# INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO DOCUMENTATION OF LATVIAN PERFORMANCE ART

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the debate among the theatre and performance theorists, who have long argued that performance becomes something else whenever it is documented. In fact, performance art historians can be divided into two groups: the first are adamant that a performance must be seen and experienced as a "live" event, the second – that performance art cannot exist without documentation, since it needs a proof of its occurrence. An alternative perspective maintains that documents themselves, however, cannot be (dis)regarded simply as incomplete remains from live events. The process of documentation is essential in performance art, since the documents can help artists to acquire a different perspective on their own work. Similarly, through such documents audiences can remember and visualize the performances they witnessed in person or, if they were not present, have an opportunity to explore the works that would otherwise remain unnoticed. The paper will analyse the role of documents in performance art through focusing on the work of four artists: Andris Grīnbergs, Maija Tabaka, Imants Lancmanis, and Miervaldis Polis. These artists have not only pursued performance art each in their own *écriture*, they can also be credited with making their own contribution to the historiography and genealogy of performance art in Latvia. Due to the documents – paintings and photographs – this legacy can be appreciated by contemporary audiences.

**Keywords:** *Performance art, documentation, photography, painting, synthesis.*

When we think of the main features of performance art such as the body of the artist as the material, form and content of artwork, the blurred boundaries between art and life, experiential immediacy and the dematerialization of artwork,

the prevalence of the process and human subject over the product, as well as the dominance of presentational modes of action in real time over representational, commodified objects, it can be stated that this kind of process-based art in Latvia emerged only in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[1]

In this period there emerged a number of Latvian artists involved in performance art, although on several occasions the artists admitted that they had not been aware of this genre or discipline, despite the fact that they had been pursuing it. On the one hand, it can be explained by the limited access to the relevant information, since the Communist Party functionaries or the so-called *apparatchiks* deemed anything associated with the West "capitalist" and unacceptable. Art and lifestyle magazines reached Latvia through uncensored and camouflaged channels, yet it was a rather sporadic and inconsistent means of acquiring information. Sometimes the artists only looked at the images in these magazines, since they did not have the command of the foreign language to translate the text. On the other hand, even if performance art had been recognized as an art discipline in its own right, it would have been denied the status of a professional art form and discriminated or neglected by the Soviet art hierarchy. This is clearly manifested by the various amateur activities such as photography clubs or pantomime and movement theatre which were supported and even promoted by the state, yet never considered "serious" enough as academic disciplines.

Performance art that is the subject of this paper can be referred to as the "unnoticed art" or the "other" art. It often existed only within close circles of the artists, their family and friends, thus establishing some form of microenvironment or the second public sphere (*die zweite Öffentlichkeit*)[2] – a paradoxical parallel culture, where the totalitarian body of *Homo Sovieticus* could be subjected to various transformations. It could be painted, dressed and undressed and, consequently, turned into a body free of ideological messages. Such were the first happenings and instances of performance art by Andris Grīnbergs (b. 1946) and the themed balls and carnivals organized by Imants Lancmanis (b. 1941) at Rundāle Palace. In terms of documentation, two equally important forms – photography and painting – can be noted. For the purposes of this paper, the paintings by Maija Tabaka (b. 1939) and Miervaldis Polis (b. 1948) will be examined. These paintings have been selected not only as illustrations of the interdisciplinary approaches to documentation when artists have created something new by crossing boundaries and thinking across them, but also as vivid examples of mutual overlapping or hybridization between performance art, photography, and painting.

[1] In comparison to Japan, the USA and Western Europe, where artists started to practise performance after World War II.

[2] Here I refer to the concept coined by Jürgen Habermas.

Andris Grīnbergs never studied fine arts, such as painting or sculpture, at the Art Academy of Latvia, the bastion of traditional art disciplines, so he cannot be considered a visual artist in the traditional sense. Yet, through his innovativeness and creative spirit he epitomizes a new type of artist in the history of Latvian art. Being inspired and creatively interweaving and appropriating elements from fashion and hippie subculture, as well as incorporating contemporary social and political events in his art, Grīnbergs's *écriture* was that of a bricoleur – a craftsman who creatively uses materials left over from other projects to construct new artefacts. He was not a painter, so he employed new media, invited photographers and used his own body as material for art. He was a tailor, so he dressed himself and other participants of his happenings. He was not a stage designer, yet he always found props and orchestrated mise-en-scène, even if it was manifested just as a piece of thread and some changes in the arrangement of furniture at the apartment.

