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Living and experiencing the  
8th International Ceramic  
Art Symposium  
"Ceramic Laboratory" in the  
Daugavpils fortress complex  
(Latvia)  
from 10th to 24th July. '20



Monument



The gallery of the  
"Ceramic Laboratory"

Harsh commands, the step-by-step march of metal-studded boots and the triple clacking of horse hooves seem to be audible all around – the smells of sweat, horse manure and gunpowder attack the nose. In the knowledge of the former events in this place, its imperial past reverberates in the present. Are these energies still mortared in the walls of the fortress complex, in its barracks and dungeons, and the large artillery arsenal? Relics of the martial-masculine consciousness, now no more than souvenirs of the past, adorn the tourist strolls through the mighty fortress complex in Daugavpils, Latvia, near the Russian-Belarusian border. But this consciousness is still alive and well all around us, as the laid-down bouquet of flowers would suggest on one of the numerous and glorious days of remembrance.

In the prime of its military might, 8,000 people were quartered in the 80 fortress buildings. The National Socialists saw in this vast space a suitable restricted area for a Jewish ghetto, and, at the same time, a fitting camp for Soviet prisoners of war.

On the other hand, today, seeds of artistic debate want to unfold exactly in this special area, in the halls of the **Mark Rothko Art Center**, conceived as a hub for contemporary art. Adjacent to it is the "**Ceramic Laboratory**", also a center that focuses on the creation of contemporary ceramic designs.

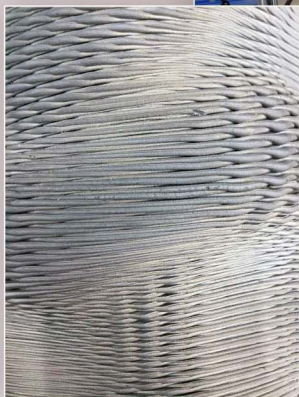


Shopping bag:  
"I'm full of life"

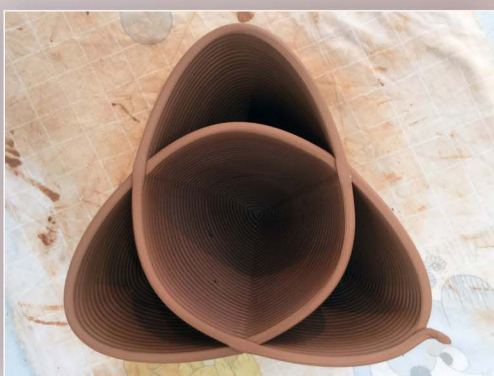


"How does material get its value"

3-D printer  
with the bust  
of its owner  
Lauri Kilusk



Shape and "fabric" of the skin



**Laboratory** What a hopeful sign – against the background of historical reverberation – to look at colorful, constructive and sensitive works of art in the museum and to be able to follow them during the symposium at the "Laboratory".

Not only the proclamation on a shopping bag brought over from Austria, but also the title of the recently presented exhibition in the center's showroom – one of the two large studios – reveals our intentions: in the time spent together with 14 colleagues from the Baltic States, to translate extreme awareness into ceramic forms.

The two rooms of a former Soviet shop were quickly regenerated into a living laboratory: in no time at all, experimental arrangements were set up on tables, with toolboxes and other necessary utensils stacked on their surfaces. Stable shelves presented themselves ready to receive our drying outputs. The acoustic effects resembled a fairground: in addition to the hum of two potter's wheels, the vibrations of "electro swing" played for "easy listening" and the ticking of a 3D printer combined in an unusual phonic symbiosis.

In addition to all of our hands, the printer turned out to be an exceptional star on the stage of the symposium: none of us, not excepting the numerous visitors, could escape the beguiling accuracy of form and internal wall structure.

Some questions developed, among others: Who is the author of the design, - the programmer who is able to operate the program or the printer itself? The sentence "I am a slave to technology!" was not formulated seriously, but the sentence does contain a spark of truth. It is already clear that a paradigm shift seems to be heralded in the area of tableware and useful equipment made of clay.



