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Texts in Works of Art

Over the course of the 20th century, text-based works have persistently forced their way into visual art until the conceptualists, in their fight for the dematerialisation of art in the 1960s, decided to push images out of works of art altogether, or, more precisely, transformed text itself into an image. Admittedly, an occasional word, title, sentence or letter had already appeared in art in earlier centuries. Cubists Georges Braque and Juan Gris included texts from newspapers, magazines, books, and pub signs in their still-lives, pointing to the transformations of modern life. Futurists Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini had to go further, weaving texts from theatre posters and patriotic celebrations in a whirling movement. The Dadaists were completely radical, going on an offensive against the Church, the state and those who profit from the military industry. George Grosz and Francis Picabia often included text in their works, while René Magritte wrote “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” under the image of a pipe, setting off a conceptual discussion about the sovereign reality of the work of art.

The appearance of text in the place of the main image in ~~the~~ a work of art was legitimated by the artists from the Art & Language group, who in 1969 established their magazine *The Journal of Conceptual Art. Art-Language*. A new artistic movement, conceptual art, was defined, already in the sixties striving to bypass the ever more commercialised art world. The beginnings of conceptual art are to a large extent connected specifically to linguistic conceptualism.

Half a century after the birth of conceptualism, the exhibition *Es_Text* examines works based on linguistic conceptualism, surveying Latvian art in which text plays a decisive role and in which, similarly to semiotics, attention is directed towards sign systems used by society and the ways in which information, whose form and content is a result of social contract, is passed through the visual representation of these signs. The heyday of Latvian conceptual art was in the 1980s, the period of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Using Soviet ideological tools, signs, images and slogans, artists replicated the codes of socialist art and life, revealing their absurd nature.

The exhibition's title, *Es_text*, includes a combination of three different languages. We may choose to read it from the perspective of Latvian, English or Latin.

Soviet 'Conceptualism'

Aiming to enrich the general context of the period, the makers of the exhibition have expanded the scope of the exhibits to include artistic examples preceding the heyday of Latvian conceptualism in the eighties. Boris Groys' provocative idea that socialist realism was an impeccably conceived and entirely conceptual artistic project¹ corresponds to conceptual art in the sense that “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.”², – similarly, in socialist realist art the most important aspect of the work is to realise the ideas of socialist realism. This dominant role of the idea links socialist realism and conceptualism. Yet, if we look at the lists of 'concepts' compiled by socialist functionaries in 1941³, we must conclude that these are primitive descriptions of subjects telling the artists what to depict in paintings. The artist thus becomes a producer, with their need for individuality and creative spirit suspended, and only the artist's technical skill is required. The exhibition includes an example that has followed this 'Soviet conceptualism' – the *Portrait of Hero of Socialist Labour Liene Zvaigznīte* (1965) by Jānis Roberts Tillbergs. Above the worker's figure, Tillbergs has painted the text: 'Hero of Socialist Labour Liene Zvaigznīte', verbally stressing the conformity of the image to the norms of socialist realism. Yet under the conditions of dogmatism, how should an artist act if their ideas contradict ideology? There are interesting examples where it had been possible to use 'Soviet words' ~~may have been used~~ as weapons and they became a shield for non-Soviet form. In a nude painting of his wife Felicita, Jānis Pauļuks has placed the mouthpiece of Soviet ideology, the newspaper *Cīņa* [The Struggle], in the model's hands, while Rūdolfs Pinnis has included the word 'Peace' in a composition in the style of the Paris school of modernism. It was possible to get an anti-Soviet aesthetic through censorship by combining it with words promoting 'Soviet values'. The most widespread approach in Soviet art was the use of so-called Aesop's language, hidden meanings, a kind of silent resistance. That is how Biruta Delle

¹ Гройс Б. Стиль Сталин // Утопия и обмен. – Москва, Знак, 1993. – С. 11.–244.

² LeWitt S. Paragraphs on Conceptual Art // Artforum, Vol. 5. – No. 10. – Summer 1967. – pp. 79–83.

³ Īsās VK(B)P vēstures tēmu saraksts tēlotājai mākslai. [List of Themes from the Short History of the AC(B)P for Visual Arts] - Rīga: Mākslas lietu pārvalde, 1941.

defined her life's philosophy during the occupation – 'non-violent resistance'. Her work *Who was Unwanted in the Olive Garden...* (1977) was made following her subconscious creative impulses in the spirit of the greatest sin of the Soviet period – Surrealism. In the painting the artist has included the text: *1940 – 45. René Char "Who was Unwanted in the Olive Garden..." The French Resistance... nostalgia for peace*. The presentation of nature, the mood of rejection and sadness together with Char's resistance to the occupation recalls the artist's own inner condition – resistance, non-involvement, self-isolation. Interest in French culture took a heavy toll on Latvian post-war intellectuals – the poetry of René Char was translated by Maija Silmale, a member of the repressed 'French Group'⁴. After the harsh deportations of members of the 'French Group', artists were cautious about displaying their love for French culture. Among those who did so was Rūsiņš Rozīte, whose work *Writer's Still Life* (1968) can in a formal sense already be linked to linguistic conceptualism. The playful popart form hides a content which is full of sadness. By rearranging the bold, light-heartedly scattered letters, we can read the word '*Le France*'. The Latvian context of the painting's creation is, of course, reminiscent of the interest in French literature and deportations to Siberia. The window of the writer's room is a reference to the sky and clouds depicted in René Magritte's works – a metaphor of distant metaphysical longing and, for a Latvian, possibly for a forbidden culture. The reference to Magritte in this work also seems quite fitting, since it was the often-mentioned Magritte's pipe that set off the discussion about the distinction between reality and representation. So far there has been no success in determining whether Rozīte's *Mathematician's Still Life* (1969) also hides any significant number combinations.

