

Subjective maps and artistic cartography

There is much talk about the fall of the walls, pluralism and tolerance in the post-Communist age, but I am still curious to know why the borders emerged and what borders still exist. Humankind will continue to harbour prejudices against other cultures, and what is more - to harbour prejudices within one's own culture, including prejudice against art.

To begin with, I am going to refer to a survey conducted by the researchers from the University of Tartu¹, which examined how Estonian schoolchildren imagine Europe. For this they used imaginative or subjective and mental maps, which were introduced by Kevin Lynch and David Lowenthal in their research in the 1960s. In the experiment the subjects have to draw from their memory their local surroundings, their country or the map of the world. Unlike the topographically exact map, there are meaningful distortions, which reflect the identity problems of the subject and his/her relation to the closer or more distant personal space. The results of the research showed that in the maps drawn by Estonian and Russian schoolchildren the neighbouring countries, such as Finland, Norway and Sweden were represented, as well as large and well-known European countries. No one drew Georgia, Armenia, Macedonia or Bosnia-Herzegovina on his/her map of Europe. To some degree, all old maps are subjective, as there was not enough geographical knowledge and the cartographers were prejudiced. It was not unusual to place Jerusalem in the centre of the world or to rely on the knowledge of one's intimate surroundings, and to reduce or exclude foreign elements.

But it is not a question of schoolchildren or old map makers. Subjective maps

are being drawn by modern artists as well. Želimir Košćević arranged an exhibition in Zagreb in 1997 entitled *Cartographers*² where many subjective maps by artists from many different countries were shown. As to the predecessors the surrealist parody of a cognitive map from 1929 is well known, but the Zagreb exhibition displayed many others. Of Estonian artists Marko Laimre has drawn a map how he as a child depicted the world³.



Karta Europe
Europske Unije
The European Union map of Europe

Europe as the European Union

If it was only for artistic purposes everything would be OK. But it is altogether a more serious matter when maps are distorted for political reasons. In 1938 a map was published in the Soviet Union on which the Baltic countries were incorporated in the Soviet Union. Or, let us take another example: an attraction in Brussels called Mini-Europe, a pedagogical and recreational journey, takes one through the European states highlighting their architectural heritage. However, it is odd that Europe should be limited to the member states of the European Union. We see that Europe ends on the Oder in Frankfurt, Germany. There is no Norway. In the pavilion inside there is an interactive questionnaire: what do you know about Europe? You are asked what the neighbouring countries of Germany are. The multiple choice does not include Poland!

That is how we reach the borders of Europe. The subjective or cognitive picture of Europe is hard to disappear, even after the fall of the walls. I would call it the syndrome of the "desert of the Tartars" after Valerio Zurlini's film of the same title. Somewhere in the desert a garrison defends the last outpost of the Western civilization. The situation is teetering on the edge of the absurd until finally the Tartars arrive. In the same way many European nations unconsciously regard themselves as the last outposts of European civilization. Russians think that they are the frontier of the Christian world, while the Estonians think that Europe ends on the Estonian-Russian border. Incidentally, in one of his wartime speeches Adolf Hitler remarked that Europe ended on the Narva River. The Slovenians are sure that they are the last outpost to protect Europe from the Orthodox hordes and for the Germans Europe ends on the Oder, for the French Germans represent an alien race, and even the Walloons boast of being the northernmost of the Latin peoples in Europe. And finally the English, for whom continental Europe is an Asian peninsula. The prejudices are supported by the satellite map where the level of civilization in different countries is marked by a different number of illuminated points.

