Re-Evaluations in Feminism and Contemporary Art

Volume 1

Edited by
Katy Deepwell

Series in Art

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:

Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:

Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Art

ISBN: 979-8-2616-0032-9
Also available: 979-8-2616-0055-8 [Paperback]; 979-8-2616-0054-1 [PDF, E-Book]

Cover design by Katy Deepwell.

Chapter 15
It's Your Fault! Feminist Art, Foodwork and the Postsocialist Kitchen[1, 2]

Jana Kukaine

Abstract

This essay addresses the realities, tensions and contradictions of food culture in postsocialist states. The main discussion is on the Latvian art scene, particularly the work of artists Aija Jurjāne (1944–2015) and Rasa Jansone (b. 1973). Aija Jurjāne was a teacher in an art school and her paintings, as well as countless drawings, mostly reflected her private domestic space and family life, including the kitchen – simultaneously an asylum, confinement, and an artist's studio. The second artist is Rasa Jansone. In her collages and installations, she weaves the stories of her mother and grandmother with the postsocialist food politics and the feminized labour of care work. Of special interest is her installation Diet (2017), which consisted of more than 400 items of jarred food (pickles and jams) – an experiment to perform the foodwork that was part of her grandmother's annual routine. By attending to the representation of the kitchen both as a physical and symbolic space, the essay explores how the construction of postsocialist femininity is intertwined with food practices, shaping the position of women artists.

Keywords: postsocialist feminism, foodwork, diet, Aija Jurjāne, Rasa Jansone, contemporary art, double burden.

***

[1] Funding acknowledgement: This research is conducted under the Postdoctoral Grant "Vegetal Agency and Contemporary Art: Towards Sustainable Relationships with a More-Than-Human World", No. RSU-PG-2024/1-0003, as part of the project "RSU Internal and RSU with LASE External Consolidation" (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/005), funded by the European Union Recovery and Resilience Facility and the budget of the Republic of Latvia. With special thanks to Rasa Jansone for providing information that supported the development of this article.

The image of a housewife in a kitchen evokes feminist curiosity. In the last decades, this attention has given rise to both theoretical and artistic interrogations of food, unpaid affective labour, gender-based oppression and violence. In the Euro-American canon, artworks by feminist artists depict the kitchen as a semi-public space or an unsettling alternative to an artist's studio, where expressions of rage, declarations of independence, ridicule of social norms and manifestations of the killjoy are the ingredients for feminist intervention and imaginaries, often set against ideals of domestic bliss and conventions of femininity. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the collective art project *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* (1975–77), Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #84* (1978) and Laurie Simmons' *Woman Opening Refrigerator/Milk in the Middle* (1978) are among the most iconic feminist artworks that make abundant references to the kitchen, cooking and the everyday lives of women. These works predominantly highlight Western middle-class perspectives, while contributions from other regions of the world remain underrepresented. I address here the realities, tensions and contradictions of food culture in postsocialist states and their implications for women, by examining two Latvian artists—Aija Jurjāne (1944–2015) and Rasa Jansone (b. 1973). I re-evaluate their contribution to representing the kitchen and ideas about what food preparation means for women in Central and Eastern Europe, from my own feminist positionality as a Latvian art historian and curator. Both artists embrace the theme of domesticity and use the kitchen as a point of departure to explore how the construction of postsocialist femininity is intertwined with food practices and how they shape the position of women artists. While Jurjāne focuses on the trope of woman as the guardian of the hearth, critically evoking her traditional role in maintaining domestic warmth, Jansone uncovers how the invisible burden of foodwork is inscribed in the naturalized devaluation of women.

Women and Food in Postsocialism

The common stereotype that a woman's place is "at the hearth" has undermined the equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities with often negative consequences for women's health and attitudes to reproduction as well as family life. However, preparing food to nourish the self and others remains one of the activities that women continue to perform on a daily basis. Stereotypical kitchen imaginaries are often met with feminist objections, sometimes resulting in an outcry, such as "I hate cooking!", analysed by scholar Irina

Glushchenko.[3] While feminist critique raises questions such as who does what in the kitchen, for whom, with what ingredients and using which appliances,[4] food practices and the confined space of the kitchen also inspire uncanny strategies of feminist revolt and resistance. They offer potential to reshape identities and subjectivities by redrawing social and cultural networks and relationships where bodies, appetites, classes, genders and ethnicities intermingle.[5] Alongside everyday aesthetics, feminist inquiry encourages exploration of the allure of ordinariness found in the rhythms of repetitive activities and the multi-sensory engagement with the materiality of food preparation, sharing and consumption.

The kitchen is not merely a confinement but can also become a refuge and a resource for social transformation. This is especially vivid in the context of anti-Soviet resistance, where research has highlighted the historical role of the kitchen as a semi-private setting for social gatherings and political and philosophical discussions, resulting in the nurturing of dissident activities at the time.[6] Yet there is little evidence that this type of 'kitchen resistance' also involved concerns for women's rights, nor that the kitchen was recognised as a feminist variation on a room of one's own, since in Latvia too, the struggle for freedom and the artistic liberation led by the cultural avant-garde seldom acknowledged gender inequality or embraced feminist aspirations.[7] The kitchen was permeated by traditional gender roles and, regardless of the sparks of empowerment and creativity it could potentially provide, the space could

[3] Irina Glushchenko, "'I Hate Cooking!': Emancipation And Patriarchy In Late Soviet Film" In *Seasoned Socialism: Gender and Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life*. Edited by Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko. Trans. by Anastasia Lakhtikova and Angela Brintlinger (Indiana University Press, 2019): 59–79.

[4] Arlene Voski and Barbara Haber Avakian. "Preface" In *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies. Critical Perspectives on Women And Food*. Edited by Arlene Voski and Barbara Haber Avakian (University of Massachusetts Press, 2005): viii.

[5] Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: Food, Sex, Identities* (Routledge, 2000).

