

# Active

# Art

Paraguay

"In an era in which everything seems  
relative and art has to descend from  
its pseudo-absolutist heights, I still  
find it possible to talk about activism,  
a contemporary, unique and active  
current in art."

Berlin, Summer 1923

Andrejs Kurcijs

Joachim Hamou, Maija Rudovska  
and Barbara Sirieix  
Editors note and Readers guide  
p. 4

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art I  
P. 9

Bella Marrin  
Fieldnotes  
P. 11

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art II  
P. 23

Rebeka Põldsam on  
Anna-Stina Treumund  
Dreaming of lesbians  
in post-Soviet Estonia  
P. 25

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art III  
P. 35

James Baldwin  
Perspectives  
P. 39

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art I  
P. 45

Laura Boullic  
And so collated  
P. 47

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art V  
P. 59

Eva Barto  
The supporters

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art VI  
P. 61

Robert Glück  
Sanchez and Day  
P. 63

Robert Glück  
Long note on New Narrative  
P. 69

Conversation  
with Ainārs Kamoliņš  
On Active Art VII  
P. 85

Andrejs Kurcijs  
Active Art  
P. 89

Evita Vasiljeva  
Gazes, 2018  
P. 139

Barbara Sirieix, Joachim Hamou  
and Maija Rudovska  
Epilogue  
P. 129

#### Editor's note

In 1923 the Latvian author, philosopher and doctor Andrejs Kurcijs wrote the essay 'Active Art' which is the genesis of the book you are holding in your hand. The text was introduced to the independent curator Maija Rudovska and Zane Onckule, the director of Kim? Contemporary Art Centre at that time, by the Latvian philosopher Ainārs Kamoliņš. He introduced the idea of an interpretation of the original text in a contemporary context: what and how would one define 'active art' today?

Joachim Hamou was invited to join the project as part of Paraguay Press, the French publisher, when the idea of making a book emerged. Soon the idea of doing an exhibition alongside the book as a way of interpreting the concept with artists in a contemporary context seemed relevant. At this point the curator Barbara Sirieix joined as did Fondation Ricard in Paris which hosted the exhibition *A Barbarian in Paris\** between November and December 2018.

It proved to be a difficult task to define 'active art' and this difficulty of defining it without contradicting Kurcijs' intentions became central to our methodology. The way Ainārs unpacked it was a possible starting point: 'One of the paradoxes when we are speaking about active art is that we can't define it because then it's already passive. In this sense it's good to think about active failure. One should do just enough so as not to govern the discourse but still enough to have an impact. To use this force within the art field without making rules.'

It became clear that despite the obvious contradictions and historical misrepresentation 'Active Art' contained a number of questions that reflected our frustrations and needs in terms of art and politics and political art. The title and the content of the text generated a series of critical

conversations; the emergency that had driven Kurcijs to write his text resonated for us given the current antagonistic crises in democratic societies.

‘Active Art’ doesn’t provide answers but many and sometimes obscure propositions. It proved to be operative as a departure point for the collaborations with artists and writers that contributed to this book. The ambiguities highlighted by the text enabled a collective exercise of analysis and interpretation as well as practical processes leading us to share the tasks of editors and curators.

We feel that the combinations of texts, conversations and analysis that lead up to the original text by Kurcijs provide an amplitude of contributions that hopefully will inspire you, the reader, to continue to generate discussions and find the need and inspiration to engage and challenge your particular situation and context in a way that feels fresh and empowering.

#### Readers guide

In this book, Andrejs Kurcijs’ manifesto ‘Active Art’ is accompanied by a series of essays by writers, artists and curators whom we invited to contribute responding to and/or coinciding with the text and ideas provided by Kurcijs. The heterogeneous character of this collection is deliberate. We approach the material as active texts: some of them are of historic nature, others poems, contributions by artists and academic writing. Many are being published here for the first time.

Among the contemporary contributors is the writer and curator Rebeka Põldsam introducing the Estonian artist and her friend Anna-Stina Treumund who was, during her short life, a very important and influential queer artist and activist in the context of transition in the post-Soviet era. Her work was presented in the exhibition at the Fondation

Ricard. As was artist Evita Vasiljeva who has produced some graphic propositions halfway between collage and field notes.

The writer and researcher Bella Marrin responds to the notion of activism through the biological domains of language exploring various contaminations and aseptic techniques of containment. Poet Laura Boullic presents her practice by weaving together a mixed text of notes and correspondences with a narrative of resistance poetry.

Somehow echoing Kurcijs’ manifesto, artist Eva Barto introduces a reader that will be compiled through her participation in several different publications. It will bring together a broad reflection on writing in relation to funding.

A strong inspiration throughout this project was the creation of the literary movement New Narrative and its approach to artistic autonomy. In the mid 1970s New Narrative was born out of the frustration with the binary heteronormative writing that was dominant in Western Literature. A group of queer writers in San Francisco began experimenting with writing in order to address a specific persona and community. We are re-publishing an essay by Robert Glück about New Narrative followed by a rare fiction from 1982.

Relating to the question of the position of the artist in the institution is another historical essay by James Baldwin. We republish one of his last texts, a commission by the African Center in New York from 1987. He was asked to select artefacts from their collection and write about them. Instead of being pulled into the problematic dimensions of the exercise, he used it as an opportunity to create a very strong statement on racism, entitlement and slavery.

Our interest in ‘Active Art’ by Kurcijs hangs on the way it orbits around the problems of art and the notion of

activism: art for political purposes, art for its own purpose or art with no purpose. Throughout the book there runs a conversation with the contemporary philosopher Ainārs Kamoliņš. The questions raised in the dialogue convoke the other contributions expanding further thoughts, an apparatus reflected in the book design.

In the final part of the book we present the first English translation of Kurcijs' essay 'Active Art' which ends with a collection of images that, we assume, he purposely included as visual examples of active art. In what we shaped as an epilogue we three editors dwell on the idea of an active position and whether it can even be contained in a collection of images within a defined space.

Enjoy!

Barbara, Maija, Joachim

\*A barbarian in Paris (Barbars Parizē) was the title of a poetry collection by Andrejs Kurcijs from 1925 in which Kurcijs dwells on the position of an outsider in the cultural epicenter that was the metropolis of Paris at the time. This transnational position was an interesting addition to the whole project.

M Actually it would be nice to know how you came across this text to start with and what it was that caught your attention?

A I was working in a library and the title 'Active Art' caught my attention. At the time I was working on misreading Spinoza, Kurcijs' writing resonated with this. Later on I did a misreading of 'Active Art' itself.

J You use that term 'misreading' often, can you explain it for us?

A The basic idea is very simple, instead of interpreting a text you misread it and it becomes something else. It's a praxis that Harold Bloom developed. He thought that every genius misreads a previous genius and that's the reason why something new can actually happen. In this sense this text by Kurcijs is very good because you can't really make a good interpretation, you can only misread it because I think it is almost impossible to understand what active art is or to give a positive definition—because a negative definition would be that active art is obviously not passive art. But I think that one of the main thing Kurcijs thinks about in 'Active Art' is actually pronounced in the first sentence of this small book. It's just a short sentence actually in the introduction of the text:

*In an era where everything seems relative and art has to descend from its pseudo-absolutist heights, I still find it possible to talk about activism, a contemporary, unique, and active current in art.*

I think it's interesting when we are speaking about the relative—relative values, relative whatever—the first thing people argue is that we should move towards absolutist or universal thinking. But he is doing it the other way around: if everything is relative we should also think about this in relative terms. This is the main thing: how can we distinguish between active and passive art? In the sense that if you are passive you take a universal perspective on something. What is interesting is that what we usually connect to active art or activism would be passive for Kurcijs. We are only registering things that are happening, like those people who are



for animal rights or women's rights or migrants. They are basically just telling you that there is injustice and they will show you the injustice, but showing is basically a passive form of acting for Kurcijs. So that's the first distinction to make when thinking about the relative perspective.

He is also trying to speak about art in terms of an organism. I think this metaphor is interesting in the sense that when we think about illness, we don't think that we should kill or replace our body but that we should heal our body. So if we take this back to activism again, and when I talk about activism it doesn't mean revolution or burning everything down, but that we should try to understand what is the healthy condition and what is the unhealthy condition. That's another metaphor. So in his text we can see a lot of these kind of biological metaphors. And actually it is very hard to understand how art or artworks can help anyone. If art is an institution that is distinct from society then again we are back to the idea of passive art, which shows how people should act in a moralistic sense. This is another problem in Kurcijs' time and ours, that people accept this moralising position; we know what kind of philosophy is fashionable and we adopt that position.

J Do you think that Kurcijs is using these biological metaphors because he was a doctor himself?

A Yes, I think it's not coincidental. Speaking about art as a biological organism is nothing new, if you look at the society as a body every part of it is an organ and art is an organ too. But you can also say it's a useless organ, it's doing something but it's a useless action.

J So is Kurcijs talking about art as healing?

A Not healing, but art should be integrated into the body in this sense.

# Field notes

Bella  
Marrin



## Glocal

It is an aggressive habit of elision that produces a word like 'glocal'. Saying it aloud reminds us of swallowing acid reflux. Perhaps this is fitting, you suggest, it is almost onomatopoeic, well-suited to its meaning, the violent crushing together of the universal and the particular, the nausea and gastric juices induced. Huel™, hangry, hubot, hazmat; linguistically this is the age of the port-manteau: a large travelling bag opening into two equal parts or a word blending the sounds and combining the meanings of two others. These compressions encourage homogeneity, standardised requirements for carry-on baggage. Meaning is emulsified to become thick, opaque and spreadable. The local is spread across the globe like re-blended butter on bread, soft and smooth, the tiny fat globules feel like velvet on your tongue. Regurgitating the glocal—who is the author of this synthesis anyway? *The site-specific artist develops a recognisable style enabling him or her to 'respond' to any site and figure its contingency against the indistinct, abstract ground of globalization; but of course, can only do so from the position of a privileged global citizen, an 'international flaneur' working up research notes in the departure lounge, taxied here and there on minor tributaries of global capital flows.*<sup>1</sup>

1. Robin Mackay,  
'The Barker Topos' in *When Site Lost the Plot*  
(Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2015),  
255.

## Expedition

We begin in a field, surrounded by an expanse of grass and mud. There is a damp silence and a blank light filters through a grey sky. The hood of your anorak obstructs your vision as you turn your head to look around. At this point we question why we came at all and wish we were warmly in bed; it is unseasonably cold and a sharp wind cuts across the flat landscape. The field itself is entirely

unremarkable, an average-sized piece of ground bounded by nondescript hedgerows. Perhaps this was not the best place to begin, but it is well suited to our purpose. In a small notebook we write in pencil *field?* on a new page and underline it twice. To start with, there is this field of mud and grass, a plot of land or a tract distinguished by its containment of some natural product. This is easy, we know how to talk about this kind of field. For instance: 'during the summer the cows were put to pasture in the field', 'they held hands and laughed together as they walked through the field' and so on. But underlying these fields are other kinds of fields, subtextual fields in which 'open-air burning includes burning carcasses in open fields on combustible heaps called pyres', 'immigrant labour provides farmers with a cheap surplus of workers for the fields', 'comparing their results with satellite imaging data, they were able to calculate the increase in melting across the entire ice field' and so on.

## Site

Please keep your proposal relevant to the site of the residency and include a CV with all relevant works and awards. Please engage with the specificities of the site in your. Please note that the residency is aimed towards the development of a site-specific artwork. We welcome. Please keep your application limited to 4000 words. Please note that due to the volume of applications we will not be able to give individual feedback. Dear applicant Please. Welcome to the site, a discrete item, a simple unit, including alongside our own anomalous presence a multiplicity of biotic life incorporated within its boundaries, a set of heterotypic agencies and forces. There is something arbitrary to the plotting of any site, why are the boundaries here and not elsewhere? The fluid substratum of the

site constantly undermines its demarcation, it is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles.<sup>2</sup> The substratum corresponds to a subtextual level of language that is noises

before they are words; I saw some teenagers perform

this once at a noise gig, it was a bit like the sound of

whale calls carried through the Antarctic ice

sheet OOOOOUUUEEWWRRWWWW-

OOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWRRRRRE.

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, '10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)' in *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1988), 46.

## Bedrock

Beneath these fields are again more fields descending like strata; we are hoping to reach the bedrock, which we find in a dictionary: a *field* 'a general area of meaning', 'the site of forensic investigation', 'a place where a subject of scientific study or of artistic representation can be observed in its natural location', 'a complex of forces that serve as causative agents in human behaviour'. How do we talk about these kinds of fields? *The body was found face down in a field*. These kinds of field require appropriate apparel and equipment. We have a dictionary and a piece of piping with a rectangular opening along the side from which we twist the soil and measure the depth along its length. We built our own pedocomparator from a YouTube tutorial, it is a square box containing a grid of cardboard cubes, samples of soil can be organised within, determined by depth and location of sampling. I look at you with a clod of earth in one hand and a tagged cardboard cube in another, as you place the mud inside the box in slow motion, a transubstantiation is taking place, the moment is hybrid. *We should never take our eyes off the material weight of this action.[...] Only the movement of substitution by which the real soil becomes the soil*

known to pedology counts. *The immense abyss separating things and words can be found everywhere, distributed to many smaller gaps between the clods of earth and the cubes-cases-codes of the pedocomparator.*<sup>3</sup>

3. Bruno Latour 'Circulating Reference: Sampling Soil in the Amazon Forest' in *Pandora's Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 49-51.

## Membrane

The internet tells us a cellular membrane creates the conditions for the possibility of life. In a sea of flows, intensity must be contained in order to establish a small area of organisation, like a plastic bag of increased concentration, life on every scale is bounded by some kind of skin holding the thing inside, otherwise everything would be too dilute, would move away, it wouldn't work; entropic logic means everything tends towards chaos. The entry of one cell into another cell, happened once, around two billion years ago creating the first complex eukaryotic cell, the common ancestor of all complex life. In a singular moment of endosymbiosis one bacterium was consumed by another bacterium and became a mitochondrion, the first organ or tool respiring and producing energy through a double membrane. Microbial mats present vistas of small green spongy fields, lush pastures and green valleys these are the earliest forms of life in the fossil record. A biofilm acts as a composite skin, for instance: cyanobacterial soil crusts help to stabilise the soil to prevent erosion and retain water. Again it is the membrane, the containment of specifics that creates the possibility of life, the skin, the scum, the crust; we return to the surfaces of things and think we must get better at describing them. But the notion of an impermeable site requires the exclusion of other sites, relying upon but denying hybridity in its evolution. The impermeable notion is a persistent illusion concealing the porous nature of a boundary. The etymological sense of a *membrane* is that which covers

the multiple members of the body, a limb, a hem, a border, a limbo zone in which movement goes both ways or is uncertain and irresolute. We often feel that way, sometimes we are so awkward it feels impossible to even walk across a room; we are always already outsiders, feeling weird, unformed and unstable.

#### Site-site-site

What is a site-specific artwork? A double iteration, a *nonsensical tautology*, site-site art, specifically-specific art, really specific art, real art, real-real art, really real art.<sup>4</sup> The artist-in-residence is an on-site insider, cursor-dragged, tiny orange legs flapping in the wind and drop-zoomed onto a site, where they burrow around the blue pipelines of Google Earth unearthing depth and granularity, 'local peculiarities' as required. The *site-specific work is in fact actually designed for global circulation as image, and the fact that its sites are in fact already reconfigured by the global exigencies of capital markets.*<sup>5</sup> The tiny orange artist tries to lose themselves, but can never escape from finding themselves, cannot resist enabling 'access to my location', which inhibits the desired *epiphanic fusion*.<sup>6</sup> The resulting experience is always 'interesting' but anticlimactic, a lukewarm bath in the texture of the local site. This sort of artistic tourism or Airbnb nomadism is a kind of terraforming and *usually amounts to no more than a journey on the spot, with the same redundancies of images and behaviour.*<sup>7</sup> We don't really want to talk about artists. Who are our heroes? Astrobiologists, affineurs, forensic investigators, food historians, Private Eyes, pedologists; we don't trust anyone who does not carry a notebook. They are all fieldagents of different sorts, amorphous operatives, working between disciplines they are undisciplined, free electrons. It takes an outsider

to investigate an inside job. A bridge is only a shortcut it's better to go the long way round. Knowledge is derived from movement, it is a kind of choreography and the fieldagent performs a sort of slow waggle dance.

#### Alien sites

Unable to sleep late at night, we sit at the kitchen table eating yoghurt and looking on the Internet at images being sent from the NASA Curiosity rover on Mars. Drilling two inches into the surface of the red planet the Curiosity has discovered organic matter. Initially we are confused, thinking organic means alive, like the colonies of lactobacilli we are spooning inside ourselves. There is life on Mars! We think we can feel all of our bodies, the collectives of human and non-human cells effloresce, *we are not alone!* I feel so. No, you say, the chemical definition of 'organic' means 'containing carbon', how disappointing. The dictionary only confuses us further, organ—organism—organic—organisation, the language is prescriptive in how it articulates agency. What starts as an organ, a noise instrument or simple tool becomes an indicator of *certain kinds of relationship and thence certain kinds of society.*<sup>8</sup> Anyone in the supermarket will tell you organic=good, or they might say 'the whole is everything and the parts are nothing' whilst the inorganic is suspect or 'the whole is nothing more than a collection of individual parts'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a question of animacy, what is at stake is the interrelation of parts. The word organic is an affirmation of the primacy of individuated wholeness over a collective. Actually eating a tomato, whether it is certified organic or not, always

4. Matthew Poole, 'Specificities of Sitedness: A Speculative Sketch' in *When Site Lost the Plot* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2015), 89.
5. Mackay, 'The Barker Topos', 255.
6. Ursula K. Heise, 'From the Blue Planet to Google Earth: Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, and the Imagination of the Global' in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: University Press:Oxford UP, 2008), 29.
7. Felix Guattari (1989), *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 17.
8. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), 228.
9. Coleridge quoted in Williams, *Keywords*, 228.

means entering into a series of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman materials which is part of being in a body of many members, all of which bear some agentic capacity.<sup>10</sup> Neither our whole nor our parts are paramount, but hybrid moments which equate to the processual movement between parts and whole. Eating a tomato reveals the swarm of activity subsisting below and within formed bodies and recalcitrant things, a vitality obscured by our conceptual habit of dividing the world into inorganic matter and organic life.<sup>11</sup>

## Deep currents

The discovery of carbon molecules on Mars lends credence to the idea of panspermia, the theory of an interplanetary transfer of life. How can we orient ourselves within planetary conditions of possibility? The astrobiologist swims in deep currents, each contraction of gelatinous tissue creates a vortex allowing forward propulsion, the field continues to rely on the promise of microbes as revelatory entities that might reveal life's universals with reference to unexpected particulars.<sup>12</sup> This field is a translational zone, performing linguistic transubstantiation, enabling contact to be made between scales, between the universal and the particular, between the global and the local. The absence of a terrestrial fossil record of microbial life means the fieldagent relies on the discovery of bubbles in rocks. Microbial metabolic action creates a distinctive-ly-shaped air pocket, a contour, like the chalk outline left on the crime scene after the body has been removed, a forensic morphology. The materiality of their existence is imprinted as a shape of absent presence. Cyanobacterial microbe-scapes, developed in the labs of astrobiologists, present us with models of possibility, weird alien

10. Jane Bennett, 'Edible Matter' in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 40; 51.

11. Ibid, 50.

12. Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich, 'The perils and promises of microbial abundance: Novel natures and model ecosystems, from artisanal cheese to alien seas' in *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April 2014), 165-193.

ecologies, *ahuman terroirs, submarine mini-gardens of cone-like shape, describing the positive of conical impressions found in ancient rocks, billion-year-old marks left in Earth's paleontological record.*<sup>13</sup>

## Morphology

We propose a morphology of motile filaments; a nexus of fibrils. Imagine the fine chains of bluey-green cyanobacteria, oscillating and gliding across surfaces, did you ever see anything so beautiful. The partitioning between the septa of a floating filamentous chain is equivalent to the idea of a *circulating reference*<sup>14</sup> or a distribution of small gaps throughout a chain which produces knowledge. These gaps are hybrid moments, between the material and the form, like the pause between breathing in and breathing out, a gap that no resemblance could fill, a synaptic leap of connection.<sup>15</sup> A reference, must re-ferre re-ferry ferry across, it must be able to carry the meaning backwards and forwards, just as a telephone message is maintained only along a line.<sup>16</sup> The activity of the fieldagent is articulation, it is not always necessary to carry apparatus, articulation can be performed and embodied. Have you ever seen someone perform the protein fold? *Curving over and tucking inward to create a concave form, he uses the shape of his arms to mimic the internal organization of helices and sheets. When describing the packing of two helices in a protein, he repeatedly draws his arms in towards each other, crossing them at the forearms to specify the precise angle at which they are associated. The flexibility or inflexibility of this association is made clear through the tension he holds in his muscles.*<sup>17</sup> A genuine attempt by the artist to articulate a site will carry him on *dissident vectors* to remote fields from which he may never return.<sup>18</sup>

13. Ibid.

14. Latour, 'Circulating

Reference: Sampling Soil in the Amazon Forest', 24.

15. Ibid, 69.

16. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 93.

17. Natasha Myers, 'Performing the Protein Fold' in *Simulation and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 187-188.

18. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 30

Knowledge is movement, no sooner do we begin to belong then it is time to move on, our presence is always alien and anomalous. We leave the field as quickly as possible with plastic bags full of mud and dirt under our nails, which are gritty between our teeth as we chew on them. The internet tells us that ingesting dirt promotes diverse gut micro-flora; studies show those children exposed to more animal faeces have less incidence of inflammation in the body as they grow into adulthood.

## Ingesting

How do you take your knowledge? Globally palatable local delicacies, bite-sized and pre-digested chosen from laminated photographic menus, you know the kind of place, or alt-modern tapas-style? We prefer outsider-style but we are upset when a waiter offers us a translated menu, our cover is blown! A fieldagent is always a true gastronome, a slow metaboliser, we relish the experience of absorbing anonymous processes through our orifices, we are keen gardeners of intestinal flora. The act of digestion is a performance of particularity *whereby the outside and inside mingle and recombine*,<sup>19</sup> ingestion is synthesis, knowledge is consumed but *digestion is never complete*.<sup>20</sup> Did you 'get anything' from the exhibition? We hate this question. *For the exhibition, the Gallery has become a porous and contingent environment...*<sup>21</sup> were you too tired to *take it in*? The experience should not be comparable to the idea of a meal which fills you up, you cannot eat the artworks, the approach to knowledge should not be one of getting it; digestion is never complete. We hope instead to find, in the experience gaps in our own knowledge; distinctively shaped air pockets.

19. Bennett, 'Edible Matter', 50.  
20. Reza Negarestani & Robin Mackay eds. *Collapse, Volume VII* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011), 25.  
21. <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/pierre-huyghe-uumwelt>

We cannot resist the fad for neologising, in response to the 'ecological turn' in the visual arts we propose the 'digestive motion', an embodied performance, accessible to everyone, knowledge is movement, how many movements do you have a day? Do you self-compost? Why is everything about soil these days? Don't talk to me about compost! Riding the eco-vogue makes us want to want to throw up, which is always the last line of resistance, a final resort, refusing to digest, you could say: *exter-gesting* is activism. The experience of nausea is one of estrangement in which my body becomes alien matter, queasy rippling flesh, fermenting meat, a stranger. An experience of otherness is what we are looking for, not to find something other outside our membranes, but to find ourselves out as other, as a plastic bag *permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles*.



# Active

- B You said, before we started, that there were several aspects you wanted to lay out?
- A Yes there is also the perspective of the artist: What does it mean to be active for an artist? What becomes interesting then is that Kurcijs is trying to talk about active art as some kind of ecstasy. He brings in Van Gogh as an example and I was thinking why? Why the ecstasy? The answer is very interesting because it relates to what we could call Kurcijs' 'Spinozism'. He is speaking about an artist who produces work with neither a universal perspective nor from an entirely subjective position. There should be a middle ground. That is why he speaks about *Amor dei intellectualis*—a love of knowledge in a Spinozian sense. For Spinoza you can't understand the world around you without certain affect. This affect will always influence you but there is also this *Amor dei intellectualis* through which you can see the world without the influence of your own affects. For Kurcijs you are outside the world but at the same time you are inside it.
- M So I'm reading this passage about Van Gogh and there are many aspects that we discussed in the workshops that are problematic. He divides art between its spiritual and the material aspects. Is this somehow related?
- A Yes he is actually writing about how the artist is both dissecting and being dissected at the same time. Again he is talking in medical terms; like being a doctor for someone and for oneself at the same time.

