



Alter Ego – 2022 Masks and Social Poster Messages in the Project “Youth Dialogues between Continents 2020 – Latvia, Brazil, Hungary, South Africa”

Alter Ego – 2022 Máscaras e Mensagens Sociais no Projeto “Diálogos Juvenis entre Continentes 2020 – Letónia, Brasil, Hungria, África do Sul”

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ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, therefore the publication is based on a comparison of the conceptual images of Alter Ego 2022 masks designed in Latvia since the beginning of the war with the messages of the 2020 social posters of Latvian, Brazilian, Hungarian and South African youth in the global world. It is remarkable that there is only a 2-year gap between the two projects, while at the same time you can see what has changed in young people and what issues have remained the same despite the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the threat of war. In both cases, the idea was to find out how young people feel in their daily lives and in the world, and what worries them.

Thus, in this study, we have analysed and compared both local and global themes, textual values and changes as well as the visual messages of young people influenced by the Ukraine war, in the period 2018-2022.

We concluded that: 1. In order to feel good in everyday life and in communication with society, adolescents need to talk about their problems, ask for help, focus on their inner problems and understand their ALTER EGO. This can be improved through the use of expressive tools and forms of visual art such as a “personal mask” and the social poster in art classes. 2. Accessibility, as both exhibitions were displayed in public spaces in Riga (the capital of Latvia) and also made public on websites. They have become important events both locally and globally, as discussions and dialogues have developed in Latvian society, between European countries and between continents – Europe, Africa and South America. 3. On the other hand, limited accessibility was detected precisely at the local level, when, due to restrictions in COVID pandemics and also since the war in Ukraine small-scale exhibitions were only available to students, teachers and staff in the school premises. Limited access to cultural events, coupled with the stress of uncertainty related to the war in Ukraine, creates discomfort, psychological exclusion and exacerbates the social problems of young people, which reflects in the disturbingly tragic works in which teenagers and young people seek answers to questions about their lives and their ALTER EGO.

Keywords: Social Poster; Personal Mask; *Alter Ego*; Public Space; Climate Change; Forms of Interaction; COVID-19; War in Ukraine; Social Problems

RESUMO

A invasão russa à Ucrânia começou em 2022, portanto, a publicação baseia-se numa comparação das imagens conceptuais das máscaras Alter Ego 2022, desenhadas na Letónia desde o início da guerra, com as mensagens dos cartazes sociais de 2020 da juventude letã, brasileira, húngara e sul-africana no mundo global. É notável que haja apenas uma diferença de dois anos entre os dois projetos, enquanto ao mesmo tempo é possível perceber o que mudou nos jovens e quais questões permaneceram as mesmas, apesar da crise pandémica de COVID-19 e da ameaça de guerra. Em ambos os casos, a ideia era descobrir como os jovens se sentem na sua vida diária e no mundo, e o que os preocupa.

Assim, neste estudo, analisámos e comparámos temas locais e globais, valores textuais e mudanças, assim como as mensagens visuais dos jovens influenciados pela guerra na Ucrânia, no período de 2018-2022.

Concluímos que:

1. Para se sentirem bem na vida quotidiana e na comunicação com a sociedade, os adolescentes precisam de falar sobre os seus problemas, pedir ajuda, focar nos seus problemas interiores e compreender o seu ALTER EGO. Isso pode ser melhorado através do uso de ferramentas expressivas e formas de arte visual, como uma "máscara pessoal" e o cartaz social em aulas de arte. 2. A acessibilidade, uma vez que ambas as exposições foram exibidas em espaços públicos em Riga (a capital da Letónia) e também tornadas públicas em websites. Tornaram-se eventos importantes local e globalmente, com discussões e diálogos desenvolvendo-se na sociedade letã, entre países europeus e entre continentes - Europa, África e América do Sul. 3. Por outro lado, foi detetada uma acessibilidade limitada precisamente ao nível local, quando, devido às restrições na pandemia de COVID e também desde a guerra na Ucrânia, as exposições em pequena escala estavam apenas disponíveis para estudantes, professores e pessoal nas instalações escolares. O acesso limitado a eventos culturais, juntamente com o stress da incerteza relacionada com a guerra na Ucrânia, cria desconforto, exclusão psicológica e agrava os problemas sociais dos jovens, refletindo-se nas obras perturbadoramente trágicas em que adolescentes e jovens buscam respostas para perguntas sobre suas vidas e seus ALTER EGO.