Both Rozīte's paintings were made at the time when conceptualism was being defined in the West and when the magazine *Art&Language. The journal of Conceptual Art* was established. It is impossible to say exactly what Rozīte might have seen from Western art of the 1960s, yet it is clear that he studied the foreign magazines available

⁴ The French Group is the name given by the security services of the USSR to a group of dissident Latvian intellectuals, who in 1950 and 1951 were accused by the officials of the People's Security Commissariat of the Latvian SSR of bourgeois nationalism and participation in anti-Soviet gatherings. 13 participants of the group were sentenced to 7–25 years of imprisonment and deportation to settlements in the USSR. The repressions were aimed at isolating people disloyal to the regime and sending a warning to Latvian intellectuals // <https://timenote.info/lv/events/Latviesu-inteligences-disidentu-Fracu-grupas-arests-Riga>. (in Latvian, Accessed 1 October 2021)

in Latvia, and which did make it possible to learn about current trends. *Writer's Still Life* and *Mathematician's Still Life* also recall the text-based pop art practice of Robert Indiana in his paintings of short words, *LOVE*, *HOPE*, *AMORE*, in which the letter 'O' seemingly is about to roll away. Yet, as was typical in Latvian art, while artists followed the formal changes in Western examples, Rozīte cannot be said to have created content inspired by advertising, posters or trademarks. Indiana's word sculptures are, however, invoked by Valdis Celms' word sculpture *RĪGA*. From a sign of Riga as a geographical location, the monumental concrete letters have also become a brand for the city. The serialisation and remarkable popularity of the sign marking the capital's boundary resembles the story of Indiana's *LOVE*, which grew from a 1965 commission for a Christmas card for New York's Museum of Modern Art into one of the most popular works of art in the world. Borrowing from both Celms and Indiana, Latvian popular culture in the 21st century has placed the *RĪGA* sign in a time machine, dividing it into syllables 'RĪ–GA' and arranging them one above the other exactly like Indiana's 'LO–VE' and other words.

The Allure of the West

Under the conditions of the Cold War, the introduction of Latvians to Western art was sometimes taken up by what could be described as agents, who opened a window onto the zeitgeist not only through the information they provided, but also their own artistic practice. In the 1960s-80s, one of these was the leftist Latvian emigre avantgardist Valdis Āboliņš. The Zuzāns Collection includes a rich selection of mail art – Āboliņš' letters to Jānis Borgs and Barbara Strak, in which the text is both a witty source of information about processes in European art and an artefact in its own right, where the calligraphy of the handwriting with insertions of collage and drawing produces a plastic volume of text. In Germany Āboliņš curated unique avant-garde art events (the Fluxus Festival of New Art in Aachen in 1964), developed contacts with Latvia, gave impulses to Latvian artists. His letters undoubtedly are works of art, where ideas, witticisms, reflections about art, politics and the times constitute a full-blooded living organism. Today, his mail art texts demonstrate that Āboliņš believed in art's ability to help affect changes in political reality.⁵ In Latvia there was another 'agent' providing

⁵ *Astahovska I.* Valdis Āboliņš. Avangards, meilārts, jaunais kreisums un kultūras sakari aukstā kara laikā. [Valdis Āboliņš. The avant-garde, mailart, the New Left and cultural relations during the Cold War] – Rīga: Latvijas Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2019. – 12. lpp.

information about art processes in the West – the Polish magazine *Projekt*. In one of the works from her series *Flashback* (2009), Līga Purmale depicts her position between art and the reality of the Soviet system in a stylish 1960s self-portrait. Her painting counterposes two words: 'ПРОЕКТ' and 'МИЛИЦИЯ' [Militsiya, Soviet police force]. Purmale began to use words conceptually in her paintings already in the 1990s. Yet she has devoted most attention to them in the series *Flashback*, which is based on the wealth of her old photographs, and *City Tour*, where texts from public shop windows, signs, posters and graffiti serve as background for contemporary city life.

Vladimirs Glušenkovs executed his handwritten art manifestoes in a pop art spirit akin to Āboliņš' mail art. The ideas of altogether four manifestos (1974–1976) are presented both in full text and as bullet points announcing, in the words of Daina Auziņa, author of a monograph on the artist, an “individual artistic programme”⁶. Following his own understanding, intuition and philosophy, Glušenkovs predominantly describes attributes that are characteristic of pop art. Here we must also keep in mind how much at the time Latvia lacked a theoretical grounding in 20th century art movements. Those artists who wished to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of artistic movements that they saw in the magazines came up with their own theoretical conclusions. Glušenkovs' unique range of diaries realise an inner necessity to record his stream of consciousness throughout his life. The design of each book is unique and resembles artist's books.

Artists' Archives

In recent years, great attention has been devoted to artists' archives. The notes, drawings, designs and concepts for works contained in them are becoming ever more relevant to researchers. If the first text-based work of art in Latvia were to be identified, it would most likely be found in artists' archives. Even more so since many Latvian artists' avant-garde ideas in the 1960s-70s were not realised because there was no hope of exhibiting them publicly.

