

Artistic research on two galleries in the periphery of the art world

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on examining art activities at two small sites in Estonia. The purpose is to identify in which matters the art world can be useful for local communities. Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum Gallery is located in Paldiski and Haapsalu City Gallery and Jaani Gallery are located in Haapsalu. While Haapsalu is a bit bigger town than Paldiski, Haapsalu City Gallery tends to be more at the center of attention than A. Adamson's Studio Museum Gallery is. This is because Haapsalu City Gallery is a space where numerous artist activities have happened over time whereas A. Adamson's Studio Museum has been presented only a few summer activities. This paper will reflect on artists' experiences in both towns. Three art projects were made lately in these institutions, which show the boundaries between artists and people from small towns. The aim is to find out whether the concept on which one has to work affects local people. Research would be particularly applicable for attending to local problematics such as undesirable living spaces or people worrying because of prioritized industry in town.

Bio

Rait Rosin earned both a BA (2005) and a MA (2007) in painting from the Estonian Academy of Arts, and an additional MA (2013) in Philosophy from Tallinn University. Since 2015, he has been completing a PhD at the Estonian Academy of Arts in the Art and Design study program. His research pertains to issues that relate to social norms and the ways in which artists, together as one certain part of society, are able to access shared but distant collective norms, and how these norms are shaping individual artists and their subjectivity in the contemporary art scene.

Why some artistic strategies would fit better for small sites

In describing two small sites in Estonia, Haapsalu and Paldiski, my aim is to understand why some artists' activities have more of an effect on the peripheral site and are more appreciated by local community than other ones. In each of the towns are art galleries that are not supposed to be regular exhibition galleries but which are running exhibition programs in warmer times of the year. In 2015, I made an exhibition titled "Our World's Future" with Triin Tarv in Haapsalu Jaani Gallery and in 2016 I made my personal exhibition titled "Swerve like the refugee!" in another gallery, namely Haapsalu City Gallery.

Haapsalu City Gallery has a long tradition and is a well-known professional gallery that has become part of Estonian galleries network. Its purpose is to serve all kinds of artists' activities in Estonia, including activities of artists who are from other countries. The art scene is truly getting to be international, at least in cases that include professional collaboration projects. In 2014, I made my personal exhibition titled "Peace in Paldiski" in Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum. In the Paldiski example I also describe the curatorial strategy I was using when I worked in Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum as a project manager. I called artists to make their own exhibitions in the gallery and left the criteria open. But later I made an interview film with them, where I asked several questions about exhibition principles in small towns such as Paldiski or Haapsalu.

Based on the interview historical explanations, while introducing local community problems and situations tends to be more sympathetic to the average gallery visitors. Those who live in small towns, have relatively fewer connections and experience with visiting art galleries than people from some of the bigger towns. People from small towns like Paldiski or Haapsalu usually attend fewer exhibitions and do not tend to be aware of what artists are working on. They may rarely go to professional galleries in bigger towns.



Figure 1. Rait Rosin' exhibition view *Peace in Paldiski*.



Figure 2. Rait Rosin' exhibition poster *Peace in Paldiski*.

These two galleries in peripheral towns are similar in many ways, and the next question may be asked: What should be taken as a priority in small site in making exhibition in order to find out ways to attend those questions that local people would see as most intriguing ones? Artists sometimes are interested of challenge to make exhibition from purely selfish interest. It would be a short term opportunity simply to get to be done some exhibition. It could be combined of the past artworks that are not peaking any of the temporal or local problematics. Is it a good reason to make an exhibition in a small site, to get better understanding and knowledge about the communities historical or social conditions? This research presents argument that emerges as an answer to this question. Finding out reasons to make ones own exhibition may be seen as well as unselfish or wish centered thinking. It stands on practitioner hope that, once working with a creative topic in such places, it would be possible to have some understanding about the people who actually live and/or work there. In focusing on communication abilities for practicing a social art strategy, I presupposed, they were environments, non protective spaces in which lot of things could happen. My main interest in doing my exhibitions in Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum Gallery and in Haapsalu Jaani Gallery was to understand main characteristics of the sites. In order

to consider descriptions about scenarios how artists may affect local people for getting better picture about their ideas and fantasies.

Based on my observations, this can be said because on particularly small sites, it tends to be the case that all resources are required to make the artistic activities take place in optimum conditions. In moments when artists manifest themselves as individuals, is it against structures of power and in the public interest? I presuppose that these moments of manifestation give the opportunity to show that ideas which are generated by the artists can be a basis for handling contradiction. I presuppose that every work of art is made in contrast to social norms and habits. Artists are not always aware of hidden traits and even restrictive laws and customs that have a knock-on effect on our ideas and practices. While the socially determined customs are hidden in decisions and opinions, we are used to weighing up the need to consider how some decisions are less restricted by societal norms than others. Furthermore, the circumstances must be analysed in which artists are motivated to make works located on small sites and more generally what type of role the art world has in cultivating artistic approaches and activities.