[6] Kateryna Malaia, "Eating." In Kateryna Malaia *Taking the Soviet Union Apart Room by Room: Domestic Architecture before and after 1991*. Cornell University Press, 2023. Online edition, Cornell Scholarship Online, 18 January 2024. https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501771200.003.0004 (accessed 11.11.2025); Slava Gerovitch, "The Kitchen and the Dacha: Productive Spaces of Soviet Mathematics," *Studia Historiae Scientiarum* 23 (2024): 123–145. https://web.mit.edu/slava/homepage/articles/Gerovitch-2024-SHS-Kitchen.pdf (accessed 11.11.2025).

[7] Jana Kukaine, "Dzimumu vienlīdzības izpratne un dzimtes kārtība Padomju Savienībā", *Letonica* 40 (2019): 97–115.

easily be compromised or appropriated either by other family members or by social expectations and norms – as the works of Jurjāne and Jansone reveal.

While the term 'postsocialism' remains highly contested [8], as different areas of Central and Eastern Europe have undergone rapid and distinct transformations, I want to suggest three considerations to support its relevance for this essay. Firstly, the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine (since 2022) has reaffirmed the term's topicality, as it conceptually frames the geopolitical relationships that have evolved from the imperial past of the Soviet Empire and continue to shape political, social, economic and cultural processes today in Central and Eastern Europe, although in each country to a different extent. Historically, Latvia has been particularly vulnerable to Russia's strategies of covert aggression and attempts at domination, which have in recent years multiplied in form and content.[9] Secondly, public perception of feminism and women's rights in the region remains heavily shaped by the socialist ideology of gender equality, which is now also employed to reinforce anti-gender discourses and the rhetoric of the right wing populism.[10] And thirdly, postsocialist food practices are sustained by the living memories of the meals our mothers and grandmothers used to prepare for us in childhood, through intimate bonds evoking nostalgic affects. As such, while Eastern and Central European taste preferences have evolved over time away from Soviet diets, this period is viscerally ingrained in the region's relationships with food.

In contemporary feminist food studies, kitchen imaginaries from Central and Eastern Europe, along with the corresponding socialist and postsocialist feminist

[8] The term has been criticized for being outdated or Western-centric, as well as considered to be too vague and lacking a distinct theoretical framework. Feminist scholars, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe, address it not merely as a historical period following socialism, but as a critical framework situated within broader discussions of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. They emphasize that this concept must be grounded in local conceptual tools, regional histories and the lived experiences of everyday realities that are often marginalized in dominant narratives. See: Lesia Pagulich and Tatsiana Shchurko, "(Re)thinking Postsocialism: Interview with Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora," *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* 3 (2020): 91–111; Jana Kukaine, "Intimacy and Darkness: Feminist Sensibility in (Post)socialist Art", *Arts* 12, no 1 (2023): 24; Adriana Zaharijević, "Postsocialist Feminism. The Conceptual Tools of Our Own", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 32 no. 1 (2025):152–173.

[9] Andis Kudors, *Russia and Latvia: A Case of Sharp Power*. Routledge, 2023.

[10] Jana Kukaine, "Dzimumu vienlīdzības izpratne un dzimtes kārtība Padomju Savienībā", *Letonica* 40 (2019): 97–115.

food agendas, are typically under-represented,[11] providing new opportunities for innovative investigation. A key aspect of socialist food politics was the establishment of collective meals in which a network of workplace canteens, along with state-funded school lunches, was designed to facilitate the majority of women joining the workforce. Paradoxically, these industrial canteens reconfirmed the importance of women's private cooking. Among other factors that also shaped socialist food practices in the late Soviet era, scholar Darra Goldstein highlights: scarcity (shortages and the infamous "deficit" items); desire (the aspiration for "luxurious" foods and the prestige associated with acquiring them); creativity (innovative approaches to provisioning and cooking); and the problematic "female world" of communal kitchens, which imposed forced intimacy and mechanisms of social control.[12] As food historian Alice Weinreb notes regarding the situation in East Germany, although canteens supplied adults and children with their main meals, "the snacks, treats and small meals prepared with love by mum" acted as the psychological glue binding families together and connecting genders and generations.[13] No matter how emancipated, women in state socialism were "never freed from the expectation that they should personally prepare food for their children".[14] The idea that "a good communist mother must not only work but also cook"[15] rested on the assumption that food preparation should be regarded as a form of feminine self-expression or leisure.

In addition, the private spaces of Soviet-era apartment kitchens presented their own challenges: accommodating all the activities and appliances within a confined, secluded area often made the gendered labour of foodwork both alienating and invisible. Following the collapse of the USSR, the profound transformations in domestic spaces and food practices leading toward a privatised, ownership-based, capitalist, consumerist economy nonetheless remained rooted in Soviet lived experiences and housing policies, rather than being the result of an abrupt political and ideological rupture coinciding with

[11] A rare exception is Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko, eds, *Seasoned Socialism,* see p. ix for their analysis.

[12] Darra Goldstein, "Foreword" In *Seasoned Socialism Life*". Edited by Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko, 2019: x–xv.

[13] Alice Weinreb, "Struggles to reconcile women's wage labor and kitchen labor in the German Democratic Republic" In *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, edited by Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda (Routledge. 2021): 342-350, 345.

[14] Ibid: 347.

[15] Ibid:.346.

the fall of the Soviet empire.[16] The largely unchallenged rhetoric of "catching up with the West" rarely, if ever, acknowledged the need for broader feminist critiques of patriarchy, capitalism and nationalism.[17]

The Cold War ideal of America's convenient and spacious kitchens (often the object of criticism in feminist art) lingered in Soviet, post-Soviet and postsocialist homes long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, even as it created a desire for open-plan design.[18] However, building Western-style kitchens, even Frankfurt kitchen models, did not produce a liberated Westernised lifestyle. As many postsocialist feminist scholars point out, the transition to postsocialism and the resulting neoliberalism did little to advance social awareness of women's rights or gender-based inequality. It is perhaps a curious coincidence that the first attempt to publish a collection of interviews with women artists in Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia, and Latvia was titled *Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures*.[19] The potato-painting nexus speaks volumes about how women artists in postsocialism found themselves caught in the dilemma of creating art or preparing a time-consuming meal, made of simple and affordable ingredients, like potatoes.

