



Portable Landscapes

Inga L?ce, Àngels Miralda

A conversation between Inga L?ce and Àngels Miralda about de-territorializing identity through cultural production in the context of Latvia's centennial celebrations. The exhibition *Portable Landscapes* was on view at the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga earlier this year, is shown currently in Gotland and will subsequently travel to Berlin and New York. The exhibition aims to engage in a dialogue with the centennial of independence cultural program commissioned in all three Baltic states while revealing new research into artistic exile and émigré Latvian communities.





Ieva Epnere, *Green School*, 2017 Photo: Margarita Ogočeva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art

Organized by the Latvian Center for Contemporary art as part of the Latvian Centennial celebration, *Portable Landscapes* assembles archival material, documents, and artworks from exile and émigré communities in an inter-generational exhibition. Curated by five researchers – Solvita Krese, Inga Lace, Diana Popova, Antra Priede-Krievkalne, and Andra Silapetere – the exhibition draws heavily on archives and material that is presented for the first time to the public. Marking the 100th year of Latvian independence, which was declared on 18 November 1918, the Latvian Institute has commissioned an extensive list of exhibitions investigating the tumultuous events in the Baltics during the past century. To some extent, the centennial exhibitions present what might be expected of a national celebration – folkloric romanticism, established national discourse – yet they also leave room for questioning matters of identity and unearthing archival research. At the National History Museum in central Riga, for example, curator and historian Dr. Toms Ņikuts presents an extensive archive visualizing the formation of Latvia into a nation state, balancing national narrative alongside less favorable historical episodes that are often sidelined, such as the dictatorial turn of the first Prime Minister of Latvia, Kārlis Ulmanis, and Latvian collaboration with the Nazis and the

Soviets.[1] The exhibition *Portable Landscapes* also takes the opportunity to question urgent contemporary issues of identity tied to territory after the extensive Eastern European saga of displacement and diaspora.

Historical documentation and archives from the period between the Latvian war of independence and the end of Soviet occupation are rare. Documents were routinely destroyed by authorities or by the opposition in order to erase clues to clandestine activity. KGB spies operated among émigré communities, making research into their activities equally difficult and producing a climate of self-censorship. Nevertheless, *Portable Landscapes* is able to reconstruct a few pockets of émigré activity with anecdotes of the experiences of displaced cultural producers facing obstacles to re-establish themselves in new environments. Many protagonists of *Portable Landscapes* never achieved international recognition, but the exhibition reflects upon why keeping a low profile might have served their interests or how a level of disadvantage in exile communities would have isolated their practice or ruptured an established career.



Portable Landscapes publicity photo by Margarita Ogoceva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art

The exhibition commissions contemporary artists to create a discourse analogous to the situation 100 years ago. Their contributions can help us understand our present political climate through interactions with the past. While Baltic artists who had to flee during the Soviet era are nowadays celebrated in their home country, new refugees arriving in Latvia are met with hostility by locals. For a country that experienced a diaspora of its own, this attitude towards newcomers who have experienced hardship is hypocritical at best.

Furthermore, the exhibition features a new network of young émigré artists who have had to travel internationally to further their artistic careers. The exhibition shows how a new globalized demand for international collaboration is changing the function of local funding schemes and exhibition opportunities, as there is no longer any benefit to staying in Latvia for young artists aiming to develop their careers and gain greater recognition for their work. Artists including Daiga Grantina, Viktor Timofeev, Inga Meldere, Mai-Thu Perret, and Kristina Norman engage in a dialog with the research-based archival displays of previous generations of Latvian émigrés presented by the curators. This dialog proposes a link between two different centuries and experiences of artistic production and creates a bridge to the past. While the Latvian artists included have mainly lived or worked abroad, the inclusion of Mai-Thu Perret and Marcos Lutyens – who have no apparent ties to Latvia or the Baltic region – might signal an opposition on the part of the curators to keeping a strict nationally-based roster or, alternatively, insecurity about gaining international interest without including a few established names.