Palavras-chave: Cartaz Social; Máscara Pessoal; Alter Ego; Espaço Público; Mudanças Climáticas; Formas de Interação; COVID-19; Guerra na Ucrânia; Problemas Sociais

Introduction. What Does the Mirror Image Say?

Latvia is geographically close to Russia and when the war in Ukraine started in 2022, it created stress in the everyday life of Latvian society and still raises many questions, as well as makes us remember the historical occupation of the Latvian state by the Soviet Union and the importance of independence. The gravity of the situation makes us constantly ask ourselves countless questions, to which each of us also hopes to receive positive answers.

The masks created by the students of the Art Department of Pardaugavas Music and Art school in spring 2022 are great allegories and kind of boundary-breaking: students, using the means of artistic expression, have managed to talk about topics that are relevant to them – from reflections on the social and political events of recent years to deeply emotional and personal issues difficult to express directly in words or drawings.

"The mask as a controlled visual message on the

author's own face not only provides a certain anonymity and sense of security, but also represents the ability to 'remove' these emotions from oneself and look at them from aside, as well as creates the ability for someone else to 'try' this mask and put themselves in the shoes of the artist" say professional artists and youth teachers Renāte Kloviņa and Paula Treimane Kloviņa (ALTER EGO 2022, Riga Treimane & Kloviņa, 2022?).

Whether war is present or not, we all tend to put on a mask in the public sphere in our daily lives. Marija U. (15 years), a student of the art school, asked questions to the reader, to the viewer and to herself: "What is my ALTER EGO, what is it like?"

She also concluded that this story is not just about who sees what. It is also about the wearer of the mask, who sees life and other people from his or her own point of view. We all have our own "distorted mirrors" – our own individual, subjective

view of everything that happens around us and interacts with us. We often see what we want to see. It's just everyone's subjective view of the world. It is not meant in a literal sense, but in a figurative sense. "In my work, this is symbolized by the mirror shards in which each viewer can see something of themselves. These are our perceptions of how the other person thinks and reacts. Often these are 'distorted mirrors', because the truth is very different. The question is also, what do you see in the other person? It is also a question, what is his ALTER EGO like?"

Digital World, a Young Person's Place in Society and the Social Poster

Observations in art lessons show that the digital world dominates everyday life and children, teenagers and young people in art school try to divide their attention simultaneously between working on a task and watching other information on their phones. They play games, communicate with friends, listen to music or even watch films and then, in parallel, they do something on their art class assignment. More and more, we see that not all children are able to do elementary tasks in lessons that require coordination of movement, such as cutting, attaching, gluing, mixing and pasting colours. This is because they spend a large part of the day either on the computer or working on digital media, most often phones. As digital skills become more widespread, practical skills are declining more noticeably.

They tend to take pictures of natural objects and inspirational ideas on their phones and only then start observing them, yet this partly bypasses the leisurely phase of observing nature, which in turn encourages the development of analysis and critical thinking. The fact that a photographic image is frozen

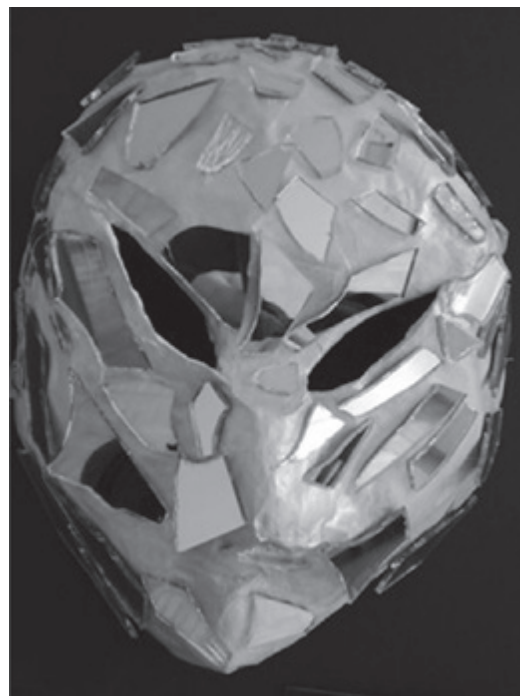


Figure 1 – Mask *MIRRORS*.

