Re-cognizing the post-Soviet condition: the documentary turn in contemporary art in the Baltic States

Harry Weeks *Ph.D. candidate, University of Edinburgh*

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Abstract

Contemporary art in the Baltic States has recently undergone a ‘documentary turn’, part of a global tendency towards the use of documentary aesthetics and formal structures in art. In the Baltic context, this has been the result of a desire amongst artists to both recognize and re-cognize the post-Soviet condition, a subject that was consciously avoided by most artists in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the 1990s. Re-cognition has involved an attempt to de-flatten and humanize the post-Soviet condition, which, although a valid framework for the theoretical discussion of Eastern Europe, has a number of shortcomings. This re-cognitive tendency has derived from a shift from ‘hot’ to ‘cold’ memory, the product of distance and detachment from the Soviet past and the rise of a new generation of artists, who were not active participants in the Soviet Baltic Republics. Artists have utilized documentary, as well as ethnographic and pedagogical strategies in order to achieve this re-cognition.

On 11 February 2009, Latvian artist Katrīna Neiburga won the inaugural Purvītis Award, bestowed in recognition of the most ‘outstanding achievement in the visual arts’ by a Latvian. She was also nominated for the Ars Fennica prize in 2008, an award won by the Estonian Mark Raidpere. Raidpere represented Estonia at the 2005 ‘Venice Biennale’, an honour that in 2009 has gone to Kristina Norman. Norman had previously exhibited as part of the 2007

exhibition 'New Wave: Estonian Artists of the 21st Century', which ran soon before the 'Biennale of Young Artists: Consequences and Proposals' in Tallinn, another exhibition she was involved with. The 'Biennale of Young Artists' also exhibited work by the Lithuanian Gintaras Didžiapetris, who in 2008 exhibited at the Frac Lorraine gallery in Metz alongside fellow Lithuanian Deimantas Narkevičius. Narkevičius, together with Raidpere, was involved in 'The Greenroom', held at the CCS Bard Galleries in New York State between 27 September 2008 and 1 February 2009, while Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonai exhibited at Okwui Enwezor's 'Archive Fever' show at the International Center of Photography, also in New York State, earlier in 2008.

The uniting factors between the artists entangled in this Baltic web of affiliations, associations and achievements are both twofold and inextricably linked. First, there has existed a willingness amongst artists in the Baltic States in recent years to engage with questions of post-Sovietism.ⁱ The aforementioned artists have all, to some degree, participated in this renewed interest in focusing on subject matter, or utilizing materials, relating to the period of Soviet occupation or its after-effects in the independent Baltic States. This tendency demonstrates an acknowledgement of and participation in the discourse of a post-Soviet condition. Second, this engagement with the issue of post-Sovietism has been facilitated by a documentary turn in contemporary art in the Baltic States.

Edit András, while acknowledging that a standard definition of a post-Soviet condition has stemmed from a supposed 'trauma of victory', proposes a more appropriate definition in the form of a 'phenomenon of accumulated traumas [...] that is, a kind of turbulence of unassimilated, unmourned earlier traumas of the socialist past, overshadowed by new traumas of change, originating in the odd, hybrid transition of the region' (András 2008). Demonstrated here is, first, the dual and complex nature of the post-Soviet condition, rooted both in the socialist past and the capitalist present, and second, the central importance of transition. Russian painter Eugeny Fiks also highlights transition, in the form of the 'turbulence of the 1990s and early 2000s', as a formative factor of the post-Soviet condition (Fiks 2007). The final facet of the post-Soviet condition is that of placelessness, a result of the post-Soviet subject moving from one reality, socialism, to an antithetical and novel other reality, capitalism. This sudden shift necessitated a transitional and consolidatory period during which a place within this capitalist system could be found. Vardan Azatyan compared the post-Soviet reality to an 'unknown place where every moment the post-Soviet man

appears in a new and alien situation for him' (Azatyan 2004).

