purified

I seek material to express an idea, or material seeks its extension.

Birutė Stulgaitė

Still young, yet multifaceted phenomenon, the contemporary Lithuanian metal art is going through a tumultuous stage of shape taking. Metal artists not only wrestle with their creative tasks, but fight the out-dated stereotypes and try to forge a new audience. It is because in public perception art jewellery is frequently lumped together with costume jewellery, while metalsmiths are considered makers of decorative iron implements, and far from every viewer is able to see and appreciate metal artefacts as unique and independent creations. From the very outset of her career, the artist Birutė Stulgaitė has established herself as a resilient fighter, by means of her work and by word, for the recognition of the art of metal. She knows it for certain: there is one if not only path worth pursuing – that of impeccable professionalism, top precision and world class.

Metal
may be not the easiest
medium for expression,

yet it is adequate
for our contemporary
language;

it is even possible
to change the perception
of this field.

Metals commit you to un compromising approach and demand inner perseverance.

It is probably because of these properties of material that I move on like a rope walking acrobat – without wavering.

When you commence a work, you should ban all thoughts (about glory or money).

Borrowing the word from Seneca, I say that every work should be a matter of conscience and not of glory. It is an inner necessity. It is essential in order to keep your identity. I was taught honesty in my family, my mother was especially demanding. There is no little evilness or little goodness. Things are either good or bad. No craftiness is allowed, nothing where you could take cover. This seed has been sown by my family. The uncompromising approach took root in my art practice as well. I would not start working in material until I have a perfectly clear notion of what I want to achieve. You add something, embellish it here or there – and there it goes. That is not an option for me.

On this foundation rests the artist's pristine work. Clear, transparent, precise. Silver, bronze, amber or seaweeds, all she uses is real and pure. Nothing is camouflaged by a conception, by ornament or style. "The artwork by Birutė Stulgaitė is minimalist, but it does not spring from formal inspirations. Her works emerge from the artist's refined and purified philosophy, from her surprising discovery: to discard, to split away, to remove is always better than to join, to receive or to add."[1] The artist's minimalism has been reiterated in nearly every review of her art. Some attempt to relate it with her ascetic lifestyle and her ideal of simple existence, with her spiritual values, but above all, with the rare these days feeling of moderation that defines her art. "This minimalism is sacred in its radicalism and pure as the desert fathers' thoughts. It takes tension and sacrifice in similarity to Lucio Fontana's slash across a piece of untouched canvas. One single slash opens it up – onto something else."[2] Viktoras Liutkus has summed this aspect of Stulgaitė's art by saying: "The radical neatness of form and purification of original properties of iron, bronze, steel, silver as well as unique patterning of artificial and natural light, and manipulation of shifting space transform the artwork by Stulgaitė into small poetic utterances. Tiny in terms of mass and volume, they are loaded with huge artistic potency."[3] The artist's aesthetic credo is strict:

Small forms are capable of communicating just the same message as big ones.

She approaches metalsmithing as small-scale sculpture where apply the same laws of space and shape making like in voluminous objects.

The creation of metalwork differs from small-scale sculpture exactly in the technique of realization in spite of the fact that in both cases artists work mostly in metal. A sculptor models his idea in wax, in plasticine or any other medium. Hot and liquid metal as technical material is used to be poured into a prepared mould. Metalsmiths work directly in metal by revealing its properties, which by themselves become part of the creative process.

1 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Birutė Stulgaitė: metalo valdovė, in: *Dailė*, 2013, No 1, p. 79.

2 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Reikli erdvė, in: *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 21 09 2012, p. 5.

3 Viktoras Liutkus. Rekomendacija Lietuvos dailininkų sąjungai. Apie pretendentės Vyriausybės kultūros ir meno premijai gauti Birutės Stulgaitės parodą „Kintanti erdvė" VDA parodų salėse „Titanikas", 06 10 2012. [Manuscript]

Therefore in her works technical process is inseparable from conceptualizing:

Idea and craft are carefully balanced on the scales –

neither can outweigh the other.

The miniature scale of her metal pieces enables the artist to capture the subtleties that would be overshadowed by traditional sculpture size. The hardness and sharpness, fusibility, sonority, sheen or opaqueness – these properties of metal enable her to visually render the notions of light and reflection, of solidity and fragility, of statics and movement. It is also the intrinsic nature of material that attracts the artist to work with amber and other materials she finds in nature or man-made environment. | Stulgaitė creates jewellery and small-scale metalsmithing objects. Irrespective of purpose and material, her works reflect a consistent and intellectual world vision, faith and values rendered not by visual verbosity, by symbols, metaphors or inferences, but established in a solid, abstract plastic form. Existence emerges in her works as a natural whole and continuous vital process. "Thus: nature, culture, danger. From nature (from plants, from animals, from landscape) Stulgaitė's jewellery inherited not only certain shapes, not only rhythm (or, more poetically, life) [...]: but also the unpredictable form, or even, I would say, thrill (Let us look at nature: is it not awe-inspiring that lycopodium should be so long, and a bent grass so tall and slim?)" [4] | When the artist comes to contemplate the motifs of her art, she mentions nature as the primary source of inspiration.

When as a child cowherdess, I'd lay on my back in the fields, I watched cumulous and cirrus shift in the sky and followed them drifting calmly high up in the firmament. These powerful images constantly recur in my memory and in my work. These were necklaces, later on, plaques. Prior to *On Chinese Motifs* (1984, copper, white enamel, graphite) I discovered another pattern similar to cirrus – these were swaths cut by my dad's scythe in the field of ray. Also, the undulating fields of rye in bloom – the ineffable beauty of this view still sends shivers down my spine. | Other strong images from my childhood are of aspen tree leaves turned out and showing their silver side, and all that shimmering, shining and rippling – afterwards they would turn in again. It is a blissful state full of longing. Who knows, maybe such moments determine or shape one's path in life? It is absolutely true that reflections of light, all kinds of shimmering and movement play an important role in my art.