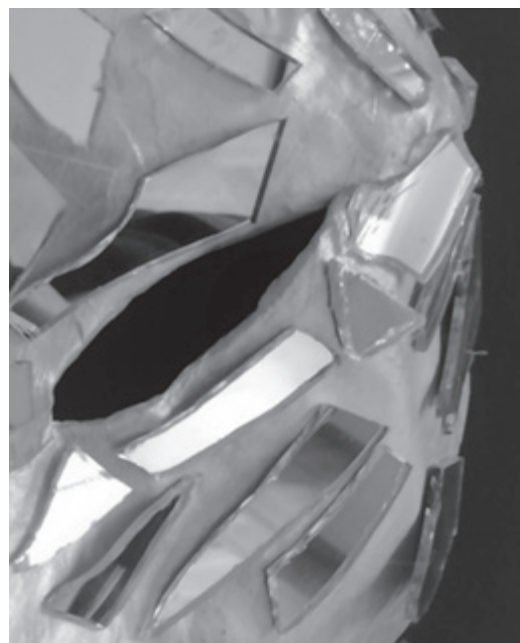


Figure 2 – We often see what we want to see in mirror shards.

in time and space, and captures a distorted image of the object that does not necessarily reflect reality, and that young people often use photo editors to enhance, improve and modify photos, is forgotten. This practice in particular developed during the COVID-19 period of restrictions and continues to this day, as remote working is now more widely practiced, replacing the real action in person. This does not always produce good results, as the two-fold working does not allow the teenager to concentrate on the task at hand and we notice that the speed of the work also starts to slow down noticeably.

It is therefore no coincidence that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were already preoccupied with questions and thoughts about how to better understand how adolescents and young people feel in their daily lives, how they feel at school when they are working on the many different tasks and technical exercises of learning art techniques. What to do and how best to develop creativity directly working on hand-eye coordination and how to combine this with learning and using the digital techniques that are so popular?

So in 2018-2019 the art school started working with 14-16 year old on social poster design, combining the possibilities of digital techniques used in computer graphics, using their individual photo staging to create the posters, and combining these with conceptual text messages. Working on the chosen theme of human interactions in society and the impact of humans on nature opened up a large and diverse range of themes and issues. The social poster is one of the few poster forms that, with its message, makes us think about current issues and values in today's society.

The poster is a medium for information in public space and a form of communication with the public. They speak to us in their own way – politically, com-

mercially, announcing an event or updating social information. Historically, poster art spread rapidly in Europe at the beginning of the last century, when it became possible to reproduce them mechanically by lithographic printing. Well-known artists such as A. Toulouse-Lautrec and A. Mucha in Europe also became involved in the creation of posters. In Latvia, posters were designed by R. Suta, G. Klucis, J. Dimiters and many others.. The poster continues to live actively in the environment, speaking to each of us on a daily basis, but the range of topical themes has expanded and new, powerful technologies have been developed to reproduce them. It has spread to building facades, vehicles, interiors, the internet, informing, educating and tempting us with endless product offers (Kursīte, 2008; Umblija, 2006, 2008).

This is a useful resource for working with young people, because most of the questions and confusion about what is going on around them are among them. It is also a great way to talk about the message, to develop visual language and the skills to use it, to get to know each other and to ask the question: "How do I feel in this world? What exactly is bothering me? Am I able, am I allowed to ask for help?"

As part of the art school's computer graphics classes, work started with the students on their first social posters. Each student could choose a topic that was relevant and interesting to them. The young people studied the posters, discussed current issues and learned to define their thoughts in short and concise phrases. They searched for a visual solution to the idea, created their own photo stories, without using any photos from the internet, to achieve the most important thing – to create their own individual story and message. The posters were made on themes like our responsibility for polluting the virtual and natural environment, health, the im-

portance of education, addictions and bad habits, fear, ethical norms and the stratification of society. Looking at the works, we can see that they deal with global and national issues, yet are very personal and directly oriented towards the problems they face in their everyday lives, as the young people used and reflected themselves, their closest friends or classmates in the posters. The themes that emerged were avalanches of information, the importance of silence in everyday life, the pollution of nature, the excessive use of food and cosmetics, and promoting healthy lifestyles.

