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KATERINA GREGOS: WE CONCENTRATE ON THE BALTIC REGION BECAUSE IT IS A TERRA INCOGNITA

BY Irene Kukota (<https://www.russianartandculture.com/authors/irene-kukota/>) POSTED 04/06/2018 9:33 PM



Katerina Gregos. Photo by David Plas. Courtesy@RIBOCA

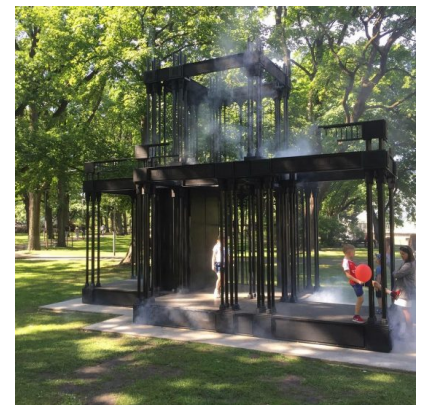
Quite recently, we have witnessed the debut of Tbilisi Art Fair (<https://www.russianartandculture.com/tbilisi-or-not-tbilisi/>), which is now followed by the inaugural edition of the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA) (<http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/ribo-ca-latvia/>) The organisers aim to launch RIBOCA as an international biennial with the European focus and a strong regional profile. The main theme is **Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More**. It was borrowed from the title of the book published in 2005 and written by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's about life in the Soviet Union. The Biennial is a meditation on the past and present, inviting one to stop and think. Perhaps, the words of the essayist **Pico Iyers** carry the gist of the whole show: "In an age of acceleration, nothing can be more exhilarating than going slow. And in an age of distraction, nothing is so luxurious as paying attention. And in an age of constant movement, nothing is so urgent as sitting still".

Overall, there are 104 artists including 10 collectives participating in the biennial, almost 70% of them being from the Baltic region (including Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Germany). The rest come from such countries as Korea, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, South Africa, Russia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Greece and Bulgaria. Russia is represented by **Aslan Gaisumov, Taus Makhacheva, Marina Pinsky, The Agency of Singular Investigations (Stanislav Shuripa, Anna Titova)**, Russian being one of the official languages of the Biennial.

RIBOCA is directed by the founder **Agniya Mirgorodskaya** and curated by **Katerina Gregos**. We were lucky enough to approach and interview them both while the Biennial was still in the making.

Irene Kukota : *We have recently witnessed the phenomenal proliferation of art fairs and biennials. How will Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art be different and in which way?*

Katerina Gregos : It is going to be very different in several ways. Previously, I have been involved into organising a number of Biennials myself, including two pavilions in Venice which were actually group shows, then Manifesta (<https://manifesta.org/>), Göteborg International Biennial (<http://www.gibca.se/>), Thessaloniki Biennale (<http://thessalonikiennale.gr/en/>). And, consequently, I am very much aware of the critique surrounding the increasing "bienallization". In fact, many biennials suffer from inflationary and indexical tendencies, in their attempt to tick all the right boxes. Frequently, they also have overwhelmingly grand ambitions that raise expectations but leave them unfulfilled, be these of artists or audiences. As a result, they grow too big and unmanageable. Therefore, it was really important for us to create a sustainable model, which would remain sustainable on several levels for both artists and visitors. In terms of artistic production, we are well aware of how artists are forced into conditions of economic precarity: they are often not paid properly, their work is not financed, and, therefore, it often ends up being presented in a compromised manner. Our Biennial is going to start with addressing this issue: all our artists will be paid. We have created for them such conditions that their work is properly commissioned and then will be properly presented to the public within a given negotiated space. We also want to focus on our visitors: we are not going to be a huge Biennial with 47 venues, no. We have approximately 5-7 venues, where we allow the deceleration (as opposed to acceleration) of perception, de- growth and proper mediation, as well.



James Beckett, Palace Ruin Courtesy@RIBOCA

I. K. : *Well, if you are taking care of ethical aspects, it might also mean that you are keeping the numbers of artists relatively small, concentrating on the select chosen few. So, to how many artists will RIBOCA limit itself now and in future?*

K.G.: Well, we are planning to keep the numbers of participating artists between 80 and 100. This makes the issue of presentation of paramount importance. I think the problem with many Biennials is that presentation is often very indexical: the exposition features the token work by many artists. What we really wanted to do, was to create a situation where artists are better represented. In addition to new commissions, we also display other already existing or recent artworks at the Biennial.

