories of his home country, Latvia. Most recently, Zhukov has had solo shows at NEVEN gallery in London (2024) and ISSP gallery in Riga (2022), exhibited at the Latvian National Museum of Art and Latvian Centre of Contemporary Art in Riga (2024), MO Museum in Vilnius (2024), Cromwell Place in London (2022). Zhukov's work has been published online and in print, including *i-D*, *CAP74024* and now-closed *????????? (o-zine.ru)*, a progressive LGBTQ+ publication based in Moscow.

Curator – Liāna Ivete Žilde, Scenographer – Liene Pavlovskā.

The cycle of exhibitions is a part of the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 programme, which focuses on issues of identity this year. More information: <https://rpbienial.com/program/9.html>

Partners and supporters of the exhibition: State Cultural Capital Foundation, Riga State City Council, Society Integration Foundation, Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, Mystero Museum, Artglass, printing house 'Adverts', Valmiermuiža Craft Brewery, Arterritory.com, Echo Gone Wrong, NOBA, 'Landscapes of Identities: History, Culture and Environment' / IDEUM.

The exhibition is organised by ISSP – a platform for contemporary photography, art and education. ISSP organises local and international education and exchange programmes, produces exhibitions, publications and events and has gathered a thriving community of artists in Latvia and abroad while exploring the connections between art and society. The ISSP Gallery is the central exhibition and events space for contemporary photography in Riga.



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Ingus Bajārs



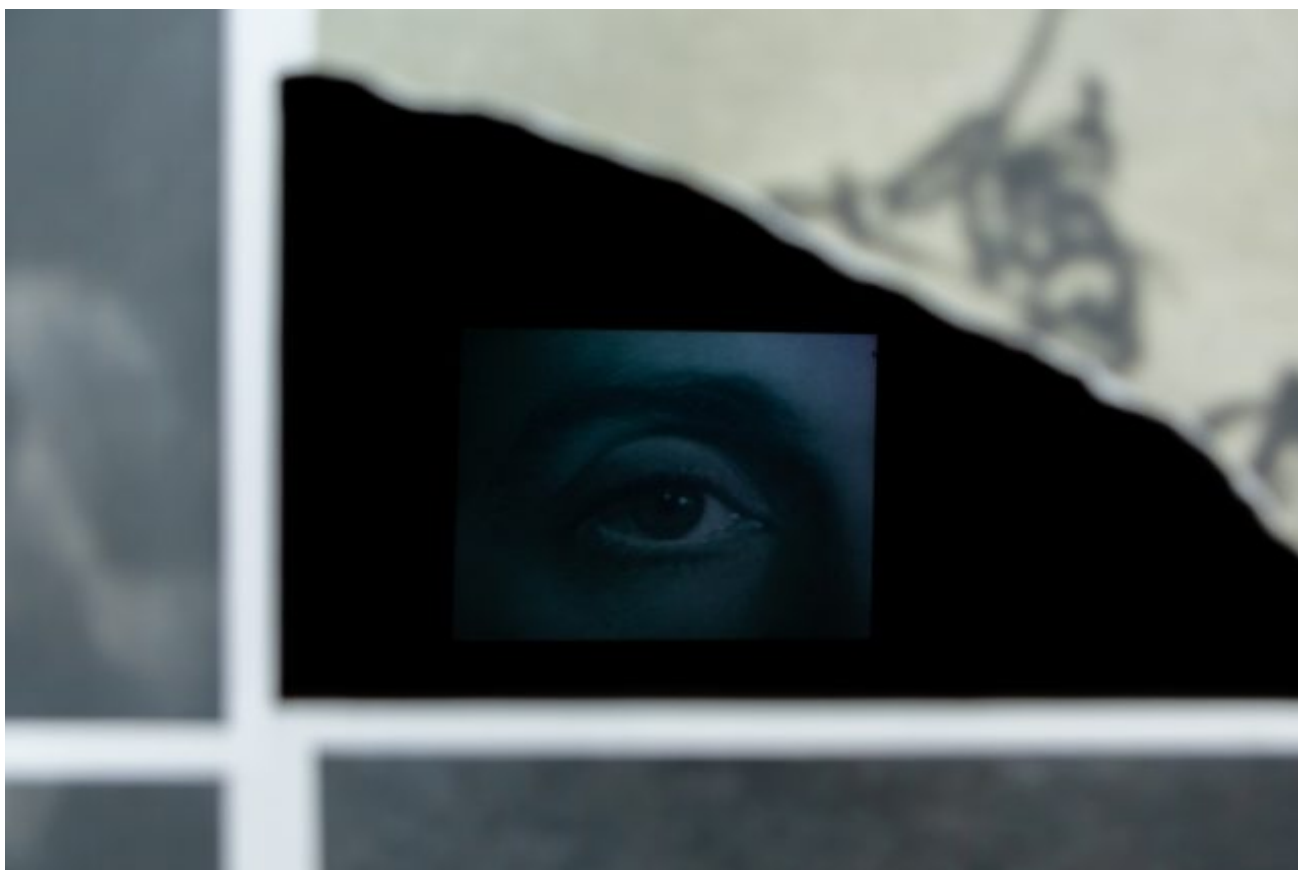
View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'.
Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Sasha Komarova



