

A bit too much randomness

Review: “Random Rapid Heartbeats”, organized by the Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius (CAC) at the Main Hall, Tallinn City Gallery, and the Art Hall Gallery

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21/11/2016

Photo: Karel Koplímets

Currently, at all three Tallinn Art Hall exhibition venues – the Main Hall, Tallinn City Gallery, and the Art Hall Gallery – it is possible to see the exhibition “Random Rapid Heartbeats”, as organized by the Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius (CAC) (through 4 December 2016). The exhibition consists of select projects from the last three years. Even though the exhibition concept sounds like an exchange of experiences between two institutions, there are many things that seem unfinished, put aside, and/or just ignored and left for the viewers to accept without question.

The exhibition concept for “Random Rapid Heartbeats” only explains the medical meaning of the term *random rapid heartbeat*, as well the fact that, in this case, the term is being used to describe the dynamics of two *similar* institutions that organize temporary exhibitions and try to keep an open mind in terms of new possibilities and ideas. Even though both exhibition spaces are institutions and they organize regular shows, it is quite difficult to find other similarities between them. One of the differences is that CAC is the largest venue for contemporary art in the Baltic countries, while Tallinn Art Hall only states that, as an institution, it doesn’t favour one type of art over another, and that they are diverse. Looking at the setup of the exhibition, each project needs a new approach, and this influences not only the space where the artwork is being exhibited, but also the people and the institution itself. If this can be counted as a similarity between the two institutions, then they are similar to most exhibition spaces. At the same time, there has been no explanation as to why these specific works have been exhibited here in Tallinn the way that they have.

One of the first things you notice upon entering any of the galleries and buying a ticket is the yellow informational flyer that will be given to you by a nice lady. It contains a map of Tallinn Art Hall and its galleries, as well as the exhibition statement: “Tallinn Art Hall is *occupied* by Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius, bringing the most exciting projects from the last three years.” The problem with this statement is that nowhere else, besides the informational flyer, are there any references to the *occupation* idea. Consequently, this raises questions: Is this just an advertisement trick with big words and no content, or perhaps it is somehow connected to the *Occupy Movement*? If so, what exactly was occupied? This exhibition isn’t a pop-up exhibition, because it seems to have been organized and planned in advance; so, there’s been no sudden occupation of the space. Also, the Occupy Movement is an international socio-political movement against social inequality, therefore, this type of terminology is confusing because further on, there is no direct analysis of social issues. If it is meant only in the context of the space itself, meaning that CAC will be using the exhibition space for the next month, it might have been better to use another term instead of “occupy”. This situation brings to mind a quote attributed to Anton Chekhov: “*If in the first act you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must be fired in the last act. Otherwise, don’t put it there.*”

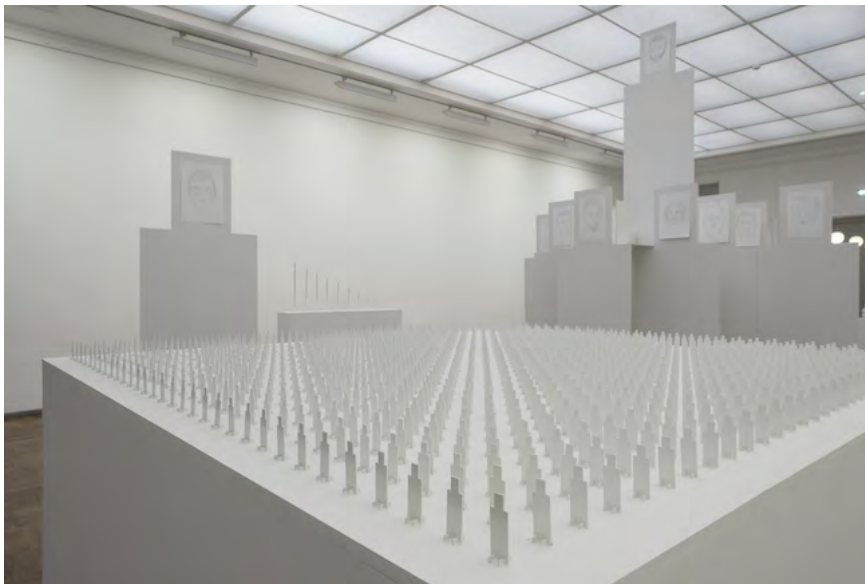
This leads me to another problematic issue – as it is a curatorial exhibition in which the curator has chosen specific works to exhibit, the guidelines of the selection process haven’t been made clear. For example, one of the things that it seems this exhibition is proud of is the fact that it has chosen “the best of the best” from the Contemporary Art Centre’s last three years of programmes. If that is so, how did they measure which were the most exciting exhibitions? Did they survey people, did they choose based

