

## A Vanishing Mediator: Videoart in Latvia, 1980s–1990s

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From its arrival in Latvia around 1986 until the mid-1990s, analogue video has been described as a medium of transition and change, as a “shift”<sup>1</sup> in the art language and the “big breakout”<sup>2</sup> out of the informational and technological isolation of the iron curtain period. The influx of this new medium coincided with the changes and liberalisation of the *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) years that began in 1985 and were marked by major economic and political reforms of Soviet policy. The first steps of video art in Latvia, back then a Soviet Socialist republic (LSSR), were concurrent with growing civil and political freedom, a rising national re-awakening movement, the opening of international borders, and increasing exchanges with artists and intellectuals in the West. The mid-1980s were also the time of the development and institutional recognition of contemporary art forms – installation, performance, and video-installation – that challenged the dominance of traditional fine art genres prevailing in Soviet art in the previous decades.

The emergence of videoart in Latvia can be traced back to 1986, and, as pointed out by several researchers, it had roots in the fields of art and in cinema.<sup>3</sup> Video, a very expensive technology in the 1980s in Latvia, did not appear in the vacuum. It was preceded by a widespread film-amateur movement, which involved thousands of enthusiasts organised in amateur clubs. Important for the emergence of videoart were the activities of the People's Film Studio and the Film-Photo-Phono Laboratory of the LSSR Academy of Sciences, led by the film director and cinematographer Zigurds Vidiņš, who purchased the first VHS video camera for the institution in 1986. As it was almost impossible for the republican scientific institution to acquire Western equipment, the camera was bought in Moscow with money borrowed from friends, then placed in a commission shop in Riga, and finally purchased by Vidiņš, who secured for this the special permission of the Council of Ministers of the LSSR.<sup>4</sup> Vidiņš's

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<sup>1</sup> Inese Riņķe, “Aktīvā māksla”, *Avots*, No. 1, 1987, p. 44–46.

<sup>2</sup> Laima Slava, “Kam vajadzīga videomāksla?,” *Diena*, 25.11.1994, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Līga Miezīte-Jensena, “Videomākslas iluminācijas, Latvija, deviņdemītie/ Video art illuminations, Latvia, the 1990s”, Ieva Astahovska (ed.) *90-tie. Laikmetīgā māksla Latvijā/ Nineties. Contemporary Art in Latvia*, LCCA, Riga 2010, p. 250–265; Laima Slava in interview with Ieva Astahovska. “‘Tas nav kino! – Tā nav māksla!’ / ‘That's not cinema! – That's not art!’,” Astahovska *90-tie. Laikmetīgā māksla Latvijā*, p. 416–427; Zanda Jankovska, “Austrumu frontē: videomākslas soli no tās dzimšanas līdz gadsimtu mijai (1. daļa)”, <http://vecs.noass.lv/austrumu-fronte-videomaksas-soli-no-tas-dzimsanas-lidz-gadsimtu-mijai/> (accessed September 15, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Zigurds Vidiņš (04.10.2023). Recording in the author's archive. In 1986 Vidiņš finished studies at the All-Soviet Institute of Television and Radio in Moscow.

efforts and the resources of the laboratory played a crucial role in the production of the first Latvian video art pieces.

In the art institutional context, Latvian video art was first presented to a wider audience in August 1986 as part of *Video-Saloon* installed at St. Peters Church in Riga on the occasion of the festive Film-Days 86 events. The exhibition showcased the first video works by three young but already recognised artists: the video installation *Orange Tele-footbridge* by Ojārs Pētersons and video works accompanied by live performances *How to Find Koshchei's Egg* by Indulis Gailāns and *The Wall* by Kristaps Ģelzis. All video footage had been recorded by Vidiņš. The works played with displacement of space, time, and action in video and in the exhibition space. The motive of the wall was further developed by Ģelzis in his visionary video installation *Dismantling the Wall* (1987), which shows a human hand endlessly constructing and dismantling a drawn wall. In 1988, just a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the installation was presented at the group exhibition *Riga. Lettische Avantgarde* in West Berlin.

