

Conversation with
ANDRA SILAPĒTERE,
Latvian Centre for
Contemporary Art
(LCCA)

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

Support for the research and development of *I is for Institute* has been provided by Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. © 2017–20 Institute of Contemporary Art. All rights reserved.



07.12.19

Conversation with
ANDRA SILAPĒTERE, Latvian
Centre for Contemporary Art

Andra Silapētere is a Curator
at the Latvian Centre for
Contemporary Art

With Laurel McLaughlin

LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

What is your role at the Latvian
Centre for Contemporary Art
(LCCA) and how long you've
worked there?

ANDRA SILAPĒTERE:

I have worked at the LCCA for seven years now. I began by assisting curators with project management and finances, basically multi-tasking with different things needed for exhibitions or other type of events. Currently, I am working as a researcher and curator, but this also includes managerial multi-tasking. I believe this is something that is common for most art and culture institutions. It's very luxurious if you can only do one thing.

LM:

How many employees work at
the LCCA?

AS:

At the moment, we have eight people on staff. Depending on the project, we invite also other curators, researchers, or project managers that are not permanent staff to work with us, but this is on and off depending on the project and its format. The LCCA, in a way, is a nomadic institution without a permanent exhibition space, so it is important for us to build network of collaborators, and share ideas and projects. We work on a lot of research projects, so there is a department focusing more on in-depth research. Then, there are colleagues who work with ongoing projects, such as the Contemporary Art Festival SURVIVAL KIT, which we do each year, and then other exhibitions and public programs. An important part of our work is education. We have a colleague developing content and programming for different groups of people.

LM:

How many curators are on your team?

AS:

We have four curators, but then we come again to this point about multitasking. Usually, for each project we form a team of about two to four people, depending on a scale of the project, whether it's exhibition or publication. People are involved in different "teams," so in one you could be a curator and in another you're responsible for a public program, or for another you're responsible for the budget. Of course, I'm generalizing here, but the aforementioned four are the ones who act as curators, develop the programs, and think conceptually.

LM:

Could you tell me how the LCCA began—it's founding and perhaps the impetus for its founding?

AS:

The very beginnings of the LCCA go back to 1993, when the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts-Riga (SCCA) was founded as part of a larger network of Soros Contemporary Art Centers all over Eastern Europe. One of the ideas from the Soros Foundation was to implement and spread the word of democracy through contemporary art, and these centers served as platforms for this purpose. Their function was defined by a manual that detailed what kind of tasks the centers should perform. One task, for instance, was to make a database of artists and develop an archive. The other, of course, was to organize contemporary art exhibitions. At that time, there were also grant programs to which artists could apply with their projects. The centers served as engines, or stimulating entities for the contemporary scene at the time.

In the 1990s, Latvia was still in a transition period after gaining its independence from Soviet occupation in 1991, and the Soros Foundation felt that it was necessary to stimulate critical conversations in this "new" environment. The Contemporary Art Center functioned under Soros until 1999 when the Soros Foundation decided that Latvia had "developed enough" and stopped the funding. Jānis Borgs, who was Director during this time, saw this as the end of the Center. He didn't see how it could function without funding from the Foundation. In 2000, our current Director, Solvita Krese, created the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art as an NGO to continue operations, though she has changed the focus of the projects and the thematic aims.

LM:

Has the LCCA always been in its current building? It looks quite historic and ornate from what I can see online. Do you rent your space?

AS:

At the beginning the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts–Riga was in the Artists' Union building that started under the Soviets. Coincidentally, Soros bought the building located in so-called Art Nouveau district of Riga and the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art started its operations there in 2000. We're in a good situation where we don't have to pay the market value rent of the place. But we have been thinking constantly about changing the location because here we run like an office. We don't have a permanent exhibition space, which is an important factor for visibility as institution. We used to have an office-gallery here. It was a space for experimental projects and emerging artists. Several years ago, it reached its goal and we decided to close it. Now we use the space for public programs, like discussions and screenings. Nevertheless, we wish we had a permanent exhibition space. From time to time we think about changing our location, but then we'd need to rent a bigger space, requiring different financial and management capacities.

