

Maria Arusoo in conversation with Kęstutis Kuizinas



Dēnes Farkas, Maria Arusoo, Kęstutis Kuizinas, Anu Vahtra. Opening of the exhibition 'MEEL. VAHTRA. FARKAS_idealist function' at CAC, Vilnius, 2015. Photo: Indrek Sirkel

Both the Center for Contemporary Arts Estonia (CCA) and Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius (CAC) opened in the early 90s to develop local art scenes and initiate international projects. Towards the end of this October, the exhibition *Random Rapid Heartbeats* opened at the Tallinn Art Hall, highlighting the past three years of the CAC's programme. The exhibition included works by Nina Beier (DK), Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys (BE), Pakui Hardware (LT), Vytenis Jankūnas (US), Žilvinas Landzbergas (LT), David Maljkovič (HR), Sebastian Diaz Morales (AR/NL) and Emilija Škamulytė (LT).

Following the opening of the exhibition, the director of the CCA, Maria Arusoo, met with Kęstutis Kuizinas, the curator of the exhibition and director of CAC, to discuss the show, the CAC's activities and the Baltic art scene.

Maria Arusoo: What are the basic principles of the CAC, the role it carries, and how is its programme and direction decided?

Kęstutis Kuizinas: The CAC is a non collection-based art institution committed to developing a broad range of international and Lithuanian exhibition projects as well as presenting a range of public programmes including lectures, seminars, performances, film screenings and live music events. To make it short, CAC is a kunsthalle type of institution and, in that respect, is closer to Tallinn Art Hall rather than KUMU which is a 'proper' museum with its acquisition budget, research and conservation departments, and so on. The main difference, however, is that we belong to the state (to the Ministry of Culture above us) while Tallinn Art Hall is founded and supervised by the Estonian Artists Association.

The CAC is not only the largest venue for contemporary art in Lithuania, but also one of the most dynamic institutions playing a key role in shaping local art life and its trends. Our artistic programme is put together by the CAC curatorial team I lead. Before the advance of each year, the programme has to be approved by an external board of experts who are delegated by various cultural institutions in Lithuania.

MA: What do you think of the Baltic art scene overall (comprising Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia)?

KK: It is small.

MA: What do we share, what is different?

KK: I am sure that we share more in common than what makes us more distinct, especially if we turn towards the arts and prevailing artistic or curatorial strategies. Here again, small scale and shared histories unite us when we strive to say something meaningful to the broader world. However, if we talk about the institutional infrastructure, Estonia and especially Lithuania stand as being far better off than Latvia, which is unfortunately slow at establishing a proper institutional framework for the promotion and presentation of its contemporary art. All of that inevitably reflects on the results of international recognition of the artists coming from all three Baltic

countries. Just to illustrate this, I could mention our successful participation at the Venice biennials, the fact that Lithuania has been awarded a special mention by the juries already four out of nine times it has participated at the biennial since 1999. That is an amazing achievement is it not?

MA: Has this collaboration been fruitful and do you see any deeper meaning of the geographical framing?

KK: Yes, definitely. We are neighbours and, therefore, for us to make a good show in Tallinn or Warsaw still makes more sense than presenting the same or similar project somewhere else like Hungary or Portugal, let's say.

MA: Having just opened this exhibition at the Tallinn Art Hall, what was the basis for the selection of these works?

KK: I decided to focus on some of the solo exhibitions which were held at the CAC during the last three years, and to fit them into the eight rooms and gallery spaces offered by the Tallinn Art Hall.

MA: Do you mean the best of the previous three years?

KK: I wish that way could have been possible but unfortunately some great projects were too complex to reassemble again or were simply unavailable during this period. From 2013 to 2016, the CAC Vilnius presented around twenty-five solo exhibitions so I still had quite a lot to choose from.

MA: Originally shown in solo exhibitions at the CAC, these works have now been taken out of their original contexts and placed together in Tallinn Art Hall. How do you see them working in the Tallinn context, and what is the meaning of the exhibition here?

KK: Gerda Paliušytė, a curator and artist from Vilnius who came to Tallinn to present her film project from the XII Baltic Triennial told me that the show felt like travelling in a time corridor. I think she is right. In fact, most of those projects currently presented in Tallinn Art Hall have never met each other in Vilnius.

In regards to its meaning, I guess besides presenting the work of truly good artists, the exhibition brings some light to our artistic programme and its making. In a way, it is self-representational of the institution in Vilnius whose hope and intention is that the work of the CAC can inspire the local art scene and particularly the hosting institution, Tallinn Art Hall, for its own work in the future.



