

# ‘P’ as in ‘Art Days Deluxe’

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Considering the media attention it seeks – and receives – one of the high-points in Latvia’s visual arts scene is the biannual Purvītis Prize. The nominees for the prize are chosen by a group of seven experts, which change for each edition, who (presumably) have the duty to visit all exhibitions of professional artists taking place in the timeframe of two years<sup>1</sup>, and select quarterly nominees from which eventually the eight finalists are chosen for the prize exhibition, taking place at the Latvian National Museum of Art’s Arsenāls Exhibition Hall. Based on that show, an international jury of nine members chooses the winner announced at an opening reception. This year it took place on February 20.

What remains after the rituals have been performed is a show taking up the largest exhibition space in Riga for 6 weeks. With most of the surrounding

debates, especially this year, concentrating on the nominees, the jury and the winner (not to mention their gender and age), the exhibition itself seems to be left without much 'elite'<sup>2</sup> attention. Still, according to museum's statistics (7575 visitors in 2013), these finalists' exhibitions are rather popular with the public, and, considering the protracted renovation of the main building of the Latvian National Museum of Art, as well as that institution putting its dissent-stifling authority behind the show, one might still expect fireworks. That is no less than the exhibition's rhetoric alludes to: 'The exposition consists of a brilliant ensemble of painting, prints, sculpture, installation and video art, created by the eight artists or artists' collectives nominated for the best achievements in visual arts in 2013 and 2014 by the independent experts for the final of the fourth Purvītis Prize [..].'<sup>3</sup>

The actual aim of the award exposition remains muddy. So is the Purvītis' painting that has been selected to go under the 'P' of the prize's publicity. A different painting is used every year, but this is the first time it is actually included in the exhibition. Situated alone on a vast white wall, it is the first thing one sees upon entering the exhibition halls. It is a noteworthy departure from tradition, as the works of all three previous winners have been located at that spot, fanning (admittedly ridiculous) rumours that the winner is decided and known to the designer even before the jury gathers. Reserving the 'winner's place' for this masterpiece – it is the only work in the exhibition that is framed and has a proper label – suggests, that whatever happens, Purvītis is always already the real recipient of all the praise and tributes.

Beyond this wall, in another departure from the typical dark grey of the previous finalist exhibitions, one enters a space of white lab-light. It appears perfectly suited to Gints Gabrāns' clean exposition and its narrative. At the same time, it suggests a link to the works of Henrijs Preiss, the other nominee in the first hall, through overstating their 'avant-garde' geometry and respectability. The second hall is a twilight zone of 'esoterics'. One encounters the free-standing large-scale paintings of Kaspars Teodors Brambergs and Ginters Krumholcs' existential sculptural installation. Both have turned their backs on Ģirts Muižnieks, never a comfortable inclusion among the eight, and so, apparently, have designer Martins Vizbulis and curator Daiga Rudzāte (the artist's wife), perhaps to underscore the latter's impartiality. A single miserably 'remixed' wall is all that remains of Muižnieks' gallery-sized installation at the Mūkusala Art Salon. One may also happen to wander in the separate compartment of Artūrs Riņķis, which does not fail to recreate the atmosphere of 1970's mysticism-driven science the artist has earned a reputation for since the Soviet era, despite the addition of a disrespectful starry-sky wallpaper (probably meant to imply a trip to the

nominated 'The Middle of Nowhere' art garden located in the rural municipality of Sabile).

In the depth of this 'womb' (the gateway flanked by the sombre soils of Brambergs' works) one finds the exposition of Miķelis Fišers, the eventual winner, and it is hard to object to the jury's selection. If in 2013, his first appearance in the finalists' exhibition, one could question his presence, seemingly based only on the fact of him having had a big personal show in Arsenāls, which resembled a rather chaotic quasi-retrospective, this time Fišers was nominated for a very clear piece that was excellently executed in a well chosen place – Pauls Stradins Museum of History of Medicine<sup>4</sup>.

