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TRENDS IN THE LATVIAN CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE, 1980 – 2020: EXAMPLES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITICISM AND ACTIVISM

Abstract

The objective of this article is to examine the artistic trends used by artists in their socio-political critical artistic practice and to question whether, and how, in the context of Latvian contemporary art, these differ compared to the discourse of Western art. The case studies of this article will be works by Latvian contemporary artists representing two generations of artists: Kristaps Ģelzis, who started working under the conditions of late socialism, and the artists Miķelis Mūrnieks and Mētra Saberova, who were born in the first half of the 1990s, and thus work in a post-socialist context. The practice of socio-politically critical art in Latvia is characterised by locally specific traits that has been influenced by the country's geopolitical, historical and educational context. Despite these local peculiarities, Latvian contemporary artists, using different visual art strategies, engage with the possibility of real social change and have found it continually necessary to work in ways that question how to participate meaningfully in the social and political life of Latvia.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to examine the artistic trends used by artists in their socio-political critical artistic practice and to question whether, and how, in the context of Latvian contemporary art, these differ compared to the hegemonic discourse of Western art. The case studies of this article will be works by Latvian contemporary artists representing two generations of artists: Kristaps Ģelzis (b. 1962), who started working under late socialism conditions, and the artists Miķelis Mūrnieks (b. 1995) and Mētra Saberova (b. 1991), who were born in the first half of the 1990s, and thus work in a post-socialist context. Therefore, the article marks the transition period from the socialist system to the transnationally oriented capitalist society of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and examines how these changes resonate throughout the artistic explorations of socio-political criticism and activism in contemporary art.

In order to identify how socio-politically critical art practice appears in the context of Latvian contemporary art, it is important to distinguish several concepts, which have not yet been endorsed in the terminology of Latvian

contemporary art.¹ It is possible to delineate two main artistic strategies that are relevant to Latvian contemporary art situation: (1) socio-politically critical art practice and (2) socio-political activism.² Since art historians have not turned their attention to this subject within Latvian historiography, the grounds for this analysis of terminology can be sought in the discourse of Western art.

SOCIO-POLITICALLY CRITICAL ARTISTIC PRACTICE OR SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM?

It is essential to focus on defining the differences between the two aforementioned artistic practices. In regard to socio-political activism, the American art critic, writer and activist Lucy Rowland Lippard, in her 1984 essay *Trojan-Horses: Activist Art and Power*,³ highlights artists whose artistic practice could be called “political” or “based on activism”. She links the practice of political art to the reflections of the represented theme or sometimes in relation to a social problem, often expressing an ironically critical opinion. In contrast, activism is mostly oriented toward the potential of a work of art to be engaged in socio-political processes, as opposed to solely functioning as a vehicle for representation. Moreover, activism demands that the artist as the author of the work demonstrates an active ability to take action. In the context of socio-political activism, one must also consider concepts such as “socially engaged practice”. Artists who work in this vein create works of art that are geared towards cooperation with the viewer. This artistic practice is related to socio-political issues and their resolution within a certain social group. Oftentimes artists aim to help a certain group within society and to improve their physical or psycho-emotional welfare. Western art historians also highlight the term “protest art”, which is art created by activists or social movements, and is often used in protest campaigns. Accordingly, one must conclude that, in contrast to socio-politically critical artistic practice, not only the formal and thematic parameters of a work of art are vital to socio-political activism, so are reaching the audience, the context, and the opportunity to influence the course of socially significant events, including political ones.

In reflecting on socio-political traits in art, the Argentinian art historian Andrea Giunta uses the concept of “cultural activism”, asserting that since the mid-19th century “cultural activism” has been manifested in two directions. First, “cultural activism” is understood evidence of the united front of artists, in other words the joint efforts of artists or representatives of a

1 In the context of Latvian art theory, no research has been conducted on socio-politically critical and activist art, although it is worthwhile mentioning series of lectures and seminars called “Art and Activism in Baltics,” which were organized by the ISSP photography school and gallery in 2021.

2 This distinction is discussed, for example, by Andrea Giunta, “Activism,” in *Contemporary Art 1989 to the Present*, eds. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