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'.
Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Sasha Komarova



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'.
Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Ingus Bajārs



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'.
Konstantīns Žukovs, 'Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1.', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Sasha Komarova



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Sasha Komarova



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Annemarija Gulbe



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', 2024. Landscape of Aknīste town. A motorcycle with sidecar and a truck on the street, 1956, Uldis Brauns. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Ingus Bajārs



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Annemarija Gulbe



View from the Riga Photography Biennial 2024 exhibition 'Contemporary Histories of Photography II'. Annemarija Gulbe (with the archive of Uldis Brauns) 'As we gathered and watched, we were happy again', 2024. ISSP Gallery. Photo by Ingus Bajārs

Photo reportage from the exhibition 'Gusts' by Adomas Rybakovas at the VAA exhibition halls 'Titanikas'

August 13, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



Adomas Rybakovas' exhibition 'Gusts' is on display at the VAA 'Titanikas' exhibition halls until August 17.

Someone sees us with a frightened glance, points at us, and, tumbling over each other, we dive into the darkness. Over many years, we have learned to avoid people. We observe them, but we don't approach them; if cornered, we attack. We encounter various types of people. Some, with their heads thrown back, balancing from heels to toes, are furious at failing to adapt to the changes of time. We rush past the curious one, whose temples throb with excitement, observing from a distance a fight that erupted instantly. One listens to the dull thuds, the blows until blood vessels burst among the tissues and slowly swell. The sounds of beating are very different from those heard in action movies.

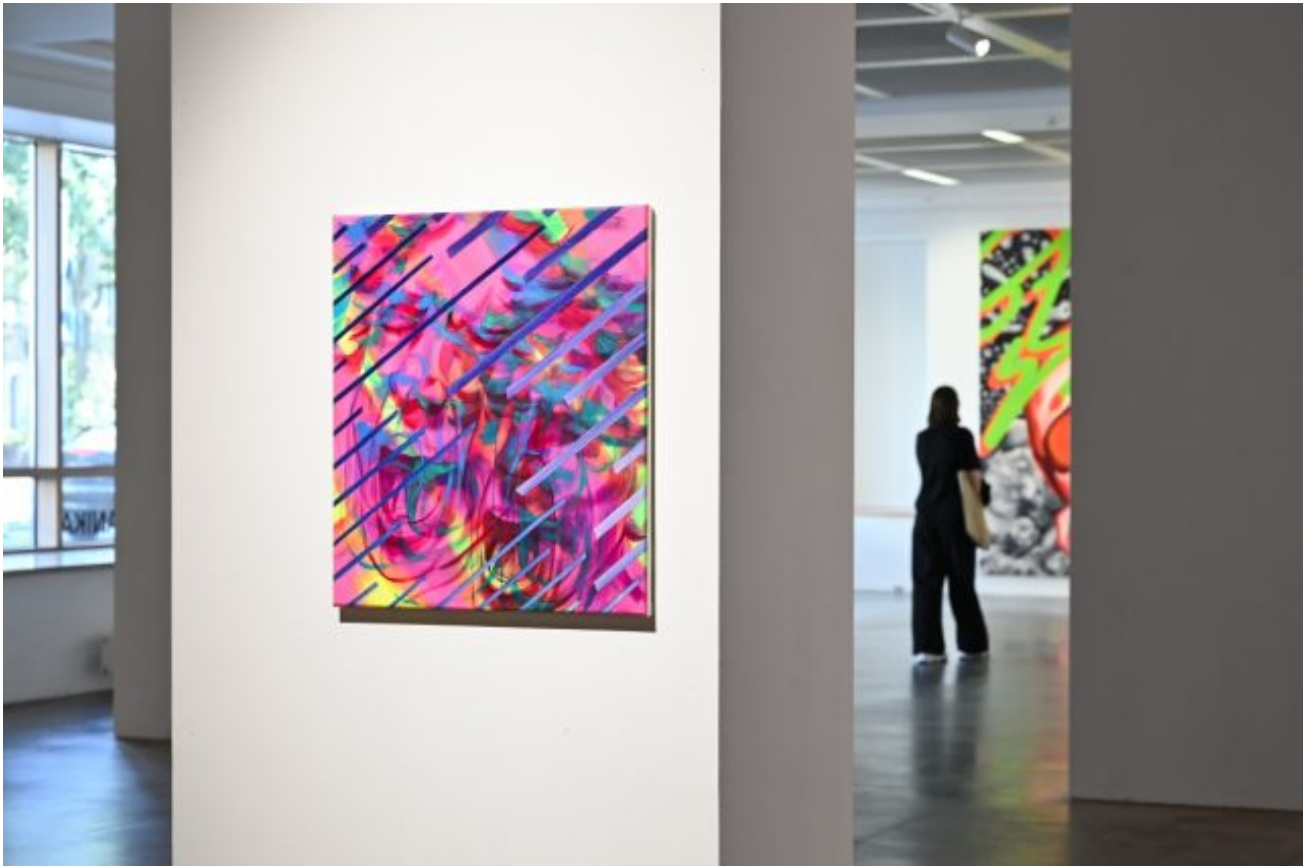
We dive between gravel and train tracks until the empty gaze of someone waiting to finally go home catches my sudden movements. His eyes rise to the announcement board: "Vandalism! Train delayed..." He craves the adrenaline coursing through his veins, those few moments of spraying on the wagons. Soon, the irrational thoughts dissipate, his gaze blurs again, and the arriving train screeches in the tunnel. The metal is covered with countless aerosol dust particles, the colors are bright, contrasting with the gray surroundings, the crumbling concrete, and the dissolved posters with news from the past on the asphalt.