Latvian writer and publicist Gundega Repše summarised the postsocialist neoliberal standard of womanhood as a "naughty little housewife who [...] does all the chores, doesn't complain and trains her love organs so she can be a good partner in bed. She is a woman for a man".[20] While the public sphere is more open to gender equality—Latvia, for example, has had women in the positions of prime minister and president—and, as in other post-state-socialist countries, educational attainment and employment rates for women are high,[21] the private sphere remains rather resistant to change, unwilling to embrace gender equality. The association of women with the role of guardians of the hearth endures, alongside additional expectations to "not complain"—a tribute to neoliberal models of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency—and "be

[16] Kateryna Malaia, "Transforming the Architecture of Food". *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 80 (2021): 460-476, 460.

[17] Raili Marling and Redi Koobak, "Intersections of Feminisms and Neoliberalism: Post-State-Socialist Estonia in a Transnational Feminist Framework", *Frontiers. A Journal of Women Studies*, 38, no. 3 (2017): 1-21, 6.

[18] Kateryna Malaia, "Transforming the Architecture of Food": 468.

[19] Matthew Baigall and Renee Baigall *Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures: Women Artists in Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia and Latvia.* (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

[20] Gundega Repše, Bailes no feminisma. *Kalendārs sievietēm, 1994.* Sastādīja L. Kalinka (Rīga: Avots, 1993): 102–103.

[21] Marling and Koobak, "Intersections of Feminisms and Neoliberalism": 6.

sexy"—a tribute to sexual objectification—regardless of their careers, hobbies, other public commitments and achievements. These social transformations and their resulting tensions, anxieties and aspirations recur in the evocation of domesticity and femininity in contemporary art, contributing to the re-evaluation of socialist legacies in postsocialist feminist food practices and kitchen imaginaries.

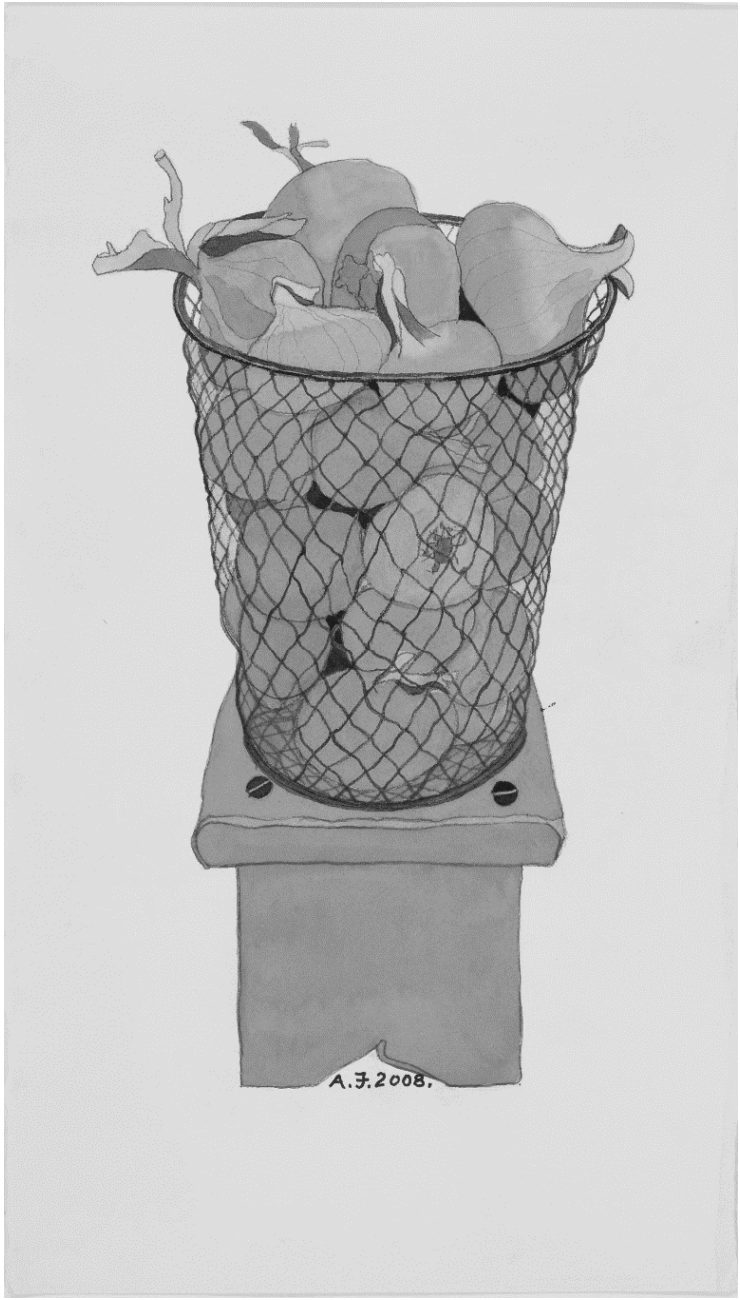
Madonna at the Gas Stove

Aija Jurjāne and Rasa Jansone represent different generations and hold distinct attitudes to feminism as well: while Rasa Jansone's art is explicitly informed by feminist ideas, Jurjāne's work is unlikely to mention it; however, her practice can be recognized as feminist from today's perspective. Regardless of differences, both artists are united thematically and analytically. Jansone had written an essay in the 2021 anthology, *The Source of Youth. Aija Jurjāne*[22], edited by artist Sandra Krastiņa, which represents the first scholarly recognition of Jurjāne's work as an artist. Jansone also curated Aija Jurjāne's solo exhibition at the Latvian National Museum of Art (2024), [23] highlighting the kitchen as the focal point of Jurjāne's praxis, which informed the exhibition's conceptual backbone and was mirrored in its title, *Aija Jurjāne: The Queen's Kitchens*. The exhibition was arranged as a series of seven kitchens, both imagined and physical spaces, revealing various facets of the artist's life: as an art teacher but also apprentice, a gardener, a wife, a mother of three, as an aging and vulnerable woman and an artist.[24]

