Reexamining Artefacts

Zanete Skarule

14 Feb 2021

An interview with artist Ella Vastijana

In the center of the exhibition Artifacts of the Present (on view until August 29) are four artists of Iar Ella: Vastijana, Monique Arcayna, Augustine Semprevivo and Lisa Lucinda. Through creating a dialogue with space, its history and its imagined future, they are rethinking our place in the world's territorial and historical context.

Vastijana's installation Brave Songs to life stories from the times of the former Training Center and Factory of the Glass Society for the Blind (1910–1999), she meticulously constructed a historical and emotional mosaic of the building to create a scenography of past events that extends beyond mere nostalgia and sentimentality. Vastijana's work is based on the accumulation of a variety of found and handcrafted artefacts, and combining art collections, sporting events, and a lively theater troupe. Vastijana positions the theater as the starting point of the installation, with the props that were left behind by the theater troupe being the main source of inspiration for the artist. Vastijana's installation that organically fills in the spaces, both newly created and found objects have been combined. The returns of the lost construction and have become glasses, while a book built from recycled material has provided the possibility for a renewed perception of the world. In a theater, Vastijana has also created a stage, but one that is autonomous – it does not lang to be filled and is instead content to just "lie" in the silent presence of memories.

Ella Vastijana is a Latvian artist, born in Vermaylo, her studies took her to the Netherlands, where she graduated from Rietveld Academy. Her practice includes installation, sculpture, and performance art. Amsterdam, Sandpoint, Berlin exhibitions have taken place in galleries and art institutions such as Ar in General (New York), ROZAK (Brussels), Passanstelle Contemporary Art Center (Basel), Munich Kunstverein, Stay Kunstverein, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum (Krefeld), de Appel (Amsterdam), Neuerkerk (Wolfenbuttel), Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Kunst Werke (Berlin), and Artist Space (New York). In 2017 Vastijana was a finalist for the Hilma af Klint Award, and she was a participant in Manifesta 12 (2018). Consequently, this exhibition in Ciema offers a rare opportunity to encounter the artist's work in Latvia.

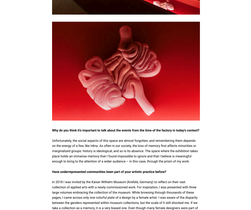
In the exhibition "Artifacts of the Present", you reference and build around events and stories from the former Training Center and Factory of the Glass Society for the Blind (1910–1999). Could you elaborate on how you decided to take this angle?

I am naturally drawn to spaces and locations which hold a memory, some have a very strong spirit still present, and I am interested in engaging with that. My work in general deals with the memory of spaces, and as such relates particularly to the surroundings – location, area and the building itself play a very significant role in my installation process. As a consequence of that, most of my work usually develops from a specific place and its surroundings. In the case of Ciema, I was drawn to the history of the place, the site crisis and feel the space and the area, which then informs the production and/or collecting process.

When I received the invitation to participate in this exhibition, the history of the building fascinated me. It was clear from the start that I would engage with its story, as it seemed impossible not to. While preparing for the first visit, I found a recording of an older TV program in which Ilieva plays – the head librarian of the Ciema Library for the Blind, and a former factory worker herself – spoke about the history of the building and the factory. I was very moved by the story, and I decided that the story of which still exists in the basement halfway that connects the two buildings at the former factory.

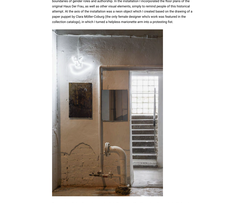
I reached out to Ilieva and explained my approach to preparing the exhibition. At our first meeting in the library, she showed me the collection of large photo albums which contained many photos and other paraphernalia going back to the early years of the factory. The albums were numbered and previously preserved.

Photo: Anete Stalte



The sentiment of Rosmo was very much inspired by the atmosphere I experienced at the museum in the basement of the main building. The museum is basically a large, long showcase on the wall containing various objects, photos, and other artefacts. It was very dark, and the only light was coming from a small fluorescing during my first visit, so I had to view the contents of the showcase with the help of a flashlight. What struck me back then was that the majority of the photo documentation focused on the rich social life that was had at the factory. There were flower exhibitions in the meeting hall of the community, youth presentations, music performances, and a lot of theater. The theater troupe of the place was very famous, and it was a very important part of the community life. I felt that this was an archive material not only illustrated the intense cultural activity of the community but also gave clues as to how significant the factory was to its workers.

People with impaired vision from all over Latvia would be given the possibility to work at one of these training factories. There was often a loving bond now the factory where the workers had apartments provided to them by the factory. The factory was a place where people met, fell in love, and raised families. Building 19, also where the library and the event room are situated. Today the community is still very socially engaged, however, with the collapse of industry there came an abrupt pause, at least compared to the degree at which it had been flourishing before. Through this installation I tried to portray the "importance" that has settled upon everything.



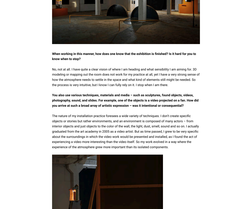
Why do you think it's important to talk about the events from the time of the factory in today's context?