The result was an interesting and witty collection of posters by young people, which formed a thematically coherent exhibition. We found that the interest of the audience in the posters as a whole was a guarantee to exhibit it not only in schools or libraries, but also in various public places in Riga, Latvia.

Dialogues Between Continents, Communication and Accessibility of Youth Art

The next step had to be taken, as we realized that when exhibiting works outside Latvia, it is the text and young people's comments that become very important. So another travelling collection with texts translated to English was created and exhibited in Klaipėda, Lithuania.

While representing Latvia and the LAT-InSEA Regional Art Educators Association, Dace Paeglīte and Dace Pudāne had an idea to invite young people from other countries to participate in the creation of new social posters. In collaboration with Teresa Torres de Eça and the InSEA organization, an electronic platform was created on the organization's website and the project went digital and international.

This is how the project "Social Posters by children



Figure 3 – Latvian Posters promoting healthy lifestyles.

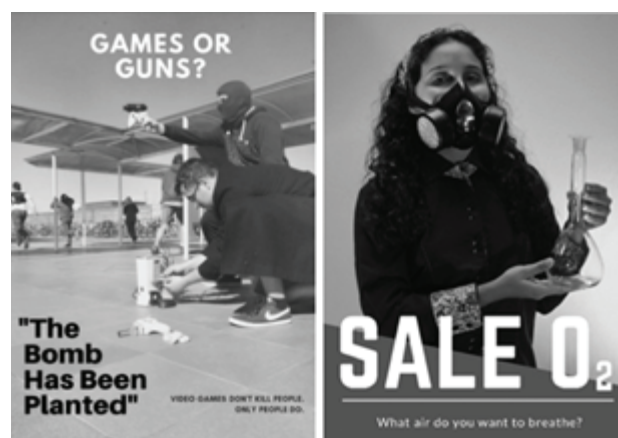


Figure 4 – Brazilian student topics – guns and ecology.

and teenagers” came about. The aim of the project was to create a virtual gallery of works by children and teenagers bringing forward socially relevant topics and issues in different countries through graphic communication. Within a short period of time, three schools from different countries answered the invitation:

Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Sul – IFRS Campus Osório (teacher Estevão Haeser), from Brazil;

Voice-Color-Space Art High School (teacher Gabor Andor Tooth), from Hungary;

North West University Potchefstroom (teacher Merna Meyer), from South Africa.

In a short time, the website was updated with various social posters created by students and learners from three different continents – Europe, Africa and South America. The posters revealed some common yet very different and even provocative themes.

The posters of young Brazilians showed life-threatening situations: guns, racial inequality, lack of access to education and severe addictions. Ecology and nature conservation are also important themes.

In the work of Latvian and Hungarian students, we saw stories about ecology, pollution and protection of nature, healthy lifestyles. A humorous approach was also used, the content of these themes was sometimes expressed in humorous ways.

The young people from South Africa were the ones to put an accent on environmental issues.

Communication via the internet and digital media enabled the posters to be uploaded and printed by the participating organisations to create exhibitions in their schools/educational institutions with posters from the different countries. The authors (students) and teachers received a certificate of participation in

the InSEA-P-Project. The digital platform offered the opportunity to promote intercultural dialogue, to organise an online discussion between one or more students and other teachers involved in the project. This is the advantage of a social poster – to be permanently available digitally anywhere in the world.

Latvia started displaying the posters publicly first in a glass arcade in Riga, on a street, Rīdzenes iela, of the Latvian capital’s old town, open 24 hours a day and located in the middle of the popular Galerija Centrs shopping centre, where there is a constant flow of young people and tourists. In February 2020, the already international exhibition “Social Poster 2020. Dialogues between Continents – Latvia, Brazil, South Africa, Hungary” was displayed. The exhibition was visually contemporary, interesting and optimistic (Paeglīte & Pudane, 2019).