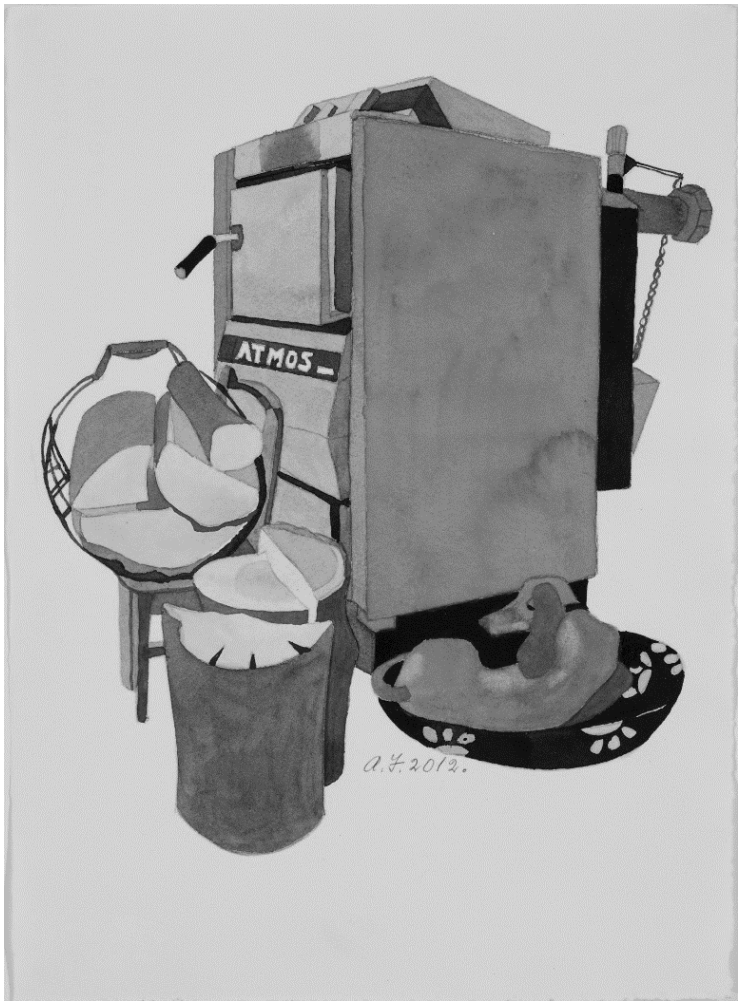
[22] Sandra Krastiņa (sastādītāja) *Jaunības avots. Aija Jurjāne.* (Rīga: Neputns, 2021)

[23] The first posthumous exhibition of Jurjāne's work took place in 2019 in art gallery Daugava. The exhibition in museum in 2024 was more ambitious, with many more exhibited works and Jansone's comprehensive curatorial effort. Rasa Jansone, "Aija Jurjāne. The Queen's Kitchens". Press release, 2024. Available: https://lnmm.gov.lv/en/latvian-national-museum-of-art/exhibitions/aija-jurjane-the-queens-kitchens-509

[24] A glimpse into the exhibition: https://arterritory.com/lv/vizuala_maksla/on_site/27083-karalienes_virtuves/ (accessed 15.05.2025.)



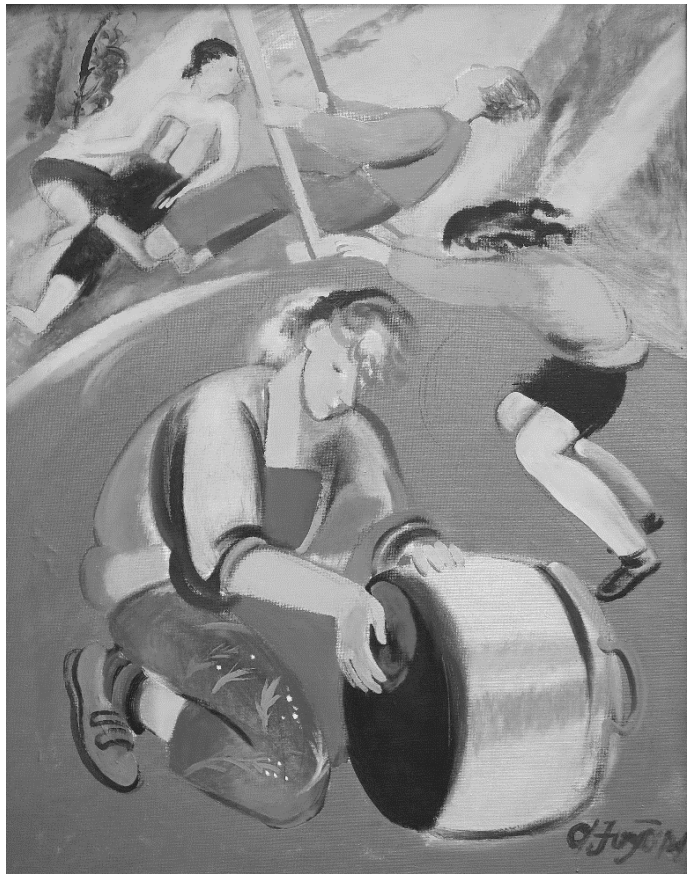
15.1: Aija Jurjāne. *Untitled*. 2008. Courtesy of the family.