Recent literature on this subject has largely attempted to question the characterization, validity and effect of this framework and its definition. Boris Groys (2008) states in his article 'Beyond Diversity' that

Cultural Studies has [...] some fundamental difficulties in describing and theorizing the post-Communist condition. And, frankly, I do not believe that a simple adjustment of the theoretical framework and vocabulary of cultural studies to the realities of Eastern Europe – without reconsideration of some of the discipline's fundamental presuppositions – would be sufficient to enable its discourse to describe and discuss the post-Communist reality. (Groys 2008: 149)

Groys's demand for a reconfiguration of the framework for the discussion of post-Soviet culture has been echoed elsewhere, particularly by artists themselves, either in their work or in writings. Fiks implores that 'the post-Soviet artist must inject "post-communist", "post-socialist" and "post-Soviet" with a new criticality. We must not forget that these terms are still open to negotiation' (Fiks 2007). Indeed, the only concrete designation of these words is a temporal one, locating them in reference to the previous political system. Thus there is room for them to be expanded upon, questioned and critiqued. One such criticism has been that by differentiating the analysis of Eastern European culture from that of other geographies, the otherness and separation of Eastern Europe will continue and be deepened. This perceived restrictive aspect of a specifically post-Soviet framework for the discussion of art from the region has resulted in a reticence, especially evident in the art of the 1990s in the Baltic States, to acknowledge or partake in debates relating to the post-Soviet condition, which has, in more recent artworks from the region, diminished significantly.

The second aspect of commonality the artists mentioned at the outset share is the manner in which they have approached post-Soviet subjects and the tactics used in the investigation of this post-Soviet condition. Baltic artists have variously used found news footage, attempted to infiltrate and alter the news themselves, created installations documenting political protests, documented the contents of women's handbags and created anthropological documentary films dealing with subcommunities and minorities. These are but a few of the examples of a documentary turn in Baltic art, characterized by a widespread

adoption of the aesthetics and formal structures of the documentary, and a willingness to locate, modify, utilize and create documents as an integral constituent of the artistic process.ⁱⁱ

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The shift towards the documentary in the Baltic States can – and must – be viewed within the wider contexts of a global documentary turn in art in recent years. Two previously alluded-to exhibitions, ‘The Greenroom’ and ‘Archive Fever’, as well as the recent incarnations of ‘Documenta’ and the 2005 show ‘The Need to Document’, embody the increased currency of the documentary mode within the contemporary art environment. Importantly to the current discussion, this documentary turn can be characterized by an increased involvement by artists ‘not just in storytelling, but more specifically in history-telling’ (Roelstraete 2008: 69).

There is an apparently obvious distinction between the story and the history, the former locating itself within the realm of the subjective, the latter engaging with the objective. However, it has been argued extensively that the documentary form, despite its propensity for history-telling and emphasis on subduing the subjective, is by no means a purely objective mode. Indeed, history-telling itself cannot be conclusively equated to objectivity. Both history-telling and the documentary rely on the document, a necessarily fragmentary object, as their point of departure and, in order to tell a history, a process of selection is required, thus eliminating the possibility for an entirely objective relaying of history. This impossibility of true objectivity, when juxtaposed with the documentary tendency to subdue the subjective, is the root of great deal of criticism of the documentary mode and has been extensively discussed as the fundamental problematic of the documentary form, both in art and other contexts.

Documentary theorist Bill Nichols provides perhaps the most useful guidelines for the examination of the documentary in the form of five adjectives which inform the documentary mode in all its manifestations: ‘expository, observational, poetic, participatory, reflexive and performative’ (Plantinga 2005: 105). This framework for the discussion of the documentary acknowledges the objective/subjective duality of documentary, placing performance on a par with exposition as one of the defining characteristics of the form. Nichols’s characterization is pertinent throughout this article, and should be kept in mind whenever the documentary form is mentioned.

The two aspects of commonality amongst the aforementioned artists in the Baltic

States – a dialogue with the notion of a post-Soviet condition and a documentary turn – are fundamentally linked in current art practice in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The tendency towards Soviet or post-Soviet history-telling has been facilitated by the documentary mode, the qualities – and indeed problematics – of which have been harnessed by artists in the Baltic States. Thus the documentary turn in the Baltic field can be viewed as a means, while what I wish to characterize as both a recognition and, more importantly, a re-cognition of the post-Soviet condition has been the end.^{iv} This article will aim to demonstrate and analyse the documentary turn and re-cognition of the post-Soviet condition by looking at recent documentary works by Kristina Norman, Kaspars Goba and Darius Žiura. Through the examination of their work, I shall demonstrate two forms of re-cognition attempted by artists: de-flattening and ‘humanization’.^v I also wish to elucidate the nature of this particular Baltic documentary turn, by highlighting the use of ethnographic and pedagogical tactics in the works in question.

