

# OPEN PANEL “THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY”

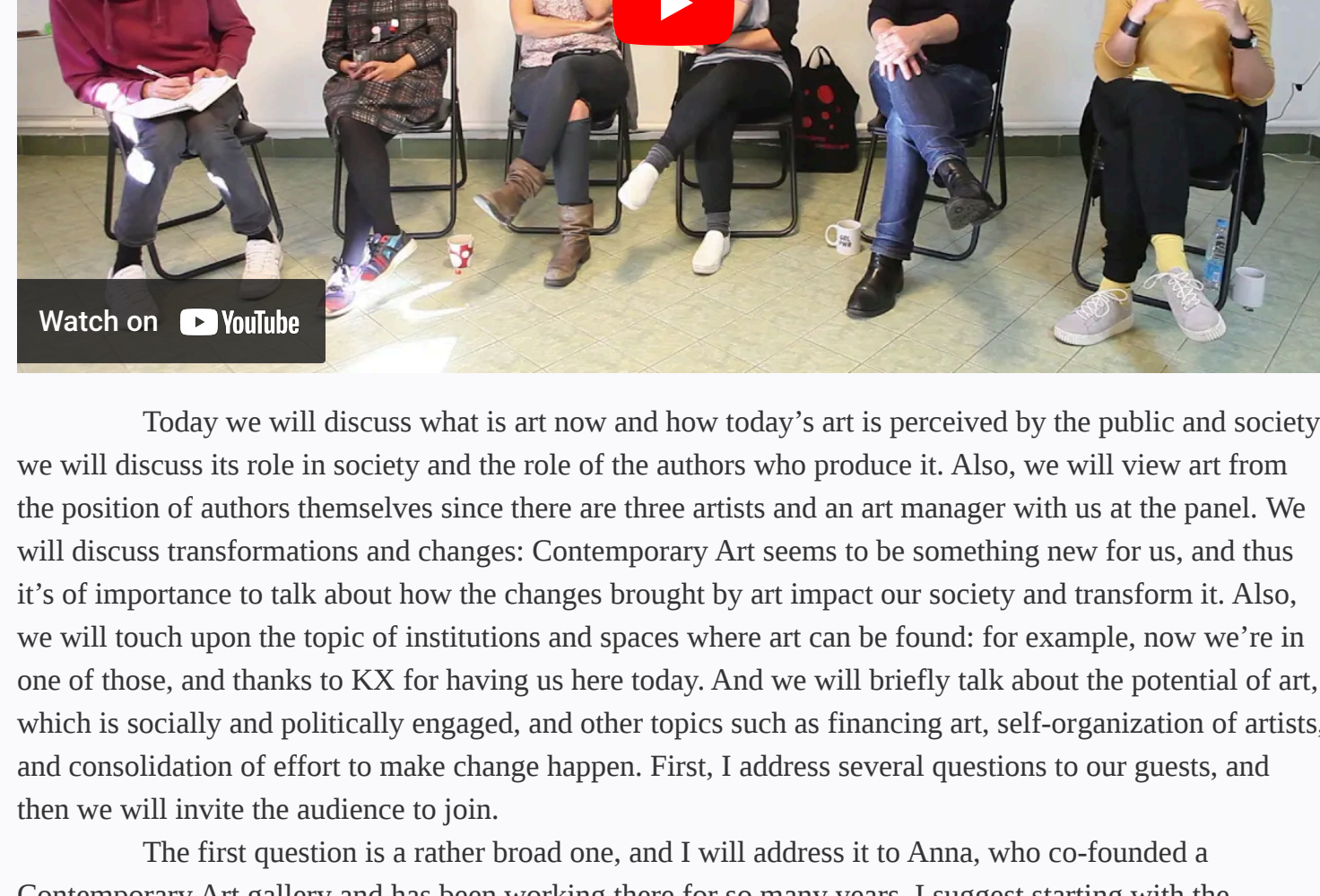
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**With Anna Chistoserdova (Y gallery, Minsk, BY), Nils Claesson (Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, SE), Linda Tedsdotter (Konstepidemin, Gothenburg, SE), and Oksana Haiko (KX, Brest, BY).**

## Brest, Belarus, September 30, 2018

**Allexey Talstou:** Hello everyone, my name is Allexey Talstou. Many of you may already know me since I worked with KX on several exhibitions. In the past days, we have been here with a team of artists and researchers from Belarus and Sweden to launch a project which will describe the role of art and actors within the art field in the transformation of society and talk about what we have in common in our lives. Our project is called Status: the Role of Artists in the Transformation of Society. We decided that today we will hold an open panel discussion in order to meet the audience since being closed in our small groups is not our intention.