# Art

# Dream ing of lesbians in

Rebeka  
Põldsam  
on Anna-Stina  
Treumund



# post- Soviet Estonia

I met Anna-Stina in the Spring of 2009, on my first year as an art history student when she was an MA student in photography. We briefly dated, and she became a major influence on my becoming an openly lesbian feminist curator and critic. She brought me along on her search for all lesbians in offline and online archives. Most of the materials about lesbians that we found in the archives concerned activist practices and identity politics, for which art was part of a community action. But where was our community?! At that moment, it seemed as if we were the only two homosexual women who were out in an arts academy amongst hundreds of students. So Anna-Stina started to dream about and create her own lesbian feminist community, which would translate and accommodate the Anglo-American theory into the post-Soviet Estonian context.

Anna-Stina's life was short, she ended it in 2017 after decades of suffering from heavy depression. While she could push and inspire people to think in new ways, she herself often felt exhausted. Following her death, her personality and the body of her work remain energising and influential. She was the first self-declared lesbian artist in Estonia. Her artistic practice was based upon her lesbian identity, and she was intent on developing this by making a variety of works from this perspective. She was an ardent activist for women's, animal and sexual and gender minority rights. During the last five or six years, she also became a practitioner and documentarist of BDSM practices and a feminist art house porn photographer. She was an activist and personality, whose work played an essential role in figuring out what the foreign term 'queer' might mean, and what it could mean in Estonia.

When Anna-Stina presented her first solo show *You, Me and Everybody We Don't Know* in 2010, the term 'queer' was completely unknown in Estonia's culture and social scene. Despite a small number of popular books briefly dealing with homosexuality in the 1990s and three Pride marches taking place between 2004–2007, the discourse around LGBT issues and lack of equal rights at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century came from the Soviet era rhetoric. During that time, male homosexuality was criminalised and women's sexuality was generally muted; a patriarchal gender system that was based on women's unpaid labour remained an unquestioned norm. Anna-Stina often expressed her frustration with post-Soviet heteronormativity, which prevented people from thinking independently or acting freely according to their hearts—and she found this situation plain stupid.

The title *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* paraphrases Miranda July's film *You, Me and Everyone We Know*. At the time, Anna-Stina was inspired by Lisa Walker's article 'How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking like What You Are' (1993), which aside from concluding and criticising 1980s gender theories, asked a number of questions about lesbian visibility, and butch-femme dichotomies. However, for Anna-Stina, the question was very literal: how to recognise lesbians apart from you, me and everyone we know?

In response to these issues, Anna-Stina's first show opened up a number of queer theory keywords and proposed visual interpretations for terms such as 'queer'—for which she sits in another woman's back—and 'drag'—for which she wears a blue wig, heavy make-up, a binding and worn-out men's long underwear. She depicted lesbian lifeworlds in photos of her dreaming of a happy love life,

and a video of a dancing lesbian couple. These expressed a common hope amongst lesbians that one day there would exist the right for everybody to get married. This series attempted to depict lesbian identity in Estonia at that time. The exhibition hosted a seminar to introduce key LGBTQI issues and authors in a feminist context, and bridged these new terms with the ones that feminists had already brought to Estonia in earlier years, for example: gender as a masquerade and gendered visibility issues, etc. The exhibition opened up possibilities and conversations, and led to numerous queer-feminist events and discussions.

#### Looking for a context

Like all Estonian artists, from Johan Köler in the mid-19th century to those emerging now, Estonian cultural heritage did not offer Anna-Stina's art a particularly meaningful context—one had to recreate the context as part of one's work. There was no public history of lesbian culture makers, nor were there any who had been publicly active from before the time of Anna-Stina's personal memory or any public representations of local lesbian culture, which might have offered ground upon which to build one's identity. Instead, there were innumerable sources of homophobia online, in law and in the patriarchal culture and media of the country. Also, pornography had normalised objectifying depictions of women having sex with women, leaving lesbian identity no space. In response Anna-Stina made a conscious decision, to collect visual imagery of lesbian women, documenting their lives and sexuality in Estonia. Through this work, she rejected heteronormative life, at times responding directly to homophobic source material, at other times resisting specific aspects of heteronormativity and creating a new conceptual context for her audiences. While Anna-Stina built a significant

anglophone archive of books and files on queer women, she also delved into Estonian art history, where she found a number of gay male artists and art works, but very few works that could be seen as lesbian or expressing same-sex desire as seen by women, not men.

Therefore, Anna-Stina made a new series *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2010), that proposed an homage to Estonian artist Marju Mutsu's (1941–80) prints of single women and women together from 1972. This idea came from reading feminist art historian Katrin Kivimaa's doctoral thesis that was published a couple of years earlier, who briefly discussed a possible lesbian reading of this series. On the one hand, Anna-Stina's photo re-enactment of the series turned Marju Mutsu's series into sort of a landmark lesbian cultural representation. While on the other hand, Treumund's piece expressed a very personal longing for love, which is continued on quite a different portrait *Together II* (2011). In the photo she's sitting with her girlfriend again, eyes closed and dreaming about possible lesbian motherhood as it was shown in the exhibition *Untold Stories* alongside her short documentary titled *Mothers*, which presented a lesbian couple with a child and a single lesbian mother with twins. I vividly remember how some women were happily talking about a baby boom amongst lesbians when they saw the video depicting their old friends.

#### Lesbian methodologies

Treumund continued to seek new methodologies. In 2011 Treumund together with her good friend, the now well-known Estonian gay artist Jaanus Samma, started an activist project called *Queer Stickers Collection*. They invited twelve people to design stickers that would conceptualise queerness from their point of view and to use these

stickers to queer public and private urban spaces. As graffiti is illegal in Estonia, the removable stickers avoided the risk of being fined. In the end, the stickers adorned many street posts, bar toilets and other places across Estonia. The collections were given out at various gathering places and as they ran out quickly, people waited for the next reprint.

This project was ingenious in its format, it involved and unified different people, the audience and the makers—some of the makers were activists, some older artists, some younger artists, some queer, some feminist, some simply finding an affinity with the message and the medium. In addition to this, it invited people to consider what queer might mean. Is it a history? Is it a language specific issue? How would it translate locally? This project had a truly interdisciplinary impetus, comprising art, theory, activism, jurisprudence, history, folklorist studies, social uses of language, and it subscribed to various queer methodologies: raising awareness, reading against the grain, providing the participant with slogans, introducing drag ideas and classic LGBT activist images of red ribbons, fists, unicorns, poodles and rainbows.

#### Lesbian her/stories

After these efforts at activism, documentary filmmaking, lesbian readings of art history, Anna-Stina next looked to the sparse history of Estonian women. Over the years, she had gathered a small network of informants made up of social scientists and historians working in archives, who would share their findings with her. For her exhibition *Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari* in 2012, she photographed a number of her close friends as historical Estonian women who were either unmarried or had been written about in the newspapers as gender curiosities, i.e. they had been transgender or intersex. This

series enabled Anna-Stina to depict her own community and to pay tribute to her historical muses Romaine Brooks and Gluck who had painted famous Left Bank dykes in *fin de siècle* Paris and London. Her exhibition focused attention on the invisibility of women in Estonian history and the little that is known of the lives of 'ordinary people'.

A year later she presented an exhibition depicting a possible lesbian childhood, a 'drag' of childhood. She emphasised the importance of dreaming and that children participate in it fearlessly. The exhibition's title paid tribute to Charlotte Brontë by citing *Jane Eyre*: 'Well then, Jane, call to aid your fancy: suppose you were no longer a girl well reared and disciplined, but a wild boy indulged from childhood upwards.' In addition to queering childhood stories, this exhibition introduced Anna-Stina's new girlfriend, who played the tomboy parts of Winnetou or Daddy spanking Anna-Stina, and would go on to reappear in a number of Anna-Stina's works.

#### Lesbian feminist sex cultures

The fairytales in this 2013 solo show introduced BDSM practices into Anna-Stina's practice, which reappeared in her work in the years that followed. In her video *Princess Diaries II* (2014), dressed in drag and being whipped, she confesses that she is considering turning away from art to have a life as a mother and dominatrix. Despite being quite a well-known artist in Estonia, she became frustrated at never being nominated for the prizes that her peers were put forward for neither did she find a gallery to represent her. It was much harder for her to earn money from her work compared to others of her generation. So for a while she took a break from exhibiting and started photographing for art house feminist porn magazines made in collaboration with the Helsinki scene.

Anna-Stina embarked on PhD research into the depiction of lesbian sexuality in visual culture and gained an income by experimenting with feminist porn practices: actively exploring various sexual practices and subcultures, and for a short period keeping a sub-slave at home. This period inspired Anna-Stina to return to exhibiting. In her 2014 solo show *Dread* in Tallinn, she presented an image of a woman being fisted titled *Origin of One Possible Orgasm* in homage to Gustav Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866) alongside a set of BDSM rules, which were a set of standards for all caring and emancipated relationships. In 2016 she held her final solo show titled *M's Wet Dream* at Tartu Art Museum. There she presented the sex positive power of female jouissance—which consisted of sexual lust as well as erotic excitement about the ability to bear children. Anna-Stina's works suggested sexual passion as a tool of resistance to the omnipresence of sexual violence. The show demonstrated how effectively Anna-Stina was able to articulate a vast set of issues relating to lesbian life: the importance of intimacy, and the significance of cultures of belonging. Ideas which would foster resistance to public violence against lesbians and women, ideas which would change the world, ideas which would encourage people to never stop dreaming.

I would like to follow in the footsteps of Madina Tlostanova's book *What Does It Mean To Be Post-Soviet* (2018), in which she stated that activist art has been the most powerful tool in the process of overcoming internalised post-Soviet power relations. Anna-Stina's project of lesbian art has been highly formative for the current Estonian feminist movement and her legacy retains its impact. Simultaneously, her work re-articulates the transnational narrative of lesbian herstory. Therefore, most

of all, Anna-Stina Treumund proved that in vigorously making her dreams come true, an individual voice can be heard and can change society.

#### Bibliography

- Grazer, Brian, and Charles Fishman. *A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Artel, Rael (ed.). *Anna-Stina Treumund*. Tartu: Tartu Kunstimuuseum, 2017.
- Treumund, Ana-Stina. Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari. Tallinn: Lugemik, 2013
- Tali, Margaret and Tanel Rander (eds). *Arhiivid ja allumatus: visuaalkultuuri muutuvad taktikad Ida-Euroopas*. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia Kirjastus, 2016
- Koobak, Redi. *Whirling stories: postsocialist feminist imaginaries and the visual arts*. Linköping: Linköping University, 2013
- Treumund, Anna-Stina and Jaanus Samma (eds). *Queer Stickers Collection*. LIFT, 2011
- Karro, Kadri. Kaskude ja keeldude vahel ehk lesbiline pilk kunstis. *Eesti Ekspress*, 13/10/2012. <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/reen/kaskude-ja-keeldude-vahel-ehk-lesbiline-pilk-kunstis?id=65091282>
- Nilsson, Andreas and Julia Björnberg, (eds). *Society Acts. The Moderna Exhibition*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2014

A There's a paradox when we are speaking about active art which is that we can't define it. If we could then it would already be passive. In this sense I think it is also useful to think about active failure. You should do just enough not to control the discourse but to have an impact. To use this force within the field of art without making rules.

M Which was also in a way what happened to Kurcijs himself, because he was considered an outsider and his manifesto didn't have a big impact in Latvia. But this reminds me of a quote of Karl Marx about the Paris commune that real activism doesn't have an audience. And in a way that's the position of Kurcijs' text; it didn't have much of an audience then and it doesn't have one now. One could ask why is this text relevant?

A For me, Kurcijs's text is a strange case because usually if I don't understand something I sit down and work on it and eventually it becomes clear. As for you, there are many things in this text I just can't comprehend—but I do understand its meaning, at least I think so. So when I was thinking about why this text should be revisited I was thinking about it as an alternative to a more classical leftwing position. I like the notion that activism is not necessarily political activism.

J But you were talking about this text as having a political quality that could have an importance beyond art.

A If we think about politics in the sense that Nietzsche talks about—he draws a distinction between an active force and reactive force—for him the reactive force is trying to suppress you and through activism you can liberate yourself. I think Kurcijs is thinking about activism in the same way; that activism is a kind of drug against reactive forces.

M Let's go back to the text again, because I find it interesting the way he uses this idea about active art in relation to national identity and nationalism. For him naturally this was an important question since many in the art field were building an identity for Latvia, his homeland, having just won its independence.



- B Also the question of how to consolidate modernity with the national culture. There are passages where he proposes a very progressive idea of the nation that stands in contrast to the common nationalistic ideas of the time stating differences with other nations and so on.

*As long as art was first and foremost considered from the point of view of its subject matter, the national characteristics seemed to be expressed in the unique data of subject matter and ethnography. Now it is different. We are trying to understand art in its formal and constructive laws. Thus the characterisation of the national element faces obvious difficulty. Anyone with some knowledge in ethnography will be able to say that the works of Kustodiyev or Malavin are 'Russian'. But what distinguishes the present art of the French, Italians, Germans or Latvians? And if indeed there are differences, are they greater than between the works of different artists of the same nationality? Is the difference, e.g., between Braque and the Spaniard Picasso greater than between Braque and Matisse? It is not so easy to answer.*

- A I did some research about the historical context and at the time there was a lot of talk about national art but Kurcijs was in opposition to Latvian nationalists who argued that Latvia was the oldest nation and so on, as all nations do as far as I know. For Kurcijs nationalism wasn't built on this kind of meta-historical perspective or contained within geographical borders or even racial borders, for him nationalism was some kind of local perspective.

- J This leads to some questions I had around the idea of active art dealing with history and tradition. How could one work with an active history for instance? Because Kurcijs' argument is contradicted at the end of the text by the proposition of a monumental exhibition—the images at the end of his text intended to demonstrate his theory.

- B It's true, with the question about universalism what is the agenda with this fictional exhibition, this ideal exhibition? I guess that is where Kurcijs is really a modernist. Because he is trying to make filiations, to grow a genealogy

tree to which the artist is connected. It's a totally modernist agenda.

- A Obviously history here is also connected to tradition and one could say there are passive and active traditions. And he is basically against the passive tradition. But then how can we understand active tradition? In the beginning Kurcijs is talking about how words lose meaning and become a kind of skim we use without understanding. So how do you activate these words again? He thinks you can do this through the *Amor del Intellectualis*, an intellectual mathematics. This again is the Spinozan influence.

- J Okay so many different philosophers influence Kurcijs but you also told us that he was anti-Kantian; why is he against Kant?

- A It's actually very interesting that he is criticising Kant. Kurcijs is criticising the *thing-in-itself* and the question is why? One of the simplest answers would be that the *thing-in-itself* is something that is the cause of our perceptions. Kurcijs thought that most artists, in their representations of the world, think in a Kantian way—that there is an appearance and behind that there is an essence. Most suprematists, expressionists and even cubists were trying to find a universal perspective that is the *thing-in-itself*. Kurcijs uses a very old argument borrowed from Friedrich Engels. Engels wrote that there is nothing in-itself because when we know something about a thing it is only through praxis. This is the basis for Karl Marx's famous phrase that you should change the world and not only interpret it. So if you want to understand art in this active context you should think about it in a meta-physical sense without the *thing-in-itself*, without essence, because essence will only show you praxis. To relate this to history and tradition again, it should not be something that you are recreating but something that you are living. That would be the simplest answer I think.

# Art

# Perspec tives

James  
Baldwin



*The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he's unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.*

From *The Fire Next Time*, by James Baldwin

I feel reconciled to myself and my past; in fact to everything. This art speaks directly to me out of my maligned and dishonored past. I come more directly from this than from Rembrandt. Rembrandt means an awful lot to me too, and so does Picasso, to name but two. But this work has been buried, this has been destroyed. We are looking at remnants, fragments of civilization and of civilizations which have something to do with me, and also something to do with you. But you hide it. You historically have denied that; you've done everything in your power to destroy whatever civilization produced this work. Therefore I have to have another connection with it because what you do to them, you are trying to do to me. These are my children. How would I not know this is African! It says something directly to me because I am black. Because the world is composed of black people and white people. What does it mean to be black? It means that you're not white. It speaks to me more directly than other things might because the fact that *I'm* still here and that *it's* still here says things to me which it would not be able to say to you. People think that I'm black, inferior to them. Black people live in white people's imagination, really. There's a great imbalance. Because I don't walk around—no black person I know walks around—with a white person trapped in his skull. But white people do. And it controls them. You see what I mean. White is a state of mind.

I've been aware of African art most of my life because of the Schomburg collection in Harlem. I've known it since I was nine or ten. I do remember that it made an impact on me. Pieces spoke to me. They spoke to me from a long way off. We recognized each other. Perhaps that's the best way to put it. It's not mysterious to me. Appealing is not a world that I would use. It's a similar connection that I have with Miles Davis or Lead Belly or Bessie Smith.

You don't realize that you're asking me very personal questions. You think you're talking about art. But you're not! You're talking about something else. You're talking about something which the West as a group has done its best to destroy. And it's still doing its best to destroy. I'm talking about a kind of testimony to what a human being is or can be—which this mercantile civilization is determined to ignore. And to kill if it can. *I* know they cannot live without it. They don't yet. They'll find out. Every one of these things we've looked at—there have been thousands more that have been destroyed. And the people have been destroyed—or everything has been done by the Western powers to try to destroy them.

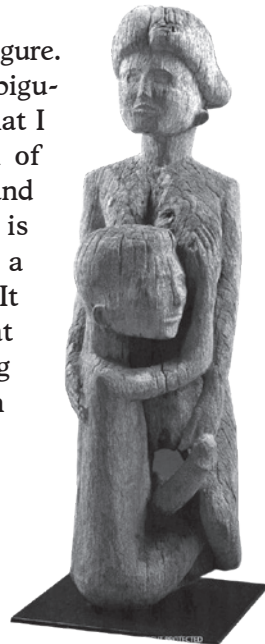
I know the things we looked at. It's forever, a criminal record. Much worse than criminal. And it is not in the past, it is in the present. The record is terrifying. And the attempt to destroy it is not in the past, it is in the present. I am talking about the rape of Africa. We are looking at the remnants of that rape. What's disturbing is not simply the artifact which have remained; what is disturbing about it is the attempt to destroy its sensibility. It's the audacity of the idea of color. And it's the audacity too of the idea of profit! I was on the stock exchange; my children were on the stock exchange. The price of slaves, the price of rice—they were on the same board. People speculated on both.

The artist's work is his intention. There's this curious

dichotomy in the West about form and content. The form is the content. I think the work of artists is to be useful. To have such works, to have them on the wall—you walk in and you are among friends. It's very different to me, and not at all real for the people who may be looking at these objects. They will not, in short, know what they are looking at. One way or another, they don't want to see it. They want to make it something extraneous, something exotic. But they know it contains their lives too. And I have other things to do than to try to translate anything for people who don't hear it. The mathematics of their lives, the algebra of their lives is built on *not* knowing it.

Then maybe I'm tired of being missionary. I'm talking in historical generalities. This is revealed in the choices—the social, political, and economic choices we make. In a way it's as though you're asking me to talk about Art Blakey. I'm not going to talk about Art Blakey. You want to find out? Go and expose yourself to him. You can't find out through a middleman anyway. You wanna play the blues, somebody said, go out and catch them. Then you'll know something I can't tell you. And if I tell you, what makes you think you should believe it?

This is mother and child, male and female figure. It's a curious combination; it's very ambiguous in a way. But let me find the words that I want. In other words, it's a combination of things. It's very, very gentle — the woman and the man. Though it appears that the man is more hopeless, despite the fact that he has a phallus. The way it's positioned is curious. It echoes his coming out of her womb and that she will be carrying his child. She's holding him and he's clinging to her. They're both



indispensable. It echoes childbirth and it promises fertility. The craftsmanship is very economical. I'd like to write a novel like that. The key is somewhere in her face; the way she's looking out and the way he's looking—God knows what *he's* looking at. She's looking at the child she bore, the man she's bearing, and the child she will bear. She knows more about him than he knows about her, which is perfectly all right—that's part of their secret. Something about the arms and the breasts and his squatting and her standing suggests this to me. Is she standing or kneeling? No, it looks like she's kneeling. It's very beautiful.

It's hard to describe these things in a Western language. It speaks of a kind of union which is unimaginable in the West. Men and women distrust each other so profoundly that this piece would not be possible. No one on Madison Avenue could see that without jumping off the roof.

That's why we're called primitive. Primitive—what a curious word.



I love this. There is a sense of continuity—and not only between the figures. *Everything* is connected, holding up—it's being held *together* and also being held *up*. Again, it's another space and another time. It's not a Western idea.

The whole thing is informed by the phallus. The faces of the children are really unreadable in some ways. From the Western point of view, it would be called grotesque. But it's very powerful. And finally, very true. I'm again talking about another space and time. This comes from a language which I'm still trying to excavate. I come from there too. It's an affirmation of the fact that the world is round and that we are all connected and that nothing ever dies.

The Western idea of childhood, or children, is not at all the same idea of childhood that produced me. To put it very brutally—to exaggerate it a little bit, but not much; white people think that childhood is a rehearsal for success. White people think of themselves as safe. But black people raise their children as a rehearsal for danger. In this piece, there's a connection between them—every one of them is facing, they're turning around, they're all looking out. But they aren't protecting themselves; they protect each other. They're joined, but each one is alone too. They are all facing out differently. It's not like Mt. Rushmore—everybody looking either at the north or south. They're looking at the world. Each one sees a part of it depending on where he is. The world is round and everything is connected. They have a tremendous humility and a tremendous energy—they have that in common. It's very affirmative.

J There is a clear idea of organising art so as to make some kind of hierarchy. That feels very much like a scientific approach.

# Active

A I also wondered how he divided the different branches of art. He says at some point that there is no conflict between an artistic statement and a scientific statement. I have some problems with this since those forms of statement are very different and therefore irrelevant to compare. But then I thought that thinking about the statement is the wrong approach as Kurcijs talks about both art and science being a kind of praxis from an Engelsian point of view. Art could be a kind of gesture, not a statement but still representative. I think he means that art can change us, not with political statements but with its transformative power, without an ego. In the end part of another text that Kurcijs wrote about art, he is comparing art with the 'wheel' of Schopenhauer;<sup>1</sup> a wheel without goals, it just continues unconsciously. That could be another way of thinking about active art.

1. Andrejs Kurcijs, *Par Mākslu I* (Rīga: Laikmeta Izdevums, 1932)

B Even if you return to basic art forms where the idea is just to represent reality you still have to deal with this *otherness*. It will always be present however simple the representation. So in this sense I relate this idea of otherness to active art.

M I know that you have read most of Kurcijs' writing. Does he discuss this idea of otherness anywhere in his texts?

A Actually, yes, in his poetry. He was a very conservative poet but there is always an attention to perspective in his writing. For example, there is this short story collection about moonlight and something I can't remember now. In a very simple way he relates the activity of the daytime, but describes how the important things happen only when the moon shines. It is the same world but with different lighting. The reason I'm telling you this is that I believe Kurcijs is trying to work through images. There is no particular perspective, just different agendas in his stories. It's hard to explain how it works but somehow it works. That's also why I'm always opposed to the idea of 'representation' as if there is an objective reality without a subjective quality. And

that is what Kurcijs tries to argue—there is a kind of truth but the main thing is the unconscious quality, we can call it ecstasy. But there are some restrictions as well, for example, the *Amor dei intellectualis* this Spinozan term. It means that there are certain perspectives confining your imagination, so you are restricted through logic, for example. Imagination is your perspective on the world and not the main thing about the world. And I think the same goes for Kurcijs when it comes to art—art should not be just representation even of your imagination.

B I would like to come back to this concept of otherness I have a feeling that you are a bit turned off by it. Am I right?

A It's rather biographical because when I was young I had to read all these books about otherness from French philosophy.

B Ah, that's why... But still, how do you understand it, in the context of philosophy, how do you apprehend it?

A I mean it's old school, right?

B For me the idea of otherness relates to the sci-fi literature I have read recently by feminist black women. In that context otherness is not old school at all.

# And so collated

Laura  
Boullic

What could interest me, perhaps, would be to invent a form of knowledge, with sirens, with witches, with my peers. To cast a spell, to create it instantaneously, and invent a kind of k'own'ledge that would be ours, as our presence would turn out to be naturally all-encompassing (engaged and engaging, invested, incarnate) in the process of its creation. In other words, each of us filled with the numerous presences through which a being travels when she or he is forever encountered by the future.

I would like all that to happen and the flow should only be interrupted with discretion (potential—shall—be potent).

I think planting is the key for this present participle incorporates a mistake in the form of a misconception and aspect in the form of fluidity.

Encompasses movement, in the form of matter that is noise-making / silence-keeping. Appears to compare, even correlate desires. Questions are desires.