15.2: Aija Jurjāne. *Untitled*. 2012. Courtesy of the family.

Aija Jurjāne was a dedicated educator at Janis Rozentāls Riga Art High School, where she taught for forty years, shaping the artistic development of numerous students. She was also the author of significant works on art pedagogy, including *Composition* (Neputns, 2005) and *Painting* (Neputns, 2002), which are regarded as the culmination of her teaching methods developed over her career. In addition to professional achievements, Jurjāne was the mother of three children—Ieva, Pāvils and Kristīne—whose commitment and persistence helped to promote the posthumous recognition of her creative legacy. She was also the wife of Juris Jurjāns (1944–2023), a prominent artist of a distinguished career. Juris taught at the Latvian Academy of Art, later serving as the head of

the Painting Department, and in 2014, he was awarded the honorary title of Emeritus Professor. His career, which included several solo exhibitions starting as early as 1974, reflects the opportunities often afforded to male artists. A comparison of Aija's and Juris' career trajectories highlights the gendered disparities in Soviet and post-Soviet Latvian art life.



15.3: Aija Jurjāne. 1988. *Pot Scrubbing.* Collection of gallery *Jēkabs.*

The overarching theme of Aija Jurjāne's creative heritage, which includes painting, watercolours, sketches, porcelain glaze paintings, illustrations and unique drawings for family use, for example, personalized greetings cards, is the everyday experiences associated with family life and friends. In particular, she has focused on pregnancy and motherhood, domestic labour, family parties, gardening and ageing. According to Rasa Jansone Jurjāne documented the seemingly humble details of daily life, treating the kitchen as a meaningful vessel of both form and content. This approach made her one of the first artists

in Latvia to highlight how women's spaces differ from men's. "She stopped pretending that there are no kitchens in the lives of women painters, or that a 'real artist' had to master the skill of ignoring these kitchens," Jansone wrote in her 2024 exhibition text. She refers to an interview for the magazine *Sieviete* (*Woman*) published in the 1990s, where Jurjāne admitted that she considered "not advancing any further than the subject of family in her painting as something abnormal".[25] This reflects the extent to which themes of family, children and "women's issues" in Latvian art were regarded at the time as frivolous, unimportant, or minor. Despite this, the artist chose to withstand the pressure and devoted her career to exploring the so-called "abnormal" theme, allowing Jansone to conclude that Aija Jurjāne is "one of the first, quiet voices in Latvian feminist art."[26] This voice finds its way through kitchen imaginaries, reworking the gendered stereotype of a housewife, exposing while also trying to reconcile the contradictory demands of motherhood and art making, a tension that is likewise reflected in Jansone's curatorial vision.

However, Aija Jurjāne's scenes of cooking, cleaning and feeding children, alongside detailed representations of foodstuffs and kitchen equipment, are colourful and dynamic (fig.15.1 and 15.2). In a painting from 1988 (fig. 15.3), we see her scrubbing a huge pot, while three children joyfully amuse themselves in the background. The colour palette is bright and lively—this effect is enforced by the presence of pure, saturated tones. The main character—the artist who does all the work—seems to be running out of time, conveying the impression of rush and multitasking that are hallmarks of women's everyday life.

Her watercolour *Stove and Pantry Door with Caravaggio Calendar* from 2012 (fig. 15.4) portrays a segment of Jurjāne's kitchen interior, featuring a gas stove and a calendar displaying reproductions of one of Caravaggio's versions of *Madonna and Child*. The stove's four burners are crowded with pots and pans, hinting at the substantial quantity of food required to sustain a large family. The kitchen utensils gleam with polish—light reflects off the curved surface of the kettle. It appears that as a housewife, the artist has full mastery over her life, she does her feminine duties effortlessly and "does not complain". One of the saucers holds a yellowish substance, perhaps pumpkin mash, hinting at recent cooking activity. The food is prepared and ready to be served. The stove is a modern version of the hearth, while domestic warmth is symbolized by the blue light of burning gas. Adjacent to the stove is a pantry, an alternative to a

[25] Rasa Jansone, "Aija Jurjāne. The Queen's Kitchens", Press release, 2024. Available: https://lnmm.gov.lv/en/latvian-national-museum-of-art/exhibitions/aija-jurjane-the-queens-kitchens-509.

[26] Ibid.

refrigerator for food storage. Both the stove and pantry are set against a light background, enhancing an impression of pristine cleanliness and orderliness in Jurjāne's kitchen.

15.4: Aija Jurjāne. 2012. *Stove and Pantry Door with Caravaggio Calendar*. Watercolour on paper. Courtesy of the family.

The reference to Caravaggio and an image of Madonna with a child intertwine the domestic responsibilities of foodwork with narratives of Western art history. Madonna's presence here reminds us of how womanhood in Christianity is traditionally associated with nourishing qualities – a classic example being the naked breast of the Virgin Mary, who is depicted as feeding not only her baby but also all mankind[27]. This view on woman is common in secular society as

[27] Marylin Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (Pandora, 1998).

well, linking femininity to "natural" care-giving attitudes and affective labour.[28] Jurjāne underscores the parallel yet non-intersecting paths of pure individual creation and the repetitive labour of foodwork, maintaining the daily routine to respond to her family's needs. In the interview for *Sieviete*, the artist admitted: "If I need to choose – to throw together a painting or to cook a soup, so that the kids have something to eat when they come home from school, of course, I will choose soup".[29] In the 1990s, when Latvia experienced social changes that led to rising unemployment and increasing social inequality, cooking became a vital survival strategy, as food preparation could not be outsourced. Sandra Krastiņa interprets Jurjāne's words as "a conscious and deliberate life choice, rather than a concession to the dictates of circumstance".[30] The urge to uphold one's agency at almost absurd cost ensures that you are not perceived as a woman who complains "too much", as such behaviour would easily be labelled an act of "self-victimisation". As this imperative suggests, the ghost of the "strong Soviet woman" who defies the dictates of circumstance continues to haunt contemporary cultural imagery, and she is mirrored by her twin sister—the image of a super-mother fashioned by neoliberal ideology.[31] One might wonder whether hungry children returning home from school, along with other domestic chores, would ever disrupt the creative work of male artists to a similar extent.

