

REIMAGINING RIGA

A view on the first Riga International
Biennial of Contemporary Art



When in 2016 a wealthy woman from Saint Petersburg laid the foundation for a biennial of contemporary art and chose the Latvian capital Riga as its base, local people raised their eyebrows. Why so? A giant art event in Latvia, made with private Russian money? The Soviet occupation is still a living memory for many Latvians, and they were uneasy if not suspicious. Yet the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art as it opened last month for the first time, over eight historic venues, actually seems to contribute to the artistic self-awareness of Latvia and the wider Baltic region. After being considered by the outside world mainly as a post-Soviet state, it offers the capital city a chance to reinvent itself and recover from its past.

TEXT

JURRIAN BENSCHOP



Pickled Long Cucumbers, 2017
Katrina Neiburga
Two channel video, colour, sound
11'44"

In her opening address to the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA), founding director Agniya Mirgorodskaya – who is actually half-Russian, half-Lithuanian – highlighted her goal of connecting Baltic artists with the rest of the world. It is a mission that chief curator Katerina Gregos has worked through in an exhibition containing roughly five thematic issues, all with a focus on change and sudden transitions in times of global insecurity. It's a mood that even carries on in the Biennial's choice of overarching motto, which is borrowed from the title of Alexi Yurchak's book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, alluding to unexpected events like the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first Biennial location is the former biology faculty of the University of Latvia in the Kronvalda park. The opening chapter, a lot of attention is given over to nature and the environment in relation to technology. Polish artist Diana Lelonek shows a collection of found trash such as shoes or electronic devices, which have been taken back by nature through moss and other plants attached to its surface. Aside from some quite research-oriented art, there are contributions that stand out for their sheer imaginative power, such as *Pickled Long Cucumbers* (2017) by Riga-based artist Katrina Neiburga. She has made a film in which a family establishes a living in the forest, crawling out of holes in a swamp, covered in mud, having retreated from city life, but somehow still following the rhythm and gestures of our current digital life. The



The Nest, 2018
Katrina Neiburga & Andris Eglitis
Multimedia installation
Kronvalda Park

work is inspired by Thoreau's *Walden* and it has another extension in *The Nest* (2018) outside in the park. Latvians have a strong connection with nature – everyone in Riga seems to have a house in the forest – and in these works this relationship is reflected upon, not only as romantic retreat, but also with an ironic sense of realism.



A Boy Who Set a House on Fire, 2018
Andris Eglitis
Archival photo from installation at the former Bolshevichka textile factory

'Nobody is buying art here,' Riga-based photographer Andrejs Strokis remarks. This may not be entirely true, especially given the fact that during the Biennial his fellow Riga residents, collectors Dina and Jānis Zuzāns, presented their plan to build the Zuzeum Art Centre for their collection of Latvian art. Yet for most part, the reality of young Latvian artists is that there is hardly a market for their work. If they want to live the life of an artist, they will need to reach out 'to Europe' as they say. It is the economy that shapes the mental map here, and many schooled and skilled people have left the country in recent years. Strokis seems determined to stay, though, and with him many other artists in Riga. His work, *A Boy Who Set a House on Fire* (2018), uses archive photographs collected by the Fire Department in Soviet Latvia in combination with other artefacts that embody his fascination with fire. The installation is on view in the former Bolshevichka textile factory, a Biennial location at the foot of a giant, empty factory building where shoe production was stopped when the Soviets left. The location is normally the studio of Andris Eglitis and some of his monumental abstract paintings are on view, alongside a Sisyphus interpretation by film-maker Ieva Balode and a 'deserted' clandestine vodka distillery created by Robert Kuśmirowski. It's a place that offers a special blend of urban Riga including industrial history, wasteland, a kebab shop, and new artistic and economic activity. Not far from the factory, a road sign in empty land announces the construction of a still to be built business centre.



The former Bolshevichka textile factory
Photo: Ansis Stark
Courtesy of RIBOCA



IGRA, 2018
Robert Kuśmirowski
Site-specific installation at the former Bolshevichka textile factory
Courtesy of RIBOCA

There are more projections of Riga's future captured in the work of Eve Kiiler. She photographed the neighbourhood where the so-called Z-towers have been built, a couple of high-rises meant to attract foreigners to work and live in Riga. With views across the river Daugava and over the historic city, the Z-towers make a surreal contrast with the surrounding traditional wooden houses. Kiiler presents the photos in modest-sized light boxes, well-suited to the Residence of Kristaps Morbergs, a 19th century downtown apartment which houses the chapter of the Biennial that focuses on historic changes. Kiiler points out that the Estonian capital of Tallinn, where she lives and works, is a small city in the process of growing. Riga, on the other hand, has a big centre but is a shrinking city. It is also interesting to note that in Riga she sees bigger contrasts between very rich and poor inhabitants than in her hometown.