De-flattening the post-Soviet condition

One particularly prevalent current within art in the Baltic States since the turn of the twenty-first century has been a conscious concern with micro-communities, minorities, diasporas and sub-groups, a tendency which has heavily employed the documentary form’s ‘expository’ quality. This represents the first tactic of re-cognition that I wish to discuss, a de-flattening of the post-Soviet condition.

Post-socialist Europe – in particular those areas that were formerly Soviet republics – has been subject to a number of both global and local circumstances which have led to the existence of such communities, the most notable of which has been the mass intra-USSR migration, which took place during the years of Soviet occupation of the Baltic States. The 2000 census in Estonia recorded an ethnic Russian population of 351,178, more than 25% of the total population of the country (Eesti Statistiken 2008). And in Riga, Russians outnumber Latvians by 43.5% to 41.5% (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2002). The imposition of borders upon a formerly unified political entity cannot give rise to an ethnically singular nation state, as has been most aptly demonstrated by the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. This example also made clear the potential conflict and unease this can give rise to, especially when one group is perceived to have been an aggressor or occupier under a previous regime. This has also very much been the case in the Baltic States, and has been the

source of interest amongst artists in the region, most notably those working in the documentary mode.

The Latvian documentary film-maker and artist Kaspars Goba and Estonian Kristina Norman are two such examples. Goba's *Seda: People of the Marsh* (2004) (from here referred to simply as *Seda*) and Norman's *Pribalts* (2006) are both video works in a documentary mode observing subcommunities and minorities in post-Soviet Europe. Their focus on such subject matter represents a conscious and concerted effort to destabilize and de-flatten perception of the post-Soviet condition through the exposition of anomalies, contradictions and complexities hidden behind a veneer of supposed homogeneity and uniformity in Eastern Europe. The overt socio-political aspect of the two films suggests that there is a pedagogical as well as a documentary element present, the artists acting not simply as documenters, but as 'informants', intentionally locating their works within the field of knowledge production (Verwoert 2008: 77).

Seda is an hour-long film, in which Goba documents the inhabitants of the town of Seda in northern Latvia over the course of several months leading up to the referendum on Latvian EU integration in 2004. Seda was constructed in the 1950s by the USSR in the architectural style referred to by Goba as 'Stalin's Classicism'. It was built to house workers on a newly established peat-mining project, making use of the huge peat resources in the marshes that make up the area around the Latvian–Estonian border. Workers were brought from across the Soviet Union to live in the town and work on the marshes. Train lines were built to connect this previously uninhabited and remote corner of Latvia with the rest of the USSR; however, the sheer distance and difficulty involved in reaching the town led to an isolated and independent community emerging. The fall of Sovietism in the Baltic States between 1989 and 1991 led to many inhabitants leaving, but some remained, and Seda is still populated with a vast array of nationalities, ethnicities and cultures, only a small minority being Latvian. Goba notes that the people of Seda refer to themselves as the 'sixteenth republic of the USSR'. The town is a remnant of this bygone past, most of the inhabitants being 'non-citizens', people of non-Latvian descent living in Latvia but without full citizenship.^{vi} They speak Russian, and only at official ceremonies and national holidays are proceedings carried out in Latvian by the mayor, who herself speaks Russian as her first language.

Goba notes that little has changed as a result of Latvian independence in the manner

in which everyday life is conducted. Not only have language and culture been preserved but the technology and routine of work have remained largely unaltered by the passing of the Soviet Union. The major change has been the diminishing of funding and investment in infrastructure. A scene late in the film shows a derailed train, with the tracks beneath it sinking into the marsh, the sleepers long having rotted away. This is a town that has been ‘willingly forgotten by the re-established independent state’ (Traumane 2008).

Kaspars Goba frames the film around the upcoming referendum on EU integration, an event which most of the town, as ‘non-citizens’, are not permitted to participate in. The general consensus though is one of trepidation over entry into Europe. Many of the inhabitants relay their affiliation to Russia, saying that they do not feel European, some saying that they do not even feel Latvian. Goba himself grew up in the town, one of the few Latvians in this enclave of Soviet diversity. He indeed begins the film by revealing this personal connection to the subject matter. The film itself is professionally produced, with a linear, chronological narrative, cinematic shots of marsh and machinery and English narration. It intersperses interviews with the people of the town with footage of everyday life.