In Jurjāne's works, the very activity of cooking is depicted as the artist's main labour. In the painting *Domestic Life with a Working Day Cake* (fig.15.5), the gendered dynamics of both art and food production are exposed. This ironic family portrait features the artist with her husband. While she wears an apron and prepares to top a cake, her husband is painting a picture of an enlarged dragonfly. Although they share the same physical space—crowded with furniture and painting frames, which speaks of the scarcity of space in the Soviet living environment – symbolically they are miles apart, each occupying the space assigned by their gender. He is the master of oil painting, she is the mistress of whipped cream. In the bottom right corner, seemingly under the table, the crouching figure of one of their children is visible. On the opposite, in the left, an upside-down painting—presumably by Aija Jurjāne—depicts two other children in a sketchy manner. This painting appears unfinished and is pushed aside to make room for the duty of affective labour—preparing a

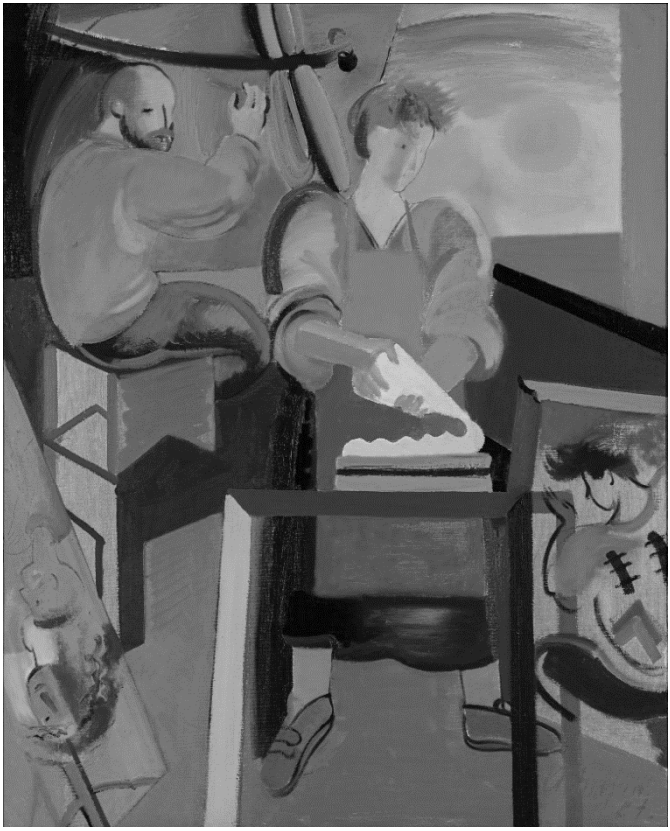
[28] Alva Gotby, *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* (London: Verso, 2023).

[29] Sandra Krastiņa, ""Uzmālēt bildi vai tomēr uzvārīt zupu?"" In: Aija Jurjāne. *Jaunības avots*. Sastādīja Sandra Krastiņa (Rīga: Neputns, 2021): 101-119, 113.

[30] Ibid, 113.

[31] Jana Kukaine, "Picking Sides, Picking Selves: Elīna Eihmane and Maternal Entanglement," *Photography and Culture* 13 nos. 3–4 (2020): 385–401.

special treat that reflects maternal love and holds the family together. Not only making soup, but also baking a cake, is prioritised over creating art. Moreover, the presence of the entire family suggests that a room of one's own—whether physical, symbolic or mental—is a "deficit item" in the postsocialist cultural economy. This scarcity necessitates strategies of creative compromise and multitasking, which—as reflected in the work—are framed as women's natural duties.



15.5: Aija Jurjāne. *Domestic Life with a Workingday Cake*. 1987. Collection of the Artists' Union of Latvia.

Day after Day, Jar after Jar

Being one of the most visible feminist artists in contemporary Latvia, Rasa Jansone holds a practice-led doctoral degree in art and works as an educator at Riga School of Design and Art. With the theme of food featured in several of her works, Jansone's installation *Diet* approaches cooking as a survival strategy which both preserves and re-enacts the lived experiences of three generations

of women: her grandmother, mother and aunts as well as herself.[32] The work consists of approximately 600 glass jars with home-made canned food: jams, pickles, sauces, brined preserves and pasteurised juices that the artist prepared in 2016, over the course of one summer and autumn, following the instructions left by her grandmother and aunts. The installation was on view at the Latvian National Museum of Art in 2017, in an exhibition, *I Touch Myself*, which was inspired by Luce Irigaray's saying "You become whatever you touch" (fig.15.6). Later that year, the work was on show in Estonia, Tartu Art House, in feminist group show *Goddess Ex Machina*. For me personally, both exhibitions also marked the beginning of my short but intense curatorial practice, therefore I had the privilege of observing the creation process of Jansone's work from its earliest stages.[33]

15.6: Rasa Jansone. *Diet*. A jar with a label in Latvian *Pati vainīga!* (*It's your fault!)* 2017. Photo by Valdis Jansons.

Rasa Jansone began working on the installation as a tribute to her grandmother Anna Rozentāle, who was the mother of nine children. Anna Rozentāle's family lived in the countryside and every summer she stocked the cellar with foodstuff

[32] For an in-depth analysis of another art project by Jansone – her installation of kitchen cutting boards titled *Ritual Place* – see: Jana Kukaine and Jānis Taurens, "A Smuggler, a Butcher and a Fairy: Doing Things with One's Body", In *Transnational Belonging and Female Agency in the Arts,* Edited by Basia Sliwinska and Catherine Dormor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 239–258.