In 2012, Latvian art history became aware of Visvaldis Ziediņš, the late 20th century non-conformist and representative of the hippy generation. He was highly esteemed

⁶ Auziņa D. Vladimirs Glušenkovs. – Rīga: Neputns, 2018. – 83. lpp.

among his closest friends yet unknown to the wider public.⁷ In one of his abstract paintings he has included Einstein's formula $E = mc^2$ (1965). His interest in scientific discoveries led him to fantasies about the evolution of humanity, which are described and illustrated in his diary. Reflecting on the system of a future society, Ziediņš wrote: "There is a "leading" group. Highly developed personalities. They have solutions to the riddle of the whole world (the Universe). They know how they can get energy, how one substance can be converted into the next. Don't think you're going to need physical effort or a amount of people there. From today's point of view, it is like divinity or magic."⁸ Ziediņš developed his own schemes about the movement of planets, the Sun and the Earth as well as galaxies. (*Improvisation* (1968); *I do wish it were so...*(1968); *Galaxy* (1968)). It is clear that in the 1960s-70s the artist was drawn towards forming a kind of cosmogony which would break free from the Soviet social environment, rise to cosmic heights and look for theories for a world organised according to other, universal principles.

Georgs Šenbergs likewise lived according to his own principles, his archive containing dozens of sheets of paper covered with signs, words, letters, scribbles. These appear to manifest a mental paradigm. It seems that instead of coming from consciousness this transcript of signs was written down from another, dictated source. The words it contains do not form a coherent text, instead they resemble the rhythm of an incantation, or flashes of words that have randomly entered his stream of consciousness. Šenbergs' writing resembles the stenography of an encoded message, interwoven with ornaments – geometric triangles, circles, ethnographic patterns. The incomprehensibility of Šenbergs' sign notations conceals a fascinating mystery, the presence of something supernatural.

Jānis Viņķelis, an artist from the second generation of Latvian conceptualism, also reflected on unworldly systems. In his concepts he expressed an interest in the netherworld, humanoids, ghosts, scientific fiction. In the series *Biological Robots* (1989) he described humanity as robots built by an extra-terrestrial civilisation. In a group of seven works made using the copier ERA from the 1980s; he has enlarged the materials from his notes according to the technological possibilities of the time,

⁷ Kulakova I. Kustība. Visvaldis Ziediņš. [Movement. Visvaldis Ziediņš] – Rīga: Galerija 21, 2012. – 400. lpp.

⁸ *Ibid*, p 270

acquiring a low-quality image that gives the impression of ancient, faded traces of information. These sheets of graphic art describe humans as biological robots introduced on the Earth and observed by aliens. In the style of technical notation with abbreviations and numbers, the artist also lists himself as biological robot, JV-19-68, that functions according to the genetic chemistry of a cosmic civilisation – deoxyribonucleic acid. This fictive theory of evolution as well as Viņķelis' other works aim to communicate something more than a joke. In her monograph about Jānis Viņķelis⁹, Inga Šteimane writes: “Perhaps after years the artist Jānis Viņķelis (1968–1994) would have confessed to us like Tolkien, the “*Lord of the Rings*” did in his old age that his art is essentially religious. And that explicit Christian parables in art are boring, whilst in the paintings about the Spanish Archers or Jackie, in drawings about the Biological Robots and in the hyperspiritual landscapes that speak of transcendence in the language of art, about the substantial values of the transcendental, he has represented the Godly order of things in images created by himself.

”¹⁰ The continuation of Viņķelis' ideas found expression in the art of his friend Miķelis Fišers. Their art was born in the late 1980s, when there was an upsurge in the popularity of esoteric literature and paranormal phenomena. Text has gained particular importance in Fišers' art in the last decade. His stories, which accompany works showing humanity under the yoke of reptilians and extraterrestrials, use the style of conspiracy theories and millennial predictions and include political connotations: “The vast majority of people are absolutely POWERLESS against the manipulations and mind control executed with sophisticated cynicism over thousands of years by our enslavers – THE GREY ONES AND REPTILIANS who have created religions as well as systems of government with one single goal – to humiliate and enslave.”¹¹ Meaning resides in the text's style and intonation, as demonstrated with nuance in the video installation *Language Lesson* (2014) that plays out the relationships of power and submission.

Universalism

⁹ Šteimane I. Jānis Viņķelis. – Rīga: Neputns, 2003.

¹⁰ Ibid, back cover

¹¹ Fišers M. Netaisnība. [Izstādes katalogs]. – Rīga, 2014. – 2. lpp.

Returning to the manifestations of the 1970s-80s, another alternative was to use national identity as a resource. This trend includes the use of Latvian ethnographic ornaments in art. In his day, Ilmārs Blumbergs claimed that he was the author of the first conceptual work of art in Latvia – the lithograph *Latvian Mandala* (1978), which he executed following a predetermined concept and whose manuscript is preserved in the artist's archive on two typewritten pages. Today they are already an artefact in themselves. The idea of a Latvian mandala is based on bringing together Latvian ornamental and astrological signs and arranging them in a mandala-like composition. The artist believed that the Latvian mandala contains the general principles of the structure of the Universe.¹² In Blumbergs' lithograph, the mandala is formed by placing a rhombus inside a square, where the oriental pictograms of the 12 zodiacal signs are synthesised with Latvian geometric patterns. The concept explains that the mandala includes seven circles: "SEVEN CIRCLES. Seven squares. Seven human principles. Seven cosmic spirals. Seven chakras of man, etc. [...] Man's eternal connection with the movement of the Sun, the planets and the stars [...] The seven circles are the symbols of the unity of man and cosmos, primeval eternal movement and renewal."¹³ Blumbergs' concept for Latvian Mandala is based on Helena Blavatsky's theosophical cosmology, elaborated in her work *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), whose Chapter XVII, *The Zodiac and Its Antiquity*, Blavatsky dedicated to the subject of astrology.¹⁴ This is an interesting case of the semiotic approach: to synthesise one set of signs with a further set of signs, while striving for universal meaning.