While one feels the low-frequency vibrations underfoot and hundreds of bodies are moving in the stuffy air, neon lights reflect on the wet pavement, and the wailing sirens of the ambulance pierce

the ears. Why is it cutting through the streets like that? What is the fate of those inside? The last storefronts go dark, and the shutters come down. Now, we can explore the surroundings more calmly. Although we experience a lot of stress, people have accustomed us to good living conditions. We will continue to live by their side and watch everything closely.

Adomas Rybakovas (b. 2001) is an artist of the young generation. In 2019, after graduating from the National M. K. Čiurlionis School of Arts, joined VDA's Bachelor of Painting Studies (2019 – 2023). 2021 – 2022 studied at the State Academy of Arts in Stuttgart. Participates in group exhibitions in Lithuania and Germany. In 2022 won the Zabolis Art Prize, and entered the finals of the XIV Young Painter Prize. In 2023, graduated with an exhibition *Thirst* in Galerija Vartai.

Photography: Rusnė Šimulynaitė.

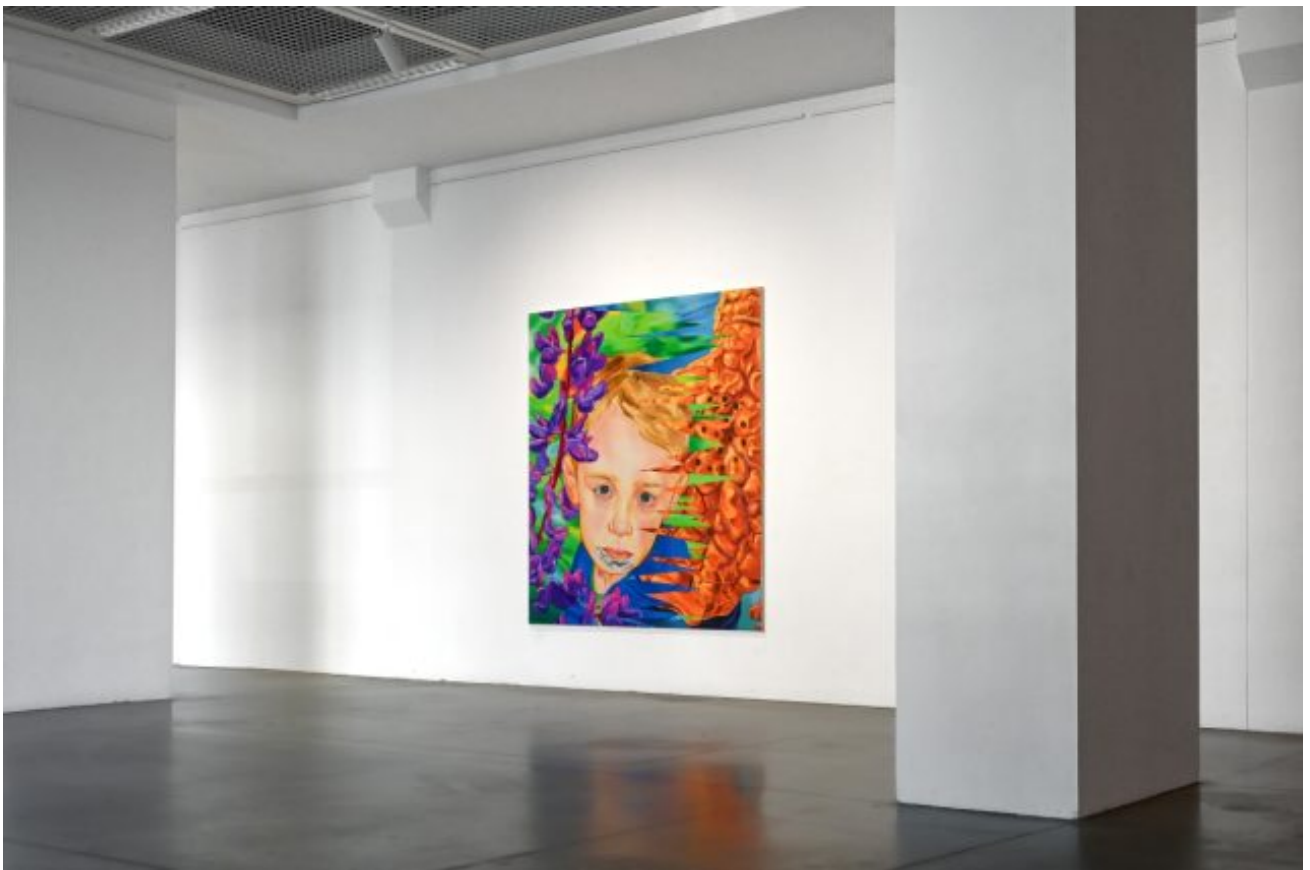
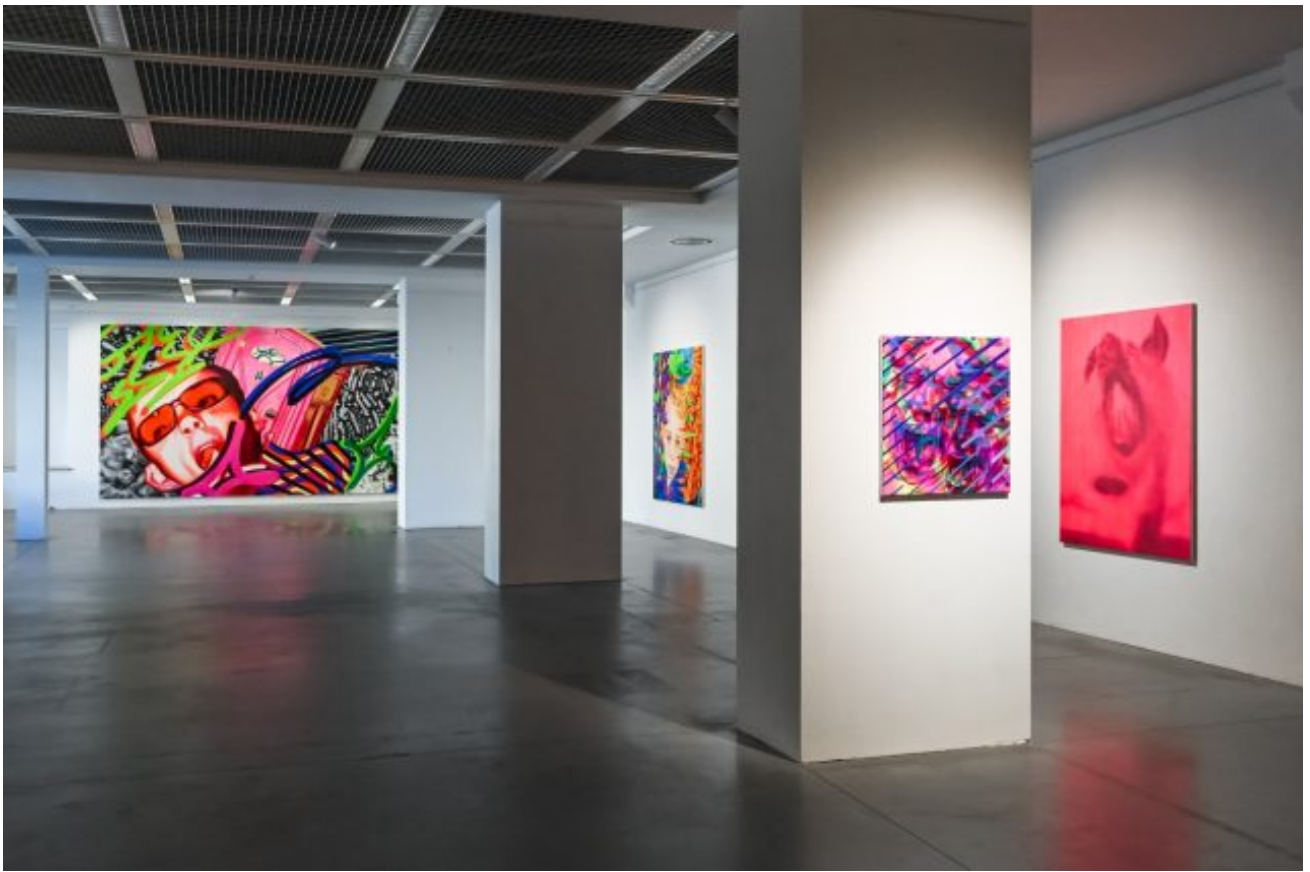