It was shortly before the onset of the COVID pandemic, but in March, the country and the world suddenly began to experience COVID restrictions, which brought with them feelings of confusion, disorientation, stress, depression and fear. The next exhibitions were already shown in autumn in schools and libraries, in rooms partly closed to the public and visitors, sometimes only on the internet. Limited accessibility was detected at the local level when, due to the restrictions imposed on small-scale exhibitions by the COVID-19 pandemic and later the war in Ukraine, only students, teachers and staff were and still are allowed to view the works in school premises.

The same question became more and more relevant: ‘How do I feel in this world? How do I cope with COVID’s teachings, remotely at home? How to make friends? What to do with my feelings, dreams, thoughts, which suddenly became very limited in space, in communication with peers, adults and school.

Elizabete J. at the name *Shame*:

I chose this theme because I often have moments of fear, shame or anxiety myself. Sometimes I even feel that people around me will think something bad or nasty. This is a very topical problem that more and more people are facing, because in today's virtual environment you always feel that you are being judged and discussed. Of course, everyone has their own individual reasons for such emotions. In the mask I depict a face red with shame, fear and worry. There are clouds on my head, meant as negative thoughts. Sweat is dripping from the face. You can tell from the expression on the face that the person is uncomfortable.



Figure 5 – Exhibition place Gallery shopping center, 2020, in Riga.



Figure 6 – Hungary.

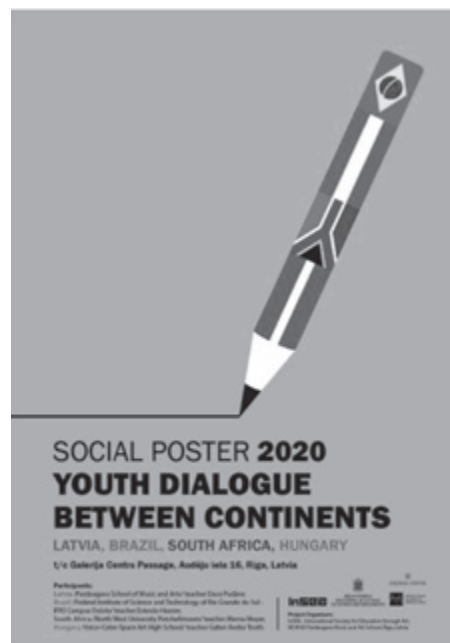


Figure 7 – Poster.



Figure 8 – Brazilia.

My ALTER EGO and Discussions With Myself

The next project, *ALTER EGO*, implemented in the spring of 2022 when school life was back on track, brought more answers to the numerous questions.

Young people had not yet had time to get used to normalcy and return to normal life when the war in Ukraine broke out on 24 February. Living next to Russia, it really numbed life in Latvia and the Baltic States mentally and divided daily life physically. The traumatic outside world full of fear, the wall around it and the uncertainty of how to interact, when again from the outside world, the fears, anxieties, phobias, avoidance of situations that are no longer controllable were pushed into the young people's inner world (Hermene, 2021; Osokina, 2022).

In any case, art classes are therapeutic as well as psychological, because bringing current events into the classroom, putting oneself in a different role, talking about problems with teachers and peers, gives the student a balancing effect that can lead to comfort, security, confidence and well-being.

Renāte Kloviņa and Paula Treimane, professional artists and teachers of young people, believe that the conversations and the chosen form of the *ALTER EGO* masks, which were created on the artists' own faces, provided a certain anonymity and sense of security for them. Each student created and removed a print of their own face using household foil, trying to preserve the most characteristic features of their face. Some did it themselves, others were helped by a classmate. The mask was then pasted with paper or paper tape, fixed with glue to ensure a firm face shape and then painted, decorated and embellished – creating everyone's inner *ALTER EGO*, adding a small written message to it at the end.

The anonymity of masks gave the authors the en-

couragement and the ability to “remove” these emotions from themselves and look at them from the outside, and also created the possibility for others to “put on” these masks and step into the other's shoes. The exhibition was shown at the Christmas and New Year's Eve event of Christmas Stars, Riga Municipality Music and Art Schools Festival, which took place from December 2022 to 27 February 2023 at the Riga Art Nouveau pearl, Ziemeļblāzma culture palace. It is a historic cultural venue where Riga's cultural, concert and exhibition scene is vibrant (Grāpis, 2006).

Rodion Š. and Audience Feedback – Should Children Really be Expressing Themselves in these Forms and Should it be Shown to the General Public?

