

## Politics\_of\_Distance

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// Liutauras Psibilskis: \_What I really want to talk about is distance.

Anders Kreuger: \_Do you mean measuring distance? Distance to what? From what?

LP: \_I mean distance as such, distance in geography, distance in perception, distance in seeing, distance in self-reflection...

A.K.: \_Distance as a mental or even moral stance? To keep a certain distance?

L.P.: \_A distance which is not about morality but about detachment in reflecting, in seeing your "own" place, or any "other" place.

A.K.: \_Could this distance be de-coded as "attitude" (as distancing or removing yourself from something - an identification with Self or Place, for instance), or as "method" (as a mode of seeing or being, outside the ideologies of belonging)?

L.P.: \_I would call this a method rather than an attitude. "Attitude" would imply the notion of *involvement*, as it becomes a mode of active reaction towards something. On the other hand, both "attitude" and "method" are performative notions. They are also founded on the contradiction between the subject and the object. By distance - or detachment - I also have in mind a certain *uninvolvement* with the object-subject contradiction.

Perhaps this is a utopian perspective, but I think it can be experienced in reality. As you travel, and encounter the variety of ideologies that societies are based on, you start realising the relativity of each (cultural) framework in relation to the next. In a way, the meanings as such disappear, and every new concept is reflected as a *performance*. Through the reflection of this serious meaninglessness you start seeing yourself as part of this conceptual wonderland, distant and present at the same time. The distance appears as you reflect on your own position.

A.K.: \_So, distance is really *belonging*, but to the disconnected or detached world of perception, or reflection, or theory, rather than to the connectedness and attachment to a physical context, such as a place of origin, a local consensus, a "home" if you like. Is your distance in effect the privilege - and pain - of belonging to non-belonging, of leading a nomadic life and paying the price for it?

L.P.: \_Yes, distance is definitely also a notion of belonging, since you are never alone, whatever activity or way of life you are involved in. There are always other people who share quite similar situations and it is only when you can share your experiences with others that you can start talking about belonging.

Detachment becomes a community experience, with an ideology and "theory" - if you like - to go with it. Something becomes a phenomenon when the ideology is coupled with action.

A.K.\_And the action is "sharing a practice with others in the same predicament." Or some other nice re-formulation of what *the international art world* is supposed to be about. One - almost "material" - aspect of belonging to this world is the networking that takes place against the backdrop of art events. If you wish, you are free to turn your belonging to such groups or events into something more "substantial" than the fact that you hold a Swedish or Lithuanian passport, or whatever. But in a sense, of course, this detachment is illusory. There are still privileges that go with nationality, with the professional experience and the economical potential that a "good" citizenship will provide, almost automatically...

L.P.\_The "ideology of distance" and reflection of the "performative" dimension in any ideology may be seen as a de-constructive stream that works against the traditional pre-conceptions of closed situations - including concepts like East vs. West. It has not much to do with the passport you hold. It is much more about the fact how you look at "your" cultural identity, whatever that may be, how you construct or de-construct it and how strongly you believe in its existence, how you "perform" identity. I would say this has more to do with your education, and that usually relates to the place you come from. However, now these things are no longer homogenous, cultures (=attitudes) become mixed, as we all know, with the diminishing role of (political) ideologies and the increasing regulatory functions of the market economy, also in culture.

A.K.\_I agree that "East vs. West" is sliding out of the general consciousness, is becoming an unfashionable, "last season" issue. I believe this is not only wishful thinking, but also a natural consequence of the fact that ten years have passed since the political break-through in Europe. Even if things move too slowly, and "Eastern" countries still have to deal with specific problems, some things have changed for the better. This means, however, that higher expectations now have to be met by artists (and other art professionals) from the "East". It is no longer enough just to *be* from the East, or pretend to be *speaking for* it. If you forward pretensions of being a member of the (international) art community, you have to prove that you understand the demands that entail. I, myself, am really tired of Eastern-European-Art that only illustrates a post-Communist condition, without subjecting this material to any artistic process or editing. Time is running out for "After-The-Wall agitprop". Or at least I hope so. Let us see, for instance, what this year's Tirana biennial (initiated by Giancarlo Politi) will offer in terms of actual *art*...

L.P.\_I agree that it is absolutely not enough today to "illustrate" the post-communist situation, for example. I think this tendency was deployed for some years and that it was actually formulated by the demands of a politicised market, pushing all concepts of identity towards highly simplified notions. Things were grouped into opposites that supposedly explain what society is all about.

It is really difficult to group together something just because of one shared characteristic, disregarding ten differences. I would say that these market demands also influenced the art process. A lot of art was produced to fit into (political) pre-conceptions. The demands change now. However, this again

indicates that every framework is highly relative and very much time-based. The thing is that once the grouping is done and accepted, it becomes real . . . There is also one "law": one-dimensionality is exceptionally sticky. Every one of us participates in this game (performance) of writing and re-writing identifications.

A.K.\_Yes, and I think this connects well to the qualitative demands on artists, curators and writers that I forward here. Art has - or should have - much more to do with the *how* and *why* than with the *what* and *where*.

On the other hand, do the elite international circuits really lead to a "cultural mix"? Is the mix that does exist not, rather, a product of popular - almost anonymous - culture, like blockbuster movies, TV soap operas (witness the almost total conquest of the post -Soviet TV soap market by Latin American producers), comic strips and hit list music.

L.P.\_I think cultural identity and belonging is more and more about the choices you make. It is about having all this wonderworld in front of you, and negotiating your own path through it. Depending on the position you aspire for, you choose what things to consume, produce and re-produce.