ADOMAS RYBAKOVAS

GŪSIAI

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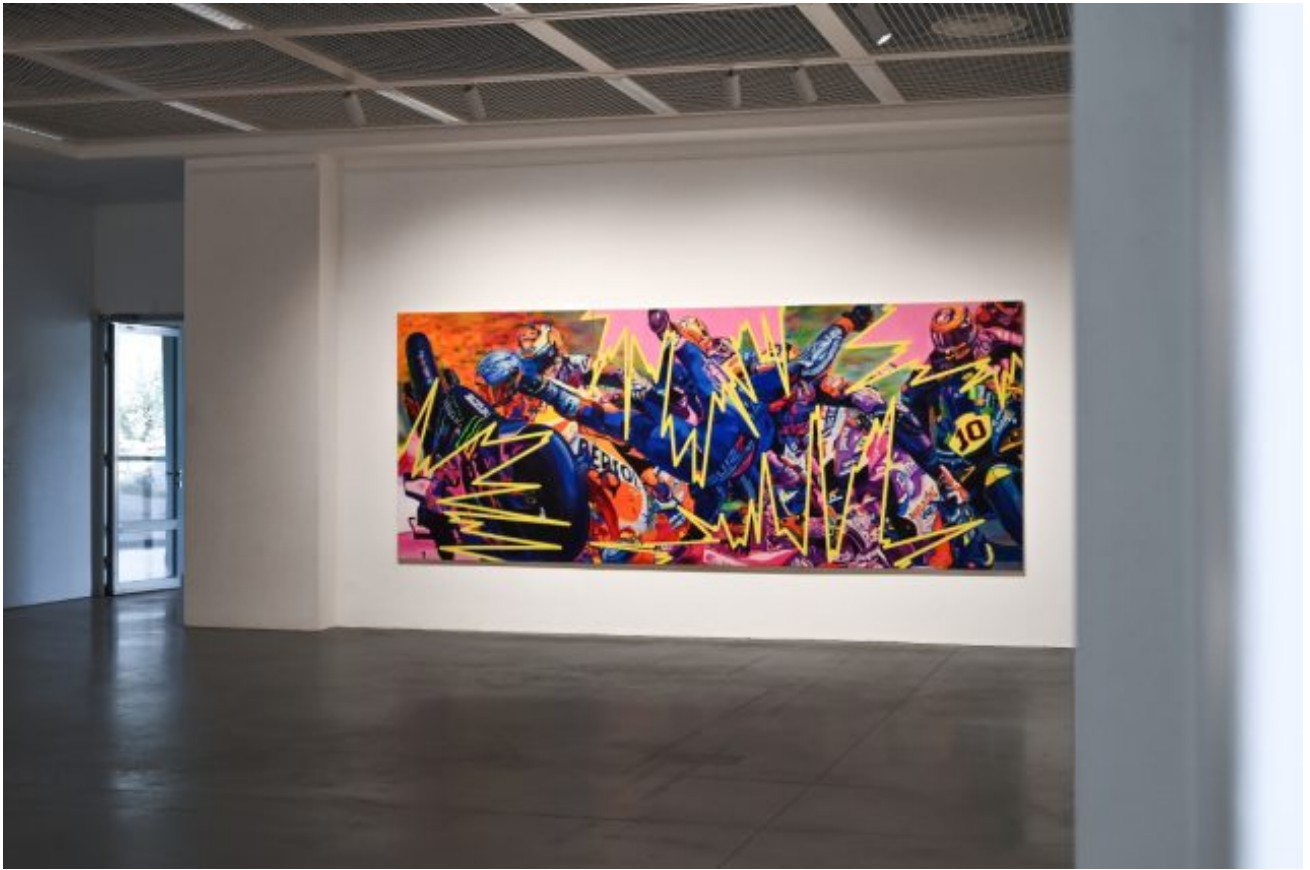