Stulgaitė has remained a mother nature's child: everyday she cycles like the wind around the Old Town of Vilnius and its environs, down the River Vilnia and the hills of Belmont. She likes wandering on foot on the shores of the Baltic. Though she does not sketch outdoors, the artist watchfully hunts for impressions like a patient lynx. Then she stores them for the future. The artist transforms them into works of art only when she comes across an adequate form, material and technical solution matching the idea. The reviewer of the international Limoges Biennial of Enamel in describing her Game with the Existing Forms (1989) has phrased it as follows: "Birutė Stulgaitė's piece, for example, exhibits vulnerability in its humility toward materials and in its fragile construction. Together, five little 'comblike' objects, made out of sea-washed wood and copper wire with enamel pearl drops, seen to form a community of

simple and interdependent beings. Poetry also lies in the interaction of materials. The ephemeral wood that supports the more durable material of copper can be seen as a metaphor for power relationships." [5] | Most of the reviewers refer to the artwork by the artist as "classical" since from the very first experiments until today it complies with the criteria of balanced architecture, characterized by the harmony of structure and rhythm. Her eye weighs and selects proportions of detail that approximate the golden section. The artist does not shun measuring:

"Numbers matter to me a lot, so I occasionally resort to the millimetre ruler and graph paper [...] I know good numbers, as, for instance, four or eight. I do not want accidental numbers in the measurements of my works. The number of wire pieces, of dots, of branches matters to me... This time I have made a brooch of bone with a small tail. I measure it – seventeen millimetres. So... visually one millimetre is not going to change anything, but eighteen is better." [6]

The rational and complete economy of her works does not mean that they are short of unbound inspiration, quite the opposite. In the introduction into her solo exhibition held in of 2012, the artist clearly articulates her credo:

Leave
some things
unsaid.
Give not a statement,
but a hint.

Do not make the image too concrete. Discard all preconceptions of what "should be" be done.

This gives her works that lightness and air. Incidental inspirations born in the process of working with material actively shape the emerging piece of art. | Many find Stulgaitė's clean and meditative creation as influenced by the culture of the Far East, as her ideas often strike as epiphanies inspired by nature. "The ability to empathize, to listen and to hear shapes her intuitive principle akin to Japanese aesthetics of going from inside, not outside. It is being content with a small one, showing the whole through a part." [7] However in a discussion of art, such explanations do not suffice. According to the artist, "Oriental philosophy is incredibly close to the deepest roots of our progeny,

4 Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, Papuošalai tobulam kakluі, in: *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 12 06 1992 06.

5 The 10th Limoges Biennial of Enamel, in: *Metalsmith*, 1991, Winter, p. 23.

6 Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė, Stalgūs Birutės Stulgaitės papuošalai, in: *Kultūros barai*, 1992, No. 9–10, p. 41.

7 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Birutė Stulgaitė: metalo valdovė, p. 79.

to pagan sensibility. [...] They say that my artwork has Chinese and Japanese spirit in it. I'd say it reaches my Samogitian roots." [8] | "The sense of space is no less important to the artist than empathy and purity. Space has to be everywhere. It is essential for Stulgaitė's artwork. When on display, her works "beg" for empty space around them, they would not stand being clustered, pushed aside or fit snuggly into a corner."[9] Space has always been an important, carefully and consistently premeditated medium of her solo exhibits. The artist is convinced that an exhibition is an independent work of art. Each element (individual exhibited piece) has to become an intrinsic part of the whole, at the same time, become displayed in a way most adequate to survey it by giving it proper attention. According to the artist,

> multiple circumstances contribute to an exhibition: location, light, distance, number. It is impossible to list them all. Designing of an exhibition is an equally creative process. The ideal case is of collaboration between the designer and the artist.

Birutė Stulgaitė has given eight solo exhibitions: two of them (in 1992 and 2002) included jewellery and drawings, two (in 1995 and 2000) – amber works, and the others (in 1997, 2012) – small-scale metal sculpture objects. They were huge in scope (having in mind the minuteness of these objects and complexity of technique), exquisite spatial structures, arranged with original exhibition equipment. The concept of each was primarily determined by the dominant medium of exhibited artwork. Three of them were designed by the artist herself, other three co-designed with the architect Gražina Pajarskaitė, two more - with Audronė Kondratienė.

8 Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė, op. cit., p. 42.

9 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Birutė Stulgaitė: metalo valdovė, p. 79.

The beginnings

Birutė (her passport carries "Birutà", a version of her name in western Lithuanian dialect) Stulgaitė was raised in a family of seven on a farm in Dryžai near Šilalė. At fourteen she entered Telšiai Applied Art Technical School. The members of the entrance commission tried to guide the childlike looking female student in to some "easier" specialties, but she stood her ground insisting that they enroll her on a metalsmith course. She never doubted her vocation, never felt any misgivings and has never abandoned it. | The artist owes two things to Telšiai. There she started from the foundation of iron filing and built numerous indispensible craft skills – from basic ones to complex technical processes involving a lot of experience and knowledge. The craft has even tamed her character – Birutė recalls that as a teenager she was quite wild and indulging in pleasures of life. Yet a good smith cannot be spineless, unfocused or irrational. The practice puts under a constant stress which has to be managed and harnessed. In the artist's own words, metal has also "forged" her character. Independent and uncompromising at the beginning, with time she became resilient and disciplined. She channelled all her temperament into one single passion – her art. | Her second gift of fate from these times was the guidance of her class tutor and teacher of the Lithuanian language Birutė Rupšytė. This noble and uncompromising teacher not only encouraged her self-guided intellectual development, but also discovered an artist in the young woman and urged her to go to study in Tallinn. | After graduation from the technical school, Birutė worked for one year at the applied artwork Dailė Factory in Vilnius where she suffered being put to making small edition adornments. Since then she gave up all uncreative work.

