

Normunds Kozlovs

Post-modern conditions for artistic expression; re:public case

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As the organizers declare, this is an intervention, although an artistic intervention within the urban outskirts (not to mention their ghetto status). Such localities already have their "aura" as a social historical background that is not fully sterilized yet through the globalized process of coca-colonization. What artists can do about it, is to accept this background and surf on the pre-given contextual wave. What is new, is that there is a certain enlightenment ambition from the artist's side to add "the hottest" global touch and to observe as patient experimentators the interference on a surface of social interface consisting of global and local communality effects. The art of mixing different audiences with their separated (centrally or peripherally axis oriented) social backgrounds is art to mask each-others oddity and to find the common ground for reconciliation.

Another trigger to form the alliance between contemporary art and the urban outskirts is "alternativeness" or as the prophet puts it: "The stone that the builder refused is gonna be the head-corner stone". To be non-elitist, to promote democratisation. And art to the masses. As the author's death is apparent (Michel Foucault et al.), everyone could be an artist and even already is; only he/she had not realized it yet. Many artworks are dealing with it, like in the Finnish artist Tellervo Kaleinena's invitation to become director for the scene of the video movie "White spot".

Speaking of local contexts and prospects: for community art in Riga symptomatic is the ethnical segregation that could cause the diffuseness in the perception of the message. In Latvia on the state level there is a huge Russian-speaking minority besides the Latvian population, most of them inhabit the largest cities. The capital Riga, which is the centre of two thirds of all economic activity in Latvia is not exceptional in this respect. On the level of media perception and consumption (art being a form of specific media) there are differences and a variety of information channels. You can distinguish an individualistic Latvian culture (with protestant ethics) on the one hand and on the other hand- much more communal Russian culture. On the media level the Russian speaking minority (although the majority of Riga inhabitants) is more freely dealing with symbols of the Soviet past while for Latvians it still could be a traumatic experience. Communality itself is associated with totalitarian connotations by a Latvian audience: as a forced communality. Therefore the language used by the Russian community is much richer, but the media basically serve entertainment, as information comes through informal channels. Each of the ethnic groups has its specific official media environment. Additionally, there is an alternative rumours-like spread of messages (even though most of the topics for such non-formal communication are provided by the centralized mass media).

Besides, the particular art message of re:public is wound up in the tough competition for media coverage and the public agenda with political battles around the referendum for and against EU accession. In addition, there are various different cultural events and festivities going on. Somehow this post-summer seasonal period (in a - as the Situationists called it - "society of spectacle" (what Latvia partly becomes with the growing gap between the generation of Euro-class citizens contrary to the post-Soviets) is full of entertainment in order to prolong the holiday-mood of the audience.

Another aspect or foreseen result of the project is the discovery of the so-called "common people's" lives' aesthetic dimension and its introduction to the contemporary arts scene. Even if such an introduction has certain exploitative characteristics, the effort is directed at reducing intrusion as much as possible and to establish a real reciprocal dialogue instead of one-way communication. The best example for such communal art is the Bolderaja region group's photo exhibition "Bolderaja is beautiful!" at the local marketplace, covering shop-windows with pictures taken by the local kids. In some cases it works and in some it doesn't. But the strength of re:public primarily comes from the historical-cultural research that

has been carried out by the artists and theorists that fixates the contemporary face of the city (published in the city guide format), which has its hidden deeper dimensions revealed under its plain touristic surface.

There is a stated difference between the spaces that are completely transparent in their prescribed functional use (coupled with adaptive behaviour), that is the nodes of the everywhere persistent network of flows and on the other side there stand "the holes" within the net (as Manuel Castells calls them). The charm of "the holes" lies in their capacity to resist the occupation of the mediated systems of integration through money and power. Instead, they remain self-regulated and sustainable life-worlds ("Lebenswelten" as in Jürgen Habermas), where symbolic exchange and open communication prevail. It gives the courage for artistic intervention because artistic expression has its prenatal memory of its existence within the life-world, even if now these "zones" have the guts to carry on the stigma of "dangerousness".