I.K. This sounds very encouraging! What, I believe, many Biennials suffer from, is the rotation of same names and same works on a routine basis. You just travel from Biennial to Biennial and gasp: 'A-ha, we've met before!'. We are navigating the same pool of names, styles and works. Are you planning to highlight this Biennial *deja vu* experience and how?

K.G.: Well, obviously, I am a curator and the large part of my work is research. I have been engaged by Agniya (i.e. Agniya Mirgorodskaya, the director) to concentrate on this over the year and a half preceding the opening of the RIBOCA. I also lecture quite a lot in various institutions, so I am in touch with lots of young artists, so we *will* have some new faces, not just the usual suspects. Prepare for lots of discoveries at this Biennial, a great deal of artists from all generations! I believe, another thing which needs to be addressed, is the age discrimination in the art world. Also, as Agniya has intended, we will give Baltic artists the priority. This does not mean, though, that we are talking in terms of percentage stats. Rather, we were seeking to find the artists who are complimentary to the issues and the main subject we are dealing with. We do concentrate on the Baltic region because it is a *Terra Incognita*. When the Soviet Union collapsed there was this craze about Eastern European art in the early 1990s and afterwards the Baltic States fell by the wayside. The artistic production in these three Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) is completely different, so you cannot even speak about the Baltic production as something monolithic.

I think the location is very special and so is the history of the city, and the city itself as a physical structure. Our venues are also quite unusual: one is a former airport which used to operate in the Soviet times, and even before the USSR emerged. It is a true relic from another era. We are working with the biological department of the University of Riga, with the former Bolshevichka Textile Factory. Another venue is the modernist railway station named Dubulti.

I.K. : So how are you going to highlight the uniqueness of the Baltic region? Through which media, events or initiatives?

At this stage Agniya Mirgorodskaya, the director of the RIBOCA joined our conversation.



Agniya Mirgorodskaya, June 2017. Courtesy@RIBOCA

Agniya Mirgorodskaya: I have a strong feeling that Riga is a perfect place for RIBOCA. It is still underexplored, but it truly deserves international attention because, historically, it has played the pivotal role in the region: it has been a major industrial centre and it also has an important port. In this way, the city has been always a window, or a door, to the West for merchants and businessmen. It is a fascinating city, which brings together very different styles and very different cultures from various historical periods. There is a Germanic feel to it in the Medieval city, then one strolls into the areas with unique Art Deco district that was created in the early 20th century. Also, nowhere in Europe will you find such concentration of buildings in the so-called *Jugendstil*. Obviously, our Biennial will make historical references to the recent past of the region but will not be entirely focused on this. We believe that this city and the region as a whole has a lot to offer to its visitors. Talking of this, we will also take care of the locals, as we have designed a very robust educational programme for the local public. We hope to reach out to as many schools and universities as we can, and we will be taking them on guided tours through the Biennial, extending to them our message and

tailoring it for various age and social groups within the city. We have drafted an interesting public programme: we have invited speakers from various fields — not only from the world of art but also from the areas of science and technology. We will cover a wide spectrum of subjects and issues, and we expect people from various walks of life and backgrounds to take interest and enter this dialogue about the current state of affairs, socially, psychologically, politically and, of course, artistically.

K.G.: The concept of the exhibition is dealing with how we perceive changes at this moment in history — hence its title *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. Riga is perfect for meditating on this precisely because Latvia as a Baltic country has experienced seismic changes and seismic shifts. And at the same time all Baltic countries managed to retain their own strong sense of identity. The experience of time and the changes it has brought, are not the same in Riga, Vilnius or Tallinn in exactly the same way as London or New York differ from Dakar. I think that the backdrop of Latvian culture, the relationship with nature and a very diverse and layered history of the Baltic countries which had been occupied by a variety of forces over the past has created an increasingly rich historical backdrop for the Biennial. At the same time, recent history has brought them to the forefront of discussing transitions and seismic shifts from communism to globalisation and economic restructuring, to new identity politics and global reintegration. What is special about our Biennial is that we do not intend to tick all the boxes. We would rather prefer to integrate into the cultural life of the region and have a more European focus. In this way, we will retain its character as an international Biennial but still continue being aware of the fact that it cannot cover the whole global range of art. We will focus on the issues specific to our situation and place at the moment, and we are planning to do it from the perspective of Riga looking outwards.

I.K. : Outwards towards Europe?

K.G. : Towards Europe, of course, because the world is interconnected and interdependent today. We should even look beyond the borders of Europe. However, our experience of the European history is very different from other European countries, and this is the position that we are coming from.