> Even now when making earrings (and the Lord has created two ears for humans,) often times I am unable to and do not even try to make the two of them identical.

In 1972, Birutė took entrance examinations enrolling on studies at the Estonian State Art Institute. It was the time when the school in Tallinn was staffed by the best Estonian artists across all fields, painters and sculptors including. In was also the only one institute across the entire Soviet Union offering a programme for metal art specialty. The Department of Metal Art had such strong personalities on staff as Salme Raunam, Leili Kuldkepp or Liliana Linnaks. In every student they managed to open up the best, something truly individual. If only that student really had a talent. | As a student, Birutė did not limit her interest to metal. At the time she was especially keen on modern architecture. The trends in architecture in the West, especially in Scandinavia, and in Estonia became a strong inspiration shaping her early art. The design of the exhibitions organized in Tallinn was undoubtedly the best all over the former Soviet Union. There the artist received her uncompromising standards for exhibiting.

> You are not obliged to create works for exhibitions. Nobody is asking for this, nor demanding. It must be your own desire – or inability not to give an exhibition. [...] The style of the exhibit must correspond to the style and character of your work. The correct way of exhibiting can add the showcased work half of its weight – or rob it of it.

Scandinavian-aesthetics-dominated Estonia's artistic ambience made the artist, still in her formative years, intolerant to kitsch and to commercial mass produced art. The library of Tallinn Institute subscribed to magazines as *Uhren Schmuck* ("from it we learned what kind of jewellery should not be created" [10]), *Projekt* and to foreign exhibition catalogues. Students were passionately absorbing their ideas, but applied critical judgment as well. | The artist disagrees she was indebted to any particular individual artist, to any contemporary Estonian or other sculptors, designers or metal artists, or was directly influenced by concrete stylistic trends. She does not deny the impact of the general milieu and the spirit of modernist art, a natural thing to happen.[11] Stulgaitė, just like other Lithuanian alumni of Tallinn's Institute (Vytautas Zaturskis, Vytautas Matulionis, Marytė Gurevičienė and Arvydas Gurevičius) perceived

10 Rūta Šetikaitė, Gamtos įkvėptos variacijos metalu, in: *Atgimimas*, 2013 03 15, p. 15.

11 The artwork of Birutė Stulgaitė is given a lot of attention in the book by Rūta Pileckaitė on 20th-century-Lithuanian jewellery presenting Lithuanian metal art within international context of applied arts. "The uniqueness of the adornments by Stulgaitė comes from a marriage of features of several trends of late modernism, of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and kinetic art. There are all reasons to consider the author as the most westernized jeweller of her generation in Lithuania [...]. Stulgaitė's signature style rests on amalgamation of the opposites – of expressiveness and of asceticism – in one single piece. The line cutting into infinity, emerging and disappearing in space, symbolizes movement. The intersecting horizontals and verticals express order and harmony." Rūta Pileckaitė, XX a. *Lietuvos juvelyrika: nuo aksesuaro iki priekūnio*, Vilnius: Dailininkų sąjungos leidykla, 2008, p. 80–81.

the work of the famous artists similarly to most contemporaries. It was not about committing to memory the names of the authors or the concepts they proclaimed, but about general awareness of general shifts of the international art process. Their work, they felt, was also part of it. There was no obedient following, neither was it needed: the artist moved forward driven by her own vibrant imagination and creative inspirations. | After her graduation from Tallinn Institute and return in Vilnius, Stulgaitė started her professional practice at Dailė Factory. Vytautas Zaturskis, Alius Šepkus, Kazimieras Simanonis were already employed there. The artists had to create models for small editions of jewellery, but the factory arts board often discarded Stulgaitė's work claiming "it would not sell".

> I really could not do otherwise. It was not a matter of stubbornness. I was under the impression that I was doing just the way it should be. I had to create things, instead of making something that looks nice to somebody. I worked with Dailė Factory for three years. But I could not adjust. I stayed an independent artist all the time. | When in Vilnius, I found myself sadly lonely without my schoolmates and my university course mates; without friends or acquaintances. Some even said I was "not Lithuanian" (and that is correct since I am Samogitian). Though in my heart I am truly Lithuanian. I had the feeling of being thrown overboard into an open sea with no shore visible on any side. But you know that you have to persevere and swim, keep going one direction hoping that the shore is closer on that side.