Portable Landscapes installation view, 2018 Photo: Margarita Ogočeva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art

The exhibition display is organized in clusters of historical material separated by walls which serve to display work as well as form self-contained units. Each pocket displays work from different regions in which émigré communities have settled during the early twentieth century. Forming an archipelago of isolated geographical groups, the audience is able to visually connect practices which developed alongside one another in different European and North American cities. While allowing an organized presentation of archival material, this structure also leaves out certain émigré communities. A glaring lacuna is that of Latvian artists who moved to Moscow both after 1918, and after the end of the Soviet era. Another missing link is that of the Latvian Jewish community which was requested to leave by Soviet authorities during the 1970s, resulting in extensive Latvian emigration to Israel.

In the context of the centenary and the multiple large-scale art events happening in Riga this summer, *Portable Landscapes* offers a local historical point of view alongside purely contemporary international exhibitions such as the first Riga Biennale and the 13th edition of the Baltic Triennial. The exhibition aims to expand the historical contextualization of Eastern

European identities in general, which gradually have been inventoried and awarded due importance in recent decades after their long-standing omission due to cultural amnesia in European art history. The exhibition's ability to combine archival research with works by young artists shows an interest in promoting academic and historical claims and a different approach to what can make up an international exhibition.

Àngels Miralda: First off, can you tell me a bit in general about *Portable Landscapes* – how you and the other curators at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art started working on this project and how you connected with the host institutions for the project outside of Latvia? The exhibition has been shown at Villa Vassilieff in Paris and is currently on view at the Kõrsbärgården Konsthall in Gotland (until September 30).

Inga Lace: It was a process that came together from several sides – first, at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA) we are generally interested in research of recent art histories and stories of artists, often unknown or overlooked, and in connecting them within a broader network of developments in art history and political and social environments. For instance, LCCA has previously done a significant body of work on non-conformist art histories in Soviet Latvia. In expanding our work beyond national borders, the issue of exiled and émigré Latvian artists came to our attention. This coincided with the Centennial celebration launching an open call for their program and the fact that our project was supported. At the same time, around 2015, the discussion about migration and the refugee crisis increasingly came to the fore in Latvia, mostly giving rise to outbursts of negativity and racist sentiments in society. Hence our aim with this project was also to show how new developments in art often appear as a result of the migration of people and the mixing and merging of ideas and forms. One of our colleagues and co-curators of the project, Andra Silapstere, had, in fact, done her PhD research on the topic of Latvian exile art, looking mostly at post-WWII emigration. This time we thought it would be useful to expand that research and at the same time question today's relevance of the exiled artists and their stories. That's why, in addition to working with the historical material, we also invited many Latvian and foreign contemporary artists to work with us and, based on those histories and stories, reflect on the respective emigration contexts. Inter-generational projects in which young artists reflect on historical perspectives and archival sources are one method we employ when doing research projects to show the influence of previous generations on contemporary production. Collaborations with other institutions resulted quite naturally: for instance, with Villa Vassilieff in Paris, an institution which is interested in working with undiscovered artists and communities, often with migrant backgrounds, in Paris who have shaped the scene, but have neither been acknowledged by the main art historical narratives nor included in the collections of art museums. This lack of acknowledgement is often due to the artists' state of in-betweenness between home and host country as well as their social and financial status in their country of arrival.

AM: To me the exhibition felt quite radical compared to what I expected the Latvian centennial to be. In the current political atmosphere in Europe, with nationalism on the rise, there can be a suspicion of government initiatives. That is why it was important for me to see the content that would be produced. *Portable Landscapes* challenges the notion of identity as territory. Identity is shown to be something that travels with people and that can be acquired by experience. Can you explain how this mentality of transience might have something to do with the history of Latvia itself and with the history of constant invasions in the Baltics?

IL: Our exhibition is certainly an extension of the discourse of the Latvian centennial towards more complex questions of migration. It also challenges the concepts of nationalism and identity without giving any specific answers, which is, I think, another reason why the project

was embraced and supported in the program of the centennial: because of this alternative vision and its exposure of the challenges migration, be it forced or deliberate, poses to nation-states. We have this semi-false, semi-true historical idea of seven hundred years of slavery where Latvians were enslaved by Germans, Russians, Poles and Swedes, which is why in some parts of society this identity is strongly connected to our language and ethnicity which has endured all of that and now still needs to be <preserved> and <saved> from any outside influences. On the other hand, since there have been so many influences, there are not that many things really Latvian.



