

Ieva Astahovska, Antra Priede-Krievkalne, eds.. *Valdis Āboliņš: The Avant-Garde, Mailart, the New Left and Cultural Relations during the Cold War*. Riga: Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2019. Illustrations. 662 pp. EUR 20, cloth, ISBN 978-993486294-6.

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Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

This book tells the unlikely story of a Latvian-born ex-patriot, Valdis Āboliņš (1939-84), exiled to Germany during World War II and remaining there after the war, who only lived to the young age of forty-five and who came to play an important role in the development of the North American/European neo-avant-garde. Reading this monograph dedicated to the figure of Āboliņš, one is overwhelmed by what this Renaissance man managed to accomplish in his short life—the people he knew and brought together, the art he discovered and promoted before anyone else, and his pioneering ideas and approaches to art. Āboliņš is a prime example of the importance of horizontal art history, of remembering that it was not simply the center that affected the development of modern and contemporary art but that those in the so-called peripheries also played a significant role.[1]

This latest publication by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA) is yet another in a series of important and impactful publications based on years of dedicated research related to its most recent art history—that of the art from the second half of the twentieth century. As one could expect from LCCA publications, it is thoughtful and creative in its design, approach, and presentation—right down to the very format of the book

itself, which appears as a large envelope containing an archive of letters and mailart by the book's protagonist. The front cover contains a flap that the reader can open and receive a piece of mail from Āboliņš himself, making the reading of the book a performative experience.

The book itself contains numerous photographs from Āboliņš's various artistic activities during his short life and high quality reproductions of his letters and mailart, many of which are reproduced in color. His letters, which due to "the sheer number and eccentric wordplay," are presented in Latvian, untranslated (p. 57). The rest of the book is bilingual, in Latvian and English. Aside from the extensive essays by Ieva Astahovska, one of the leading art historians of contemporary Latvian art, the book also includes texts by Petra Stegmann, noted Fluxus scholar; Mark Allen Svede, an expert in modern and contemporary art; curator Janis Borgs, who worked with Āboliņš; and Janis Taurens, a contemporary Latvian philosopher. The book is divided into three sections: the first includes essays dedicated to Āboliņš's involvement in avant-garde art of the 1960s, in particular Fluxus; the next focuses on his approach to the Marxism popular in the West at the time and Āboliņš's "new leftism"; and the

third is dedicated to his activities in West Berlin in the 1960s and 1970s and contacts with Latvia.

In her introduction, Astahovska describes Āboliņš as an “invisible net weaver,” and indeed he wove this net not only across Europe but also across the globe (p. 56). His abundant connections with artists, including Fluxus, an international network of experimental artists active in the 1960s and 70s, and cultural figures contributed to the global development of the neo-avante-garde in the 1960s. What is more, Āboliņš wanted the world to be aware of contemporary Latvian art, which he both criticized and praised. While stating that modern Latvian literature did not exist, he championed the work of Maja Tabaka, a painter whose surrealist style did her no favors with the Soviet authorities. Not only did he exhibit her work in Germany, a feat that was quite difficult to achieve at the time, as the authorities did not consider her work exemplary of fine art in the country, but he also encouraged her to apply for a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Fellowship, which she received and consequently spent a year in residence in Germany. Āboliņš contributed to the promotion and development of contemporary Latvian art, and his involvement in the cultural scene in Germany was also substantial. Most notably, he co-founded Galerie Aachen and launched its own program of new art and eventually became executive secretary of the Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK, New Society for Visual Arts) in Berlin, with its equally progressive agenda.

Perhaps the most interesting texts included in this volume are those that provide first-hand recollections not only of Āboliņš but also the political and cultural milieu in Germany and Latvia in the 1960s and 1970s, the time when Āboliņš was most active, prior to his untimely death in 1984. For example, Maruta Schmidt’s text, “Hi, Valdis!” offers a fascinating insight into the student movement in Germany in the 1960s, the artistic community, Fluxus activities, and her relationship and inter-

actions with Āboliņš. A student of art history, Schmidt had a front-row seat to the Fluxus activities of the time and was even married to Tomas Schmidt. Her description of the artistic activities of the time period and the Socialist German Student League (SDS) offers a vivid picture of the environment in which Āboliņš was operating and the times he was influencing.

Likewise, Borgs’s essay, “Judge a Man by His Hat: Some Private Insights in the Life and Works of Valdis Āboliņš,” provides a view from the other side of the Cold War divide than that presented by Schmidt. Borgs describes his first encounter with Āboliņš, when he entered his art school classroom as a guest, a mysterious visitor from the West, who was nevertheless of Latvian origin. The essays by Schmidt and Borgs provide the context for understanding the circumstances in which Āboliņš was working, both positive and negative, and the ideas circulating at the time that he either supported or reacted against.

Svede’s essay provides a welcome contextualization of mailart in the specific circumstances of mail being sent to and from Soviet Latvia. Following a brief autobiographical introduction detailing the manner in which his own family “participated” in mailart, by creatively and covertly sending seeds and yarn to relatives in the occupied country, he proceeds to outline the various regulations regarding the censoring and monitoring of mail coming in and out of the Soviet Union. This text underscores the significance of the mailart created and circulated by Āboliņš illustrated in this volume. Even Borgs adds to this story in his essay, where he describes a mail “scandal,” when Āboliņš sent him a copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine, which he never received. The two pursued the item through their respective postal offices, only to be told, in the end, that the magazine was a piece of contraband and had been confiscated.

This volume also details Āboliņš’s complicated relationship with Latvia and leftist politics at the time, a phenomenon not unusual to the coun-

try and its diaspora. When I lived in Latvia from 2004 to 2009, I often encountered conversations about the nature of the “real” Latvian language and culture, and questions about whether the Latvian to be found within the country’s post-Soviet borders constituted its true essence, because it included all of its history, including the occupation, or whether the diaspora maintained and protected the authentic ways that had been curtailed with the first occupation by the Soviet Union in 1939. Further complicating Āboliņš’s relationship with his native land, he was an ardent leftist, holding political views not unusual to youth in Western Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in Latvia this leftism conjured images of the Soviet regime, and was something to be categorically rejected. Āboliņš, like many artists from or working in East-Central Europe, rejected both capitalism and Soviet-style socialism and believed that an ideal and egalitarian society was possible outside of both systems. While it was difficult for his Latvian compatriots to understand this, his openness and willingness to discuss and write about his political leanings meant that discussion was never closed because of his beliefs.

While at first glance this text might appear to tell a niche story, its message and themes are quite widespread, and as a result should be of interest to the scholar of art and politics alike. *Valdis Āboliņš: The Avant-garde, Mailart, the New Left and Cultural Relations during the Cold War* offers a compelling outline of the networks of artists and social groups in Europe and across the globe in the politically charged 1960s, it offers a unique perspective on the Fluxus movement, it provides insight into one aspect of the development of the nGbK in Berlin, and it also speaks to the tense relations between exile/émigré/diaspora and one’s homeland during the Cold War. While the detail may refer to one specific Latvian cultural figure, the history the book offers is universal. Furthermore, the publication of Āboliņš’s myriad letters in the original language provides the scholar of

Latvian art and culture with a rich primary resource, and those who do not read Latvian still benefit from the publication of rare and unique primary source material, in particular, mailart; an overview of the content of his letters; and the translation of some of those letters as well. This is a rich resource of high quality scholarship that will have value for scholars for years to come.

Note

[1]. See for reference Piotr Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal Art History of the European Avant-Garde,” in *European Modernism and Avant-Garde Studies*, ed. Sascha Bru and Peter Nichols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 49-58.

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