Surgical wars

The romantic dream of the aesthetic sphere's primacy failed. It has not the capacity for setting the rules not only for the arts' sake, but also having the ambition to reshape the whole society. What we have got, is further a one-sided process of rationalization, where science and technology under the servitude of a military-industrial complex as being the leading production force are shaping social interactions. There are certain structural similarities between the military and culture spheres at the levels of rhythms and developmental pace of our technocratic society. Even the superstructure form of artistic expression is following the overall developmental tendencies (and not introducing anything new within them). Previous massive movements, happenings and also confrontations are changed by surgical interventions. There is the war of positioning and the war of manoeuvres. Now it is time for the surgical interventions of peacekeeping troops, of observing, monitoring and patrolling the territories. Unlike similar military operations, artistic ones are hard to evaluate concerning their efficiency. Although the intention is clear: to escape from boring exhibition halls with their usual audiences in order to increase interactivity and to gain public response. To what extent the task gets fulfilled remains questionable. What the artists expect from the inhabitants of the post-Soviet/pre-European standard zone is the capability for at least some creativity - even if on a large scale this creativity is observed by gallery circles and art critics as part of an anthropological curiosity. Why anthropological? - Because this kind of aesthetic experience is deeply non-reflexive, even unconscious. While these "alternative" audiences are in the state of total emergency for media manipulation, they are giving the feed-back and are scanned for public opinions. This appears in the subversive and ironic character of some of the artworks, as it is the case for example in Gints Gabrans video-lectorium "How to get in TV", in which a homeless is turned into a media-star.

Mapping urban space

First of all, not every place in the city's micro-region is eligible for artistic intervention. Pre-scanning of the sites is necessary, something like taking samples before intrusion, which can be compared to biological warfare continuing with military metaphors. Then some sort of networked structure starts to appear that becomes visible on the map, describing the dialectic of centre and peripheral relations. Geographically speaking, most exciting is always to walk on the wild-wild east side that is a suburb in the direction of Moscow. The Moscow district of Riga with its gipsy community and historical memory of the Jewish ghetto becomes the starting point for re:public's psycho-geographic journey through the old working-class neighbourhoods of wooden buildings to the Soviet era's block houses' "sleeping" regions.

Surfing the ambience of floating sociality

What is characteristic for the new global information age, is the economy of flows (money, data, etc.). There is a certain decentralization of the subject happening through such processing. Identity becomes floating. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observed such de-centralisation considering the change in such human activity as sports. Originally, there is subject oriented individual effort making; and the effort comes out of a single body as the privileged source of power and starting point of movement. A development can be observed towards the "new" sports that are surfing already pre-given waves and calculating the motions according to flows. At the same time the re:public project is virtually cutting the synchronic slice of the city stopping its spinning at a historical moment to show the frozen time of a city in change. The transition. This is the overall result of giving the space for thought, to re-think the distances and differences.

Pragmatics of creation

What do these contemporary art efforts of searching for exhibition sites on the margins represent? What could such search have in common with previous developments of artistic expression and how does it differ from them? It should be said that since the good old avant-garde there is still observed concentration of efforts within pragmatic sphere of the flow of specific arts message. If the beginning of industrialization and modernization processes could be described as the rule of purposive rationalization that suppressed the irrational side of human nature, Romantic art was there to re-establish the wholeness of (suddenly cut into one-dimensional) humanity. Such movement appeared as the search within semantic sphere for new meanings, contents and themes out of the dark, instinctive, unconscious and irrational side. Later, the arts emancipated as a self-sustainable realm focused on its own legacy. That is the period of experimentation and search within the sphere of pure syntax; the search for new forms and various -isms: impressionism, expressionism, cubism, suprematism, etc. And finally, there was a concentration on the message processing in the arts where both the content and the form are subordinate to the perceptive effects, i.e. in the sphere of pragmatics- the use and manipulation of signs. That is the true avant-garde like ready-made pissoir by Marcel Duchamp exhibited in the white cube of gallery as "the fountain". If such classical avant-garde artworks were modelling completely new and shocking set-ups and environments in order to reach out to the audiences, then contemporary a pragmatic of artistic messaging is looking for much more gentle interactions (even if it is declared as an intervention), using already pre-given conditions and surfing the contexts.

Future visions

Another artistic movement that is characteristic for the switch from modernism to post-modern conditions is the squatting of ghosted factories, the remainders of the industrial time of Fordism. In Riga, due to the lack of resources for the contemporary art and culture sphere this has not happened yet though there are plenty of such ghost factories all around the outlying area. In such perspective re:public could be seen as the reconnaissance and the testing of an adaptation of these places for contemporary art to its future suburban existence.