AM: The exhibition is also a direct critique of the refugee crisis in Europe. The Baltic states have accepted very few refugees and often do not provide appropriate resources for the accepted families. Has *Portable Landscapes* and the weight of Latvia's own refugee history changed anyone's mind about this local issue? We can mention much of the older generation's work such as that of Marija Induse-Muceniece (1904–1974, a Latvian printmaker who famously threw her works overboard while on a small ship carrying refugees to Sweden where she started her practice from scratch) and contemporary artists' contributions such as the very moving film *Common Ground* by Kristina Norman (Estonian, b. 1979). The film features interviews with a few refugees who have been placed in Estonia and shows how they are treated and what attempts at integration are made. They reveal that they feel isolated in the countryside where they do not have many opportunities to make friends or learn about Estonian culture.

IL: We often say that in Latvia the refugee crisis is not even visible, because so few people have arrived compared to other European countries and even less have received asylum. When it was agreed to divide the refugee flow between EU countries happened we only agreed to accept about 700 people. The refugee crisis was followed by a «political crisis». Politicians started using the refugee crisis in every possible populist way to raise their own political capital and heighten nationalistic sentiments in society, using horrible stereotypes, myths and half-truths about refugees. The most worrying thing to us curators was that it actually worked, even among people very close to us, our friends and especially our parents' generation. It is still hard to say whether our exhibition managed to change some views, but we had a very interesting situation. During a tour a man burst out in screaming when we were at the work of Kristina Norman. As soon as I mentioned that she compares the Baltic refugees in the wake of WWII with the Syrian refugees currently located in the remote countryside of Estonia, he started to shout «It's not comparable, because they are black and they raped women in Cologne I heard!» We had a serious discussion with the visitor during and after the tour, but exactly this example showed how fragile, influenced by fake news, conspiracy theories and stereotypes public opinion can be in Latvia.

AM: *Portable Landscapes* already showed at Villa Vassilieff in Paris and is now on view in Gotland in collaboration with the Baltic Art Center and the art space District in Berlin. How was having the exhibition in Latvia different from having it in other countries?

IL: The stories of Aia Bertrand (1891–1978) and Raymond Duncan (1874–1966) and the alternative education institution and commune Akademia, which they ran from the 1910s to 1970s in Paris, was a discovery both in Latvia and Paris. The role of Aia Bertrand was especially surprising as the fact that there was a female protagonist was eclipsed by the eccentric, often self-centered Raymond Duncan who was behind the founding of the commune. I think, in Latvia people value the fact that she served as a cultural envoy between France and Latvia when Latvia was not even established as a country, since she left before the First World War. She translated Latvian texts into French during the interwar period and bought Akademia's theater plays to Riga throughout Soviet times. However, in Paris people would be more interested in the idea of the utopian commune itself and how it turned out, starting with emancipatory values of gender equality and anti-capitalist principles.

AM: The display system of the exhibition is organized in different «archipelagos». Dividing walls create isolated spaces that represent each of the cities that became places of exile for the Baltic diaspora: Gotland, Berlin, Paris, New York, and Montreal. While this structure helps to visualize the diaspora communities that emerged, did it perhaps also limit the artists you selected to exhibit?

IL: In the 1990s, the legendary Latvian film director Ansis Epnars (b. 1937, Riga) made a film titled *I am Latvian* in which he visits exiled Latvians in all corners of the world. It was filmed in the last years of the Soviet Union and Moscow had allowed it to be made and financed, which was rather unique given the theme. When doing research, we watched the film and it was really interesting to <meet> the Latvian artists in Australia, communities and individuals in Brazil, Argentina, but since most of the research has to be done completely anew it would have been logistically and financially impossible to manage more distant places during this chapter. But this project has a potential to evolve.



(From left) Pair of Woven Sandals (Raymond Duncan, ca 1930); Daiga Grantina, *Ink waves cobble bread*, 2017 Photo: Margarita Ogina Contemporary Art

AM: Corresponding to each architectural archipelago in the exhibition, which denote separate exile communities in the world, are works of young Baltic artists responding to the works of a previous generation. Some choices were made that I would like to talk about. There are quite a few young artists of Latvian origin who are receiving a lot of recognition abroad – for instance, Viktor Timofeev (b. 1984, Riga) and Daiga Grantina (b. 1985, Riga). Is it possible to speak of their contributions and biographies as linked to a new kind of Latvian diaspora

driven by freedom of movement within the EU?