Foto: Monika Gedrimaitė  
*The participants of the "Ceramic Laboratory" 2020*

- Rūdis Pētersons, Latvia*
- Agnes Sunepa, Latvia*
- Olga Melehina, Latvia*
- Ieva Jurka, Latvia*
- Haralds Jegodzienskis, Latvia*
- Agnė Šemberaitė, Lithuania*
- Monika Gedrimaitė, Lithuania*
- Laura Põld, Estonia*
- Lauri Kilusk, Estonia*
- Una Gura, Latvia*
- Lilija Zeiļa, Latvia*
- Eleonora Pastare, Latvia*
- Ilona Abdulajeva, Latvia*
- Nellija Dzalba, Latvija*

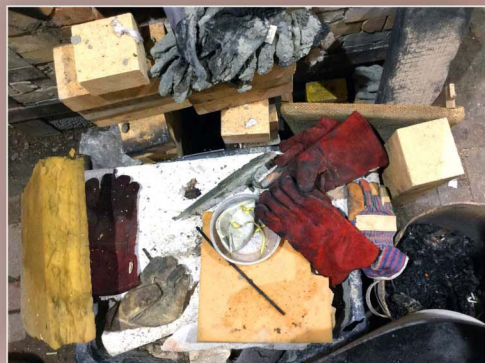
Don't all of our lives represent creating or receiving questions to then embark on the path of finding an answer – with subsequent realization that we are given gifts of further questions?

Every ego creates living spaces in order to (hopefully) be able to consciously design the laboratory process of playing the questions and answers with calm and activity.

Being a participant and thus a co-creator of the symposium implies the decision to leave the security of one's studio and the usual patterns of everyday life in order to establish a real relationship with colleagues in practice and thinking spaces.

Words and the way they are expressed create a social structure in the intensive symposium period in connection with the ceramic designs that reflect our consciousness. Working together develops strength and creativity. The effects of a symposium or laboratory harbor the explosive power of being able to experience new and unfamiliar things. A symposium promotes condensed intellectual and energetic journeys of discovery, the process of being able to convert the apparently exposed reality into new ways of looking at personal reality. In this sense, a symposium laboratory serves as a training ground for a kind of radical subjectivity that enables authentic community and connectedness to be experienced beyond expectations and judgments.

**The kilns** At the heart of any ceramic refuge is the device that converts the earth's material into permanent works. Four electric kilns and two large wood-fired kilns hardened our extremely numerous works, burning day and night.





One of the many loops of Daugava, the main river of Latvia in Latgale



We listen to Valdis Pauliņš's stories and explanations



A jumbo jet with a difference

**Attractions** Our symposium period was carefully structured with a few attractions in order to get to know the advantages and aspects of the surrounding area amidst concentrated studio work.

Daugavpils is the political center of Latgale, - the largest of the four regions of Latvia. This area is characterized by a rural landscape marked by gently rolling hills and speckled with numerous lakes.

\* In **Kraslava**, a small town, there are at least two attractions to be admired: the meandering mainstream of Latvia - which still has its natural structure before the first dams to generate electricity - and a potters couple, Olga and Valdis Pauliņi, who, having remained traditional over the course of their lives, now subscribe to smoke-fired ceramics, which is widespread in Latgale. For a few hours, we were immersed in the idyllic atmosphere of their home and workshop and talked about the advantages of black firing. An excellently arranged "hors d'oeuvre", since the next day our work would have to be hardened in the newly built kiln at the "laboratory" with the same firing method.

\* The **Livani** Glass Museum showed us that, one should think, they can produce almost anything in glass. The main event for us and visitors to the city, however, was a lecture on local history and customs, and the special firing process characteristic to this region. We immediately learnt how lively it can be in the open-air space outside the museum where we attended a firing demonstration - with equally traditional dishes, drinks, songs and readings.