In August 1972 Grīnbergs organized his first staged happening "The Wedding of Jesus Christ" (see figure 1).[1] Grīnbergs, his wife, friends, and photographers went to Carnikava beach (25 km from Riga), where they engaged in an improvised wedding ritual that lasted for two days. With this happening Grīnbergs wanted to implement an event of life such as a wedding in a poetic, figurative form. The title "The Wedding of Jesus Christ" was appropriated from the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar" which was popular at the time with Grīnbergs and his circles and consequently made the performance "more contemporary" [Demakova 2011: 255]. According to Grīnbergs, the title did not have any religious implications, because he was against religion as a dogma and violence against the free spirit, thus Christ in this happening merely served as a decoration and the crucifix as a design [Demakova 2011: 255]. It must be noted that there was another happening on 11 July 1973 dealing with the theme of wedding entitled "The Green Wedding" (with the alternative title "Summertime").[2] Here the green colour was the leading motif; there were green clothes for Grīnbergs and his wife, and a green cab that took them from Old Riga to an outing in the green countryside. Grīnbergs characterizes the setting of this happening as "very romantic and hippie – the horses, swings, a grass wreath, naked bodies" [Demakova 2011: 255]. This happening started as

[1] Participants: Andris Bergmanis, Irēna Birmbauma, Māra Brašmane, Ināra Eglīte, Mudīte Gaiševska, Aija Grīnberga, Andris Grīnbergs, Inta Jaunzema (Grīnberga), Ninuce Kaupuža, Ingvars Leitis, Ināra Podkalne, Sandrs Rīga, Ivars Skanstiņš, Eižens Valpēters. Photos: Atis Ieviņš and Māra Brašmane.

[2] Participants: Irēna Birmbauma, Egīls Blūms, Ināra Eglīte, Ingūna Galviņa, Andris Grīnbergs, Inta Grīnberga, Jānis Kreicbergs, Ināra Podkalne, Jānis Sējāns, Alfrēds Stinkurs. Photos: Jānis Kreicbergs.

Figure 1. The Wedding of Jesus Christ (1972).
Atis Ieviņš.

a post-nuptial procession through the streets of Old Riga following the official wedding ceremony of the Grīnbergs couple at the State Registry Office.

The second example of performance art is another wedding, this time of the painter Imants Lancmanis and his wife Ieva Šmite. Similarly to the wedding of the Grīnbergs couple, this was also a real wedding party after the official ceremony, which took place in May 1971 (see figure 2).[1] The carnivalesque event carried out with scrupulous attention to details was held at Rundāle Palace some months later. It stretched out over three days and each participant was free to play any character they wanted. Similarly to Grīnbergs's wedding, here, too, the participants were dressed up in costumes, for example, the Lancmanis couple wore the attire from the Rococo period. Though similarities with Grīnbergs's happening are really striking, Lancmanis himself states that Grīnbergs's event was a specially planned happening, a work of art, whereas in their case it was essentially a beautifully designed and presented wedding. During the same interview, though, he admits that it was a performance, despite the fact that they were not aware of the term at

[1] Thus predating Grīnbergs's happening "The Green Wedding" (1973) by two years.

Figure 2. Wedding at Rundāle (1971).
Photographer unknown.

the time: "There is no need to look at foreign magazines or to know that it is called performance. It is interesting to do that here in Latvia and only then find out that the same thing has been happening in the rest of the world. It was performance and we felt inspired by it. We perceived it as a motion picture, as a process. We did it in great style" [Demakova 2011: 178].

It must be noted that in the early 1970s the emphasis of environment in art was not an extraordinary phenomenon on both sides of the Cold War divide. In the West such artists as Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim started to create their works of art outdoors with natural materials creating textbook examples of Land Art or Earth Art and contributing towards the terminology of conceptual art. Moving outdoors and shifting emphasis from the object to the process was also essential in happenings. Allan Kaprow described the settings of his early happenings as "environments" or spaces, which entangled spectators in multi-sensory experiences [Kaprow 1966]. For Kaprow, the approach to "site" through

performance closely linked phenomenological enquiries into art-viewing with a testing of the limits of the artwork. For him, performance provided a means through which the geography and events of "found" sites could be approached outside the representational terms of painting and sculpture [Kaye 2000: 105]. Consequently, happenings and performances reflected on relationships between practice and place, and so work and site, facilitating fluid exchanges between the frame of an artwork and its various contexts [Kaye 2000: 105].

