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## **Politics of Location – BaltArt in Kaliningrad**

Politics of location is one of the key concepts in the feminist and contemporary culture studies. It is connected with the ways of doing research<sup>1</sup>. What could politics of location mean in art pedagogy? Why such multidisciplinary study is important in the study of the relationship of art and people, ensuing teaching assignments and practical fieldwork? We took a trip to Kaliningrad with the BaltArt<sup>2</sup> postdocs with the purpose of doing a little study of contemporary culture based on the politics of location. Originally, there were three of us, but in the end there were eight, five from Finland, and one from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania each. Eight women. Irit Rogoff once said in her interview: 'Whatever we do, I always think we should start from some place else.' This kind of agenda is also behind our location research, geographical issues are one context of BaltArt network.

Politics of location is a concept that guides researcher in the search for his/her place alongside/together with the research subjects: where the research takes place? How it happens? What can be done there? What about the dialogue between the researcher and the phenomenon? How does it relate with the

contemporary culture? I will be discussing a number of ideas related to politics of place where theory and artistic production are engaged in interactive discussion on the contemporary key phenomena. So what now? Or as Lolita Jablonskiene asked: 'What if nothing happens?'

Study of contemporary culture is an open field. One of the pioneers of Finnish study of contemporary culture, Mikko Lehtonen, articulates it thus: "no one is entitled to act as the gatekeeper of the contemporary culture studies". Hence the metaphor of the Bergamont Group's performance: we discuss discipline, academic disciplines, who explains which phenomenon and how, how to process it, what to understand before the encounter? In studying the contemporary culture, we could perhaps agree that the audience will always be there so contemporary culture unfolds every moment. Divisions between disciplines are of no interest to its practitioners. This is what we should keep in mind, to whom we are telling our theoretical stories, whom we want to convince, whom to influence, who to tell about? And who of us academics ventures into this contemporary culture? Who will encounter its practitioners, and how? What should be told about the encounter?

Eight academics go to Kaliningrad. Some of them have visited it before, for the Finns, this is the first time. We had a BaltArt meeting in Vilnius in fall 2005, and I suggested that our next meeting place could be Kaliningrad. As we had started our meetings in Tallinn, then proceeded to Riga and Vilnius, geographically, Kaliningrad would have seemed the natural next step.

The group was not ready for the trip in Vilnius, some were confused, some declined and those interested remained silent, as I was later told. Thus, we decided to have the next meeting in

Poland and leapfrog Russia. In Poland our members wanted to organize a conference proper and that takes some time, and so there was no programme for the spring 2006. I decided to travel to Kaliningrad anyway, with two of my doctoral students. In the end, eight researchers joined the group and traveled to the small, interesting wedge of Russia by the Baltic Sea, each for her own reasons.

We are off to do a little cultural study of the contemporary art scene in Kalingrad

Knowledge is essential: what happens just now? In spite of freedom of choice, cultural studies have their own politics; Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg and other classics claim that: “it is not as if cultural studies were political a priori, political in a given way.” However, the self-understanding of cultural studies requires locating oneself close the subject of studies, as a part of the phenomenon or issue studied – and seeing theory and practice as partners in a continuous, interactive dance. The group traveling to Kaliningrad was multidisciplinary, with different historical, political, national and generation backgrounds.

Cultural studies could be perceived to be striving towards a situation where they in themselves are relevant to those cultural practices they are studying. Other fundamental features in the method are acceptance of uncertainty about what is being studied and using this uncertainty as a resource. Due to this, also the important idea of responsibility and politics of research in relation to will to know is emphasized. Focus on ethics is crucial in all research crossing the borders between sciences and cultures: how to approach the other, how to interpret him/her, what to ask, what to interpret, as an outsider, alone or collectively, which theoreticians to use as , what can be said about the researcher’s own experiences?

Cultural studies are born specifically as study of the present, to find out what happens just *now*. What we see just now in Kaliningrad where we meet Elena Tsvetaeva, the leading art curator and director of the NCCA, National Center for Contemporary Art, and the local group of artists/researchers she has chosen to accompany us. Like Stuart Hall described, cultural studies are situated, as “point of disturbance” on the division separating university from the everyday life. This doesn’t mean abandoning theoretical concepts but, more fruitfully, it is radical conceptual dissidence, actively and critically entangled with our dominant concept of culture. When we arrive in Kaliningrad, some of us have certain experience, knowledge, and memories of a place, the other will be interpreting something completely new, for them. Only the issues of border and nationality are shared among the group – we have all been in and out before, Kaliningrad as a part of Russia, all of us by the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Politics of location leads to politization of concepts, their continuous reconstruction and renaming. This dialogue helps us capture some of the many facets of the phenomenon studied and its processual nature. In the study of Finnish art a similar paradigm shift, dissidence, is discussed for example by Marja Sakari and Mika Hannula.