The breakthrough came about in the autumn of 1980, during a workshop in Palanga, where the artist found herself stimulated by nature and by her own tribe. Palanga Artists' House hosted workshops for metal artists across the Soviet Union, bringing together colleagues from Tallinn, Riga, Moscow and other towns. Other Lithuanian artists who had graduated from Tallinn Institute also took part. These workshops were a meeting ground for people who were bound by sincere relationships, into the spirit of sharing, assistance, trust in friends and acquaintances. We supported each other in creative achievements and "sufferings". It is natural, that in our art we shared the same attitude – the eyes in the sieve are so tiny in order not to let through any false things. | That autumn walking along the coast of the Baltic Sea, Stulgaitė found a carcass of a seagull's wing pecked clean by birds and bleached out by the sea. The structure of the wing prompted her decision to join multiple spindles of silver into a pattern similar of cirrus or of swathes in the field, the image she had carried so long in her memory. The artist thus came about the main technical principle of her art, whereby the resources for structural ideas of her pieces come from natural shapes and structural patterns. It is not an imitation of components of nature nor a natural motif used for decoration. It is about translating structures found in nature into material in art. This seagull wing inspired a series of "hinged", transformable adornments of bent silver wire – the neck embracing neck-rings and brooches sprawled on the breast. | Selected works of the participants in the 1980 Palanga workshop were sent to the International Jablonec Nad Nisou Costume Jewellery Exhibition of 1981. That year the event included a separate section of unique authors' work. The event, one of the major at the time, featured jewellers from thirty five countries. The neck-rings by Birutė Stulgaitė were awarded bronze. | Subsequently she was invited to other, differently themed, workshops focusing on a range of technologies. The 1983 winter workshop in Palanga was dedicated to metal enamelling on the occasion of the first ever invitation to artists from the Soviet Union to be featured by the Limoges International Biennial of Enamel. The event remains among leading ones in Europe in the field, while in 1983 it showed the artwork of over thirty participants. The collection by the Baltic (Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian) and Moscow-based artists made a powerful impression on the jury of the exhibition who lamented that these artists were invited only as guests and not part of the competition. The 1990s were the time of intense participation in the international processes of metal art. Birutė was building links with artists from different countries and was regularly invited to international exhibitions. Sometimes her work would travel to events in three or four different countries at the same time. | Her first solo show was held in 1992 at the then Vilnius Exhibition Palace. The design of the exhibition and the works on display were received with enthusiastic approval. [12] It was the first time when she presented her small-scale metal objects in Lithuania, though at the same time international exhibitions featured her as an established fine metalsmith. Such a positive response from the audience at home not only strengthened Birutė on her creative journey along the chosen path, but also helped her to build the sense of belonging, not only as of an individual, but of an unique artist, to the Lithuanian artistic community. |

12 Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, op. cit.; Pillė Veljataga, Maža yra daug, in: *Literatūra ir menas*, 04 07 1992; Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė, op. cit., p. 38–40.

The turn of the 20th century electrified artistic ambience in Vilnius. Exhibitions, discussions and debates of these days were a source of strong experiences and revitalizing impulses to Birutė Stulgaitė. She was immersed in conversations and arguments with her contemporaries, as well as senior generation artists, who, according to her,

> cared about the free spirit of creativity. Among them were the artists Augustinas Savickas, Ričardas Vaitiekūnas, Bronys Savukynas, Petras Repšys. The artists whom I find as my spiritual kin, such like Ksenija Jaroševaitė, Vladas Urbonavičius, Gintautas Trimakas, Eugenijus Cukermanas, have been and still are linked through Lietuvos aidas Gallery. With Eimantas Ludavičius I share the "hearing" of metal and the enjoyment of creative process. Some time ago I was profoundly impressed by Kazė Zimblytė's solo exhibit at Vilnius Exhibition Palace and by her equally imposing person when I came to know her. The sticks by Algimantas Švėgžda... Alfonsas Budvytys' photography: a frog in ice, pears, portraits from a mental home, and later on, potatoes. His wife Rima was happy that we could talk in "broken lines". Similar conversations between the lines went on with Vytautas Šerys. Such interactions take few, yet precise words. Also, Raimondas Katilius' music, such... as much as... as is possible for a human being... and beyond. This "beyond" reaches as high as the sky.

All these individuals, each in a unique way, supported the artist in her uncompromising approach to art. Just like nature, people never directly prompted concrete artistic solutions, but inspired new thoughts that sustained the tension of internal work and a constant need to perfect. | The year of 1991 widened international contacts for all Lithuanian artists and gave a boost to exhibition life. The artist showcased her work in numerous exhibitions in Europe and the USA. Her experience in Gothenburg where she went in 1993 on a scholarship from the Swedish Institute was a strong creative impetus. Stulgaitė's neck-ring from amber and silver became one of the highlights of the Baltic and Scandinavian exhibition From Dreams to Reality. In 2002 she was featured by the A&C Black (UK) among one hundred of the most excelling masters of enamelling. In 2002, the School of Creative Arts at the University of the West of England in Bristol included her works into an international contemporary enamelling art archive, NEVAC. | The work by the artist was internationally recognized for its novelty and authenticity. Critics praised the Lithuanian artist's unexpected approach to material, her exceptional treatment of form and the overall original concept of an adornment as such. In 2002, the Lithuanian LATGA nominated Stulgaitė the creator of the year 2002 for her solo exhibit of jewellery. In 2012, she was awarded the Lithuanian Government's Prize for Culture and Arts. | Most artists are unanimous that Birutė Stulgaitė has long ago established herself as a benchmark of excellence of professionalism and of Lithuanian art. The style of her works is defined as "late modernism", characterized by the unequivocally profound and consistent approach, both to idea and to material, as well as by the purity and homogeneity of form. Being intensely involved in the process of contemporary art, she indisputably resists some of its manifestations and facets. In that respect, Stulgaitė appears a defiantly, uncompromisingly conservative figure of culture who affords herself being in conflict with the mainstream and considers her consistent agenda in arts as fundamental to her as a person of integrity. The artist has no pupils that she would tutor, but due to her unbending standards applied in metal art and creative enterprise in general, and in her ethics, she is a role model to younger artists, to those working in metal or in other applied arts.