3 Lucy Rowland Lippard, “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: D. R. Godine, 1984), 341–343.

cultural environment, which are implemented with the goal of expressing dissatisfaction with a specific situation. In applying this strategy, works of art are gathered together in exhibitions or in a public space, unifying in a joint manifesto, and the accompanying text is published in print media or shared on social media, in addition to which demonstrations can be organised as one form of strategy. Secondly, “cultural activism” can be understood in relation to works of art whose meaning is related to a specific social or political event. Giunta calls this direction “image activism”, because the image can also be used and interpreted in a broader context, not only in connection with the specific event represented.⁴ Thus, one can conclude that socio-politically critical art practice can be described as executed in order to respond to and critically evaluate some specific social or political issue, with art playing an instrumental role. However, in the context of socio-political activism, process is vital, as is proactive activity that directly addresses power structures or the general public, rather than merely representing or describing some problem. Therefore, socio-politically critical art practice does not incorporate activism as one of the forms in which it is manifested; it studies socio-political themes or comments upon them, not including specific socio-political activities. In contrast, socio-political activism examines socio-political themes, bearing socio-political responsibility, manifests an active civic stance, and organises a complex process, sometimes in the form of protest. Nevertheless, both the aforementioned artistic practices are mutually related, because they apply to a type of artistic activity that integrates some form of socio-political protest or resistance, or responds to such.

In turn, the art historian Grant Kester stresses that such artistic practices incorporate a certain connection to some social or political movement, community or group endeavouring to criticise an authoritarian regime or to combat hegemonic forms of domination, which are often related to differences in class, race, ethnic affinity or sexuality.⁵ In the context of Western art, a salient example of socio-political activism is the anonymous artists’ group *Guerilla Girls* (f. 1985), which, since the mid-1980s, has utilised the urban environment (posters and large billboards) and mass media to highlight sexism and racism in the art world, including by drawing attention to the meagre representation of women artists at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. By contrast, an example of socio-politically critical art is Portuguese-born British artist Paula Rego’s (b. 1935) series of pastel paintings dedicated to illegally performed abortions and their consequences, which was the artist’s response to the Portuguese Government’s failure to adopt a law legalising abortion in 1988.

4 Giunta, “Activism,” 235.

5 Grant Kester, “Activist and Socially Engaged Art,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0160.xml>

The history of manifestations of socio-politically critical art in Western art and culture is not only connected to contemporary art trajectories.⁶ As the American art historian Claudia Mesch asserts: “Political art is certainly not unique to the moderns; it can also be found among the ancients. One needs only to see a single triumphal arch to be reminded of the power relations of ancient politics.”⁷ She emphasises that in the world of today the political content of visual art is becoming increasingly specific, and more widespread in the age of globalization.⁸ 19th-century cultural, political and economic conditions in Europe offered artists a new form of activity and freedom of expression. As well as putting distance between itself and the everyday realm of manufacturing, art’s emancipation from state and religious institutions offered it the opportunity to assume a new role – *l’art pour l’art*. Painters and sculptors were no longer the servants of a certain religion or aristocracy. They had greater scope to develop their creative practice as they pleased.⁹ Mesch stresses that, in the context of contemporary art, the roots of new socio-politically critical and socio-politically activist art forms are to be found within the discourse of post-colonialism and in the atmosphere of student protests during the 1960s, which were based on issues of individual and collective identity.¹⁰ A host of post-war protest movements – the civil rights movement, student riots, feminism and gay rights – encouraged members of the general public to engage and show solidarity with them. These groups took shape by drawing on common aspects

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of personal identity and creating the famous phrase, “the personal is political”, which was used as the slogan for the second wave of feminism.

Of course, it is debatable whether the discourse of Western art is the yardstick by which comparisons with the domestic art and cultural scene should be drawn. A host of notable art historians have objected to such a comparison, including Piotr Piotrowski, who acknowledges that art historians who engage in Eastern European research encounter the problem of “the

6 One of the most clearly defined periodizations of contemporary art is attributable to the philosopher Peter Osborne, who contends that the dividing line between modern and contemporary art stabilized after 1945, as contemporary art gradually secured its foothold. For the most part the 1960s are referred to as the starting point of contemporary art, as the end of modernism and the start of contemporaneity. In *the Oxford Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, the term “contemporary art” is defined. For most of the 20th century, the term was flexible. Instead of defining a specific period in art history, the term tended to move forward with the times in order to reflect that which defined it. Nowadays there are two separate terms, modernism and contemporary art, which presuppose that the era of modernism has ended, despite the fact there is no uniform theoretical understanding of when this occurred. The geopolitical context is also important here. Although the development of Latvian contemporary art started fragmentarily during the late 1950s, it was the exhibition *Nature. Environment. Man* that took place in St. Peter’s Church in Riga in 1984 that first extensively heralded a conceptual exhibition involving new interactive types of art, thus becoming a turning point in the development of Latvian contemporary art.

7 Claudia Mesch, *Art and Politics. A Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 2.

8 Ibid.

9 Will Bradley, “Introduction,” in *Art and Social Change. A Critical Reader*, ed. Will Bradley and Charles Esche (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 9.

