

AUGUSTAS SERAPINAS

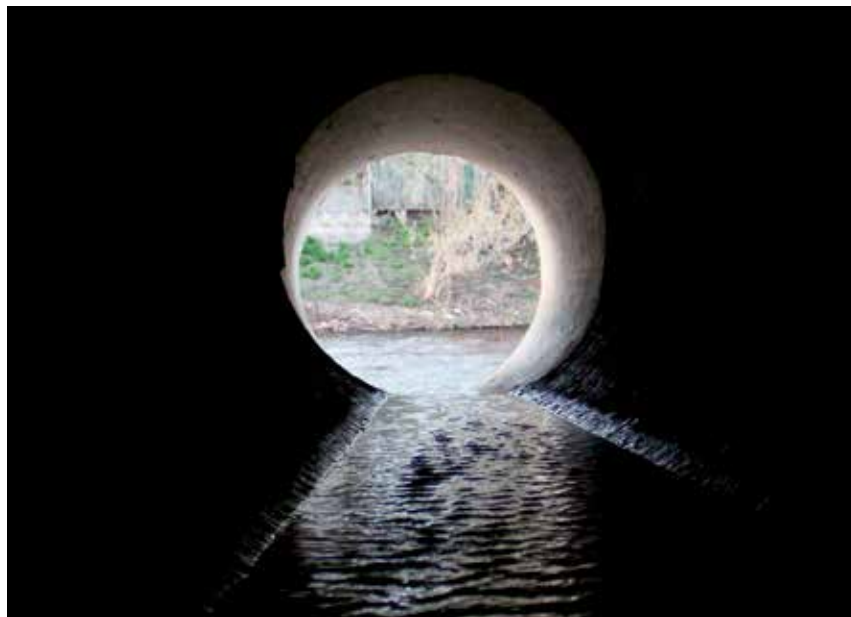
CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Augustas Serapinas:
Four Sheds," at
the Fogo Island
Gallery, Fogo Island,
Newfoundland and
Labrador, through
Apr. 2.

Interview by Travis Jeppesen
Portrait by Algirdas Bakas

TRAVIS
JEPPESEN is an
artist and writer who
lives in Berlin.

IN THE STUDIO





View from Augustas Serapinas's drainpipe studio, looking toward the Vilnia River, Vilnius, Lithuania.

LAST AUTUMN, I was invited for a monthlong residency at the art and education center Rupert in Vilnius, Lithuania, where I got to know a number of key figures in the Baltic art scene, including some of the brightest up-and-comers. Among the latter is Augustas Serapinas (b. 1990), whose site-specific installations and actions have garnered much attention throughout Europe in recent years. While Serapinas's approach is sometimes evocative of relational aesthetics and institutional critique—aesthetic trends that were in vogue in his earliest schoolboy days—the impulse at the root of all his work is ultimately empathy.

Soon after my arrival in Vilnius, Augustas began dropping subtle hints about visiting a “secret place” together, but I honestly had no idea what he was talking about up until the moment he took me there. One cold but sunny afternoon in October, we parked near a bank of the Vilnia River in the Old Town, and he gave me galoshes and a raincoat to wear. He then led me down the bank to the entrance of a drainpipe from which a tiny stream trickled out about a yard above the river. With the aid of a flashlight, he led me to the very back of the passageway, where he invited me to sit in a handmade hammock, facing outward. It was there our conversation began—with Augustas seated in the darkness to one side as I stared at the outside world, our discussion naturally falling into contemplative pauses as I lost myself in the rush of the river before me. I soon came to realize that Augustas had found a way to turn a “studio visit”—a problematic notion for an artist who operates outside the conventional art-production structure—into an aesthetic experience.

TRAVIS JEPPESEN So what is this place, exactly? Is it your studio? Do you actually make work here?

AUGUSTAS SERAPINAS This place is made for one purpose—for me to lead people here and have a conversation with them. I am interested in how space affects certain activities. By creating a specific environment for my meetings and then bringing people into it, I indirectly steer the conversation. In this place, certain topics can unfold more easily and exchanges can go in new directions.