In the exhibitions I made in these galleries, I was concerned with various topics such as news about crisis abroad, dreams of the individuals and issues with integration in Estonia. I focused on those issues and made several paintings, photographic images and an interview film titled “Undevelopment.”

Those who live in Paldiski with its two harbors cannot get to the sea because harbors are between the town and the sea. Harbors with their closed territories and barriers are hiding the sealine and also sea views. In the year 2017, I made graffiti on the wall between town and one of the harbors that had “Berlin Wall” written in Estonian. I stroke through the word “Berlin” and wrote the word “Paldiski.” I edited the photo of the graffiti. The described working process expresses an idea about visualizing the borderline between harbors and the living area. “Paldiski Wall” is in my view a frontline between two territories that are governed by people with different understandings about how the actual living space in Paldiski should be used. The wall is one of the visible signs in Paldiski that shows conflicting spaces: one in which people could live, and the other that is owned by private interests. The wall surrounds the small town, delineating the environment where locals should live. I made an interview film for which I interviewed five local people from Paldiski who were remembering times after the Amandus Adamson’s Studio Museum was

founded. I asked what they have seen during visiting gallery exhibitions and what artists should or could do for Paldiski. Also, I conducted interviews with five artists who were recently making solo exhibitions in the Studio Museum gallery room. I asked the artists about the motifs they used for the exhibition in Paldiski. One question was asked about their artistic practice. The other questions were asked about how the artists frame their artistic practices in small galleries. I interviewed the same number of people in Haapsalu, and also five artists who made exhibitions in Jaani Gallery in Haapsalu. I asked them the same questions I asked in Paldiski.



Figure 3. Rait Rosin. *Berlin Paldiski Wall* in Estonian (Graffiti on wall made of silver tapes).



Figure 4. Rait Rosin. *Paldiski Wall* in Estonian (digital text added after).



Figure 5. Still images from interview film *Undevelopment* (2017).

It may be said so far that artists were aware of the towns' problems but fewer artists took these problems on as themes in their exhibitions. More artists presented previous works and did not touch on any aspects of local issues. I interviewed local people who had lived in towns for a long period and had visited exhibitions in both galleries. They were waiting for artists to address life conditions, as they have been used to living in these relatively small towns.

Exhibitions expose the unspoken conditions we face in making art in a small site. To conduct research that possibly involves art practice, one has to be aware of customs that one has to follow in order to get better results. Every sphere and project is, in a way, a closed system in which all individuals are playing with possibilities with certain limits. There are methods that fit the social or art-making conditions better and by contrast there are existing methods that do not (Hannula, Suoranta & Vadén 2014).

Visual imagery, if carefully modified and addressed, may also educate those people who are not fully informed about the background of the exhibited art pieces or do not know much about the general context of the art world. I suppose that such imagery, as visual information, has traditional qualities that involve common ways of communicating. It would allow a viewer from peripheral site to get some educational experience for making decisions about certain cultural meaning and its implications. Knowledge on that educative manner includes basic ideas, information about how to read visual images. It makes it possible to build up generalizations and a general understanding of cultural forms in the way Husserl (1962) explains. In his project of mapping the human psyche, Husserl has the universalistic aim to develop a complete picture of what the mental activity actually consists of. Even if one prefers to follow one's own reasoning and decides to ignore rationalist arguments, one's own need would still be the source of healing for one's shortcomings.

One's dependency signifies somehow a stable ground for different experiences. Various experiences, described as significant effects, may have exemplified some of the archetypes. Husserl believed that exemplary situations, which may include virtues, can be described in a more precise way. I would add that once described in a such way, these descriptions could be used as one's own motives that are based on naturalistic understanding of that kind of situations. According to Mörsch (2011), there are two different notions of art. On the one hand is intuitionism, and on the other hand is utilitarianism. Both are trying to develop an idea about artworks that may be in some way be related to their home site. People learn about certain art issues, and common ways of thinking will cause social change, as Sternfeld (2016) has described with reference to postcolonial discourse.

In my understanding, the sociological attitude toward rational choice has been ambivalent in terms of explaining of how to affect viewers may give knowledge and consequences for serving local community needs and to adopt artists site specific activities. Even in small sites, possible choices are sometimes limited enough to cause worry. Social necessities are not essential, since we are self-dependent individuals. An explanation of good or bad emotions as a social condition could be situated in the art world context and could have more general meaning. Institutional theories are the central question here, and they concern strategies for every art practice. The belief systems of the art world are grounded in relations to society and in strategies for beneficial art practices (Bishop, 2012). One's behavior, when described in this way, could take on the status of an example in some theory of inquiry. It is more important to advance one's ability to manifest one's outlook on the world and build up more trusting relationships that can stimulate one to become socially active according to one's own reasoning.