Norman’s *Pribalts* is altogether less slick and professional, shot on a handheld camera by the artist. The camerawork is shaky, the sound muffled and the footage grainy, with no narration and little discernable narrative. Rather, the film is structured thematically, dealing with concepts of European integration, citizenship, identity, migration, diaspora, language and culture. The film documents Norman’s journey to find her old classmates from her time at a Russian school in Tallinn during the late 1980s. Norman herself is half-Russian and half-Estonian, thus exists in a state of ‘being fluent in both Russian and Estonian and being part of both communities – and of neither at the same time’ (Wiarda 2008: 125). The film was shot shortly before the ‘Bronze Day’ riots in Tallinn, in which Russian and Estonian youths clashed and looted over the removal of a statue in the town centre commemorating Soviet soldiers of the Second World War, and thus gained significant exposure in the aftermath of this event.^{vii} Another of her works, *Monolith* (2007) focuses explicitly on ‘Bronze Day’.

Most of the film is centred on Norman’s trip to Moscow to meet the actor Seryozha Shchedrin, with whom she went to school. He left Tallinn to pursue his acting career but states that his goal is to return to Tallinn as a star and to reinvigorate the Estonian theatre scene. He discusses his lack of any need to speak Estonian, indeed the only people she meets who have learned the language and deploy it at all are those who work in Tallinn as lawyers

and other public jobs where it is required. Shchedrin also states that he feels Russian, Estonian and European, and does not have any desire or need to close off his identity with any more precise pigeon-holing. Others seem less sure of their identity, while Norman herself, in her inquisitive and occasionally provocative interrogatory style, seems particularly dislocated and unsure of her place.

Soon after her arrival in Moscow, Norman is caught in a underground train accident in which one of the foundation posts of an under-construction advertising hoarding is driven through the roof of the travelling train she is on. The footage she shoots of the aftermath of the accident, in which there no injuries, it should be pointed out, appears not only in *Pribalts* but was also bought by the Russian TV networks for their news reports. Norman and Shchedrin are interviewed on television and are utilized by the networks as the ‘human faces’ of the incident. Norman then in turn uses this news footage in her own film. She switches momentarily from interviewer to interviewee.

One of the primary aspects of the theoretical negotiation of the post-Soviet condition has been a questioning of its flattening effect. In applying one framework across the entire geopolitical space of Eastern Europe, thinking surrounding the subject serves to subdue and hide difference, variation and exceptions. This flattening aspect can, in part, be viewed as the reason behind the reluctance to engage in discussion of the post-Soviet condition by artists in the Baltic States during the 1990s. The choice to focus on subcommunities which exist as anomalies within their Eastern European contexts can be seen as an attempt at de-flattening the post-Soviet condition by introducing nuances that question the uniformity of post-Soviet Europe. This de-flattening is the re-cognitive aspect of both *Pribalts* and *Seda*.

Pat Simpson, in her 2004 essay ‘Peripheralising Patriarchy: Gender and Identity in Post-Soviet Art’, discussed notions of East and West in relation to identity formation in contemporary art in Eastern Europe. Central to her argument is the term ‘imagined geographies’, which she uses to describe these geographical distinctions (Simpson 2004: 393). The Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova states that, ‘all of Central and Eastern Europe, seen from the West, appeared grey and monolithic, an expanse bristling with missiles and secret police, a monotonous wasteland, a great Nowhere’ (Venclova 2006). This touches on a number of stereotypes of Eastern Europe, formed predominantly during the Cold War, and relating to the supposed backward, militaristic and dour nature of ‘The East’. Of particular note here, however, is the fact that these stereotypes are of the entire region, and there is no

suggestion of local variation. This single conception of an entire region demonstrates the existence of a flattened Eastern Europe as an imagined geography that has outlived the Cold War and its political East/West divide.