Exhibition 'Hold Me Tender' at Medūza gallery

August 20, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



Sarah Nõmm 'The Branch / Untie My Silk Ribbons' and Marko Mäetamm 'Our Daddy is a Hunter'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela

The exhibition 'Hold Me Tender' at Medūza gallery in Vilnius will be open until 31 August.

A couple of decades after Jacques Derrida described a curious encounter with his cat, I was driving with my friends across the restored alluvial plains towards the sea while on holiday on Muhumaa island. Every now and then, one of us had to jump out of the car to open and close the cattle gates blocking the road. In front of the last gate was standing a large herd of cattle, which slowly began to lumber away as we approached. Eventually the herd parted except for a couple of stubborn animals. One of them was lying on the ground in front of the gate, while the others were standing around as if on guard, all gazing at us through the windshield.

One day as he came out of the shower, Derrida looked at his cat. As he regarded his cat, he felt the cat regarded him. Looking into the eyes of the cows, one by one, I realised that I had no idea how to communicate with these beautiful and conscious creatures. As a child, I had seen cows being herded home along the village roads, but I had never done it myself. I was sitting there in the car, wearing my grandfather's old shirt and thinking with embarrassment that I lacked the knowledge that would have been considered completely normal only a few generations before me. Finally the cow slowly rose to its feet and limped away, followed by its attendants. The guard of honour had simply waited patiently for the injured herd member to gather its strength to rise.

For some time now, I have been consistently working on exhibitions that, in one way or another, deal with the pain points and bottlenecks of modern society and try to unravel the tangle of eternal global crises a little bit, so that some bright ray of hope can briefly shine through. During this time, I have felt a deep impatience with the immeasurably slow impact of art, the anxious loneliness of a climate warrior, and groaned under the seemingly endless burden of care as both a parent and a citizen, almost to the point of breaking.

However, in recent years, I have also experienced how crossing a certain threshold of pain arouses sympathy in society and encourages almost everyone to help others. But why do we need a pandemic or a war in order for us to recognise that our neighbour is also a human being? How can we find each other sooner, rather than reacting after the damage has already been done?

In philosophy we have come to the realisation that just as I exist, another living being or object also exists in its own way. However, such thoughts are ahead of society, and sometimes it seems that we are moving further and further away from understanding each other. Even in the Baltic countries, which have taken great strides towards a more equal and free society in the three decades since regaining independence, there are complex issues on the agenda that cause conflicting opinions. Those residents who do not show a desire for integration are distancing themselves from each other, one example of which being the segregation that is increasing at a record speed in the Baltic capitals, compared to the European average. Migration, security and livelihoods, the destruction of the natural environment and changing traditions cause fear and resentment.

Right now, Baltic societies are on the cusp of several upheavals. After decades of delays, both Estonia and Latvia have finally launched education reforms, aiming to abolish state funded education in Russian in the coming years. While same-sex marriage became legal in Estonia at the start of this year and same-sex civil unions legal in Latvia merely weeks ago in July, Lithuania is yet to legalize same-sex partnership in any form, although a bill to grant same-sex couples some limited legal rights and benefits is pending in the Seimas. Though these changes have the potential to strengthen and improve society, there are also those who are reluctant and feel somewhat threatened by them. Far-right movements successfully exploit this fear to their advantage.