Valdis Celms also chose to focus on a semiotic interpretation of Latvian ethnographic signs in the broadest possible context of world culture. Since the late 1980s he has been developing his life's work, the book *Latvju raksts un zīmes*¹⁵ [Latvian Patterns and Signs]. The artist uses Latvian ornament to carry a greater message, the sign is an 'intermediary': "the sign is something that is located between "us" and "something else"", writes Celms. In the book he points out that a "new wave

¹² *Blumbergs I.* Interview on 11 September 2013. Transcribed by E. Ansone. Audio recording in E. Ansone's archive. In Latvian

¹³ No: *Blumbergs I.* Latviskā mandala: koncepcija litogrāfijai [Latvian Mandala: Concept for the Lithograph] – Ilmārs Blumbergs' archive.

¹⁴ Sk.: *Блаватская Е. П.* Тайная доктрина синтез науки религии и философии. Том III. – Владивосток : [b.i], 1993. – 510 с.

¹⁵ *Celms V.* Latvju raksts un zīmes [Latvian Patterns and Signs] – Rīga: Folkloras un informācijas centrs, 2007.

of pattern research” had appeared in the 70s-80s, where several researchers and artists “created rather divergent theories and hypotheses about ornament as an expression of philosophical views”¹⁶. This new wave was sensationally pioneered in the Baltics by the interpretation of the Lielvārde Belt of Estonian artist Tõnis Vint¹⁷. Celms likewise represents this new trend, which no longer interprets patterns according to its conventionally accepted decorative function. The word 'ornament' is likewise replaced in his book by 'pattern' and 'sign'. The semantics of patterns is examined from a symbolic perspective, searching for the basis of the cosmic knowledge of proto-Baltic-Indo-European peoples: “(..) signs come from the cosmos,... [their] origin is to be found in the manifestations of natural (cosmic) laws (..).”¹⁸ Celms bases the principles, ethics, philosophy of the Latvian worldview “the understanding of the world and God in the Dainas” in Latvian patterns. The book describes how the basic elements of the signs are shared by many peoples of the world (there are similar signs in the cultures of Native Americans and Asian peoples¹⁹). The centrically-structured signs are compared to Buddhist and Hinduist mandalas and yantras. Celms sees the nature of mandala in the Latvian patterns in general, stressing the centre in the geometric Baltic signs as the origin of everything: "The world's universal origin, whatever it may be (God, cosmic intelligence or dead silence – nothing), expresses itself in a mandala.”²⁰ In his interpretation of signs, Celms moves from Eastern philosophy to physics and poses the question: “What happens at the centre of the circle [mandala], what is this void”, and refers to the physical vacuum and spin field theory, which gained popularity in Latvia as the 'torsion field'. “The voids contain the plan – “the matrix of [all] possibilities”; “the energy shaft”; “Many signs of our 'ornament' can be classified as “purely energetic patterns”²¹. The idea of the world as a space permeated with energies and the readability of this message in the background patterns found on mittens, belts, headdresses, towels and other objects is expressed in the chapter *The Fabric of the World*: "The fabric of the world symbolises the framework of the Universe's unified construction, its nature as an information field and weblike grid or strings of energy. It is one of the many symbolic pointers to the

¹⁶ Ibid, p 21

¹⁷ Ansis Epnars. Lielvārdes josta. Dokumentāla filma. [Lielvārde Belt. Documentary]. Rīgas kinostudija, 1980.

¹⁸ *Celms V. Latvju raksts un zīmes.* – 35. lpp.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 50

²⁰ Ibid, p 114

²¹ Ibid, p 41, p 46

crystalline structure of the Universe.”²² Referring to Edgars Imants Siliņš' book *Lielo patiesību meklējumi* [In Search of the Great Truths]²³, the artist also refers to the explanation theoretical physics gives for the interrelationship of all elementary particles in the superstring theory. Alongside scientific theories, he also mentions the Buddhist metaphor about Indra's invisible net, which stretches throughout the Universe as an infinite number of cords and knots. "Perception and knowledge that the world is built on the basis of a grid formed by invisible forces is, obviously, very old. In Eastern philosophy and mysticism, such Universal grid is symbolised by Indra's net".²⁴ Celms also mentions the number nine, often mentioned in the Dainas, which when expanded in space forms a 3x3-part world which is taken to mean that: "A pattern expresses the awareness of the possibility of the existence of multiple worlds"²⁵. In the book, signs and the entire Universe are treated as a torsional structure, demonstrated by the swastika as well as the grass snake, which is compared to the Möbius strip, and also the contrast of yin and yang. By synthesising Eastern perspectives, physics, spirituality, power and energy of signs, the Latvian patterns are assigned a quasi-universal meaning.