Norman's presentation of conflicting and confused identities, as well as the focus on linguistic and cultural differences between Estonia and Russia, subverts any notion of a unified whole in Eastern Europe, which can be treated with a singular framework for discussion and analysis. Likewise, in *Seda*, Goba presents an alternative to the idea of a 'New Europe' willing to ingratiate and integrate themselves into such bodies as the European Union, by demonstrating the fear and reluctance in parts of Latvia to aligning themselves westwards, when the inhabitants of Seda feel far more affinity towards their eastern neighbours. Thus, if the notion of a homogeneous, flat Eastern European entity is false, then a similarly uniform post-Soviet condition is fundamentally flawed. Norman and Goba utilize the documentary as an expository tool to assert the falsity of a flattened Eastern Europe and post-Soviet condition, re-cognizing and de-flattening both concepts in the process.

Documentary pedagogy

Norman's and Goba's concerted efforts at a re-cognition of the post-Soviet condition are achieved not simply through documentary means, but through a pedagogical engagement of the viewer. Jan Verwoert has commented that 'artists are treated as informants and one expects to learn through their art things about the situation in their country of origin' (Verwoert 2005: 77). The exposition of the untold histories of the subcommunities in question, and the resultant re-theorization of the post-Soviet condition exhibit this status of the artist as informant in *Pribalts* and *Seda*. The Estonian writer and critic Johannes Saar comments on the same point in a slightly more withering manner: 'the emphasis is on conceptual, critical and social art that would also be internationally convertible. Sounds like a good business plan' (Saar 2007: 4). It would be my assertion, however, that international convertibility is not a business plan, although there is a lively debate to the contrary, rather a tool to facilitate a pedagogy within art. The audience of contemporary art is no longer necessarily localized but globalized and as such there has emerged a 'globally comprehensible visual language' of which the documentary is an established component (Verwoert 2005: 77). Norman and Goba are not simply addressing their own compatriots, or even others in the Baltic States or Eastern Europe, their pedagogical efforts extend to this

globalized audience.

Carles Guerra's article 'Negatives of Europe: Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies' discusses the work of Ursula Biemann and Angela Melitopoulos within a pedagogical framework. His theorization of the subject seems eminently relevant in the discussion of Norman and Goba as well. He states that 'rather than merely narrating events, they [Biemann and Melitopoulos] generate knowledge about them in which information and opinion deliberately overlap' (Guerra 2008: 146). While there is a far less overt expression of opinion in *Seda* and *Pribalts* than the works discussed by Guerra, their fundamental trait is knowledge generation through exposition. In the act of exhibiting or screening their recognitions of the post-Soviet condition, they are exposing the viewer to a previously unknown subject and untold history, and thereby generating knowledge through what Guerra refers to as a 'collective pedagogy' (Guerra 2008: 145).

The overlap between information and opinion discussed by Guerra is an area of complexity when discussing the documentary form. Guerra is dealing with the video essay, a purposefully subjective medium. A more strict definition of the documentary, as stated previously, subdues the subjective and thus suppresses the possibility for argument or opinion. The documentary form, especially within an artistic context, is far more complex than this suggests, and there is an invariable subjectivity amidst all documentary practice thanks to human intervention in the documentary process; framing shots, editing, interviews and even choosing subject matter are necessarily subjective interventions. As Pascale Cassagnau comments, 'The concept of the documentary [...] stands in relation to a point of view, an attitude' (Cassagnau 2005: 167). Thus while Norman and Goba may not present an argument in the same sense as Melitopoulos and Biemann, there is certainly a point of view present. The four interventions mentioned above are in evidence in Norman's and Goba's works, especially in *Pribalts*, where Norman herself is as central a player in her film as any, and it is in these interventions that the pedagogical agenda of the artist is located. It is here that the artist can exert a subjectivity onto the documentary and draw a pedagogical strand from the subject matter.^{viii}

'Humanization', ethnography and self-colonization

Parallel – and inextricably linked – to the attempt among artists in the Baltic States to de-flatten the notion of the post-Soviet condition, there has been a widespread effort towards its

‘humanization’ (Enwezor 2008: 81). The flattening aspect of a pan-Eastern European discourse not only serves to disguise cultural or national difference, but also individual difference. The specifics of the individual are routinely overpowered by the sheer weight of theory diagnosing a more macroscopic condition, resulting in a lack within theory surrounding the post-Soviet condition of what Enwezor describes, in his discussion of identity politics, as ‘our sense of “humanity”’ (Enwezor 2008: 81). One response amongst contemporary artists in the Baltic States has been to adopt the lexicon and methodology of ethnography, leading to a recurrence of the ‘artist as ethnographer’ paradigm (Foster 1995).

