

A Curator's Portrait. Latvia at the 58th Venice Biennale



Inga Lāce. Photo: Mārtiņš Purviņš, Delfi

Under the sunny skies of Los Angeles, Inga Lāce, co-curator of the Latvian pavilion exhibition at the forthcoming 2019 Venice Biennale, and Andrew Berardini, who is to be one of the team members of the Estonian pavilion, go round making small talk to everybody they are introduced to, about how great the Baltic States are, and mentioning by the way that in order to get an idea of it all they have to come to Venice next year. It's going to be great! This is despite the fact that neither of them knows yet exactly how it will all play out. But Lāce's character does not allow for roundabout words in this situation. Instead, she will burst into an energetic description of how vibrant the process has been so far, making it almost impossible not to get involved in the story, or to doubt her claims about how fantastic it will all be, as she herself is obviously already enchanted by the charm of the participants in the project.

Where do curators come from?

We can assume that, if not before, then now that the Latvian Academy of Art has opened a special curatorial studies programme, the position of curator, which reached the Baltic countries with some drama in the early 1990s, has finally found a stable institutional body. Inga Lāce, who could be described as belonging to the second generation of Latvian curators, received her professional education quite recently from the De Appel school in Amsterdam. Dita Birkenšteina, who worked for several years as a manager at the Kim? Contemporary Art Centre in Riga, and played a key role in preparing the project for the forthcoming Venice Biennale, has also just left Riga for De Appel. Kati Ilves, the curator of the last Estonian pavilion, also fulfilled her task, while dividing her time between Amsterdam and Venice. We do not need much insight to predict that in 50 years there will be art history research exhibitions and publications dedicated to the influence of De Appel on the Baltic art scene.

With the biennial being a common name for a major art institution, and with the Venice Biennale being one of the greatest among the many hundreds that take place around the world, curators have quite a lot of influence, as they are the stars of these events, standing separately next to the list of participating artists. But in the context of the national pavilions in Venice, which tend to be solo shows, and in Latvia's case have always been solo shows, the curator's role is more hidden, and we can say it is of secondary importance. Inga Lāce, together with Valentinas Klimašauskas, the former artistic director of the Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, are the curators of Daiga Grantiņas' forthcoming solo exhibition in the Latvian pavilion. For Lāce, this is the first time she is curating a solo show.

When we look at her curatorial career, not only does it lack solo exhibitions, but it also has an obvious socio-political thread running through it. Since most of her curatorial projects were realised while working for the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA), led by Solvita Krese, who is herself a highly influential curator in the Latvian art field, we are tempted to claim that the political stance in Lāce's practice is a result of Krese's influence. Lāce agrees with this diagnosis, adding that she became fully aware of it while studying at De Appel, where all the participants came from very different backgrounds. But what I could gather from Lāce's own descriptions of what has shaped her world-view, the belief in the power of art to convey a political message, seems to be triggered by personal experience.

On leaving school, Lāce set out to rebel against the fashions that were popular with her contemporaries, and decided not to study law or business. Following a suggestion by her sister, she ended up instead on the University of Latvia's Asian studies programme, where she focused on the Middle East, studying Arabic. Not really knowing what to do with what she learned, only in retrospect has she understood the shortcomings of the programme. Having gained her BA, she started, again mostly by chance, as a manager at Riga Art Space, which was then a new, cool and promising exhibition venue run by Ieva Kalniņa, who, quite literally looking into Lāce's eyes, felt she had the right kind of energy for the job. And although in her initial choice Lāce decided not to follow her contemporaries into law, what she did not rebel against was the notion that after you have finished your BA you have to pursue an MA. So she became a student once more, this time at the Latvian Academy of Culture, studying cultural management. What else? If you are already working in the field, it seems to make sense to study it too. But the lectures and academic tasks were dull compared to her day job, so even though she managed to obtain her diploma, in the end it was more like a duty fulfilled rather than an achievement.