on awards received, or critics' opinions, or maybe based on individual opinions? Even these factors haven't been made clear. Of course, since the claim that they are "the most exciting" works can only be found in the exhibition flyer, and it isn't repeated anywhere else, it might again be a case in which the exhibition's advertising campaign is simply trying to hype the exhibition.



Žilvinas Landzbergas. *From the series Crown Off* (2015). Photo: Karel Koplímets

There are catalogues for the exhibition, so if you have a moment to read it, you can see the accompanying texts and pictures. The first noticeable flaw concerning the space and the works is that there is no consistency between the portrayal of the art projects in the catalogue and in the artworks as exhibited in the space. It seems that most of the works have been taken out of context, or only a part of the project has been exhibited. The design of how the space and the artworks interact doesn't seem properly worked through, because some of the artworks disappear in the space that they have been placed in. In the exhibition catalogue, the first text: "From a session in finding questions to important answers," raises the question: Does an exhibition have to be beautiful and precisely installed?[1] No, but at least the artworks shouldn't melt into the space so that they lose their uniqueness. Most of the artworks in the Main Hall seem like they don't belong there. As if they were just meant to fill up the space. For example, the positioning of Žilvinas Landzbergas' work: even though the space was changed and interrupted for the purpose of exhibiting his installation, it doesn't work for the artwork. In some ways, the installation has lost its uniqueness and meaning; it just disappears next to the work of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys. The things one notices are the carpet and some feathers, and that's all; but if you go and look closely, you will find live doves.



Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys. *White Suprematism* (2016). Photo: Karel Koplímets

On the other hand, the quite spacious installation of the Belgian artists Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, "White Suprematism", seems over-crowded, but in some ways it even works. Even though the installation seems suited for a bigger place, it did give the impression of modern times – with overcrowded cities, masses of anonymous people, high buildings, etc. – even creating a feeling of mass graves for unknown soldiers in different war cemeteries. During one of my visits to the exhibition, a young woman was giving a tour in English, and one thing she talked about concerning this installation was the word play between "Suprematism" and "White Supremacy" – the former is a Russian art movement from the beginning of the 20th century, whilst the latter is a racial ideology. It is possible to understand the connection to the first, especially because part of the installation consists of white paintings on the wall that could be connected to Kazimir Malevich, but for the second interpretation, there are no references to it even in the catalogue.



David Maljković. *New Reproductions* (2013-2014). Photo: Karel Koplimets

Looking at David Maljković's exhibition project, only two works from the exhibition "New Reproductions", which took place in 2013/2014 at the Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius, have been exhibited at the Tallinn Art Hall. Of course, one needs to go through the catalogue to understand that this work isn't the whole exhibition, but just one work, and by reading an article on Maljković, one can find out that the design of the space is personally very important for the artist. Even if we would like to argue that this is quite a different space and exhibition, it would still be nice to think: Does this place work with the artwork? If an artist has a solo exhibition, one could assume that he or she spent a lot of time thinking about not only the concept and the works, but also about how and where the works should be placed. Both of Maljković's works in the Main Hall seem a bit too random – both in terms of the way that they have been positioned, and in terms of the room that was chosen for their display.



Nina Beier (2015). Photo: Karel Koplímets

Danish artist Nina Beier's work for this exhibition raised questions for me after reading the exhibition catalogue, even though its positioning seemed fine and well curated. First of all, her work in the Art Hall consists of two works combined: "Tileables" (2014), a mosaic of ceramic tiles that imitates concrete, marble, mud, etc.; and artworks from the series "Plunge" (2014), which consist of compositions of objects suspended in resin. As neither the catalogue text, nor any of the other available information about either this work or its previous exhibition in Vilnius, look thoroughly at the artwork, it made me wonder if the installation is being exhibited in Tallinn the same way as it was in Vilnius? In addition, nowhere is it mentioned that the installation consists of many details – broken and frozen wine and martini glasses. This lack of information leads one to wonder if by exhibiting already-once-exhibited exhibitions, is it allowed to manipulate the artworks?



