

Untamed Assembly: Backstage of Utopia presents newly commissioned work by the interdisciplinary artist duo MAREUNROL'S that has emerged from their dialogue with the archives of Untamed Fashion Assemblies (UFA)—a series of experimental fashion, art and performance events founded by alternative fashion designer Bruno Birmanis. Five editions of UFA were held in Latvia between 1990 and 1999.

Held during a decade of profound political rupture and social transformation, UFA expanded existing notions of fashion by facilitating crossovers into visual art, drag, music and club culture. Defying conservative social norms inherited from the Soviet era, the Assemblies offered an alternative to the emerging commercial fashion markets of the West. They were improvised, collaborative and often chaotic environments where students and international stars shared the same stage. Makeshift scenography, DIY costumes and radical styling generated an atmosphere of rare intensity. Media coverage from *Vogue*, *The Guardian*, the BBC and MTV, among other outlets, briefly positioned Latvia as an unexpected avant-garde hub—experimental, carnivalesque and fearless.

The pavilion approaches Untamed Fashion Assemblies as a lived space—a site where freedom was tested through dress, bodies, collaboration and daring. Linking past and present, the exhibition highlights the necessity of utopian thinking in moments of breakdown. It asks how collective imagination, desire and legitimacy are produced when political and economic systems are in flux and how futures are imagined and new forms of togetherness rehearsed behind the scenes rather than on the main stage.

The newly commissioned installation by MAREUNROL'S rethinks the legacy of UFA from the perspective of the present and is conceived of as a backstage—an in-between space of preparation, invisible labour, joy, improvisation and human connection. Drawing on the histories of the Assemblies and the visual elements of the fashion show, the clothing rack—the most ubiquitous element of any backstage—becomes a holding



device and the architecture for the installation's stories. Other motifs that run through the practice of MAREUNROL'S, such as birds and textile sculptures, carry memories of flight, risk and fragility. Birds, a recurring "medium", central to the

artistic language of the duo, often symbolise freedom, lightness, hope and joy; we think of their wandering between earth and sky, something inherently surreal to us humans. How was it possible for something like the Assembly to happen when it did,



and what is possible today?
Woven into the installation are also the duo's own experiences. Having entered the fashion industry around fifteen years ago as young designers from the Baltics, MAREUNROL'S

encountered a dilemma experienced by many: is it better to seek market visibility while trying to maintain authenticity or to agree to be subsumed by a major fashion house? Ultimately, their own choice has been to remain independent, navigating a multidisciplinary path where art, scenography and research converge in conceptual projects. The vertical assemblage of clothing racks, jammed together tightly and holding both historic artefacts from the Assemblies and textile sculptures, becomes a spatial translation of the pressures and constraints that affect a young designer's creative trajectory, the relationships they form and the utopia they are looking for.

Across the installation, newly digitised footage and photographs from Birmanis's archive offer the spirit of UFA, capturing moments from the rehearsals, preparation, afterparties, jury panels and audience reactions. Several thematic lines anchor the presentation. A focus on the crossing of newly opened borders foregrounds the extraordinary logistical conundrums that UFA managed to solve while pulling off events on an international scale and building a transnational community and network. Among collapsing supply chains, scarcity became a driving force for creativity as unexpected materials came together in bold collages: blankets and pillows were reimagined as costumes, sheets of paper transformed into evening gowns. Political freedom, newly gained and protected through the Barricades, was also inhabited through bold public performances, such as at the opening of the UFA in 1991 on Riga's central Dome Square.



Other elements of storytelling are threaded through the installation—for example, hangers crowded en masse are suggestive of the consumers that Western fashion houses anticipated encountering in the East, the former members of the Soviet collective who would emerge as new capitalist subjects. Mirrors reflect the past into the present, their surfaces covered in stickers—a nod to the 1990s Baltic fascination with new products and branding as well as to club culture, which offers an escape to another reality. Together, these elements transform the pavilion into a narrative space where archival memory and contemporary experience unfold simultaneously, as ongoing contributions to the unfinished project of constructing an alternative world.



The idea for Untamed Fashion Assemblies emerged in 1989 when it became clear to Bruno Birmanis that Tallinn Fashion Week—in which Birmanis and Uģis Rūķītis (1960–2014) were then taking part as young designers—would cease to exist. UFA was preceded by experimental events such as Costume Theater and the *Ball of Postbanality*, organised by Birmanis and Rūķītis, which had already tested fashion as performance.

The first three Assemblies, initiated by Bruno Birmanis, took place annually, establishing Riga and Jūrmala as unlikely hubs for experimental fashion. The inaugural event was held in Jūrmala, the seaside town near Riga. Through connections with cultural figures such as music critic Artemy Troitsky, international participants were invited. Coverage by programmes such as the BBC’s *The Clothes Show* introduced Western audiences to the newly open Baltic context, often through a lens of exoticisation. From the first year, Vilnius Academy of Arts took part, its students

and teachers arriving alike, often with several collections. The geography represented by the participants was wide and expanded with each assembly, eventually including countries such as India, Kazakhstan, Georgia, France, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands and the UK.