Unfortunately, the social aspects of this space are crumbling, and forgotten, and remembering them depends on the energy of a few, like Ilieva. As often in our society, the loss of memory first affects minorities or marginalized communities, and this is what happens here. I felt that it is very important to preserve and place media on otherness memory that I found impossible to ignore and that I believe is meaningful enough to bring to the attention of a wider audience – in this case, through the prism of my work.

How underrepresented communities have part of your artistic practice before?

In 2019 I was invited by the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum (Krefeld, Germany) to reflect on their own collection of applied art with a totally contemporary look. The collection was composed with three large volumes embracing the collection of the museum. While browsing through thousands of these pages I came across one cross-stitched piece of a design by a female artist. I was aware of the disparity between the genders represented within museum collections, but the scale of it still shocked me. If we look at the collection of the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, the majority of the work by female artists and/or design innovators fills the Wetlandt or Bauhaus, their work was discontinued and dismissed by their male colleagues, who regarded it as kitschy or insufficiently objective.

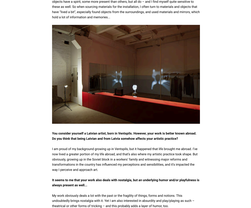
To respond to these practices, a group of women designers created a pavilion called Haus der Frau for the 1914 German Werkbund exhibition in Cologne. Only women by women designers were presented – the intention was to introduce the objective female designer. Ironically, Haus der Frau was dismissed by critics as a copy of male design, and the creativity of the women designers was again criticized. The pavilion was dismantled after the exhibition, and the designers were forced to return to their previous jobs like. So, what today there is hardly any evidence of its existence in historical documents. The context served as the starting point for my installation Haus Der F., which playfully tried to area the pavilion's spirit and its contemporary relevance. The installation consisted of a wooden frame, a large hanging Haus Der Frau, as well as other visual elements, simply to remind people of the historical attempt. At the ends of the installation was a neon object which I created based on the drawing of a paper puppet by Sofie Heller-Colacios (the only female designer which work was featured in the collection catalogue), in which I turned a telephone mannequin arm into a promoting flat.



For your installation Rosmo*, you not only built site-specific objects but also worked with found objects from the surrounding vicinity, presumably seeing to be an important aspect of your work.

My approach to building up a show requires this local sourcing – understanding how people in the area live, being inside the work, zooming in for a bit – this process leaves some sort of sediment. I believe this sediment can change the work with the sense of a performance that has taken place. – that lingers. I am very aware of the fact that I am a foreigner, and I am very aware of the fact that I am a "tourist" that can articulate the installation or the atmosphere, I will elaborate that some from my own realm – off the rest usually happens is etc.

In the case of Rosmo, I worked in Ciema four times – they were a combination of site visits, working with the library and assembling the installation. Each trip offered up a new layer I could then unfold further, and I continued to work in the studio in the ideas which were developed during these trips – the glass work, the volcanoes, or other details. The total installation usually comes to life only at the very last stage – I arrange and position it all together when the lighting is set.

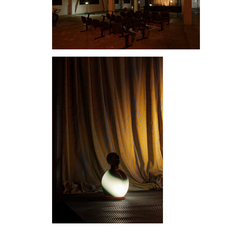


When working in this manner, how does one know that the exhibition is finished? Is it hard for you to know when to stop?

No, not at all. I have quite a clear vision of where I am heading and what sensibility I am aiming for. Sitting in residency or mapping out the room does not work for my practice at all, and have a very strong sense of how the atmosphere needs to settle in the space and what kind of elements still might be needed. So the process is very intuitive, but I know I can fully rely on it. I stop when I am done.

The also use various techniques, materials and media – such as sculpture, found objects, videos, photography, sound, and Ilieva. For example, one of the videos is a video projected on a fan. How do you arrive at such a broad array of artistic expression – was it transitional or consequence?

The nature of my installation practice forces a wide variety of techniques I don't create specific objects or stories but rather environments, and an environment is composed of many actors – from objects to sound, to light, to video, to people. I feel that I am a "director" of a story, and I feel that I graduated from film art academy in 2005 as a video artist. But as time passed I came to be very specific about the surroundings in which the video work would be presented and installed, so I found the act of implementing a video more interesting than the video itself. So I am constantly looking for ways where the importance of the atmosphere grow more important than the isolated contribution.



The installation Rosmo seems to capture a moment. In your own words, it is the people have left the building, but the spaces and the nostalgia suggest a narrative, although you say your work is not narrative driven.

I am very much interested in an intermission moment that marks a kind of absence that is not ultimate abandonment but rather a temporary displacement. It leaves clues for the viewer to compose their own narrative, and it also gives some hope. My work is not driven by narrative in the sense that I don't impose a story upon a viewer, instead, I'm interested in creating a suggestive environment that can form associations in the mind of the viewer.

Do you believe that objects and places have a soul?