LM:

Yes, the challenges with rent fees, balanced with the conceptual goals of the institution seem like a constant negotiation. We usually ask about square footage of an exhibition space for organizations, but we've also encountered other institutions that function as offices with satellite exhibitions and programs in other sites. It seems to build a network of collaborations and I'll ask more about that later.

I'm curious about the LCCA's name as this project attempts to think critically about language. You mentioned that it comes from this post-Soviet moment where "centers"

across the Baltic states were quite crucial to the cultural and political transition period, but I'm curious if that legacy of the centers persists today? Do people still think of them in the same way as in the 1990s?

AS:

Since the 1990s a lot has changed, and I think that people do not associate us with this particular history now. I guess it is also a generational question. Some people or artists who were close to the Center and its activities at that time may still remember that history, but with our projects and programs, we've built an independent and strong image that is different from what the Center was in 1990s. Of course, this history serves as a foundation for developing some of our goals. For instance, the archive we inherited from this period, which was partly created in the 1990s as a database, is important to the public because there is no contemporary art museum in Latvia.

LM:

Perhaps this question of legacy also relates to how you as a curator, and also how the LCCA as an institution, define "the contemporary." Is there one, or maybe many, dispensations for how you're considering the present moment?

AS:

One way of answering this question would to look at the projects we have done over past few years. We have been looking back to the past and its different histories as important tools in understanding present social and political events, both locally and globally. This also serves as a productive way to project futures. We developed this mentality from our research, which relates to the archive that we've inherited and shapes the way we consider the contemporary through our connections.

LM:

Do you think of the LCCA as an institution, and if so, what does that mean in your context?

AS:

To answer, I would need to give some insight into the local art scene. As I mentioned earlier, one of the problems in the local scene is that we still don't have a contemporary art museum and contemporary art is mostly represented by NGOs and programs developed by them. We have the Latvian National Museum of Art with its own structures, and while contemporary art is part of it, it's not quite evident. Basically, in Latvia we don't have a permanent and state-subsidized entity that would formulate, give direction to, act as an umbrella for, and organize the local scene.

Since we don't have a state institution, non-governmental organizations are running the scene and they're very, very important. They are the ones that are asking the questions and stimulating the environment. The LCCA is the oldest and largest organization that consistently works with contemporary art. One of our main aims is to promote Latvian contemporary art locally and internationally. In the early 2000s, there was also an idea that the LCCA could become a contemporary art museum, which unfortunately failed because the state, under whom project was developed, lacked a strategic course of action in terms of financial and management support. The archive we hold serves as an important resource for locating histories of contemporary art in Latvia going back to the 1960s. This is also one of the things that we're systematically building and preserving, as there is no contemporary art museum where you can access this information.

LM:

How did this archive, with its materials from the 1960s, emerge prior to the organization of the Centre in 1993?

AS:

The archive developed from one of the guidelines of the Soros Foundation. In 1993, when the Soros Center started, it was a requirement to build a database of artists so that if Western curators or art historians came to Riga they would have resources for understanding contemporary art in Latvia and, which they would hopefully disseminate further. Part of the archive that was built during those years consists of many black folders, which were curated by various personalities that worked for the Center. Most of these folders represent the artists that were active during 1990s. After becoming an NGO, the focus changed, and it became a goal to research and recuperate overlooked art movements that were suppressed during the official Soviet program. Filling in these gaps have foregrounded artistic movements that happened behind the Iron Curtain, such as exile art. We are a rare institution in Latvia that systematically does this work and we involve researchers here and abroad in

trying to build this network of knowledge.

LM:

That's so fascinating. I find it interesting that the motivation for this database was for Western scholars to come in and do this work—as if that wasn't happening already within Latvia. That's very problematic.