10 From the 1960s forward, post-structuralists argue that a uniform, fixed and stable system of identity no longer exists – instead identities are decentralized and unstable, accommodating various models of representation. Post-structuralists believe that “the self” as a separate and linked unit is an imagined structure, because most probably individuals harbour mutually contradictory orientations and skills (e.g. gender, family, profession and age, etc.).

absence of our cultural production within the canon of the artistic culture of the continent (with a few exceptions) and by its peripheral location.” However, he stresses that the solution to this problem is not reproducing “the imperial and hierarchical interpretative models, but to revise the paradigms, to change the analytical tools so that they would allow us to discover the meanings of cultures of ‘other’ geographical regions.”¹¹ However, the question remains – what methodology should be used to break these Western biases? In his 2018 article, *Towards a Horizontal History of Modern Art*, Piotrowski suggests applying the following interpretative methodology: (1) deconstruction of the Western inspirations, i.e., comprehending their analysis not on the basis of hierarchical (center-periphery) influence, but in functional terms aiming to determine what a given influence meant in a specific local context (hence, the long history of the socio-political criticism and activism manifestations in contemporary art in the West and their locally specific expression in Latvian contemporary art context); (2) rejection of the idea of stylistic homogeneity in favour of heterogeneity – combining styles into local, unique stylistic mutations (in the case of Latvia these mutations were determined by the socio-political circumstances in socialism and post-socialism); (3) recognition of the local canons and value systems, often contradicting those of Western art centers (for example, the difference between activist art and its relations to social movements in the West and in Soviet Latvia).¹²

Also, several Baltic researchers have pointed to the necessity of evaluating regional art processes, breaking stereotypes and assumptions in historiography, particularly in relation to the superiority of Western art and the inferiority of art from the former Eastern bloc – a paradigm often dictated by Western art history. For example, Latvian art historian Laine Kristberga advocates using the method of horizontal and revisionist art history analysis, which focuses on the polyphony of the region’s local art historians, thus accenting the differing development of artistic processes and practices on this side of the Iron Curtain.¹³ Latvian art historian and theoretician Ieva Astahovska, in her description of the situation of Eastern European art,¹⁴ contends that, already from 1990s on, work on exhibitions, publications, conferences, and contemplations of the versions of Eastern European art history illustrate that this field is of no less importance than Western art history.¹⁵ This also applies to researches

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11 Piotr Piotrowski, “The Geography of Central/East European Art,” in *Borders in Art – Revisiting Kunstgeographie*, ed. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius (Warsaw: Institute of Art, 2000), 45–46.

12 Piotr Piotrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History of Modern Art,” in *Writing Central European Art History* (Vienna: ERSTE Stiftung, 2008), 4.

13 Laine Kristberga, “The Strategies of Escapism in the *Homo Sovieticus* Reality: Art in Cultural and Geographical Periphery of Soviet Latvia,” *Reliģiski-Filzofiski raksti*, no. 31 (2021): 322–344.

14 Ieva Astahovska. “Foreword,” in *Recuperating the invisible past*, ed. Ieva Astahovska (Riga: The Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2012), 13.

15 In this context, we can mention research mapping Baltic art specifically: *Art of the Baltics. The Struggle for Freedom if Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, eds. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New Brunswick, NJ: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University Press, 2002) (Dedicated specially to artistic modernisation in the Baltic Soviet Period) and *Peeling Potatoes. Painting Pictures: Women Artists in*

regarding socio-political criticism and activism in Baltic contemporary art.¹⁶ One of the most recent researches in the field is *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic art: political and social perspectives, 1991–2021* (2021), edited by Svitlana Biedarieva, which discusses questions of identity, memory, trauma, and social change as reflected in the art of the last three decades. As a result, this book offers a thorough examination of the aesthetic transformations that occurred following independence. It investigates how artists responded to socio-political transformations and shifts of perspective following the fusion of the two worlds separated by the Iron Curtain. Comparing Baltic and Ukrainian artists' socio-political criticism and activism, Biedarieva admits that artistic practices are too complex to be encompassed by a single formula.¹⁷ Rather, she concludes that Baltic art and Ukrainian art need more detailed research that would trace their specific histories before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and establish an interdisciplinary framework of notions and definitions.¹⁸

Baltic contemporary art took shape in the second half of the 1980s. Hence two periods of socio-political conditions should be considered while describing the manifestations of socio-political criticism and activism in Baltic art: the state of late socialism and post-socialism starting from 1990s onwards. These two periods can be judged as being specific to the region and, especially, Latvia; this conditionality of both periods has been influenced by socio-political and historical factors. Although it is not the aim of this article, the role of curators and art institutions in stimulating socio-politically critical and activist art would also be worth investigating, both in late socialism and in the post-socialist context.¹⁹

Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia, and Latvia. The First Decade, eds. Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell. The Dodge Soviet Nonconformist Art Publication Series (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press and The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 2001). Recently, more focus on the Baltic art situation is present in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (Routledge, 2020).