Some members of the group traveling to Kaliningrad apply gender theories in their work. Everybody studies the contemporary and its visual phenomena. I have followed the videos of Elena Gladkova, from Kaliningrad, where she presents her own artistic reading of the psychoanalytic theory using scenes from film classics. I look forward meeting her when in town.

Gender and cultural studies are closely related, they share an interest both in the theoretical discussion and the everyday life and they strive towards interdisciplinarity. Both realize that everything happening now or any phenomena in transit cannot be explained through a single theoretical discourse. Interdisciplinarity is negotiation, grounding and searching through different approaches, unlike multidisciplinarity, which offers a series of lectures strictly from their own points of departure. Gender and contemporary studies question the traditional academic demarcation lines and far-arching power structures.

Issues of power, as well as epistemological questions have made the collective work lively. Collaboration brings also personal experiences, the dialogue of theory and history, to the fore. Both gender and cultural studies have questioned academic conventions, for example by favoring collaborative research and searching for the connections between personal experience and theoretical issues. In personal thought themes of identity and subjectivity are central. Who am I? How I read myself alongside what I am studying, whose is the voice in my interpretation, whose is power and space for producing a personal point of view – visual or textual, images or theory, mine or part of a larger cultural consciousness? Still, it is, somehow, about sensitivity towards the *now*.

How can personal experiences be utilized in research? Feminist scholars summarize: experience offers neither origin for explanations nor authoritative founding for knowledge, and one might think that rather than emphasizing experiences, we should make visible processes that produce experiences, powerful partly because inconspicuous.’ In research, experiences should be tested, not used their raw form. Thus experience becomes a research problem, object of knowledge, and that which is explained. Further: “although subjects are discursive constructs,

and experience is understood as linguistic phenomenon – it is not thought to take place outside cultural signification – neither subjects nor experiences are tied to a stable signification frameworks” How research is done and what is thought while it is done are part of the process, where experiences should be tested, where we should ask ourselves why I am thinking like this – and also: why theory I am applying explains the situation in a certain way.

Individual thought, experiences of the surroundings, phenomenon studied and theory are at a conflict. According to feminist studies this situation “creates an opening for agency and resistance, and change, too”. Those studies on contemporary culture that end up reproducing existing theoretical interpretations are not important. Attending to conflicts thus pushes research-theory-discourse into movement; it is shared, common to all. Researchers it testing his/her own experience and interpretation as well as the theory applied – remaining sensitive to what is studied. Thus, the researcher can bring his/her experiences to two levels: private and collective. Gladkova’s video ‘Freud and Movies’ shows the power of personal notions in reconstruction of classical psychoanalytical theory. Small counter reading activities give birth to a long series of thoughts where the woman is located.

Contexts: spaces we locate the private and the collective

Stuart Hall said: “we are always talking from somewhere, there is no other way to talk, there is no general truth, approachable on the general level and guaranteeing the timelessness of any given cultural value. We are dealing with positionalities, and they are never final, there is no sticking into them in the hope staying in the same place. Being on the move is the way of doing research.

Acting thus I/me and you/You will never get stuck in the grid but escape it time after time.” This kind of thinking is quite well-grounded in humanistic art studies – and this is why the study of the contemporary is so interesting.

The researcher will always bring his/her history, experiences; his/her own social and cultural background. In a way, s/he weaves his/her study into the other texts (visual/textual). Thus, the researcher contextualizes the researched. What am I talking about, why like this just now and especially for you? Contextualization is a methodological decision in the feminist study. One could make a still image of the *now*, freeze it into a time and a place and grow roots for his/her textual researcherhood. If that is not desired, contextualization strategies create new conceptual spaces. Relevant contexts are defined through will to know and political goals.

We cross the border, some of us more than one; everyone shows her passport at least thrice. Olga Kisseleva describes borders and their crossings in her two-video installation. In the other video, a woman dances in an empty space across white, red and black lines, the other is a candid camera take of an airport passport control.

