The Baltic pavilions at the 57th Venice Art Biennale: Žilvinas Landzbergas R (Lithuania, Curators Ŭla Tomau and Asta Vaičiulytė): Mikelis Fišers What Can Go Wrong (Latvia, curator Inga Šteimane): Katja Novitskova If Only You Could See What I’ve Seen with Your Eyes (Estonia, Curator Kati Ilves)

Shamanism

Šelda Puķīte: At first glance, the three Baltic pavilions in the 57th Venice Biennale might seem totally different. And from a formal point of view, they really are. But at the same time, all three Baltic pavilions share something in common: a kind of shamanic, retro, vibe about them. For example, Lithuanian artist Žilvinas Landzbergas has been working with the romantic notion of nature being the source for humanity’s inventions, not only in science but also in art. In the Latvian pavilion, Mikelis Fišers has used an old-style engraving technique, which looks and feels pretty retro. In the Estonian pavilion, whereas Katja Novitskova’s work is incredibly futuristic. In a weird way they all seem to be interested in the past, even though they are talking about the future. Fišers work talks about an alien invasion. But at the same time, it is impossible to determine whether it is something that
has happened, is happening or will happen in the future. In the case of the Estonian pavilion, one might also think that the work is about the future, because Novitskova employs a more digital aesthetics using internet as one of her main source. Whether directly or indirectly quoted, it refers to ideas about the future which are already 50 years old themselves. The title of her exhibition If Only You Could See What I’ve Seen with Your Eyes is from Ridley Scotts movie Balde Runner. And if you walk through the exhibition, you will begin thinking about classical sci-fi movies like Alien or The Matrix. But it all refers to questions which were important in the past, and I doubt whether it talks about how we see our future now.

The most difficult work within this concept was the Lithuanian pavilion. Maybe I am looking at it too literally, but the pavilion seemed to rely heavily on a Pagan way of understanding and relating to nature.

Valts Miķelsons: The geographical closeness of the three Baltic countries forces them to be compared to each other all the time. And granted, they do have somewhat similar histories and share similar problems…

Indrek Grigor: And they are all interested in each other because of that.

Valts: Not necessarily…

Šelda: …Let’s be honest.

Indrek: Come on. We are commissioned by a Latvian editor, working for a Lithuanian medium, to write about all the three pavilions in comparison. So there is some kind of reason for the comparison – be it geographical or historical. The editor could have commissioned us to write about three totally random pavilions. So at least on an editorial level there is the idea that we should be interested in each other.

Valts: The Balkans is in a similar situation. But that does not mean their states would be too sympathetic to each other or interested in each other for that matter…

Anyway, I would see a difference between what Latvians and Lithuanians are doing on one hand, and what the Estonians are doing on the other hand. This is probably because of the differing media that is used and the aesthetics employed. And that extends also to an ideological positioning. For Latvia and Lithuania, the sort of looking back either on a real or fictionalised past seems to go together with some traces in their national identity. Especially in the case of Lithuania, they take pride in the fact that they were the last country in Europe to convert from Paganism to Christianity. I am sure the Latvians are as happy to highlight their Pagan roots and so on and so forth. Also, their uses of materials, which are either focused on the past, or come across as having a historical outline seem to suggest a historically-determined attitude. In Western Europe, you would probably talk about colonialism and guilt or debt towards other parts of the world. In the Baltics, however, the dominant perception is that we are the victims and we are therefore innocent. It seems that in the case of the Latvian and Lithuanian pavilion, the position is that we don’t need to deal with current political questions. We just look into the past and fantasise about whatever. Because the current political situation was not created by us, but by the evil Westerners who went around colonising people and spreading Christianity. We fantasise about weird
ahistorical stuff and make art out of it. Maybe it’s my personal perspective, but the approach seems somewhat reminiscent of quite a few authoritarian countries where, instead of dealing with political issues, stories are built about what might have been and what, perhaps, has never been the case, and ignore the nasty aspects of our identity and reality. In the Azerbaijan pavilion, there were musical instruments and people living in harmony. And of course there wasn’t a single word about journalists and civil activists being harassed. In this respect, even though the Estonian pavilion does not necessarily appear very political, it definitely belongs to the current time in terms of media and in terms of aesthetics and also pretty much in terms of subject matter. Travelling around various biennales, you would see art that is dealing with some sort of hybridisation of nature and technology quite frequently. In that sense, despite whether the Estonian pavilion adds anything new to the debate or not, it still falls pretty much within the range of contemporary concerns. For me, this is what sets it apart from the Latvian and Lithuanian pavilions.
Politics

Indrek: I am sure Inga Šteimane, the curator of the Latvian pavilion, would disagree with you.