Drawings

The artist has showcased her drawings only once, in 2002, in Vartai Gallery in Vilnius, alongside with silver adornments. She treats drawings as a linking part of her creative process and usually does not put them up to exhibit. They are not in the usual sense in art "preparatory sketches" for works. As an intermediary chain they are necessary for transitioning from an idea inspired by nature into a finished work. It is an idea that is born from a transition from one kind of material into another: her sketches of floundering reeds are a good example of how it works. The artist drew a "cardiogram" of the stalks, capturing the drifting wind, the pulse of the swinging plants. She hatched it in by the movements of graphite, she caught it by a trapped-in line. Their natural rhythm got translated into silver lines – the wire of copper with drops of enamel and blended with natural cracks in a plate of mammoth bone. | Stulgaitė's drawings are different as they pave the way for the emergence of not a work of art in general, but specifically of a work of art in metal. They are based on profound analogy between all natural phenomena and processes taking place in them. There is lightness in them and energy, also a seminal idea which is starting to germinate. The artist so speaks of her drawing process:

> I usually experience a great creative tension when drawing. It is the way to let off some steam. Or to fight

a deep melancholy, when one can not work. When truly despondent, then I toil on paper. Or outdoors. Mostly on the seashore, or by the lagoon, where I find peace and balance [...]. Once a child of four saw my drawings. He said: "Your drawings are like a child's." I first felt embarrassed; later I took it for truth, because when you do not want to say anything important, there is no need to attach any significance to that condition.

Adornments. Silver

Stulgaitė's adornments "have nothing sumptuous, nothing decorative, no embellishments, no expensive materials or shiny precious stones. There is plenty of space about them and no dimension of time. Time does not exist, therefore the artist's adornments do not fall into a particular decade of the 20th or the 21st century. What they reflect are not fashion trends, but the artist herself."[13] Silver adornments make up the most plentiful segment of her work:

Silver is the metal I have been "friends" with for longest. Silver means adornments. "Adornment maker", said the art critic Bronys Savukynas.

In her jewellery, silver carries marks of eruptions of her vital energy, and also embodies the seemingly light and playful, though in fact powerful and purposeful, control of these "lightings". The trajectories of bent silver lines, of arrows, streams, sparkles freeze in abstract space, like a short-lived and unreachable footprint of a star. Metal lines are sometimes harsh and painful like a lash, sometimes incredibly tender and fluid. But the individual axis of her art does not bend a single bit. The neck-rings, the brooches, the earrings from different periods show the same clarity, purity and internal unity. According to the sculptor Vladas Vildžiūnas, that is maximalist minimalism. "Precision, sparseness, asceticism, modesty and elegance – are the epithets that can be heaped with a clear heart on the works exhibited at Lietuvos aidas Gallery, which stirred the long-forgotten feeling of admiration of a perfect form and spiritual aristocracy. They easily take your fancy and stick in your memory, so strong is their meditative field." [14] Birutė's adornments are reminiscent of sculpture, they are of "pure form and have little to do with decorativeness (in the sense of embellishing). However, they do not lack qualities traditionally inherent to ornaments. Even the most extravagant adornments match the scale of human body and are meant to wear." [15] Or rather – are meant to being showcased on the human body. Such jewellery is not for every woman: it must match not so much a costume, as a person. A wearer of such adornments could be an artist, an Amazon, a lady. It is also true that the artist's concept of femininity would hardly satisfy popular tastes. There is no sweetness or flattering about them, but playfulness, lightness and fantasy. These adornments control their owner and not vice versa. The wearer has to pull together and to learn how to present them and to look worth of them. These are the articles of a dignified person. Starting with the transformable neck-rings, the motif and treatment of silver material changed every several years. New idea is developed over multiple variations. This explains numerous series of jewellery, akin in style, similar in motif, yet different in terms of composition.

For a long period, I have made my silver "squeak", I made it thin and tapering, I bent it and joined with hinges, and was even dubbed "Miss Hinges" at the international shows. One classic figure in Lithuania put it this way: "a single piece of wire – two pieces of jewellery". With the smallest (indeed, from the first glance only) efforts and the least of complexity I tried to do what at the time "pressed into being". Also, I always wanted to integrate an opportunity to alter them. The "hinges" provide for such options. When the pivots are closed together or they are separated, the resultant effect creates a different emotion, whether in a neck-ring or a brooch. With the movement of the wearer's neck or shoulders they also shift and change.

Most of Birutė's adornments are crafted exclusively of silver. When she creates work of other materials, she uses metal only for a mount for fastenings and other details of construction. The artist has created series of adornments with red garnet, with noble greenish jadeite, with mammoth tusk, later on, with synthetic alexandrite and coconut shell. Choice of material is the matter of finding. She follows the wise Biblical incitement "keep watch", and watching alertly she notices new materials in nature. Sometimes they come along on their own.

I received some mammoth tusk from my Siberian colleagues. I dedicated quite some time to educate myself about it and learn about the properties of it. Tusk is a warm material and pleasant to file. There is already a form in it predetermined by the way it bends, and by direction of grain. These are brooches, neck- rings,

13 Laima Kanopkienė, Aukštasis pilotažas sąmoningai apribotoje erdvėje, in: *Kultūros barai*, 1997, No. 11, p. 39.

14 Ibid.

earrings and twin pins (to be worn on one side) – I wanted to give room for alterations for the wearer.