Emphasis on discussing and visioning subjectivity in the feminist theory has led to reconsideration of the knowledge creation process – interplay of the researcher and the researched. How we produce knowledge? Mieke Bal<sup>3</sup> described the video method used in her study by telling that she, as a researcher, will retire completely from the actual act of collecting of empirical material. She creates the situation, painstakingly, appropriating the importance of the space and sharing it with the discussing subjects. But when the information begins to amass, the video taping begins, she isn't there, leaving just two persons, familiar

which each other, discussing. In the feminist critique of science both the possibility of knowing, what and how can be known, and objects and ways of producing knowledge have been redefined. Each of us, a woman, a researcher – and a bunch of other identities – went to Kaliningrad to ask a certain question, some sought for a complete experience of a journey, some had specific questions, modeled by memory and experience to this specific situation. Some of us spent two days in St. Petersburg waiting for connecting flights, some traveled down the Via Baltica, through, Tallinn, Riga, Siauliai and Vilnius to the final destination.

The feminist critique and emphasis on subject positions have meant underlining the many-faceted contextualisations of knowledge and its production. This was inevitable in Kaliningrad, even in our traveling party it was constantly on the fore. We come from different countries and decades, our theoretical, political, historical – and theoretical backgrounds differ. As disciplines go, researchers are grounded in theoretical traditions and writing styles, and epistemologically the position themselves in concepts and preunderstandings.

In the same time, feminist studies are about the future, visions of something that is to be and exits from the present knowledge/power system. We cross the border. We use passports and visa. Some of us are looking for something new, some reflect on their own research; everyone wants to see what is happening Kaliningrad just *now*. What the academics are studying, what the artists create, what do they think and see? Feminist production of knowledge is motivated by political objectives, desire to subject issues to discussion, motion and change. We will meet some leading researchers of culture, artists, curator and theoreticians.

Although researchers locate themselves in certain positions,



historical, experiential, discursive, and subjective, those positions are not given. Researcher may have space to move and options to choose. The researcher is allowed to be sensitive, experience the place or situation. Vilniusian curator and art theoretician describe the state of Lithuanian contemporary culture as fog and shapeless movement. According to Jablonskiene even those living in a given culture lose their ability to interpret its present state, where modernization and postmodernization unfold simultaneously. Sometimes you have to stop, step out – and see from the outside what is happening.

Feminist scholars, as well as other researchers of contemporary culture, have to navigate through the dominant paradigms of various disciplines in circumstance where the dominating discourses appear strong, natural approaches to students and researchers. Positionalisation contains elements of both dependency and agency. We can adopt, change and/or resist such a discourse.

## New place, creation of concepts

Russian Juri Vasielev studies in his video triptych the meaning of the color red in the Russian contemporary culture. The work reflects the historical, political, private, associative and imaginary meanings brought about by the color. It crosses many divisions between the private and the collective and creates a new conceptual world born in red.

Feminist study refuses to accept unambiguous categories of knowledge that create clear-cut divisions between disciplines. Because feminist studies are interdisciplinary by nature, it perceives such divisions as artificial constructions and strives to –

contrary to the traditional disciplines' tendency to homogenize and categorize knowledge – break the myth of epistemological and methodological purity. This is facilitated by the critique of dominant power positions in creation of knowledge and categories of knowledge presented as genderless.

Writing on contemporary culture studies Mieke Bal claims that the "interdisciplinary disciplines" have not been successful enough in challenging the traditional disciplines and divisions between them. The reason has, above all, been the nonexistence, yet, of a concept-centered methodology to balance out the exclusive methods of separated disciplines. While the research subjects – what is researched, have changed, the methods – how the research is done – have not. Therefore there is a certain tiredness of interdisciplinarity observable, and even defense of the traditional divisions between disciplines. More often than not, this is based on the perceived uniqueness and exclusivity of the methods of the discipline defended.

Formulation of our frameworks, hypotheses and arguments is tied in production of thoughts. All knowledge begins with conflict of concepts, giving rise to new ideas. Vasiliev's 'Washing the Red Piglet' cuts into pieces images of washing a red piglet and builds out of them a new whole, with its new meanings. Many of us have developed her arguments and theses as an attempt to rationalize encounters, where affective factors can be very strongly present specifically on the methodological level, in discussions of "tools". A given metaphor appeals to us if there is an element of strangeness or surprise present. This happens more seldom if we apply a given method instead of allowing a meeting of multiple methods with the research subject as a participant.

In Mieke Bal's proposal interdisciplinary studies have to find their methodological basis, instead of methods, in concepts, which are

the backbone of communication between researchers. Concepts are the locus of discussion, awareness of difference and experimental interaction. The essential mission of concepts is to focus interest and rearrange phenomena in new, interesting and meaningful ways.