Another work that announced the arrival of video in Latvian art was the 1986 video action *Man in the Living Environment* by Hardijs Lediņš and Imants Žodžiks. The piece was made for an architectural conference as a critique of the uniformity of Soviet mass housing. In the footage, analytical narrative and on-site interviews with inhabitants of newly built suburbs were accompanied by the colourful performance of the film group. This work marked the beginning of a series of video actions by the group Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings (NSRD), which included Lediņš, Žodžiks, Juris Boiko, Inguna Černova, and other participants who recognised video as the medium that allowed them to fuse their interest in performance, post-modern visual language, and music. Video, a “mystical eye”,<sup>5</sup> became the main tool that enabled NSRD to document and present their actions at exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> Several of these pioneering works, such as *Iceberg's Longings / Volcano's Dreams*, and *Grindstone of the Spring* (both 1987), were recorded by Vidiņš. The group also produced the first computer animation in Latvian art, *Dr. Eneser Binocular Dance Lessons* (1987), using basic but back then ground-breaking digital technology. An important influence for NSRD was friendship with the West-German Latvian émigré media producer Indulis Bilzēns, who has already produced some TV programmes on Frankfurt community TV as part of his project

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<sup>5</sup> NSRD: Juris Boiko, Hardijs Lediņš, Inguna Černova, “Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings”, manuscript, 1987. Reprinted in Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikare (eds.), *Nebijušu sajūtu restaurēšanas darbnīca. Juris Boiko un Hardijs Lediņš / Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings. Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš*, LCCA, Riga 2016, p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> *The First Approximate Art Exhibition* by NSRD at the House of Knowledge, Riga, 1987 and the group exhibition *Riga. Lettische Avantgarde* in West-Berlin, Bremen, and Kiel, 1988–1989.

Bräunungsstudio Malaria. It was he who acquainted NSRD with the tradition of Fluxus and contemporary developments in media art. After the breakup of NSRD in 1989, Lediņš and Boiko continued creating video projects, with Lediņš authoring a few video works and establishing an action art video studio *Krupis Baravika* (1991, with Valdis Poikāns), and Boiko creating several multichannel video installations.

Meanwhile, even though still expensive, video was taking over the media landscape in Latvia. The technical arsenal was expanded with Betacams, videomixers, and editing technology. Video artists recall the feeling of freedom granted by simple, instant, portable technology and experiments with signal distortion, glitches, feedback, and other effects.<sup>7</sup> In 1987, an independent organisation called Riga Video Centre (the first in the USSR) was established, which soon created its adjacent structure, the Multimedia Office (since 1991, an autonomous Riga Multimedia Center). The experimental film and video programme *Ciklops* was launched on Latvian television. Vibrant and international events in the field of film in Latvia attracted the attention of Pascal-Emmanuel Gallet, the head of the Multimedia Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, who in 1988 organised in Riga a screening of his collaborative multimedia piece *Brise-glace* (1987). Contacts and collaboration between Latvian and French multimedia offices led to an important initiative: the French-Latvian Videoart Festival (1990–1991) and the France-Baltic Videoart Festival (1992–1994)<sup>8</sup>, financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France and co-programmed by the French centre of videoart *Heure Exquise!* and later also CICV Montbéliard Belfort.

In the early 1990s, the festivals became the major platform for the production and presentation of Latvian video art, contributing to its emergence as a broader movement. The history of the festivals reflects the currents of the time: the first festival was launched when Latvia was still a Soviet republic, while the second took place already after the restoration of Latvian independence. Many authors who presented their works at the festival screening sessions – Dainis Kļava, Gintars Kavacis, Roberts Vinovskis, Viesturs Graždanovičs, Arta Egle-Biseniece – came from the film background; for example, some of them were enrolled in the film directing study course run by the renowned film director Ansis Epnars. However, visual artists like Lediņš, Ģelzis, Gailāns, Kristaps Gulbis, Anita Zabiļevska, and others also

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<sup>7</sup> Author's interviews with Zigurds Vidiņš and with Dainis Kļava (13.09.2023). Recordings in the author's archive.