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Pakui Hardware, The Metaphysics of the Runner, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplímets



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Vytenis Jankūnas, Stuck on the Train, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplímets

MA: You decided to focus on the 'heartbeats' of the institution. Could you elaborate on this a little further?

KK: Well, a faster heartbeat is a truly familiar feeling to anyone who has tried to achieve something beyond the average, be it a person or institution. To build something ambitious and realise new ideas creates great excitement. On the other hand, it is inevitably a temporal feeling, as one would have to rest a bit in between doing so. My mother was a cardiologist in the Kaunas clinical hospital. I grew up in an environment full of those medical terms. I remember her saying that certain symptoms of tachycardia were nothing to worry about...

MA: Is there also a wider context to this 'heartbeats' exhibition?

KK: Each solo exhibition presented in Tallinn or, to be more precise, a fragment of its original version has its own story – a story of making it possible. I tried to reflect on those projects that were not only presented but also produced by the CAC and the efforts of its fantastic team.

MA: What are the basic principles for you as a curator?

KK: I hardly have many chance to curate shows nowadays. The biggest thing I do curate is our exhibition programme at the CAC. But, nevertheless, from time by time I jump into the water in order to better know the work of other curators and my colleagues at the CAC.

MA: And what are the basic principles for you as a director?

KK: No idea either... As I don't have any other job experiences in my life besides running the largest art centre in the country, it is difficult for me to say what these principles were or are now. I just do it somehow.

MA: Do you have any institutional or personal role models, someone whose work you follow or admire?

KK: Role models...? Is that something you do in sex games...? No, I don't think I have one, but thinking about actors, I really admire the work by Christoph Waltz. I imagine he could be an excellent museum director.

MA: Could you tell me what the main changes in the Vilnius art scene have been in the previous twenty-five years, and what has been the role of CAC there?

KK: The main changes were happening in the infrastructure for arts. Back in 1992 at the beginning of our activities, the CAC and Soros CCA were almost alone in the field of contemporary art. That is why we tried to react and cover as many possible fields of artistic life in our countries as we could. We did historical, museum type shows and even made a kind of art-fair event to stipulate local galleries and the art market. But this is no longer the case anymore. We finally have a museum – the National Gallery for Arts, as well as smaller private and public initiatives such as Rupert or Nida Art Colony. There are also a couple of decent galleries in town as well as some ambitious art collectors and private foundations taking more of an active role in the local art life. The new Museum of Modern Art, designed by Daniel Libeskind, is going to open its door to the public in a couple of years from now. So the institutional landscape has changed quite a lot since the time in which we

started our activities. This means that we can finally focus on what a contemporary art centre could be, as such, without trying to do things that are usually covered by other parts of normally developed infrastructure

MA: What has been the highlight of the CAC in the last twenty-five years?

KK: I would say the biggest achievement (but not the highlight) of the CAC is that it has become a pretty established and mature contemporary art institution without losing its original dynamism and desire for experimentation.

MA: What do you see as being the biggest challenges for the CAC?

KK: Education in the art centre is something that we haven't had enough time (or enough willingness) to work on in the earlier years of our activities, but we have recently been changing our attitude towards this. CAC always was and is still very popular with young audiences, but we have to work a lot more to tune our communication towards other audiences especially those of a senior age so that we can cater for everyone as best we can.

MA: As the founding director of the CAC, what keeps you going in one place for such a long time?

KK: I love the work I do and I trust my team which, by the way, is constantly refreshing itself by bringing even younger and more ambitious people on board.

MA: If you could name one art centre or institution that inspires you, whose program you believe in, which would it be?

KK: That would have been a good question to answer in the nineties (Rooseum, Kunst Werke, Palais de Tokyo) but from today's perspective, I don't know... perhaps there is no such one art centre or museum, but rather a selection of some good parts from different places around the world. In any case, I believe that the CAC is strong and ambitious enough to create its own standards that could become inspirational for many other institutions in the field.

MA: What will the next twenty-five years bring to the CAC?

KK: After the recent elections in the US..? Quite frankly, I don't know. Let's wait and see.

MA: Thank you!



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplímets



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Žilvinas Landzbergas, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplímets



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Nina Beier, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplímets



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Emilija Škarnulytė, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplimets



Random Rapid Heartbeats, Sebastian Diaz Morales, Tallinn Art Hall, 2016. Photo: Karel Koplimets