In the pieces with alexandrite, the material is fashioned like optical lens in a mound: when tilted, it catches changing light that shines through a coloured lens:

synthetic alexandrite is a clear material of lavender colour. In its hardness and all other properties it does not differ from natural stone. When polished at a certain angle, it perfectly reflects light. So here I was occupied with "light catching".

The artist has also tried her hand in untraditional for adornments material, coconut shell. The metal mound needed to be adjusted in a special way where silver emphasised the natural colour of coconut shell and its concave shape interesting in sculptural terms, thus transforming the piece into a noble and extravagant objet d'art. | After 2002, the artist started testing other plastic qualities of silver by melting, gauging, laminating it and by repeatedly heating until it showed expected texture: "It is an opportunity to catch the unexpected, as you cannot train fire too much. It is a real fire way. These ornaments are of simple and crisp form, usually of a regular circle. Yet their rich and subtle surface textures are the result of frozen moments of natural flow, of dripping and spattering of melted silver. " [16] These pieces show the interplay of subtle matte and glossy surfaces, of minute relief textures together with reflections, semi shades and precise lines. It is a marriage of classical peace and tamed fortune.

"The more experience you have, the stronger command of your material you gain, the less physical struggle it takes to achieve something closer to the desired expression. While listening to it, handling it, watching metal, you become convinced: there can be no harshness towards it, no battling it. Metal is sufficiently hard to prevent you from fighting it..." [17]

Amber

The artist works in amber either sporadically or for continuous periods of several years, and then with great intensity. She showed an important collection of amber pieces in her first amber works exhibition in Vilnius in 1991. One more was displayed at the Baltic States exhibition of decorative arts *From Dreams to Reality.* An exceptionally ample collection encapsulating her discoveries of an extended period was showcased by the artist at her first solo exhibit (called *Creation*) in Vilnius, at the Contemporary Art Centre. In 1995, Stulgaitė started collaborating with Virginija and Kazimieras Mizgiris Gallery. This led to her exhibition of selected works in 2000. The artist's approach to amber is worlds apart from her treatment of metal.

"You have to allow for natural incidences in order to achieve sensory and rational unity. To intuit the order of nature's laws." [18]

Stulgaitė gives up entirely her will to the character of nature's nugget in hope to reveal some wisdom of existence hidden in this special material. In contrast to metals – which are melted over and reworked (hammered over) by jewellers altering their natural condition – amber pieces are fashioned in techniques retaining the original structure of the find.

The hardest part was to overcome in myself the downgraded, the abused stereotypes of the products by "folk artists". Each time upon taking a piece of amber into my hands, I was haunted by images of bead necklaces and the like. It took me exceptionally long to figure out what I could do from it. It was until I realized that with amber I have to start the other way round – not from what I want, but from what it "wants" – because each piece already exists – and each one is different. It was rather difficult to take it, to reconcile with the situation where I was not having the upper hand, but was walking around it trying to see the most prominent aspects of a particular piece: its colour, crust, maybe a hole there, some pattern, transparency... Translucent amber gives me more opportunities to work on it, to create shapes or corners that break the entering light and reflect it. I like catching light. Few pieces of amber are solid: these are only cracks, several layers. You do not know what you will find after removing one level. You have to go by intuition in judging whether what you see is already the most valuable in it, or should you risk it and take another try. It is a disquieting process. When I open up my amber piece, I do not think what I am going to use it for this time. It is essential to reveal it

15 Pillė Veljataga, Birutė Stulgaitė: erdvė ir kaita, in: *Dailė*, 1999, Nr. 1, p. 52.

16 Laima Kreivytė, Šiaurės alchemija arba sidabras – elegantiška juvelyrika, in: *Verslo žinios*, 04 11 2005.

17 Aleksandra Aleksandravičiūtė, Objektai tik buvimui, in: *7 meno dienos*, 14 09 2012.

18 *Birutė Stulgaitė*, Vilnius: Solidarity, 2000.

right, after a while it shows where it can be applied. I use metal (silver) only as much as need for structural purposes: for fastenings, suspensions, for boarders and loops. Company for amber usually comes from organic materials: leather, horsehair, paper string, seaweed holdfast are best matches. The latter material was unexpected discovery for me. One late autumn a storm washed down the dunes by the sea. These witch "tresses" were caught on the scarps at some three meter height, trailing in the wind. I tried to rip apart a twig as thin as a thread – it was very strong. That's my lucky strike, it occurred to me. I bundled a good bat of them like oakum and headed home. There I found some fixing liquid to apply on them and prevent them from drying over and keeping them lithe.

The adornments from seaweed holdfast and a drop of amber are indeed Stulgaitė's signature pieces – primarily because of this simple, organic union. | As concern with existential problems is at the core of her art, amber is a perfect choice of material for Birutė Stulgaitė. It represents a captured frozen moment of nature's transmutations and by its nature already is a powerful comment on time and eternity. Her objects strongly reveal the inherent meaning and visual impact of amber. | Among all properties characteristic of Lithuanian amber, the artist mostly associates with it's purity as a universal metaphor for the purity of the soul, which was perceived similarly by people of kin who lived in medieval times and those of contemporary cultures. Most of the artist's works look like polished and translucent lens. Light plays in the depth of an amber piece. The artist discerns transparency under a natural, slightly opened "bark" of the surface, and in a dark, or opaque piece of mineral. Amber for Stulgaitė may be natural, earthy, warm, but never mundane. It is a means of testing the truthful and right, next to which all lies are immediately exposed. | The artist is positive that metal, which symbolizes masculine element, cold and melted over, is not the best choice for setting in amber which she perceives as feminine organic material, a gift from nature itself. Some of her amber adornments feature paper and horsehair.