Denials are desires. Inspirations are desires. All that is not desire is deference, sleep mode without courage to cease. Seizing the farewell to embrace the return (expressing) everything is possible.



regret, I sigh in ignorance—confined like a b- flat, to suffering  
i invest my roots in the outrage of silence  
i only silence effort  
for effort, I breathe



That's what I call a key. For me, whatever we do, consciously or unconsciously, we are always somewhere in the process, positioning or receiving different keys to existence. Then it's the way they're incorporated, the way we deal with them or not, which ends up informing the present, presence. Like saying a minute is always the result of the sixty seconds within it and that nothing is fixed, in terms of time.



[extract from an interview with Nina Simone, "Nina: An Historical Perspective", a documentary by Peter Rodis—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Si5uW6cnyG4>]

*everybody is half dead  
everybody avoids everybody  
all over the place  
in most situations*

*almost all the time  
i know  
I'm one of those everybodies  
and to me it is terrible  
and so all I'm trying to do all the time  
is just  
open people up so they can feel  
themselves and let themselves be  
open to somebody else  
that is all, that's it*



all practices are independent, one from another,  
carried out with respect for each subject  
the substance, always poetry, unifying  
the work

#### creative permanence

one practice is not enough for all the  
poetry present  
the state of pure creation is a time to  
return, as it grows—learning to channel  
it is a must  
imparting change, transitions, to keep it  
pure (*continuing to expect nothing from  
this synopsis of raw existence*)

conferring the same fervour to the  
technical understanding of 'non-initial'  
art by observing the codes of our own  
creative uniqueness

(addition: this can be applied to human personalities, ways of being and believing, 'non-initial art' would be the other)

wright to belong, in ourselves  
possible in any space  
any space accessible  
fertile earth continuously cultivated



As if my life had taken a leap into reality, against my will, I often allow myself the pleasure of time paused by furtive thoughts fixed on the end of so many forthcoming gazes. The simple and precious joy of acting, more or less, precisely. It's generally not far from there that I encounter faces that are windows to other possible existences and, in general, it's at that point I more or less begin to do everything to maybe create a sort of fusion—a tangible convergence of views that accept fantasy as true, are ready to acknowledge it. I always think that fantasising is self-representing or rather, imagining doing. And that single consciousness is revolutionary.





Perhaps it's a collection. This, or  
perhaps it's an essay.  
Let's say poems.

In any case I can't seem to write a  
collection that someone would publish,  
and even less so an essay. I manage to  
write poems, I manage to write thoughts,  
and, bring them together. But still  
there's no collection that feels  
appropriate to send, relentless, nor an  
essay.

That makes poems

Dance to re-tire.

So there's this thing that blurs my mind  
and body, this professional ambiguity,

if I spend money without earning it

while I write without publishing

what  
d are  
my convictions?

ideas<sup>aides</sup>

gratitude in the eyes does not satisfy the  
owner<sup>theorise</sup>.

...  
(I borrow Michael's Battalla's way of  
exposing words, as I knew at first  
glance that his exposition was not really  
foreign to me)

...  
as I think of war  
of wars that could be dismissed

so long  
all.fe.males

measured the impact of each (each  
blink of the eye  
(each day from the next

'dismissing sense' daily we—forever  
think broadly, daily wi.  
thout taking time to refine features,  
define lines

every blink of the eye is a thought in  
itself,  
a timely agreement  
perhaps unconscious  
time never blinks  
the living deal with understanding its  
rhythm  
is exposed  
so time may take .the shape of the living



The other thing is: art (or intention)  
makes people gather together.

I remember a friend speaking to me  
of the deathly emptiness emanating, in  
her opinion, from private viewings in art  
galleries. A feeling evoked by these  
works and people, and so collated, in  
surroundings that should, we're not  
sure why—remain pure.

So I've noticed there's a tendency to  
paralyse works and artists within the  
function that a gaze bestows upon them,  
within the perceived vision of the art,  
and of artists. The emptiness the work  
can maybe fill.

Nicanor Parra said (he often read  
his poems out loud in the street):  
'Poetry will die if it isn't offended—it must  
be possessed and humiliated in public—  
we'll see later what to do with it',<sup>1</sup> and  
it's true that we're really content to read  
a poem alone. We're happy to  
understand it but we obscure the  
dialogue opened up to us by the poem,  
and we try not to engage with it in our  
own reality. For works create other places  
in reality, other reasons for existence.  
That's one factor in its appraisal. We  
feel different, no longer wanting to  
abandon this feeling of otherworldliness,  
or failing that, to rediscover it. We  
distinguish reality from the work from  
the reality of our own lives, while the work

materialises fully in the reality of each  
environment in which she plays a part.

Flies also materialise in any  
environment in which they play a part.

Often we're less demanding with life  
than with the works we create, but I  
believe it's a way of accepting  
disillusion: self-resignation. We do  
things half-heartedly, for few things in  
the end seem as accessible as we  
imagine them to be. We utter reasonable  
words to rationalise—forgetting to  
reason so as to live.

Works should not be taken to one  
side, there's no need to cut them off so  
much from the rest of the world, even if  
new lands are then created.

Raised with images, with codes, with  
expressions, with culturally dominant  
Western beliefs, I started by thinking, as  
an artist, I needed to distance myself.  
To rise to a place where I could no longer  
be touched, and redistribute: always  
being a compelling beacon of humanity,  
taking for others, translating—but  
my professional, moral, social and artistic  
experience, the pathway followed and  
encounters along the way have shown  
me the limitations when agreeing  
to convey voices other than my own  
(already made from the thousand voices  
of the past minute in 60 seconds /  
or thinking that my only voice is worth

1. Nicanor Parra,  
*Poems and  
Antipoems*, (London:  
W.W.Norton, 1966).

many others) and that an artist, or any person leading a project, should not agree to convey the words of others. To my mind instead, let her breathe life into her desire to express herself through and for herself. Participating. As a matter of urgency.



words conveyed and acknowledged by he-r also promote a desire to convey our own words, to confide our discourse in others

would thinking be allowed if thinking for someone other than me was forbidden? So what happens in construction?

is it possible to avoid creating habits, avoid claiming them—avoid challenging them? Is it possible to be born, and never challenge the state of being? For self-belief to be unfailing?



Human beings can adjust to all situations and presence of mind is needed to recognise subtly aberrant situations that we then speak about with family or friends when we arrive home in the evening and

feel powerless.<sup>2</sup> In concentration camps, they ate wool and used dead bodies to keep warm.<sup>3</sup> But in the meantime, a number of films were released, radio broadcasts on fashions, different reports depending on the town or country, people moaning in the evening, another day without daring, once again, to speak out. Awareness is needed to speak out, luckily that can't be invented. We knew it was wartime, soldiers would walk along the street with lethal weapons, there were bombings and interrogations, there were raids. We knew that people were tortured, killed, we know very well that people are tortured, killed, but what can we do about it? And if I keep quiet about that, why would I strike when I'm replaced by a self-checkout machine and my work becomes unbearable as I've become the mouthpiece for people waiting in the queue? Who should I speak to? I feel alone, and isolated, I need to escape. Even if that means becoming the king's jester just so I can sing. I have to surpass myself, avoid all contact with those realities. Why do we accept we have no right to talk in class, and express our point of view? Why do we get used to ignoring uniforms? Because we experience everything at the same time? Because it's easier? As there are so many of us? But then who seized ownership of our land and insisted we flock to the cities for work,

2. 'and so we live our lives feeling powerless and inauthentic—feeling that the real people are somewhere else, that the characters on the daytime soap operas or the conversations on the late-night talk shows are more real than the people and the conversations in our lives; believing that the movie stars, the celebrities, the rock stars, the People Magazine-people live out the real truth

and drama of our times, while we exist as shadows, and our unique lives, our losses, our passions, which cannot be counted out or measured, which were not approved, or graded, or sold to us at a discount, are not the true value of this world.' Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark, Magic, Sex and Politics*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

3. Celja Stojka, (Lyon: Editions Fage, 2017)

while establishing an official form of knowledge, an aesthetic? And now that the cities are overflowing, who is draining the land on our planet by filling up our screens? Nothing makes more sense than that: everything is possible.

The war we're living through will always be easier to rationalise than the peace we must create ourselves.



How can we activate inspiration? How can we make inspiration active? How can we embody it?



*perhaps it's all a mistake... perhaps there's been a mistake somewhere... and there may be places bearing culture... where collections are loaned... are movable for art creates favourable conditions for reflection for self for conversation therefore... and it adorns a place where we may be able... where we may be able... to converse... here museum... library... to speak we must whisper. Whisper... first mistake...first faux pas. perhaps there's been a mistake somewhere and there may be places*

*bearing culture... where collections are movable for art creates favourable conditions for reflection for conversation therefore! and it adorns a place where we may be able to converse. here museum, library, to speak we must whisper: that's the first faux pas.*

*not good... it's not good when we can't speak, can't express ourselves when we consider something that represents freedom of expression. it is... incoherent... must be lighter... restore the gift of art... demystify it... these frames, must loan them to places... that are living... so it... may have coherence in real life, so it may have the power to act—beings are works that must be watched over, cosseted.*

*I really like the authors' choice. to remain distant from all judgement*

*perhaps there's been a mistake somewhere and there may be places bearing culture. where collections are movable for art creates favourable conditions for conversation so it inhabits a place where we may be able to converse. here museum library to speak we must whisper: first faux pas . and art collections held*



*by museums start to be lent out will maybe even as a result have a fair reduction in value and annihilate the art markets such as it has become, aberrant—for taking care of works to this extent also means leaving them on a pedestal creating a noxious imbalance.*



i really don't know how you were able to tell me I was subjecting others to my art  
(what consideration did I give you, then your works, caring to disassociate the human from the artist?)  
lately, I no longer believe you, if I cast a shadow over you  
that's because you are well and painfully alone in this business  
i continue to recognise the heart you admonish  
if you want to retain the chains of your judgement (such is your freedom, that nothing will be better than that) but no longer let yourself attack the freedom of others in their name.



I remember a pupil at the Beaux-Arts (French National School of Fine Arts) in Paris, when the college was occupied during the 2016 Nuit Debout protests,<sup>4</sup> who wanted to bring in security to guard the institution's Leonardo da Vinci drawings ('the world's largest collection of da Vinci sketches').

People outside the school said these sketches should be taken hostage, that they would provide pressure and ideal protection as the CRS (French riot police) would not be granted permission to gas the da Vinci sketches (the CRS would not be granted permission to gas sketches). But the pupil in question refused categorically and when asked what the drawings meant to him, he replied: 'No-one in this school can hold a candle to da Vinci.'



It wouldn't do anyone justice to force you to read everything in one go (retire in two) and I don't want you to fade away before the words written here, as I don't want anyone to fade away before any being, before any law, policies enforced by people. I would prefer us to face up to it, each according to their rhythm, their will, their means.

4. French social movement emerging from labour reform demonstrations in 2016. Distinct from the recent *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement, seen as a larger, more organic working-class pressure group, initially stemming from protests on rising fuel prices in 2018.

[...]

I expect nothing of you, nothing other than you yourself.



So to continue with the singular presence of a work of art, I slowly realised I didn't want this presence to surpass other presences. I needed therefore to create conditions for conversation rather than conditions for eternal and unconditional recognition (form of slavery?).

Again, works and artists when obscured do not interest me. While I admire Leonardo da Vinci also, I refuse to see myself as his inferior on the grounds that he's produced more, and possibly better than me, as that's a way of alienating and isolating the artist and just instils the belief in us that all things that emanate from him are untouchable or perfect.

That's alienating or isolating the person who sees the work by making them believe they're not equal, that they're no longer able to contribute anything. That's refusing to listen and open up a dialogue. That's refuting the receptivity of works when nothing replies, ever; and that's denying someone's marital status to confine them to a single truth, forever. This is the same in all

professions, for all trends of thought, stemming from every mind.



The DOC free university! Open forum and interactive readings  
For civil poetry, come and discuss poetic thought with us, and bring along your own texts and those by other fe.male writers. We'll prepare a few snacks and bring a few bottles of wine.

[In case that's not enough, bring something, or just you,  
[Come along.

These sessions are based on interactive readings linked together by poetic thought produced through and in preparation for meetings. Meetings conducted through civil poetry take place once a month.

Extracts read out loud, spontaneous speech, provide a monthly opportunity to nurture thought and reflection and the physical, psychological, intellectual perception of the concept of 'all' and each one of us—civil poetry is a workshop that's been given free rein at the DOC—which is a former lycée, restored in 2015 while bunking up in artists' and artisans' studios—for let's say, present training. Calling upon our daily political

consciousness (wakening at each detail good and bad, true or false, it doesn't matter), to develop a methodology for the present by thinking and formulating written, experienced, possible pasts.

Vegan buffets are prepared in advance of these evenings, wine and water are provided, books on a table, also ashtrays as smoking cigarettes is tolerated—ventilated—tolerating.

Each segment is suggested directly indirectly by the six poets facilitating the open forum, a booklet based on poetic thought arising is printed and distributed during these evenings of readings and dialogue. Sessions are recorded so all is available to participants and the curious, and this is where we put the project's coherent creations (décor): transcripts of interactions, proofread and annotated, as well as all useful information on other forms of 'nourishment' taking place during our periods of sharing.

Civil poetry sessions are monthly meetings for exploring poetic thought, the first focuses on the magical act of the spoken word: what is the spoken word? Is it, as Starhawk wrote, 'the art of changing consciousness at will'? what forms does it take? In this inaugural session we'll try our best to make the very form of civil poetry tally

with its intention so it accompanies us throughout ensuing poetic discussions. More specifically, theoretical and militant texts, documents will be suggested for general reading by all as background for each of these sessions. We'll choose readings beforehand from our list of reference texts and anyone who so desires can develop them in light of the poetic theories under discussion and also make suggestions for other texts. Periods of exchange will enhance these readings (spoken word) so this shared experience enters into dialogue with theoretical reflection or poetic reflection, our own poems here.



The idea was to practice genuine horizontality in dialogue, without a central figure to develop the discussion. In my opinion, horizontality doesn't emerge in classrooms, and that contributes to a certain depreciation in the character we then forge for ourselves, not really accustomed to expressing our point of view, or suggesting food for thought. Horizontality can't emerge amongst women in formal education environments because teachers as 'meeting organisers' are faced with pressure from all directions so that each pupil leaves

admiring the programme shaped by the national education system. Isolation in view of the programme, lack of means, lots of students...

Now, each teacher, each student is different. All truths are equal and there's no reason to insist on particular programmes of knowledge, programmes reducing the possibility of critical thought to nothingness, as during the communication process there's neither an appeal to the consciousness of pupils, nor to teachers. Any exchange is confined within this pre-defined programme, so this pre-established path and teachers like pupils struggle to practice the art of discovering facts, information, truth or lies. Everything can be studied, but it's important to understand. Understanding implies perception and perception practice.

The more our minds experience toing and froing, the more we construct our own framework for thought.



There isn't—ever—a single colour, a single question, a single genius or a single act—this act could very well be the anchor point, the last before capsizing.

Consequently and provided it's given attention, we can help thought to

emerge thanks to presences inscribed in works, by respecting interactions with each moment—the sum of people or facts making up a work's environment. Works contain signs invisible to the eye: in other words, each element encountered along the way, before and after—counts. Good or bad. All the work's karma and the power of others.



No obscuration

hears the inevitability of its potential for action in is the result



If a word is a person, a poem would be a collective.



I try to create as many entry points as possible, so I'm not controlling everything. Once I decide to create, to organise or to participate in something, I leave the door open for any surprises, because the work's infinitude (or absoluteness) comes from encountering any seemingly exterior elements: faults. We often close off without thinking: we set limits for the number of dinner

invitations, we limit our words so we don't end up without a reply. For me, accepting the fault, makes our dinner fragile by inviting too many or too few people, rambling when we express ourselves is actually an invitation to the infinite, allowing existence to surprise and reflect the moment. It's about giving yourself time to invite the fault, not the opposite. The requirement of the fault is the reply from the infinite eight to the final zero, this invitation to fail, to silence maybe, dialogue to start it all up again: the unknown entry is the surplus in life.



The fact that lines of latitude do not cross is infinitely impossible.



I learnt to say no to make it equal to my yes (aye, know). I've learnt to ask questions, to check, just as I've learnt to forgive. I bring disproportionate attention to interaction, and I drift over to the autistic side of my character. I do not censor it, quite the opposite, I develop it.

I think autism is a relative disorder, mainly due to the fact we live in a world where it's difficult to express nuances.

We live in a hegemonic world that

tames women who've had enough of this scholarly and social intelligence, making them docile so as to mock the digressions that can be taken and teach us to be the way we need to be to function successfully; and create a female disorder where forms of intelligence do not incorporate this kind of compromise.

In this way I can—completely—overstep the mark, in writing or spoken word, when I address certain people. When I think of overstepping the mark, for me it's all about faith and the love you give to the other: overstepping this mark, is bringing us back to life. Is breathing energy into self-presence by giving our heartbeat an echo.

J You said earlier that a moral position is a passive one; a position from which you are only showing what is wrong but not changing what is wrong.

A Yes, in a sense I think it's an interesting position when we speak about the passive position as a form of representation. So that is connected to moralism in general where we just present certain values without risk.

B Do you mean that universalism is a sort of safe place?

A Yes because no one can argue about it: like all people are equal etc.

B So passive equals safe?

A In general, yes.

B So it's to avoid the risk of contradicting yourself or being wrong? When you take an active position you also take the risk of being wrong or making mistakes. There is something of that in Kurcijs' text, in the sense that he takes the risk of contradicting himself.

A I agree. We can take a simple example about refugees and argue from a universal position about, for instance, the human rights. But another way would be to try to understand the problem and complexity of the situation. So it's not only social determinism but also a field between the artist's position and social relations. Kurcijs is defending obvious values but at the same time trying to interpret them from his own perspective which is not so safe.

B So it's the individual versus the universal position? Isn't that a binary?

A Yes and no. Kurcijs is trying to show that there are some inner dialectics, and that's the reason he talks about the artist's immanence. Being outside the position he or she is actually in, and there is a play between the personal and

# The Supporters

Essays on economic translations.

FONDATION  
D'ENTREPRISE  
RICARD

Kim? Contemporary Art Centre

Paraguay

Latvija100=

*Active Art*, Joachim Hamou, Maija Rudovska,  
Barbara Sirieix

Graphic design : Laure Giletti & Gregory Dapra

Printed in Latvia

500 ex.

## Foreword

*The Supporters* gathers ten different authors through short essays hosted in various publications to come. The overall brings together a broad reflexion on writing in relation with fundings.

The forthcoming publications involve different funding situations, private or/and public, all grounds for writing considerations upon various given publications contexts including their interdependence relations.

*The Supporters* will collect a variety of essays from which funding will influence forms and contents, dealing with possible impoverishment of language, tongue excellences and failures, quantity rates, ghostwriters use, literal and non-literal adaptations, all constitutive translations of various economic gestures involved in the publication of an essay.

The present foreword also states as an open call for contributions.

social situation. But you can't distinguish so easily between the personal and universal I think.

B So are you saying that he is trying to identify a place that is neither one nor the other?

A Yes. He is trying to say that the artist has this position that is in-between.

J So it can be said that you make a proposition without owning the discourse.

A Yes.

B What do you call this space? The process is active art but what do we call this space that is neither one nor the other?

A I think there are two concepts through which we can understand active art. One is the idea of the transcendent; art is creating a special place for art. But Kurcijs uses the concept of immanence in which there is no special place or concept for art. There are no objects or things-in-themselves that art should represent. Rather the artist or the processes should be within the social determination. For Kurcijs there is no special place for art, thus he can distinguish himself from the traditional way of seeing art. This is why he is criticising Kandinsky for having the dual ontology hung between the spiritual and material.

J I think we should address the urgency of active art. Kurcijs notes that he is writing this proposition in a troubled time just out of one world war and on the way towards the next. So it's written very much in a time of crisis and I was wondering how that came across in the text.

A Actually he wrote that 'Active Art' is born out of the war. To write about crises is nothing new, but I think that Kurcijs is trying to argue that the problem with art was that it was not connected to the crises; it was always disconnected from the world. And that's why he is trying to argue against what he calls 'formalism'—art that doesn't engage with content.

J The reason I'm asking is just to try to understand why this text resonates with us now. Maybe this is a text that will always resonate in troubled times?

A It should be relevant in any time whether there is a problem or not, the problem of art being disconnected from the world remains. It could be then the question of art as entertainment for instance. But this is exactly why he is criticising passive art. Because passive art can speak about war but those artists taking a passive position, do not deploy their own subjectivity and they create art without intending to change anything. So I think his position is that art should connect with the world—especially in times of crises. He speaks about active art as being born out of the war and in the early 1920s a lot of Latvian artists were criticised for

connecting art to politics. For example, expressionism was criticised for being a style born out of war. Now the war had ended, said the critics, we should abandon that form of expression.

B I just read a book by the anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, called *Nationalism and Culture* from 1937. This book was a first of its kind making a distinction between the progress of art and the progress of the society in general. He states that periods of war and crisis are the best periods for the arts. Previously there had been an association between the peaks of civilisation and peaks in the arts. And probably this was more of an agenda for the arts at the time. When you give the example of critics saying 'we should stop expressionism because we are not at war anymore', we can read into this that at that time the arts were meant to have an agenda in relation to the crises. Nowadays we have integrated this idea of disconnection between society and art.

A We can argue that the best philosophy is also produced in times of crisis. Socrates, for instance, was living at the end of Athens. But I think art should be safe because it has the potential to bring new crises as well. So that was maybe why people also reacted the way they did then as they were afraid of the potential of art. But Kurcijs argues that the crisis is already here and art can help us somehow.

M Yes but now it's the opposite. Nobody believes art can change anything.

# Sanchez and Day

Robert  
Glück



ONE MORNING I was walking Lily around 29th and Sanchez. Lily, whose motto is better safe than sorry, trotted not too far ahead, avoiding Dobermans and saying hello to pedestrians, gravely accepting their compliments—her gold eyelashes and extravagant tail. A Chevy pickup turned the corner in front of me and I probably looked too hard at the man in the passenger seat, who had a profile. All at once they started yelling ‘faggot’ and ‘fucking faggot’. I had been in a happy mood and with the last of my ebullience I gave them the finger, which I instantly regretted because the truck screeched to a stop and lurched into a three-point turn. There were four, they were laughing and yelling. Lily and I took off. We ran down Sanchez and turned back down the corner of Day along with the truck. One of them missed me with a beer can. They were laughing and driving parallel to us, but then we cut across Day, leapt up a retaining wall and through a cyclone fence by way of a hole I knew about. The fence surrounded a large field where I sometimes walk Lily late at night, giving her an opportunity to roam around a little on her own and enjoy some damp plant and earth smells.

If they didn’t separate the advantage was mine since the field had entrances on both sides. I stood in the centre on cut grass in San Francisco’s expensive daylight; two blocks away bells began swinging toward noon, and they wouldn’t attack someone in broad daylight unless of course they would. You’ll understand my fear because television has trained us to understand the fear of a running man. I hoped for no police cars; attacking a homosexual is not such a clear-cut offense as, say, stealing a package of process cheese. The odour of cut grass reminded me of my mother’s childhood in Denver because she always says it reminds her of that. She lived there during the summers with my great-aunt Charlotte, a regal

woman who fed the children tubs of strawberries in heavy cream and bakery bread with huge slabs of butter. That was before the days of cholesterol. But Charlotte advocated health food, brown rice and no sugar, which took some independence 50 years ago. She had plenty to spare. I remember after Uncle Harry’s funeral the doorbell rang and an immense basket of fruit from Denver was delivered to my mother’s hands. The delivery man said very soberly, ‘Mrs. Isaacs wanted to be especially sure you received this message from her. Wash it before you eat it.’ Then I recalled my mother’s recent phone conversation with Charlotte, who said, ‘You were such a pretty girl, are you still pretty?’ And my mother replied, ‘Charlotte, I’m pushing sixty.’ My mother who is first and foremost a granddaughter, a daughter, sister, cousin, niece, wife, mother, sister-in-law, aunt and grandmother. So far the incident was nothing much and it had happened fast but with the sluggishness that precedes violence, so I tried to reassure myself with the safety of family memories of childhoods and old ages.