According to these definitions, Lancmanis had a very similar creative approach. For him, too, the place and environment played a key role in creating "the feeling" and a world which no longer existed. Moreover, such a mix of genres overlapping the boundaries between a scientific research project, painting and performance allowed Lancmanis, like Kaprow, to extend the limits of mere representational forms: "Rundāle interested me as an opportunity to "re-create" a world which no longer exists, actually this is what I wish to do in my paintings as well: to conjure up a world which either is no longer there or has never existed, except in my mind; to make it so tangible and detailed that people would believe that such a world could exist. Rundāle gives you a chance to "re-create" the palace, the environment and park in total; every room you enter takes you to a different era. That's what I like about Rundāle – the huge installation that it has become. That is indeed the right word. It is a large, but very consistent and conceptually-directed installation. That is at the foundation of what I like about it, that people say that Rundāle is a *living* palace. [..] this palace has been re-created from scratch. I was greatly inspired by the chance to "re-create" it. Not only to fill it with pictures and furniture, but to create the feeling that that's how it is" [Demakova 2011: 176–177].

For Grīnbergs, the environment was not the decisive factor around which to construct his artwork, since he was not re-creating the environment that once had existed. Thus, although the place – Carnikava beach – was not chosen randomly, the change of environment moving away from the centre to the periphery allowed Grīnbergs to escape the control and surveillance of the panoptic KGB sight.[1] Here, where no one was watching, nudity became a self-evident norm, as the totalitarian body needed to be freed from any restrictions and ideological messages, or, to quote Grīnbergs, the body was "the only zone of freedom" [Demakova 2011: 257]. According to Grīnbergs, nudity was a deliberate provocation, used to visualize

[1] It must be noted that in the Eastern Bloc creation of such environments or site-specific art was not without challenges. Despite trumpeting the collective ownership of all resources including space itself, state censorship, surveillance and a paranoid attitude to any form of unlicensed social gathering meant that the creation of works of art, which formed environments – in the sense suggested by Kaprow – always risked official condemnation [Crowley 2014].

the ideas that he had in his mind. Grīnbergs states that he was interested in the body in all its manifestations, both as flesh and soul and as a matrix for one's identity: "As to the naked body, it was not like things that can be seen in magazines today. At that time the body was not a commodity yet. For us it [being naked] was a liberation. They can take everything away from you, but the body belongs only to you" [Demakova 2011: 257]. Consequently, in Grīnbergs's case the environment was a tool for placing greater emphasis on the process-based art and the presentational modes of action in real time as opposed to representational, commodified objects, thus also extending the boundaries of art in the traditional sense, whereas Lancmanis focused on creating a site-specific art reviving a "found" site with props, imagery, and historical figures.

These two performances are also interesting due to the fact that both of them were weddings – a continuation of the official marriage registration act held at the State Registry Office. Consequently, they both mark the boundary between the public and the private laying emphasis on the importance of the second public sphere – the one where the participants could feel free and unrestricted by the laws imposed by the regime. Moreover, it is fascinating to examine the visual evidence of these events. In Grīnbergs's case there were two photographers – Māra Brašmane and Atis Ieviņš – documenting the performance in the snapshot aesthetics, namely, taking photographs of the participants and the events as they unfolded in time. However, Lancmanis's wedding was documented not only in photographs, but also in a large-scale painting made from a photograph in 1974 by Maija Tabaka ("Wedding at Rundāle"; see figure 3). This painting was also crucial in Tabaka's own development as an artist, since she considers it "the beginning of [her] art theatre, system of images and autonomy that was referred to as *the Theatre Of Madame Tabaka*" [original emphasis, Blaua 2010: 85]. As a painter, Tabaka often used models and staged various *tableau-vivants*. Moreover, Tabaka was the contemporary of both Lancmanis and Grīnbergs, and both have appeared in her paintings as models.[1]

Another contemporary artist was Miervaldis Polis, who was active both as a painter and as a performance artist. Polis is an especially interesting case study for the purposes of this paper, since as a painter he was interested in creating illusion and enthusiastically adopted the photorealistic and *trompe l'oeil* manner of painting. He also wrote a manifesto on Photorealism (or Hyperrealism, as it was termed in Latvia) reflecting on the artistic methods applied by Leonardo da

[1] Maija Tabaka and Imants Lancmanis also belonged to the so-called Second French Group (along with Bruno Vasiļevskis, Jānis Krievs, Līga Purmale and Juris Pudāns). This group was established in the 1960s by artists who avidly studied French painting, literature, and culture.

Figure 3. Wedding at Rundāle (1974). Maija Tabaka.