I consider this the best place to start to talk about my work—because it's an artwork itself, made for the purpose of presenting my practice during studio visits. Every meeting is a sort of performative action: walking through the city, at a certain point stopping by the riverbank, taking the rubber boots out of the rucksack, giving them to my guest, inviting the visitor to step into the river and enter the drainpipe. Then walking, bent down, a few meters and finding a hammock at the end. The visitor taking a seat in the hammock and having a very intense river view with constantly changing scenery. Spotting the spring right underneath the hammock and experiencing how its sound blends with the river sound. Noticing how after a few minutes, one's eyes and ears start to adapt to the environment. Looking at the surrounding concrete structure and hearing bits of conversations by people passing by outside, right above the hammock. That is the usual course of my studio visit, during which I accompany my guests. Sometimes, inside the pipe, I start to talk about the environment; sometimes I am silent.

I should say that I don't own this place; it is completely public and at the same time very intimate. Anyone potentially could enter here. But since it is hard to find and you need some determination to step into the darkness, I've never spotted any signs of other visitors so far. This place was built back in the Soviet times, in the '80s. It is a drainage pipe for carrying ground water to the river. Most of the time, my artistic practice doesn't require a traditional working space—so I consider this site my alternative studio. I usually ask people not to reveal its location.

JEPPESEN Do you ever come here alone? Or only with invited guests?

SERAPINAS Yes, I do come here to sit alone, just not very often. I regard it as a place to expand my thinking. But when I create physical art pieces, I usually work on-site.

JEPPESEN Who are some of the people you've brought here besides me?

SERAPINAS Originally this place was made for my BA graduation show in 2013. In a way, I wanted to talk about problems with the graduation assessment format. Students each had one hour to explain their work, which meant there was simply not enough time to bring everyone to this space, even though the experience inside was a crucial part of my project. So my presentation ended up being very mediocre; I offered some pictures and some recorded sounds from the pipe.

At that time I was not fully understood, so I got strongly motivated to leave the academic context and to bring as many people here as I could. I remember my shaky meeting with Anders Kreuger, the first international curator I invited to do a studio visit. At the beginning, he was not so enthusiastic about going inside the dark pipe. But once he got here, we really talked, and I felt it might not be as bad as I had thought at the beginning. A few months later, he invited me to participate in “Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics,” a show he co-curated at his home institution, the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp [M HKA] in 2014.

JEPPESEN You created a terrific site-specific work there.

SERAPINAS I arrived in Antwerp with no idea of what I would make for the show. After a few days I was introduced to Georges Uittenhout, head technician of M HKA, and we looked around for possible places to develop my work. At one point, he



Two views of Serapinas's installation *Georges*, 2014, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp.





Two views of the installation *Housewarming*, 2016, at Emalin, London.



“My sauna repeated the gallery space on a smaller scale; the heating stove was inside an old safe.”

showed me a space above the ceiling. I kind of liked it, but it was too small for my project. So I asked if there were any other spaces like that. After thinking for a while, he mumbled that I should follow him. We went to the top floor, to a room that was always locked because it contained security monitors and almost no one was allowed to enter. In that room was another door, which was also locked. Georges went looking for the key for nearly an hour. When he finally returned and opened the door, I went closer and laid eyes on a huge shaft hidden inside the museum. The space, which was for pipes and wires and other bits of infrastructure, was fifteen meters high, seventeen meters long, and one meter wide. Even people who had worked in the museum for years didn't know this grotto existed. It was kind of a personal space for Georges. He was the only one who ever went there, on visits related to his job.

I wanted the two of us to collaborate, but initially Georges was not so keen—maybe because of his position at the museum. But with his permission and full support, I started making the shaft visible. I destroyed a section of wall on the ground floor, so that visitors could experience a hidden museum space. Part of my project was to fulfill all the health and safety requirements. This is why some wires inside the shaft were covered with plexiglass. The piece grew out of a dialogue between me and the person responsible for health and safety.

The museum had been created by connecting various old buildings together, and the wall I destroyed was one of the few original ones left. In a way, that was the price for opening up a secret but functionally very important part of the institution, though I saved—and showed—the remaining old bricks.

Georges was very interested in the history of the area around M HKA. On one of the elevated platforms inside the shaft—unreachable by the general public, accessible only to Georges—I installed a study alcove for him. Gathering archival material about the redevelopment of the southern districts of Antwerp from the 1870s to the 1960s, a topic that fascinated Georges, I provided the technician an undisturbed reading room. I named this artwork after him: *Georges*.

JEPPESEN It seems to me that your work, which often stems from personal narratives, is rooted in an empathetic identification with your subjects. I'm thinking here, for example, of your project with the Elderly Home for Exiled People near the Rupert art center. Would you say that your work proposes an alternate means of telling stories, of re-creating and commenting on history?