Traditional pottery from the Utenos region



Results from an Anagama kiln: Fascinating and enchanting surfaces



New building and atrium of the Municipal Gallery for Art Ceramics in Panevėžys



A moment in the archive



„Martinson Treasury“

A day tour took us to the neighboring country of Lithuania to introduce two centers of ceramic art to the symposium group.

\* In **Utenos** we were able to get to know the joy of Vytauto Valiušio's work and life; he exuberantly illustrated the pottery tradition of "his" area with many examples displayed in clearly structured exhibition rooms in the "Keramikos Muziejus".

The second aspect triggered a special vibration in us, as the results of an Anagama kiln were presented in a showroom for contemporary ceramics. The formal language of the two groups of sculptures seemed familiar, since we found similar designs on the work tables of our Lithuanian colleagues at the laboratory.

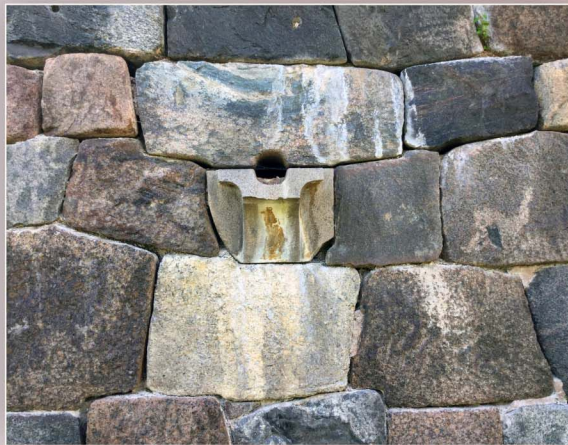
\* When the city name "**Panevėžys**" is mentioned, it rings the doorbell in many an ear - and worldwide at that. An international symposium is organized here every two / three years, which, due to the special working conditions in an industrial plant, which allows doing large sculptures in particular, has focused on the so-called "free ceramics".

The long tradition of the symposium has yielded the archive of the newly built Municipal Gallery for Ceramic Art a significant collection that impresses in terms of both quality and quantity. As "experts", we were allowed to stroll through the archive landscape and, time and again, one would hear a cry of delight at another discovery of a piece by a well-known ceramicist.

\* One of the artists we were very familiar with at this chosen colloquium was an outspoken symposium attendant, whose creative outputs have been featured in many museums around the world: **Peteris Martinsons**. An international competition for ceramic art was named after him, a descendant of the city of Daugavpils, - advertised by the Mark Rothko Art Center and the "Ceramic Laboratory". In the museum, we were also allowed to browse the archive and study his work in the "treasury" of Peteris Martinson's estate.



*Crowds of people and photographer's flashlight during the opening of the exhibition - a hopeful sign in the slowly fading COVID virus period.*



*"Machu Picchu in Daugavpils ":  
Fortress reinforcement wall  
with outflow  
opening of the  
drainage system*



*Sophisticated  
Ventilation system  
for black powder  
magazines*



*Cavalry casemate:  
Brickwork at its finest*

**Exhibition** At the end of the symposium period, the enormous collection of works that we could previously only perceive raw, amidst a jumble of tools, useful racks and kiln accessories, transformed into a museum labyrinth of "artistic nests of ideas" at the Rothko Center - a creation of an experience landscape of the curators and symposium organizers, **Valentins Petjko** and **Aivars Baranovskis**. The subdued lighting within the exhibition hall creates a sense of intimacy and tranquility in the viewer as the beams of light focus on our artistic arguments.

**Musings** The general shape of the fortress system, structured in the orthogonal axis cross, reinforces the idea that every single member of the military was committed to only one goal in all respects of their service: to be defensive and to function on command - for the good of their Fatherland and Motherland. To support this aspect, the buildings are framed with wide streets and marked as officers, commandant's or emperor's streets. Creative and natural developments played a more than subordinate role.

All of the explanations about hypocaust heating and ventilation systems, the sophisticated resistance of the star-shaped fortress system and all the innovative functional solutions of its time, which were at the absolute height for their period, still leave us in awe today. Finally, one cannot help but believe that, at that time, the conclusions were coherent and used for natural life, and subliminally transferred to our common good in the present circumstances. However, as always, the military absorbs innovations first and keeps them secret.