### With strangification to concept-oriented study

When we choose a given research subject, materials to be studied, the choice grows from our objectives. Meanings gleaned of material are not embedded in it, but depend on the processings, or readings, we used to contextualize it into the surrounding spaces and events. Vasiliev's "Grove" is a performance installation, where the artist has painted the trunks of birch trees red half-way up. A white rabbit is running around the copse. Meanings of material are based on the production of differences rising from related, more general issues. It is about how meanings are created in the complex network of preconceptions, theoretical and methodological issues, of how the contents and contexts of materials and texts are conceived and how differences between them and "everything else" are produced

Our style could be for example deconstructive strangification, bring the differences to the fore, showing the conflicts, curiosity and penetrating gaze. In Vasiljev's video Ma-Ma, the audience has to be face-to face, literally, with the piece, Strangify his/herself and what is seen in order to receive the face encountered in it. Practicing politics of location in ones own research, just now, in Kaliningrad, could be asking the following questions:

What is the meaning of the way we think and name our research subject? To what other cultural texts we connect our research subject? As a result, how this forms the identity of our research

subject? What is the role played by the location of our own researching, our own gaze and experience in formulating meanings?

Just to start this exploration, Kaliningrad curators, Yevgeny Umansky, Irina Tchesnokova wrote about their contextualization for the location in 'Wild Russian West' exhibition:

“Wild Russian West”, exclave, “abroad”, Russian Königsberg, – what associations does the strange territory, which was annexed to the USSR after the 2nd World War, not arouse. The Kaliningrad region is part of Russia, though it does not have any common border with it. But it's only the beginning of the peculiarities of geography and history that evoke a sequence of reflections: Kaliningrad - Königsberg, Russia - Prussia, eastern territories of Europe and the westernmost Russia...

Historically Russian Kaliningrad, the former Prussian Königsberg, turned out to be a specific place, a phenomenon of new postgeography, a point where imperial ambitions of the two states came into collision with each other: Prussian heritage, which was strenuously squeezed out from the Soviet city; monstrous architecture that emerged on the Prussian cube; transformation of memory of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, the Königsberg citizen, into a great narrative symbol of the Kaliningrad desire to merge with the European history and rejection of the charisma of the wild west of the Asiatic Russia.

Just some years ago there were neither institutions nor practices, nor obvious possibilities for development of contemporary art. The cultural infrastructure of the city is quite conservative, it's mainly tourist program (from the Kant's tomb to the amber and castle ruin-lovers), reconstructed fortifications, the cathedral, etc.

During the ten-year activity of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts an artistic community has been formed that positions itself as “contemporary”, which makes the task of working with the local artistic context and its further transmission topical.

The mythic instability “east-west”, geographical uncertainty create a fertile field for work with the contemporary art problems, such as perception of area, memory exploration and significance of existence.

Themes and subjects of the Kaliningrad artists that were naturally picked up in the local mainstream rise to All-European category simultaneously fitting both European – western and Russian – eastern contexts.<sup>4</sup>

In the following pages there are different kind of interpretations and happenings in the city, written by the members of our Baltart-group, researchers from Kant State University and National Center for Contemporary Art, Kaliningrad.

#### Notes

1 Theoretical discussion presented here is based on my doцентural lecture at the University of Art and Design in spring 2006. The ideas were materialised and developed collectively in Kaliningrad, we visited with the BaltArt doctoral students in May 2006. The article builds on sources used in the lecture: on the Finnish expert of contemporary culture, Mikko Lehtonen and texts of Lea Rojola, proficient in theories between gender and visual culture studies, which in the Finnish discourse are based on ideas of Anu Koivunen and Marianne Liljeström.

2 BaltArt, *Contemporary Artlife around the Baltic Sea* –group was founded in 2005 in Tallinn on the initiative of Mari Krappala and Juha Varto and counselled by Hanna Karkku. At present the members consist of 20 universities, numerous art institutions, curators an critics all round the Baltic Sea.

3 Public lecture at the Turku University department of Media studies in May 2006 .

4 «WESTERN RUSSIA». Contemporary Art in Kaliningrad. Organizer: the Kaliningrad Branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Russia. Curators: Yevgeny Umansky, Irina Tchesnokova. Artists: Yury Vasiliev, Elena Tsvetaeva, group «Karpenko&Karpenko», Yevgeny Umansky, Dmitry Bulatov, Danil Akimov, Yevgeny Palamarchuk, Alexey Chebykin, Elena Gladkova, group «Common Wince». <http://www.ncca-kaliningrad.ru/>

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