Paldiski and Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum

Before Estonian independence, Pakri Peninsula was used as a Soviet military zone. It was a restricted area, offlimits to ordinary citizens, and a Red Army base was located in Paldiski town. Paldiski, which is situated on Pakri Peninsula, has a port with a sea depth suitable for both military ships and ocean ships to come in to port.

Though the whole peninsula was once used only by the military, the area is now quite green. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a scheme for the

protection of nature was created. In Soviet times, when only the military was granted access, the ground was, sadly, polluted. Much effort has already been made by the Estonian government to clean up the ground: oil, chemicals, and waste have been gradually collected so that much of the area has been saved, and now the whole environment is greener.

As Paldiski was a closed military base in Soviet time, the town has no clear cultural traditions: no culture institutions remain from earlier times. Paldiski was the hometown of the famous Estonian artist Amandus Adamson, and his wooden studio house still stands. So there is one museum but was grounded in era of the new Estonian Republic after the state gained its independence. The museum has been there only for the last 7 years, since 2010.

Amandus Adamson was one of the first professional native Estonian artists and was particularly famous in his time in countries that were governed by Russian tzars. Issues of cultural identity emerged during a crucial turning point in Paldiski. Because of this, people in Estonia find it to be an interesting region. The artist's studio museum became a subsidiary of the Harju County Museum – The Amandus Adamson Studio Museum. The house has been renovated with the support of the European Union, and it began welcoming museum visitors on 13 November 2010. I worked as project manager in the museum for approximately one and a half years.

One of the museum buildings has been renovated as a gallery space. The building is not heated, so it is possible to run exhibitions only during the summer months. Previously, it has been tradition to give artists the opportunity to have an exhibition time in June, July, or August. During the time I was working in Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum, the exhibition period began earlier, in April, and ended with the end of October. The exhibiting artists paid no rent for the gallery space, but visitors were obligated to purchase a museum ticket in order to enter, which is unfortunate given that Paldiski is only a small town with a small population. The gallery may not draw the attention of those living locally, as the cost of a regular museum ticket also applied to the gallery exhibitions. Only a small number of people want to visit an exhibition with an entrance fee, as galleries in Estonia are usually free to enter.

The exhibitions held during 2015 were varied in topic, but they were mostly made using the gallery room, with its limestone walls and flooring. Some of the artists—for example, Kadri Toom or Kristino Rav in collaboration with

Juha Hilpas—made site-specific art, keeping in mind the town of Paldiski, with its extraordinary and intriguing history. While planning the artworks, the artists took Paldiski as the main interest of their exhibition. The material and installation expenses had to be covered either by the artists themselves or with support they themselves found from other channels. In my curatorial vision, I felt it was not possible to apply for funding that would cover all costs unconditionally. I therefore left the conditions open, so that the artist had the possibility to choose whether they focused on Paldiski town or instead based their exhibition on their own artistic practice.

Haapsalu Jaani Gallery

Haapsalu Jaani Gallery is a gallery project room that was established by local community organization called “Creative Center” in an empty old wooden house in the Haapsalu old town. The house was donated by the city council to the self-organizing Creative Center in 2011. A lot of work has been done by community members in the house to empty the house of trash and prepare it for public use. There have been five years of summer activities, with as artist exhibitions and artist workshops. But in 2016, Haapsalu City Council decided to renovate the house and provide rooms for Haapsalu Art School. The Creative Center, whose purpose is to develop local artist activities in town as well as in Haapsalu Art School, is supported by Haapsalu City Council. The city council decided to take the house away from the organization without consulting it first. In my opinion, this case is one of those examples in which politicians in power take advantage of artists and volunteers and hence create precariousness (Standing, 2011). Haapsalu town has been dominated by liberals for a long time, and that has changed the atmosphere in town. Artistic activities have never been taken as a priority of Haapsalu’s future vision, and also all kinds of support have gradually been cut down year by year.

Conclusion

Because Haapsalu is a tourist town, advertisements are more often directed toward people outside of town. This makes Haapsalu more attractive than Paldiski, which has basic communal troubles to resolve. The whole town’s situation is different from Paldiski’s, which is simply a kind of low-quality living space for local people. Paldiski is three times smaller than Haapsalu and needs more culturally active artists who, based purely on their own interests,

want to share knowledge about the situation in town. By contrast, Haapsalu has enough of a population to make it possible to maintain one professional gallery. Paldiski has one museum, namely Amandus Adamson's Studio Museum, which is the one and only cultural institution in town. It may be an opportunity for individual artists to enhance their visions and ideas regarding how to live in some small site. But there should be a clear distinction between the tool and the user of the tool, between instrument and agent. The current paper offers ideas to consider when organizing art events that aim to educate local people about contemporary art.



Figure 6. House of the Creative Center before and after renovation (Painting on view of before state is made by Rait Rosin 2017).

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