AS:

Yes, this is problematic. The post-Soviet region has been dealing with this issue for some time, first being, on the one hand, exoticized and perceived as this *terra incognita*, and, on the other hand, marginalized as art processes have been developing in parallel to the Western discourse. Of course, things slowly have changed now, and we see that there is greater interest in the region and its processes. For instance, in 2019 MoMA and its C-MAP (Contemporary Art and Modern Art Perspectives) program announced a focus on Eastern Europe. This is important, even as it's a large institution that has a tendency to swallow information.

In 2016, my colleague Inga Lāce and I curated an exhibition called *Lost in the Archive*, which was developed through the process of digitizing LCCA's archive and interrogating what this archive meant—who selected the material and why? All of the folders were curated by different personalities under the guidance of Soros's manual and indicated priorities of what had to happen and what had to be included. We wanted to understand how it was built. Through the archive, you could see this history and how the art system was kind of colonized, this time by the West.

LM:

It sounds like there's so much to unpack in the archive that you could have exhibitions for years to come.

AS:

Most of our exhibitions are based on research in the archive—looking for the gaps and seeing which directions we should move in. We also look for new ways to rebuild and restructure the archive, to make the information more diverse and accessible. It is an important part of our work, to understand the processes that shaped our history and current events.

LM:

This also leads to my next question concerning your mission statement. As I'm interviewing institutions in Eastern Europe, it's been interesting to see the variances in this kind of statement. Your website doesn't seem to easily package it into a neat sentence or two. You characterize the institution as a provocation of sorts, which seems important in this region. Protests, the most famous of which was the 1987 Singing Revolution that signaled an end to Soviet occupation, have been so central to the political and social development of this region. I was hoping you could speak more about this notion of provocation—how is it important to Latvian sovereignty and how does it figure within LCCA specifically?

AS:

The protests that took place in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s were important manifestations incorporating not only idea of freedom, but also equality, solidarity and importantly, care for the environment where people live and where they would like to live. They include not only social and political elements, but also ecological aspects. This was a very inspiring and important time for many. Protest and provocation were necessary tools not only for bringing up these issues, but also to activate society as a unit that moves toward one goal.

Now, the context has changed. We live in a different world with different priorities, and we have moved on. But looking through the LCCA as an institution, we can recognize that provocations are important tools to stimulate different processes in society. It has only been 28 years since Latvia's independence from the Soviet Union, and there are still many questions that need to be asked, answered, re-asked, and reviewed all over again. It's not only important to point out the problems, but to provoke society to engage in a dialogue or discourse that would cause change.

We use the word provocation for this reason. It might not mean doing something scandalous, but revealing questions that might be ignored or forgotten. This is what we've been trying to do with all of our exhibitions, publications, and research projects—to complicate this task, especially now when recent history is so crucial to understand contemporary political situations, and social and ecological issues. Next year, LCCA celebrates 20 years since its founding and we proudly can say that we are one of the first institutions that systematically started, through art, to talk about political questions that were ignored, especially in the Soviet period when questioning political and social processes was taboo.

LM:

What does a typical exhibition season at the LCCA look like?

AS:

We program the annual SURVIVAL KIT Art Festival in September. That's an exact point in our calendars. Besides SURVIVAL KIT, we plan another large exhibition, that takes place most often in the Latvian National Museum of Art. Our education program runs throughout the year with consistent programming like Art Mediation and evening and summer schools. An important part of this programming is the publications we have done and a translation series that focuses on translating theory into Latvian.

LM:

Wow, that's quite a feat to also translate! Does the Centre focus on particular kinds of artists or exhibitions—such as emerging artists, or mid-career and/or group shows?

AS:

I would say we don't have a specific kind of artist. There is a group of artists with whom we like to collaborate, and it is usually nice to continue dialogue with artists from project to project and see their work evolving. But all in all, it depends on the project and what type of research questions we have. We are interested in bringing together different generations of artists to see how processes have evolved and where they are heading.

LM:

Is there a specific number of Latvian artists that you aim to work with, or do you try to balance this number with the international artists you exhibit?