The Bible

In one of the works from *Drawing*, an ambitious cycle of around one hundred abstractions that he worked on in the early 1990s, Ilmārs Blumbergs has written a single word expressing the essence of this series: DIEVS [God]. The Lord's Prayer has been included in text-based works by Sigurds Vīdzirkste and Māris Subačs. Since the early 1990s, Māris Subačs has been creating conceptual texts accompanied by minimalist drawings which express the idea of a World which belongs to God. Alongside text, Subačs' system of signs occasionally contains Hermeticist semiotics – the cross, the Ancient Egyptian looped cross or ankh, the all-seeing Eye of Horus, the swastika, number combinations and others which encode magical meaning. The content, meaning and essence of the Bible, expressed both as written word and abstract idea, is also part of Sarmīte Māliņa and Kristaps Kalns' white marble book without text (*Untitled*, 2012). Valdis Villerušs' assemblage places the 1794 third

²² Ibid, p 107

²³ *Siliņš E. I. Lielo patiesību meklējumi*. [In Search of the Great Truths] – Rīga: Jumava, 2002. – 137. lpp.

²⁴ Ibid, p 107

²⁵ Ibid, p 110

edition of the Bible in Latvian inside an ethnographic 19th century seed basket (*In Memoriam 2*, 2016). The first edition of Johann Ernst Glück's translation of the Bible is said to have been 2487 pages long and weighed 4 kilograms. Instead of pages and kilograms, Leonards Laganovskis has measured the square metres of text in the Bible. In his diptych of digital prints, *The Bible* (2001) – *Old Testament and New Testament*, the artist provides a comparison of the area of paper necessary to print the former and the latter. By printing continuous text on a single page in barely readable (4.78-point font) size, the Old Testament requires an area of 155 x 300 cm, while the New Testament fits on just 155 x 119 cm. The Bible as an abstract, unreadable mass of text in the life of a secular person.

Metanarrative

Imants Tillers' monumental work *Diaspora* (1998), which consists of 48 etchings, is also structured by Biblical texts and the numerological codes denoting the books and chapters of the Old Testament. These etchings were made after the 1992 painting *Diaspora*, which was dedicated by Tillers to the events in the Baltic States in the early 1990s. The work resembles a gigantic iconostasis with descriptions of the lives of the saints and religious stories. The work's basic structure is derived from the religious obsession with Biblical texts in the works of the classic of New Zealand art, Colin McCahon. Permeated by religious messages, this work also includes fragments from works of other artists. In correlation with Biblical revelations, they build a conversation among works of art and ideas from Christianity of different periods. This visually large collage is not a chaotic agglomeration, it is a concept based on systems theory, a structure of interrelated information, in which each one element follows from another. Tillers adopted the 'T' appropriated from McCahon's work and the tau cross as his self-identifier 'T', which is both his initial and a religious symbol. '*I and Thou*' overlaps with the Roman numeral 'T' and the English personal pronoun. In the upper part of the work we read Andrejs Eglītis' lyrics to Lūcija Garūta's cantata: *Dievs, Tava zeme deg!* [God, Your Land Is Burning!], which recalls Colin McCahon's quotations. Tillers has tied the word 'RĪGA' to the appropriation of tormented characters from Georg Baselitz's work *Oberon*.

Tillers' works are made up of an arrangement of modestly-sized boards covered with canvas; he started using these in 1981. He began his career in the 1970s, throwing himself with great enthusiasm into the field of conceptual art. In the late 80s,

he conceptualised the system of the canvas boards under the title 'Book of Power'.²⁶ Tillers' *Book of Power* contains countless texts, numbers, signs, pointers, toponyms, religious texts, symbols used by the Australian indigenous people, sentences found in the works of writers and thinkers, recurring from painting to painting as prophetic messages. His art must be read as a meta-narrative.

Imants Tillers' method of appropriation is not based solely on postmodern art's urge for quotation. An important driving force in the development of Tillers' concept of appropriation was the 1974 essay by Australian art historian Terry Smith-'The Provincialism Problem'²⁷. It is a provocative essay which argues that there is no avantgarde in Australian non-Aboriginal art. White Australian artists are only imitating works of art from Western cultural centres. Tillers found this sad fate of provincial cultures to repeat the ideas of the centre worthy of a concept and, instead of creating something similar, decided to repeat Western works of art directly. Tillers began to consistently use of the concept of appropriation in the 1980s. Admittedly, it is not merely a dispassionate hijacking of images, as Tillers only quotes from the artists towards whom he feels spiritual affinity. He uses appropriation as a network of communication with all periods and artists, finding relationships and building systems among images created in world art, literary works, historical collisions and his personal biography. Among the artists most frequently quoted in his works are Shusaku Arakawa, Robert Barry, Georg Baselitz, Giorgio de Chirico, Enzo Cucchi, Marcel Duchamp, Caspar David Friedrich, Madeline Gins, Eugene von Guérard, Hans Heysen, Michael Nelson Jagamara, Jasper Johns, Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, Anselm Kiefer, Kazimir Malevich (*Казимир Северинович Малевич*), Stéphane Mallarmé, Colin McCahon, Philipp Otto Runge, Julian Schnabel, On Kawara.