According to Bruno Latour, the reason for this conservative revolution is the transformation of globalisation from the process that enhances cultural diversity into one that narrows and devours biodiversity. The local doesn't even wish to become global if it has to give up a lot of its special features in order to do so. If we add to this the aimlessness typical of the present time and the failure of the grand narratives of the past, it is not surprising that a society that is hurting in many areas goes on the defensive. But the networking of living beings and cultures is a fact, and the previous rigid national narratives must one way or another make room for viewpoints not represented in them to date. Latour proposes a new political subject, the Terran, which I understand to include all beings and objects. But how to become an empathetic and caring Terran?

To be a subject is to be both free and conquered at the same time. Maggie Nelson says that the question is not whether we are intertwined, but how we negotiate, fight and dance in that entanglement. Paranoia, despair and constant vigilance limit humanity's ability to do something for both the present and the future. We need new ways of feeling and acknowledging that other ways of being are also possible. And not just in some uncertain revolutionary future or idealised past, but right here and now.

Boring a hole in the shape of ourselves in the currently valid norms is a common human ordeal. How can we bring grey space to black and white confrontations? How can we find these new ways of feeling and knowledge? In a region whose history includes stories of suffering, repression and reconciliation, on which the entire national identity is built, could we have the emotional intelligence

to not only notice the hardships around us, but also empathise with them?

I burned out dreaming of such a caring utopia, but gradually gathered myself again, getting to know works of art and artists who, based on their personal experience, shed light – not to say a ray of hope – on experiences and questions that don't always get the attention they deserve, or that are even considered taboo. The works by the invited artists in this exhibition deal with relationships, care, social roles and responsibility, language and ethnicity, vulnerability and violence. There are as of yet no concrete answers to the questions raised, but these artworks floating in the common value space indicate that the knowledge necessary to understand each other and move forward is within reach.

It seems to me that one of the most important questions in life is what to do with the time that we are given. True care takes commitment, but I'm not sure depth of experience has much to do with its duration. Even a fleeting encounter with another person can shake you to the core. Once the areas of concern are identified, is it possible to resist the forces that try to hijack our valuable attention? And to tenderly hold each other, even for just a brief moment.

Artist presented in the exhibition: Bas Jan Ader, Hanna Piksarv, Mark Raidpere, Keiu Maasik, Marko Mäetamm, Sarah Nõmm, Agnė Jokšė, Morta Jonynaitė, Sandra Kosorotova, Elina Vitola

Curated by Siim Preiman

'Hold Me Tender' is part of Tallinn Art Hall's ongoing exhibition series, which pays special attention both to the possibility of being good and to ecological responsibility in conditions of certain destruction.

Exhibition is supported by Frame Contemporary Art Finland, Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture and The Lithuanian Council for Culture

Photography: Laurynas Skeisgiela



'Hold me Tender' exhibition view. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



'Hold me Tender' exhibition view. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



'Hold me Tender' exhibition view. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Marko Mäetamm 'Our Daddy is a Hunter'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Our daddy
wears a hat
with a feather
and a bow

Our daddy has a ⁵guy hat
He never goes hunting without this hat
Because this hat brings him luck
And there is a beautiful feather attached to this hat
This feather is from an animal who had some work to do

Our daddy
has a bag
with a handle
and a strap

Our daddy has big ⁶black rubber boots
They are our daddy's best friends
Because they keep his feet dry
They have a special place in our hearts
And they have a very special smell
And they make a funny noise when they are filled with water

Our daddy has a ⁷big gun
So big that our daddy can put everything in it
Everything he needs when he goes hunting
And it has so many pockets!
And it is so heavy that only our daddy can pick it up

Our daddy has a ⁸big hunting gun
It is very heavy
And very dangerous
And it makes a big noise
When our daddy starts to shoot

Marko Mäetamm 'Our Daddy is a Hunter'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Sarah Nõmm 'The Branch Untie My Silk Ribbons' and Marko Mäetamm 'Our Daddy is a Hunter'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



'Hold me Tender' exhibition view. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Morta Jonynaitė 'Never-Drying Towels'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Sandra Kosorotova 'Can I Grow Here'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Elīna Vītola 'The Line'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Bas Jan Ader 'I'm too sad to tell you' ir Hanna Piksarv 'My Students I-V'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Hanna Piksarv 'My Students I-V'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



'Hold me Tender' exhibition view. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Agnė Jokšė 'Daring Dreams (Ateitys Ateis)'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Agnė Jokšė 'Scrape I & Scrape II'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Keiu Maasik 'Three Brother'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Keiu Maasik 'Three Brother'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Keiu Maasik 'Three Brother'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela



Mark Raidpere 'Pae St. Playlist'. Photo: Laurynas Skeisgiela

Photo reportage from the exhibition 'a wall without a window is not the same as a wall without a door (AWWAWINTSAAWWAD)' by Krišjānis Beļavskis at the DOM Gallery

August 24, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



The exhibition 'a wall without a window is not the same as a wall without a door (AWWAWINTSAAWWAD)' by Krišjānis Beļavskis at the DOM Gallery runs until August 31.