IL: They are artists who are post-national, because both of them have been living in several places before settling in Rotterdam and Paris, respectively. Nevertheless, there is a strong relation to Latvia in the practice of Daiga Grantina. Her sculpture in the exhibition is a collage of found materials which don't necessarily go together – a confluence of material flows which refer to hasty structures of habitation. We have been speaking about the connection to Latvia a lot, and perhaps that connection becomes apparent precisely because she lives abroad. She became involved in the research about Aia Bertrand, translating in her distinct way emancipatory feminist aspects of Bertrand's story into the strong material presence of her installations. Grantina's sculptures include found pieces of plastic resembling fake eyelashes or detritus from urban settings arranged into nearly humanoid shapes. An artichoke – symbolizing the girl Cynara who defied Zeus' wish for her to remain with him as a goddess and returned to earth in the form of an artichoke – and bread-like structures reference the humble worldview of Bertrand and Duncan. Timofeev recently has also been spending more time in Riga again and collaborating with Latvian artists and institutions, even considering moving back here for a while. When we invited him to reflect on the Hell's Kitchen group of Latvian artists and poets that was active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York where Timofeev has also spent time, he immediately felt drawn to the practice of painter Sigurds Vidzirkste (1928–1974) with his cybernetic painting and interest in contemporary music and chemistry. Timofeev himself is doing programming, also using language as his medium – his contribution consists of a system that translates abstract poetry into code so quickly that the viewer is unable to interpret the sentences, combined with chairs that allude to a waiting room – a space familiar to emigrants. In many ways the work is not a direct reference to Hell's Kitchen or Vidzirkste, but an evocation of what the historic artist's practice could be like today.



Viktors Timofejev, *Node*, 2017-2018 Photo: Margarita Ogoševa, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art



Viktors Timofejev, Node, 2017-2018 Photo: Margarita Ogoševa, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art



Bitra Razavi, *Pictures from our future, pictures from our past*, 2015-2017 Photo: Margarita Ogo?ceva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Conte

AM: we find another captivating dialogue in the photo series of Bitra Razavi (b. 1983, Tehran). Originally from Iran, she has been living in Finland and Estonia where she experiences the xenophobia that is still very virulent in the Baltic states. The photo series she contributed to the exhibition captures houses that were abandoned during both world wars and that still stand in ruins in the Baltic countryside. There are also scenes of her participating in genre scenes of Estonian life – sauna, standing with a child, or sitting in a café. Why did you choose to place this work at the entrance to the exhibition?

IL: We started the exhibition with this work, because it connects the two stories – the Baltic past and current attitudes towards newcomers. Razavi made this work because she was once approached on the street in Estonia by someone ironically saying «this is what our future looks like», i. e. «Iranian», dark-haired, dark-skinned. The exhibition therefore also asks, without irony, what future we imagine for ourselves?



Mai-Thu Perret, *An ornate jar filled with shit soup*, 2008; *It's crooked like the pine. It's mottled like the stone*, 2008 Photo: Margarita Contemporary Art

AM: There are some artists whose relation to Latvia is not so clear, for instance Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret (b. 1976, Geneva). Can you explain how she entered the discourse in *Portable Landscapes*?

IL: When we worked for the exhibition in Paris at Villa Vassilieff, our idea was to not only focus on Aia Bertrand as a Latvian émigré, but also explore what her practice and context was in relation to Paris and other utopian communes of the early twentieth century. The work of Mai-Thu Perret is fitting, because it is a fictional antithesis to the Akademia. If the Akademia, like all utopian communes, failed to ensure the total equality it strove for, because there was still a male leader etc., then the imaginary radical female commune *Crystal Frontier* created by Mai-Thu is a perfect foil not just because it is female, but also because it is imaginary. Regardless of its failure, it is a reminder to not stop imagining and striving for a better result.



Zanis Waldheims, Drawings, 1965-1988 Photo: Margarita Ogočeva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art

AM: The example of Zanis Waldheims (1909–1993) is quite remarkable: his works are a series of geometrical abstractions shown in low light that reflect an intrinsic darkness and curiosity about the world. Brightly colored and yet esoteric, they are accompanied by a selection of books by famous philosophers that inspired his modernist visions. The depression and disillusionment of losing his country to the USSR became the starting point of a philosophical and psychological artistic attempt to moralize the sequence of history. How did you find his work and why is it the only example from Montreal and environs?