SERAPINAS For me, it is important not to over-identify with a situation or other people. It's always about balancing, about how to be an insider and outsider at the same time. When I was working on the project at the Elderly Home, I lost that balance.

The facility serves elderly people who were previously deported from Lithuania to Siberia during the Soviet era. There, by chance, I got to know a lady who wanted to re-create a play she had directed in her younger days, when she was a kindergarten teacher sixty-some years ago. The story was about a prince and princess, and the cast members were all Elderly Home residents and workers.



Two views of the project *Four Sheds*, 2017. Top, the original Barr'd Islands shed, and bottom, Serapinas's installation of reclaimed wood, nails, and wallpaper at Fogo Island Gallery. Courtesy Fogo Island Arts, Newfoundland and Labrador. Photos Alexander Ferko.

I didn't do anything material; mainly, I just helped arrange things. I wasn't a director or scriptwriter or stage designer. I was more like a diplomat. But I believe my being there helped make it all happen. Without an outsider present, you know, people would always come up with excuses not to take part. I couldn't separate myself from this situation, because I wanted too much to help that old woman.

JEPPESEN But in cases like this, the work—due to your involvement with it, your identification with it—becomes this other, tertiary thing. It's neither the performance itself nor the commentary on it, but something else entirely, something molded by your presence and participation.

SERAPINAS Yes, I am interested in the creation of alternative points of view. They make for more diversity, which is often lacking in institutions and the art world in general. Imagine attending a show that is critical of cheap labor, but after museum working hours, a person—probably an immigrant getting the minimum wage—comes to clean the floor in the space. If any artist or curator in that exhibition responded to that particular person, the whole show

“After an intensive workout in my gym at Frieze London, you could join me and other participants at Emalin gallery.”

Serapinas's installation *Jõusaal (Gym)*, 2016, at Frieze, London.



would gain new qualities. I am always looking for these kinds of “glitches,” and they don’t have to be as extreme as this example. My approach could be seen as very critical, but first of all I am interested in the parallel stories—especially how those stories blend within a certain framework at a given moment.

JEPPESEN I’m curious about the gym performance you did at the last Frieze London art fair. Do you consider it one work together with the sauna piece that was installed concurrently at Emalin gallery, or do you think of them as separate pieces? What’s the connection between the two, if any?

SERAPINAS The gym was originally made a few years ago, while I was doing a student residency at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn. The sculpture department was situated on the outskirts of the city. The division between the department and the local environment really struck me. Inside the Academy everything looked like a self-run art factory. Students were producing a lot of art, which seemed to do nothing but take up storage space. There was a huge storage area full of artworks, some of which had been sitting there for fifteen years or more. At the same time, the atmosphere right outside the school was very dynamic. You had a stadium, some trails, a lot of people jogging. Once I even saw the city’s famous Olympic discus thrower.

I decided to remove some works from the students’ storage unit and convert them into gym equipment. Then I invited students and townspeople to work out together. When I remade this project for Frieze, it looked even funnier in the new context. But the irony came first from Estonia. The work had a history behind it; it bore the footprint of a specific situation.

The sauna piece had an independent spark. I created a fully functional sauna at Emalin gallery. I asked a guy who had run a printing shop next to the gallery for twenty years to make drawings