The Assemblies followed a recurring structure. Each Untamed Fashion Assembly opened with a spectacular show conceived by Birmanis, followed by daily fashion presentations by participants as well as lectures and workshops dedicated to fashion. For example, during the second year of UFA, Phyllis Cohen, an iconic avant-garde make-up artist who has worked with everyone from Janet Jackson to David Bowie, led a series of workshops on make-up.

Young Baltic designers such as Bruno Birmanis himself, Juozas Statkevičius and Sandra Straukaitė appeared on the stage alongside figures including Paco Rabanne, Vivienne Westwood, Zandra Rhodes and Andrew Logan. Progressive designers from Russia also took

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part, such as Andrey Bartenev, whose avant-garde collections and drag were presented at the Assemblies in 1992 and 1994. Emerging designers who would later become global icons, among them Viktor & Rolf, passed through UFA as fashion students. The Assemblies became a space where bodily display and costume were tools for negotiating new identities and social self-performance. Sexually charged gestures, drag, role-play and deliberate exaggeration appeared alongside innovations in cut and silhouette. A carnivalesque suspension of social norms sat next to serious experimentation with image and form.

Held shortly after the Barricades in Latvia, the 1991 Assembly carried a heightened political charge. Performances on Riga’s Dome Square captured a fragile but tangible sense of newly gained freedom. The public space seemed to have just been reclaimed. In 1991, student groups and Britain’s young designers travelled to Riga from Central Saint Martins, the Royal College of Art in London and other



art and fashion schools. The journey itself, involving long bus rides across newly opened borders, became part of the experience of transregional curiosity and political solidarity. Iconic jewellery designer and sculptor Andrew Logan and his Alternative Miss World participants—among them Burnel Penhaul, style icon Scarlett Cannon, French bohemian Hermine Demoriane, British feminist performance art icons the Neo Naturists and the famed Royal Ballet prima ballerina Lynn Seymour—were some of those who took these fabled bus trips across Europe.

In 1992, Dutch students from Arnhem participated in UFA; they were from the broader generation of conceptual Dutch designers who were emerging at the time. They were scouted by Guus Beumer of Orson + Bodil, an architect who attended Assemblies as a jury member (1990–1992). Among the students were Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren who, after finishing their studies in 1992, went on to form the now well-known avant-garde fashion duo Viktor & Rolf.

After a brief pause, in 1994 the Assembly returned on a larger scale, with expanded international collaborations, including with the French school ESMOD as a partner, and a jury that featured designer Paco Rabanne. This edition became one of the most widely attended. The final Assembly in 1999 in a way also marked the end of an era. As commercial fashion structures took hold in the Baltic region, the earlier spirit of experimentation and improvisation became harder to sustain. This closing chapter also produced an unexpected link to the present: Rolands Pēterkops, later one half of MAREUNROL'S, participated in the Assembly as an intern. This moment is another connection point between the past and the pavilion today.

The Spirit of Assembly



UNTAMED ASSEMBLY: BACKSTAGE OF UTOPIA

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The ambition of Untamed Fashion Assemblies, at once expansive in scale and DIY in spirit, was perhaps only possible at that particular moment of sociopolitical collapse and profound transition. It emerged at a time when Soviet-era structures, norms and codes were crumbling, leaving little to hold one back from taking risks. The sense that nothing was certain stoked the fire for imagining alternatives. Quite unbelievably, the daydreams of those taking part in UFA, for a period of time, become reality.

Revisiting Untamed Fashion Assemblies today may help us better understand how such fragile spaces of freedom come into being, and why they continue to fan the flames of artistic imagination across generations. As political and cultural systems once again move through rupture and uncertainty, there is a palpable clamour for something structurally similar to UFA: an environment of radical imagination, a micro-utopia in which collective labour is grounded in trust, competition is secondary and alternative ways of being together can be rehearsed.

In this sense, the Assemblies achieved some-

thing extraordinary. They dreamed up a space that was neither governed by the restrictive social codes of the Soviet era nor organised according to the rulebook of the emerging market economy. By allowing different worlds to collide, the Assemblies briefly collapsed them into something else entirely. For a moment, a carnivalesque, overflowing space of excess and unpredictability could simply exist, and artists could inhabit it, relish it and test its possibilities. For a brief moment, the Assemblies staged a utopia.

With renewed urgency, the Latvian Pavilion returns to Untamed Fashion Assemblies to ask how freedom, risk and possible futures might be imagined now. By revisiting the utopian visions of these historic festivals, *Untamed Assembly: Backstage of Utopia* asks: what can be carried forward from the dreams of the past to imagine alternatives to the present?