Prejudices, prejudices

In the same way, culture and art are judged - much of modern Western art is reflected on this map. Unfortunately, Western art culture, the notorious "art world" or institutionalised "art theory", according to George Dickie and Arthur Danto, is itself prejudiced and has raised new walls. Here are two examples. In the early 1990s a well-known European museum director, who had never been to Estonia, came to visit for the first time and, after the plane had landed, was led to a restaurant where he was warmly welcomed. He did not know anything about Estonian art. In the middle of a conversation he mentioned Picasso and, to be on the safe side, asked: "You probably know who Picasso was?" We nodded eagerly. Or another, even better-known British critic and the writer of modern art history, who, when on a brief visit to Tallinn, happened to go to a crafts exhibition. He only shook his head and said: "You have a strange understanding of modern art, here in Estonia." Another prejudice is revealed in a widespread belief that the transfer from socialist realist art to modern art would take place in the East European countries immediately after the fall of the Berlin wall. In the book on post-Communist art *The Nosy Nineties* I have attempted to analyse art in the East European countries during the Communist period. There were big differences: art in Hungary and Czechoslovakia as well as in former Yugoslavia was more influenced by the Western avant-garde while in Albania, for example, abstract art was forbidden. Of the Baltic countries Estonia was de-

finitely more progressive than the other two: abstract expressionism reached Estonia in the mid-1950s, not much later than Finland, and pop art in the mid-1960s. Latvia came to be influenced by pop and concept art only after the mid-1970s, and even then in the form of hyperrealism. In Lithuania the 1960s art movements had no considerable influence until the 1990s. While not wanting to overemphasise the role of Estonia on my subjective map, I would like to point out that Estonia was in the vanguard of modern art together with the underground art movement in Moscow. Thus Ilya Kabakov considers the Estonian Ülo Sooster as his mentor, because the latter, after returning from the exile in Siberia in the 1950s and settling down in Moscow, has influenced all independent Russian art. In this way European art movements had found their way into the former Communist countries long before the advent of perestroika or the fall of the Berlin wall and there is no need to prove it to the local people.

The third prejudice held by the Western Soviet experts stemmed from their inability to foresee the collapse of the Communist empire and, when it did collapse, they made another mistake. This has been aptly characterised by Peeter Tulviste, the expert on intercultural psychological studies: in the West, America in particular, it was believed that immediately after the end of Communism each person, even in the remotest villages in Russia, would stick a yellow star on their lapels, manage banks, run shops, turn kolkhozes into progressive farms and forget handicraft and develop abstract art instead. Nothing of the kind ever happened even if we had wanted it to happen. Instead the newly introduced democratic forms of government intertwined in strange combinations with the remnants of the old order. Another psychology professor, Talis Bachmann has described what he calls the "reform paradox". The reforms have slowed down because with the majority vote the tendency is not toward changes but to preserving the status quo. That is why the changes in state support programmes to modern art and the higher education programmes have not been implemented in East Europe.

The West looks down upon it all impatient to see quick changes according to the Western model. By trying to keep a mental or cognitive Berlin wall, a typical Western European curator might draw his/her own subjective map. Beyond Europe there are Africa, Asia and South America whose art is much more attractive to a New York curator than anything produced in Eastern Europe. Here I am tempted to quote Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys who pointed out that each time Western art perceives a crisis it turns to non-European art: this was the situation in the crisis of academic art in the late 19th century which led to post-impressionism, such is the situation in the postmodernist age.

There are two words of Greek origin: paradigm and paradox. There is no doubt that paradigmatic changes have taken place in East European art, but paradoxes remain and perhaps it is only for the best that Eastern European art is experiencing a historical post-Communist phase and, what is even more important, it is stimulating Western art in the welfare societies. Historically, we are situated between the so-called advanced world and the Third World. Viktor Misiano has predicted that after the disappearance of local differences in the 1990s there will be a return to local idiosyncrasies in the art of the new decade. He might be right and we must admit that the world on our maps is and will be subjective.

- 1 Hannes Palang, Urmas Vessin, Ülle Liiber. Europe as Pictured by Estonian Schoolchildren. *Akadeemia*, No.2, 1996
- 2 *Cartographers. Exhibition catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Zagreb, 1997*
- 3 *Estonia as a Sign. Exhibition catalogue. Tallinn, 1996*