I will introduce our panelists: Anna Chistoserdova, art-manager and art-director of a Contemporary Art gallery Y in Minsk; Linda Tedsdotter, artist and independent curator from Gothenburg; Nils Claesson, artist and researcher in the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm; and Oksana Haiko, director of KX theatre and KX space, director and actress. My name is Allexey Talstou, I am a curator and artist from Minsk.



Today we will discuss what is art now and how today's art is perceived by the public and society; we will discuss its role in society and the role of the authors who produce it. Also, we will view art from the position of authors themselves since there are three artists and an art manager with us at the panel. We will discuss transformations and changes: Contemporary Art seems to be something new for us, and thus it's of importance to talk about how the changes brought by art impact our society and transform it. Also, we will touch upon the topic of institutions and spaces where art can be found: for example, now we're in one of those, and thanks to KX for having us here today. And we will briefly talk about the potential of art, which is socially and politically engaged, and other topics such as financing art, self-organization of artists, and consolidation of effort to make change happen. First, I address several questions to our guests, and then we will invite the audience to join.

The first question is a rather broad one, and I will address it to Anna, who co-founded a Contemporary Art gallery and has been working there for so many years. I suggest starting with the audience: who is the audience of Contemporary Art practices now, and how are these practices perceived in our society? After Anna replies I suggest other panelists follow.

**Anna Chistoserdova:** First of all, thank you for inviting me to participate in this discussion. My colleague Valentina Kiseleva and I started to work in the field of Contemporary Art fifteen years ago, so probably the audience – the audience of Contemporary Art, in particular – has influenced our professional development. The first gallery called 'Podzemka' was founded in 2004 on the almost scorched earth of Contemporary Art. Actually, I think that there were quite some Contemporary Art initiatives in Belarus in the 80s, but, unfortunately, the political fluxes caused changes in the art field as well, so our gallery gave an opportunity to artists who weren't welcome in the official art spaces to present their works. From the other side, it is possible to work with any audience, and thus from the very first days, we found education and public discussions of great importance for us. And still, as a representative of the institution, I can say that if we realize our projects only according to the audience needs, expectations, and background, you will never see the art we bring to Belarus. Probably it is necessary to have these fifteen years over with in order to have the audience ready for the product you present. Though only yesterday we were told to go to church and confess our sins because of the content we show in our gallery. Thus I am thinking that, in working with the audience, there is double work to be done within the institution since the institution has to educate the audience. And the last thing I want to finish with: I wish that the perception of art as something that sows good, the eternal, and the beautiful, and serves as entertainment will be abandoned – especially in regards to the official position of governmental actors in the field of art.

**A.T.:** Thank you, Anna. Linda is working in Konstepidemin, our partner in this project. It is a big structure and a big community of artists which is comprised of 130 studios and situated in Gothenburg. Linda, please tell us about your audience in Gothenburg.

**Linda Tedsdotter:** Konstepidemin is a studio complex, and it was from the beginning squared. It was an edict hospital; when it was closed, some artists started to squat the space. And during the years, more artists have been moving in. It's all different kinds of artists: fine artists, ceramicists, theater actors, filmmakers, photographers, and musicians. And we have about 130 artists. During the years, artists have started to do public events: we are centrally situated in a very attractive area in the city so at least many of us find it very important to keep working very intensely with publics to secure our position in the city especially because there's a lot of economic interest in this area. So we have both... there's a lot of interest in meeting the audience, but also there's pressure, and a lot of us feel pressured to show the reason we exist. Of course, there are 130 artists, and we have a lot of opinions, of course also a lot of different kinds of wills, and a lot of individualistic people because we are artists. But we have some organized groups, and we have a gallery group: one gallery which is a typical, traditional white cube. And we have two other more experimental scenes. This gallery group is choosing artists to be shown at the gallery, and they are mostly working in the group and showing just what they think is good and not much about the audience. They are mostly thinking about the artists that they are showing and to give them an opportunity to show, to have a platform. It's really hard to answer how we work with the public because first of all there are so many individuals.

**A.T.:** The last year I was invited to stay in a residency during the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, and I saw the audience which visited your events and also I remember about BRA 10 – a big party which is held in Gothenburg every month. It is possible to meet many different people there, so who are they, who is the audience?