[33] The exhibition in Tartu was co-curated also by Šelda Puķīte.

to sustain her large family through the long winter. Later, three of Anna's daughters became food engineers and women discussing cooking technologies in Rasa's childhood was a commonplace. Preparing home-made jars of food was a widespread practice in Soviet Latvia because the shortage of food supply urged women to pickle, pasteurise and boil all surplus product. The recipes and the availability of products provide evidence of the changing social and political circumstances and the intensive repetitive manual labour involved was part of the double burden of Soviet women.

15.7: The process of creation. The kitchen of "Dūmiņi" farm, Bauska district, Latvia. 2016. Photo by Rasa Jansone.

While gathering the necessary seasonal ingredients, bringing them home, peeling and cutting, simmering and stewing, and finally carefully filling jar after jar, the artist sought to recreate her grandmother's fully stocked larder,

reiterating her annual routine of food preservation. Like many other rural women of this time, her grandmother lacked modern appliances designed to save labour and time. For a more authentic experience, the artist did most of the cooking on a wooden stove still in use in one of her aunt's houses (fig. 15.7). At the exhibition, the jars were arranged into rows on the wooden shelves made by Modris Mičulis, resembling the interior of a pantry or a cellar. While the room in the National Art Museum was well-lit, the exhibition room at Tartu Art House was submerged in twilight, with heating turned off to ensure a lower temperature. Visitors were invited to use portable lamps, recreating the experience of going to the cellar to select a jar or two for an upcoming meal, but without disturbing the display itself.

15.8: Rasa Jansone. Installation *Diet* at *Tartu Art House, Estonia.* Photo by Valdis Jansons.

The nuanced palette and textures of *Diet* encapsulated the sensuality of food preparation, alluding to the aesthetic and even painterly aspects of her grandmother's food labour. Although visually impressive and bursting with colours and even stirring appetites among exhibition visitors, the work is by no means intended as a monument to the skillful cook. Nor does it celebrate the beauty of homemade food or the endurance and sustainability of local food preparation traditions, which might fascinate audiences accustomed to supermarkets and fast food. By reviving and literally embodying her grandmother's lived experience, the artist brings to light (and to the museum) the material labour of generations of women, subject to seasonal change, the size of a family and one's cooking skills, that is considered natural. The social equation of motherhood with food highlights how the concepts of nourishment and care

are deeply intertwined with ideals of femininity. Similar to Aija Jurjāne, Jansone's work attests to the fact that women's cooking routines are influenced and shaped by their family's needs—whether when they return home from school or throughout the long winter in rural Latvia. The ability to perform foodwork is essential for being a good mother.

Yet, a diet is more than just one's eating habits. The artist also addresses the "discursive diet" of contemporary (postsocialist) femininity, focusing on what women eat and what eats them, to rephrase Elspeth Probyn (2000). Labels added to the jars feature quotes from both literary classics and Jansone's own lived experience. Fragments from private conversations, Latvia's media and news reflect stereotypical representations and the infantilisation of women, misperceptions about love, romance, family life and motherhood, the widespread denigration of the feminine and unrecognised gender-based violence. The symbolic ingredients of the postsocialist diet replace the usual year of production and description on the label of each jar's contents, revealing the normative aspects of socialist and postsocialist femininities.

15.9: Rasa Jansone. *Diet.* A jar with a label in Latvian *Pati vainīga! (It's your fault!)* 2017. Photo by Valdis Jansons.

A brief glance at the labels derived from private conversations offers insight into the "daily menu." Labels such as "You will have problems with the final exams. Your boobs are too small", "Don't you do art anymore? Have you given birth?" and "I worked as a cleaner for eight years. I have a master's degree in painting," highlight sexism in art education, the double burden of being both an artist and a mother and poor working conditions, reflecting the artist's

firsthand experience of intensive maintenance work. Social expectations surrounding womanhood and marriage are further reflected in "I love you, of course, but what can you offer me?" and "Wear something sexier. Stop looking like a forest troll for once!". The role of the ideal wife is encapsulated in "My busy bee" and "The little housewife", while the infamous "It's your fault!" (fig. 15.9) echoes the neoliberal emphasis on autonomy and self-responsibility tinged with victim-blaming.

These observations are interspersed with quotes from Charles Dickens: "Shake hands with me. You're a very good old creature – full of what's-his-name – and all that. You're all affection and et cetera, ain't you?"[34] and "Receive me as your domestic and I will serve you well. I will do more for you than you figure to yourself now."[35] Margaret Atwood is also quoted, for example: "As for her, despite what she had to put up with, not one word of complaint was ever heard to cross her lips."[36] The overall impression of ideal femininity conveyed here reflects profoundly what, more than 20 years ago, the poet Gundega Repše described as "the little sexy housewife" (beware of complaining or looking like a troll!). The difference is that now this image has been refashioned in a more maternal way, incorporating virtues such as patience, helpfulness, loyalty and kindness.

Notably, some discursive elements of the *Diet* specifically reference the kitchen and cooking. In quotes such as "Cookery means the knowledge of Medea and of Circe and of Helen and of the Queen of Sheba. [...] In fine, it means that you are to be perfectly and always ladies—loaf givers" and, also from Atwood , "I felt like a huge grape, swollen to bursting with sugar and purple juice; I felt ugly and cumbersome",[37] the ideal of the perfect lady is equated with providing sustenance, nourishment and care—woman as a loaf giver—while simultaneously, the female sexual body is reduced to food that is "bursting with sugar" and waiting to be consumed. However, "On that August day in 1935 I had not yet heard about abortions. [...] dark hints about kitchen-table butchers"[38] and "Ground-up leaves, dried flowers, exotic roots, musty-hayfield aromas, snake oil, mole bones, age-old recipes brewed by certified crones. Not that Roz has a thing against crones, since at the rate she's going, she'll soon be one herself," [39] signals a significant departure from normative

[34] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2007): 603.

[35] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London, Bradbury and Evans, 1853): 226.