I.K.: Well, this is quite an ambitious plan! However, I wanted to ask, how people perceive contemporary art here in Riga? Are they conservative, wary of it or are they more open and enthusiastic about it?

K.G: I think, you cannot generalise it this way. We should speak not just of the public, but of different publics.

I.K.: How you are planning to attract the collectors? Are you going to work with them, drawing their attention, say, to emerging artists or art representatives of the region?

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(http://www.ribo.ca)

K.G.: Collectors are just a fraction of a Biennial public. We are not only working only with collectors; we are working with different publics.

I.K.: What would you like to achieve with this Biennial? You wish to re-establish the Baltic art as a phenomenon to reckon with?

K.G.: Definitely, we hope to bring Baltic art out of the shadows because the art scene in Baltic countries is varied and prolific: it is not the same in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — each of them has its own character.

A.M.: We are very interested in attracting audiences from Estonia and Lithuania alike to our Biennial. We would like to target different age groups and areas of interest, as we also hope to attract the audiences who are not very familiar with contemporary art. Even though we have developed a comprehensive public programme which is not entirely focused on art, yet we are running a special department which is focused entirely on widening the public appeal and attracting participation in the Biennial.

A very important aspect, is that we are creating sustainable model for the Biennial, as Katerina has mentioned it already. Also, by creating this Biennial, we want to bring something new and fresh to the international art scene. This will not exclusively mean sound names — this will be a place of discovery of new artists who work in the region.



Nikos Navridis All of old. Nothing else ever... (2018). New commission for the Riga Biennial. Photo by Andrejs Strokins. Courtesy@RIBOCA

I.K. Also, another question. You have fantastic plans but how are you financing the Biennial?

A.M.: RIBOCA is an entirely a private initiative, exclusively supported by my family foundation. Luckily, my family believed in me and entrusted me with the funds to make my dreams myself. I used to be involved in the arts myself, for some time and lived in London for about eight years. I worked with commercial art galleries at some point, but I had a strong feeling that my interest lies totally in the non-commercial sector.

I.K. How did you decide to organise this Biennial then?

A.M.: I personally believe that Biennials are the best model to showcase art and highlight the artistic practices of a particular area. I am myself from the Baltic region, my mother is Lithuanian, and I strongly felt that there was a great need to bring the art of the region to the attention of the public.

I.K.: Are you also supported by any international funds, museums or other institutions?

Yes, of course. To name a few, we are collaborating with the Latvian University, Contemporary Art Centre in Riga, Danish Arts Foundation, Mondrian Fund, Oslo National Academy of Arts, Swedish Grants Committee's international exchange programme for Visual and Applied Artists (IASPIS), which is based in Stockholm and financed by the Swedish Government. We also work with Generation — Peter and Elena Aven's Foundation, Valsts Foundation, JCDcaux, KDI and many others.

I.K.: How would you like to raise public awareness of contemporary art's importance? Normally, contemporary art is viewed as something very remote from everyday life, something unrelated to it?

K.G.: Well, as Agniya has pointed out, everything starts with education. Some of our projects invite members of the public to participate in them, in this way or another. I will not tell you which projects these are: you have to come and see for yourself.

I.K.: What about the emerging artists from the Riga region? How you are going to take care of them after the Biennial? Are you going to facilitate their careers in this way or another?



One of the venues. Art Station Dubulti. Courtesy@RIBOCA

K.G.: Biennials generate relationships between people, and the fact that we are going to have this extensive educational and public programme means that these relationships will have continuity. The participating artists are not just arriving to Riga to produce their work. They have also been asked to contribute in terms of knowledge and experience — they will give lectures. We will introduce them to local art professionals and at the Academy of Art. We do hope to build a long-term reciprocal relationship — not just invite someone from the outside to do a job and leave.

I think an international Biennial, when properly organised and facilitated, is in itself an ambassador for artwork and a facilitator for the practice of an artist. As I have mentioned, we expect a large international audience and visitors from the Baltic region. However, what I see as the key factor, is international public who



will see the Baltic art for the first time. When, for example, I travel as curator to Biennials, I am often the lookout for young and emerging artists who I do not know. In this way, Biennials play a very important role in promoting young artists who are not yet known to the wider international milieu.

A.M. I think that drawing attention to these artists through our Biennial is the best way of spreading the word about them. Hopefully, some art lovers from London will also come to Riga and discover interesting new names.

The Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA) (<http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/riboca-latvia/>) will run until 28th October 2018. You will find the information about the venues, events and public programme on the RIBOCA website.