While Fišers' original installation is transplanted to Arsenāls in its entirety, the works of most of the other artist's appear compressed into the gallery space. Bringing the original exhibitions that have earned artists their nominations to Arsenāls is, of course, nigh impossible, but these souvenirs with often unpredictable relation to the original are all the visitors and, significantly, the jury see and judge. Sune Nordgren, a member of the jury, curator and founder of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, comments that, 'The exhibition of the Purvītis Prize candidates is very complicated as such. If you compare the catalogue and the exhibition, the works of many artists in the exhibition appear in a different light, but the work of the winner is absolutely perfect – it is exactly the same as it was exhibited in the space of the Medicine Museum [Museum for History of Medicine] – in its original variant.'<sup>5</sup>

Another work that survives in its physical entirety (minus 30 centimeters) is Kristaps Ģelzis and Ģirts Bišs' installation 'Pulpit', originally exhibited in the cloister garden of the Riga Cathedral. With only a video screen to testify for its site-specificity, it is left in the no man's land of the Arsenāls lobby, before the exhibition has properly begun. While the lobby's arched ceiling does support the religious symbolism behind the work, its utilitarian character of being a streetlight gets totally lost under the roof. A possible alternative was demonstrated by *kim?* Contemporary Art Centre in presenting Krišs Salmanis and Kaspars Podnieks' work for the Latvian Pavilion in the Venice Biennale in Riga. As it was materially impossible to show the installation in its original setup, Salmanis literally made an exhibition about the exhibition. While the time-frame for the curator-artist duo of the four Purvītis Prize exhibitions so far – with the finalists being announced a day before Christmas and the exhibition opening on February 20 – may be too tight for such a creative endeavour, the seemingly selective approach that has been dominant under their guidance always raises the same questions. In absence of a stated curatorial policy for

these exhibitions, it remains unclear if the artists have any chance to disagree about the way they are exhibited. At the same time, it is clear why they would rather play along – you don't mess with money (28 500 EUR for the winner).

Spatially distributing the works of the participants to fit in the provided space is an approach reminiscent of the Art Days from the Soviet era, yet one would suspect that surely the Purvītis Prize is aiming for more. Perhaps it would not be too wild a guess that the idea of the exhibition is to give an overview of the contemporary art landscape in Latvia. According to the description of the prize, that means art 'which is deemed to be deeply connected to the developments of the era and forming a bridge between contemporary life, spiritual ideals and intrinsic values.'<sup>6</sup> The change in the overall exhibition design from keeping the works as separate as possible to opening them up to each other in the past two editions, appears to suggest as much.

The landscape that emerges this year is 'cosmic'. Tellingly, five of the finalists and one of Artūrs Riņķis' nominated works were present in the preceding exhibition in these very halls, 'Perspective of the Solar System' (14.11.2014 – 01.02.2015), which was curated by Elita Ansone, one of the experts. She also curated the exhibition that earned Henrijs Preiss his nomination (pushing the 'esoteric' interpretation of his works in the press release) and is working on a PhD paper on New Age. Ieva Kalniņa, another expert of this edition, was the curator of 'In Search of the Horizon' at the Railway History Museum, dealing with (mostly) spiritual exploration in art. Meanwhile, Inga Šteimane, another expert and also the curator of the nominated Miķelis Fišers' exhibition, said in a recent public debate at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, that after years of practice as a critic and curator, she has arrived at metaphysics as the essence of good art. All three being among the most active and influential players in the Latvian curatorial scene and, no doubt, also among the experts, their personal preferences would inevitably shape the process and have to be recognised. Yet that is insufficient to argue that 'cosmos' has been the dominant theme of Latvian art of the preceding two years and, further, implying that it builds any bridges with contemporary life. The 1960 and 70s have irretrievably gone, the space race has dwindled along with the (old) Cold War, and public attention has shifted to other fields of science (where Gabrāns fits fairly well). Meanwhile, an 'esoteric' bent has been pursued by a stable minority of artists and thinkers throughout the centuries without truly being of any particular time and place.