¹⁶ Although the Baltic region has been often evaluated as a historically and politically homogeneous unit, art researchers emphasize that it is impossible to generalize about a single art scene of the “Baltic States”. For example, during the Soviet period resistance to the regime took various artistic forms and expressions depending on the geographical location and connections with the West, the available Western periodicals and literature, and the influence and contacts of specific cultural figures, as well as the art traditions of each country, creating local art models in each of the Baltic States. This has also influenced contemporary art development trends in each of the countries.

¹⁷ Svitlana Biedarieva, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic art: political and social perspectives, 1991–2021*, ed. Svitlana Biedarieva (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2021), 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

¹⁹ For example, in her extensive overview of curating Baltic feminism (“Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe”), Estonian art historian Katrin Kivimaa suggests that socio-political activism in curatorial practice addresses the specific socio-political issues in various exhibition formats and includes in its methodology strategic decisions that have lasting impact both on the functioning of the institutions themselves, as well as socio-political change in general. Although the article concludes that strategically inclusive activities (in this case regarding feminist curating) in the context of Baltic art institutions are mostly not part of the exhibition policy, the number of recent feminist and queer projects initiated by the new generation of curators and artists-cum-curators is, without doubt, an indication of the changing understanding of the role of an art professional.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MANIFESTATIONS IN LATVIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

As discussed in the previous section, the practice of socio-politically critical art in Latvian contemporary art should be considered as a hybrid form and means of artistic expression, characterised by locally specific traits. It should be noted that this article will not explain the broad spectrum across which art interacts with politics;²⁰ rather it is an attempt to identify the strategies and practices in Latvian contemporary art that are used by artists in response to socio-political changes, and to ascertain how this resonates or differs from global contemporary art processes.

In order to describe the traits of socio-politically critical artistic practice in Latvian contemporary art, one has to take into account that it is not possible to subsume the course of its development within the dominant scenarios of Western contemporary art development. To describe the trend of socio-politically critically-oriented art, one has to take the geopolitical, historical and educational context into account. During the 1960s, when socio-politically critical artistic practices and the discourse of socio-political activism were developing globally, Latvia was occupied and part of the Soviet Union. Under the conditions of a totalitarian regime, expressions of artistic freedom were restricted and controlled. Art was politicised and subject to a strict mechanism of censorship, while the only “correct” style was socialist realism. However, as art historian Kristberga notes:

... intriguingly enough, alternative manifestations and explorations developed in parallel to this official discourse. The 1970s and 1980s evidenced performance art, installation art, kinetic art and overall, an experimentation with a myriad of techniques, styles and disciplines. Surely, due to the socio-political circumstances, the artistic discourse lacked the critically and philosophically orientated mindset in order to reflect on society, culture and politics similarly to postmodern artists in the West.²¹

Under the totalitarian regime, it was prohibited to express a socio-politically critical stance in art that openly and defiantly challenged the existing political system and powers-that-be, because this step would have resulted in repression and punishment.²² Despite this, as Kristberga emphasises, political micro-gestures can be observed in the strategies adopted by artists, such as forming small groups or communities, creating works of art distanced from

20 In Latvian art history, there have been several comprehensive studies that describe the relationship between art and politics, e.g. Ilze Konstante, *Staļina garā ēna Latvijas tēlotājā mākslā. 1940–1956* [Stalin's Long Shadow in Latvian Fine Art. 1940–1956] (Riga: Neputns, 2017).

21 Laine Kristberga, “The Transformative Power of Ritual: Between the Artifice and Catharsis,” in *Hermann Nitsch exhibition catalogue*, ed. Līna Birzaka-Priekule (Riga: Latvian National Museum of Art, 2021), 5.