We received feedback from the audience, along with comments that the exhibition was interesting, but also questions on should children really be expressing themselves in these forms and should it be shown to the general public. The school teachers felt that the results were surprising, as the conceptual display of personal masks *ALTER EGO* showed visually tragic messages, where both the war in Ukraine and the long-lasting, everyday stress caused by COVID-19 were present and felt. However, they believe that the exhibition of the works was a positive benefit, where the students have expressed their pain, asked for help and gave their teachers an opportunity to understand them better. At the same time, they reached out to their peers and adults in public space. The works showed a wide variety of materials and techniques used and applied to reveal the content, i.e. broken mirror shards, jewellery, props, nails and objects made by the pupils themselves, as well as paint or nuanced painting. Most



Figure 9 – Exhibition place *ALTER EGO* 2023, the Riga Art Nouveau palace of culture "Ziemeļblāzma".



Figure 10 – Wonderful personality. Estera T mask.

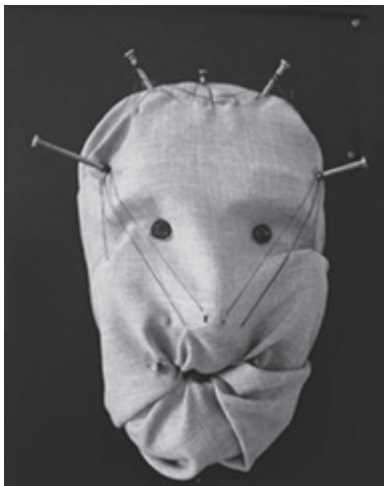


Figure 11 – Mask with nails.

importantly, the conceptual masks do not leave the viewer indifferent, as they scream not only visually but also in terms of content (Meherali, 2021; Osokina., 2022; Kadiķe, 2021; Paeglīte, 2012).

We compared these works with the images of the social posters and concluded that the main problems and themes of young people are and remain similar. However, comparing the themes and forms of expression of both projects, we see that in a war situation young people speak more emotionally about their personal problems, asking themselves questions and looking for their ALTER EGO, the part of their personality that other people don't usually see.

For example, the mask by Margarita S. tells that the person depicted in the work closes his eyes to what is happening around him – he does not want to let the harsh reality into his life. The third eye on the forehead represents intuitiveness, the person accepts what awaits him. The mouth is "sewn shut" representing the fact that people no longer even try to express their individual opinions. This whole theme has become particularly relevant during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when everything was suddenly turned upside down.

Adriana V., on the other hand, talks about russo-phobie, believing that it is a particularly problematic topic, very important for many people at the moment.

She believes that no one should be ashamed of their nationality and that everyone has the right not to be judged solely on their origin. In her work, she depicts that despite negative experiences, hatred should never be directed against innocent people and that it should not happen on an individual or national level. She wants everyone to understand that things must not be simplified and the entire population of a country must not be turned into something horrible.



Figure 12 – Adriana V. and mask talks about russophobia as problematic topic.



Figure 13 – Samanta E. created provocative work.



Figure 14 – Mask *Under the Skin – All the Same*.

The aim of fantasizing and self-awareness is to maintain psychic balance, a sense of self-protection and self-preservation through the technical possibilities of visual art, in which the unconscious world finds its expression (Paeglite, 2012; Kadike, 2021). We realize this already when we read the titles of the works such as: *Brilliant personality, Calm before the emotional storm, Default, Untitled, Under the skin – all the same, Forgotten-shame, etc.*

“People tend to judge and hassle each other, to constantly compare on social media who has a better life, but inside, under the skin, under the ‘mask’ – we are all the same, and this cannot be hidden by jewellery or expensive brands” (Samanta E.).

But among the loud and outwardly dramatic works, we also find the silent cry of Natalia P.

This mask reflects me in my everyday life. I chose this look because it shows my shy and quiet nature. I represent my shyness as a blush and my silence as a ball in my throat. Because of my quiet voice, people don't hear me in everyday life. Even though I say the same thing several times, they still don't hear me. Sometimes I feel as if I have a lump in my throat that prevents me from speaking and being heard (Natalia P.)