For me, the parallels between the pavilions start with Novitskova’s kinetic objects looking like Fišers’s aliens. Novitskova’s room with the aliens felt like one of Fišers’s breeding houses or nursing rooms where the new breed is being bred. But coming to the political things you referred to, in her catalogue essay, Šteimane puts a lot of effort into conceptualising Fišers’s interest in esotericism as a political gesture. In it, she claims that within politics you cannot think completely outside the box: “One can quite safely say that esoteric narratives in contemporary art have something to do with unnecessary hopes and unproductive longing for humanity. It turns out that esoteric deviation is a way to talk about the political.” She tries to claim that through esotericism, through something totally irrational and insane, you are political. Šteimane commissioned Margus Tamm – an Estonian designer and art writer with whom she has worked with before – to write for the catalogue about esotericism in Estonian art. And Tamm actually built a pretty similar model of the world. In describing the first Estonian artists to participate in the Venice Biennale, he said as follows: “In 1997, the Estonian artistic delegation, a triumvirate consisting of Siim Tanel Annus the priest king, Raul Kurvitz the brutal dandy and Jaan Toomik the father and the son participated for the first time in the Venice Biennale.” Siim Tanel Annus was one of the first consistent performance artists in Estonia. He made huge rituals in his backyard where, at times, he played the role of the king. Kurvitz was into ‘technodelic’ insanity and Jaan Toomik participated in the Biennale with twelve coffins. So the esotericism was really there. But what Margus points out is that Venice Biennale very quickly became – literally already by the next time we participated – the place where the Estonian society had to show itself as normalised – having gone through a transformation from socialism to
capitalism. Tamm used the opposition, “natural versus normal”, which I very much like. Estonia had to “normalise” and the Venice Biennale became the place where Estonia could show itself as a normal country next to other normal countries. So Novitskova’s pavilion, following the normcore, is in that way very political. By following the contemporary mainstream, it carries out Estonian cultural policy.

Valts: I am unsure whether the “contemporaneity as normality” represented by Novitskova isn’t actually a minority when looking at what else goes on in the rest of the biennale. That is one thing. But coming back to the conversation of esoterics as a commentary on politics, I think that if it is a commentary, it is a comment president Vladimir Putin would make. By that I mean Russia is a country that also went through the transformation from socialism to capitalism, and many people were deeply unhappy about it. So Russia ended up again becoming an authoritarian state. I think the narrative of discrediting normal democratic processes – creating various conspiracies or indeed being very dismissive about normal electoral processes, accountability and rule-of-law, presenting it all as some sort of fiction very much like Fišers’s work suggests – is quite irresponsible in the current political climate. It sounds like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin – not really thinking beyond the frame.

Šelda: I am not sure whether you always have to be straightforwardly political, to actually be political. For example, my newly found love is Annie Sprinkle’s *Ecosex Manifesto* and *Ecosex walking tour* in which I managed to participate in Kassel during Documenta 14. Her chosen tools were very playful, and metaphoric. She uses sex as a metaphor for politics and for environmental issues; how we treat our planet is actualised through the topic of sex. And her ways of doing it are kinky. She is suggesting for us to join in the orgy and to make love to nature, to find a way to become a nature lover. “If you perceive nature as your lover and not as your mother, you will want to take more care of it”. This is one of the *Ecosex* movement’s slogans. By that, I just want to say that there can be very different ways and sideways in the way we talk about current problems. As you mentioned Donald Trump, some of the painful questions being debated right now are about global warming, human rights, wars or refugees – these being the top of the hot topics at the moment. Politics is a very wide topic. There are different kinds of problems. Of course, if the artwork becomes too much of a play and less straightforward, and where you cannot make out whether it is more than just a game anymore or not – using reptiles or something like that to talk about human problems – therein lies a problem. But that’s another question.

Valts: In this sense I did feel that it might be productive to look at Fišers’s work in the context of the global trend that is called the Anthropocene and interspecies relationships. I mean, that is what is literally in the images. And, in many cases, it is literally sex. Instead of the curator’s proposal to look at it as some sort of a dig at the politics, maybe it would be much more productive to position Fišers’s works into this new context?
Storytelling

Šelda: Fišers, himself, is a kind of conspiracy theory created by all the other people around him. All the professionals are trying to riddle him. It also seems that he allows different kinds of theories to be built around him and his work. I guess one of his biggest trustees is Inga Šteimane as they have worked together on several occasions. So we don’t actually know what he has to say for himself or what his position is, because in his exhibitions the interpretation is given mostly by curators.

Valts: I’m not an art historian so I would not pay that much attention to what the artist says. I mean, come on, who cares? Let the historians deal with that.