Darius Žiura’s film series *Gustoniai* (2003–07), like Goba’s *Seda*, is based around the return of the artist to his home town. Gustoniai is a village in rural Lithuania, and Žiura’s project of the same name sees the artist visiting every two years to take 60 one-minute video portraits of the inhabitants of the village. These portraits are still, posed and silent. The subjects are documented outside their houses, or at work or in the street, but always unmoving and mute. A large proportion of those filmed are elderly, a result of the migration of youths to the urban centres of Lithuania, and some of those people we see in *Gustoniai I* (2003) reappear in *Gustoniai II* (2005) and *Gustoniai III* (2007) visibly aged, but once again silent and still. Žiura’s treatment of the subject in these films is absolutely dry and methodical, almost scientific and clinical in the precise 60-second duration of each portrait. And by returning every two years and performing the same ritual, the films seem more ethnographic study than video artwork.

Hal Foster has popularized the theoretical location of ‘the artist as ethnographer’. In order for this paradigm to be applicable to the Baltic States, some clarification must be made regarding the differentiation between the fields of anthropology and ethnography. Tim Ingold notes in his paper entitled ‘Anthropology is Not Ethnography’ that

it has become commonplace [...] for writers [...] to treat the two as virtually equivalent, exchanging anthropology for ethnography more or less on a whim, as the mood takes them, or even exploiting the supposed synonymy as a stylistic device to avoid verbal repetition. (Ingold 2008: 69)

Ingold proposes a disparity between the two based on objective and methodology, a proposition I shall subscribe to here. First he asserts that ‘the objective of anthropology is to

seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit. The object of ethnography is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves' (Ingold 2008: 69). This discrepancy in objectives is based on inclusivity. While anthropologists view themselves as a part of the subject of their investigation, the ethnographer remains external from the subject. There is a necessary process of othering intrinsic to ethnography, which is not present in anthropology.

Second, the methodology of ethnography is based on the documentation of 'particular facts of past and present lives' through 'direct observation of living people (Ingold 2008: 70). Anthropology may utilize this ethnographic approach as a means towards its end, but the anthropologist seeks 'general propositions or theoretical statements', moving from the 'particular facts' to the 'general, the general to the more general and ultimately to the universal' (Ingold 2008: 70). Again, anthropology's search for the universal encompasses the anthropologist within his or her own propositions and statements.

In Žiura's work there exists a strange contradiction of intimacy and distance. On the one hand, the fact that the artist returns every two years to take new video footage and the same figures recur, two years older than their initial appearance, creates a level of familiarity and association with the subjects. On the other hand, however, there is an intense awareness of the medium once again. The one-minute-long, silent and unmoving portraits appear forced and unnatural, and the power relations between documenter and documented become hugely apparent. Jan Verwoert states that 'curiously, photographers always remain alien to the site of the shot. Even if they happen to own it or be in a familiar place, the act of taking the photograph turns them into visitors' (Verwoert 2008: 202). The simple presence of the camera creates a power relationship in which whosoever is in possession of the camera also has the potential to distribute and publish their documentation, whereas the documented has no power over the document.

In relation to Ingold's first point, I wish to argue that the relations between artist and subject – for example, Goba's and Žiura's use of their home towns – demonstrate a degree of inclusivity, suggesting that these works are perhaps more anthropological in character. However, this inherent othering quality of the lens precludes the possibility for total inclusivity. There is a power hierarchy between documenter and documented, which overrides any relations the artist may have to the subject. It is important to keep in mind the connection between artist and subject in these works however, as this represents a shift from

the almost colonial character of the ethnographic tendency Foster discusses. He focuses on the Western artist generally finding a subject who is both ‘the cultural and/or ethnic other’ and ‘socially oppressed, politically transformative, and/or materially productive’ (Foster 1995: 302). In the work of Žiura and Goba particularly the artist is acting as ethnographer of their own community and their own condition. This represents an almost ‘self-colonizing’ aspect of the works, which Chari and Verdery comment upon as a potential path for the future of an ethnographic field devoid of postcolonial associations. They state that ‘post-Cold War ethnography could build upon work by “natives”, analysts of their own condition, on their own terms’ (Chari and Verdery 2009: 29).

