

# Galva Revisited: Helēna Demakova vs Solvita Krese

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Two strongly curated exhibitions of contemporary art are currently running in Riga. “Sveika, galva! / Greetings Head!” in Railway Museum, curated by Helena Demakova, and “Re: visited” in Riga Art Space, curated by Solvita Krese. The curious co-temporality of these ambitious exhibitions puts the approaches of two of the most recognisable Latvian curators working today in the spotlight.

Both exhibitions carry the signature of their curator, representing two quite contradictory positions towards contemporary art. Helēna Demakova argues that there should be no “playing hide and seek with the viewer”, meaning that art must communicate, and the essential message art has to convey is one of aesthetics. Solvita Krese on the other hand, comments in an interview to Jana Kukaine<sup>1</sup>, that unlike her recent exhibition “...for an occurrence to become an adventure...” from the art collection of ABLV Bank (committed for the future Latvian Contemporary Art Museum) the exhibition “Re: visited” will not be popular (a verdict that might not actually turn out to be correct), because it is not focusing on art as aesthetics attention to the aesthetics. Krese knowingly works within a language that is difficult to fully grasp for a viewer who is not engaged with the field of contemporary art.

Krese's exhibition is put together from artworks she has selected at the European art biennales of the preceding two years. The central topic of the exhibition is the broadening of the notion of what is European. But if for a moment we consciously push the political layer of the exhibition into the background, we could say that the exhibition is about how to survive the exhibition format she herself has created. Literally, it is a collection of souvenirs. If somebody else, let's say, Demakova would have taken up the same kind of task, the solution would have been different. Yet critical discussion would still be possible without having seen the exhibition. (As was demonstrated by Jana Kukaine who interviewed Solvita Krese before the exhibition.) The artworks themselves lose their role as generators of (autonomous) meaning and are turned into bearers of curatorial meaning. (It must be admitted, that Solvita Krese denies the possibility of this, and, from the point of view of communication theory, it indeed is impossible, nevertheless, it appears to be merely a symbolic nod – an act of curatorial self-defence.) So in a way Solvita Krese has done what she usually does: set out a task and created a survival kit to survive it.<sup>2</sup>

Demakova's approach also is very typical of her – instead of engaging with politics, she has turned it into a question of aesthetics. The central poetical theme of the exhibition “Greetings Head!” is the human head, which in a way connects and conceptualises the selected works, forcing the viewer to see a head everywhere – deer-head, beet-head, rock-head, pineapple-head, godhead etc. It is more than obvious in the monster “An Accident with Grandma's Head” (originally part of a costume design for the theatre play “Little Red Riding Hood and Wolf” at the National Theater of Latvia) greeting the visitor at the entrance, while such works as Indriķis Ģelzis' “Blue-Blue” – a car cut in two, one half blue, the other one pink – require a bit more consideration. In terms of head metaphors this may well be seen as the divided, schizophrenic mind.

Demakova is honest and straightforward in what and who she thinks is noteworthy. This also includes the private sponsors of the exhibition, to whom she dedicates approximately half of the exhibition text, and sponsors' statements take up a considerable part of the catalogue. That is fairly unusual, considering that “high art” often attempts to obscure raw commerciality. Re: visited, on the other hand, is financed from public funds, represented by no more than tiny logos of the institutions.

The problem is that Demakova's values appear as the unquestionable absolute. She neither reflects nor comments on the media, authors or even the theme of the exhibition (apart from the rather pretentious opening statement of the catalogue, claiming that ““Greetings Head!” is a rare, perhaps even the only, showcase of Latvian art ever to combine practically all contemporary art media...”). This lack of a thorough concept is altogether the weakest point of the exhibition. Its quality must be obvious to the viewer and there is no appropriate way to question it. In the text by Boriss and Inara Teterev, the main sponsors of the exhibition, one reads: “This year,

work has begun on several new works of art. The conceptual basis for these objects is humour and goodness, manifested through surprising works of art which people will want to spend time in the company of; works that delight people living in the city and arouse the interest of tourists in Riga and Latvia". This authoritarianism renders "Greetings Head!" as non communicative as – in a somewhat different way – is "Re: visited".