Indrek: But at the same time, Valts, when you refer to interspecies sex as being a current trend, in this sense isn’t Fišers being very much current? A few months ago, two Estonian journalists were speaking out about their despair when looking at the list of the best-selling books in Estonia. While Lithuanians are very proud of being the last country to turn from Paganism to Christianity, Estonia is very proud of being one of the three countries in the world where atheists are not discriminated against. And in this proudly atheistic country not only in the top ten but, I think, even the top three best-selling books could be classified as “esoteric”. In a way, Fišers as a phenomena rides on top of that wave, and I would like to claim that Novitskova does the same, albeit differently. Internet and big data are just new words for inherently esoteric concepts. It’s “new magic”. And, I don’t think there is anything new about mystifying technology either; the first recorded UFO sighting described the UFO as a steam-engine locomotive with a lot of lights, much like in the movie Back to the Future
What I would claim, however, is that Novitskova and Fišers are running on the same track in this sense – that everybody likes esotericism. In Novitskova’s case though, the topic is more clearly rationalised and does not refer directly to conspiracies.

Šelda: But I must say I was surprised, because when I compare Novitskova’s pavilion to the two other Estonian pavilions I have previously seen, to Jaanus Samma and Denes Farkas before that, Novitskova was the least straightforwardly conceptualised. Samma worked with history and archive, “playing” the museum. Farkas went into language and literature. Classics of minimalism and conceptualism are his best friends, I guess. Novitskova, in comparison to them, was much more abstract, chaotic and mysterious, in a good sense.

Indrek: And isn’t there much more storytelling overall, especially when we think about the Lithuanian pavilion? In the 55th Biennale, the Lithuanian pavilion that they shared together with Cyprus, got a special mention from the jury. The pavilion exhibition was very conceptual, very hard-edged. The current pavilion is much more about storytelling.

Šelda: That was a surprise for me as well. I am so used to seeing Lithuanians working in a Fluxus-like conceptualist manner, but the current show took quite a different direction. I would even say it was kind of surreal and naive with all those bigger and smaller wooden sculptures emerging from different corners of the space.

Indrek: When one walked into the Lithuanian pavilion and saw this huge horn on the floor, one might have been a little confused as to whether they’d arrived at the right place or not. But by the time they had been back stage, and up to the second floor, everything became normal again, as though the horn they’d just seen was “proper” contemporary art. Valts, what did you think about the storytelling issue?

Valts: I certainly liked the story in the Lithuanian pavilion. If you went upstairs, you had four saints looking down at the pagan mess that was downstairs… But for me it is not that big of a surprise. Žilvinas Landzbergas recently had an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius, and those giant antlers were also exhibited in the Riga Sculpture Quadrennial last year. In that sense, the question for me is more about why and who decided that the country should be represented by this specific narrative, and what to make of that. In the case of Estonia it seems quite clear. Katja Novitskova was represented in the Berlin Biennale last year, and she is a reasonably safe choice. Her work was also a reasonably safe choice. But I am not so sure about Latvia and Lithuania in that respect – they both certainly looked like there was a story being told, but I don’t think they really knew what that story was themselves. There were some expressive means that suggested a story, but you couldn’t make something coherent out of that. Could you? I am not sure I’d even want to try.
Šelda: Concerning the space, they always manage to find interesting spaces to exhibit in. Lithuania did it again this year. I think the “special mention” they received for their project with Cyprus – and I know this might be a cruel thing to say – was awarded to them partly for the way they worked around the space, and because they decided to use this sports hall
that was situated in the middle of Venice which was surreal in itself and, for me, worked perfectly. In the case this year, also looking from the outside with the skulls in the sculptural decors, the space itself was freakishly befitting and relative to the work contained. I heard from the artist that there was also a money issue concerning what they could afford to rent which forced the Lithuanians to migrate, but because of this reason – and we can discuss the artworks that are exhibited in there as part of this forced “nomadism” – it was exciting to see what the new space they had found by accident, or by design, created, causing a whole different dialogue with the work to come about.

Indrek: The Estonian pavilion “happened to be” next to Palazzo Grassi where Damien Hirst had his exhibition and when I passed through, someone had already managed to write into the guest book saying: “So much better than Hirst”…

Valts: I totally agree!

Indrek: Why I asked about the storytelling is that Hirst does the same thing in a way.

Valts: I saw the Latvian pavilion after I had seen Hirst’s show. I thought that the Latvian pavilion could be read as Damien Hirst light or Damien Hirst noir, or something like that. Because some of the things that appeared to be at play in Fišers’s exhibition, were somewhat similar to Hirst’s show. I mean in terms of imagining some stories and strange mythologies. But perhaps Fišers’s show was a more censored edition, perhaps even a lighter edition of what the Hirst exhibition was about, for small kids.