Ingold’s contrasting of the particularity of ethnography and the universality of anthropology also points one towards the use of the ethnographic as a framework for the examination of these works. There is little attempt to draw from the microcosmic studies of these artworks any grand narratives or generalizations, indeed it is the particularity of the studies that introduce a ‘humanizing’ quality to the post-Soviet condition. Enwezor discusses the use in contemporary art practice of ‘images that appeal to our sense of “humanity” or categorically reinvest the condition of the human with contingency’ (Enwezor 2008: 81). The lingering minute-long portrayals of the people of *Gustoniai*, people who are otherwise invisible to the viewer of the work of art in whichever international gallery it is exhibited in, allow the viewer to discern the nuances of facial expression, nervous movements of the eyes and mouth of the documented subjects. These indicators of ‘humanity’ are obscured by the homogeneity and generalization of the post-Soviet condition, and this exposition of hidden ‘humanity’ ‘invites viewers to invest interest and take on responsibility’ (Verwoert 2008: 198).

Calzadilla and Marcus note that the ethnographic tendency in art differs from the traditional field of ethnography in that ‘the outcome is not a work of analysis or a representation, but a peculiar sort of chronotope’ (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006: 97). *Gustoniai*, with its dry, unmediated presentation delivers to the viewer this chronotope, a simple presentation of the people of a time and space – the two words that comprise the Greek etymology of the word ‘chronotope’. The artist allows the viewer to analyse or to feel responsibility, but does not engage in these activities himself.

Conclusions: cold memory and generational difference

The dual rise of art dealing with post-Soviet issues and utilizing documentary forms and aesthetics has been a relatively swift and recent process. Of the works discussed here as exemplars of the documentary turn the earliest dates from 2003 and there is little artistic output in the Baltic States that conforms to the assertions of this article previous to this. The most fundamental reason for this turn towards the documentary can be located simply by looking at the issues of memory and generation.

A recent issue of *Third Text* (2009), guest edited by Reuben Fowkes, instigator of the SocialEast forum for discussion of Soviet and post-Soviet art, dealt with the importance of memory in relation to this field. One current that recurs throughout the various articles in the journal was the notion of ‘generational difference’, and the effect age and experience has on memory and association with historical issues. At a rather simplistic level, but of great import nonetheless, an artist who was 30 years old in 1995 would have lived under Soviet rule for around 25 years thus would probably have studied and worked in a socialist system. For someone who was 30 in 2005, this number is lowered to 15 years, thus largely discounting the possibility of both work and extended study during the years of Soviet occupation (Arns and Wettengl 2006: 13). This basic distinction serves as the most fundamental example of the effect of generation in a transitional situation. One’s experience is informed partly by one’s age, and therefore memory and the manner in which the artist looks at the issues of Sovietism and post-Sovietism are also informed thus.^{ix}

Fowkes asserts that this is also the case within academia, noting ‘the more dispassionate approach of younger researchers who find it easier to maintain a critical distance from the turbulent history of art during the Cold War’ (Fowkes 2009: 3). It is this critical distance that has allowed the recognition and re-cognition of post-Soviet subject matter in contemporary art practice as well as theory. For artists who have lived for a substantial time under socialist rule ‘the past represented [...] a former present’ (Szczerki 2009: 87). Artists for whom this is not the case can view the past in more detached terms as simply a history to be told. Those artists of a later generation can thus maintain a ‘distance which is not about morality but about detachment in reflecting, in seeing your “own” place’ (Milovac and Stipancic 2002: 45). The ‘own place’ of these artists is one of a non-active involvement with Sovietism, and from this emerges the willingness to engage with the subject matter without the baggage of personal experience.

It is key to note that the unifying factors between artists collectively constituting a

generation are ‘common experiences and a shared social context rather than [...] any unifying aesthetic platforms’ (Epner 2007: 7). Thus, when discussing the pool of artists who are currently operating within a documentary tendency, it is inaccurate to group them in terms of their artistic idiom. Instead their shared thematic and aesthetic agenda is the result of their ‘common experiences and shared social context’, which derive from their generation and thus their personal relationship to Sovietism. Kristina Norman’s own personal history of socialism, as related in *Pribalts*, is not one founded on state politics, rather it is based on her school days and the social implications of ‘Russianness’ in Estonia. Indeed the main focus of her film is not of Russianness in Soviet-era Estonia but during the period after independence, thus the subject matter is truly post-Soviet.