In the meantime, the financial crisis struck, and Lāce eventually lost her job at Riga Art Space. This, as she herself put it, finally gave her the freedom to leave Latvia; for why go to work somewhere as an intern if you have a well-paid job at home? So she found herself in Paris at the Mains d'Oeuvres Art Centre. According to her own account, the centre tried to send her around the different departments, so that she would also get an idea about theatre and music production, but her heart lay in the visual arts. Working in the art centre in the Saint-Ouen suburb of Paris, she learned about the colonial history of France through exhibition projects, which made her realise what a weird image of the world she had been fed at the University of Latvia, where the colonial history of Asia was never really a topic. This in turn made it obvious to her how important it is for art, and culture in general, to have an articulated political stance, which we can follow through her career as a curator.



Shared History, exhibition view, Art Museum Riga Bourse. Andrejs Strokina. The Other Side of the Coin. Digital print on dibond, 1×1,125 m, 2018. Photo: Margarita Ogoļceva, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018

The curator

Returning from Paris, Lāce started as an assistant on the Survival Kit No 4 'Downshifting' in 2012. Survival Kit is an annual international contemporary art festival, organised by the LCCA. This is where her collaboration with Solvita Krese started.

Having started working part-time on Survival Kit, she would get more and more involved as other projects came up, until she became an integral part of the LCCA staff.

Lāce sums up her education to that point as three years of rebelling, that is, Asian studies, and two years out of practicality, which was the MA in cultural management, acknowledging that she had finally found a field she was really passionate about. Thus, the idea came up to pursue curatorial studies on the De Appel curatorial programme in Amsterdam. The studies there were apparently rather hands-on. At the time, 'One could graduate without having to write a word. What is taught is to act as an independent active agent, who finds opportunities for him or herself.' When asked about the differences in working as a freelancer as opposed to the office of curating, which is how I would describe the LCCA, which does not have its own exhibition space, Lāce underlines the importance of providing opportunities. Some time after she started at the LCCA, she had a moment of self-doubt over whether to continue at the LCCA, or pursue a freelance curatorial career, until she realised the importance of the opportunities the institution provides, and the encouragement of the team members in backing each other up. Of course, the institution takes up a lot of time. You need to participate in building up the structure that supports you, but the importance of the institutional support your projects have is difficult to overestimate. And in effect, even if you are a freelancer, you still need some sort of outlet for your ideas, which still means looking for an institution to help you implement them, which in turn means relating to the structure of the institution. And this is true even if you have been invited by them.

The hierarchies within the LCCA are not really fixed, in the sense that staff meetings are not solely about practicalities, but curatorial questions in the form of: 'Any suggestions for artists who have worked with this or that theme...?' come up as well. So, it is not necessarily the curator who takes all the decisions alone. Public programmes especially are often curated in collaboration. So, before Amsterdam, she would be engaged, for example, in a programme of symposiums. But only starting from Survival Kit No 8 'Acupuncture of Society' was Lāce listed as a co-curator. Even though the collaboration between Krese and Lāce worked out well, for the last two instalments of Survival Kit, the number of curators grew, with Jonatan Habib Engqvist participating in curating Survival Kit No 9 in the former Biology Faculty in 2017; and now in 2018/2019, a double issue of Survival Kit, Krese and Lāce invited Sumesh Sharma, who in turn invited Àngels Miralda to join in. The initial plan behind inviting a guest curator was that Krese would be the artistic director of the festival, and Lāce would distance herself altogether from the event, in order for the festival to have the freedom to grow in whichever direction it wants to. But the curators invited have so far all insisted on a co-curated programme, while referring to the importance of knowledge about the local situation, etc. This, Lāce says, makes sense. But in effect, they do exactly what Lāce said an institution does: they provide a platform. A practice followed by almost all international art festivals nowadays.