**L.T.:** If you are talking about BRA 10 – because there are so many different scenes in Konstepidemin – it was an initiative from a group of artists in Konstepidemin. We really felt that we were missing something: we were missing a space, a meeting spot, so we created it. We wanted to have a place to go to at the end of the month when we are broke and to be able to meet people, to meet other 'culture' people from the city. So BRA 10 consists of people who work with art in Gothenburg or in the areas around. It's a big range of ages – people from preparatory school around 18 up to 80 – but it's all artists.

**A.T.:** Therefore I think that the art here deals with the audience, which is itself related to art. It is probably a paradox, but quite a characteristic one of when artists are the main audience at vernissages and art-related events. But let's move to the local situation. Oksana, please tell us about the way and how KX works, and who is visiting you? I see familiar faces here today, but nevertheless – whom are you working for? Also, I wanted to ask: why are you doing this? As I understand, you are the theater, and KX is its continuation. How did you set your goals when you started this new activity?

**Oksana Haiko:** You made this question so complicated! The theater is turning eighteen soon, and the space has been existing for almost four years. So I don't even know how to start since I planned to talk about a slightly different topic. I think the most distinctive thing is that we are the theatre in the province. I will use this word though I am persuaded that there is no center and periphery. Because I saw what people do in the most godforsaken spots, as we may perceive them, and how these villages or small towns became huge cultural centers. Nevertheless, I will use this word now because in Belarus the province is in our minds. Though when I am talking with people from Minsk who are involved in similar activities, they say that similar problems with the audience are frequent in Minsk as well. Nevertheless, a couple of words about the theater: it has started and has been operating for a very long time as an activist project. People were working without any money and rarely received fees – and mostly only then from the festivals.

Everything we did was dictated by the idea that we have to do art which had to influence the world somehow, change the world and reflect our critical perception of what was around us, and we continue to follow the same principles. Only lately we started to organize as many events as possible. There was a feeling of the lack of cultural events in general: lectures, meetings, people coming up with new ideas and who show, examples of new ways of living, or various creative practices, and so forth. We understood that if we didn't do that then nobody would; so we started. We didn't have the space that we have at that moment so we utilized various venues across the city. Beyond that, we had an unrealized need to organize everything and anything because, as a theater, we stayed for thirteen years in cultural centers owned by the city administration where we couldn't organize all the things we wanted because of censorship, committee revisions, and prohibitions. Probably for those years, we learned how to organize anything: festivals – since we held some – and so forth.

**A.T.:** So who are the visitors?

**O.H.:** I should say that depending on what we do the audience is different. Talking about this space, since it is operating as a gallery, the audience is quite narrow. Therefore I will come back to the word 'province' because we discuss it a lot when we gather together as a team. We see how difficult it is to perceive the art which we want to show here in Brest. From the very beginning, we set the bar, aiming to exhibit art which critically views contemporaneity. For example, we would like to work with artists from Brest, but we don't exhibit them there because in our opinion there's no art to exhibit which would fit our standards. People who visit exhibitions here are part of a particular community. We are always trying to find new ways of attracting new people, for example, students. Anna is absolutely right that there's work to be done with the audience, but sometimes we get too depressed. From the other side, there's an example of the last theater project realized here. It was last year in June and a final performance of an acting studio which worked in our theater. We made this performance about the very acute events which took place in Brest that year: the construction of an accumulator plant and protests around that. It was a rather loud business. So the people who came here were not part of the usual audience which normally visits our exhibitions. All this space was filled by people, and they were sitting on the chairs, on the floor – everywhere. There were activists from the protest and those whom apparently these activists invited here. We've never had this amount of visitors before. It demonstrates that if – with our art – we touch the truly painful points for our community, it attracts people and many of them are the people who were not necessarily assimilated to the arts discourse.

**A.T.:** You described the situation very well. I was listening to you and thinking that I know what is going on and how to work around that. But I think that, in the case of KX or Y Gallery, there is the intent to make changes and a will to make a difference. We were discussing how to change our audience and work with the people. One way or another, I see that both art workers who operate either as organizers or art-managers, or artists themselves, have a will to declare their agenda. I think that of course there is a difference between how art oriented towards entertainment vs. art oriented towards change, operates. Therefore I think that the work of artists itself has some different aims: it is not always to get a wage, or nor only, but also to have some kind of social influence. Nils, you are researching the artist working conditions. What is the situation in Sweden? Or maybe you have any examples from other countries?