Vinci and Johannes Vermeer [Polis 1983: 6–9]. Polis's declaration "I am painting a photograph" [Traumane 2000: 130] manifests his interest in the synthesis of a photographic image and the principles of painting. Moreover, his painting "Self-Portrait in Bronze" (1988; see figure 4), which is a painting done in the snapshot aesthetics from a photograph is also, in fact, a documentation of Polis's performance "The Bronze Man" (1987), where he had covered his face, hands, hair and suit in bronze paint and strolled around Old Riga finally putting himself on an empty pedestal and becoming a live, breathing sculpture (see figure 5). At the time, when a monument of Lenin was placed in every town of Latvia, eyewitnesses interpreted this performance as a mimetic representation of Lenin, which Polis terms "the narrow understanding of art in the Soviet times" [Brizgela 2015: 151]. However, the photorealistic painting made after the photograph from this performance represents not only synthesis or hybridization of three art disciplines – painting, photography, and performance – but is also intriguing, since the photorealistic painting looks like a photograph, yet, it is not. It can

Figure 4. Self-Portrait in Bronze (1988).
Miervaldis Polis.

be suggested that Polis as a painter and performance artist has "appropriated" photography. Moreover, due to its photorealistic qualities, it is quite impossible to tell which form of documentation prevails – photography or painting. What are the differences and the similarities? Are there any?

In this context, both Tabaka's painting "Wedding at Rundāle" (1974) and Polis's painting "Self-Portrait in Bronze" (1988) are cases of integrated or hybrid performance aesthetics becoming something else and different than at the time of the point of departure. If they are viewed as cases of artistic synthesis and transformation in aesthetics, they provide richer grounds for contextualization, since in the history of art the idea of synthesis and integrated aesthetics is not so recent. Indeed, if we talk about theatrical performance, perhaps the most prominent transformation in the 20th century has come through the hybridisation of traditional disciplines [Klich, Scheer 2011: 20].

The first significant expression of integration in theatre was the Wagnerian idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or Total Artwork, in which Richard Wagner prophetically envisioned the integration of traditional disciplines into a unified work with the

Figure 5. The Bronze Man in Riga (1987).
Miervaldis Polis.

aim of intensifying the audience's experiences of art [Klich, Scheer 2011: 20]. In 1849 Wagner produced the landmark essay, "The Artwork of the Future", in which he declared, "Artistic Man can only fully content himself by uniting every branch of Art into the common Artwork" [Wagner 2001: 4]. In this essay Wagner asked for a fusion or "totalising" of all arts and as such it can arguably be considered the first systematic effort in modern art towards such comprehensive integration [Packer, Jordan 2001: 4].

Another prominent example of fusion of arts is Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who in collaboration with Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra wrote the essay "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre" (1915). Their essay articulated a theatre, which would reflect the rapid technological advances of the age and directly oppose the historical "passeist" theatre. In the age of the automobile and the aeroplane they insisted that a new type of art practice was needed to reflect the changes that the industrial revolution had initiated: a new aesthetic for a new mechanised social and industrial infrastructure [Klich, Scheer 2012: 25–26]. The Futurist Theatre was to be "synthetic", "atechnical", "dynamic", "simultaneous", "autonomous",

"alogical", and "unreal" [Marinetti 1998: 177–80]. A significant aspect of their approach was the statement that the theatre should meet the challenges of the new art form of cinema with its "polyexpressiveness towards which all the most modern artistic researches are moving" [Marinetti 2001: 12]. They declared that Futurist cinema "will be painting, architecture, sculpture, words-in-freedom, music of colours, lines, and forms, a jumble of objects and reality thrown together at random" [Marinetti 2001: 13].

And the last example, which is especially crucial in the context of performance art, is the "untitled event" (1952) at the Black Mountain College organised by John Cage. This event not only evidenced the hybridisation of artistic disciplines but also epitomised the shift in emphasis from product to process and from dramatic theatre to performance [Klich, Scheer 2012: 28]. In her article "Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance", Erika Fischer-Lichte explains that the event challenged the borders between the arts, as it "dissolved the artefact into performance. Texts were recited, music was played, paintings were "painted over" – the artefacts became the actions. [..] Poetry, music and the fine arts ceased to function merely as poetry, music, or fine arts – they were simultaneously realised as performance art" [Fischer-Lichte 1997: 25].