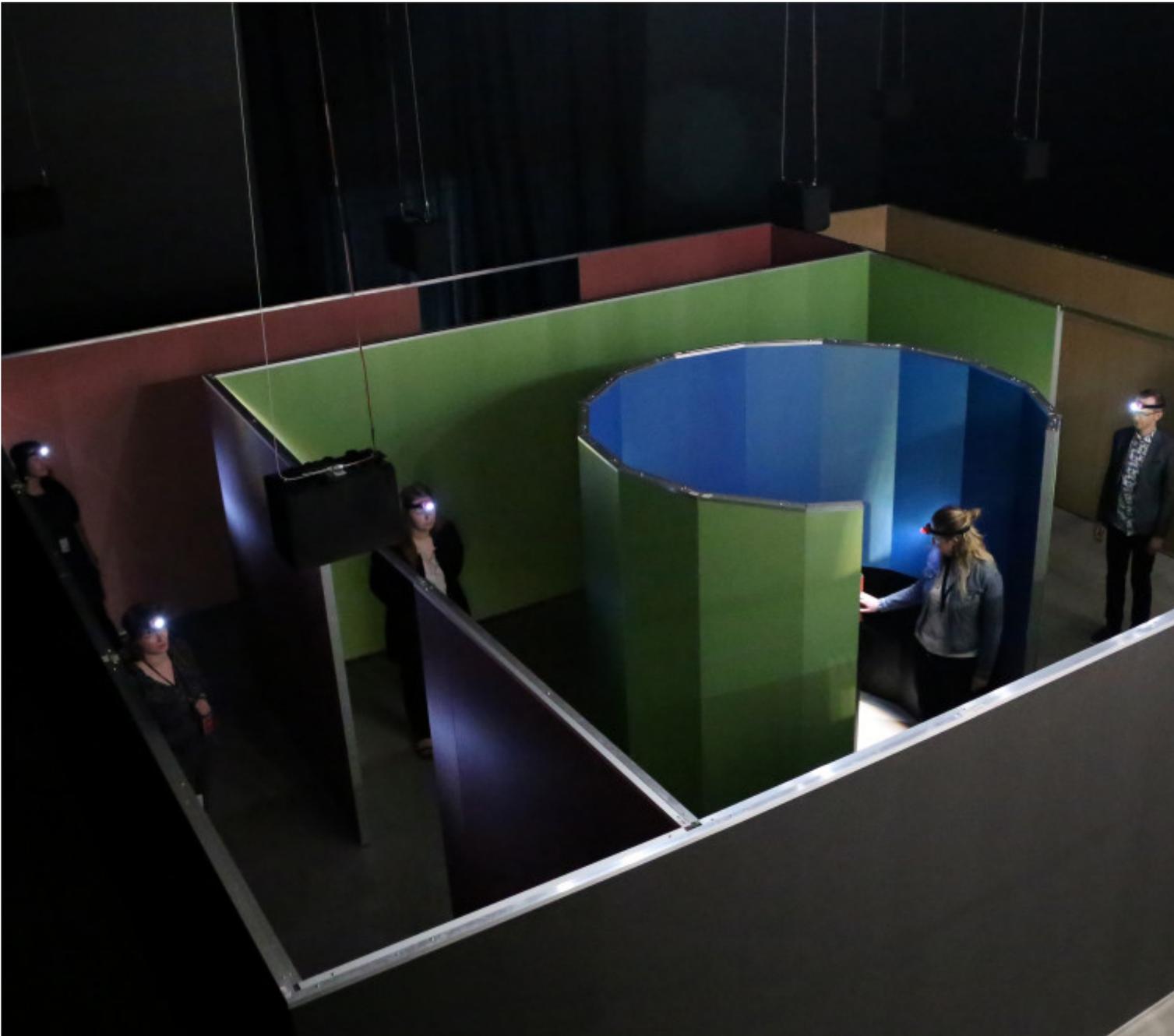
IL: We discovered his work when we were doing research for the 2015 edition of the contemporary art festival *SURVIVAL KIT* titled *Acupuncture of Society*. We were examining the role of spirituality and esotericism in art and society and his work seemed to be formally deriving from a tradition of sacred geometry, very similar to Emma Kunz. We started to research his practice and realized that its foundations are very different from those of spiritual geometry: his geometric abstraction derives in a way from the political disillusionment you mention and the desire to establish order in the chaos of the world by translating his research and readings of western philosophy, psychology, and science texts into more than 600

captivating drawings. His interdisciplinary practice is very idiosyncratic within the Latvian expat milieu and his work hasn't been shown in an art context before *SURVIVAL KIT* and, now, *Portable Landscapes*.