On the other hand, I had ample time to remember Kevin’s bashed-in teeth and Bruce getting roused and then roused again by the police, and the Halloween when a man yelling ‘queer’ charged Ed and me with a metal pipe; and to recall an acquaintance, hardly a face even, who one day sat on the blue chenille of the couch in my kitchen. He was murdered by someone he brought home, the neighbours saw the killer’s face on and off during the night. That’s the logical conclusion to this catalogue of betrayals: the murderer takes you when you’re naked and expect tenderness and each by agreement is host to the other’s vulnerability. The sky clouded over allowing the green, which had been overexposed, to relax into its full colour. Recalling these events did not necessarily indicate

great extremity, they are not isolated in the way the grammar of sentence and paragraph isolate them. The threat of physical violence makes one part of the whole. College and my literary education agreed that I should see myself as a random conjunction of life's possibilities, certainly an enviable, luxurious point of view. But it's hard to draw on that as a model when four men are chasing you down the street. What life will that model sustain, and when aren't we being chased? The truck circled, pulled over at the entrance on 30th, the men piled out. I waited until they were out of the truck, then exited from the opposite side with Lily keeping close to my legs. Her eyes were dilated; she was vibrant and totally thrilled by the escape. We ran down to Church, turned the corner and slipped into a produce market.

The store was filled with strawberries and the odour of strawberries. I picked two baskets, making sure they were red on the bottom as well as on top, that they weren't they mouldy, that they smelled strong and healthy. People from Thailand ran the store and oddly, it seemed to me, they had the country-western music station playing. 'Stand by Your Man' by Tammy Wynette, Willie Nelson's intimate version of 'Georgia on My Mind', intelligent song—and the Eagles' song that begins by drawing out the beautiful word desperado. Then there was the kind of song I like a lot, where two people exchange verses answering and explaining. He worked the dayshift and her husband worked on the nightshift. They lived in Pittsburgh and you could call them the Pittsburgh Steelers because in voices resonant with country-western pain that made the joke dimensional, they stole love and pleasure whenever they got the chance. You might think that I like the song because I identify but that would be wrong. Their love was a child's secret hiding place for chocolate, hidden in

the difference between their needs and their lives. It's true that I carry in my spine, wrists and knees the glance of a man I passed three years ago walking up 18th Street, and the shock I felt on seeing that he was completely to my taste. But the difference: walking on 29th a bunch of men in a truck yelled 'faggot' at me.

The song ended and then I heard the sound of brakes screeching and then one, two, three, thud!—somebody's in trouble. We looked through the window to see the pickup piled into a telephone pole. A fender was balled up like tinfoil and they stood there wearing uncertain smiles, looking small and bewildered. I picked out the attractive one and when he turned I saw he was holding his hands in front of a mess of blood on his face. I stood a minute, enjoying the sheer pleasure of breathing in and out. I resolved to make my bed, throw away papers, read Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, have an active, no, a famous social life.

Of course that makes for a satisfying if frivolous ending. What really happened was that the men and the truck disappeared except from my imagination. I had angry dreams. Even in my erotic fantasies I couldn't banish a violence that twisted the plot away from pleasure to confusion and fear. And what I resolved was this: that I would gear my writing to tell you about incidents like the one at Sanchez and Day, to put them to you as real questions that need answers, and that these questions, along with my understanding and my practice, would grow more energetic and precise.

# Long note on New Narrative

To talk about the beginnings of New Narrative, I have to talk about my friendship with Bruce Boone. We met in the early Seventies through the San Francisco Art Institute's bulletin board: Ed and I wanted to move and Bruce and Burton wanted to move—would we all be happy living together? For some reason both couples dropped the idea and we remained in our respective flats for many years. But Bruce and I were poets and our obsession with Frank O'Hara forged a bond.

I was 23 or 24. Bruce was seven years older. He was a wonderful teacher. He read to transform himself and to attain a correct understanding. Such understanding was urgently political. Bruce had his eye on the future, a catastrophic upheaval he predicted with a certain grandeur, but it was my own present he helped me find. I read and wrote to invoke what seemed impossible—relation itself—in order to take part in a world that ceaselessly makes itself up, to 'wake up' to the world, to recognise the world, to be convinced that the world exists, to take revenge on the world for not existing.

To talk about New Narrative, I must also talk about Language poetry, which was in its heroic period in the Seventies. I treat diverse poets as one unit, a sort of flying wedge, because that's how we experienced them. It would be hard to overestimate the drama they brought to a Bay Area scene that limped through the Seventies—with the powerful exception of feminist poets like Judy Grahn, and the excitement of poetry generated by new movements. Language poetry's Puritan rigor, delight in technical vocabularies, and professionalism were new to a generation of Bay Area poets whose influences included the Beats, Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, the New York School (Bollas was its western outpost), surrealism and psychedelic surrealism.

Suddenly people took sides, though at times these confrontations resembled a pastiche of the embattled positions of earlier avant-gardes. Language poetry seemed very 'straight male'—though what didn't? Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*, for example, brilliantly established (as it dispatched) a lineage of fathers: Olson, Zukofsky, Pound, etc.

If I could have become a Language poet I would have; I craved the formalist fireworks, a purity that invented its own tenets. On the snowy mountaintop of progressive formalism, from the highest high road of modernist achievement, plenty of contempt seemed to be heaped on less rigorous endeavor. I had come to a dead end in the mid-70s like the poetry scene itself. The problem was not theoretical—or it was: I could not go on until I figured out some way to understand where I was. I also craved the community the Language poets made for themselves.

The questions vexing Bruce and me and the kind of rigour we needed were only partly addressed by Language poetry, which, in the most general sense, we saw as an aesthetics built on an examination (by subtraction: of voice, of continuity) of the ways language generates meaning. The same could be said of other experimental work, especially the minimalisms, but Language poetry was our proximate example.

Warring camps drew battle lines between representation and non-representation—retrospection makes the argument seem as arbitrary as Fancy vs. Imagination. But certainly the 'logic of history' at that moment supported this division, along with the struggle to find a third position that would encompass the whole argument.

I experienced the poetry of disjunction as a luxurious idealism in which the speaking subject rejects the confines of representation and disappears in the largest freedom,

that of language itself. My attraction to this freedom, and to the professionalism that purveyed it, made for a kind of class struggle within myself. Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia. The mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me—an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on. We had been disastrously described by the mainstream—a naming whose most extreme (though not uncommon) expression was physical violence. Combating this injustice required at least a provisionally stable identity.

Meanwhile, gay identity was also in its heroic period—it had not yet settled into just another nationalism and it was new enough to know its own constructedness. In the urban mix, some great experiment was actually taking place, a genuine community where strangers and different classes and ethnicities rubbed more than shoulders. This community was not destroyed by commodity culture, which was destroying so many other communities; instead, it was founded in commodity culture. We had to talk about it. Bruce and I turned to each other to see if we could come up with a better representation—not in order to satisfy movement pieties or to be political, but in order to be. We (eventually we were gay, lesbian, and working-class writers) could not let narration go.

(I wonder if other readers register the extent to which the body of Language poetry is collage, pastiche, and the poetry of the ‘already said’. A phrase can be, in the first place, an example of itself, of phrases generally, and that doubleness creates in this reader an ongoing sensation of déjà vu. Phrases, sentences, ring with a feeling of déjà vu, like the sentences of Raymond Roussel. That is my deepest relation to Language poetry, a poetry that deepens the sense of the arbitrary because it hollows out language

through a multiplication of contexts. I am made aware, almost intolerably, of the infinite valences.)

I’m confined to hindsight, so I write as though Bruce and I were following a plan instead of stumbling and groping toward a writing that could join other literatures of the present. We could have found narrative models in, say, Clark Coolidge’s prose, so perhaps narrative practice relates outward to the actual community whose story is being told. We could have located self-reference and awareness of artifice in, say, the novels of Ronald Firbank. So again, our quest for a language that knows itself relates outward to a community speaking to itself dissonantly.

We were fellow travelers of Language poetry and the innovative feminist poetry of that time: our lives and reading led us toward a hybrid aesthetic, something impure. We (say, Bruce Boone, Camille Roy, Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy, Mike Amnasan, Francesca Rosa, myself, and to include the dead, Steve Abbott and Sam D’Allesandro) are still fellow travelers of the poetics that evolved since the late Seventies, when writers talked about ‘nonnarrative’. One could untangle that knot forever, or build an aesthetic on the ways language conveys silence, chaos, undifferentiated existence, and erects countless horizons of meaning.

How to be a theory-based writer?—one question. How to represent my experience as a gay man?—another question, just as pressing. These questions led to readers and communities almost completely ignorant of each other. Too fragmented for a gay audience? Too much sex and ‘voice’ for a literary audience? (One gay editor of an experimental press observed in his rejection that for me homosexuality is an *idée fixe*—I wonder what heterosexuality is to heterosexuals?) I embodied these incommensurates so I had to ask this question: How can I convey urgent social

meanings while opening or subverting the possibilities of meaning itself? That question has deviled and vexed Bay Area writing for 25 years. What kind of representation least deforms its subject? Can language be aware of itself (as object, as system, as commodity, as abstraction) yet take part in the forces that generate the present? Where in writing does engagement become authentic? One response, the politics of form, apparently does not answer the question completely.

One afternoon in 1976, Bruce remarked on the questions to the reader I'd been throwing into poems and stories. They were theatrical and they seemed to him to pressure and even sometimes to reverse the positions of reader and writer. Reader—writer dynamics seemed like a way into the problems that preoccupied us, a toe in the water.

From our poems and stories, Bruce abstracted 'text-metatext': a story keeps a running commentary on itself from the present. The commentary, taking the form of a meditation or a second story, supplies a succession of frames. That is, the more you fragment a story, the more it becomes an example of narration itself — narration displaying its devices—while at the same time (as I wrote in 1981) the metatext 'asks questions, asks for critical response, makes claims on the reader, elicits comments. In any case, text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be.'<sup>1</sup>

We did not want to break the back of representation or to 'punish' it for lying, but to elaborate narration on as many different planes as we could, which seemed consistent with the lives we led. Writing can't will away power relations and commodity life; instead, writing must explore its relation to power and recognise that group practice resides inside

1. Robert Glück, "Caricature," *Soup: New Critical Perspectives*, no. 4 (1985): 28.

the commodity. Bruce wrote, 'When evaluating image in American culture, isn't it a commodity whether anyone likes it or not? You make your additions and subtractions from that point on.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1978, Bruce and I launched the Black Star Series and published my *Family Poems* and his *My Walk with Bob*, a lovely book.<sup>3</sup> In 'Remarks on Narrative'—the afterword to *Family Poems*—Bruce wrote, 'As has now been apparent for some time, the poetry of the Seventies seems generally to have reached a point of stagnation, increasing a kind of refinement of technique and available forms, without yet being able to profit greatly from the vigour, energy and accessibility that mark so much of the new Movement writing of gays, women and Third World writers, among others. Ultimately this impasse of poetry reflects conditions in society itself.'<sup>4</sup>

We appreciated the comedy of mounting an offensive ('A critique of the new trends toward conceptualisation, linguistic abstraction and process poetry') with those slenderest volumes.<sup>5</sup> My poems and stories were set 'in the family', not so antipsychological as they might have been given that we assumed any blow to interiority was a step forward for mankind.

- We contended with the Language poets while seeking their attention in the forums they erected for themselves. We published articles in *Poetics Journal* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and spoke in talk series and forums—a mere trickle in the torrent of their critical work. If Language Poetry was a dead end, what a fertile one it proved to be!
- New Narrative was in place by the time Hoddypoll published Bruce's novel *Century of Clouds* in 1980 and
2. Bruce Boone, "A Narrative Like a Punk Picture: Shocking Pinks, Lavenders, Magentas, Sickly Greens," *Poetics Journal*, no. 5 (May 1985): 92.
3. The Black Star Series published *He Cried* by Dennis Cooper and *Lives of the Poets* by Steve Abbott. Black Star still publishes, most recently Camille Roy's *Swarm*, and soon John Norton's *Re:marriage*.
4. Bruce Boone, "Remarks on Narrative," afterword to *Family Poems* by Robert Glück (San Francisco: Black Star Series, 1979), 29.
5. *Ibid.*



Donald Allen's Four Seasons Foundation published my *Elements of a Coffee Service* in 1982. We were thinking about autobiography. By autobiography, we meant daydreams, nightdreams, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture; the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies, and distortions of the self; the enjambments of power, family, history, and language. Bruce and I brought high and low between the covers of a book, mingling essay, lyric, and story. Our publishing reflected those different modes: stories from *Elements* appeared in gay anthologies, porn magazines, *Social Text*, and *Soup*; Bruce wrote about Georges Bataille for *The Advocate*.

I wanted to write with a total continuity and total disjunction since I experienced the world (and myself) as continuous and infinity divided. That was my ambition for writing. Why should a work of literature be organised by one pattern of engagement? Why should a 'position' be maintained regarding the size of the gaps between units of meaning? To describe how the world is organised may be the same as organising the world. I wanted the pleasures and politics of the fragment and the pleasures and politics of story, gossip, fable, and case history; the randomness of chance and a sense of inevitability; sincerity while using appropriation and pastiche. When Barrett Watten said about *Jack the Modernist*, 'You have your cake and eat it too', I took it as a great compliment, as if my intention spoke through the book.

During the Seventies, Bruce was working on his PhD at UC Berkeley. His dissertation was a structuralist and gay reading of O'Hara—that is, O'Hara and community—a version of which was published in the first issue of *Social Text* in 1979. He joined the Marxism and Theory Group at St. Cloud, which gave birth to that journal. Bruce also

wrote critical articles, especially tracking the 'gay band' of the Berkeley Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> We were aspiring to an ideal of learning derived as much from Spicer and Duncan as from our contemporaries. Bruce introduced me to most of the critics who would make a foundation for New Narrative writing.

Here are a few of them:

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács maintains that the novel contains—that is, holds together—incommensurates. The epic and novel are the community telling itself its story, a story whose integration becomes increasingly hard to achieve. *Theory of the Novel* leads to ideas of collaboration and community that are not naïve—that is, to narrative that questions itself. It redistributes relations of power and springs the writer from the box of psychology, since he becomes that part of a community that tells itself its story. I wrote 'Caricature', a talk given at 80 Langton in 1983, mostly using Lukács's book, locating instances of conservative and progressive communities speaking to themselves: 'If the community is a given, so are its types.'<sup>7</sup>

In his essay, 'Ideological State Apparatuses', Louis Althusser refigures the concept of base/superstructure, breaking down the distinction between public and private, and bringing to light ideological systems that had been invisible by virtue of their pervasiveness. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote that myth is 'an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction'.<sup>8</sup> In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson transposed Levi-Strauss's description of myth onto narration. By 1980, literary naturalism was easily deprived of its transparency, but this formula also deprives all fantasy of transparency, including the fantasy of personality. If a

6. See "Robert Duncan & Gay Community," *Ironwood*, no. 22 (1983), and "Spicer's Writing in Context," *Ironwood*, no. 28 (1986). Bruce's studies have led him to Eastern religion—now he's a nondenominational minister specializing in caring for people who are terminally ill.

7. Glück, "Caricature," 19.

8. As glossed by Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 77.

personality is not different from a book, in both cases one could favour the 'real contradiction' side of the formula. That is, if personality is a fiction (a political fiction!) then it is a story of contradiction in common with other stories—it occurs on the same plane of experience. This 'formula' sets a novel and a personality as two equals on the stage of history, and supports a new version of autobiography that rejects the distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Althusser comes with a lot of baggage. For example, he divided science from ideology, and ideology from theory. Frankly, Bruce and I pillaged critical theory for concepts that gave us access to our experience. In retrospect, it might be better simply to 'go with' cultural studies. To the endless chain of equal cultural manifestations (a song by R.E.M., the Diet of Worms, Rousseau's *Confessions*), we add another equals sign, attaching the self as yet another thing the culture 'dreamed up'.

Georges Bataille was central to our project. He finds a counter-economy of rupture and excess that includes art, sex, war, religious sacrifice, sports events, ruptured subjectivity, the dissolution of bodily integuments—'expenditure' of all kinds. Bataille showed us how a gay bathhouse and a church could fulfill the same function in their respective communities.

In writing about sex, desire, and the body, New Narrative approached performance art, where self is put at risk by naming names, becoming naked, making the irreversible happen—the book becomes social practice that is lived. The theme of obsessive romance did double duty, destabilising the self and asserting gay experience. Steve Abbott wrote, 'Gay writers Bruce Boone and Robert Glück (like Acker, Dennis Cooper or the subway graffitiists again) up the ante on this factuality by weaving their own names,

and those of friends and lovers, into their work. The writer/artist becomes exposed and vulnerable: you risk being foolish, mean-spirited, wrong. But if the writer's life is more open to judgment and speculation, so is the reader's.'<sup>9</sup>

Did we believe in the truth and freedom of sex? Certainly we were attracted to scandal and shame, where there is so much information. Shame is a kind of fear, and fears are what organise us from above, so displaying them is political. I wanted to write close to the body—the place language goes reluctantly. We used porn, where information saturates narrative, to expose and manipulate genre's formulas and *dramatis personae*, to arrive at ecstasy and loss of narration as the self sheds its social identities. We wanted to speak about subject/master and object/slave. Bataille showed us that loss of self and attainment of nothingness is a group activity. He supplied the essential negative, a zero planted in the midst of community.

Now, I'd add that transgressive writing is not necessarily about sex or the body—or about anything one can predict. There's no manual; transgressive writing shocks by articulating the present, the one thing impossible to put into words because a language does not yet exist to describe the present. Bruce translated Bataille's *Guilty* for Lapis Press when I worked as an editor there. We hammered out the manuscript together, absorbing Bataille gesturally.

Five more critics. Walter Benjamin: for lyrical melancholy (which reads as autobiography) and for permission to mix high and low. V. N. Voloshinov: for discovering that meaning resides within its social situation, and that contending powers struggle within language itself. Roland Barthes: for a style that goes back to autobiography, for the fragment, and for displaying the constructed nature of story—'baring the device'. Michel Foucault: for

9. Steve Abbott, "Notes on Boundaries, New Narrative," *Soup: New Critical Perspectives*, no. 4 (1985): 81.

the constructed nature of sexuality, the self as collaboration, and the not-to-be-underestimated example of an out gay critic. (Once at 18th and Castro, Michel pierced Bruce with his eagle gaze and Bruce was overcome!—he says.) Julia Kristeva: for elaborating the meaning of abjection in *Powers of Horror*.

Our interest in Dennis Cooper and Kathy Acker produced allegiances and friendships with those writers. Kathy moved to San Francisco in the fall of 1981; while getting settled she stayed with Denise Kastan, who lived downstairs from me. Denise and I codirected Small Press Traffic. Kathy was at work on *Great Expectations*. In fact, Denise and I appear in it; we are the whores Danella and Barbarella. Kathy's writing gave Bruce, Steve Abbott, and myself a model, evolved far beyond our own efforts, for the interrogation of autobiography as text perpetually subverted by another text. Appropriation puts in question the place of the writer—in fact, it turns the writer into a reader.

Meanwhile, Bruce and I were thinking about the painters who were rediscovering the figure, like Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel. They found a figuration that had passed through the flame of abstract expressionism and the subsequent isms, operating through them. It made us feel we were part of a cross-cultural impulse rather than a local subset. Bruce wrote, 'With much gay writing and some punk notoriously (Acker the big example), the sexual roots of aggression come into question. There's a scream of connection, the figure that emerges ghostly: life attributed to those who have gone beyond. So in Dennis Cooper's *Safe* there's a feeling-tone like a Schnabel painting: the ground's these fragments of some past, the stag, the Roman column, whatever—on them a figure that doesn't quite exist but would maybe like to. The person/persona/thing the writer's trying to construct from images.'<sup>10</sup>

In 1976, I started volunteering at the nonprofit bookstore Small Press Traffic and I became its co-director not long after. From 1977 to 1985, I ran a reading series and held free walk-in writing workshops at the store. The workshops became a kind of New Narrative laboratory attended by Mike Amnasan, Steve Abbott, Sam D'Allesandro, Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy, Camille Roy, Francesca Rosa, Gloria Anzaldua, John Norton, Edith Jenkins, Richard Schwarzenberger, Phyllis Taper, and Marsha Campbell; and later Rob Halpern, Robin Tremblay-McGaw, Jocelyn Saidenberg, and others, too many to name, whose works extend my own horizon. Later, guided by Bruce, we started a left reading group at Small Press Traffic, attended by Steve Benson, Ron Silliman, Kathleen Fraser, Denise Kastan, Steve Abbott, Bruce, myself, and others. The personal demolished the political, and after a few months we disbanded. From that era I recall Ron's epithet (which Bruce and I thought delicious), the 'Small Press Traffic School of Dissimulation'. More successful was the Left/Write Conference we mounted in 1981 at the Noe Valley Ministry. Bruce Boone and Steve Abbott conceived the idea for a conference in the spring of 1978, and sent letters to 30 writers of various ethnicities and aesthetic positions. Steve was a tireless community builder, and Left/Write was an expression of New Narrative's desire to bring communities together—a desire which informed the reading series at Small Press Traffic, Steve Abbott's *Soup* (where the term New Narrative first appeared), Michael Amnasan's *Ottotole*, Camille Roy and Nayland Blake's *Dear World*, Kevin Killian and Brian Monte's *No Apologies*, and later Kevin and Dodie Bellamy's *Mirage*. We felt urgent about it, perhaps because we each belonged to such disparate groups. To our astonishment, 300 people attended Left/Write, so we accomplished on a civic stage

10. Bruce Boone, "A Narrative Like a Punk Picture," *Poetics Journal*, no. 5 (1992): 92.

what we were attempting in our writing, editing, and curating: to mix groups and modes of discourse. Writers famous inside their own groups but hardly known outside, like Judy Grahn and Erica Hunt, spoke and read together for the first time.

Out of that conference the Left Writers Union emerged; soon it was commandeered by its most unreconstructed faction, which prioritised gay and feminist issues out of existence. At one meeting, we were instructed to hold readings in storefronts on ground level so the ‘masses of San Francisco’ could walk in! Bruce and I staged a walkout, which was perhaps less dramatic than we intended, and the Union continued for many years, based at Marcus Books.

During this decade—1975 to 1985—Bruce and I carried on what amounted to one long, gabby phone conversation. We brought gossip and anecdote to our writing because they contain speaker and audience, establish the parameters of community, and trumpet their ‘unfair’ points of view. I hardly ever ‘made things up’—a plot still seems exotic—but as a collagist I had an infinite field. I could use the lives we endlessly described to each other as ‘found material’ to complicate storytelling, because this material also exists on the same plane as the reader’s life. Found materials have a kind of radiance, the truth of the already-known.

In 1981 we published *La Fontaine* as a valentine to our friendship. In one poem, Bruce (and Montaigne!) wrote, ‘In the friendship whereof I speak ... our souls mingle and blend in a fusion so complete that the seam that joins them disappears and is found no more. If pressed to say why I loved him I’d reply, because it was him, because it was me.’<sup>11</sup>

In using the tag New Narrative, I concede there is such a thing. In the past I was reluctant to

11.  
Bruce  
Boone and  
Robert Glück, *La  
Fontaine* (San Francisco:  
Black Star Series, 1981), 63.

promote a literary school that endured even ten minutes, much less a few years. Bruce and I took the notion of a ‘school’ half seriously, and once New Narrative began to resemble a programme, we abandoned it, declining to recognise ourselves in the tyrants and functionaries that make a literary school. Or was it just a failure of nerve? Still, I would observe that my writing continues to develop a New Narrative aesthetic—the problems and contradictions outlined above—and I wonder if that is not true of my New Narrative confederates. Now I am glad to see the term being used by a critical community, younger writers in San Francisco and New York, and writers in other cities, like Gail Scott in Montreal, and critics like Earl Jackson, Jr., Anthony Easthope, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Dianne Chisholm. Bruce and I may have been kidding about founding a school, but we were serious about wanting to bring emotion and subject matter into the field of innovative writing. I hope that these thoughts on our project—call it what you will—are useful to others looking for ways to extend the possibilities of poem and story.

“Long Note  
on New Narrative”  
was published in  
*Narrativity*, no. 1, eds. Mary  
Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy,  
and Gail Scott (2000). It was reprinted  
in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore  
Narrative*, eds. Camille Roy, Mary Burger,  
Gail Scott, and Robert Glück (Toronto:  
Coach House Press, 2004).

- J I would like to get back to the idea of 'synthesis' in Kurcijs' text when he talks about art. It's something he comes back to quite a lot and it would be good to elaborate on this a bit.
- M Yes, there is a bit of confusion there because he uses synthetic and synthesis and sometimes it's not clear if these are two different things?
- A I think we can make four distinctions analytically: the first distinction is from the enlightenment and it applies as he speaks about the project of the encyclopedia for which there is some kind of hierarchical synthesis in the sense that there are metaphysics and physics, as Diderot distinguishes them. Another concept of synthesis is based on Hegel, or rather Engels in Kurcijs' case, and that is thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Here expressionism is playing a role as a kind of step towards synthesis. The third concept of synthesis is mechanical, in this case synesthesia; music in paintings or Kandinsky and so on. And the final distinction would be Kurcijs' own synthesis which relates to the metaphor of art as an organism; that there cannot be a mechanical replacement of parts between several different arts, but rather a principle of art. He is not trying to argue or define this principle, but I have a suspicion that it is some kind of Élan vital\*<sup>1</sup>, or something like that. Meaning something that you can't describe analytically, it just gives life to the art organism. I think that's the simplest way to understand synthesis. If we were trying to understand what this synthetic art would be, I think Kurcijs is arguing that there is no distinction between the art realm and the social realm; they are together. There is no clear distinction between a subjective position and the objective or universal. What you bring into the room are universal values and your own perspective and so in this way you can bring change.
- B This is very much like the moment in modernism when the autonomy of art was defined and on the other hand, the point of constructivism when autonomy was discarded for communist art.
- M Because of the idea of synthesis.