22 This topic is extensively covered by Konstante, *Staļina garā ēna Latvijas tēlotājā mākslā*.

the official discourse, in the awareness that they would never be exhibited in exhibitions subject to censorship, and contenting themselves with a marginal, but nevertheless autonomous existence on the periphery of the art and cultural scene.²³ Although various efforts to introduce “survival strategies” in artistic practice existed within the artistic community during the Soviet period, one has to conclude that the lack of access to a theoretical discourse during the Soviet era and its absence from the system of art education after the restoration of independence,²⁴ along with the “Aesopian language” or masked form of expressive ideas adopted in Soviet times, have resulted in manifestations of socio-political activism in Latvian art being the exception rather than the rule. Art historian Ieva Astahovska stresses that the parallel dialogue between the discursivity of Latvian and Western art became relevant during the 1990s, if one compares it to the post-1960s West, when the ideas of post-structuralism and feminism were relevant.²⁵ In relation to feminist theory, Czech art theoretician Martina *Pachmanová* states that during the Soviet period, difficult access to information and intellectual isolation from the Western world caused a lack of knowledge about feminism, while after 1989 this isolation contributed to the perception of feminism as a foreign phenomena “imported from the West.”²⁶ This absence of theoretical thought²⁷ can also be attributed to other key thematic manifestations of social-political criticism and activism in Latvian contemporary art, including ecological awareness, queer issues and others. One must admit that there is also still a prevailing opinion that art should distance itself from politics. For example, in an interview with art critic Ieva Lejasmeijere, Kristaps Ģelzis emphasises the connection with the socio-political background of his works: “I have to admit I have never fought against Soviet rule. I’ve never been socially and politically active. Perhaps you could read into some of my stuff in some conformist way, but that’s a matter of interpretation.”²⁸ This tendency to distance oneself from a socio-political stance in art even after gaining independence corresponds to the conclusions that Estonian-Finnish sociologist Iivi Masso has drawn about the period of change in Estonia, where the market economy, neoliberalism and consumer culture were accepted and socially implemented without scrutiny, stifling

23 Kristberga, “Performance Art in Latvia as Intermedial Appropriation,” 138–151.

24 Art historian Ieva Astahovska only started giving lectures on contemporary art and its developmental trends at the Art Academy of Latvia in about 2007.

25 Ieva Astahovska, “‘Globālie lielceļi’ jaunās lokalitātēs” [Global Highways in New Localities], in *Devīņdesmitie. Laikmetīgā māksla Latvijā*, ed. Ieva Astahovska (Rīga: Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2010), 35–36.

26 Martina Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory,” in *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 37–49.

27 It should be noted that information about contemporary art developments in the West was mostly obtained via secretly acquired Polish magazines such as “Projekt”, “Tvar”, the Czech “Výtvarné umění”, as well as the German “Bildene Kunst”.

28 Ieva Lejasmeijere, “Instalācijas. Saruna ar Oļegu Tilbergu, Sarmīti Māliņu un Kristapu Ģelzi” [Installations. Conversation with Oļegs Tilbergs, Sarmīte Māliņa and Kristaps Ģelzis], in *Devīņdesmitie. Laikmetīgā māksla Latvijā*, ed. Ieva Astahovska (Rīga: Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2010), 244.

other achievements of Western democracy such as feminism, social democracy, the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities, environmental protection, etc. This selective uptake of Western values brought about a situation in which nationally conservative American rather than tolerant and inclusive European democratic values were introduced.²⁹

Research into Latvian contemporary art also evinces the prevailing view that socio-politically and critically-oriented artistic practice is a rarely encountered phenomenon after 1990s, but this trend and its forms of manifestation have been minimally studied. In describing the contemporary artistic trends of the 1990s, art historian and curator Ieva Astahovska stresses that "... after the 1980s' collective enthusiasm – social and political messages conveyed in picturesque and symbol-filled language – Latvian artists in the 1990s mostly produced works that were expressions of 'socially tinted' associative metaphors, whose meaning seemingly lent itself to interpretations of currently relevant subjects, but at the same time included poetics, energy, orientation toward sensations and experiences, ambiguity, mystery value."³⁰ As art curator Helēna Demakova also stresses, "... fear of over politicisation or direct acceptance of social problems persevered throughout the 90s. In my opinion, the most interesting Latvian contemporary artists are not asocial. On the contrary, their fortune or misfortune (let history be the judge), is the aestheticization and 'tasteful' arrangement of the work of art, or however paradoxical it may sound, the art project with the most radical expressions of content."³¹ Art historian Santa Hirša argues that:

... although loudly confrontational art and works manifesting specific ideological positions are not characteristic of Latvian contemporary art after gaining independence, the mechanisms of both Soviet communism and neoliberal capitalism are deconstructed in symbolic objects and situations on different levels of generality, with observation, play, paradoxical upheavals of meaning, and ambiguous irony being the predominant means to do so... The experience of Soviet socialism made the public suspicious and less interested in ideas of social justice and new leftist politics.³²

Thus, it can be concluded that the development of contemporary art under socialist conditions also affects socio-politically critical and activist art expressions in today's contemporary art scene.

29 Iivi Masso. "Freedom Euphoria or Post-Communist Hangover?," in *Noisy Nineties. Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art in the 90s*, eds. Sirje Helme and Johannes Saar (Kaasaegse Kunsti Eesti Keskus, 2001), 30.