There is a text which is repeated in all of Tillers' paintings: a line from French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem '*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*': 'A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance' (Tillers uses the text in English translation). The line is arranged along the perimeter of Tillers' paintings and invokes the visual structure of Mallarmé's modernist poetry. Tillers is drawn by systems theory, the idea of the butterfly effect. The quotations included in the

²⁶ Curnow W. Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'. – Craftsman House, Sydney. – 1998. – P. 71.

²⁷ Smith T. The Provincialism Problem // Artforum. Vol.13. – No.1. – September 1974. – pp. 54–9.

paintings are like an open information system, in which connections are interrelated and self-ordering.

A paradoxical transformation of idea takes place in Tillers' appropriation of Ed Ruscha's *Faith* (1972). Tillers' *Faith* (1988) repeats the visuality of Ruscha's work, but gives it a different context. There is no sign of Ruscha's irony about commerce and a crisis of faith. Tillers saw the colour of the Latvian flag in the hues of the original painting, with the word 'Faith' forming the flag's white middle band; the work also includes the Latvian ornamental symbol of the world tree *Austras koks*. or Tree of the World. Tillers dedicated the work to the Baltic awakening. In his work *A Painting Which Does Not Speak* (1990), Tillers quotes Georg Baselitz's painting *Oberon* for the image of the mental state of Latvia as an occupied country. The word MUTE written on the painting can be read both in English and Latvian [the word 'mute' means 'mouth' in Latvian], calling to mind people who have been denied the freedom of speech.

Tillers has dedicated his work *Terra Negata* (2005) to the inexorably disappearing languages of Australia's indigenous people. It is estimated that there may have been more than 300 languages in existence, yet the exact number is not known – they were not studied in the preceding centuries, and today many have already disappeared. The painting includes the names of both lost and still extant languages. The painting's decorative pattern is formed from the meandering ornaments from a painting by the Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye and is very similar to the wavy lines in the paintings of the American abstractionist Brice Marden, which ~~was~~ were created without any knowledge of the work of the famous Aboriginal artist.

Tillers' modular, intertextual works continue to be made, and the increasing number of canvas boards points to the growing number of appropriated texts and works of art from the books in Tillers' extensive library.

Literature – a Source for Art

Naturally, literary works are also quoted or referred to in Latvian art. Juris Boiko's poetic triptych *Sounds* (2001) layers quotations from American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's novel *Walden: or, Life in the Woods* (1854) over a

background of the rainbow spectrum. This cult novel of the Green movement had a significant influence on the thinking of many Latvian artists. It inspired the green thinking of the hippy era, fostering the romantic call of back to nature'. Walden is also mentioned a source of inspiration for 'dark green religion', and Thoreau's Walden 'pond lifestyle' pilgrim movement.²⁸ Already in the 19th century, right after Thoreau's death, the novel *Walden: or, Life in the Woods* spawned the movement of returning to nature, which had a renaissance in the culture of the sixties.²⁹ Walden also inspired artistic circles in Latvia – life in the forest served as an example of independence, a social experiment, a spiritual journey and an alternative way of life. Poetry provides further alternatives, having appeared in works of art as a manifesto or a message corresponding to one's mental state. Using a pure text-based approach, Aija Zariņa has painted a line from Eduards Veidenbaums' poetry 'MOSTIES, MOSTIES REIZ, SVABADAIS GARS' [WAKE UP, WAKE UP, FREE SPIRIT] (2002) in thick block letters as a giant poster. Izolde Cēsniēce embroidered the text of Aspazija's poem *Dievzemīte* [God's Land] on a ten-metre-long blood-red ribbon which can be read by turning rolling pins, thus reminding us that Aspazija sacrificed her writer's talent in order to carry out home duties for her spouse, the renowned author Rainis. A feminist tone can be discerned in the sensual words from Aivars Eipurs' poem *More and More* embroidered in Zaiga Putrāma's textile works (1999). It is not only artists who want to transform poetry into visual images, ever since Symbolism and the above-mentioned Mallarmé, poets themselves have also presented poetry as a visual structure, where the arrangement, rhythm, pauses, spaces and concentrations of words create a kind of landscape. Ēriks Apaļais finds inspiration for his painter's practice in philology studies. In Apaļais' paintings, letters and meaning of words transform into images. The letter L from Mallarmé's poem *Le Cygne* (1885) becomes a flying swan with a slim neck and wings in the shape of an open book. The word – its visuality, sonority and imaginative potential is an important instrument for the text group Orbīta, who transform images into texts and texts into images.

Attitude towards the representation of a literary text in visual art can also be entirely analytical, statistically dispassionate, truly conceptual. Thus, Arturs Bērziņš took up

²⁸ See: *Taylor B.* *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future.* – Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. – pp. 33–34, 49–50, 224, 60, 152.

²⁹ See: *Lawrence B.* *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture.* – Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995. – p. 586

the play *Joseph and His Brothers* by Rainis and, aiming for objectivity, analysed it as a statistician. He grouped the frequency and type of mentions of the play's protagonists in columns, percentages, and tables, and presented the analysis in four office-style A5 format spiral-bound volumes of materials, in which information is processed in order to reach certain truths in establishing the hierarchy of the characters. Bērziņš has also attempted to show the world as an aesthetic construct formed under the influence of important philosophers: Wittgenstein, Kant, Nietzsche, Berlin. Yet sometimes it is sufficient to depict what already exists in order to point to a phenomenon, for example, the novels of Viktor Pelevin (*Untitled 1(3)*, 2010).