<sup>8</sup> *Franču–Latviešu Videomākslas festivāls / Festival Franco-Letton d'art video* (1990–1991); *Francijas–Baltijas Videomākslas festivāls / Festival Franco-Balte d'art video* (1992–1994). The latter included film programmes from Lithuania and Estonia, and it also travelled to Vilnius and Tallinn.

participated, either with screened works or live events and installations integrating video.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the festivals had strong female representation, including works by Egle-Biseniece, Anna Viduleja, Zabiļevska, Kristīne Želve, and Aija Stafecka (Bley). Recipients of the festival *Grand Prix* and *Journaux de voyage* awards were granted residency at film production facilities in France. Along with retrospectives of French and international authors: Jean Lois Le Tacon, Jean-François Neplaz, Hervé Nisic, Robert Cahen, Patrick Prado, Alain Longuet, and others, the festivals featured retrospectives of Lediņš and Kļava. At the beginning of the 1990s, international ties and collaborations were thriving, with Lediņš, Kļava, and others working in the residency in France and Boiko creating exhibitions and installations in Germany. In 1992, Riga became one of the *Piazzettas* of the international media project *Piazza Virtuale*, organised by Van Gogh TV for documenta IX.<sup>10</sup>

The 1990s witnessed the rapid development of contemporary art language, with video being a leading medium in this process. Analogue video was used in poetic video installations by Boiko and minimalist, phenomenological, multichannel installations by Zabiļevska. Pētersons, Ģelzis, and Gailāns also occasionally returned to video in their practice. After 1994, as geopolitical interest and, therefore, funding for the projects in the Baltics started to fade, the video art festivals could no longer sustain themselves. Another reason for the crisis of the festivals was the lack of evaluation criteria for the artistic merit of the screened works. In the mid-1990s, many of the former participants of the festivals chose to work in more prestigious or lucrative fields of the film industry and advertising. Analogue video, the media of the upheaval time, reached its final decline in the second half of the 1990s with the arrival of digital technology that became dominant in the art field and infiltrated club culture, providing VJ-ing visuals for drum and bass and noise music gigs. Cross-disciplinary dimensions of video continued to be explored at the video poetry festival *Word in Motion* (2001–2011), organised by the poet collective *Orbita*. Since 2000, the legacy of Latvian video art has been preserved in the Video Art Archive of Latvia, established by Noass Gallery in Riga, which also organises the yearly contemporary video art festival *Waterpieces*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the 2<sup>nd</sup> France-Baltic Videoart Festival in 1993 included an exhibition with video installations displayed at the exhibition hall *Arsenāls* in Riga.

<sup>10</sup> See the research project “Van Gogh TV. Erschließung, Multimedia-Dokumentation und Analyse ihres Nachlasses” by the Institute for Media Design, University of Applied Sciences Mainz, <https://vangoghtv.hs-mainz.de/?portfolio=riga-2&lang=en> (accessed September 15, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank the Video Art Archive of Latvia and Noass Gallery, in particular Sandra Ķempele, for their help with the research for this article.