INGA LĀCE & ADOMAS NARKEVIČIUS

MÁDARA
organic skincare



LET NATURE
SOAK YOUR SKIN

MÁDARA
organic skincare





Goswamy
a modelis



Caroline Beil tērps
(Godalga UFA '90)



Phyllis Cohen
ar lietuviešu
jaunajiem
māksliniekiem
UFA '90

Bruno Birmanis tērps no U. Rūķīša un
B. Birmanis skates "postmodernisma balie"

LA 4E ASSEMBLÉE DE LA MODE NON-
APPRIVOISÉE VIENT D'AVOIR LIEU.
Durant la semaine du 25 avril au premier mai
cent treize stylistes de Lettonie, de Lituanie,
d'Estonie, d'Ukraine, de Russie, d'Italie,
de France, de Grande-Bretagne, d'Allemagne,
de Suède et
de Finlande
ont fêté
la mode
à Riga.
Soixante -
sept
créateurs ont
participé aux
cinq défilés
de concours
qui ont
révélé les
quatorze

lauréats de la 4e Assemblée de la mode non-
apprivoisée. Le jury était présidé par un des
maîtres de la haute couture Paco Rabanne. Un
prix spécial a été attribué à Andrei Barténiev,
la jeune vedette du postmodernisme russe pour
sa collection "Princesse des neiges". Mais c'est
la Lituanienne de 25 ans, Redita Tumenaite





Perestroika, which began in 1985, promised freer gatherings and less controlled artistic activity across the former Soviet Union, although in reality the KGB continued to closely surveil and at times intervene in what it deemed “ideologically suspect” cultural practices. Bruno Birmanis recalls spending an anxiety-inducing half-day in a KGB interrogation room.

It was within this context that he organised his first alternative fashion performance together with like-minded artist and designer Uģis Rūķītis. *The Ball of Postbanality*, staged in 1988, featured models in futuristic angular, geometric, vertically striped outfits, in which prisoners and prison guards were indistinguishable. Some figures were chained, others carried exaggerated metal spears and arrows. The performance offered a layered commentary on a society under external control but also on the need to break free from self-censorship and internalised surveillance, a nod to the decolonisation of the mind as much as the shedding of Soviet rule. Somewhere between a fashion show and a theatre piece, *The Ball of Postbanality* toured socialist countries, acting as a precursor to what would later become the Untamed Fashion Assemblies.

The convergence of politics and fashion reached a visceral peak in the turbulent events of 1991. Shortly before UFA took place, Latvia had lived through a period now known as the Barricades,

during which its population defended its newly reclaimed independence against attempts by Soviet armed forces to seize government buildings and mass media infrastructure.

When UFA opened in Dome Square that year, the psychic traces of the struggle for freedom, and the barricades themselves, were still in plain sight. Amidst the heavy tractors and technical machinery that had recently served as defensive structures, Birmanis’s and Rūķītis’s *Prison Collection* from 1988 was revived, a part of the earlier work being reconfigured and reused for this opening performance.

In this new context, the costumes shifted in meaning. What had once operated as covert theatrical critique became a literal shedding of the past. Staged in the square where the Barricades had just taken place, the show transformed into a kind of parade of defiance. Many participants joined spontaneously, improvising ecstatic elements of the performance in what became a collective breaking out of a cage, a final exit from Soviet confinement towards hard-won autonomy.

This spirit of defiance resonated across Baltic borders. In Lithuania, designer Sandra Straukaitė responded to the violent January Events, during which the Soviet army killed fourteen civilians, with her collection *In the Blue*, also presented at UFA. Her work distilled the collective shock and grief into a study of colour and form. The silhouettes conveyed a palpable sense of entrapment—some

garments literally had no sleeves—and the models emerged slowly, as if from a cocoon, while small glass trinkets attached to the outfits with fishing line symbolized tears.

Lithuanian-Armenian designer Serge Gandzumian’s collection that year enveloped the body in neo-Dada-esque assemblages of jagged, salvaged metal, at once a material response to the conditions of the time—shortages, scrap, industrial debris—and a formal meditation on what a socio-political shift of such unprecedented scale might do to the body. Less armour, more a refusal of function, coherence, and stability through deliberate misassembly, the work carried a sense of playful defiance, reflecting both the harsh industrial reality of a crumbling empire and the resilient inventiveness required to survive its collapse.

Not all collections and performances at UFA were as explicitly politically charged. Yet many carried tacit meaning through their very existence and expression—in their material and forms, in the choreography of the show itself, and in the ways they allowed bodies to be, to feel, and to relate to one another.

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Inga Lāce, Adomas Narkevičius

POLITICAL FREEDOM