There was a conspicuous lack of such celestial concerns in the action-discotheque 'The Other Purvītis 2013/14' taking place on the same night at the Ģertrūdes Street Theatre. Nor had one to face the awkward sight of eight well-

groomed male geniuses floating on the white suprematist screens reflecting on their nominations. The fact that no woman has been nominated for the Purvītis Prize final for the second time in a row may have been among the reasons that brought feminist critic Jana Kukaine to co-organise the alternative event (although one should add that neither shortlist has any representatives of ethnic or racial minorities). The *other* Purvītis questioned the experts' choices rather than the format of the award. It also had a jury that selected the nominees from the same two-year period. Some of the jury's members had institutional links to the official prize including Šelda Puķīte, contemporary art curator of the National Museum of Art, which is the institution organising the official prize, Līga Lindenbauma, one of the initiators of the alternative prize, and Valts Miķelsons, a critic, both working at the Mūkusalā Art Salon, whose owner Jānis Zuzāns is among the founders and financiers of the Purvītis Prize. And, just as the mean age of the experts was lower, so were the finalists<sup>7</sup>, pointing to a possible generation change. Linking the two, Fišers was listed in the final of both the official and the alternative prize.

But the one thing the alternative event surely did not question, was the necessity of a glitzy exhibition. Nor did the newly launched *kim?* Contemporary Art Center Residency Award, with the international jury shortlisting five artists<sup>8</sup> based on electronic portfolios and determining the winner via studio visits. In both cases, one might argue that the issue lies first of all in funding. The *Other Purvītis*, launched spontaneously as a reaction to the announcement of the finalists of Purvītis Prize, was organised in the space of a few weeks without any budget whatsoever as a one-evening event with a mini-exhibition of those finalists who agreed to take part (5 out of 8). Although Riga Art Space was approached as a possible venue, the option might only have been considered because the space is currently looking for a new director and a new program, and is thus standing empty. Using its premises would have been a gesture with much wider implications than just a comment on the Purvītis Prize results.

*Kim?* obviously had at least some finances for its endeavour, but, all in all, both events were quite similar. *Alternative Purvītis* called its event a disco, trying to be the punk after party or the carnival of the Purvītis Prize official gala. *Kim?*, at the same time, tried – and to some extent succeeded – in mimicking Purvītis' high society milieu by successfully inviting businessmen to the venue and by, instead of criticising the Purvītis Prize, just ignoring it in their PR as an event not worthy of attention, while suggesting something else through their timing with the ceremony taking place a week after the announcement of the Purvītis Prize winner. The *Other Purvītis*' reliance on the official prize for its meaning as an event, and the *kim?* Award referring to contemporaneity as a prestigious value

apparently not present in the Purvītis Prize, makes both prizes unsustainable on their own. This is also reflected by the character of the actual awards: the Other Purvītis winner was determined through a lottery, receiving a jar of money collected on-site – a grotesque symbol – while the *kim?* Residency Award winner gets the possibility to spend two months in Berlin, allowing for a contact with a value that money cannot buy – international collaboration.

Despite their current imperfections, both prizes demonstrate workable alternatives that have a potential to confer comparable symbolic capital on their recipients leaving the question of whether there is any need for a prize exhibition, and if yes, what is its function. In this context, it is noteworthy that three of the artists nominated for the final of the Other Purvītis refused to participate in the exhibition. Ēriks Apaļais did not explain his choice, suggesting in an e-mail an artist he would like to see represented instead. Another was Fišers, who was nominated for the same exhibition and hence had all his best works in Arsenāls. The third – Maija Kurševa – sums up the award debate from an artist's and perhaps even from a much broader perspective:

'This action is critics' and not artists' business, I see it as a kind of joke, but do not intend to take part. If anyone believes that something is unfair or astray, one can talk and debate that. Criticism is a very good thing and one has to have a healthy attitude towards it. I am happy for the artists that receive it [The Purvītis Prize], it is a big pile of money after all. Personally, I have no disappointment in not being nominated or awarded.'<sup>9</sup>