In addition to the aesthetics of the functionalism of past epochs, this system harbors another fascination - but also a "danger" for us, designers: "the aesthetics of the morbid".

"Aesthetics" is a term that is consistently positive and therefore has an engaging effect. If the word "morbid" is added, the gloomy attribute is glossed over with constructive connotations, and one is only too happy to embrace this fact.



*Double fascination*

**The construction:** Every batch coming from the brick factory was checked for quality and then artfully laid.

**Aesthetics of the morbid:** constructive elements yield impressive images through signs of deterioration



*"Green Melancholy"  
Netting protects passers-by from crumbling cornices*



*"Signature" of our "ceramic ancestors" exactly 56 years ago*



*Opening of the gallery of the „Laboratory"*

This is how it is with us when we explore the fortress area: When we discover such aesthetics, we accidentally dig into the scenario of what is decaying, and, as a result, reap emotions - in addition to "beautiful" structures and extraordinary shape constellations. Thus, however, there is a connection with the decline of consciousness, mostly unconsciously, - with the decadence it is emotionally involved with.

**Objects reflect events in our world** - like the word in traditional scriptures. Things and objects that appear to us are the mainstay of our conscious being. With this statement, one can decipher the physical world of things anywhere on earth. Accordingly, also objects of art. And we, symposium participants, can ask: have our symposium works, drawn from creative fever, added new aspects to the world of things?

The addition of a new aspect means change. The martial-male consciousness of a fortified citadel is still alive here. For instance, here we find the Commandant's Museum that offers its relics for studying or there are plans for a museum of military and war technology - and yet a change in this place is no less apparent:

\* The striking beginning is embodied by the art center, which was named after artist Mark Rothko, an offspring of this city, who was courted in the art universe.

\* A stone's throw away from this museum, the stately building of the former artillery arsenal, is a large, elongated former magazine for gunpowder, the basic material for destruction of life. Now the "sparking" ideas of another artist son of Daugavpils, Peteris Martinsons, are kept in this building.

\* The fact that a Buddhist center was recently opened here, as well as an art gallery, a vintage furniture salon committed to the protection of historical monuments and ... our temporary studio, the "Ceramic **Laboratory**", rounds off this line of thinking perfectly.



*Posthumous monument to a living being*



*Foto: Agnė Semberaitė*

*After party at the "LAB": Not just the participants and the kiln room of the laboratory, but also the sky appears "all fire and flame", lit by the events of the past fortnights*



The sober reality of war is not documented by medals, shiny military equipment or postcards from the front, which are presented to visitors to the fortress at several locations - nor is it present in the list of heroic victories on display boards. The effects of war mean broken, ruined and traumatized lives, which are not mentioned in the panoptics provided for tourists.

It does not make much sense to repeat artificially all the war-associated suffering and grief in order to design memorials for a change of mind. It is all the more touching to be able to track down two artistic designs that reflect the peculiarities of the fortress or the reason for its existence and seek to bring the aspect of healing to the effects of war:

\* War horses were critical to the military infrastructure. One of these horses was sculpturally wrapped in bandages as a symbol of all life and dubbed the (good) "spirit of the fortress".

\* The above illustration shows inserts in existing display cases by Romanian ceramicist Ana Maria Asan: delicate, pure-white porcelain reminds us that a hand is guiding a saber or that the sounds of war produce deafening noise.

**Glory** In the final photo, a pine tree is now hiding the entrance into the officers' mess and the first three Cyrillic letters in the Russian word for "Glory". Who this exuberant praise is addressed to can be seen in the further abbreviation that stands for "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union". The building is on the verge of decay and nature is gradually reclaiming its terrain - the party and the state structure have dissolved. So much for the stability of glorifications and martial consciousness.



This photographic monument warns us to concentrate on the "now" and to show "glory" with joy, love and mindfulness towards nature, creature and things ■