I would not use the word soul, but I would use the word spirit. I do believe both spaces as well as objects have a spirit, some objects are present their others but all do – and I find myself very sensitive to these as well. So when sourcing materials for the installation, I often turn to materials and objects that have "lived a lot", especially found objects from the surroundings, and used materials and mirrors, which hold a lot of information and memories.

You consider yourself a Latvian artist, born in Vermaylo. However, your work is better known abroad. Do you think that being Latvian and from Latvia somehow affects your artistic practice?

I am proud of my background growing up in Vermaylo, but it happened that life brought me abroad. I do now have a great portion of my life abroad, and that's also where my artistic practice took shape. But obviously, growing up in the Soviet block in a workers' family and witnessing major reforms and transformations in society has had a strong influence on my production and sensibilities, and it is important the way I perceive and respond to it.

It seems to me that your work also deals with nostalgia, but an underlying humor and/or playfulness is always present as well...

My work obviously deals a lot with the past or the fragility of things, forms and notions. This undoubtedly brings nostalgia with it. Yet I am also interested in absurdity and play/playing as such – theatrical or other forms of trickery – and this probably adds a layer of humor, too.

What inspires you on a daily basis?

Conversations, architecture, history, mythology, dreams, the absentee, everything and everyone that lays.

What are your plans for the future? Are there any particular themes you're excited to explore in your upcoming work?

I have a project Sweden plug based on work by Guido Cantelli. Sewing.

Can you tell us more?

I have become interested in puppet theaters over the past few years – both as a vanishing form of media architecture/culture focus as well as a metaphor for the increasingly stagnant and fully commercialized "theater" of our contemporary society. Cantelli's "Teatro Stabile a Guidonia (Guidonia)" concerns the idea of theater "in a perfect and sacred capital monumental system." I have been obsessed with the notion of "memory buildings", so I am very curious to develop this body of work.

Puppet theaters remind me of my childhood – your daughter must have a lot of fun! What is it like being an artist and a mother? From a newcomer perspective, how is motherhood, in your opinion, perceived in the art world?

Thank you for asking this! This question, unfortunately, keeps falling to make it into the mainstream art world discourse. When it is discussed, it is often as an anecdote, theme and not within the context of the very real and practical problems facing artist parents.

My becoming a mother partially coincided with the pandemic, so the work disparities affecting mother artists were not yet so visible to me. However, when I continued to notice and experience is a lack of support for parents, I felt that it is time to do something. Having a simple network of creative parents "like me" who are also navigating the complex terrain of being an artist and a parent. The

LAT · FR/E · PL/S About us Search
2022/23 Calendar
CONTEMPORARY ART/ARCHITECTURE
ARCHITECTURAL SCENES & STYLES
SCIENCE & CULTURE
OPPORTUNITIES OF ART/ARCHITECTURE
GALLERY CONTEXT
ARTWORK/ART PUBLICATIONS
Events Topical, Q&A Interviews Reviews Articles Projects On Site

art world is definitely not structured to include mothers. There is a general idea that an artist is a single white man in their thirties or forties who is available 24/7. There's a failure to imagine that an artist can also be a mother. There are no structures in place for that – the most basic example: the timing of art events, the length and timing of residencies, and travel and accommodation that does not foresee children and so on. Exhibition openings are typically held between 18:00 and 21:00. It's when networking happens, where you meet curators, gallerists, and other artists. If you're cut off from early evening events, you become isolated.

I had two solo exhibitions in the first year when my daughter was born, one when she was three months old, the other when she was six months. It was extremely demanding – I would not do it again, to be clear. Yet I was not even a single mum. I had some financial stability at the time and both myself and my child were healthy, so clearly, my case was not the most complex one by far.

In the Netherlands, my partner and I run an art space focused on artistic publishing (*Page Not Found*). This year we invited the art critic Hettie Judah to present her book "How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and Other Parents)". In it Judah details the difficulties experienced by artist parents and suggests specific solutions for how to move forward. Together with some artist parents, Hettie has also composed the open manifesto *How Not to Exclude Artist Parents (Some Guidelines for Institutions and Residencies).* The word "artist" can be understood here as a creative worker, I would say. I can imagine that for curators, critics, writers and other people working in the field, this issue is just as valid. I believe more art institutions and cultural organizations should self-reflect and open up to this issue.

I recently found this very meaningful thought by artist Camille Henrot in her book "Milkyways": "My hope is that one day, motherhood will no longer refer to a fixed identity determined by gender, health, and reproductive and economic ability to care, but rather to a way of moving through the world. *Mother*, newly defined, is someone who stands by, stands close and certainly stands against."

** "Rosme" (Activity) is also the name of the socio-political and literary-artistic monthly magazine of the Latvian Society of the Blind*

Title image: Ola Vasiljeva. Photo: Tanya Abramova

Related articles

I know where I'm going but have no idea how I'll get there

Visual Arts —Interviews — 13.07.2022.

An interview with artist Evita Vasiļjeva

Cēsis Art Festival 2022 presents 3 exhibitions

Visual Arts —On Site — 12.07.2022.

July 9–August 14

What not to miss: Cēsis Art Festival 2020

Visual Arts —Events — 23.07.2020.

Programme highlights