Šelda: Hirst was less shy of being ridiculous. I have a feeling Latvians always want to have good design. Everything is fancy and very nicely made. And that actually quiets down what Fišers is doing. Maybe it’s his choice, I don’t know. But in the case of Hirst’s show, everything just screamed in your face, and at some point it even got cool.

Indrek: Šelda, you mentioned that Hirst is not afraid of being ridiculous. This is actually also one of the things that Šteimane says about Fišers; if you want to make a joke, you have to do it with a stone face in order to be funny. Now, if you say that Fišers is obviously more afraid to be ridiculous, then how does it feel in the context of Novitskova? Can Novitskova’s post-Internet thing get ridiculous? It seems to be like pop art in a new form.

Šelda: It definitely is. Pop is in its definition ridiculous, it just all comes down to which camouflage it uses. Some can make it very serious. And it is serious. It is wrong to think that pop art is just mimicking pop culture. For example, most South American pop art has been very political. The post-pop art does play with ridiculousness. For those who skipped over the toilet part of the exhibition in the Estonian pavilion – because it continued also in the toilet – there were rubber insects and a monster coming out of the bath in a manner quite like the best-of-the-best bad horror movies.

Indrek: Leaving the toilet and coming back to the ridiculousness. What about the Lithuanian pavilion? Was the Lithuanian pavilion funny?

Valts: Well, firstly I would say that as far as pop is concerned, Fišers was totally pop art.

Indrek: So there actually are some really weird connections between Fišers and Novitskova that I did not even realise before?
Vals: The Lithuanian pavilion had an element that looked like a stage for some sort of dictator. And there was a fan that was going around. I am not sure if this was actually part of the show or if it was because of the hot climate. In that sense it certainly had some touches of humour in there – if you could even take it seriously at all.

Šelda: But I liked that naivety, or the humour around naivety. There was this old cupboard with holes and natural elements inside.

Vals: There were elements of design and applied art.

Šelda: And there were little birds carved from wood – naive little details.

Indrek: There is one more topic which I deliberately left for last. Having read the Latvian and Estonian catalogue, I started to, at some point, note down the authors who had been referred to in the texts. Interestingly enough, it was still Boris Groys, Roland Barthes and even Wassily Kandinsky somewhere with his Über das Geistige in der Kunst. And then there were some weird Latvians, like philosophers Maija Küle and Igors Šuvajevs. I must say, I was surprised. I know that name dropping is over, or out of fashion at the moment in art writing. But I was still surprised that I could not see a new conceptual layer. Šteimane reached back to Barthes Mythologies and Groys Art Power, and yes, they are classics, and she even referred to Aristotle, but…

Vals:…As far as Fišers is concerned, his trajectory has been reasonably consistent in recent years. I am not sure where the new conceptual layer you are looking for would come from.

Šelda: I think that this is also style of a particular curator and maybe it even is a signature of her generation. It becomes apparent following her writing that she seems to like these classical authors and mixes them together. If the catalogue would have been written by somebody else, it could refer towards much more current authors through whom Fišers’s works could be analysed. So it has a lot to do with who is writing.

Indrek: But in defence of Inga Šteimane, I would say that next to Groys, Kandinsky and Barthes, there are also other authors specific to esotericism and so on. So I am not accusing her of having a bad bibliography. Rather, from the point of view of contemporary art theory, it’s the choice of authors she builds her text upon that astonishes me.

Vals: I would certainly take a part in the longing for more contemporary or newer references in writing about art. But if we were to look at the international exhibition at the biennale, then I think you could easily argue that all three Baltic pavilions looked much more contemporary than the main biennale itself. In terms of layout, the biennale was sort of like the Museum of Decorative Art and Design in Riga. Not that I want to discredit the Museum of Decorative Art and Design in Riga.

Indrek: And the texts were just horrible. I was actually happy about the main exhibition being so weak. It gave me more time and the desire to look at the other satellite pavilions.

Vals: Exactly.
Šelda: The main show was structured almost in a childish way. The beauty is in the exhibition coming together as a whole, but this time it felt like a children's exhibition – nature, colour, sound etc.

Indrek: Do you have any last remarks?

Šelda: It was interesting to see that the Estonian pavilion’s organisers had come back to choosing Estonians again – in the sense of curators. To curate their previous two pavilions, they had selected a Polish curator followed by an Italian curator. It almost felt as though the Estonians couldn’t choose an Estonian curator that would be a safe-enough choice, meaning that he or she converted well to the contemporary art world, and so I found it refreshing that they had refrained from the need to keep finding a bigger or smaller celebrity curator who may have had had more visibility on a European scale.