Krese, on the contrary, seems to be very self-reflective. The exhibition text is critical towards her own choices: "It would be naive to view an art work as an autonomous entity, because the ideological, geographical and institutional context of any exhibition are not neutral – nor is the dramaturgy of its arrangement. On the other hand, we can affirm that although the context of an exhibition contributes to the meaning of an art work, it does not anticipate that the meaning or essence of the art work is a result of the exhibition." (Solvita Krese "Re: visited" exhibition catalogue [p 5].) But behind all those dialectic paragraphs, Krese's concept still, in a sense, reads as authoritarianaloo as Demakova's: if you don't speak the language (quite literally – most of the exhibition requires English) you are just excluded. And, similarly to Demakova's, this position cannot be questioned from outside its own discourse: "The exhibition's frame of reference is outside that context which is of interest to Latvian society... The viewer is conservative and needs clear, intelligible and attractive things. It may eventuate that people visit the exhibition to look at "internationally famous artists from significant biennales" à la Bill Viola, but there'll be nothing like it there!"<sup>3</sup>

One could say Krese has made a contemporary exhibition whereas Demakova's exhibition leans towards Modernism. So in this set-up Demakova plays the role of the conservative/reactionary, seemingly looking back at the tradition of the artistic absolute. Considering the artist as a romantic genius who cannot be fully grasped by "normal" people, art is positioned as somehow untouchable, at the same time dutifully providing a modicum of entertainment for (slightly better) accessibility. Politically to the left, Krese looks at ways of mending the ills of this modern condition, including, by invoking "pre-modern" ways of living and creating. In the context of contemporary art and its local advocates, it does appear like a safe solution – to stand up for liberal values, equality, rights, decentering, etc. Yet these very same concerns often remain as removed from the cultural preferences of the Latvian society-at-large as some of the visual language. Indeed, the only painting (of sorts) in the show is Rana Hamadeh's The Big Board.

The politics of choosing the authors is also quite revealing. Demakova selects a set of "trusted" authors, related to the Art Academy of Latvia, whom she has worked with previously, positioning them as self-evidently genius creators of great art. To her credit, the exhibition manages to look fresh. Krese, on the other hand, sets out to ignore the widely known names of the artworld and concentrates on marginalities, not only those of the art world, but also geography. "I did arrive at an experiment. Because in the end we understood that quite possibly the selected artists might not be widely known in Latvia, even though they're internationally recognised."<sup>4</sup>

Despite Krese's attempts to sidestep aesthetics, her exhibition's design is among the best Riga Art Space has seen. Echoing the cacophony of the biennales by separating and highlighting the narrated authors each in their own "corner" may feel tame to the professional viewer. At the same time it can be interpreted as a necessary means to keep the exhibition accessible to a wider audience, to whom the break with the traditional celebrity-based choice of authors is already enough "excitement" for one day. So altogether the design appears to be one more tool from the survival kit box.

Demakova's white cube based sectioning of "Greetings Head!" is reminiscent of an art-fair where every artist has his/her box, which once again underlines the status of the author. But not even trying to create connections between the works makes the whole exhibition look like a display of (really outstanding) student graduate works. The only "contemporality" sneaks in as if by accident: in the form of photos from Alvis Hermanis' production of "Shukshin's Stories" at the State Theatre of Nations in Moscow, premiered in November 22, 2008, a mere few months after the Russo-Georgian War. It bears more than a little irony in the light of the notable Latvian director's recent cancellation of participation in projects and festivals in Russia in relation to its aggression towards Ukraine.

While the simultaneity of these exhibitions may be a mere coincidence, it only takes approximately 1 km to make the connection: this exposition of the left-right / modern-contemporary split in Latvian curating, in the end, seems to be more telling than the narratives each might generate on their own. Bearing in mind both curators are involved in an MTV-style Celebrity Deathmatch of sorts to head the (hopefully) forthcoming Latvian Contemporary Art Museum, these divergent approaches may be an indication of what is to come once that institution starts its own exhibition programme. In this context it is comforting – as well as regrettable – to conclude that in both exhibitions art and the artist remain alienated from the non-professional viewer, who at the same time maintains the crucial functional role of the addressee of art. Both exhibitions, then, manifest at their core the sustainability of the framework of avant-garde ideology that has survived the past century and is still going strong.

1. "There was a Young Lady of Portugal" Studija February/ March 2014. pp 77-79. ↑

2. "Survival Kit" is the annual exhibition format of the LCCA, of which Krese is the director. ↑

3. "There was a Young Lady of Portugal" Jana Kukaine interviews Solvita Krese. Studija February/March 2014. p 79. ↑

4. "There was a Young Lady of Portugal" Jana Kukaine interviews Solvita Krese. Studija February/March 2014. p 77. ↑