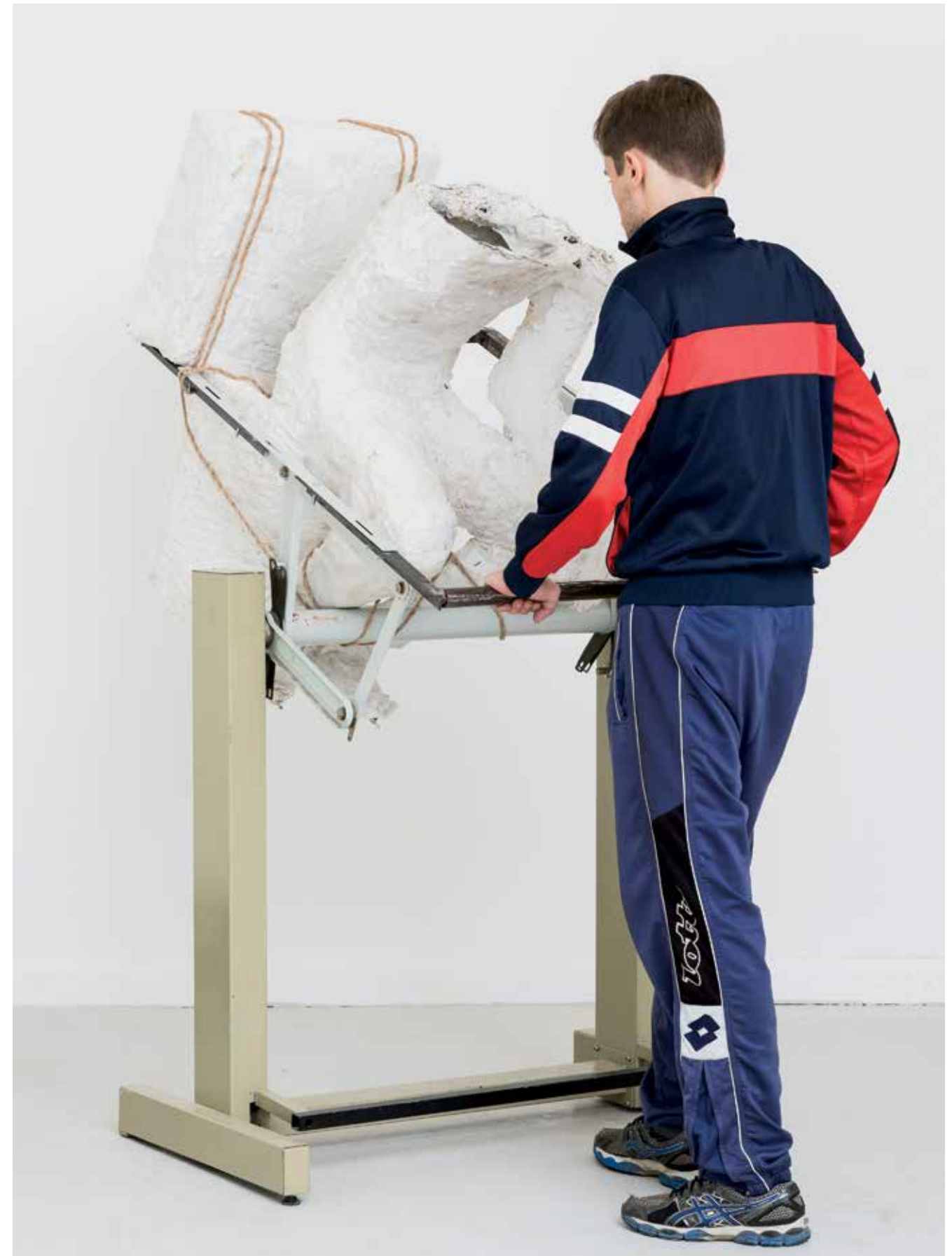
for the sauna objects: a bucket, a ladle, a door handle, some shower curtain rings. Emalin is located in a former locksmith’s shop. When I visited it before the renovation, I found a lot of discarded keys, which I then used for casting the sauna objects.

The sauna itself repeated the gallery space on a smaller scale, and its front was a mock-up of the building entrance. The heating stove was placed inside an old safe that I found there on my first site visit. Since the gallery was new, I wanted to help establish its relationship to the local surroundings. I made a sort of ritual of introducing the gallery. Visitors could come to the space and get a swimsuit or pants and a towel for their sauna session. That was the best way to experience the exhibition and see the sauna objects. There was even a shower where people could wash up after their session.

So, you see, the two London artworks, despite sharing the fitness theme, derived from very different origins. Nevertheless, there was a bond on the functional level. After an intensive workout in my gym at Frieze, you could join me and other participants in the sauna at the gallery.

JEPPESEN A duck just went by! Somehow that feels hilarious. I have to say, after you stay here for a while in the pipe, it starts to have a trippy effect, like being on hallucinogens. You’ve definitely found the most otherworldly place in Vilnius.

SERAPINAS Once when I lost my house key and it was too late to ask to stay anywhere else, I slept in the pipe. Sometimes I come here to contemplate, but usually it’s a matter of spontaneous visits rather than a planned studio stay. I’ve thought a lot about how to best present my practice to others, and it turns out that the pipe is ideal. It contains some things that you can understand only through experience. It’s like the homepage of a website—if you want to check it out and then maybe browse more, you need to come to Vilnius and meet me. ○



Agonist, Jõusaal (Gym), 2016, plaster and metal, approx. 70 by 38 by 45 inches. Courtesy Emalin.