Three different attempts were made in Riga to build a new museum of contemporary art, but so far all without success. Most recently, the Latvian Museum of Contemporary Art lost its financial backup as the ABLV bank collapsed. The USA imposed sanctions on Latvia's third biggest bank, accusing them of money laundering in transactions with Russia and Ukraine that were connected with business in North Korea. Thus Riga feels the harsh consequences of a global conflict, and is reminded once more of its position on the East-West axis. (Although with a nod to coincidence and chiming with the Biennial's unexpected moments, during the writing of this piece Donald Trump had just met Kim Jong-un in Singapore, so who knows where that axis will spin.) Even though some individual members of the bank have pledged to continue support for the museum plan, which is due to open in 2021 with a design by Adjaye Associates and AB3D, it is not clear if it can be realised. People in Riga seem to get used to it and refrain from making further predictions. While the future museum seems to battle with a curse, the Biennial, despite the sceptical circumstances of its birth, might turn out to be a blessing and incentive for the city's art scene.

Driving Through the Past, With the Present Ahead, and the Future Behind My Back, 2018
Nedko Solakov



I Know How to Dance, 2018
Ieva Epnere
Video, colour, sound
18'



New Neighbours II, 2018
Eve Kiiler
Lightbox, 42 x 42 cm

Featured in the Biennial is Latvian artist Ieva Epnere, who has made a film about traditional dances that are still widely practiced in Latvia, just as the popular singing contests are. She filmed a dance group at work, stripping them gradually of music, their coloured costumes and voices, to refocus the attention on the figures and their movements, and what is expressed about individual, pair and group behaviour. Epnere is interested in the changes in the practice of dances over time, and how they imply the ideology of a certain era. In her work the Soviet heritage naturally plays a role, as she is herself the child of a Russian military official based at

the Baltic coast and a Latvian wife. In this piece, whose title translates as *I Know How to Dance*, she picked a motif that dates back much longer but changed form under communist occupation. In the same building Nedko Solakov brings a light note with his diary, describing and visualising a road trip from his hometown Sofia through former communist countries. His journey to Riga became the actual subject of his contribution for the Biennial, *Driving Through the Past, With the Present Ahead, and the Future Behind My Back*, reflecting in a tragicomic way on crossing borders and meetings.



Dear R., R., K., S., M., A., C., S., K., I., G., L., A., A., L., P., G., E., J., D., M., C., B., O., F., F., R., D., M., E., L., I., F., L., A., M., T., K., L., P., F., V., A., L., L., 2018
Taus Makhacheva
Installation, mixed media, speakers, sound



Art Station Dubulti
Photo: Ansis Starks

In her opening speech, curator Gregos pointed to our busy and stressed ways of living, leaving many people with burnouts or existential fears and emptiness. In some artworks this is reflected quite literally, for instance in Taus Makhacheva's installation with a cacophony of speakers, where individual voices each apologise in their own way for not having answered an email earlier, an all too familiar phrase. As an antidote to all this, the visitor is offered 'deceleration' in the last chapter of the Biennial. Located in the modernist train station of Dubulti, a 30-minute train ride from Riga, here Anne Duk Hee Jordan invites the viewer to lay down on a water bed and watch a movie showing how erotic life underwater can be, while observing the multitude of coloured, moving species. Humans are just one among many species, you realise. Viron Erol Vert's *Ambereum* is an amber-coloured 'waiting room', where different soundtracks set the tone in what feels like something between a lounge and a meditation centre. Some visitors snap away, take pictures and leave quickly, but they won't find anything on their camera as the actual content of the work here is formed by the mental projections of the visitor who surrenders to time and empty space. From this work it is only one thought, and a five-minute walk, to the Jurmala beaches, for further deceleration.



Ambereum, 2018
Viron Erol Vert
Installation, mixed media with sound
Art Station Dubulti

Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art 2018, various locations throughout Riga, until 28 October