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Ieva Astahovska about Valdis Āboliņš

Ieva Astahovska: My name is Ieva Astahovska and I'm curator in research here, in the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art in Riga, and I'm mainly working on this research about recent past and basically the socialist or soviet past and it is of course also very amazing, very interesting research to be done, also because most of the people are still very present. We can talk with them, we can approach private archives to really luck to write these things which have not been written yet.

Right now I'm working with research about Latvian art curator and also artist, Valdis Āboliņš, and this is rather untypical research we are doing, and also I'm doing, because Valdis Āboliņš was not living in Latvia, he was living in West Germany but he was very connected with exile community, the Latvian exile community in West Germany and in Europe in general. He was really a bridge who was connecting the western culture and also the exile community living in western countries, and Latvia, which was soviet Latvia that time, and which was rather isolated.

His theoretical position, as he was very leftist and he was belonging to the sixties generation of the western Latvian movement, for example he organized Latvian artists exhibition in West Germany in early seventies, which was an exceptional event. He managed that Latvian artist Maijas Tabakas in the second part of the seventies managed to get the DAAD scholarship and spend the year in West Berlin. She was really the first soviet artist, as it was really unnoticed a lot of times, who got the scholarship, who got permission to leave officially abroad for a year.

Also after his death, he passed away in 84, we could say that this early eighties generation and their connections with the western countries somehow were brought up by Valdis Āboliņš. He was really very in that sense patriot, although he was not nationalist. Really like stressing and pushing that Latvian culture should be more international.

In his early years he was studying architecture in a small town, Aachen, which is in the Westphalia region. That was the region where a lot of the Fluxus and avangard art events were taking place. He was really active and curious about this new culture and he started to organize these events himself. Through the Fluxus events -also including for example very historically important event in the 20th of July in 1964, which was the twentieth anniversary of the [attempt of] assassination against Hitler and that was one of the first event through German culture political past was really consciously brought on the table. And through these activities he was he kind of define himself that he is

mostly interested in art which is political. He is not interested in art as formal gesture or art as esthetical experience. We could say that he was really critical towards capitalism as a system, and as alternative he saw the socialism, which he kind of found in the soviet Latvia, which was his kind of motherland. Of course from today's perspective we can see that he had a lot of idealism, which was actually missing here in the soviet Latvia, which was a totalitarian, authoritarian state. But somehow this formed him a very conscious interest, also in a sense with whom to collaborate, both here in Latvia and also in Germany, for example he was rather close friend of Wolf Vostell and Joseph Beuys and Jörg Immendorff and many others German artists which he collaborated. And it's also important to mention that starting from the mid seventies he was the executive director, we could say so, of the leftist artist organization Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, which is still active also today. And also here, he managed to come several times to Latvia which he could do only through the official way. It meant that his visits in Latvia were strictly controlled and there were organized by the institutions which were actually part of the KGB, the state security service. This is another page of Latvian history, and also art history, to see that he came here and collaborated with the officials, the oppressors. But on the other hand he saw that only real and functioning way to bring this connection of the western culture and here, culture of Latvia. And of course also mainly we are working with his archive and his letters he was sending to his friends here in Latvia and also to other people who were part of the exile community. And we see somehow how his perception changes, he has a lot of hopes and believe and faith in the system, and then of course with time he's becoming more critical and also in a way skeptical we could say.

He was a creative person but also not in a direct sense that he could be called artist. So this time of the sixties and the early seventies I would mainly see him as an art curator. He was organizing exhibitions, he was managing individual artist's creative work in a way. And he was really theorizing about it, which is very important thing which was missing somehow also from the art curators or art organizers here in Latvia. So whatever he did he had to have a clear idea of why he's doing this. But on other hand his field was mainly mail art. He was also drawing, he drew a lot of comics and cartoons, which were political cartoons, several of them were also published, mainly in the exile community press. And from all this work we can see that he was very sharp and very ironic about whatever he was doing. Also in our archive we have quite a lot of his mail art, letters, which are extremely interesting content wise, but also extremely fantastic in its image, for its formal qualities, and they are very experimental, so he was using all the possible materials, starting from collages, assemblages, ... It all started with this one archive, which didn't belong to the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art but we borrow or it was generously given for a while, and it was all Valdis Āboliņš letters with one artist and art curator here in Latvia, Jānis Borgs, who was a close friend of him. We digitalized the archive and through this rather longer activity, we managed to approach the archive of his family, which was also mainly correspondence, incoming correspondence, through which we could see with whom he had contacts and with whom he exchanged letters for a longer period. For example with Vostell. In the sixties he was also having correspondence with Nam June Paik and Jörg Immendorff and all this now legendary figures. And right now, we are mostly working me and my colleague Antra Priede-Krievkalne, as editors and compilers of an almanac about Āboliņš. We are close to the finish. We hope that the book will be published at the end of the year.

He was not really a member of any mail art community and he was not exchanging letters through this kind of programmed agenda which was for mail art as a genre. But from he was doing all this visuals and also whatever it contained, it's clear that he found it as a maybe the most proper expression of himself as an artist, which of course makes him one of the mail art artists. In this almanac, there will be a brilliant essay by the American art historian curator Mark Allan Svede. He is analyzing these mail art contexts between western and eastern cultures during the socialist time. And also he is mentioning this division between "mail art" and "correspondence art". And in that sense maybe could be more appropriate to use the term "correspondence art". Because in mail art was more important sending the letter, but for him the most important thing is that there is a receiver and a result of what this letter really creates.

In the Fluxus context he was mostly seminal as a curator or organizer or provider of these events, provider of the field, of bases for these activities. And also he organized the Gallery Aachen which for two years was running really experimental program with Fluxus members. Valdis Āboliņš was really present and I would even say very charismatic in whatever he was doing and also very dedicated in whatever he was doing.

I think through this research we also speak about those figures which somehow remain in the background, which are not one of those star names, but their presence and in their role in fact have been rather important also in developing this letter really well known international movements like Fluxus.



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