1. Élan vital is a term coined by French philosopher Henri Bergson in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, in which he addresses the question of self-organisation and the spontaneous morphogenesis of things in an increasingly complex manner.



- B Exactly art doesn't need to be one or the other, but rather the combination of the two things. That's my understanding.
- A Actually it is difficult to say that Kurcijs' idea of art is of something autonomous. In the sense that art is something you can define but not that art is autonomous as if it has its own kind of logic and objects that it represents. It's another perspective on the social realm, I think. In this sense it is and it is not autonomous at the same time.
- B From your point of view, after having worked on this text for a long time and then worked with us on this project, how did your approach to the text change? What did this conversation add or take away from your understanding of the text?
- A I'm not sure if I told you but I actually did the same reading continuously, because what I am interested in is a kind of failed text. A text that is trying to give you some kind of understanding but somehow fails to do so. I think that the concept of failure is very important when we think about such big projects. And for me, reading this text extensively—I actually know it almost by heart now—it has transformed from a description of a project to a *hauntology*,<sup>2</sup> a hauntological text that continues to haunt me. I can apply small snippets to my everyday life, but not the project as a whole. That is one thing that has changed for me. Another thing is that I was really trying to understand if it was possible to rewrite this project as a successful project. But I don't think that is possible. But it is possible to rewrite it as a representation of failure. And failure is a space for thinking in which we can easily play with text and ideas and so on without thinking about how to implement them.
2. *Hauntology* (a portmanteau of haunting and ontology) is a concept coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*.
- J Wait, so what you are saying is basically that you failed to misread Kurcijs?
- A I don't know if I failed really... You know failure is a lifetime project. I don't know if I will one day be successful in my failures.

# Active Art

Andrejs  
Kurcijs



In an era in which everything seems relative and art has to descend from its pseudo-absolutist heights, I still find it possible to talk about activism, a contemporary, unique and active current in art.

Being of the conviction that the various branches of art are attached to the same tree, the live organism of artistic consciousness, in this article I have attempted to present an overview of all this embranchment of active art as can be observed in the fine arts, poetry, music etc. If painting and sculpture are more of my focus and my conclusions have been illustrated by many pictures, then it has happened for the following reasons: 1. The activism in contemporary fine arts is expressed most overtly and it is therefore they that provide the most accessible overview, rich in examples, of the essence of active art. 2. To demonstrate it with examples from other genres, e.g., from poetry as the many-sidedness of the issue seems to require would not be possible for me because of the narrow confines of the article. I therefore leave this important task for the future.

Being fully aware of the disproportional and unique character of my work, I remain in the hope that it may provide an overview, albeit less than exhaustive, of contemporary active art and may revive many an issue of art theory and practice that are yet to be resolved.

Berlin, Summer 1923

Andrejs Kurcijs

I

The contemporary field of art seems to be torn up by tractors: deep changes have taken place that require clarification and to be acknowledged theoretically. The storms of the recent decade have made the expressive wave rise the highest, which is ecstatically present already in Van Gogh's exotic green-hued self-portrait available for everyday viewing by the lucky residents of Munich. It is a magnificent elation, which quickly leads to artist's burnout and splits the cosmic reality in two unequal parts: the ecstatically spiritual and roughly material. In his drive for organised unity in his work of art, the artist is vivisected or vivisects himself. Van Gogh's tragic end looms for the ecstatic artist, for the time is not ripe for the success of true synthetic art. And those who fail to feel less titanic than Van Gogh and want to live—they rush to seek lucidity in art from hyperbole to hyperbole, like Kandinsky—not a sun but a comet.

The stars whose ways are hyperbolic soon lose their reality for us. Even their return is more of a logical possibility—of a formal nature. And the expressive ecstasy is a magnificent glow from comets mathematically subject to their era. This phenomenon is now known as a crisis of expressionism and there is talk of an end of expressionism. Indeed, expressionism, as seen in

today's poetry and art, seems to have hit a dead end. Having refused Van Gogh's titanic search for synthetic art in ecstasy, expressionism would prefer to rise, easily and more graciously, as pure formalism. Yet, under the impact of formalism, it does not achieve an organic unity of form. What remains is formalism without form.

For that reason, Van Gogh's ingenious effort and the often selfless ecstasy of expressionists is not always an uninterrupted 'triumphal march', but is only a symptom of a revolutionary era in art—an indispensable and historical auxiliary method.

The new synthesis in art is accomplished through expressionism. Although expressionism presents its own rhythm, its own guidance and control, it should be considered a process of training the creative will. The wave of expressionism does not completely pass by even the important current of formalist art launched by Cézanne. If, for the layman any kind of formalism is expressionism, he is right in a way. Even the half-conscious quest by the Cézannists, Matisse and Derain, as well as the first interesting attempts by Picasso, Braque et al. are rather a protest against the individualist psychologising of impressionism and scholasticism of the academic Miró. We have yet to see any real vertical, any flight here, which was present in the best works of expressionism.

The art of Henri Rousseau is only a happy and peculiar individuality made possible by the era. Its synthetic basis is in this individuality and not in the overall development of contemporary art.

Suprematism managed to only approach uninspired geometrism and, in its purely technical research, is devoid of a wider cultural significance. This formalism no longer concerns itself with moving hearts in an era-specific manner or to enlighten minds with lofty emotions. In its drive for an elementary simplicity of form, it loses the highest artistic mathematics. Yet without it, without this '*amor intellectualis*' there really is no art. What remains is a mannerist void that gives rise to concerns about the future of formalism. The great masters of the past are first and foremost great creators of form. And that is natural: form is an instrument of aesthetic recognition, a mover of the human spirit. It is a phenomenon sine qua non. A spiritless form that does not excite the spirit and formalism, irrespective of the way and the branch of art in which it appears, is incapable of creating a lively and contemporary organism of art. Such a form is not real and such formalism is not artistic.

Thus, from Cézannism through expressionism, formalism soon arrives at the mechanism of suprematism. A crisis of formalism sets in—and not

just in painting. Along with painting, we could point to this crisis also in literature and in particular in the stage arts in Western Europe, Russia, and in our own country.

The problems of theatre have been most intensively dealt with in Russia. The theatre of Stanislavsky, the highest expression of recent past in stage art, fades in its naturalist psychologising because of a lack of artistic form and means of expression. The type-casting of the past, which is aesthetically dubious, cannot win over the present. So the formalist, stylised theatre follows. Yet even at the very beginning of its development, this formalism is untheatrical: two-dimensional painting forces its way into stage-art and ties up the actor who, in order to act, needs three dimensions.

As a result, formalism in theatre does not do away with the crisis of naturalism in theatre; in fact, initially it even exacerbates it. Gordon Craig dreams of bringing about progress in theatre through puppet theatre and an entirely mechanical actor. Meyerhold in Russia follows the same direction, coming up with his biomechanical theory. Even the formalism of Tairov's theatre, whose technical achievements cannot be denied, can interest us only as a path toward a higher synthesis in stage-art.

A path of development similar to the fine arts and theatre can be observed

in literature. The decadence of realism and naturalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicate that the organism of art has become seriously diseased. From the point of view of history, this disease does however open the way for new experiments with form. The current of formal art soon presents an antithesis to the old naturalism. As any antithesis, this current is one-sided and unorganized; it is more a symptom of the era and not living art.

The symbolist attempts at synthesis end in failure in their theoretical, transcendently speculative interpretations. The pathos of symbolism lacks any foundation in emotion. Active art is replaced by historicism and archaeology. Even before 1910, when akmeism and futurism were only beginning to find their various formulations, the crisis in symbolism was already obvious. Therefore, a final victory of formalism seemed easy to achieve. And this time, this victory was more complete than about twenty years ago when the attack was launched against naturalism. Just as in painting and theatre, the wave of formalism had an internationally European character and it swept over our homeland as well, albeit with some tardiness and peculiarities. And now we find ourselves at the crossroads of formalist art in literature. The creation of synthetic works turns out to be more difficult than destroying the old. Yet the period of

standstill seems to already be behind us, even though literary constructivism in its various forms as well as imagism as a literary school are both just formalism.

After the impressionist sophistication of feeling, after Tchaikovsky, Massenet, Debussy, and after the Van Gogh-like expressive exercises of Skriabin, a period of quest has arrived in music as well. Eric Satie's name has already gained some recognition. And Prokofiev's music may already be formalism that has transcended itself and entered new, boundless expanses.

Finally, it must be said that the formal method of investigating spiritual culture, albeit it has been known, e.g., in music theory from the time of the Greek sophists, has been acquiring a more definite shape only in recent years. The theoretical current in philosophy, factionalism and relativism in both science and philosophy should be considered part of the formal current.

## II

We saw how the dialectic of the development of art leads from naturalism and the presence of a subject to formalism and subjectlessness. What would be the next stage in this development? That is the question first and foremost on the mind of the viewer of current art. Have we entered the realm of stable formalism and abstraction

whose end is impossible to see? Are we moving forward? And if so, where to? Can we expect an antithesis to formalism or some new formation, a new synthesis? Let us consider the facts and examine them for the first elements constituting an answer.

First, the fine arts. This branch of the arts is telling us that it has no desire to devote itself to pure formalism for any substantial period of time. Already before the World War, around 1914, one could clearly see a transition from abstract formalism to constructive, artistically realistic art as developed by Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Survage, and others. The next step forward in this direction is made by the sculptural painter Fernand Léger and the sculptors Archipenko and Lipchitz. This art is based on the spirit of the present and its works want to be full-fledged things in real surroundings. The three-dimensionality in the new art is no naturalism, however. Even Léger's art compared to the old naturalists is only 'artistic lies', to borrow a phrase from Gauguin. And still, the French modern painting and sculpture are far from the suprematism, which the young painters in Russia pursued vigorously as late as 1918. A spiritual construction is looking for expression in a realistic composition. The traditions of the great eras of past art are made evident and developed further. In France, a compact group of artists,

painters, sculptors, theoreticians, and stage artists (L'Esprit Nouveau) has been established with Ozenfant and Jenneret at the helm. It expounds a new spirit in art, vigorous and proud. An era of determination, integrity, and raised intensity is approaching. 'A good relationship' with Ingres and Corot is once again established. The development of the issues relating to mass and movement does without abstract formalism and involves something like the traditions of the Florentine School.

After Greek sculpture, Michelangelo represented the next stage. New contemporary sculpture strives to continue Michelangelo's work, so misunderstood by the second-rate imitators of naturalism. The contemporary cubism as a new discipline of the spirit of art has been already methodologically well established. Therefore the conclusion that cubists have supposedly rejected their principles and become morally bankrupt is more than hasty. Cubism sets Van Gogh's ecstasy in the right direction and fulfills the constructive plans of Cézanne, creating a new era in art on an all-European scale. This truth is clearly confirmed by those contemporary French painters who, being far from theoretical battles of the Cubists, work in a spirit akin to cubism. Here I am talking about the modern classicism of the constructive impressionists Matisse and André Derain and their

followers. This unconscious collaboration with cubism is truly contemporary and indicates that cubism is becoming the style of the era that is gradually gaining ground even outside of France.

Germany is experiencing the crisis in art in a very tragic way. The paths of formal mastery from Dürer, Cranach, and Holbein seem to have been all but forgotten. The canvases of Lenbachs, Kaulbachs and *tutti quanti* have obscured any wider horizons for German art. And now that the expression of ecstasy has come to an end, where can the German painter, the German artist go? Even Lovis Corinth does not dare return to the academism of yesteryear, becoming—*horribile dictu*—an expressionist in the comical sense of the word. Impressionism has become second-rate imitation. And it is difficult for a German artist to become a trailblazer if he does not want to live with the role of an unpretentious pupil.

But still, even in Germany a new, entirely formal art is on the rise. The difficult task of a trailblazer has been assumed by the cubists Feininger and Baumeister in painting; Belling in sculpture, and the constructive and figurative Poelzig in architecture. Like the French cubists, they primarily tackle problems of the formal nature.

In other countries as well we can observe a transition from formalism to active contemporary art. In Russia, the constructivist Tatlin and

the former suprematist Puni are prominent; in Italy there is the group 'Valori plastici'. And turning now to Latvia, there too, just like in Czechoslovakia and the other new countries, fresh new currents in art are observed. Our painting and sculpture work in conjunction with the lively art of other countries, and is searching for its own way to the validity of real art as in the case of Zalkalns and Zālits in sculpture and the activists in painting who paint in the styles of Picasso, Gris, Braque, or Derain and whose work will merit closer inspection below.

Albeit not as striking as in the fine arts, developments in contemporary literature are also quite characteristic. Here too a transition to a new artistically real expression of substance is observed. After the harlequinade of Dadaism, the 'Clarté' group led by Anatole France and Henri Barbusse has gained a prominent status. A particular current of modern classicism is propagated by the magazine *Mouton Blanc* and its followers in France and Belgium with André Gide, Charles Vildrac, and Jules Romains as the best known figures. The unanimist Vildrac in fact does not quite fit in with any confined group. In his originality, he can be compared to Derain in painting—he is actively of the present period.

In Russian literature, where formalism was taken to the extremes, a definite turn to constructivism and

a new, original synthesis can be observed. Whereas the treatment of plot by Erenburg is still excessively formalist, Maxim Gorky in his latest work, Andrei Bely, Pilnyak, Remizov, Mayakovsky, and some younger writers are searching for and finding true artistic conclusions about the present. While the English novel is still suffering from dense psychologism, the heaviest subject is rendered artistically winged by the Russian talent. The emptiness of abstract formalism is avoided whereas a return to the experience of naturalism would be inartistic and anachronistic.

Latvian literature too in its current development is experiencing both too much plot and too much formalism, which has predominated lately. Now it must be decided what to do next: to stay where we are or go forward and develop life with new artistic awareness.

### III

As we can see, formalism in today's art is dialectically followed by a new current in art. This contemporary art I have dubbed active art or activism. But what is active art or activism? How can the main characteristics of this art and differences from other currents be defined?

A short definition would be the usual road to a lack of clarity. I do not

want to walk this stereotypical road or spare any spiritual energy. Activism is a growing art, of which it is difficult to give an overview. Of what help would be the conventional definition? That would only mean a shell of logical pattern and pretentious syllogism. But we are looking at a live organism of art and are first of all turning to the artists. Therefore we do not need a dead syllogism. Yet the present definitions are for the most part such dead syllogisms that they have little to do with the reality of things. And it is not for lack of logic! Our words and concepts, if they are not purely formal, have changed their content in the present catastrophe of culture. That means that our definitions turn into fictitious schemes. They are like banknotes that have long since lost their actual value. We read the name—the usual signature—and believe. Thus our imagined knowing and definitions turns into a web of pitiful fictions to attract the naïve reader.

So I want to take a different and, to me, a better route in considering activism. In all simplicity and concreteness, I would like to examine some of the most important questions pertaining to the current of art that we find existing de facto and have named activism. That may be the best definition for the kind of art that moves from recent chaos to an all-encompassing synthesis, conquering the world anew spiritually. A purer and brighter love

of recognition—*amor intellectualis*—is ignited in the hearts of artists. The old souls die away in the ashes. There is the field fertilised by the new art where, as Charles Vildrac has put it, the old pain smiles and the old joy cries.

### IV

The current crisis and the common direction taken by different branches of art make us think about common laws and unity more often than before. Former art criticism and theory, if we exclude Diderot and the encyclopaedists, created and maintained this concept in a rather peculiar, and not always justifiable, fashion. Terms and concepts from one branch of art were simply transferred to another. When discussing painting, for instance, harmony was evoked; in literary criticism it was colour etc. That is how an impression of unity was created, which lacked a deeper theoretically critical or philosophical basis. Certain methods and auxiliary hypotheses for establishing unity in practice were not yet used. This of course could only increase the powerful trend of using sociological methods of investigation in discussing the formal questions of art. An impoverishment of principles has become the case in art criticism and theory. The sociological methods at first brought in freshness and life. It seemed that a genetic explanation

of art, taking the formality of art as a point of departure, was not even possible. Indeed, if all the phenomena of life—including the spiritual ones—are correlatively united in necessity, do not the artistic moments in the development of art lose their importance in a sphere unrelated to art? A question thus arises whether in art, outside the sociologically public one; any other scientific appraisal is possible.

It seems to me that by now this question has been definitely resolved in favour of original methods for investigating spiritual life. Just as mechanical principles cannot be logically applied as phenomena of spiritual life, a work of art cannot be directly explained by inartistic phenomena. In this sense the sociologist Friedrich Engels turned out to be more prescient than his imitator, the literary critic and historian Fritzsche. By emphasising the importance of the laws of the so-called spiritual life and the necessity for understanding spiritual laws and dialectic in understanding reality, Engels has provided us with a useful hint that we should observe. Even the theory of literary plots as a methodology of imaginative conjunctions is not possible without understanding form theory. Sociology in exploring art remains sociology, illuminating its own particular problems. Therefore we will return less to those socially psychological questions, which recent



art philosophy usually considers under the headline of receptive art. Without denying the importance of these issues we still consider them secondary in understanding art.

But what should be the method for investigating art? However different art may be in different eras, its task and goal always is to captivate and excite, to provide new experiences by its characteristic, primarily aesthetic means. Great works of art are admirable constructions of form. Form is what makes them immortal, so to speak.

The importance of plot fades in the dialectic of life and vanishes with time, whereas the form remains alive and active. According to Ozenfant, in the works of Michaelangelo we do not find gods or beautiful women on the canvasses of Ingres—what we find instead are original achievements of new forms, a great acceleration of the movement of human spirit. The cultural and historical significance of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is based on the contemporary construction of the elements of form of this work. It is an eminent formula of spiritual life.

For investigating the formal elements in a work of art, the formal method is therefore natural. Using this method, we should look for broad principles applicable to art. Otherwise art theory and criticism face a decline. Here we are at the edge of an untended

field. Theory of art as a science is still getting out of the swaddling clothes that the 'special philosophy' has wrapped it in. Finally, the formal method itself has reached the stage of serious transformations.

All of this prompts us to refrain from final conclusions and stick to what is possible scientifically. In considering active art I will therefore use the principles of space, time and association, without insisting that they are the only possible ones in investigating the wisdom of art. Perhaps here too it is possible to reduce variety to some simpler but more encompassing and exhaustive principle. There is an attempt to capture the associative and rhythmic elements, as far as they can be considered artistically formal values, with the help of the spatial principle. Yet, in the current circumstances, such a method would either mean to carry purely painterly elements over to the other branches of art or, in the best case, excessive abstraction and schematism, which could not help to comprehend some of the real phenomena of art. We do not wish to promote either of these possibilities. We have no wish to repeat the mistake of about 30 years ago. Then it involved a disproportional focus on musical elements in literature and other branches of art not directly connected to music. Let us recall, for instance the 'music' of Musatov and Ciurlionis in painting.

Nor do we want to try to achieve schematism at any costs. Excessive and lifeless rationalist simplification is nowhere as dangerous as in active art.

A work of art cannot be likened to an ideal mechanism but rather to a live organism. For that reason, even the formal method in the investigation of art does not fully exclude the intuitive moment. It does not place it at the centre of its explorations, yet reveals and evaluates the connection between the science of art to other closely related spiritual studies. Here arises the question of the significance of an artist's individuality, metaesthetism, and the socio-biological element in art. Activism as an art that reigns between abstract formalism and naturalism is directly concerned with this and similar questions. Therefore we must examine this relationship more closely when explicating active art.

## V

Activism in art leads from passive impressionism to an encompassing revelation whose psychological depths contain the current of public will. Active art, be it potentially positive or negative, pessimistic or optimistic, is always real. This reality is rooted in an artist's publicly formed individualism. Activism is therefore not pure formalism but art with a lively contemporary character. The voluntary and

socially psychological underlies it. It is the artistic will, which has not been perceived individually psychologically but as the deepest objective phenomenon of art. In the culture of awareness the phenomenon of active art is thus by far not exhausted. But if logic, this strict and, after maths, most complete science does not shy away from considering emotional thinking and cannot do without emotional elements, then the contact between the theory of active art with metaesthetism and irrationalism becomes much more clear.

Yet activism is not mysticism but is formally based on the scientific facts of artistic awareness and psychology of thinking, i.e. on recognising inner laws and lucidity. It is time to get rid of schemes outdated in psychology also in art theory. To know much does not mean to understand and perceive the inner necessity. It is a fatal truth in the life of both individuals and nations. By emphasising the importance of inner necessity and lucidity in art, activism becomes scientific.

The average realism of nature and experience of social life is fragmented and does not awaken an understanding of inner necessity, rather establishing the power of convention in both life and art. To a certain degree, we are tamed animals. The geniuses of naturalism and realism—Tolstoy and even Flaubert, by rising above fragmentation and depiction of trivia of life

and nature, only reassert the aforementioned thought.

Impressionism is trying to rid itself of convention and socio-reactionary training and puts its trust only in the process of artistic creation. Historically it is a step forward, yet this step is not decisive: impressionism misunderstands the importance of the subject in the cognitive process, in art and in science, both. Each realisation—including in art—is an active process. Only thus can we gain true understanding and clarity regarding inner necessity instead of a fruitless fragmentation of cognitive facts. By dissolving in the processes of individual reasoning, impressionism seems to reject new problems in art and, having gained new facts of cognition, subsides without reaching clarity.

An understandable counter reaction was formalism and intellectualism in literature: the dynamic futurism, the formally indeterminate expressionism and, later, modern classicism; in painting and sculpture, it was cubism in its transition from abstraction to concreteness. Activism is running from archaeology and imitation. Therefore, no one should attempt to imitate activism. It will not work: activism, as I already remarked, springs forth from social will; it is not excitement caused by artistic activity, it is not even a school, but a new understanding of world's inner necessity, a new era in

artistic culture. After the analysis by impressionists, active synthesis now becomes possible.

Naturalism could not solve its problems with the help of analysis. Synthetic activism shows the possibility of solving contemporary problems of art. Here we find the social and ethical justification of activism: a dynamic reproduction of reality, an encompassing concept of humanity, and an historical expansion of the idea of a nation.

There is only united and contemporary activism. Various 'isms' (purism, cubism, expressionism etc.) in various branches of artistic life are but methodological in nature. Yet they share a common channel in the awareness and substance of the culture of the era, which stimulates successful cooperation among artists. Activism provides the formally theoretical basis for this cooperation, presenting the coordinating principles common to all art.

Now that the Latvian writer too has some past behind him, he, together with representatives of other branches of art, will have a more adequate assessment of our half-modernised life and will select the right path of art, avoiding dubious sidetracks.

## VI

Activism is an artistic era resulting from war and revolution in the sense that, without which, its deep

and thorough reassessment of values would not be possible—it may have started before the war, but it has been striking only in recent years. This era is creating a new man. Skepticism, criticism, and exaggeration of originality are stations on the path to new values in art, to new and active art. An approximation of the primal matter of art is taking place, rejecting all that is external, transient, accidental and dealing only with the essential. Cubism in its latest stage of development, as we observe it in painting and sculpture, is such a methodological treatment of a work of art. It has been said that cubism as a methodological approach has not brought about any new spirit. Yet cubism meant substituting existing ways of looking with a new form. And there is no form that would not be built and formed by an original spirit. Even narrative art has its form.

In painting—and not exclusively in painting—we observe a competition between a real and an abstract tendency. A straight line or a form that reminds us of some real object but which does not have a value independent of a real object recedes and is replaced by a straight line or a form with a geometrical significance but without any reference to real objects. Between these two trends in painting and sculpture, between the abstractly constructive and the painterly real,

the cubism of today is looking for the balanced coordinating line that would harmonise with the cognisance of the present era. Paradoxical as it may seem, in this sense cubism approaches classicism. And it is only a fully contemporary spirituality and strong artistic originality that can save the cubist from eclecticism. That is why there are so few great and genuine cubists and cubism is more intimately related to iconography, the ancient Egyptians, Pieter Bruegel's constructive art, and even Raphael, Ingres and Corot than it is to Rubens. Yet it is not enough to do away with shadows and reflections in painting. An active work of art must involve a new cognisance of the world with its own original laws that would be as valid as the laws of nature. Herein lies the theoretical current of cubist thought. And, in order not to lose its social significance, cubism as activism should involve artistic cognition.