We thank our contributor **Anna Kanunikova** for her help in preparation of this article.

Below you will find the full list of the artists participating in the Biennial:

ASI* (The Agency of Singular Investigations), Russia (founded 2014)

Alexis Blake, USA/Netherlands (b.1981)

Alexis Destoop, Belgium/Australia (b.1971)

Adrián Villar Rojas, Argentina (b.1980)

Andrejs Strokins*, Latvia (b.1984)

Andris Eglītis*, Latvia (b.1981)

Annaïk-Lou Pitteloud, Switzerland/Belgium (b.1980)

Anne Duk Hee Jordan, Korea/Germany (b.1978)

Ariane Loze*, Belgium (b.1988)

Aslan Gaisumov, Chechnya (b.1991)

Augustas Serapinas*, Lithuania (b.1990)

Clemens von Wedemeyer*, Germany (b.1974)

Diana Lelonek, Poland (b.1988)

Diāna Tamane*, Latvia/Belgium (b.1986)

Emilija Škarnulytė, Lithuania/Germany (b.1987)

Erik Kessels*, Netherlands (b.1966)

Ēriks Apaļais, Latvia (b.1981)

Eve Kiiler, Estonia, (b.1960)

Femke Herregraven*, Netherlands (b.1982)

Fernando Sánchez Castillo, Spain (b.1970)

Han Hoogerbrugge, Netherlands (b.1963)

Hannah Anbert*, Denmark (b.1984)

Hans Rosenström*, Finland (b.1978)

Henrike Naumann*, Germany (b.1984)

IC-98, Finland (founded 1998)

Ieva Balode, Latvia (b.1981)

Ieva Epnere*, Latvia (b.1977)

Indrė Šerpytytė*,Lithuania/UK (b.1983)

Ivar Veermäe, Estonia/Germany (b.1982)

Jacob Kirkegaard, Denmark (b.1975)

James Beckett, Zimbabwe/Netherlands (b.1977)

Jani Ruscica, Finland (b.1978)

Johanna Gustafsson-Fürst, Sweden (b.1973)

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Johannes Heldén, Sweden (b.1978) & Håkan Jonson, Sweden (b.1978)

Jonas Mekas, Lithuania/USA (b.1922)

Julian Charrière, France (b.1987)

Julian Rosefeldt, Germany (b.1965)

Julijonas Urbonas, Lithuania (b.1981)

Karel Koplímets*, Estonia (b.1986)

Katarzyna Przeważska, Poland (b.1984)

Katrīna Neiburga, Latvia (b.1978)

Kerstin Hamilton*, Sweden (b.1978)

Kristaps Epnērs*, Latvia (b.1976)

Kustaa Saksi, Netherlands (b.1975)

Liina Siib*, Estonia (b.1963)

Lynn Hershman Leeson, USA (b.1941)

Maarten Vanden Eynde*, Belgium (b.1977)

Marco Montiel-Soto, Venezuela/Germany (b.1976)

Marge Monko*, Estonia (b.1976)

Marina Pinsky*, Russia/Belgium (b.1986)

Marisa Benjamim, Portugal/Germany (b.1981)

Mark Dion*, USA (b.1961)

Maryam Jafri, Pakistan/Denmark (b.1972)

Melanie Bonajo, Netherlands, (b.1978)

Michael Landy*, UK (b.1963)

Michael Sailstorfer*, Germany (b.1979)

Minna Rainio & Mark Roberts, Finland/UK (b.1974, b.1970)

Nabil Boutros, Egypt/France (1954)

Nedko Solakov*, Bulgaria (b.1957)

Nicolas Kozakis, Greece/Belgium (b.1967) & Raoul Vaneigem, Belgium (b.1934)

Nikos Navridis*, Greece (b.1958)

Oswaldo Maciá*, Colombia/UK (b.1960)

Orbita, Latvia (founded 1999)

Paulis Liepa*, Latvia (b.1978)

Petra Bauer, Sweden (b.1970) & Rebecka Katz-Thor*, Sweden (b.1982)

Robert Kuśmirowski*, Poland (b.1973)

Sandra Kosorotova*, Estonia (b.1984)

Sasha Huber, Switzerland/Finland (b.1975)

& Petri Saarikko*, Finland (b.1973)

Saskia Holmkvist*, Sweden (b.1971)

Sissel Tolaas*, Norway/Germany (b.1963)

Sputnik photos*, Poland/Slovakia/Belarus (founded 2006 in Poland)

Stelios Faitakis*, Greece (b.1976)