30 Astahovska, "'Globālie lielceļi' jaunās lokalitātēs," 37.

31 Helēna Demakova, "Mākslas jēdziena paplašināšanās Latvijā 90. gados sociālo un politisko pārmaiņu kontekstā" [The expansion of the concept of art in Latvia in the 1990s in the context of social and political changes], in *Citas sarunas*, ed. Helēna Demakova (Rīga: Vizuālās komunikācijas nodaļa, 2002), 398.

32 Santa Hirša, "Waiting for Wild Capitalism: Latvian Art and the Post-Socialist Condition in the 1990s," in *Kur manas kārtis kritušas?*, eds. Līna Birzaka-Priekule and Zane Onckule (Rīga: Contemporary Art Center, 2022), 116.

Although there are few activist artists in Latvian contemporary art who are members of a political movement or organisation, or who would initiate or defend the interests of a community or advocate socio-political changes,³³ one cannot say that Latvian contemporary artists do not reflect on socio-political issues. Geopolitical, historical and educational aspects have also influenced manifestations of socio-politically critical artistic practice, which are more characterised by conceptually poetic, metaphorical and multi-layered hints and generalisations of various socio-political events, which are deconstructed to the level of symbols, a type of artistic intervention that is more humorous and ironic than a direct and tendentious form of expression. Even the work materials or media used become vehicles for these ideas. One must conclude that for various socio-political and historical reasons, the traits of socio-politically critical artistic practices are far more common in the Latvian contemporary art scene than “activism” as such. However, in describing the manifestations of Baltic art during the Soviet era, art historian Sirje Helme’s comments about Estonian artists could also be applied to the Latvian art scene: “The fact that a small national group such as Estonia is characterized by a collective, subconscious survival instinct that does not encourage extremes in its culture does not imply that its culture lacks radical artists.”³⁴

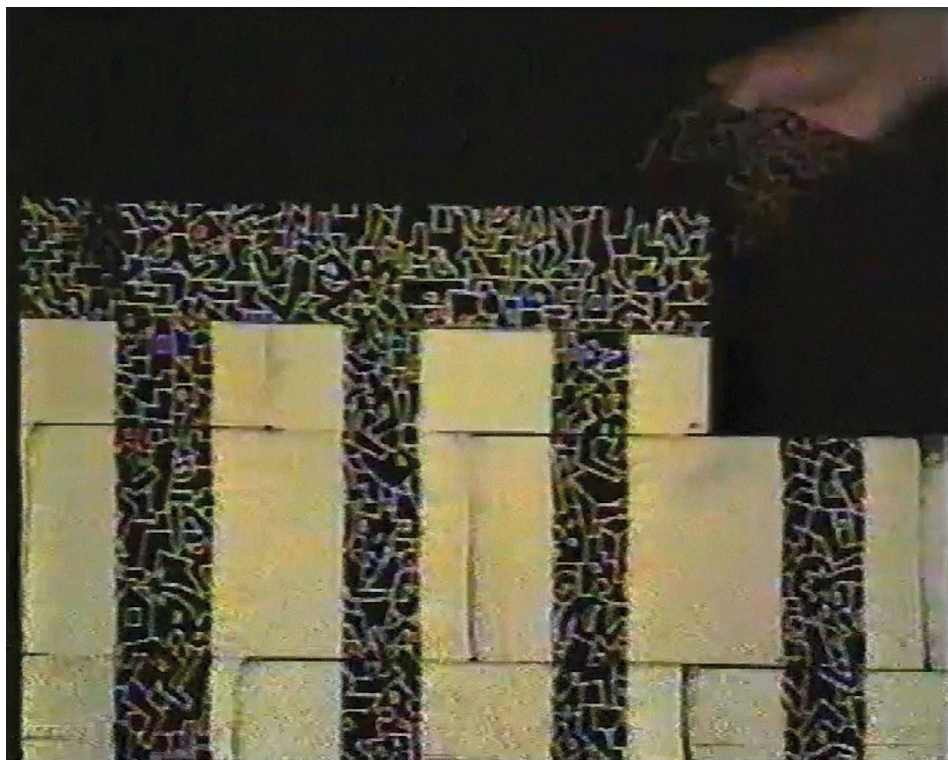
SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITICISM AND ACTIVISM IN THE CREATES OEUVRES OF KIRSTAPS ĢELZIS, MIĶELIS MŪRNIĒKS AND MĒTRA SABEROVA

Within Latvian contemporary art there is no shortage of artists who deem it important to critically reflect upon and evaluate various socio-political processes. In elaborating on this subject, I will focus on three works by artists of two different generations, which will serve as the case studies. Socio-politically critical art practice, which does not include any specific socio-political activism, but offers reflection through visual art and representation, is much more common in Latvian contemporary art. The practice of Ģelzis and Mūrnieks matches this definition. Saberova’s artistic practice is a rarity in Latvian contemporary art in that it should be viewed in the context of socio-political activism. It is also important to note that Ģelzis’ art can be seen in the context of late socialism, while the artistic practices of Mūrnieks and Saberova developed after Latvia regained independence.