AS:

Most of our shows are international. We show Latvian artists with other artists in the world. We're committed to showing Latvian contemporary art, as this is in our mission, but in order to do so, we exhibit international artists in dialogue. This is important in order to engage critically with contemporary art.

LM:

You've also organized many exhibitions at major biennials, such as at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the Venice Biennale. Can you discuss those collaborations and how they fit within with your program?

AS:

Participation in biennales, like Venice, is definitely important for us, but it is not always delegated to LCCA. Latvia's participation in Venice Biennale is coordinated through the Culture Ministry. Each year when there is a biennial, the ministry announces an open competition and different organizations apply with their projects. We have won the competition several times. This year for the Latvian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, we showed Daiga Grantiņa, curated by Valentinas Klimašauskas and Inga Lāce, which we co-organized in partnership with Kim?, another contemporary art space here. For the Kochi Biennale, we showed Katrīna Neiburga, Andris Eglītis, and Voldemārs Johansons.

LM:

You also seem to collaborate quite frequently with institutions in the Baltic states and further afield, so I was hoping you could talk about those relationships.

AS:

We have collaborated with institutions and individuals in Estonia and Lithuania quite intensively, as we share common historical, social, political, and geographical contexts. Again, because we don't have a permanent exhibition space, we try to build networks not only of institutions, but also of researchers, curators, and artists. Our work consists of research and exhibitions, but this concept of collaboration is an important part of our annual summer school, which brings together people from the region to share their experiences.

Recently, the Baltic Culture Fund opened and it aims to stimulate cooperation among the Baltic states and their representation outside of the Baltics. It is an important initiative that also helps to develop these collaborations in a sustainable manner. Over the years we have realized several projects that involved collaborations with the National Gallery of Art in Lithuania, Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, the Kumu in Estonia. We're now also developing projects with the Kai Art Center in Tallinn, Narva Art Residency in Estonia, Nida Art Colony, and the MO Museum in Vilnius.

LM:

The most recent show that you co-curated with Solvita Krese, Inga Lāce, Antra Priede, and Dīāna Popova, *Portable Landscapes: Comprehensive Latvian Exile and Emigrant Contemporary Art Project*, has ongoing exhibitions in Riga, Paris, New York, Gotland, in Sweden, and most recently in Berlin. I'm curious about this multi-year, multi-venue exhibition model and how it has functioned.

AS:

We started this project three years ago with a model that was invented specifically for this project. It came from the concept of diaspora and we wanted to build a network of exhibitions that would happen in various locales emphasizing different points on the map that have been important to the Baltic diaspora. We started collaborations with different institutions and it was something new for us, but at the same time we understood that working long-term across institutions had many benefits. You have a chance to develop a project over time and to grow through these institutional conversations and exchanges. We've trying to implement this model with satellite exhibitions in

different venues in another project, which we hope will be supported through outside funding.

LM:

The topic is fascinating and timely in terms of a branching network. The show focused on Latvian diaspora, and on Baltic migration more broadly. Based on your research for the exhibition, and the artist perspectives that you're showcasing, what have been some defining aspects of migration in our contemporary moment versus that of World War II? I've also been reading about emigration trends from the Baltics, and how emigration has increased in recent years.

AS:

The idea was to look back to the Second World War, which had one of the biggest waves of emigration from Latvia. In 1944, as the Red Army was approaching the territory of Latvia, people were fighting for their lives, and escaping the West was, for many, the only way to stay alive. This project was conceptualized in reaction to contemporary politics around immigration policy in Europe. Nowadays, certain discourses look at migration as a catalyst for unemployment, problems with integration, and even terrorism. Knowing the history of migration and diaspora allows us to understand that migration has always been an important part of our culture. There is a nice example in the exhibition from the Estonian artist Kristina Norman, who made a film called *Common Ground*, 2013. She filmed Estonian WWII refugees who are now living comfortably in Sweden, but in 1944 were risking their lives by escaping Estonia. It was a very dramatic period in their lives. Then, she interviewed a current asylum seeker living in Estonia. Unfortunately, they are isolated from society and live in a camp in the forest, far away the center. This points out how fast we forget about where we were ourselves. It was very important for us to think about how history repeats itself. We are constantly facing these situations where people are not welcome somewhere.