Enter a rock from below, through the ground. Or a tree. Perhaps it has no roots down there. They appear only when the ground is dug up and your eyes can see them. While I am not looking, a bowl bounces on the kitchen table. The table is a surface. The table stands on the surface of the ground but if the table is flipped upside down, the ground stands on the table. A bucket is a blanket and to arrange means to trick.

Beļavskis holds a BA in arts from the Sculpture department in the Art Academy of Latvia. He spent two semesters studying at Art Academy of Munich (ADBK München) class led by Peter Kogler and continues his studies at POST, an interdisciplinary MA program.

Supported by: SCCF, Sculpture Quadrennial Riga 2024 and Tālava

Photos: Ieva Viese (@sudrablapsa) Krišjānis Beļavskis (@ch2kb)









Exhibition 'Bruised Lilac' by Maria Izabella Lehtsaar in Keldrisaal of Kanuti Gildi Saal

August 28, 2024

Author Echo Gone Wrong



Maria Izabella Lehtsaar's solo exhibition Bruised Lilac is on display from August 21st until September 6th, 2024 in Keldrisaal of Kanuti Gildi Saal in Tallinn, Estonia. The exhibition is open Mon-Sat from 13-19.

Boxing is inherently violent, hypermasculine and deeply performative. Violence is central to a patriarchal society, and boxing as a sport enables it to normalize and celebrate this through carefully constructed rules, chosen attire and choreography. Similarly, there are rules that govern the performance of gender. As writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado explains in his film *Orlando, My Political Biography*, masculinity and femininity are socially constructed political fictions, which we have learned to perceive as natural through repetition, violence and discipline. Yet, the rules for performing gender are much more abstract than those in boxing.

Maria Izabella Lehtsaar explores the common ground between boxing and gender performance. According to stereotypical gender norms, boxing symbolizes everything that one must not represent when growing up as a girl in society. Both boxing and gender conformity involve violence – it can be painful to force oneself to adhere to societal expectations, and failing to conform to these expectations often leads to punishment. However, both can also offer moments of beauty, the pursuit of perfection and opportunities to express oneself and act out.

The exhibition presents the series of works titled Loveless, through which Lehtsaar reflects on the experience of coming of age as a queer individual. Through humor and unique use of materials, they emphasize the importance of self-care and self-understanding. While boxing gear is predominantly designed to protect the boxer, the insides of the bruised lilac boxing gloves in the exhibition are lined with simple foam that can't protect the hands, rendering them beautiful but useless. By creating miniatures of the artworks on display, the artist plays with notions of kitsch and industrial manufacturing, queering and parodying boxing gear and their own work, seeking liberation and navigating the world of boxing on their own terms.

As part of the exhibition's public programme, a three part collective zine-making workshop will take place, hosted in collaboration with the artist Nadya Tjuška. The workshops are based on discussions on personal experiences and gender performativity, through which a collective zine will be made through different exercises for illustrating and creative writing. The workshops take place on Thursdays at 18.00 on August 22nd, August 29th and September 5th.

Maria Izabella Lehtsaar is a non-binary artist based in Tallinn, who works primarily with under-represented queer experience and narratives, often playing with the boundary between reality and fantasy. Their work often narrates spaces, hidden symbols and coded meanings in queer and lesbian material culture. Maria's works catch the eye through softness, which loudly touch on the subjects of gender performativity, construction and political fictions that create a binary and lonely world. They blend pop culture aesthetics and sensitive monochrome graphics, combining them in practice with textiles, drawing and poetry. Their use of various mediums bend the familiarity with layered meanings.

Exhibition team

Artist: Maria Izabella Lehtsaar (they/them)

Curator: Mikk Lahesalu (they/them)

Workshop conductor: Nadya Tjuška (they/them)

Exhibition designer: Riin Maide (any/all)

Graphic designer: Agnes Isabelle Veevo (she/her)

Editor: Emilia Kõiv (she/her)

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Photography: Kertu Rannula