On a hot summer day a ride over Samogitian hills reveals same lovely view I've witnessed hundreds of times. The horse, standing peacefully, raises its tail in an elegant gesture, and spreading its skirt like a fan, lets it fall down. It was enough to make the trick... I did not know what it was at the start. Later a vet gave me horse hair that came from tails and mane, and they became my material for a series of objects. During washing and combing, tying in tufts and separately, in watching how the tied ends stick out, I gleaned the principle of how I should use them.

Some of her polished amber pieces have flexible metal settings which keep them suspended in the air. Metal seems to melt as it services amber. And – it is in these pieces precisely – where amber seems to return to its primeval state of a drop of resin, becoming an iconic image for fragility and transience. Amber, the mineral so badly compromised by kitsch products, here manifests another extra-mundane perception of existence."The amber by Birutė Stulgaitė is unlike any other. It is neither manipulated nor hidden under metal, nor transformed into any other kind of material. The artist does not grind it into powder and does not shape amber figurines or similar. No game playing. No flirting. No violence. The artwork created over a course of entire decade shows no evolution: Birutė Stulgaitė brought her mature treatment of amber – careful, minimalist, gentlemanly and laconic – when she first approached it as material." [19]

Objects. Metal

Stulgaitė has created metal art at different periods, of different materials, and has never produced any for a specific exhibition. These works are not linked by a common idea or any formal properties, except for the artist's sensibility and her authentic touch. She is equally concerned with the meaning they communicate and with expression in material. Both follow and stimulate each other. The idea "in Stulgaitė's work is generated by her metalsmithing strategy. Metalsmith's [...] stance was always anchored to high technologies, but not necessarily machinery. Stulgaitė painstakingly handworks iron or copper, stamping each piece with an authentic touch [...] Plastic shapes inspired by nature do not ape it; form, when entering metal, does not downgrade it." [20] Just like jewellery, metal artworks are prompted by collaboration with material: opening up, emphasizing characteristic, innate properties. | The idea of small-scale sculptural objects came about while working on compositions with enamel.

I started with white enamel, because I only had one kind when I went to Palanga workshop in 1984. What can one do having just that? Now I am happy for being deprived of other colours or other opportunities... Surely, I also had pencils. Wintertime outdoors, clouds drifting by, nearly touching pine tree tops, all enveloped in mist.

The white enamel works with texture of graphite lines, similar to cirrus or pine tree spikes (the triptych of plaques *On Chinese Motifs*, 1984) travelled to Limoges. The ingenious idea was immediately appreciated. The crispness of solution, purified rhythm and subtlety bespoke of an entirely new approach to the enamelling art tradition, which started some two thousand years ago in imitation of precious stones, colour relationships therefore seeming to be its inherent element. | Later on the artist created compositions with drops of enamel bound to copper wire (*Intersections*, 1987, *Movement*, 1991). The artist found this solution by simply listening to her material.

> The idea of enamel on wire was prompted by sound, by something like a melody created by working wire with a hammer and punch... ping clang and clang, ping and clang clang. It is possible to put enamel on a flattened wire and then bake it in a muffle furnace.

Warm copper and colourful enamels uncover a different aspect of Stulgaitė's work: no longer silvery-white and ascetic, but playful and vibrant. These small-scale objects manifest a variety of copper properties. Such objects like the *Limit Mark* and *Unity* demonstrate sculpturesque nature of pure and solid copper. The *Pair* (2008) features two shiny rods of superbly polished surface suspended horizontally in space: upon colliding, they ring with a melodious sound. The piece is literary a visually rendered sound of copper in space. The *Reflections* (1995) and the *Crumpled* (2012) are different – fire-like metal planes enriched in texture and colour. Stripes cut from copper sheets become soft as paper when heated at a certain temperature. By means of crushing and wrinkling they create subtle textures, and finally their wrinkled surface is hardened and fixed by lamination. The unexpected discovery that metal can be wrinkled and precise technology go hand in hand in this piece.[21] | There is also a group of objects created from silver and steel. The 1997 and the 2012 artist's solo shows of small-scale metalwork featured different exhibits. The 1997 event was one of the highlights of the year, being the first ever silversmith's mini sculpture exhibition in the country.

19 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Kontempliacija, kuriai nereikalingi komentarai, arba Kaip šviesa ateina ir pasilieka, in: *Literatūra ir menas*, 18 08 2000.

20 Algė Andriulytė, Formos apoteozė, in: *7 meno dienos*, 10 10 1997.

21 Aleksandra Aleksandravičiūtė, op. cit.

22 *Birutė Stulgaitė*. Introduction by Aleksandra Aleksandravičiūtė, Vilnius: Solidarity, 1997.

23 Laima Kanopkienė, Aukštasis pilotažas..., p. 38–39.

These works are meant for private spaces, for intimate and deep contemplation on one's own. They approach the historic *arti minori* in terms of scale and relation to space in which man observes the object, feels its presence, touches it and contemplates.[22] "Her art makes one think about aristocracy of spirit, about miraculous present of being – and the virtuoso expression of all of this when she selects very simple materials and minimalist forms." [23] | Small-scale sculpture pieces by Stulgaitė are metaphors for silence. In silence metal is purified, it is a time of intuitions and epiphanies, when dregs of small things settle down to reveal the essence.

> The value of silence – it takes plenty of effort. The art of silence brings peace.