AM: I would like to add that some other historical artists are relatively unknown. Were any of them entirely new discoveries besides Waldheims? Did you find any example of this being due to the disadvantages they had starting from scratch as refugees in their new homelands?

IL: Zanis Waldheims was the only completely new discovery, the other figures have been more or less known at least in Latvia or in the context of the Latvian émigré community, but what we have added is new material that often had never before been seen. The only case of deliberate emigration in *Portable Landscapes* is examined in the Paris chapter, where dancer, writer, and weaver Aia Bertand left Riga for Paris for the purpose of education and in the hope to dance with Isadora Duncan. We visited her grandchildren and Raymond Duncan and found photographs and textiles that have never been shown, as they are part of their private family collection. In this case, Aia was part of a lively community of expats in Paris.

However, in NY the situation was a bit different. The Hell's Kitchen group of Latvian artists and poets was rather insular within their community, writing poetry in Latvian, painting but rarely exhibiting in NY. Obviously, we need to acknowledge that there are more difficulties to establish oneself as an artist if one arrived in a new environment as an adult refugee already in your adulthood. This was the case for many artists like Sigurds Vidzirkste or like Rolands Kaneps (1905–2011), a prolific painter yet completely unknown outside the Latvian exile community. And we only got to know about his work through researchers Karlis Verdins and Janis Ozolins who were interested in the queer aspect of his work, which previously had been completely overlooked.



Marcos Lutyens, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, 2018 Photo: Margarita Ogočeva, 2018, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art

AM: Looking back critically and with all the celebration events in mind, was it really possible to rupture the concept of national identity by means of an exhibition? If so, where did you see this happen?

IL: I think it is more visible looking at the project as a whole rather than just the exhibition in Latvia – specifically when chapters of *Portable Landscapes* are shown in countries that took in exiled Latvian artists who ended up spending most of their lives there. For instance, when the work of the artist Laris Strunke (b. 1931, Riga) is shown first in Riga and then in Gotland, as he is considered both a Latvian émigré artist and a Swedish artist, having spent his creative life in Sweden. Or when people ask, for example, whether the artist Marcos Lutyens (b. 1964, London), who worked with the heritage of Zanis Waldheims, is of Latvian background himself. He is not, and perhaps it is precisely because of his non-Latvian perspective that he brings a different dimension and new levels of interpretation to Waldheims' work.

[1] National History Museum, *Centennial of the Latgale Congress*, until 8 September 2018 (<http://lnvm.lv/en/?p=1700>).

INGA L?CE

Inga L?ce (1986) lives in Riga and is a curator at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA). She was a curatorial fellow at de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam (2015-2016) and has recently curated the exhibitions *It Won't Be Long Now, Comrades!* at Framer Framed, Amsterdam (2017, co-curated with Katia Krupennikova), *Resilience. Secret Life of Plants, Animals and Other Species*, ?ükü – Büro für kulturelle Übersetzungen, Leipzig (2016). L?ce has co-edited the book *Revisiting Footnotes. Footprints of the Recent Past in the Post-Socialist Region* (with Ieva Astahovska, 2015). She has been co-curator of the 7th-10th editions of the contemporary art festival *SURVIVAL KIT* (2015-18). She is currently working on the exhibition *Shared History* at the Riga Bourse Museum Collection (2018) and has been appointed co-curator along with Valentinas Klimasauskas of the Latvian Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2019 with the artist Daiga Grantina.

ÀNGELS MIRALDA

Àngels Miralda is a writer and independent curator based in Barcelona and Berlin. She is a regular contributor for *Rotunda Magazine* (Santiago de Chile), *Revista Arta* (Bucharest), and *Collecteurs Magazine* (New York), while also contributing to *Sleek*, *AQNB*, and *BlokMagazine*. She is a member of *Lítost Gallery* in Prague and is currently in Riga engaging in preparations for the upcoming *Survival Kit 10* festival which will take place in September 2018 and May 2019.

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