Surely, these are only a few examples illustrating that migration and hybridisation of forms can take place in all directions – both from the object to the action and from the action to the object. In a sense, it is the question of "polyexpressiveness" that the Futurists wrote about and it does not necessarily imply that one or the other form of documentation can be considered more prevalent or "appropriate". Thus, the paintings of Tabaka and Polis integrating performance aesthetics and relying heavily on photography are instances of such an artistic fusion, when the action not only as a performative action, but also as the gesture of the painter – his or her phenomenological experience – has become an artefact. To appreciate these works of art, the viewer does not need to be aware of the ontologically prior event, which has taken place before the act of painting. Moreover, unawareness of these performances will not restrict the viewer's aesthetic experience. By no means can these paintings be regarded only as "supplements" to the "actual" event. Yet, knowing the historical, political, social and personal contexts for a particular performance, can encourage the viewer to look at the document – painting, in this case – in a new light and from a different perspective.

Nevertheless, as regards the role of documentation in performance art, theatre and performance theorists have long argued that performance becomes something else whenever it is documented. In fact, performance art historians can be divided into two groups: the first are adamant that performance must be witnessed in person, because "performance is about the 'real-life' presence of the artist" [Elwes 1985: 165],

the second – that the documents themselves cannot be (dis)regarded simply as incomplete remains from live events. The most frequently quoted theoretician supporting performance as a live event is Peggy Phelan, who 23 years ago declared that "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" [Phelan 1993: 146]. Whereas, Amelia Jones argues that "there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art" [Jones 1997: 12] and, moreover, the specifity of knowledge gained from participating in a live performance event should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledge that develops in relation to the documentary traces of such an event [Jones 1997: 12]. This kind of mediated "re-presence" has become the ultimate polemic argument in performance studies [Phelan 1993; Jones 1997; Auslander 1999].

Yet, it cannot be denied that there is definitely a tension between the evanescent quality of a one-off live performance and a need or requirement to leave a trace in the form of a document. Moreover, as stated by Philip Auslander in his earlier writing, certain forms of documentation are higher in the hierarchy than others, "Written descriptions and drawings or paintings of performances are not direct transcriptions through which we can access the performance itself, as aural and visual recording media are […] Whereas drawings, like writing, transforms, performance, audio-visual technologies, like photography "record" it. In everyday usage, we refer to "live" or "recorded" performances but not to "written" performances or "painted" performances, perhaps for this reason" [Auslander 1999: 52].

Thus, Auslander suggests that accessibility to something past is somehow manipulated through "transformation". From here, it can be concluded that Auslander declares the politics of form concerning documentation in which video and photography rank higher due to their capacity to "record" a "performance", whereas writing, painting and drawing are dismissed [Campbell 2014: 36]. This is a discussion concerning the politics of form connected to the document in terms of representation and ideas surrounding "truth" (that is, how different forms of document may be hierarchically placed in their attempt to represent an action that is now absent) [Campbell 2014: 35]. As Amelia Jones proposes, "while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical "truth" of the performance" [Jones 1997: 11].

In the event of photography, surely photographs have been used and still are used as a form of evidence. Portrait photographs, such as passport photographs or photographs from police records, have generally been widely regarded as providing evidence about their subject's outward appearance; sometimes portraits

are also thought of as revealing something about their subject's inner personality. On the other hand, visual objects such as paintings or drawings also have the potential to serve as documents. For example, drawing is a form of document, when the courtroom sketch artist uses drawing to provide access to specific aspects of proceedings in a court of law. Another example can be found in Jill Gibbon's research "Dilemmas of Drawing War" (2011), where the work of an artist and activist is discussed in the context of using drawing as a form of war reportage. Similarly, since there were no other means of documentation available, the drawings and even sculptures done secretly by the inmates of concentration camps can be regarded as a form of witness, as, for example, examined in Mary S. Constanza's book "The Living Witness: Art in Concentration Camps and Ghettos" (1982). Consequently, these can be considered an alternative or "non-traditional" form of documentation, as suggested by Campbell [Campbell 2014].

In conclusion, it must be admitted that this article provides only a partial insight into the on-going discussions on the interdisciplinary approaches in performance documentation. For example, the role of the painting as a document can be further discussed, since art historians and theorists tend to draw a distinction between photography as "straight" and "fast" and painting as "constructed" and "slow". Through examining the works of Andris Grīnbergs, Imants Lancmanis, Maija Tabaka and Miervaldis Polis, the interaction between performance art, painting and photography in the local art scene has been illustrated, yet, surely, the relationship between these three genres can be further examined. Within the scope of this article, it can be suggested that, perhaps, it is essential to focus not on documents as objects but on the processes of documenting as a practice [Sant 2014: 6].

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