Daiga Grantiņa, exhibition Toll at Palais de Tokyo, 2018. Photo: Toan Vu Huu

Forgiving the formalists

Let us return to the role of the curator, the double-sidedness of which becomes apparent in the overall structure of the Venice Biennale. The central exhibition is all about the curator, who stands on a hillside overseeing the battlefield like a general, making all the strategic and tactical choices, commanding the artists like an army. It is a role curators are quite often hated and criticised for. But then, there are the national pavilions, which are rather often solo shows, and, in the case of the Latvian national pavilion, have always so far been solo shows, with the forthcoming Daiga Grantiņa exhibition being an exception only insofar as it is the first solo show by a female artist to represent Latvia. The curators of these exhibitions are quite often literally invisible. But institutional curators especially also function as gatekeepers to significant resources, be it an art space, or just possibilities for funding. This raises several questions about responsibility. On one hand, it is the curator's role to take care of the art field in general, to be aware of the prevailing trends in art, as well as in society, and provide a voice for marginals. At the same time, while exhibiting at the Venice Biennale, which is effectively global, it is pointless not to speak the denationalised common global tongue of what is currently considered contemporary, one dialect of which is also spoken by Daiga Grantiņa's colourful silicon and plastic sculptures, with their abstract poetic stories. Granted, Manifesta in Palermo this summer, in parallel with the Berlin Biennale, tried curatorial practices which fundamentally undermined the institutional power assigned to the institution of the Biennale, in order to cut down on its capital. But this, I believe, is more a sign of the system trying to balance itself, and not a major turnaround. This is because there needs to be machinery which supports and mediates art. Art belongs to the people in the same way that science belongs to the people. It is a distinct field, with a distinct role to play in society, and it is important that the agents acting in the field know what they are doing and are aware of their role and their power. But this might also be just a white Western approach to aesthetics (uttered in the September 2018 issue of *Frieze*), as one of the criticisms of the Biennale from the global south is the institutions' denial of the biennial platform being able to contribute to aesthetic forms of discourse, effectively being unable to challenge what it means to be contemporary. For example, Zoe Butt, one of the three curators of the 14th Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates, who participated in a round table about biennialism organised by Art Basel, put it: 'The exhibition space is positioned as an arena where history seeks to understand the significance of artistic output. I've struggled with that model quite a bit, because where I am [Vietnam], exhibition-making hasn't been a very long, very prominent, or even very feasible way of showcasing art practice.'

Lāce underlines how important it is for her to put everything in a social setting. But when I use the term social engagement she opposes it, saying that, looking at the most recent projects, 'Portable Landscapes' and 'Shared Histories', nerdly archival would be more correct. It is not so much about engaging in society, as about how a particular artwork relates to the current world. Knowing this about her, it seems rather surprising that she has chosen to work with Daiga Grantiņa, whose works centre first of all on materiality and light. So, I ask Lāce quite openly whether she is rethinking her approach. And she admits that she has recently been opening up and learning about different approaches to art, more abstract, spatial and sculptural manifestations, thanks to the long talks she has had with Grantiņa in the artist's studio in Paris, not only pursuing the Venice project, but even more while preparing the exhibition 'Portable Landscapes' at the Latvian National Art Museum, of which the Paris chapter included Grantiņa, and was also exhibited in Paris at the Villa Vassilieff. Grantiņa can talk about art history, from where she draws her forms, and mythology, but she can also speak about social issues, like being an immigrant in Paris. But only a few people can have this kind of discussion with the artist. The rest will see solely the works. 'Things aren't always that evident,' Lāce says. In a way, the experience of working with Grantiņa seems to have opened her up to artistic approaches she did not work with before. Another, even though quite different, example Lāce describes is that of the Latvian refugee autodidact artist Žanis Waldheims, whose heritage she too worked on at the aforementioned exhibition 'Portable Landscapes'. Waldheims is a geometric abstractionist, something Lāce would not have been interested in working with earlier, but the story behind his approach, how in a literal sense he tried to find a geometrical formula to save humankind, as, in fact so many other modernists did, suddenly fell on fertile ground in Lāce's practice: 'Waldheims' personal story, it's so freaking political, it really blew my mind.'



Survival Kit 10, exhibition view. Kris Lemsalu, Phantom Camp, 2012. Photo: Margarita Ogoļceva, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018



Survival Kit 10, exhibition view. Kader Attia. Reflecting Memory, 2016. Photo: Margarita Ogoļceva, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018. HD video, 48', installation in collaboration with Vladimirs Jakušonoks; installation dimensions variable.



Portable Landscapes, exhibition view, Latvian National Museum of Art, Zanis Waldheims, Drawings, 1965-1988,