

## Kaliningrad Oblast – the flashback

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The main street crossing Šiauliai city is named *Tilžės* – used the old name of the town in Lithuania Minor (1). The streets surrounding my living place - *Tilžės, Ragainės, Karaliaučiaus, Gumbinės, Stalupėnų* was the names of towns until 1945, which are known now as *Sovetsk, Neman, Kaliningrad, Gusev, Nesterov* and located in recent Kaliningrad Oblast. A new highroad was built year ago from Šiauliai to Kaliningrad direction and was named *Karaliaučiaus* road.

How does Šiauliai correlate with Kaliningrad when the distance between the cities is more than 200 km? Why so many place names are around? The answers are in the history. The main trade road from Riga via Šiauliai to Königsberg was connected Baltic countries and West Europe in the past and today.

There are many reasons, why so often these names are referring in Lithuania: the nostalgic historical past of territory of Lithuania Minor, the roots of Lithuanian literature, writing and culture. There the **first** Lithuanian book by *Martynas Mažvydas*, was printed in Königsberg in 1547 and the **first** Lithuanian grammar (*Grammatica Litvanica*) by *Daniel Klein* was printed in 1653 there, the **first**

Lithuanian poem "*Metai*" (The Seasons) was written by *Kristijonas Donelaitis*, who laid the foundations for Lithuanian poetry. ( 2)



The Baltic Sea connected through the ages people and countries around it. In olden times there were strong trade and political connections. At 15 century the alliance known as HANZA connected 16 cities from 10 countries. The Baltic countries have developed not only the trade but had cultural connections as well.

Naturally this land is attractive for the Lithuanians now for many reasons, not only for commercial – the fascinated historical past, the flashback of soviet times, culture, unexplored resort areas and sand beaches, cheap petrol, vodka and cigarettes. That what I heard interviewing people around and asking what do they could find interesting in Kaliningrad Oblast.

The *Baltart* network – contemporary art around the Baltic Sea - proposed special possibility to study the contemporary culture around it. Kaliningrad state has a special interest for all of us, joining the group. The heritage of German architecture, the mystified memories myth and legends about Königsberg-Karaliaučius, created a certain spirit of fascination and nostalgia for the imagined past of destroyed town (A. Karpenko. 143). The regional identity of Kaliningrad oblast has unique position for Russia "the oblast represents Europe for the rest of Russia and at the same time it is a little Russia within Europe." (Karpenko, 2005, p. 144)

Observing the Kaliningrad culture one can find the layers of Russian, German, Baltic and soviet culture. The culture formation in Kaliningrad oblast can to be understood as transculture, as Fernando Ortiz defined transculture as a "product of encounter between an existing culture or subculture and a newly arrived migrant culture that violently transforms them both and in the process creates a neo-culture that itself immediately subject to transculturation. (F.Ortiz, 1995) (3)

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1. The territory today known as *Lithuania Minor* was part of Prussia as an ethnic-majority Lithuanian region outside of Lithuania-proper. The name *Mažoji Lietuva* in Lithuanian language (*Lithuania Minor* in English and *Klein Litauen* in German, - was applied during the 19th century and used more widely during the 20th century, mostly among historians and ethnographers. Back then Lithuania Minor was part of Prussia and Germany, the ethnic Lithuanian inhabitants of Lithuania Minor were called *Lietuvininkai*. The major cities in the former Lithuania Minor are, as shown by their Lithuanian-language name (and in their German-language name), *Klaipėda* (Memel) and *Tilžė* (Tilsit). Other towns include *Ragainė* (Ragnit), *Šilutė* (Heydekrug), *Gumbinė* (Gumbinnen), *Įsrutis* (Insterburg), *Stalupėnai* (Stallupönen). In [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania\\_Minor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania_Minor)

2. *ibid*.

3. Karpenko A.M. The identity of Kaliningrad in the Context of the EU – Russia Relations. *Russia, the United States, and Europe in the Baltic region*. 2005. Kaliningrad.

4. *ibid* p. 144.

3. Ortiz F. (1995) *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and sugar*, in Mirzoeff N., The subject of visual culture. p. 18.

The issue of identification it is very actual for the kaliningraders. The artists we were met in the contemporary art center emphasized the identity and *in-between* situation of their artworks and artistic projects.

One of the identity projects I found interesting there was the art project “*she-cat*”. E. Tsvetaeva presented it at our meeting. Based on the true story about cat which was left in Königsberg, When people were deported they could take only 16 kilos of luggage and were forced to leave their pets of their own destiny. The cats stayed near their homes and learned to live independently. So was created new myth about cats who are actually real and true citizens of the area (1). The project also refers to the new citizens who were creating their own history and shaping their lives.

So what the identification of the city? How does it changed from our visionary Prussian land history to the postsoviet or Russian place? Many tourists from Germany, Poland, Lithuania are coming there seeking the historical and cultural roots. Joining the group of researches it was unique possibility to understand the cultural situation from different perspectives.

As N. Mirzoeff wrote, “researcher does not pretend to the impossible position of the ideal observer but involves her/himself into the group and uses that involvement as the basis for interpretation through interviews and other forms of joint participation” (2)

Our marginalized point of view, as observers and consumers, as artists and researchers unfolds our cultural understandings of other culture, the differences and draw up the picture of the place: visual, cultural, sensual....

I try to understand the culture as picture of the world, as visual culture. The picture of the places we are passing by consists of various multiple images and views – road signs, traffic of cars, streets, lights, advertising hoardings, petrol stations, shop signs, local monuments and houses, restaurants and casino lights, even weather... N. Mirzoeff defining visual culture phenomenon noted that “one of the principal tasks of visual culture is to understand how these complex pictures come together.” (3)

Visiting *Oblast*, Kaliningrad and some towns around I was creating my *Picture* of the place from different perspectives - visual experience of everyday life, old and recent architecture, art traditions and contemporary art, details of environment and other artifacts.



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1. Tsvetaeva E. Inside and between. *Communication and identification in contemporary art*. NCCA, Kaliningrad
  2. Mirzoeff N. (1999). *An introduction to visual culture*. London, Routledge, p. 9.
  3. *ibid*, p. 7.



The first time I have visited the Oblast was last year in *Pionersk*, small harbour, with its soviet relics. After a long troublesome night sea trip by yacht, the first contact with the ground has brought somehow feeling of instability and little fear - what to expect in other land. We were constrained to stay on the harbor for three hours, because of misunderstanding between the Russian border control officials, who were writing the papers and keeping us there.



Having lot of free time and waiting for nothing, I just tried to get the visual experience of the place. Strong fish smelling dock, few old fishing boats, empty buildings around and few sleepy dogs. The big rusty fishing ship "Nemanskij" guarded by its former captain came to our camera window. Captain's sad story about the glorious past of the ship and the russian mismanagement and hoping maybe they will repair the ship. Walking around and inside the ship, the group art project "Nemanskij" was born. One of us was talking with the captain, others making video and photos.

**The rust paintings of "Nemanskij"** Visual essay by Edita Musneckienė and Darius Linkevičius











The urbanistic diversity of old german buildings, Old church, soviet monumental buildings and small kiosks and market places, ancient grounded block streets and chaotic traffic continuing to create the picture. Something very familiar and strange was recollecting in my memory from the *soviet* past, which surrounded me in my childhood. The forgotten part of my identity recognized the landscape, the artifacts around, the language and the communication.