Sebastian Diaz Morales. *Pasajes I* (2012). Photo: Karel Koplímets

However, in the Main Hall, Argentinian artist Sebastian Diaz Morales' and Emilija Škarnulytė's works seem well placed, even without a common concept. Argentinian artist Sebastian Diaz Morales' video works, "Pasajes I" (2012) and "Pasajes II" (2013) didn't feel displaced. Both of his video works weren't over-shadowed by their placement in the space, therefore allowing us to enjoy the works more fully. After reading the catalogue about his exhibition in CAC, it felt that the things we're seeing now in Tallinn Art Hall are nothing compared to what one could have seen in Vilnius in 2014.



Emilija Škarnulytė. *QSO Lens* (2015). Photo: Karel Koplímets

Emilija Škarnulytė's work "QSO Lens" was one of the few works that looked like there had been some effort put into installing everything necessary to change the space for the artwork. Her video-work and the alteration of the room – by putting up a black mirrored ceiling – creates a reflection of the projected video that is not only a reflection, but also part of the work itself. It was possible to enjoy both Sebastian Diaz Morales' and Emilija Škarnulytė's works without knowledge of the exhibition concept; the experience was also not intruded upon by the works' positioning in the space.



Pakui Hardware. *The Metaphysics of the Runner* (2016). Neringa Černiauskaitė and Ugnius Gelguda

The situation with both downstairs gallery spaces is a little bit different. The Tallinn City Gallery has Pakui Hardware's exhibition "The Metaphysics of a Runner", and the Art Hall Gallery has Vytenis Jankūnas' "Stuck on the Train". As both of these exhibitions have separate venues, it seems like more time has been spent working on their layout, creating the illusion of a solo exhibition instead of just a random amputated limb that has been placed in a random room. Pakui Hardware is an artist duo comprised of Neringa Černiauskaitė and Ugnius Gelguda. Looking at their exhibition, I was reminded of a dystopian vision of the world in which everything is perfect and good looking, and sometimes, even too much so. It reminded me of the British television anthology series created by Charlie Brooker, "Black Mirror". Everything in the exhibition – the sounds, the colours and the artworks – clean, pretty, perfect, but without content. It is merely an aestheticized world.



Vytenis Jankūnas. *Stuck on the Train* (2015). Photo: Karel Koplímets

However, Vytenis Jankūnas' "Stuck on the Train" exhibition is like a social research study of people on a train. Taking the same route each time, the artist took pictures of random people on the train. And as can be seen in the exhibition, the pictures weren't taken with the permission of their subjects; it looks like some of them noticed that he was taking a picture of them, but others didn't. In some pictures, the same people recur, and it looks like they were taken at the moment when they noticed that they were being photographed. This idea seems interesting, especially if you need to use public transport every day. It is a way to see so many different people going somewhere or coming back from somewhere. In the exhibition space, the photos are arranged in an order that creates the illusion of continuum and the feeling of a train, all of which is intensified by the sound of the installation in the back room.

Besides the exhibition concept, in which one can read about what *random rapid heartbeats* denotes both medically and as a name for the exhibition, there still is no apparent logic to it. There is one question it does raise, however: Does putting each of these works in a different, artificially created environment decontextualize them? Even though the exhibition concept states that the exhibition is like a living archive depicting Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius' projects, it still doesn't take into consideration the original exhibitions and their original concepts. The works themselves might be working, but their positioning in Tallinn Art Hall might need rethinking, or perhaps the curator should have selected a different set of works. The problem isn't with the artists or artworks; it is with the curatorial idea that hasn't been carried out to the end. It just doesn't inject any enthusiasm for being there. It feels like two slightly-tired institutions met, randomly placed stuff around the space, and then simply went away, letting the artworks just sit there (be it for criticism or praise, but that clearly depends on each

individual's point of view). Most likely, it might leave people not caring about it at all, which would be the worst-case scenario. There's too much randomness in the exhibition, leaving too many unanswered questions beginning with "Why is...?".

[1] CAC Collective "From a session in finding questions to important answers", exhibition catalogue "Random Rapid Heartbeats" Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius, 2016 – P. 6-7.

Curator: Kestutis Kuizinas

Assistant curator: Edgaras Gerasimovičius