A range of meditative states of silence are captured in the *Sheen* of alexandrite, copper and enamel (1995) and compositions the *Rough* (1991) structured from copper mesh. | The 1997 exhibit included works that were completely independent objects, linked with her adornments only through experience in materials and technologies. Though small-scale, these objects appear monumental. "The eye falters: photographs of these works lead you to believe that any one of them could be immediately erected in a public space: with their harmonious proportions and the generalized, purified forms they strike like veritable sculpture pieces. Then they turn out to be miniatures. But that does not take away their monumental nature. Nobody can prevent you from building pieces that become monuments, in your imagination and transport them into interior spaces." [24] | Yet there is hardly one single piece of the artist's oeuvre more perfect, more harmonious than *Balance* (1997, steel, copper, enamelling). It also gives the strongest reflection of the artist as a person. Its minimalist composition – two white metal beams bent in a semicircle and two copper axes with enamel drops connecting them – embodies the order and harmony of the world. The *Balance* seems to trace the coordinates of the great Universe from top to bottom and span the poles of connectedness and separation, of tension and rest, of movement and poise. It is a sculpture piece that took a long and tense spell of silence to mature. | Stulgaitė has subsequently revisited the same *perpetuum mobile* theme, but in a different manner. The 2012 exhibition *Changing Space* showed silver compositions *Harmony I, II* (2005), and the *Swings* (2010). According to Jurgita Ludavičienė, "A new and distinct feature of this exhibit is its mobility. That is, there is movement dormant in each piece similarly to a compressed spring – it is stable while you keep it

in your fingers, but you know that it could be flying any moment any direction. *Swings* are openwork objects that expect to be rocked and get a chance to demonstrate how they manage to keep balance by rolling back and forth [...] and, how, after swinging for a short while, they would come back into the state of stillness." [25] The openwork *Nets* (2009) and *Wind Boards* (2011) have also been showcased at the *Changing Space*. "A different type of movement is frozen in the objects created from industrial netting. It is metal, no doubt. Transparent and light this time, it stands in contrast to the relentlessly functional edge iron. This netting stirs memory and imagination into movement: immediate associations with fishermen's nets on the shore bring the sound of wind whistling into your head. Though static, these objects are full of internal movement: of sand carried by the sea wind, of nets' eyes shimmering in the blowing wind." [26] Two compositions from stainless steel, entitled *Against the Wind* and *Downwind* (both 2010), were exhibited attached to pillars at Titanikas Gallery. Steel carried in the wind? Such a visual paradox would not have been possible without long years of experience and very intimate understanding of metal and its "character". Determined, unrelenting, not giving in to pressure from outside. Such positioning enriched the process of perception: their shape changed visually with visitors walking round the corner. Metal objects catch, reflect, absorb and filter light. When metal surface casts off light, it shimmers and changes. Smooth cold and warm metal surfaces reflect light in a different manner. Light makes static forms move, highlights introduce dynamism. For the cycle *Light Catching* (2012) Stulgaitė has used twelve iron sheets. She has added lines to incidental surface defects and has partially transformed textures of their glossy colourful and rusted surfaces, transforming the sheets turned into paintings of iron and light. Depending on one's viewing angle, the direction of drifting surface lines changes, so does the scheme of tones and reflections. Quite a big group of objects are *objets trouvés*, natural or man-made items or their fragments: retrieved from everyday environment, they ring quite an unexpected note. Such are brick objects featuring minimal changes of shape.

I found the first "brickbat" on the seacoast in Königsberg. It came from a corner of a German building. A "find" of unusual firmness and hardness. Other bricks have simply "arrived": I received a payment in two bricks for one of my works. Of course, they are antique, historical. After finding their way into the studio, such materials as a brick or netting (of copper or stainless steel), have to wait patiently until it transpires what should be done with them.

The same happened with a piece of old, rusted metal cable – it was shaped into *Symbols* (2011). Rust and a weird, ancient blacksmith's nail prompted a brave solution. The grim, rough, yet aesthetically potent metal has been transformed into a dramatic art piece – a powerful comment on suffering. One truly ingenious work emerged from the process of using a loadstone piece to collect iron rust. The "dancing" of rust particles drawn by a magnet was videotaped (*Rust. Loadstone*, 2012) and became a highlight of the exhibition *Changing Space.* Through movement, attraction and musical rhythm, imparted onto static metal, the video speaks about metamorphoses taking place in nature.

How did this idea of loadstone come about? Perhaps rust invited it. Many years ago I brought from the seashore a piece of badly rusted cable. Though disintegrated and crumbling, it looked beautiful. I was sorry to discard it. The loadstone helped to clean it. What kind of metal? It is a secret of sorts. It fits me. It is essential not to make it too concrete. You make an impact with an artistic image, which is hard to define in its content.

A mist of poetic associations surrounds the work *Crumpled* produced from paper with acrylic (2007) and copper foil (2012). The work celebrates simplicity and fragility of material, as the artist captured their inherent properties – the ability to wrinkle and change when damp and crushed. The artist always takes great care to ensure that her artwork is displayed according to her intent. "The artist's approach is not an accidental, quantitative filling up of the exhibition space. She creates a unique entirety by strictly selecting artwork. Next comes establishing of relations between each piece and its surrounding space, when considered are not only individual works, but also the inter-relational harmony and wholeness of the exhibit, which functions like a potent chain of meanings and metaphors of metal shapes." [27] All the exhibits that the artist has given have set very high standards of showcasing artwork. They have also shaped the concept of an exhibition as a scrupulously prepared, integral and purified visual experience.

Aleksandra Aleksandravičiūtė

24 Jurgita Ludavičienė, Reikli erdvė.

25, 26 Ibid.

27 Viktoras Liutkus, op. cit.