Similarly to how he transformed the texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament into meta-texts in the above-mentioned work *The Bible*, Leonards Laganovskis has also taken up Shakespeare's complete works, bringing them together in a single digitally printed 160 x 520 cm sheet of paper *Shakespeare All-in-One* (2009). While Laganovskis loves literature, a passion for Dostoevsky can lead to depression, according to the dark humour of his work *Three Tablets* (2018) – consisting of impressive-sized tablets formed of the crushed pages of the 30 volumes of Dostoevsky's collected works. Nabokov's *Lolita* has also been subjected to the tearing out of the book's pages in the name of art, with pages enveloping a light kayak (*My Lolita*, 2018). The artist reflected: “*Lolita* was released in my year of birth. In my youth I practiced rowing and all the boats had women's names. It is hardly surprising – boats have an ideal form, beautiful and erotic, and use noble materials. And I also know what it means to swim in different languages and cultures [just like Nabokov], and there are further reasons why I can relate to the literature professor Humbert Humbert.”³⁰ This group of objects also includes *Baron's Lifebuoy* (2018), a lifebuoy decorated with folksongs. Laganovskis commented on the work as a necessity to return to the origin, if at any point it seems that everything begins to develop not as planned.³¹ Miervaldis Polis also turned his attention to Krišjānis Barons, quoting one of the so-called naughty Dainas and depicting Barons in the manner of *trompe l'oeil* (*Daina with a Photo Krišjānis Barons*, 1997).

³⁰ Laganovskis L. *Nākotnes valsts* [Future State] / Sast. E. Ansons – Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs. 2018. – 56. lpp.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 54

For Latvians, the Dainas represent a kind of origin – a codex of ethics, customs and rules. Meanwhile the laws of ancient states are the world's oldest preserved artefacts of writing. One of these is the Rosetta Stone (196 BC), with the engraving of a decree issued by Ptolemy V in Egyptian Demotic script and Ancient Greek. The deciphering of the Rosetta Stone provided a key for the understanding of the language of Ancient Egypt. Today this understanding is accessible only to a limited circle of specialists. An ordinary viewer sees hieroglyphs and cuneiform on the modestly-sized stone stela, (the original is held in the British Museum in London, while a copy is available in Latvia in the collection of the Art Museum RIGA BOURSE) – and looks at them as a visual, mysterious text. In the late 80s, in honour of the decipherer of this ancient text, Egyptologist Jean–François Champollion (1790–1832), conceptualist classic Joseph Kosuth produced an enormous enlargement of the Rosetta Stone on stone slabs, which was placed beside the house where where Champollion once lived.

Beyond the Comfort Zone

Another important classic of text-based art, Ed Ruscha, brought serial use of photography into the vast array of conceptual art. In his series of photographs *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), with the help of banal shots of similar-looking petrol stations which at first gave little clue as to why they were photographed, he drew attention to what Americans see in their daily lives. In his series of city photographs *Theme O11*, started in the 1980s and still ongoing, Gvido Kajons captures verbal messages in ideological posters, in amusing shop windows and signs, in graffiti and elsewhere, with people passing by undisturbed. Meanwhile, in the context of serial use of portraits, it is important to refer to another classic of conceptualism, Douglas Huebler, who decided in the 70s to document all the people he would encounter (*Variable Piece # 70: (In process) Global 1975*), in order to create the most authentic representation of the human species. Perhaps by combining the work of all the photographers in the world it might be possible to accomplish one percent of this impossible mission. Our exhibition of texts includes a group of serial portraits accompanied by verbal self-reflections which the artists have acquired from the persons portrayed. In 1992 Valts Kleins made his series *I Want to Be Happy*, which documents dozens of children living in correctional facilities for adolescents with behavioural problems. Under the portraits the children have written their responses to the artist's question: “What would you like today?”. The answers are heart-rending.

Meanwhile in her video, *I Want to Be...* (2000), Līga Marcinkeviča filmed children attending ordinary school and responded to the question as to who were their role models. For boys these were predominantly famous sportspeople, while for girls it was Britney Spears. The children's honest responses are confronted in the exhibition with the refined self-image of the title figure in Leonards Laganovskis' ironic series *The Gallerist* (1995), where life's 'great questions' are about status, style and standards. The persona of the gallerist meanwhile is counterposed with the grey-haired protagonists in Inta Ruka's series *Remembering Life* (2018) with their life stories of wars and deportations providing a vivid contrast.

Kosuth's magnificent idea that “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual”³² can be gradually be applied to Latvian art from the middle of the 1960s onwards by seeking out artists' ideas in their notes and the materials kept in their archives, and occasionally finding a finished work. The first buds of conceptual ideas were already forming in the sixties, yet at the time there were few artists and art historians in Latvia who were able to define them theoretically. Poster artists were trained to think in terms of semiotic systems, and a forceful group entered the scene in the 1970s (Laimonis Šēnbergs, Georgs Smelters, Gunārs Zemgals, Juris Dimiteris). Andris Grīnbergs, Atis Ieviņš, Hardijs Lediņš, Juris Boiko, Imants Žodžiks, Aigars Sparāns, Leonards Laganovskis were already active at the time. Miervaldis Polis' series of trompe l'oeil paintings *Illusions on the Pages of a Book about Venice* (1974) and *Pages from the Book "Island of the Colossi"* (1975) can be considered an early and conscious example of text-based art. However, we can speak of conceptualism as a distinct movement in Latvia starting from the eighties. The first generation of conceptualists – Ojārs Pētersons, Ivars Mailītis and Inese Mailīte, Andris Breže, Juris Putrāms, Andrejs Kalnačs, Kristaps Ģelzis, Oļegs Tillbergs, Sarmīte Māliņa, Aija Zariņa – were artists who shaped the avant-garde of local art for the following two decades. Yet text appeared in their works much later, or, for a majority of them, not at all. Leonards Laganovskis is the most consistent in his work with language as an artistic material in the manner of Art & Language, Lawrence Weiner, Edward Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry at the beginnings of conceptualism. Words and their