33 Activist artistic expressions often go hand in hand with social movements. Researches show that with the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis in 1934, the voices of legal protests were silenced for more than half a century. On the other hand, at the end of the Third Awakening (the second half of the 80s), an unprecedented wave of political protests accompanied the process of revival of the Latvian state and democracy. It is noticeable that since 1990, the physical involvement of citizens in protests has decreased considerably. During the revival, 80% of the population of Latvia had participated in a demonstration or picket, but by the beginning of the 2000s this number had dropped to 13%.

34 Sirje Helme, “Nationalism and dissent. Art and Politics in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under Soviets,” in *Art of the Baltics*, eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, 8.

Fig. 1. Kristaps Ģelzis, *Dismantling the Wall*, 1988, video still. Courtesy of Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.



Kristaps Ģelzis is considered to be a master of Latvian contemporary art and has been active since the 1980s, participating in both domestic and international exhibitions. He is one of the key artists belonging to the so-called generation of “Trespassers”. The driving force behind Ģelzis’s art are ideas, which the artist executes in an eclectic range of media including graphic art, painting, installation, video, digital print and object art. Ģelzis expresses himself in any material or technique available to him; what matters is that the medium in question dovetails with, and fulfils, the artist’s acutely observed and typically witty idea. He draws on individual history and experience (e.g. environment, state, political events, consequences of changing systems) to present his observations and openly ironize socio-political changes and their impact on society. He possesses a sensitive command of the symbolic elements of the local environment, which he masterfully integrates into his works, reflecting on topical issues within society.

For the 1988 group exhibition *Riga – Lettische Avantgarde* (Riga – Latvian Avant-garde) in West Germany, Ģelzis created a work entitled *Dismantling the Wall* (**fig. 1**), which is considered to be the first video installation in Latvian contemporary art. In this work we observe the artist’s hand dismantling a wall brick by brick. This wall depicts a labyrinth of drawings with human forms collapsing on top of one another, layer upon layer. Three video screens monotonously repeat the building and collapse of the wall, which never ends. The video format makes it possible to emphasise the endlessness of this activity. The artist himself presents the image of the wall in a broadly individual human context, explaining that:

We are each bricked up behind our own walls, and it is very difficult to reach us. At the same time as cutting ourselves off from others, we also cut off ourselves and our world. We brick up our field of vision. Everyone will have noticed that in a field we can see far into the distance, the line of the horizon seems infinite. In the city we usually do not see beyond the wall opposite. How can we demolish these walls that separate people?³⁵

Nonetheless, in the context of time, the image of the wall can be viewed as an ideological and effective symbol for the Iron Curtain between Western European and Eastern bloc countries. This was noted in the art criticism of the day, for example, by Pēteris Bankovskis, who stressed that Ģelzis was offering an insight into the artist's attitude towards the tragic Berlin Wall, as well as in relation to ideological schemes threatening humanity in general.³⁶ Ģelzis embodies his personal opinion about the manifestations of ideology within the Soviet apparatus *via* the powerful laconic symbol of a wall, and although the work is not an overtly socio-political manifestation, it becomes one of the "agents for change", which chimes with the socio-political mood of the day, and becomes a powerful sign of a time of transformation. The power of the impact of Ģelzis's socio-politically critical art also lies in its enduring relevance. Accordingly, in the context of 21st century socio-political events, "The Wall" becomes an effective metaphor, for example, for the "Trump Wall".

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On the whole, the oeuvre of emerging artist Miķelis Mūrnieks (b. 1995) is characterised by the presence of socio-politically critical symbols, whose essential nature is ironic and socially analytical. One such work is *The Art of Winning* (2019; **fig. 2**), which was exhibited in *Fresh Meat for Critics*, an



Fig. 2. Miķelis Mūrnieks, *The Art of Winning*, 2019, installation, Zuzeum art collection, Riga. Photograph by Miķelis Mūrnieks.

35 Inese Riņķe, "Aktīvā māksla" [Active Art], *Avots*, no. 1 (1987): 3, my translation.

36 Pēteris Bankovskis, "Sleja" [Column], *Liesma*, no. 10 (1988): 1.

exhibition of diploma works by graduates of the Art Academy of Latvia. In this work, the name of the Zuzeum Art Centre was created from the orange font of the Fenikss chain of gambling halls, which have become ubiquitous in Riga. In a global context, this reference to the business of art philanthropist Jānis Zuzāns, which is connected to gambling, points to the globally relevant issue of sources of funding for arts institutions that are contrary to the interests of public health.³⁷ Although this work of art generated quite a lot of publicity within Latvian art and cultural circles, it did not stimulate a debate in the form of socio-political activism. In his work *Piece of Shit* (2020), which depicts Joseph Stalin, and the works in his solo exhibition *Contemporary Vandalism* (2019), Mūrnieks implements a socio-politically critical art strategy, which conveys the artist's critical position, but is inert in terms of a proactive capacity to take action.