Picasso and Braque inherited the basic elements of cubism from Cézanne. The cube, cylinder, and cone were the elementary forms with which Cézanne was attempting to penetrate the so-called metaphysical essence of reality. The cubists are thus continuing the formally clarified, unsentimental tradition in French art and are heading a new and contemporary style of art. Albeit the youngest generation of cubists with Léger at the helm has



yet to provide us with a definition of this style, we can already enumerate its main features. They are: the clarity or light, geometrical thinking and, above all, a genuine inner dynamic.

Just as the Renaissance and the other great eras of art, today's active art cannot be found within the boundaries of some territorially ethnographic unit. Cubism—activism in this narrower sense—as a discipline of art capable of development, attracts artists of several nations and countries and provides them with the possibility to develop their originality. It seems that in cubism the old law, which provides creation with new freedom, has been found anew. The discipline of the past, as Gleizes writes, is renewed in the present. This discipline, the original method of cubism provides security and security liberates: to be free means to predict more than one possibility. Thus a broad field of individual possibilities is freed up where next to Picasso, Braque, Gris, Léger, and Gleizes create the painters Puni and Feininger, as well as sculptors Arhipenko, Zālits, Lipchitz, and Belling. By means of their international cooperation, these active artists of the present are fighting against the monotonous existence that threatens us anew. The impact of the active fine arts is great and felt in other branches of art, in particular in literature.

We have already pointed out the

kinship between and unity of the basic principles of different branches of art. Now we can observe this unity in the concrete development of art. After the philosophical speculations of expressionism, in literature too we can observe aspirations for clarity of form, an active and up-to-date grasp and expression of reality. This modern classicism of activism is certainly not the so-called archaeology of neo-classicism or an impotent return to the already passé naturalism—it is not a reaction in art.

Having experienced its growing pains in impressionism and nourished by the ecstasy of expressionism, activism seems to have been washed by the rainstorms of the world. Now it is rising in the morning sun before the eyes of humanity, cleared by all the dangers and horrors it has seen and setting a new rhythm to the hearts that have overcome the point of death of European culture.

## VII

Activism has to be separated from the rationalist scheme of Kant's critical philosophy. It is no paradox; it is a necessity. To understand it means to rid oneself of a one-sided abstraction, achieving a truly free and encompassing overview of reality. Activism is a reaction to passive art, e.g., impressionism both in literature and in fine arts. That is the reason for the

dogmatism of the activist method, the conviction of strict laws, and intellectual architectonics. With its standards of form the activist tries to penetrate reality deeper than the impressionist could manage to do; he wants to prevent the less than valuable, the accidental, and the transient and to see things in their meta-phenomenalism—things 'as they are in and of themselves', free from any impressionistic sensuality.

The above is an approximation of the way of thinking of the activist in which he refers to 'things in themselves', thereby reviving the philosophical shadow of Kant. That is why we must observe a certain reticence and prudence in terminology. And it should particularly be observed in places like Germany where the rigid teachings of categories are still very much alive.

Activism is not after pointless factionalism or after needless and pointless philosophical auxiliary hypotheses. But 'things in themselves' in the Kantian sense is the most fictitious element of the hitherto prevailing idealism: the things in themselves—emptiness as a meta-phenomenon has to give rise to all conceptions. Yet emptiness can generate only emptiness. A philosophically unnecessary fiction, it separates the intellectual logical scheme from reality and turns it into fiction which lacks any focused, teleological basis, any *raison d'être*.

Activism of course should not follow the one-sided schematism of rationalism. The Kantian dogmatism in questions pertaining to the philosophy of art must be dismissed as an uncritical anachronism. No matter how we view the newer philosophical currents—positivism, empirical criticism, immanent idealism, dialectic materialism, or fictionalism as developed by Feininger—one thing is clear: to restore Kant's dualist gap of reality, with the attributes of reality, left hanging, so to speak, to separate reality from understanding and making a scientifically synthetic, albeit socially subjective action impossible—such cowardice in the name of activism no one can ask of us. This is a general conclusion. But what about specifically? Here is an example of the inapplicability of Kant's terminology to the explanation of activist art:

A cubist depicts objects the way they are—not in a naturalist way, but according to the visible and invisible formal laws of their reality. A table the way it is and nothing else—neither the surroundings, nor what is related to this table as impressions of light and color around it. It is not impressions but 'things in themselves' that are painted. It is a dubious situation in which a cubist unschooled in philosophy faces the danger of empty schematism. Indeed—where is the line that the activist cubist should not cross,

where the distance from impressionism and naturalism is sufficient? Is it Cézannism or Corotism as many seem to think? It seems to me that more consistent, for instance in painting, may have been those suprematists who could just smirk at Cézanne and even more so at Corot, who did not have a good relationship to the classicism of Ingres, and whose 'things in themselves' were straight line and the infamous dot in a lifeless square. However, no matter how valuable the quest of the suprematists might have been—and it was just a quest and theorising by the easel—deathly sadness comes from their painterly 'achievements'. A suprematist is on his way to 'things in themselves' and is approaching the void from which there is no way back to life.

And therefore any cubist, this conscientious and firm practitioner of active art, has no escape from the pessimism of this realisation if he in his artistic quest is not clear about Kant and cannot separate activism from Kantianism. Yet even rejecting Kant does not mean that the work has been done. A new criterion for artistic creation must be set. Barring that one faces the danger of eclecticism—as in the case of the highly educated André Derain. Yet it is not Kant who saves him but his original artistic mentality that brings him close to the active art of cubism.

An activist in art is not a philosophical speculator, a searcher for epiphenomenal and metaesthetic essences of things but a person with a firm and sure biologically social perception and understanding of artistically architectonic forms. An activist orients himself towards the deeper currents of present life. And therefore, despite all of its inherent extremes, activism is contemporarily real. Activism is a new look on and concept of reality by artists free from the old sense of the world. It is not an artistic concept mutilated by stereotyped classifiers—it is a concept in the sense attributed to it by Schopenhauer: an original achievement of unity in a work of art by an artist.

A work of art is unimaginable without a concept. The concept behind active art creates modern art, original and contemporary, it finds a balance between excesses of subjectivism (expressionism) and objectivism (naturalism). The word as sense encompasses in organic unity the word as sound and the word as image. And if impressionism makes one wonder if such an encompassing concept even exists, now there can be no such doubt. Life experience does not match the artistic concept.

The artistic concept is found later when lucidity is already in place. Here the kinship between the scientific and artistic processes of cognition

is revealed. For that reason, let us not base our artistic conclusions on outdated schemes.

Active art is evidently founded in the live culture of the present. A genuine artist is its bearer and, as he generates cosmic reality, he can say with apostle John that already by living he belongs to eternal life.

## VIII

Perceiving art as a peculiar form of cognition, we relate activism to many general theoretical issues. Thus the question of rationalism and realism is present in the consideration of naturalism and imitation of nature in art.

Activism highlights the importance of the formal and intellectual moment. The essence of art expresses itself actively and expressively (not expressionistically!) instead of passively and impressionistically. If we consider, for example, Milton, Masaccio, J. S. Bach, and Picasso, intellectuals in art, then we can talk about the rationalism of activism in a certain sense. Yet it is not the old philosophical rationalism, which, drawing away from the pulsation of life, has turned into empty schematism. The intellectualism of the active art of the present, founded in the concreteness of the complexes of feeling, joins instinct with metaphysics. In poetry, for instance, a poet's formalism does not exist next to poetry, but

forms alongside the active creation of poetry.

If formerly the artist used to pay more attention to the so-called outer world in creation—if nature was depicted in the work of art, it was reflected in the prism of his disposition—then nowadays it seems to be different. The artist no longer wants to be passively imitating, he turns to himself and depicts his temperament with, if I may say so, the help of the wealth of an outer world forms and images, using these forms and images compositionally and always for constructive purposes. Of course, such an artist is no longer a naturalist in the former sense of the word. He does not stick to the forms of impressions provided to us by everyday phenomena and objects, which always depend on memory and the finetuning of feelings. The artist attempts to penetrate the deeper essence and finds in his art formal means for expression that superficially may be completely free of the template of objectiveness. Thus, for instance, in the contemporary active sculpture and painting we are fully within our rights to talk about a real and yet non-objective expression and a dynamic architectonic. As in the Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic plasticity, as in the Hera of Samos or a Doric temple, sculptors, builders, and painters of the present are no longer content with imitating nature, but

create artistic organisms that breathe energy. In activism thus are present the destructive and new building processes characteristic of the entire cultural awareness of the present time.

Constructivism above all. Thus the contemporary artist is also a philosopher to a degree. An active philosopher also expresses his temperament on the world scene. Therefore it is no paradox to talk of lyricism of philosophically scientific creation as the French purists do. Doubt of the possibility of such lyricism was well founded when science did not apply to life. Now science has turned from abstraction to concreteness, it has been coated in a new flesh and is presenting its particular poetry, active and intellectual. If Verhaeren is receding into the past, then Léger is contemporary. In his paintings the dynamic of present life is expressed as an experience of artistic concreteness. The modern urban poetry and painting are not found only in the representation or imitation of urban civilization and technology, even though, as we already saw, activism does not deny the value of so-called external facts and the reality of coherence. Should it be the case then, activism would obviously depart from its wide objective base. The pragmatic and in a sense active philosophical idea as if, in his cognitive process, man actively formed cosmic rules out of incoherent chaos cannot apparently

be applied to active art. Activism disassociates itself from such one-sided intellectualism. For even if active art often treats the rules inherent in works of art and objects as immanent to an artist's activity, it is done only in the sense that these rules in their objective substratum are of cosmic generality. After all, no artist exists outside of society and the cosmic whole! Moreover, activism definitely wants to emphasise the organising meaning and purpose of artistic cognition; to unite the chaotic and tiresome variety of the present in spiritual concentration, artistically true and genuine.

Thus in today's active art, the principle of least expenditure of force—the conviction of the possibility of a new and more noble organisation both in art and other spheres of cultural awareness and civilisation—finds its peculiar expression. The naturalism of old often lacked this conviction and therefore it was not artistically convincing.

## IX

To the above intellectualism, which we observe both in the active fine arts as well as in poetry and other spheres of present day art, another current of art seems to take a seemingly opposing position. Ignoring the spatially-conceptual elements of intellectualism, it puts emphasis on emotional rhythmic, as observed in many works of Andrei

Bely, in contemporary poetry and art in general. Thus a serious question is posed to activism that requires an answer. Otherwise our conclusions about present-day art could seem subjective and its characterisation unconvincing.

As in fine arts, so particularly in poetry, the rhythmic, figurative, and associative elements or the principle of time, space, and association are evident. The question is which of these principles should be considered as dominating in the active art of the present and in what direction future art can be predicted to move.

Neither in fine arts—painting, sculpture, and architecture—nor in poetry, the question long since has not been whether art with a subject or without one, with an object or without one should be cultivated. This antithesis belongs to the past.

In fact there is not, nor has there ever been a purely narrative art. The so-called narrative art meant piling non-artistic values upon artistic forms. And in its abstraction, the associative element as an artistic principle leaves the sphere of artistic cognition and that which we usually characterise as narrative art is, at best, art with a preponderance of the associative element—usually from life experiences, which have yet to be given artistic form. Such a work cannot have actively organising significance. Narrative art is

certainly not present-day active art as a formally dynamic expression of spiritual energy.

As we can see, activism is not associativism. Nor is it abstract formalism—either spatial, painterly and sculptural or rhythmic, musical and melodic. In painting, suprematism as a typically objectless current has already sufficiently mapped out its direction. Suprematism does not lead to the organics and architectonics of active art but back to the individualism of expressionism. Just as futurism, suprematism pays much attention to movement, to the dynamic as such. Yet this dynamic is not organised as in the works of the ancient classics and present constructivists Léger or sculptor Zālits, but rather it is mechanical and cinematographic as in the productions of ego-futurists and, for instance, the short stories of Erenburg. The objectless construing becomes superficial playing; psycho-dynamism is replaced by crude mechanisation as can be seen, for example, in late German expressionism. The present-day suprematism as a peculiarly pure formalism has not justified its principles. Taking on the fight against the traditional perspective and illusionism, it has inadvertently returned to artificial illusionism and academic perspective, as can be seen when analysing, for example, the works of Malevich and Lissitzky. The oblique areas of course create an illusion of perspective.

Pure formalism has not fared any better than emotional rhythmic, as we can see from some of the works of French symbolists and later Russian futurists.

Thus, by separating itself from one-sided formalism, activism in poetry is not only musical lyricism. Metre and rhythm do not constitute the only content and determining principles of this poetry. This poetry is an iambic, expressive monologue of the contemporary bard, assuming that iamb, with its sternness, resists the pure musicality of old. The active poetry of the present highlights the importance of a spatial-conceptual element in artistic cognition and sets imagism vis-à-vis the musically rhythmic.

True, by getting rid of any image-based concrete content, relying only on the musicality of language, to evoke a certain emotional mood. A case to the point would be some lyric compositions of Verlaine. Yet a too high and one-sided assessment of musical melodiousness and complete rejection of figurative and conceptual elements brings about poverty of content and turns the artist into a craftsman instead of activist and prophet. Lyricism does not involve only music and to talk of 'Mozartism' in architecture, as does the figurative and constructive Poelzig, is perhaps possible for purposes of poetic expression. Even though music

and poetry share rhythm, there is still a difference between them. For a word in itself contains certain restrictions on rhythm and is not as free as is the sound in music. The rhythm and musicality of language may awaken only the very basics of feeling—the feeling of light, gravity, speed etc. A poet can give rise to artistic cognition only by awakening certain sets of feelings and memories. Therefore, the poet has to set words to rhythm also on the basis of their expressive meaning. Thus the spatial, i.e. image-based, and associative element in poetry does not lose its significance and the musical melodiousness should be assigned only a correlative role. Musicality must support and interrelate the inherent expressiveness of words.

The word as a unit containing rhythmically spatial elements is also the womb of thought and concept. It is no coincidence that the logic of the present locates the conceptual element already in imaginative assumptions and fantasies. In thinking that is devoid of images and emotions no such element is found. The process of creating poetry is related to the word and thinking in images. Therefore it would be wrong to require of the poet that he only pay attention to the musical and emotional elements and get rid of images, i.e. the spatially conceptual and associative principles.

It would be even worse to ignore images and the spatial element in painting and sculpture. That would mean to fail to understand the essence of these arts. Moreover, just as poetry involves the word and image, sculpture is related to material. Material to be worked on also involves certain rules, which cannot be simply ignored by the artist but subjects him to requirements that turn into problems for an entire era in the arts. Form is in reality tied to material and the artist has to know, so to speak, the soul of various materials to express his architectonic conception in real form. Sculptures or buildings unrealisable in material are a certain contradiction in terms. Contemporary constructivism has by far failed to take into account the importance of material. Yet it has to be done if the fine arts are to enter practical life and achieve true mastery.

We see that the spatially conceptual element in art cannot be denied. Yet let us refrain from assuming it as the only important and valuable principle for understanding art. I would simply like to give it an adequate emphasis. Up till now, this principle has been undeservedly ignored. The one-sidedness of impressionism, symbolism and emotionalism must be rejected. The more unique the image-related plasticity in a work of art, the greater, sociologically, its value. Art no longer wishes to be a programmatic imitator

of past forms. The uniquely contemporary view of the contemporary active artist relates art as cognition with the kind of cognitive battle that humanity has not ceased to heroically continue fighting both in revolution and in the dullness of everyday life.

## X

The rhythmic of the word can certainly not be separated from its sound characteristics. The musically melodious in poetry is not just a harmonious combination of words, sounds and rhymes. Therefore, objections that can be raised against an exaggerated assessment of the musically melodious in understanding poetry should, to a great extent, also be raised against melodiousness as a school of poetry as theoretically developed and practically justified by Andrei Bely.

The basic theses of melodiousness: 1) a lyric poem is a song; 2) there are hidden melodies in a poet: he is a composer; 3) in a pure lyric, melody is more important than image; 4) enough with metaphoric excesses; less imagism, and more song, more simple words, less sonorous noise (fewer trumpets); ingenious composers show their genius not with instruments but melodies; Beethoven's orchestration is simpler than Strauss's.

We can see that these theses contain both practical hints and



principal assertions. As far as Andrei Bely wishes to prevent the excesses and exaggerations of uncoordinated images, sounds and rhythms surrounding the melodious soul of lyric poetry, one can fully agree with him. This trend of melodiousness would be understandable as a reaction against the often less than artistic and unnatural imagism in poetry and against imagism as a school of poetry.

Yet we would be acting in a wrong way, if, by fighting against the excesses of imagism, we tried to sow unsupportable one-sidedness. And just such one-sidedness is heard in those theses of Bely's that carry the weight of principles.

Bely asserts that in 'pure' lyric poetry, melody is more important than the image. But what exactly is 'pure' and 'impure' lyric? Bely attaches more than just a historical content to this question of purity, even though he is of the opinion that lyric poetry flourished when poetry was sung. But just as we no longer think that the genuine ideal of beauty against which the present day concept of beauty is to be measured can be found only in Ancient Greece or renaissance, we cannot claim that the only pure lyric poetry is found in the poetry of the troubadours or minnesinger poetry and that contemporary French lyric poetry should be placed lower on the scale than the simple love lyric of Walther von der

Vogelweide. And if pure lyricism in a song that is sung, for example, in troubadour poetry, were to be found only in melodiousness, then Walther von der Vogelweide's image based poetry, as we can clearly see from Morgnestern's translations, would not even be part of pure lyricism, not unlike many poems written by Bely in an exhilaration of melodiousness.

The concept of lyricism can be gleaned by analysing the production of contemporary lyric poetry. Thereby we can find out that Bely, keeping to the concept of 'pure' lyricism, evidently narrows the concept of lyricism as such, which does not at all match the grandiose breadth and universal lyricism of Bely's artistic activity. Bely certainly has an inadequately low appreciation of imagery. Considering the image an indirect element in poetry, similar to the harmony of sound and rhyme, Bely does not do justice to the word as including image and concept, which at other times is placed at the centre of cognitive culture. In this thought of Bely's we seem to detect an echo of the view that lyric poetry in its emotional rhythm should be placed closer to music and even mathematics, than to other artistic forms of expression, epic or drama. Such a view could have developed only in the atmosphere of an exaggerated appreciation of musicality observed in the last 20-30 years. In this sense, Bely seems to be stuck in the past. We

recognise Bely's striving for a balance in poetry. In this striving, Bely asserts his strength as a creative artist. Yet this balance cannot be achieved by denying lyrical elements of equal worth to melodiousness. Even Bely himself does not want such an artificial balance. An engineer of complicated metres and the mechanism of the strophe, he does not want to tend to abstract musicality, even in his poetry, growing out of his excitement with melodiousness. In the theoretical basis of melodiousness, there is an unavoidable contradiction, which Bely, in his latest poetic works, is trying to overcome. Yet he manages to do so only when he oversteps the bounds of his theory of melodiousness. Bely the poet triumphs over Bely the theoretician.

The contradictions in the basis for Bely's melodiousness also become obvious if we juxtapose it to this outstanding writer's views on art in general, his art theory and philosophy. In his *Theory of the Word* Bely suggests that the process of creating poetry is the process of creating the word. A word, a simple word with all of its content of image and concept is like a gesture of expression to the image and expressionless, hollow emotional wave, the social-individual artistic will that carries the word. But the word, at least as far as it is related to an idea, already contains spatially conceptual elements. There is no poetry without

a word. Pure music, a melody is not yet poetry. Melody is also not the emotionally metaesthetic wave that Bely talks about. Nor can it then be the metaesthetic basis for the creation process of word and poetry. And therefore we cannot consider the melodiousness of non-conceptual intoning as a new synthetic gain that would balance poetry. After all, it is Bely himself who claims that cognitive culture is unmistakably about the birth of the word; but the word that is born, the figurative gesture of the imageless affect is a new figuratively conceptual gain. The active art of the present does not want to go back to emotional lack of logic but rather achieve revived and lively logic, cosmically all-encompassing and harmonious. The poetry of Sophocles and Aeschylus, discussed by Bely, is closer to such logic than it is to melodiousness. In my opinion, Zelinsky is right in contrasting the specific logic of the art of Ancient Greece with the excessive voluntarism of modern—e.g. Shakespeare's—poetry.

In the final analysis, the basis for Bely's melodiousness is philosophical. But, as a result, it possesses the inevitabilities of philosophical schematism. Bely talks about an 'intonational architectonic', yet wants to have a strict separation of the formally logical accent from the gesticulative and mimic. It is obvious that the conceptually spatial element inevitably

penetrates the 'pure' lyricism and melodiousness of Bely similar to the way Leibniz's idealistic monadology is pervaded by materialism, in the form of conceptually spatial mathematical points. It is only by ignoring this philosophical inconsistency and rejecting, to a degree, the principal theses of melodiousness, that one can talk about the architectonic of intonation and compromise oneself by the spatially conceptual element in poetry as in the case of Bely who asserts that rhythm is given to us intersected with concept, that it is the gesture of the concept and the place of intersection is in intonational gesture-melody. Thus the one-sidedness of the emotionality of melodiousness is tempered but Bely fails to show that 'only if melody is at the centre of a lyrical production and turns the poem into a song that can be sung, the image, sound interactions, metre, and rhythm have been placed correctly.' Therefore a more encompassing principle should be sought in contemporary poetry as a process of cosmic cognition. This artistic cognition no longer fits the boundaries of 'pure' lyric poetry and Bely's melodiousness. It obviously distances itself from image-less emotion and approaches image-based conception, a spatially conceptual grasp on the word. In the future, therefore, poetry can expect not only a wealth of melodious worlds but also a spatially conceptual

embracing and recognition of cosmic unity—not only constructive but also one that includes the subject in the composition; not only formal but also termed in the cosmos of expressed consciousness. The path of active art I would rather like to describe as one from Pythagoras to Plato and not the other way around.

## XI

The conclusion on melodiousness determines the position activism assumes vis-à-vis imagism, not as a school of poetry but as a current in art where the image-related figurative element takes precedence over musical melodiousness. Without in any way rejecting musicality and melodiousness in lyric poetry, activism will still feel closer to imagism as an intellectual phenomenon in art. In this sense, we can no longer call imagism pure formalism. However, the Russian school of imagism often rejects not only musicality but also any kind of ideas in art. 'Ideas are for philosophers', these imagists claim, 'social questions are for sociologists, music is for composers, and images and only images are for poets.'

Let us not be confused by these assertions. More than outstanding musicality, the painterly plastic and conceptual element in what the Russian imagists produce—whether

they like it or not—is akin to ideas in art. Activist poetry is positioned under a new metaphoric star. A new sensibility requires a new word. The metaphors of words clash with each other, sparking new idea worlds. If Russian imagism as a school often goes to the extreme and dissolves in excessive and uncoordinated imagism, turning into chaotic formalism, it is a sign more of intellectual and socially individual laxity and weariness than of an absolute contradiction between active art and imagism in lyric poetry. It is a sign that the Russian school of imagism is unraveling and that present-day activism is threatened by the passive impressionism of the past instead of imagism.

## XII

In the characterisation of activism so far, we already had to touch upon the question of the significance of the artist's personality in the process of creation and art. Now I would like to take a closer look at this issue, particularly because in assessing the significance of the artistic personality I cannot fully agree with Gleizes who asserted: '*L'art de demain sera impersonnel*'. Gleizes prediction of the art of the future's impersonality is based on the opinion that such an art will have to be scientific.

It is however possible to appreciate a well-understood approximation of artistic cognition to scientific reasoning and still disagree with Gleizes assertion. It is not difficult to prove that science too is not all that impersonal and free of any subjectivism as some may think. This presence of personality or individual element can be detected in any scientific hypothesis whose objectivity may turn out to be completely subjective, that is, it may not be what it seems. Yet hypotheses are widely used in science. It is really an inexhaustible topic. Here I would just like to point out the following: every science unfortunately possesses the so-called philosophical part, i.e. science is related to philosophy and in the foreseeable future this close connection is likely to be retained—not because it is desirable but because it is integral to the process of scientific thought. But if so, if science is undeniably related to philosophy, then it also possesses the personal or subjective element, which will not be lacking in the scientific art of the future. The subjectively personal element in philosophy is so visible that there is no need to prove it. It is no coincidence that Simmel talks about philosophy as an expression of personality on the global scene or of character reflected in the prism of the world.

Gleizes himself somewhere discusses the intensity springing from



longing for adventure and joy as the internal cause of human action. Yet creation of beauty is also a part of human activity and thus related to the intensity characteristic of man. For that reason, it is difficult to imagine Gleizes' impersonal art of the future.