Hedvig Turai, in an article discussing statue parks in Hungary and Lithuania (2009), relates these reminiscences of socialism in terms of a duality of memory:

this living relationship to the past is hot. In contrast to this, cold memory is frozen, the past remembered in a cold way is closed, is not kept open, not worked through [...] hot memory raises emotions [...] cold memory is more neutral, more forgiving. (Turai 2009: 99)

Time, and therefore distance, generation and experience, have diminished the heat of memory in the Baltic States with regard to Soviet occupation. The immediate aftermath of independence may have been tempered with emotional, hot memory or ‘living memory’, but this has over time given way to the more neutral cold memory. It is the distance and detachment that cold memory provides that has given rise to the re-cognition of the post-Soviet condition in contemporary art in the Baltic States, and by extension, a documentary turn.

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Contributor details

Harry Weeks recently completed an M.Sc. by Research in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh, achieving a distinction. The focus of his studies was contemporary art in the Baltic States and his dissertation was entitled 'Re-cognising the post-Soviet condition: the document in contemporary art in the Baltic States'. He has just begun his Ph.D. study, also in Edinburgh, examining the transformation of community in contemporary art. He has presented papers on Eastern European visual culture at conferences in Edinburgh and St Andrews.

Contact

University of Edinburgh, History of Art, School of Arts, Culture and Environment, Minto House, 20 Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JZ, Scotland

E-mail: hjjweeks@gmail.com

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Ⓜ Although the terms ‘post-communist’ and ‘post-socialist’ have been widely propagated by theorists, I shall use the more specific terminology of the ‘post-Soviet’. This seems a more accurate and particularized lexicon with regard to the Baltic States, due to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania’s former status as satellite states of the Soviet Union, as was the case with most of Central and Eastern Europe, but as Soviet republics within the borders of the USSR.

ii When using the term ‘documentary’ in this article I wish to invoke the phrase ‘aesthetics and formal structures of the documentary’. By doing so I am implying that the documentary turn in art does not entail a turn towards the documentary genre, rather a turn towards an adoption of some of its aesthetic and formal properties.

iii ³ Definition or characterization of the nature of the documentary mode has also been attempted by Michael Renov (1993: 12–36) and Carl Plantinga (2005: 105–17). However, Plantinga’s theories of the documentary as ‘indexical record’ and ‘assertion’, and Renov’s quartet of tendencies to record, persuade, analyse and express, both lack sufficient acknowledgement of the performative aspect of the documentary, which seems especially relevant in the contexts of the films discussed here.

iv Taking the prefix ‘re-’ to indicate repetition and the stem deriving from the Latin *cognoscere*, meaning ‘to know’, ‘re-cognition’ suggests an act of knowing once more, rather than simply realizing and acknowledging – the two fundamental qualities of recognition. One may further expand on this more complex definition by noting that ‘cognition’ denotes not just knowing, but the process of knowing, thus ‘re-cognition’ can be characterized similarly as a process.

v The term ‘de-flattening’ was originally formulated and defined by Wu Hung (2007: 259–61) in his paper ‘De-flattening “Regional” Contemporary Art’.

vi More information on the precise status of ‘non-citizens’ in Latvia can be found in Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia (1997).

vii A detailed report of the surrounding circumstances and events of ‘Bronze Day’ can be found in Kaasik (2006).

viii Norman states that, ‘here I see a difference between the artist and the journalist. I am not claiming I get the truth. I can play around with reality as well. I can document it at a distance and I can interfere’ (Norman, Ladõnskaja, Muravskaja and Siib 2008: 23).

ix It should be pointed out that age is by no means the exclusive determinant for participation within a particular generation. Experience and attitude are the fundamental determinants, and there is nothing preventing artists of any age being considered part of a generation. The speed of the transition from socialism to capitalism and the attendant changes this brought with it does, however, increase the significance of age in the context of the Baltic States in comparison with most other situations.