Examples of socio-political activism are comparatively few in the Latvian contemporary art scene; this can be explained by the regime of occupation which lasted for half a century during which socio-political activism could only be manifested in apologetic form, i.e. by fitting into the existing totalitarian political system. A radically different opinion was considered to constitute political dissidence and the individual in question was invariably punished. After the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991, a transitional period was required to switch from one political-economic system to another. Accordingly, only after a generational change can one report the existence of socio-political activist art in Latvia, vividly exemplified by the works of the multidisciplinary



Fig. 3. Mētra Saberova, *Pimpin' yo mama crib*, 2015, video still. Courtesy to Mētra Saberova.

37 Parallels can be drawn with the protest organised outside the Louvre Museum (*Musée du Louvre*) by the Western art representative, photographer and activist Nan Goldin (b. 1953). The protest was directed at a pharmaceutical company run by the Sackle dynasty, which produces the addictive pain killer *OxyContin*.

artist Mētra Saberova (b. 1991). Saberova is one of the most prominent feminist artists in Latvian contemporary art. She works with performative instruments and uses her body as a medium to examine various issues related to female identity. Similar to the French artist Orlan (b. 1947), in the creation of her art, Saberova concentrates on her body not only as an anatomical structure, but also as a vehicle for socio-political meanings. One of Saberova's performative actions was an operation to tie her fallopian tubes followed by the restoration of her hymen, thus challenging the widespread stereotypes prevailing within society regarding female reproductive rights and duties. Saberova's works highlight aspects of the interaction between a woman's social and personal life, drawing attention to gender inequality and criticising the "status quo" in relation to the restriction of the roles played by women (as in the works *Pimpin' yo mama crib*, 2015 /**fig. 3**/ and *Hymenoplasty: A Quick Guide*, 2017). Socio-political activism is also an important component of Saberova's creative practice; she is an active member of the Baltic LGBTQ+ community, takes part in public discussions³⁸ and protest campaigns, organised educational events, and exhibitions devoted to feminism, as well as organising the Baltic Drag King festival. Thus, Saberova's proactive socio-political position is integrated into the artist's individual artistic practice, in which public defence of the specific community she represents is equally important.

200 CONCLUSION

When analysing the socio-political criticism and activist manifestations of Latvian contemporary art, we encounter the problem of the hegemonic model of interpretation characteristic of Western art history. Piotr Piotrowski, for example, proposes amending the established canon and modifying the discipline's analytical tools to discover the meanings of cultures of 'other' geographical regions. Furthermore, the practice of socio-politically critical art in Latvia is characterised by locally specific traits that has been influenced by geopolitical, historical and educational context.

During the 1960s, when socio-politically critical artistic practices and the discourse of socio-political activism were developing globally, Latvia was occupied and part of the Soviet Union. Art was politicised and subject to strict censorship. Despite this, as the dogma of socialist realism slowly receded during late socialism period, several artist groups and communities created socio-politically critical works of art that responded to the manifestations of Soviet ideology and the conjunctures of the Soviet period. From the 1990s onward, artists have continued to engage with socio-political problems and express them in contemporary art.

38 For example, during a recent episode of the LTV discussion show *Būris*, "Who will give me a glass of water or life without children". Available at: "Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji" [Latvian Public Media], accessed Month day, year, <https://ltv.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/27.11.2021-projekts-buris-kas-pasniegs-udens-glazi-jeb-dzive-bez-berniem.id245335>.

In the context of Latvian contemporary art, due to geopolitical, historical and educational circumstances, the practice of socio-political activist art has not been a widespread. This was true in late socialism and remains so in the era of post-socialism. However, manifestations of socio-politically critical art in a local hybrid form are a more common contemporary art trend. It is unusual for socio-politically critical art practice to use direct socio-political arguments or tendentious, protesting forms of expression. Instead, such socio-political art is characterised by poetic and metaphorical means of expression, indirect allusions and vehicles of multi-layered meaning. In future studies, in-depth research should be conducted into the assimilation of the relevant terminology, and the comparative manifestation of specific trends in the Baltic region should be ascertained and studied. Analysing the works of art of Ģelzis, Mūrnieks and Saberova, one is prompted to conclude that Latvia's contemporary artists are interpreters and intermediaries of social problems, civil rights, social identity and problems stemming from globalisation.