Finnish psychotherapist K. Brummere recommends interacting with the child in a neutral way, without judging or worrying him, because the inner ideas and foundations on which the young person's behaviour and relationships with others are based work automatically, partly while still living in the parents' world (Brummere, 2011).

Astra J. in *Bright Sun* talks about how difficult it is to be outstanding and to satisfy the dreams and expectations of one's parents.

The Sun is usually seen as a good personality – bringing light and warmth after a cold winter.



Figure 15 – The silent cry of Natalia P. mask.



Figure 16 – The mask of Laura G., *Forgotten*, represents a thing that was too difficult to take care of, so it was put aside and forgotten.



Figure 17 – Mask *Bright Sun* talks about how difficult it is to be outstanding and to satisfy the dreams and expectations of one's parents.

However, it also has its downsides – staying in the sun for long periods of time can also cause sunburn.

This is a hot topic for me because I see people around me who are as important to me as the sun, but at the same time I have felt stress and pressure from these people in the last year. I am expected to be very successful, which causes me even more stress.

This mask is my set of emotions. Visually it has 3 faces with countless horns and eyes. The eyes and faces represent the people around me and the horns represent the pressure of what my future should be (Astra J.).

At this point, I want to recall the Merleau-Ponty quote:

We must understand literally what seeing teaches us, namely, that by it we touch the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere at once, as near to things distant as to things near, and that even our faculty of imagining ourselves in another place and of freely picturing real beings, wherever they may be, still imitates vision, reuses the means which it places at our disposal. Only seeing teaches us that “the mutually distinct”, “the external”, “beings alien to one another,” yet exist absolutely together, simultaneously – this is the mystery with which psychologists play like a child with explosives. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p.).

Conclusions

By living through the COVID-19 period and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, by analyzing the conversations and dialogues of teenagers and young people, and by evaluating the social posters and personified ALTER EGO masks they created, we concluded that both projects are still asking questions about the following:

Can the art expressions employed in the projects help young people bridge the gap between where they are now and where they want to be?

Can dealing with an issue in an art project allow



Figure 18 – Latvian Brazilian posters and Latvian mask – similar stories.

one to get out of the surrounding environment and start doing something that at first seems difficult and irrelevant?

Have the artworks and the process of their making given them satisfaction and can it help in solving things and getting answers to questions about situations important to society?

Analyzing the gains and losses of young people's daily lives through participation in art activities, we can conclude that:

Adolescents need to talk about their problems, ask for help, focus on their inner problems and understand their ALTER EGO in order to feel good in everyday life and in their communication with society. This can be improved through the use of visual art expressions and forms such as the personal mask and the social poster. We concluded that the processes of creating these works, the discussions and the textual storytelling can stabilize and improve young people's daily lives both psychologically and socially.

Speaking about the accessibility of the exhibitions, both of them were shown in public spaces of the Latvian capital, Riga, and made public on websites (including InSEA), thus becoming important events both locally and globally, promoting discussions and dialogues in Latvian society, between European countries and between continents – Europe, Africa and South America.

On the other hand, limited accessibility was found specifically at the local level, when small-scale exhibitions, due to the restrictions of the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine, were and still are restricted to students, teachers and staff and can be seen in the school premises. Limited access to cultural events creates discomfort, psychological exclusion and exacerbates social problems among

young people, and these are reflected in the disturbingly tragic works in which teenagers and young people seek answers to questions about their lives and their ALTER EGO.

Jekaterina B. confirms this in her work naming it *The Past* and writing the following:

The idea of my work is based on the idea that under the mask of an “empty animal” there is a person who tries to hide his inner suffering and pain, but still has “lost his head” in the struggle for his goals and desires in life. The ears of the hare have been cut off, and in my idea, the hare has torn them off himself, so that for the rest of his life he will never hear the painful words that would prevent him from moving on. While he goes through all the difficulties, there is something beautiful inside, because through the mask the “flowers of the soul” sprout and show others how strong and kind-hearted is the person who wears the mask all his life. With my work I wanted to show that not all people who wear masks of bad or inexpressive people are actually like that. In fact, these people go through great trials and shoulder challenges that not everyone can bear (Jakaterina B.).



Figure 19 – Figures 26, 27 and 28. South African, Brazilian and Latvian posters and texts about discomfort.

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