

Contrasts between Contemporary Art, Art Teaching and Kaliningrad by itself

Thinking about my experiences in Kaliningrad over four days, I have been remembering the contrasts again and again. I do not recall having experienced an environment so full of contradictions. Contrasts in the city environment, architecture, peoples' clothes and the shop windows were immediately noticeable. I saw later, that despite the lack of order the city was full of a joy of life that can be rarely felt in much more affluent European states.



New windows, old bricks



New Cathedral



Near Cathedral



City government



Street marks



Entrance of supermarket

Speaking about the contrasts between my ideas and what I saw. I had considered that I was travelling to Russia, but did not know that I would find myself among memories from my school years. All kinds of funny and endearing absurdities like in my soviet childhood Latvia. More detailed naming and description would inescapably land me in the role of a seemingly superior being, seemingly standing above, living in a *more correct and refined* environment, and I categorically do not want that. Possibly because that I often have to listen to observations as to what is not right in Riga, i.e., what is different there from, for example, America. I completely clearly realise my unclear, or rather unwanted angle of vision, seeing contrasts and stylish oddities in the Western Russia city of Kaliningrad. Sometimes I felt awkward there, looking at items I had not seen for a long time or had never seen and meeting the surprised looks of the Russians, wondering about my choice, and at the same time realising how problematic my "politics of location" was.



Central marketplace



Wedding salon



Flower bed – Japanese



Archeological excavations



Las Vegas – We are opened



Leather, Fur, Sewing, Credit, Repairs

The environment of contemporary art proved no less contrastive than the city centre, full of bright adverts and loud music. The conversations with people from the National Contemporary Art Centre were interesting – the art projects that they had incepted and implemented were full of sense and visually valuable. The local “non-art” community had been involved in several projects, too, without awareness of the involved people (for example, filming by secret camera). When asked about the NCCA art education activities, Elena Tsvetaeva replied that education projects had been delayed for the period while the centre has settled in its new premises - Tower-redan “Kronprince”. Currently contemporary art is available for artists themselves and those citizens who either notice or find it. I and my Estonian colleague Eve were looking for the "Kronprince" tower for rather a long time, asking the people for directions and, as we followed erroneous ones, inspecting other towers, too. The real tower is truly very beautiful and has been used in the context of art works many times already. We hope that its anticipated future function- the establishment of the national museum and an exhibition, research and informative, educational and leisure complex in Kaliningrad- will work in contrast with its secluded, introvert architectonic image. Having heard about my interest in art education, Elena Tsvetajeva suggested that I should visit the Children’s Art School, noting that there is no connection with contemporary art, though.



Cat and Dog



Design of street edge



Europe – department store



Flower bed – tulips



Flowers



Fountain

The art school is a beautiful building, scenting of paints, full of people, located in the corner of a green park. Each addressed passer-by knew its location, in contrast with the „Kronprince" tower. I found the director Natalija Voronova in a classroom where she was helping children to sort coloured paper scraps. The director took my questions about the connection between art education and contemporary art in the same classroom, not interrupting the sorting of paper and consulting the children on continuing with their compositions made in the application technique.

Natalija presented the concept of the school: „The old academic school is the basis for everything. The school has no connection with different transient directions in art. What we teach are tested things – the perspective, colour harmony, techniques of painting, etc. How to connect what is taught with ideas, remains in the discretion of the students themselves. Should an idea occur, the educated person will be able to implement it in adequate material.”

I.V. „Do you teach your students how to find ideas, how to think?”

N.V. „What is necessary for ideas to develop, is life experience. It is like soil which man accumulates over his lifetime. It cannot be taught. I know that work with ideas dominates in Western European and Scandinavian art schools. That takes a lot of time and when a concept is finally created, it turns out that there is a shortage of skills for its implementation. In my view, philosophers and writers, not artists, must work with concepts. We have to create, not to talk.”

I.V. „Do you take eventual giftedness of a pupil into account?”

N.V. „We give tasks correlating to the students' age. Certainly everybody masters classical drawing, which will be necessary for entrance examinations for continued studies, however, they can use their own ideas in composition tasks. Either we want it or not, anyway everything that they think about finds expression in their works - the

evil and the good, the social inequality and other subjects that are topical in the society. As regards giftedness - what matters most is not to jump to conclusions. A man's abilities can manifest themselves at any given moment, they cannot be forecast beforehand. We work with every child. We split children into groups according to the results of entry examinations, for it is essential that the level of skills is similar across a group, and it does not matter if it is high or low. We do not work with individuals, after all, but with a group.”

I spoke to the other teachers of the school later and they were all convinced that it is impossible to become a professional artist without academic school. A teacher said that a few creative, fantasy-stimulating tasks are necessary in parallel to the classical school. After a long time I again heard the view that was widespread in my years of schooling – you have to learn the rules first to be able to transgress them. When asked to imagine how to teach art without the system of the academic school, the teachers were noticeably confused and said that then there would be no system of reference. What would we teach then - to think, or else? The perplexed teachers discussed.

Salvador Dali was mentioned several times, as an example that some artists can draw "nowadays", too. This incredibly conservative, and at the same time united attitude was what truly surprised and moved me. A strong school! The teachers did not want to discuss art after the World War II, hinting that they view the recent 60 years to be a transient period of weakness in art.



Bear looking to heaven



Soft-painted bear



Ancient bear



Sculpture Park



Façade design



Living district

My most vivid adventure in Kaliningrad was the doubtless assurance and complete unity in views about correct teaching of art. The question about my initially unintentionally critical position also was solved this way - strange, but I liked the school a lot, with a comment that I perceived it as a contemporary art project. The school is harmonious, unchanging and the teachers are proud and sure about it. It is an important difference if we compare it with the much freer, personality-oriented and still quite often low quality, clueless and profane teaching of art in Latvia.

Certainly I also remember my years of education, spent in a rather academic art school in Latvia, and how difficult it was to understand that in art things are quite different and completely not understandable. And to dare to trust in art of our time, step by step. I do not know how young Russian art school leavers feel themselves today, in the current visual environment where it is difficult to see anything of what they were taught at school. It is possible that the enormous contrast between the school and the life carries in itself a value that I do not understand.

After the afternoon spent at the art school, I understood much more clearly the visual environment in the city. The city of Kaliningrad is a wonderful place for creative experiments. And the contrasts are not created intentionally, they are just marks for the wide range of environmental art. The experimenters – people from most diverse professions surely do not think that their creations have any connection to art. And therefore they can create freely and genuinely. Probably life experience, the importance of which was underlined by Natalija Voronova, has left crucial impact on the splendour of separate objects and of general city landscape. Eve, walking in the town, often repeated excitedly: "What design!". Kaliningrad is a work of art, and a contemporary one at that. I do not quite know what those art school leavers who do not find a job in adapting western advertising to the local environment do there. Do they see how the principles of contrast and harmony they learned in the school apply in their city?

Maybe art should not be taught, after all?



Golden Lemon



Cafe



Serious roof



Bear with four teeth



Bear with three eyes



Letter box