## Chronology: Latvia

Chronology of Works	Chronology of Events
<p><b>1986</b>  Hardijs Lediņš and Imants Žodžiks, <i>Man in the Living Environment</i>, video action</p> <p>Ojārs Pētersons, <i>Orange Tele-footbridge</i>, video-installation; Kristaps Ģelzis, <i>The Wall</i> and Indulis Gailāns, <i>How to Find Koshchei's Egg</i>, video performances produced and presented at the <i>Video-Saloon</i> exhibition at St. Peter's Church in Riga</p>	<p><b>1986</b>  Zigurds Vidiņš acquires a VHS camera for the Film-Photo-Phono Laboratory of LSSR Academy of Sciences</p>
<p><b>1987</b>  The Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings (NSRD),  <i>Iceberg's Longings / Volcano's Dreams; Grindstone of the Spring; Dr. Eneser Binocular Dance Lessons; Walk to Bolderāja</i>, video actions</p> <p>Imants Žodžiks, Mārtiņš Rutkis (NSRD), <i>Dr. Eneser Binocular Dance Lessons</i>, computer animation.</p>	<p><b>1987</b>  <i>The First Approximate Art Exhibition</i> organised by NSRD at the House of Knowledge in Riga includes the display of TV monitors with video actions of the group.</p>
<p><b>1988</b>  Kristaps Ģelzis, <i>Dismantling the Wall</i>, video installation, presented at the exhibition <i>Riga. Lettische Avantgarde</i> in West Berlin alongside video actions by NSRD</p>	<p><b>1988</b>  Presentation of the French multimedia piece <i>Brise-glace</i> (1987), co-produced by Pascal-Emmanuel Gallet, as part of the <i>Film Forum Arsenāls</i> programme.</p> <p>The Second Transworld Telephone Concert, organised by Micky Remann and Indulis Bilzēns, with the participation of NSRD. Participants from Frankfurt am Main, Damascus, San Francisco, Riga, Gambia, Kathmandu, and Moscow were connected via telephone with images of the event in different locations transmitted over a photophone</p>
	<p><b>1989</b>  Beginning of the experimental film and video programme <i>Ciklops</i> produced by Gintars Kavacis and broadcasted by the TV Riga</p>

<p><b>1990</b> Juris Boiko, <i>Saltblower</i>, multi-channel video installation, produced for <i>Latvia: 20th Century Somersault, 1940–1990</i> exhibition at the exhibition hall Latvia</p>	<p><b>1990</b> 1st French-Latvian Videoart Festival, organised by the Multimedia Office of the Riga Video Centre and the Multimedia Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, co-programmed by the French centre of videoart, <i>Heure Exquise!</i>. <i>Grand-Prix</i>: Gintars Kavacis; <i>Journaux de voyage</i>: Dainis Kļava</p>
	<p><b>1991</b> 2nd French-Latvian Videoart Festival. <i>Grand Prix</i>: Valdis Poikāns; <i>Journaux de voyage</i>: Viktors Zariņš</p> <p>Hardijs Lediņš and Valdis Poikāns establish an action art video-studio <i>Krupis Baravika</i>.</p>
	<p><b>1992</b> 1<sup>st</sup> France-Baltic Videoart Festival, organised by the Riga Multimedia Centre and Multimedia Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, co-programmed by the French centre of videoart <i>Heure Exquise!</i> and CICV Montbéliard Belfort. <i>Grand Prix</i>: Olafs Okonovs; <i>Journaux de voyage</i>: Arta Egle-Biseniece.</p> <p>Riga participates as a <i>Piazzetta</i> in the project <i>Piazza Virtuale</i>, organized by Van Gogh TV for documenta IX</p>
<p><b>1993</b> Kristaps Gubis, Dainis Kļava, and Olafs Štāls, <i>Scaffold</i>, multimedia installation; <i>Heavenly Necessity</i>, video opera (music by Juris Kulakovs, video by Arta Egle-Biseniece, sculpture by Igors Dobičins), both produced as part of the France-Baltic Video art Festival</p>	<p><b>1993</b> 2<sup>nd</sup> France-Baltic Videoart Festival. Exhibition of video installations at the Arsenāls exhibition hall in Riga. <i>Grand Prix</i>: Aija Stafecka; <i>Journeaux de voyage</i>: Aleksas Andriuškevičius (Lithuania).</p>
	<p><b>1994</b> 3<sup>rd</sup> France-Baltic Videoart Festival</p>
	<p><b>1998</b> Ieva Rubeze, Mārtiņš Ratniks, Līga Marcinkeviča, and Ervīns Broks, students of the Art Academy of Latvia, get access to a digital video camera during residency in Tornio, Finland. They establish the group Famous Five (F5, with Fēlikss Zīders.)</p>

	Digital video becomes widespread in art and in VJ-ing sessions.
	<b>2000</b> Juris Boiko, Dzintars Zilgalvis, and Līga Miežīte-Jensena establish the Video Art Archive of Latvia at the Noass gallery in Riga.
	<b>2001</b> Beginning of the video poetry festival Word in Motion organised by the poet collective Orbita (2001–2011).