[36] Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London, Virago Press, 2001): 98.

[37] Ibid: 522.

[38] Ibid: 399.

[39] Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (London, Virago Press, 2019): 126.

femininity. These references with hints at witchcraft and magic highlight how food practices can serve as a means of breaking with social expectations, while also acknowledging the costs of reclaiming reproductive rights and autonomy.

The *Diet* weaves together family stories and the time-consuming and labour-intensive tradition of preserving food. Jansone envisions the kitchen as a battleground where contemporary identities are forged at the intersection of food's materiality and gender-based discourses. On a more personal level, her relationship with food revives the lived experiences of her grandmother: the full pantry can be seen as her family archive, where the material labour of foodwork preserves and stores otherwise invisible female genealogies.

For both artists, Jansone and Jurjāne, cooking is not only part of their familial duties but also a feminist subject enabling them to explore the lived experience of motherhood through the contradictions of gender-based inequalities surrounding art, representation and reproduction. Local histories and cultural contexts are inscribed in their kitchen interiors and cooking routines. The abundant use of references to iconic Western paintings and literary classics engages Latvian feminist art in a transnational dialogue, transcending the symbolic seclusion of postsocialist kitchens. While blurring the boundaries between low and high art, the kitchen and the artist's studio, the female cook and the male genius, these artists position maternal foodwork as central to the construction of postsocialist femininity.

Bibliography

Gerovitch, Slava. "The Kitchen and the Dacha: Productive Spaces of Soviet Mathematics." *Studia Historiae Scientiarum* 23, (2024): 123–145. https://doi.org/10.4467/2543702XSHS.24.018.19591.

Glushchenko, Irina. "'I Hate Cooking!': Emancipation And Patriarchy" In Late Soviet Film, Edited by Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko. Trans. by Anastasia Lakhtikova and Angela Brintlinger. *Seasoned Socialism: Gender and Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life*. Indiana University Press, 2019: 59–79. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77npr.7.

Goldstein, Dorra. "Foreword". In Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko (eds) *Seasoned Socialism: Gender and Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life*, Indiana University Press, 2019. ix–xvii. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77npr.3.

Gotby, Alva. *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* (London: Verso, 2023).

Jansone, Rasa. "Aija Jurjāne. The Queen's Kitchens". Press release, 2024. Available: https://lnmm.gov.lv/en/latvian-national-museum-of-art/exhibitions/aija-jurjane-the-queens-kitchens-509 (accessed 16.05.2025.)

Krastiņa, Sandra. ""Uzmālēt bildi vai tomēr uzvārīt zupu?"" In *Aija Jurjāne. Jaunības avots*. Sastādīja Sandra Krastiņa. Rīga: Neputns, 2021: 101–119.

Kudors, Andis, *Russia and Latvia: A Case of Sharp Power*. Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003412335.

Kukaine, Jana. "Dzimumu vienlīdzības izpratne un dzimtes kārtība Padomju Savienībā", *Letonica* 40 (2019): 97–115.

--- "Intimacy and Darkness: Feminist Sensibility in (Post)socialist Art", *Arts* (MDPI) 12, no. 1 (2023): 24. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12010024.

--- and Jānis Taurens. "A Smuggler, a Butcher and a Fairy: Doing Things with One's Body". In: *Transnational Belonging and Female Agency in the Arts,* edited by Basia Sliwinska and Catherine Dormor. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 239–258. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501358722.ch-012.

--- "Picking Sides, Picking Selves: Elīna Eihmane and Maternal Entanglement." *Photography and Culture* 13 nos.3–4 (2020): 385–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/17514517.2020.1834688.

Malaia, Kateryna. "Eating." In Kataryna Malaia *Taking the Soviet Union Apart Room by Room: Domestic Architecture before and after 1991*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501771200.001.0001.

--- "Transforming the Architecture of Food". *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. 80. (2021): 460–476. https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2021.80.4.460.

Marling, Raili and Redi Koobak. "Intersections of Feminisms and Neoliberalism: Post-State-Socialist Estonia in a Transnational Feminist Framework", *Frontiers. A Journal of Women Studies*, 38 no. 3 (2017): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2017.a678861.

Repše, Gundega. "Bailes no feminisma". In *Kalendārs sievietēm, 1994*, Edited by L. Kalinka. Rīga: Avots, 1993: 101–106.

Pagulich, Lesia and Tatsiana Shchurko. "(Re)thinking Postsocialism: Interview with Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora*". Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*. 3 (2020): 91–111. https://doi.org/10.52323/376442.

Probyn, Elspeth. *Carnal Appetites: Food Sex Identities*. Routledge, 2000.

Weinreb, Alice. "Struggles to reconcile women's wage labor and kitchen labor in the German Democratic Republic" In, *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. Edited by Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda. Routledge, 2021: 342–350.

Yalom, Marylin. *A History of the Breast*. Pandora, 1998.

Voski Avakian, Arlene and Barbara Haber (eds) *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies. Critical Perspectives on Women And Food*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.

Zaharijević, Adriana. "Postsocialist Feminism. The Conceptual Tools of Our Own", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 32 no.1 (2025): 152–173. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxae025.

Jana Kukaine is an Assistant Professor and Senior Researcher at Riga Stradins University, Faculty of Social Sciences. She is the author of the monograph *Lovely Mothers. Woman. Body. Subjectivity* (2016), a pioneering feminist study on motherhood in Latvian contemporary art, and *Visceral Aesthetics: Affects and Feminist Art in Postsocialism* (Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts, Rīgas Stradiņa universitāte, 2024), where she introduces an innovative framework of viscerality for art research. Her academic interests include environmental, decolonial, and postsocialist feminisms. In her research, she is eager to embrace and test novel concepts and methodologies through interdisciplinary perspectives and experimental approaches. Jana Kukaine also contributes regularly to art criticism and works as an independent art curator, engaging with and reinventing feminist genealogies in Central and Eastern European art.