WWII emigration was definitely one of the dramatic events that left a significant mark on Latvian and Baltic society as a whole and influenced its cultural, social, and economic development. The 2008 economic crisis, when approximately 160,000 people from Latvia went abroad to seek jobs, can

be interpreted as a similar example, even if the reasons for migration were different. Most of those who left have not returned, and the number of people who emigrated is actually similar to those who left during WWII.

LM:

This topic is so timely, and museums and art organizations are only beginning to trace these diasporic trends within various generations since pivotal moments such as World War II.

You also mentioned the numerous institutions that you've been working with on this project in the various satellites. Which institutions does the LCCA see itself in dialogue with on a regular basis as peers? This could be in a collaborative sense or conceptually.

AS:

This is an interesting question. Working on the *Portable Landscapes* project for instance, we had different experiences, and each has been very valuable to us. We are interested in working with institutions that are of the same or similar scale as we are, and more importantly, institutions with whom we share a similar understanding of current processes in the society. It gives our collaborations a certain flexibility of understanding each other as we go through similar experiences as institutions. For instance, in New York, the exhibition takes place at the James Gallery at The Graduate Center, CUNY, so it's in a university context.

We also worked with commercial galleries, like in the case of the Gotland exhibition, which took place in a gallery called The Cherry Garden. Then in Berlin, our experience also was also very special because we worked with District Berlin, which is an important institution that has gone through various changes but has kept its critical gaze on social and political events. We also built an important collaboration Villa Vassiliev in Paris.

LM:

This leads me to ask about the contemporary arts ecology more broadly within Riga. I know you

mentioned that there's currently not a contemporary art museum, but I believe there were plans for one?

AS:

The environment is very complicated, and, as I mentioned, the contemporary art sector in Latvia is mostly run by NGOs. There have been two attempts to build a contemporary art museum, but both have failed. The first was the economic crisis that shut down the project. It was an ambitious project with a design proposed by Rem Koolhaas. Then, the last initiative came from a private bank that was in the process of gathering a collection as well as developing the project for the museum itself. They said they would build a museum and give their collection to the state—and the state would, of course, need to be involved. It turned out that this bank had been involved in some dirty business, so this plan collapsed. It's a super sad situation, especially for the artworks that were already bought for the collection and whose destiny is unknown. We don't know if they will ever be available to public. Personally, I think the failure falls on the shoulders of the state. For some reason they are unable to make concrete plans to build a museum. Of course, relying on private funding could be a solution, and we see a lot of museums operating like that. Still, I believe that it's the responsibility of the state to plan the structure of such a project and work toward it.

LM:

That's a segue into thinking about funding. You mentioned that the LCCA is an NGO, but do you get any funding from the government or other grants?

AS:

For each project, we fundraise and apply for different grants. There is a small grant that we receive each year from the Culture Ministry, which allows us to maintain the archive and carry out some communication tasks. That is a very small portion of what is actually needed to run the institution and develop our programs, so there's constant fundraising and consideration of what can and can't be done. It feels like we're reacting to situations and need to always have a Plan B.

LM:

In the U.S., there are many conversations about precarious

structures regarding payment for cultural workers, particularly artists. There have been many initiatives, such as those led by W.A.G.E., who are thinking critically about artist compensation and how to institute these plans. Does the LCCA compensate artists?

AS:

This is an important and complicated question, but yes, of course. This is something that is a priority for us as we function as a nexus for the local scene. As each of our projects depend on grants, when we succeed in procuring them, we pay artists, although we can't pay a large amount. But we're doing our best. We have worked out a standard that we try to follow and we try to keep our standards regarding equal pay high.

LM:

That's great to hear. Is the funding that you receive from grants or the government based on analytical data, such as the number of people that see your exhibitions? Often times, institutions are dependent on such quantitative data that perhaps doesn't speak to their qualitative aims.

