

mara traumane

republicart-interview on *re:public*

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raimund minichbauer: you curated *re:public* together with solvita krese and in your profession as an art historian you work on developments in contemporary latvian art, e.g. in your essay "the question of changes: the 1990s in latvian art"¹. which developments in the last ten years have had an impact on the current situation?

mara traumane: the essay is mainly about this shift that happened in the 1990s. very important were two cross-disciplinary art events: *open* and *bio.sport* in 95 and 96, which were basically techno events and brought together different people and disciplines: musicians, artists, fashion designers etc. the events were like a lounge and party space, and at the same time an art space; it also became clear that you can arrange the setting of visual art work into a musical environment. it was also important that people realised that they can somehow aggregate in certain activities - and not necessarily in the form of a visual artist's union or sound artist's union, but that they can mix together, they can try to cross different genres of art.

in the following years, the influence of new media added up to this tendency of shifting between different disciplines. and with the new media came also the possibility to record and broadcast things, i.e. as a subcultural music group you were able to produce a cd, or for example, *acoustic space*², an ongoing internet radio project, started in 1996. this was the time of clubbings and experiments in music, new media and visual culture and many visual artists tried to create new solutions for the internet - it was the beginning of the internet, so it was not yet that commercialised and there were a lot of idealistic expectations as to how it would develop, there were hopes it would become a space for everybody; and there were these hypertext-ideas behind as well, the possibility to jump through different pages and to connect completely disconnected things.

but in many respects the situation is different now. this dj-ing and vj-ing and the chillout-things got marginalized. somehow people became tired of it, it disappeared in a way. there are much less clubbings than in the 90s, for example. it somehow shifted to other forms such as the creation of web pages or the publishing of your texts on the net - the portals of rixc³ are also very important here -, or it shifted to investing in education and the organisation of lectures, workshops and conferences. maybe it has become more institutionalised, but probably it is also more target-oriented. there are still these influences of music, and the borders between different genres are still blurred, but it is a different model of working now than it was in the 1990ies.

raimund minichbauer: what is the situation of infrastructure for contemporary arts in latvia like?

mara traumane: there is a terrible lack of infrastructure; for example, there is no real physical space for contemporary art in riga, which is strongly noticeable. independent activities like orbit⁴, karosta⁵ or re-lab/rixc⁶, or the visual communication department in the art academy are all like small cells, which try to compensate the lack of infrastructure and also the lack of funding for art education. that is why people in karosta are also thinking about founding a film academy, and rixc received this almost collapsing annex of the artist's union house and they hope to rebuild it into a media space in the nearest future. so it is very much about these visionary ideas, which we have around now. people just work towards these visions concerning future perspectives, which is however not supported by any ministry-of-culture-policy or municipality-policy.

¹ http://www.balticart.org/essays_mt.html

² <http://acoustic.space.re-lab.net/>

³ <http://www.rixc.lv/>

⁴ <http://www.orbita.lv/>

⁵ <http://www.karosta.lv/>, see also the republicart workshop *communart*, which took place in karosta: <http://www.lcca.lv/en/komun.html>

⁶ <http://www.re-lab.lv/>

raimund minichbauer: i would like to talk about the political aspects...

mara traumane: are you wondering why there are no political aspects? that is what western critics are always wondering about. direct political messages are not very popular in latvian contemporary art. even the 'workshop for the restoration of non-existent sensations' - an avantgarde group that was active in the 80s and could be compared to 'collective action group' in moscow -, they were also totally apolitical, their work was about the creative ideas and some represented a kind of escapism and construction of an alternative reality to the existing one. in art history literature there are many remarks, that latvian art is more constructive than deconstructive, so it always tries to construct the alternative to something, like these new institutions i mentioned. maybe latvian art is not so analytical, but more trying to construct some alternative world, like trying to find new passes for existing things. that is why new media probably is so popular, because you don't need to deconstruct anything, but they had this new information highway to put information on, sort of looking for these alternative interventions which change something.

there are a few political projects, like this ecological group in bolderaja⁷, which i think is more concerned with ecology than it is an art group. or in the karosta cultural centre in liepaja, there is the gallery k@2⁸, where they had an exhibition-trilogy *corruption, promised land, conscience*. i think, these are political subjects at the moment, but dealt with again in a more creative way, just reflecting about these three themes.

it is also a question of terminology. in my opinion latvian art currently is very political in terms of cultural policy - building up new structures and new institutions, it is really an intervention in cultural policy.

raimund minichbauer: as a co-curator of *re:public* you were mainly working with the artists from abroad. what was the concept behind the choice of artists?

mara traumane: yes, i was invited to chose international artists for this project. the composition of them was mainly based on diversity - artists who are oriented towards different practices, different concepts of what we consider to be public space. so the target was mainly to create a diversity of approaches, but not to make the project more political.

nevertheless, there were political aspects, for example in marianne bramsen's *where would you like to be born?*⁹ she conducted interviews with people from riga and asked that question, and photographs of these people and their answers were afterwards displayed on posters. there are some remarks by russian speaking people, who comment on citizenship-issues and there are answers like that this would be the country where you get citizenship in the moment you are born there - which is not necessarily here in latvia.

so marianne bramsen's project is more political. otherwise, i think *re:public* is also about alternative practices like mark bain's project¹⁰ with an fm-radio system, which is being broadcasted one kilometer around the building. it is interesting also, because eventually you can do that yourself, to broadcast one kilometer around, but it is more about the exploration of public space - how you explore it and how you make it visible, also visible to other people, this question of the public space as some shared space.

a quite different approach is tellervo kalleinen's *white spot*¹¹. she spreads advertisements, in which people are asked to come and direct a film scene, and also to give her a role in it, and it all happens in an empty white space. it will really involve approximately ten people in a very creative process of making a film, and it will show up something about the behaviour and the fantasies of people in riga. this is a very personal and somehow very local approach, strongly localised and determined by the context of the country, in which it takes place, as well as about what people think and what the basic cultural conventions are.

⁷ see the republicart interview with solvita krese: http://republicart.net/art/concept/interview-krese_en.htm

⁸ <http://www.karosta.lv/k2.htm>

⁹ photo of a poster can be found at: <http://www.lcca.lv/en/repdar.html>

¹⁰ *sensecity*

¹¹ cf. <http://www.frame-fund.fi/aom/kalleinen/artwork-2.html>

raimund minichbauer: so there is a very broad range of concepts, like the cooking and music events in local pubs by kalle hamm, dzamil kamanger and jyri pitkänen¹², or hinrich sachs' *save harry! the largest harry potter fan meeting in the country* are very different.

mara traumane: yes, the aim was to get a variety of different participatory practices, and to create a platform for these public art practices in general, and projects, that could provide something new for the audience.

raimund minichbauer: thank you very much.

¹² *con-fusion food and free palms*; see the republicart interview with kalle hamm, dzamil kamanger and jyri pitkänen: http://republicart.net/art/concept/interview-hammkamangerpitkaenen_en.htm