The active worth of personality cannot be denied even if, along with Gleizes, we should assume that 'universal spirituality' must act and express itself, so to speak, non-individually but can be understood through cosmic law. Even if we adopt such a hypothesis of immanent idealism, personality is perceived as a certain kind of a plexus—and not just of a mathematical nature!—and thus contradicts Gleizes' impersonality in art.

Gleizes' view should probably be interpreted as a counter reaction to the extreme individualism and mysticism of expressionism. Yet such a one-sided assessment of artistic personality does not lead to a correct understanding of art. Just as religious feeling cannot be destroyed through the propaganda of atheism, so it is not enough to deny the significance of personality in art to achieve art that would be even more scientific than mathematics—i.e. completely impersonal. Gleizes also does not succeed in this: the subjective element chased out the door returns, so to speak, through the window. Even Gleizes himself

is talking about personal passions expressed in art. These passions are the main component of a personality. Already Plato taught that man's soul does not consist only of the logical element. After Hume, Mach, pragmatists, and fictionalists we no longer have to prove that even this logical element per se is a certain kind of abstraction and can never be observed as clearly and absolutely as sometimes is claimed. Hence it turns out that subjectivism even in the active art of the present has much deeper roots than we may think and that Gleizes thinks. A good example here is the theoretical work by Puni, *Art of the Present*. In this work, Puni criticizes the non-objective art of Kandinsky and Malevich and proves that in the end it is a certain kind of individualism—no matter whether conscious or unconscious. He also shows that the individual is the main embodiment of law and coherence with respect to the formal elements of this art. Thus there is no concealing the lack of objective construction and irrationalism. In his skepticism regarding the excesses of contemporary art, Puni reaches the rather unexpected solution that in creating contemporary art, everything after all depends on the artist's talent, i.e. something rather irrational and individual or, as Puni puts it, mystical and romantic. For what else but irrationalism is emphasized by bringing

the notion of talent into the discussion of theoretical issues of art? The notion of talent certainly is of no use in the struggle against individualism, mysticism, and romanticism, which, similar to Gleizes, Puni also seems to reject.

In my opinion, all this suggests that the subjectively individual element, i.e. personality cannot be simply dismissed from the contemporary active art and that in the near future art is likely to be no less subjective than philosophy. Yet one thing we should keep in mind: the subjective element cannot be envisioned in abstraction and the individual as remote from society as Puni does. What A likes, he says, B may not like at all; what is liked today may not be liked tomorrow and vice versa. It is a paraphrase of the sentence, *De gustibus non disputandum est*. Yet to repeat what the ancient Roman said with some justification is not a step forward but rather backward. And the reason for this unfortunate inconsistency is, as we have seen the antisociological understanding of personality, the abstraction of subjectivism and personality.

Activism should therefore not try to abolish the individual peculiarities of the creative process but rather to give them a correct assessment and grounding. The individual should be perceived as a plexus of activity, whether we assume the position of general spirituality like Gleizes or adopt the directly

opposing materialist view. From the sociological perspective, the creative artist is a *Mater dolorosa*: his heart has been penetrated by the spears of the tragedy of humanity. Thus new, individually attuned artistic perceptions are born. Yet in an individual work of art something greater and more significant is expressed than what A likes and B does not. Michelangelo is Renaissance itself. The subjectively individual element in art does not disappear and instead objectifies in the style of the era and is contemporarily limited. The tragedy of the artist lies in the limiting. In this sense, activism too is tragic. The active comedy is a tragicomedy and in the grotesque of activism, there is deep seriousness. Therefore, in the formal development of art, the formation of the cognitive culture is reflected in the formal development of art—the struggle of consciousness up from the depths of the subconscious. This struggle is still too complicated, rich in the elements of irrationalism. I can second Puni's view that even the conscious and intelligent Picasso is producing most of his paintings intuitively. And how pitiful those who extol the mechanisation of artistic creation! They unfortunately cannot overcome the irrational in art but are simply denying it, at the same time rejecting art and 'remaining as smart as they ever were'. That any construction possible by simple geometric

means should be considered a work of art—this view has been a fateful misunderstanding for more than one painter. We wish to understand, e.g., the mechanisation of suprematism as a certain lab preparatory work, seeking activism in its own time, perhaps as indispensable as expressionism. However, active art does not and will not have anything in common with the philosophical dilettantism of imitators of nonobjective art to whom the awareness of a socially grounded strong artistic personality is yet to become known. I do not understand these apologists of ‘pure’ mechanism in art theory, albeit I would like to see them somewhere between the theoreticians of mechanics and mechanics. It is unjustifiable, it seems to me, to require the active art of the present to be more mechanical than the mechanics of today. Whoever has followed the development of mechanics at least since Mach to recent times knows that even in mechanics not everything happens mechanically by far and that even in this discipline there is no lack of theoretical problems. And why should an artist-constructivist be a greater rationalist than a mathematician or mechanic? There is no machine that would not have one or more cylinders. Thus there is no mechanic who, in his calculations, would not use his  $\varpi$ . But this  $\varpi$  is after all a fruit of irrationalism, something incognito and mysterious. And yet the mechanic is

not afraid of this mysterious mechanical personality. The immortal practice of life makes him forget that any real form that contains the mysterious  $\varpi$  must fall apart one day—it does not matter whether tragically or comically. Whence this great fear of  $\varpi$  amongst artists? A thought stirs quietly: Could it be a symptom of emotional shallowness or, as was said in the past, a lack of temper? This thought is particularly reinforced by the imitators and experimenters of suprematism whose ‘architectonic conceptions’ are often very dubious. There is no architectonic in art without an architectonic unity of world view in the artist-creator. Yet this unity can be achieved only by overcoming the faults in the mechanism. Mechanics cannot do it but art seemingly can. Therefore every genuine work of art always possesses something that one cannot fully understand. That is something new. A conclusion must be made by analogy—without the analogy.

Thus it turns out that the active art of the present is after all deeply intuitive in its development. And I already emphasised above that the intellectualism about which I am talking is not rationalism, the wilted plant of scholasticism. Gleizes’s view of the impersonal art of the future should therefore be considered a certain metaphor. *Suum esse conservare*—singularity should be preserved.

### XIII

If the subjectively emotional moment should not be excluded from art, the issue of romanticism in the active art of today also requires an explanation. Those who fight against any romanticism in the name of activism seem to act similarly, albeit in diametrically opposite ways, as Nietzsche at one time did against Socrates and the Socratics. Nietzsche’s contemptuous criticism of Socratism as rationalism fails to see that Socrates was one of the most well-rounded of the past, dismantling the kind of rationalism that at the time had turned into cultivating empty scholasticism. Nietzsche fails to see that Socrates as an intellectualist is closer to him not only in his understanding of art, i.e. tragedy, but, as a strong and active personality, closer even than some of his romantic friends. His break with Wagner is a case in point.

Those who fight against the romanticism of the present also often fail to see that instead of romanticism they are actually battling pseudo-romanticism and instead of a sovereign current in art, a cowardly rejection of the culture of art.

There are different kinds of rationalism—there is Socrates, Plato, scholasticism, and Kant. It is possible to fight against one and defend another. Likewise, there are different kinds of

romanticism: Friedrich Schlegel in his youth as opposed to his old age and Catholicism; Ludwig Tieck, Amadeus Hoffmann, and Edgar Poe, Lamartine and Hugo, and finally, to turn to our own country, the poet Pavasaru Jānis and—Eduards Veidenbaums, and Aspazija. There is reactionary and social revolutionary romanticism. And this social significance finds its own artistic expression.

What is this art of romanticism? Hegel, as we know, considered it as following classical art, which surpasses the synthesis of idea and emotion, i.e. form and content, in further search. This art Hegel places lower than classicism, however, for to him, classicism is the highest of arts ‘in general’. Thus is revealed Hegel’s absolutism in aesthetics that is contradictory to Hegel’s dialectic.

Following the principles of dialectic, Hegel should have considered romanticism, as a contemporary negation of classicism, a genuine further development. That said, I do not wish to defend the German romantic art of the previous century. I would just like to bring the thought in motion that, in a certain historical situation, romanticism, as a drive to find an artistic form to a formless surge of emotion can be rooted in its era and real—romanticism without pseudo-romanticism.

The issue of romanticism should be resolved with a view to the

concreteness of the present, similar to the way Léger does it in his approach to the active art of the present and praise of urban culture. Léger imagines that the globally organising culture of consciousness formed by the present civilization is creating the heavy rhythms of Verhaerenism in painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry without the Flemish mysticism and autumnal impressionism of Verhaeren. Yet as the cities expand geometrically, horizontally, and vertically, if we are to use his own phrase, the force of the feeling of life, which finds its unique expression in the intensity of contemporary art, grows accordingly. It is important to note this, for even in this era of great opportunities, this intensity contains something that goes beyond the limits of real possibilities. Therefore the active art of today has its element of social utopianism and artistic romanticism. Yet it is not quietism or rejection. The new art, according to Léger, leads people to a new life, dressing it into something plastically new and decisive. Such idealism should not be combated—and not because, as Léger puts it, to give man respite from his excessive and trying efforts, but so that, by overcoming these efforts, he would always be right in the middle of an active event of consciousness where social fictionalism is unfolding in a clear awareness of culture.

Thus we gain a much clearer overview of the romantic element from the point of view of contemporary civilization and art theory. In our era of flux and decomposition, when the great horizons of civilization have not been obscured, however, we should not fear a conflagration but rather the chimerical dreaming and pseudo-romanticism that is gaining ground in today's literature and art, in the prose of Meyrink and Erenburg and the painting of Dix and other so-called German verists. Verists claim to be waging a war against the mush of bourgeois romanticism. They want to show the repulsive pathological anatomy of the present. Yet in fact they are only revealing their individualistic Ropsist symbolism, albeit without Rops's mastery of form. Even pathological anatomy in art requires a specific language of form.

#### XIV

Activism is a specific, contemporary vocabulary of form. As we already saw, active art separates itself both from impressionism and naturalism and from suprematism and mechanisation. It puts an emphasis on the immanent rules of a work of art and, as a synthesis of art, considers the so-called pure formalism as an analytical antithesis to the reliance on subject that was so powerful until recently. Activism, therefore, cannot recognise

aestheticism as an attempt at an artistically formal synthesis. Aesthetic values in aestheticism have no less of an incidental character as in expressionism. The only difference of sorts lies in the fact that expressionism was active and aggressive, whereas aestheticism is always tired, always seemingly living in the past. What are the eternal and immutable laws of beauty in aestheticism? They are abstractions of the realistic art of the past, primarily that of Ancient Greece and the Renaissance. As soon as art turns to real cognition, the passively contemplative spirit of aestheticism becomes obvious. Therefore activism in essence is as alien to conventional aestheticism as to impressionism of the clichés of academism. To consider art for art's sake, *l'art pour l'art*, would be more wrong now than ever. Art for art's sake is in fact art for the artist—an extreme kind of individualism, a contrast to the social nature of activism. If the contemporary active art, as it is expressed in painting, sculpture, and other branches of art, is still separated from the general public by a difficult to bridge gap, then it means that the public and artists have a different approach to art and works of art. Just like 50 years ago, the public seeks the customary subject in a work of art, whereas the artists look for the formal rules immanent to art in a contemporary architectonic. The gap between

life and art has to be bridged, of course. Yet it cannot be done either through aesthetic conventionalism, or through art rejecting its essence and turning into an imitation of life whose usefulness can be doubted even from the practical viewpoint of a bourgeois. The majority of the public must sharpen its tools of artistic cognition in order for the active art of the present to become a truly social kind of art. In this task, the active artist and theoretician of art come together as propagandists of art. Bright and tempting lights are beginning to shine over the culture of art and cognition of old Europe. There is talk of a new era in art, powerful and swift, a global, self-aware and much augmented Hellenism.

#### XV

Contemporary art is dominated by an international trend of clarity and architectonic unity. Yet separate nations still remain a fact. Therefore it is only logical to look for the "national element" in active art as well. Thus we have to look, for instance, for the formally immanent elements in Latvian folk art that are distinct and separate this art from similar artifacts of other nations.

As long as art was first and foremost considered from the point of view of its subject matter, the national characteristics seemed to be expressed in the unique data of subject matter

and ethnography. Now it is different. We are trying to understand art in its formal and constructive laws. Thus the characterization of the national element faces obvious difficulty. Anyone with some knowledge in ethnography will be able to say that the works of Kustodiyev or Malavin are "Russian". But what distinguishes the present art of the French, Italians, Germans or Latvians? And if indeed there are differences, are they greater than between the works of different artists of the same nationality? Is the difference, e.g., between Braque and the Spaniard Picasso greater than between Braque and Matisse? It is not so easy to answer.

Of course, we will not discuss "national art" as a certain kind of servile approach useful for some political situation. In the culture of national awareness, such art has no deep roots. The freedom battles of the Latvian nation also oppose such servile spirit and we have no interest in insignificant changes. It is the analysis of the immanent, figurative, painterly elements of the art of our nation to which we should turn. The theoretical basis provided by Madernieks and Zaļkalns is far from clarifying the issue. Likewise, the attempts by Madernieks, Zaļkalns, Dzenis, and Strunke to consciously develop the national element in ornament, sculpture and graphic arts may be interesting but not

always justifiable if we consider art to be a live organism. One must reject any kind of lifeless stereotype here. If we attempt to transfer the elements of our folk art to contemporary art in any clichéd way, the result will be not better than the fiasco experienced by our pseudo-national poets and their theoretician Pārstrautu Jānis some thirty years ago.

The question of Latvian national distinction in the art of the present still remains in the sphere of intuition. There are too few studies of this. Brastiņš, for example, has tried to find a formal foundation for the Latvian ornament and finds its theoretical basis in the folksongs, fairy-tales, myths, cult and customs. In this way he finds the basic elements of Latvian ornament: horizontal, vertical and zigzag line as well as circle, triangle, quadrangle, crisscrossed and oblique form.

Yet we cannot get very far this way. Brastiņš's literary approach is inadequate and unconvincing in graphic analysis. And it is also clear that the elements Brastiņš assigns to the Latvian ornament are not specifically Latvian but rather pertaining to humanity as such. A quadrangle of any other geometric form is neither Latvian, nor French, nor Spanish. Indeed, we can only note the typical Latvian compositional arrangement of these general artistic elements in Latvian works of art. And therefore, the method

should not be historical, ethnographic, or literary, but formal instead, and it is the analysis of the figurative values that should be analyzed. Pointing out the worldview of "ancient Latvians" is not of much help here and we should resort to it with the greatest of caution.

Our modern poetry is rooted in folk poetry and, to a certain degree, we can talk about an uninterrupted tradition. In fine arts we are, however, much less independent. Our painting and sculpture, for instance, have completely borrowed their means of expression from other nations. And therefore we still have to find our unique and conscious traditions of the color palette and linear architectonics. That does not mean that we have to demolish our present-day painting, sculpture, or graphic arts to return to the 'basics' in the national style, but conscious augmentation of our hypothetical or intuitive peculiarity by artistic means. That is how our best artists have understood their task.

Our purpose here is not to give a general assessment of Latvian art, to mention all the historically significant works and their authors. Yet if the bygone impressionistic era in our poetry is best expressed by Rainis, Poruks, and Skalbe and in painting by Purvīts, the active art of the present involves other names: in painting, Voldemārs Matvejs, Jāzepts Grosvalds, Jēkabs Kazaks, Niklāvs Strunke, and

Konrāds Ubāns; in sculpture, Teodors Zaļkalns, Kārlis Zālīts, and in architecture, which we practically do not have, architect Štālbergs. All these and other active artists, albeit with different intentions, would like to consider their conclusions in national art as being of equal worth and necessary in the development of the artistic culture of Europe and, yes, even the entire civilization.

Voldemārs Matvejs is the first among Latvian painters who definitely broke ties with the academic painting and sought something new, fighting for new artistic principles in his paintings. About 15 years ago, this path was still too difficult; it required incredible amounts of energy. Matvejs has left very few paintings; he only had time and energy for delineating the main tasks; Matvejs worked much as a theoretician of art. In his book, *The Principles of Creation in Plastic Arts*, he solves, to the degree that it was then possible, the issue of creating surface when painting bulk and introduces the question about the simple and complicated texture—the conflict of textures. Matvejs was among the first to begin to study Negro art. Today's active art—and not only in Latvia!—has lost one of its greatest forces.

Jāzepts Grosvalds also died at the beginning of his career. But that which he has left as an artist definitely points to a constructive understanding of



works of art and intelligence and brings it closer to the active art of the present. Even in the watercolors of his *Persian Trip* he rejects a simple representation of interesting scenes of nature, and does not show what he sees but rather what he feels—a psycho-geographic synthesis, as the French artist and art theoretician Ozenfant puts it. Jāzeps Grosvalds also does not lack for means of expressing in his painting what he wants to express.

While being a weaker colorist than Grosvalds, with his striving for synthesis, the free and constructive approach to the material and the strict, albeit not always architectonically organized drawing, Jēkabs Kazaks, who also died prematurely, is among our activists. As in today's cubism, in Kazaks's paintings, the relations that tie this art to the traditions of the great art of old become revealed. Jēkabs Kazaks was not satisfied with imitating late impressionism as have many other of our beginners in painting but fought for a new and individual "museum art", to use this famous phrase of Cézanne.

Niklāvs Strunke is certainly another activist. For several years, consistently and with notable perseverance, he is working on his strictly constructive, hostile to any illusionism, two-dimensional painting, paying the greatest attention to the treatment of texture. With their architectonic and clarity of the color scheme, his latest paintings

indicate that this young artist is gradually freeing himself of the excessive theoretical weight, the inorganic schematism of construction that was often evident in his earlier expressively dynamic works. Inconsistencies in treating the perspective (preciosity, echoes of academism) can no longer make one doubt the further growth of Niklāvs Strunke as an artist toward greater independence and originality.

Konrāds Ubāns is a painter of a different nature than Niklāvs Strunke. We cannot call him a conscious constructivist and it is only with a certain proviso that we can consider him an activist. Ubāns's relationship to activism in painting of the present is similar to Derain's relationship to cubism. Yet Derain is more consistent and clear, and the impact of the impressionists of old is less obvious in him than in the works of Ubāns. And yet Ubāns's artistic originality allows him to be discussed among our active artists of today, among whom are also Jānis Liepiņš, Romans Suta, Ludolfs Liberts, Valdemārs Tone, the Vodkinist Uga Skulme, and others, whose development will become obvious in the future.

In sculpture, only Zaļkalns has not been content to remain with Rodin and has continued with an independent development. Similar to Aristide Maillol, he has overcome Rodin's sophisticated impressionist showiness, with its effective treatment of light

and surface, by making his surfaces simpler and with a more definite expression of the inner construction. In this, Zaļkalns has found a student in the sculptor Emīls Melderis-Millers.

The sculptor Kārlis Zālīts already belongs to a different, younger generation. Just as Archipenko, Lipchitz, Belling, and a few others he rejects the mood provoking impressions in sculpture and shows that only an organic architectonic, constructive logic makes sculpture as an art creative and socially important. In the latest works of Archipenko, a certain erotic aestheticism, even catering to the bourgeois taste, can be detected. Zālīts does not care for external beauty. He prefers a sharp and manly looking at things that is characteristic of today's active art in general. For value of form, Zālīts shows a subjectless subjective, real expression of power and movement, a dynamic plasticity.

With the help of contrasts, showing the movement of mass in space, Zālīts overcomes the two-dimensional trend in sculpture borrowed from Lipchitz and Picasso and restores the three-dimensionality of classical sculpture. In relation to the resumption of construction work in our new country and the outstanding proficiency we observe in the designs of architect Štālbergs, more practical use could be predicted for Zālīts's sculpture. The requirement of present-day active art to leave the

confines of museums and enter real life would thus be satisfied. Zālīts of course has fostered the founding of new, constructive sculpture, and he will have followers, with the young and gifted sculptor A. Dzirkals, who seems to search for his individual path between the plastic dynamic of Zālīts's and Archipenko's latest aesthetic plasticity.

That is the situation in our fine arts. In our other branches of art, e.g., poetry, a similarly new era, a movement toward an active cognition in life, has begun.

## XVI

In the active art of the present, we can observe a definite tendency to free itself of all that is redundant and not immanent to art itself. Thus the prospect of moving from the chaos of individualism and Dadaism to a new synthesis of active art is revealed. The purely formal subjectless art, suprematism par excellence, is already in the past. As I mentioned above, in the exactitude of the cubist drawing and stylisation of the colour scheme as well as the organisation of the painting, the ancient traditions of art are expressed. The so-called neoclassicism is only a variation of cubism, an original conception. In poetry, as well as in sculpture and painting, the basic material formally remains the same as always, yet it

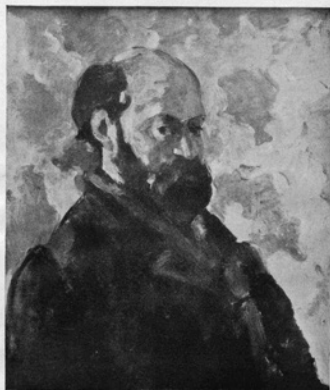
develops in new augmentation whose architectonic limits are not yet seen. Of course, the element of real idealism or romanticism remains in art. Therefore no return to realism and naturalism in the former sense of the word is likely. The theoreticians of naturalism used to refer to Aristotle's phrase that art is imitation of nature. In his aesthetic, i.e. poetics, Aristotle does not talk about imitating nature but rather about imitating the general principles of reality. Already here, a certain freedom from subject matter is seen, which is now highlighted by activism. This freedom in creation of course would not be perceived as an idealistic indeterminism. By placing a shoe brush among mammals one cannot make it grow the relevant glands. This is the ironic approach of Engels to this indeterminism. This freedom is to be found in the inner laws of an artist's will, in its intelligible nature as understood by Kant and Schopenhauer and interpreted by Hegel.

If Schopenhauer thought at one time that the will to life can be rejected only by an intellect to a degree emancipated from this will, then modern psychology and parapsychology talk about positive and negative trends in the will to life in a healthy and strong organism. These trends and their regulatory relationship may have a deeper cosmic significance. At least they permit us to have a more concrete idea

and understanding of this feeling of freedom and clarity—the catharsis in creation, about which, in following Aristotle, Nietzsche and the symbolists have so much to say. But only in this freedom of creation, we can find a real *salto vitale* to genuine artistic cognition to which the real art of today, activism, is leading us. According to the conclusions about the essence of active art, we thus be able to set forth the necessary programmatic theses. The rest will be up to the future artistic experiences.

Paul Cézanne. Self-portrait.  
 Van Gogh. Self-portrait.  
 Pieter Bruegel (elder). The Fall of Icarus.  
 André Derain. Landscape. 1913.  
 Pablo Picasso. Still Life.  
 Georges Braque. Still Life. 1922.  
 Fernand Léger. City. 1920.  
 Juan Gris. Still Life.  
 A. Gleizes. Wall decoration.  
 Ozenfant. Still Life.  
 Jeanneret. Still Life.  
 Jacques Lipchitz. Drawing.  
 Alexander Archipenko. Woman (various metals).  
 Hans Poelzig. Staircase.  
 Rudolf Belling. Erotica.  
 Lyonel Feininger. Swimmers at the Beach. 1918.  
 Iwan Puni. The Reader. 1923.  
 Carlo Carrà. Artist's Son.  
 Giorgio de Chirico. The Holy Fish.  
 Valdemars Matvejevs. Crucifix. 1908.  
 Niki von Strunke. Smokers. 1923.  
 Konrads Ubens. Still Life.  
 Teodors Zalkalns. Skriabin. 1918.  
 Krišis. Mass Movements.  
 Arnolds Dzirkals. Woman.





P. Srouso (Paul Gauguin): Poluportrejs.

39



Van-Gogov: Poluportrejs.

40



Fernand Léger (Fernand Léger): Pluša. 1926.

45



Žano Gris (Juan Gris): Klasi dala.

46



Hans Lissens (1893): Hans Lissens.

41



A. Derens (André Derain): Almera. 1913.

42



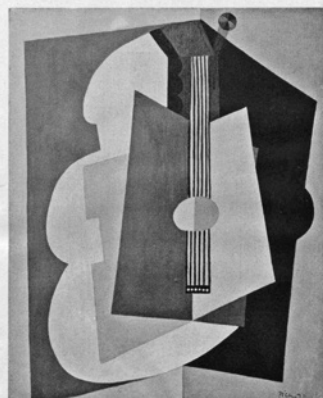
A. Glebov (Glebov): Dekoratívna síma.

47



Oskar Kokoš (Oskar Kokoschka): Klasi dala.

48



P. Pikaso: Klasi dala.

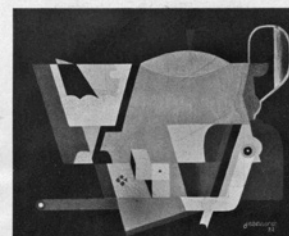
(Zbir. Luce Boudier)

43



Zoran Popović (Zoran Popović): Klasi dala. 1932.