AS:

Yes, this bureaucratic attitude towards institutions is everywhere, you can see it, for instance, in EU project, that sometimes numbers are more important than content. In the case of the Culture Ministry, we apply for a three-year grant and we provide all of the information that they ask from us, reporting to them each year. Of course, we must make many promises based on their criteria to meet their expectations. But I can't complain and say that we've faced absurd situations too much. Working with governmental institutions, it's always little bit irritating to provide information that is purely statistical and not pertinent to our plans.

LM:

Along those lines, who does the LCCA perceive its audience, or audiences, to be?

AS:

In this regard, I should mention the program we've developed called Art Mediation. We have a group of 20 people who work and help us in our exhibitions to communicate with our audiences. They talk to exhibition visitors and tell them about the artworks and contexts involved in the projects. We provide them with lectures and activities that explain the topics that are important to us. We initiated this program because we saw that when we're talking about contemporary art, we're not always speaking the same language as the audience. Non-professional audiences come to the exhibitions, so we saw the need for people to help engage these audiences and provide more information. They don't so much retell the stories as aid in the interpretation and provide this information to people that are coming to our events. We've been surprised that this is really working. It's formed a small community that is sharing this information and initiating events among themselves. They've attracted people that we didn't see in our exhibitions before. For instance, in the last SURVIVAL KIT, we observed that there are more and more elderly people attending the exhibitions and they are very interested in what we are showing. This bridge has really helped to bring these people to our exhibitions.

LM:

That sounds like a really innovative program, and especially for the ways in which it brings in audiences from an older generation that perhaps might not always feel like contemporary art is for them.

AS:

Yes, we're interested in different types of audiences and for us it was great to see that this was working.

LM:

This leads to my next question, since you used the word "community." Some institutions differentiate this from audience and others think about them in

an aligned manner. How does the LCCA think about community?

AS:

If we're talking about the local cultural environment in Riga, it's quite small and we can't necessarily divide these entities. We want to speak to as many people as possible. Of course, there's a division in that not everyone is interested in contemporary art and then you realize the circle of people that are coming to events regularly. I would emphasize that we don't have the luxury to separate community from audience, even if there are a certain number of people and artists that are our friends and are regularly attend our events.

LM:

To bring this conversation to a close, we're wondering about the frustrations and challenges that you face in your role. You've mentioned so much of the good work that you're doing, but inevitably, I'm sure, there might be things that you wish functioned differently.

AS:

If you can imagine a chair with four legs—at any point we have to be ready to lose a leg. We have to keep the balance and the three other legs must be strong enough. We really have to think carefully how we develop projects, so that if something happens, we can survive. This is the biggest challenge and it is connected to the funding, which, as I explained, is project by project. We're sometimes really overwhelmed with these various aspects and it comes back to the four legs, as we're all also multitasking. Sometimes it takes away from things that we could do better. These are the things that I'm thinking about now. But as an institution that's thinking critically about what we're doing now and what we could do better, it's always a dialogue with the people who come to the exhibitions. We think about how to improve exhibition-making by changing the methods of working.

LM:

And finally, what are you looking forward to in the future of the LCCA?

AS:

This year has been super, super busy. I'll finish *Portable Landscapes* in New York, and there will also be a publication that I'm working on with my colleague Inga Luce which we're publishing with the Berlin-based publisher K. Verlag. This is something I'm looking forward to because it intersects with my interests as a researcher looking into diaspora and exile. We're also working on a thematic exhibition on science fiction through a partnership with institutions in Copenhagen and Poland. We're looking at science fiction and the way it's influenced art in the recent past and now as it projects different futures. There will be exhibitions in Copenhagen and Riga. For next year, we have chosen to develop projects where we will research different aspects of our difficult past. It is a reaction to the present situation with increased violence, racism, and criticism of gender issues. We're realizing that traumatic and long-silenced histories are necessary topics to acknowledge. This project developed in collaboration with several partner institutions and there will be multiple exhibitions and a symposium.