A.K.\_Still, "national" cultural policies in each small European state decide how most of the money invested into culture is actually spent. The "official" Lithuanian cultural policy objective, for instance, talks about being "based on the ancient Baltic world-view, although this may be re-interpreted using new artistic forms." Needless to say, these objectives are almost totally ignored, even by the government itself. But somebody must still think them worth holding on to, at least in theory. And when you remember that Europe consists of some forty or fifty ethnically specific (and culturally "unique") territories, you can only start imagining all the closed, narcissistic narratives that are being put into play every time money has to be spent on cultural manifestations. And this is in no way an Eastern European ideological monopoly. Just think of the two linguistic communities in Belgium, each with its own national ideology and resources to back it up . . . You really need some "distance" when you start dealing with *these* issues.

L.P.\_I really do not think there is anything wrong with "the ancient Baltic (or ancient Swiss, etc.) world-view." This might be just another manifestation of variety. Not everything can be based on one single - let us call it liberal - ideology . . . It is just important that one ideology wouldn't get the (legal and actual) right to dominate over another. Anyway, it may seem that today's artistic production does not really care about the issues that seem to be important for politicians and often still present (national) communities they supposedly represent. So it is natural that contemporary art has to create its own platform that exists outside of these boundaries. Alternatively, it has to find ways of changing them. On the other hand, I think that the issues of transgressing national limits find their way into regional politics in our days. All over, they speak about the issues of "political correctness"

A.K.\_But if you want to "find ways of changing" political realities, what happens to that distance that you need, for the sake of method if nothing else? Or do you think that art with a "cultural-political agenda" can really function, in terms of the qualitative demands forwarded by the "international art

world?" I think it is better to acknowledge that the art world is - has to be - cynical, and uses the political nonsense just to secure its own public funding. Political correctness is, of course, a career tool also in the art world, but it is not a good long-term investment. The myth of the artist as an individual above politics is still too strong, not least among collectors, the people who finally decide about the market value of art, by actually spending real money on art. And who actually *collects* the ancient Lithuanian/Swiss/Croatian world-view "in new artistic forms"?

L.P.\_If we speak about the *The Baltic Times* exhibition, it is clear that this is a project based on geographic (cultural) presentation - yet another way of manifesting belonging or the construction of identity.

A.K.\_Perhaps we are expected to pay more explicit attention to this regional aspect in our discussion. But do the three Baltic republics really form a region, as far as contemporary visual art is concerned? There is some room for doubt.

Just a few basic observations: Of the three countries, we both know Lithuania best. It probably has the least developed infrastructure for funding and propagating art, but on the other hand Vilnius is the only Baltic capital with a Contemporary Art Centre that attempts to be part of the international circuit (with a degree of success). Lithuanian art seems to be drawn to the narrative, to various connections between the literary text and the moving image, to content-based means of artistic expression. In Latvian and Estonian contemporary art - which I know from travelling to these countries, from exhibitions and publications - there seems to be more emphasis on securing an international, contemporary "look" for the art produced and promoted, and on making use of media and technologies that bear the trace of "now". Predictably, in all three countries the contemporary art "scene" is small - my estimate is that the Lithuanian environment hinges on the activities of no more than a few dozen people, and I gather that the situation is similar in Riga and Tallinn.

L.P.\_I do not think that identities necessarily are based on "substance" or on some "real" (whatever that is) sharing of qualities. Identities can also be constructed for the sake of geographic and historical convenience (and become "real" consequentially). I suppose such operations also agree well with political expectations. The main issue here is: who wants to do this, for whom is it useful, and is it something that the parts involved want to do? These kinds of exhibitions, indeed, are a platform where the art context and politics meet.

You have been invited to curate a Lithuanian biennial at the Vilnius CAC. Can this pre-existing (political) structure be useful for your look at contemporary Lithuanian art?

A.K.\_Perhaps I will ruin your picture of political and artistic synergy a little, but I have to say that the Lithuanian biennial is programmed as an exclusively national event (almost aggressively local - which I find an interesting point of departure in itself), and that there is no hint at a "Baltic" unity or community for this project. You should not forget, though, that there is a whole series of traditional "Baltic" art events (the Vilnius Painting Triennial, the Tallinn Printmaking Triennial, the Riga Sculpture Quadrennial etc.) In general, however, there seems to be little everyday contact - and limited mutual

interest - between the three capitals. But they do, of course, form an "imagined community" in the eyes of the surrounding world...

L.P.\_Is it useful for you to be from "outside" (from Sweden) when it comes to curating overview of Lithuanian art scene? (I should also add that you are in a very special position towards Lithuania, since you know the language, the people, you lived in Vilnius for years) Do you still feel as an "outsider" there and if yes, does it help if you do? What is the "distance" in that situation? Would you see the Swedish context differently?

A.K.\_I guess I am already just as much an outsider in my native Sweden (where I have not lived for ten years) as in Lithuania or anywhere else. On the other hand, whenever you get to know a language, or people who speak that language, you also get to know a "culture" (in the anthropological sense, a cultural unit as distinguished from other cultural units), and if you gather enough intelligence or knowledge about a context that was not originally yours, you also become something of an *insider* - but only through applying "distance as a method"...

L.P.\_Do you think it is a legitimate method?

A.K.\_It is always legitimate to be curious about things you do not know. Everyone is free to try and understand a new context, but there is no guarantee of success. And there is, of course, the risk that distance as a method will create nothing but alienation, for yourself and others. //