³² Kosuth J. Art after Philosophy [1969]. – In: Kosuth, J. *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*. – London, Cambridge (MS): The MIT Press, 1993. – P. 18.

forms provide the visual structure of his works. In the dying embers of the Soviet period, he used texts and signs from this ideological system to ironise about its absurdity (*Laganovkis Visual Acuity Chart*, 1988; *Biography*, 1990; *End of the Movie*, 1989). A row of Laganovskis' works show a 'Kosuthian' interest in equivalences between languages and things and ways in which language is used to identify and describe objects. Text as a structure of imaginative potential in art is favoured by Andris Breže. His installation *Like Swans...* (1995) with Eduards Veidenbaums' poem in the exhibition *Kalāčojums* in the said poet's memorial museum is probably one of the most poetic instances of text art. Perhaps this lyricism and conceptualism brought together in Breže's art is what generated the local term 'poetic conceptualism', which can also be applied to his *Boxes of Quotes* (1990). Based on a political clash of two languages (Latvian and Russian), Breže's very early posters *Do Not Pollute Language I* and *Do Not Pollute Language II* (1981) were created in a pure linguistic conceptualist manner. Andrejs Kalnačs' *BILD* and *TATSACHE* (1998) are typical word art paintings, with the threatening size of the words recalling spatial word installations of such classics as Barbara Kruger and Lawrence Weiner. Inga Brūvere worked with the 'scissors' of linguistic information and visual perception, pointing to the assumptions that influence our illusion-filled perception (*Love & Hate*, 2003; *True Colour*, 2004). Juris Putrāms' art also contained deeply personal texts, posing the dilemmas of existential questions. The text in the last part of his triptych *Dedication to All I Hold Dear; Dedication to Ingrīda; Dedication to My Mummy* (2000) reads: "I DON'T BELIEVE WE HAVE ARRIVED ON EARTH IN ORDER TO SWEAT AND TOIL, EARN A PILE OF MONEY AND THEN DIE."

If in the nineties the presence of text became more visible in Latvian art, although still rare, over the last two decades texts have taken over all media in Latvian visual art, leaving ever fewer artists who would be able to create a work without the help of text or narrative. While intellectual games with language are endless, the work of purely linguistic conceptualists has already been accomplished, as it seems to be impossible to generate ideas that would not invite references to any of the linguistic conceptualists from the 1960s-70s. All contemporary art is based on the conceptualist legacy, and has long found itself in the post-conceptualist period. This can be applied to Latvian art since the 90s, when text was necessary for social and political narrative, or less often – for a purely linguistic approach. In the nineties, with the changing

system of societal values, artists were those who quickly noted the darker aspects of capitalism. While Māris Subačš turned away by choosing religion, other artists decided to stay in the game and chose new, aggressive approaches. The obscenity escalated in Gints Gabrāns' installation *Knife to Cut Your Arse* (1995) was written under specific political and economic conditions where the state was being plundered and the ordinary person could do nothing. The obscenity is a reflection of the absurdity and desperation of this situation. The installation *Everything Happens in the Head* (1998), again breaks a taboo, using the head of a sex doll, a chair where to engage with the doll and text “Krēslam ir vienalga, vai viņš ir māksla, vai nav. Viss notiek galvā” [The chair does not care if it is art or not. Everything happens inside the head] posing a riddle – in whose head does everything (and what exactly) happen? And since it is a chair, it inevitably necessitates a reference to Kosuth's famous work *One and Three Chairs* (1972), even if the works are not formally similar.

Artists have used words that intentionally annoy, strive to push people out of their comfort zone, to shake up; they can express obscenities, sneering, regret; there are words that scream and are very sarcastic, and they have arisen in specific social, political and economic contexts. And the more words have already been said, the louder it becomes necessary to shout them out (Ēriks Božis' *Kzzz...* (1999); Monika Pormale's *I do n't want anything for any money* (2003); Kristaps Ģelzis' *Cloud* (2015); Envija's *MOTHER WHORE* (2018); Artūrs Virtmanis' *Fucking Times* (2010)). It seems that the boundaries of how far it is possible to go are being tested, with Ēriks Božis saying in an interview with Ieva Astahovska: “There is a difference – to investigate the language of art in general and to investigate the boundaries of art. Satisfaction resides in investigating the boundaries, the edge of the world of art. To make a very banal comparison: if the artist generation of the 1980s were “trespassers”, we, who became active in the 90s, can be called “border surveyors””.³³

The exhibition *Es_Text* uses an intertextual approach in examining the boundaries of text art. Texts permeate our daily lives, they look at us from the screens of our devices, talk to us from our television sets, podcasts and announcements. The urban

³³ Božis Ē. Instrukcija. [Instruction] – Rīga: Latvijas Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2008.

environment can no longer be conceived without text and it is impossible to imagine what it would be like if they had never appeared in art.