44



Zoran Popović (Zoran Popović): Klasi dala.

49



Z. Lipton: Zlatopis.

50





A. Ančipenko: Sieviete (no dabai, metāls).

51



H. Pehligs: Kāpums.

52



V. Matrojs: Krustā Sitaiss. 1900. (Pēc N. Bēnne izpildes)

57



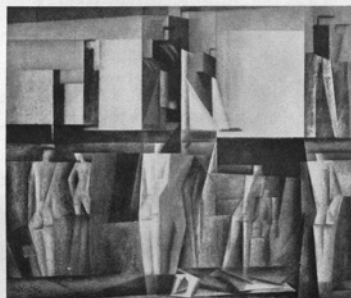
N. Strunke: Sauskietāji. 1923.

58



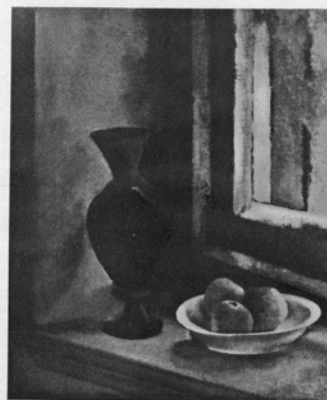
R. Bollings: Erotika.

53



I. Pētšingere: Pēdējais jasmūls. 1918.

54



K. Uhms: Klusi dala.

59



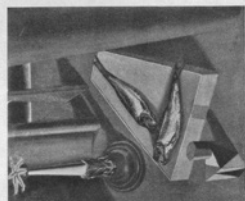
T. Zefkalns: Skolotājs. 1918.

60



Iw. Pami: Lasiņš. 1923.

55



Dr. Galka: Gēorgijs de Chakelovs' Svētās dāmas.



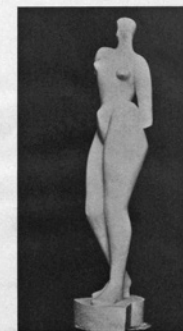
K. Karsa: Gēorgijs de Chakelovs' Svētās dāmas.

56



K. Zālītis: Mans kurtiņš.

61



A. Dzirkalis: Sieviete -

62

# Epilogue:

# three reflec- tions on 'Active Art'

Barbara Sirieix,  
Joachim Hamou  
Maija Rudovska

At the end of his essay 'Active Art' and to illustrate it, Andrejs Kurcijs selected artworks by iconic modernist artists—all male of course. It is interesting to look at how he travels in time and space with this. It starts in France with Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh then it tips into a waking dream bringing us to the 16th century with Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*. At the time of the text, it was a famous piece in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels attributed to Pieter Bruegel. Since its acquisition by the Museum in 1912 the painting has been proven to be a copy.

I've never seen the painting in real life although I remember it. I saw it in the horror movie *The Stendhal Syndrome* by Dario Argento. In the first scene, the main character Anna is wandering inside the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. She's agitated for a reason that is unknown to the viewer. Then in front of *The fall of Icarus* she collapses, struck by the Stendhal syndrome, a psychosis generated by an excess of artworks. Actually, she's a female detective who had organised a meeting with a serial killer and rapist in the museum so as to corner him by herself. How presumptuous can she be? Anna goes through the museum and as she crosses an art history written and made by men the surfaces of the paintings reflect her predator like mirrors. Eventually she will be raped—of course, but she'll be spared because the killer objectifies her as a muse because of her syndrome. When she's in front of the Bruegel copy, her eyes zoom in on the legs of Icarus falling in the water then she's caught in a spiral drawing her inside the painting. She faints, bangs her lips against the marble banister and falls into the water. Then she's in the ocean; a large strange fish approaches her and kisses her mouth.

I slipped into the story of the painting like in a dream. In Kurcijs' selection, *The fall of Icarus* is the only painting that is not modern. Why did he choose this painting in particular? It's interesting to realise that actually Dario Argento added the painting to the collection of the Uffizi for the purpose of the fiction. Did he know it was a copy? The painting that Anna is looking at before *The fall of Icarus* is *Medusa* by Caravaggio. It was painted on a shield in connection to its apotropaic power but also to the fact that Perseus killed Medusa with a shield. The apparatus produces a strange impression for the viewer, Medusa seems to get killed over and over again. What petrifies then: the horror or the power of the revengeful goddess? The onset of the syndrome is the climax of the narrative of death and violence building up during Anna's visit to the Uffizi; what's the narrative for Kurcijs?

We move back to modernity with other French dudes or dudes who have lived and worked in Paris—Derain, Picasso, Braque, Léger, Gris, Gleizes, Ozenfant, Le Corbusier, Lipchitz. Archipenko connects it to Berlin and Germany with Poelzig, Belling, Feininger, then there is a short stop in Italy with Carra and de Chirico. At the end of the path, in the last room of the gallery, Kurcijs introduces the Latvian modernists Matvejs, Strunke, Ubans, Zajkalns, Zale and Dzirkals. I don't think Kurcijs' intention was to create a hierarchy or a typology of contemporary art by nationality, otherwise why the Bruegel? Flicking through them feels a bit like a continuous motion, like a train ride of expressive features from the same genus. It seems to reflect Kurcijs' experience as a traveler and dilettante, in a collection of things seen and learned through time.

At first, when I searched for connections between the images and the text, I had the impression Kurcijs was drawing genealogies because of the lineages he creates

between artists who have lived in different times. The connections between artists can be chronological but the purpose is not historical. Rhetorically he's assertive but I think he withdraws from ideology. He's a collector of ideas but he drops them when they start to make a system. This might seem like a paradoxical statement because 'isms' are swarming in the text, so densely that they lose meaning—constructivism realism synthetism cubism formalism expressionism geometrism suprematism cezanism naturalism activism metaaesthetism mysticism. They are profuse, eerie, esoteric like the contents of a cabinet, knickknacks.

Flipping, scrolling through the images starts a journey for the reader, it could be a tour of Europe or a tour in a gallery, in the aftermath of the First World War or in the future. We could be visiting the exhibition *Active Art* curated by Andrej Kurcijs. We see black and white pictures on white planes. It is not so different from exhibition documentation: the backdrop of the white walls often annihilates contrasts and perception of scale. Actually, the images have nothing to do with the actual scale of the paintings. This is something quite ordinary in books, but if you think about it like in a dream, you can really imagine yourself on a tour of Munchkinland's MOMA after the ingestion of Alice's Eat me cakes and Drink me potions. So when Kurcijs says that 'in an era in which everything seems relative and art has to descend from its pseudo-absolutist rights...', I dream of versatile museums, shape-shifting institutions.

Joachim Hamou

In the introduction of the book *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek makes a visually

arresting observation. He revisits a short video clip from the Romanian revolution 1989, a revolution that played out on live TV a few years prior to the publication of his book. In the clip he notices that the Romanian flag is waving over a crowd, but the emblem of the toppled dictator Ceausescu, in the middle of the flag, is burned out. Instead there is a gaping hole. Žižek dwells upon the symbolic gesture illustrating this historic transition where the hole in the middle of the national identity hasn't healed or been replaced. In a typical Lacanian analysis Žižek argues that the hole is the national psychosis that might be tamed or covered but never mended.

Some thirty years earlier during the uprising against the Soviet regime in Hungary, 1956 something not dissimilar occurred. The Hungarians removed the communist Rákosi's coat of arms from the middle of their flag, leaving a hole. The contrast is interesting; the Hungarians cut out the hole as a symbol of disobedience whereas the Romanians cut their hole as a mark of disgrace. One is active and the other passive one could argue following the logic of Andrej Kurcijs' 'Active Art' manifesto. From that perspective it is also interesting to observe the legacy of the two holes in the neighbouring countries. In Hungary the newspaper of the Association of Political Prisoners, that still commands considerable influence today, is simply called *The Hole*. The Romanian hole on the other hand witnesses the unresolved character of the revolution and the many conspiracies surrounding it. Leaving the hole would maybe have been a more active reminder of the atrocities that dictatorship produces. Instead the hole was covered as paint covers the walls that were once tagged with graffiti.

Inherent to the question of active and passive is also the question of power. Kurcijs addresses the problem of



power in a rather philosophical manner. He proposes an ambiguous position for art from which it should challenge and change the discourse without owning it. It's easy to criticise this position as vague or even prudish but when it's set in a political context such as in Hungary or Romania the potency becomes clear. The hole in the flag is doing exactly that; changing the discourse without owning it. As long as the hole is there the imagination of a future society is still possible.

Art these days is mostly administrated by powerful institutions, and the idea that art should be public is no longer contested. It seems that Kurcijs, with the visuals at the end of his manifesto, was anticipating an art collection that would 'activate' its viewer. A good host is acclaimed as one that sets the stage for exchange and surprising conversations. This would also be the way we imagine ideal institutions in our societies; as places that expand and cross-pollinate knowledge. No wonder that the cultural value of museums is now an important political playfield. But our institutions are held captive by an idea of their own success. Boards and directors shy away from challenging moral positions because the visitors are, just like voters, flattered, nursed and quantified. The institutions become aseptic and the art to be shown inhibited, or if we stay within Kurcijs' dichotomy; the art becomes passive. One wonders if Kurcijs would have imagined a time in which the transgressive power of art would be threatened, precisely because of the evolution of the very institution ideated to protect and manage it.

Active art is an interesting concept because it processes a dilemma. We could consider it a 'disturbance'. To keep art and our institutions active we will have to accept that they are constantly changing, constantly challenged. Any attempt to take control will make both art and its

institutions passive. It's like a hole that will inevitably appear in a structure or the way in which a knot may be found in a rope or a wrinkle in a carpet.

Maija Rudovska

*A woman with a chicken*, painted by Latvian portraitist Jānis Roze around 1860–80, is one of those artworks that has vividly sunk in my memory from visits to the Latvian National Museum of Art while I was a student in the art history department of the Art Academy of Latvia. The work was part of the permanent collection and for years it hadn't changed location—placed on a wall at the entrance to the second floor which was supposedly the starting point of Latvian professional art. So we were told, and we believed it.

Jānis Roze is described as a very adventurous character, mainly because he liked to gamble and live a lustful life. Yet he was also a masterful painter, especially in the portrait genre. He first received his training in the arts as a craftsman, which he afterwards elevated to a professional level by studying in Saint Petersburg. On returning to Riga, Roze soon became known in the local circles of the bourgeoisie, receiving regular commissions which brought him significant wealth that he expended on his lifestyle. *A woman with a chicken* isn't really about a realistic depiction of a young woman in the style of late romanticism and realism, as is usually described in the art history books. This work seems to stand out in the context of his other portraits and embodies quite a different agenda. A young woman with a black kerchief around her head, perhaps indicating that she is of a lower class, maybe a peasant, holds a white chicken, which is portryed in a very elaborate manner, every feather made visible while the woman herself somehow remains rather unfinished, the



black colour of her clothes merging with the background.

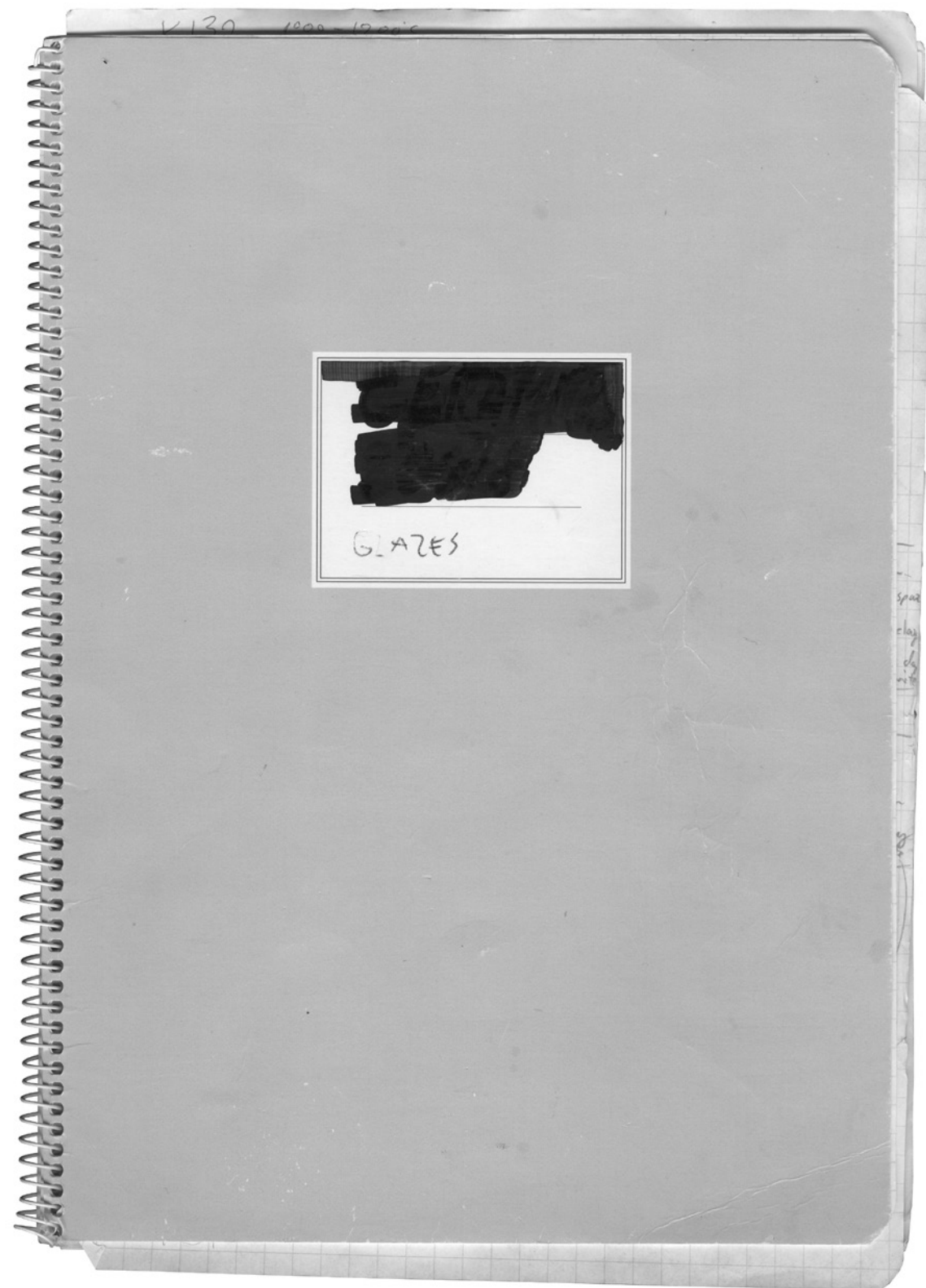
We discover in this work that Roze has used a photograph, directly painting over it and so the outfit of the young woman and the background somehow merge together and introduce a flatness that is not usually seen in the paintings of realism or romanticism. I was told by the most respected professor of local Latvian art history that this painting is of lower value because of the lack in sophistication of technique which characterised the realist portraiture genre at that time and because of its experimental nature. Apparently the experimental approach is not very appealing in the context of art history which, as I understood, should strive for a masterfulness in every aspect. But now from the contemporary perspective this work gains a new meaning. It obviously indicates a shift that happened slowly in the arts during the second half of 19th century when artists started to approach the advent of photography as a medium that could offer a completely different perspective and that could be married with other mediums of applied art. The surface of the painting gained a more active role, it started to embrace a challenge, that Roze clearly reveals in this painting, despite the fact that, compared to his other work, it might seem a rather naive and simplified depiction of reality.

I am lingering on this particular work for many reasons—firstly it was a significant point for me when entering the field of art history because we as students regularly spent time in art museums, especially at the Latvian National Museum of Art. Later, art history or at least in the way I was taught it, became quite problematic for me. It was limited in its approaches, yet it was also exciting, presenting barriers to be challenged. Secondly, *A woman with a chicken*, was an important work in the permanent collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art for a few

decades, given its position and the meaning it provided when entering the the space in the museum dedicated to local art history. About two years ago with the renovation of the museum the permanent collection was changed. Although the museum received a new face, restored facilities and thereof a new permanent collection, something was lost with the introduction of a newly curated selection. I wonder, probably it was because of the ambiguity that was present in the previous one which sought to question the origins of national art, indicating too many marginal characters and possible detours, as well as avoiding the clear lines of various art movements in the context of the local art and its history. I find this extremely important since I trained in the field of art history, my training was always been surrounded by a certain language, that sought for an objectivity which in reality was an action of constant failure. Now as this work by Roze is no longer displayed in the permanent collection I feel a compelling sense of loss, which is maybe also symbolic at some point. Maybe it doesn't matter for others because a new generation will come in and their experiences will be different. But what bothers me mostly is that as a new collection is formed in the museum, a certain way that we are supposed to look at the local art is also introduced, there are certain guidelines that do not welcome the same ambiguity that I used to experience.

With this in mind I wonder if Kurcijs aimed to create his own art historical canon? Did he wonder about a different art history, that would be active in its meaning? What is this image collection about? How did he make this selection? What kind of principles did he follow? We can, of course, read the selection of the pictures as illustrations accompanying Kurcij's ideas about active art, expressed in the manifesto. Though, as he doesn't indicate that and

it is not explained anywhere, this interpretation perhaps can be questioned. My thought was to read this material with the same distrustful approach that I had when I learnt about local art history in my student years, which I also had when reflecting on Roze's *A woman with a chicken*.





Kierrevihko A4/60

Design: **Classics** by Paperipalvelu Koskimo ja Rännäli Oy

**James Baldwin** (1924–1987) was an American novelist, playwright and activist. His essays, as collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), explore the intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, particularly in mid-20th-century America. Some of Baldwin's essays are book-length, including *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *No Name in the Street* (1972). Baldwin died in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France where he spent much time later in his life.

**Eva Barto** graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Paris in 2013 and attended the post-graduate programme at Ensba in Lyon. Recent solo shows include exhibitions at gb agency (Paris, 2016), Villa Arson (Nice, 2016), and the Kunstverein Freiburg (April 2019). Her work has been presented at gallery Marcelle Alix (Paris, 2015), Centre Pompidou (Paris, 2016), Biennale de Rennes (2016), Wattis Art Center (San Francisco, 2017) and Secession (Vienna, 2018). In 2016 she initiated the publishing project Buttonwood.Press.

**Laura Boullic** is a poet. She conceives of her multidisciplinary practice as a way to explore the expression of what is or isn't possible with the self, with others, paying particular attention to the roots: the various temporalities needed for the instinct, the theory, the achievement in order to remain anchored—within a reciprocal recognition (harmony)—in the available realities. With her writing, she mainly works with notes, correspondences, transcriptions and poetry. With her voice, she's involved with LE DOC, and sings in the duo Amnésie internationale, from the trio Pays P.

**Robert Glück** is a poet, fiction writer, editor, and New Narrative theorist who has served as director at San Francisco State University's Poetry Center, co-director of Small Press Traffic Literary Center, and associate editor at Lapis Press. His books include two novels, *Jack the Modernist* and *Margery Kempe*, two books of stories, *Elements* and *Denny Smith*, a book of poems and short prose, *Reader*. With Bruce Boone, Glück translated *La Fontaine* for a book of that name. With Camille Roy, Mary Berger and Gail Scott, he edited *Biting the Error: Writers on Narrative*.

**Joachim Hamou** is an artist and director with a social practice that involves performances, films and community work. For the last five years he has been involved as curator and editor with the artist space castillo/corrales and publisher Paraguay Press in Paris. In 2009 he was one of the founders of the NGO The Trampoline House and a year later the artist space Rio Bravo, both in Copenhagen. For now he works with the French film production company Barberousse Films.

**Ainārs Kamoliņš** is a philosopher from Riga, Latvia. He has obtained an MA in philosophy from the University of Latvia. Kamoliņš's main academic interests concern the questions raised by the early modern philosophers, including how biology, natural and exact sciences are linked to philosophical theories. His best known book is *Diaries: Spinoza's Poetics* (2014, published by Kim? Contemporary Art Centre). In 2016 he wrote a dramatisation of Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* that was staged in the Latvian National Theatre.

**Andrejs Kurcijs** (1884–1959) whose real name was Andrejs Kuršinskis was a writer, poet and theoretician. He studied at the Riga Polytechnic Institute (1904–1905), the universities of Jena (1905–1911), Kazan (1912–1913) and Berlin (1922–1923). Up to 1918 he was a practising doctor in Latvia and St. Petersburg. During the Soviet period he taught literature and theory at Riga University before being appointed a doctor again during the Second World War. In 1949, he was arrested for his political views and deported to a Gulag penalty camp. After Stalin's death he was released and returned to Riga, where he died.

**Bella Marrin** is an artist and writer based in London. Her current research involves models of dairy and meat production, investigating the various agencies and anxieties attached to those networks of contact and contamination. She worked as an assistant editor for the arts journal *The White Review* between 2012–2014 and as a radio producer and presenter for Resonance FM in London before moving to Paris and working with Paraguay Press on various editorial projects. She currently works as a cheesemaker for an independent urban dairy in London.

**Rebeka Põldsam** is a feminist critic and curator based in Estonia. She is a doctoral student in the ethnology department at University of Tartu, where her research is focused on the life stories of sexual and gender minorities in Estonia since the 1920s. Between 2012–2017 she worked as a curator and project manager at CCA, Estonia. In 2015, she was a deputy commissioner and contributing editor for the Estonian pavilion exhibition *NSFW. A Chairman's Tale* by Jaanus Samma at the 56th Venice Biennale.

**Maija Rudovska** is an independent curator, researcher and art critic. The focus of her work is inter-mediation and the stimulation of relationships between different spaces, contexts and institutions, especially focusing on the Baltic-Nordic context. She runs a network platform Blind Carbon Copy that focuses on network building models, alternative education and work strategies between curators, artists and other practitioners.

**Barbara Sirieix** is an independent curator and writer based in Paris. She works with critical tools borrowed from feminist theory and fiction to reflect on forms of emancipation within institutional contexts. In 2015, La Galerie, the contemporary art centre in Noisy-le-Sec published with Dent-De-Leone her first book *24 ter rue de la pierre feuillère*. Recent projects include: *Oeil de Lynx et tête de bois*, co-curated with Emilie Renard, *Occidental Temporary*, (Villejuif, 2016), *Scattered Disc*, Futura (Prague, 2017), and *Déclassement*, Château d'Oiron (2018).

**Evita Vasiļjeva** is a Latvian-born artist based in Amsterdam. She graduated from the Fine Arts programme at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 2013. Her latest solo-exhibitions include: *Postcrete*, Lower.Green (Norwich, 2019), *Still Stands and Resilient Nows*, Tallinn Art Hall, (2018), *Manhours in Headquarters*, P/////AKT, (Amsterdam, 2017), and *Nothing Lost, Nothing Found*, Gallery 427, (Riga, 2016).

**Laure Giletti** and **Gregory Dapra** are graphic designers, working as Eurogroupe since 2012. They work on long term collaborations, designing on paper, screen and space. Attentive to the way images and texts sustain their own intent and impact, their approach results in a content-based production.



## Colophon

**Editors:** Joachim Hamou, Maija Rudovska  
and Barbara Sirieix

**Copy editor:** Bella Marrin

**Translators:** Georgina Collins, Ieva Lešinska

**Graphic design:** Laure Giletti and Gregory Dapra

**Images:** Evita Vasiljeva, Jerry Thompson  
(Missing copyright from the High Museum)

**Print:** Studio RBB, Riga, Latvia.

**Supported and realized** in collaboration between Kim?  
Contemporary Art Centre (Riga, Latvia) and Fondation  
d'entreprise Ricard and Paraguay Press (Paris, France),  
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, Latvia 100,  
Latvian State Culture Capital Foundation

**The editors would like to thank the participants of  
the two Active Art workshops held in Riga and Paris  
in 2018:**

Signe Frederiksen, Virgile Fraisse, Laure Giletti, Kaspars  
Groševs, Ainārs Kamoliņš, Guillaume Maraud, Bella  
Marrin, Stella Pelše, Viktor Timofeev, Airi Triisberg,  
Evita Vasiljeva.

**Special thanks to:**

The James Baldwin Foundation, The African Centre,  
Carol Thompson, Lauri Kind, Rebecca Servadio,  
Benjamin Thorel, François Piron, Zane Onckule, Stella  
Pelše, The National Library of Latvia

**Published by:** Paraguay Press

**ISBN:** 978-2-918252-59-7

# Active



# Art

James Baldwin

Eva Barto

Laura Boullic

Robert Glück

Joachim Hamou

Ainārs Kamoliņš

Andrejs Kurcijs

Bella Marrin

Rebeka Põldsam

Maija Rudovska

Barbara Sirieix

Evita Vasiļjeva

Paraguay