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1. As head of the expert jury, Elita Ansonē explained in the discussion dedicated to art prizes in Latvia, which was held in the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, that the members of the jury have to visit as much as possible all the professional visual art exhibitions happening in the territory of Latvia. It is advised to also follow Latvian artists' projects in other countries, but it is not obligatory, since jury has to travel at their own expense. To discuss a particular project as candidate for nomination, the exhibition needs to be seen by at least four members of the jury. ↑
2. According to eyewitness accounts, after winning the award Miķelis Fišers invited the attendees for a drink at the Other Purvītis, only to be told by Elita Ansonē and Inga Šteimane, both experts for the Purvītis Prize, that the event is not elite enough. ↑

3. From press information. In Latvian. Authors’

translation.: [http://www.lnmm.lv/i/assets/PRESE/2014/12/Purvisa-balva\\_LNMM\\_2014.doc](http://www.lnmm.lv/i/assets/PRESE/2014/12/Purvisa-balva_LNMM_2014.doc)

“Ekspozīciju veido spilgts glezniecības, grafikas, tēlniecības, instalāciju un videomākslas kopums, ko radījuši ceturtajai Purviša balvai par izcilāko sniegumu vizuālajā mākslā 2013. un 2014. gadā neatkarīgo ekspertu izvirzītie astoņi mākslinieki un autoru kolektīvi”

At the moment of writing there is no English version on the museum’s website (March 4, 2015) ↑

4. This is not the first project Miķelis Fišers has made in cooperation with the Museum of History of Medicine. In 1998, during the 2nd World-wide Latvian Contemporary Art Exhibition Fišers exhibited a work featuring a stuffed two-headed dog from the above-mentioned museum’s collection, accompanied by text “God is” – in effect pointing out the necrotic nature of traditional painting. ↑

5. In Latvian. Authors’

translation. [http://www.artterritory.com/lv/teksti/raksti/4455-nebija\\_viegli\\_gruti\\_gan/](http://www.artterritory.com/lv/teksti/raksti/4455-nebija_viegli_gruti_gan/)

“Purviša balvas” kandidātu izstāde kā tāda ir ļoti sarežģīta. Ja jūs salīdzinātu katalogu un izstādi, daudzu mākslinieku darbi izstādē atklātos citā gaismā, taču uzvarētāja darbs ir absolūti perfekts – tas ir tieši tāds pats, kāds tas tika izstādīts Medicīnas muzeja telpā – oriģinālajā darba variantā.’ ↑

6. <http://www.purvisabalva.lv/en/about> ↑

7. The nominated artists were Ieva Epnere, Maija Kurševa, Anda Lāce, Izolde Cēsniere, Ivars Grāvlejs, Miks Mitrēvics & Kristīne Kursiša, Miķelis Fišers, Ēriks Apaļais ↑

8. Ieva Epnere, Kaspars Groševs, Darja Meļņikova, artist duo Miks Mitrēvics & Kristīne Kursiša and Krišs Salmanis. ↑

9. In Latvian. Authors’

translation. <http://www.muzeji.lv/lv/museums/museums-association/all/akcijas-diskotekas-cits-purvitis-2013-and-2014-balvu-sanjem-izolde-cesniece/>

“Šāda akcija ir kritiķu, ne mākslinieku lieta, es to uztveru kā tādu joku, bet piedalīties nedomāju. Ja kādam šķiet, ka kaut kas ir negodīgi vai griezi, par to var runāt un diskutēt. Kritika ir ļoti laba lieta un to vajag veselīgi uztvert. Es priecājos par māksliniekiem, kas to [Purviša balvu] saņem, tā tomēr ir baigā naudas čupa. Man personīgi nav nekādu pārdzīvojumu, ka neesmu nominēta vai apbalvota.” ↑