**Nils Claesson:** If we are discussing these questions about the artist's role in changing society, then we must ask ourselves what is changing society? And I would say that you have two things that really change society: one is information technology, and that's an international thing. It's not national because we all have mobiles, we all have computers, and we all go on the Internet. And another thing that affects and changes society is global warming and the global ecological crisis. And that's also something that cannot be solved on the national level. So how should art respond to those changes of society? Maybe the artists should be – you know it's an old saying that you hear the truth from crazy people and children. So art plays the role of crazy people or children. Or maybe art plays the role of a mushroom. Because you need to know something about mushrooms to pick them and eat them. Because some mushrooms are really tasty and they will make things tastier. And some mushrooms will give you hallucinations. And some mushrooms will kill you. So it's a complicated thing with mushrooms. Sometimes you think that people have been eating mushrooms for thousands of years, but how did they accumulate all this knowledge about mushrooms? What happened to all the mistakes? So if you have an art audience, you have to educate them about mushrooms. And now we have information technology that's really affecting people's private lives because when you are on Facebook, Facebook is a commercial company, and it's not really for free. They get a lot of information about you. So you are basically working for free for Facebook. Art can be an alternative to that kind of information flow. And questions to art... So art as a totality can question the monopoly of tradition and new media to interpret reality.

**N.K.:** So it means that if artists are mushroom people, some of them can be poisonous?

**A.T.:** Artists are not automatically good people. Artists are not a collective, and they feel as individuals. And in history you could buy artists for money, and they will sell themselves. But I am still an artist.

**L.T.:** Can I just add about the mushroom? Mushroom is also a good example because most of its life is underground: its whole system is under the ground.

**A.T.:** I think we can move further and focus our attention on Nils's remark about artists being sold: that there are many who can pay artists and buy them, hire them.

**A.Ch.:** On the other hand, there is a certain amount of artists who can buy whatever they like. A.T.: When we are stepping upon the uncertain path that leads to change, we need to tackle the issue of information technology or ecology, as Nils puts it. There are actors who are buying artists, labor, time, and commission certain work. But who are the actors of change? We gathered here to discuss what the change could be like: what are the conditions of our work, and what do we want to change? But it's quite obvious that there are certain organizations and institutions, which offer us jobs. Hence I think that for many in the artistic community, a community of like-minded artists, this is a question of the concurrence of individual interests and interests of a commissioner. Do they speak the same language? I would like to address this topic. After all, we are working with changes, and we probably have certain cultural and artistic projects which advocate these changes. Anna, I know you have to face it oftentimes.

**A.Ch.:** We face it every day. Currently, with the participation of artists, we are working on a project which hopefully improves or changes the situation on Oktyabrskaya street. It is a project initiated by the gallery, and it is focusing on the promotion of a non-discriminatory approach to work among the various institutions that are based on Oktyabrskaya. We only recently realized ourselves how different discrimination could happen and that it has many shapes we luckily don't think of. We are accustomed to seeing visible, which is, for example, discrimination or social exclusion of people with various forms of disabilities; but there is also ageism, sexism and various types of discrimination of the representatives of smaller communities. For us, this project would become first of all a challenge since we don't know how many of our colleagues will support our idea. In fact, there are a lot of such questions. Probably the first challenge that became a certain catalyst for a change was the choice of the Belarusian language as the official language of the gallery's communication nine years ago. And nine years ago it was very often considered to be a political gesture, to which we did not agree: it can be a gesture with regards to cultural policy, but in no way can this political statement be attached to the gallery. Therefore, I think that this kind of change, transformation, is a joint work in which completely different groups of participants are included: the gallery workers, artists, and society as a whole. I hope that starting with some small steps and examples, these practices will be adopted by others in the future. In my opinion, it is not the easiest or fastest, but possible ways of transforming society or discussing and solving some social issues that seems to me the most possible in our country.

**A.T.:** And my following question is: does the city or governmental institutions somehow participate in this initiative? Do you work with them?

**A.Ch.:** We assume that one of the results of this project will be a research: a specific mapping of the street, which we want to present to the city authorities as a good example of how to make the city friendly. On the other hand, the first exhibition which opened a new gallery space was called Without Exceptions. In it, together with artists, we explored various types of exclusion from life and society. And one of the issues that we discussed was the friendliness of cultural institutions to people with various disabilities, at least at the level of infrastructure. It turned out that out of eight governmental institutions that we visited in Minsk, only two were ready to accommodate at least a person in a wheelchair or with visual impairment. And then we conducted a series of trainings on the topic of mediation with representatives of these institutions and, roughly speaking, on inclusion in its various forms. As I see it now, there are already some changes in the approach to their work. In our practice, this is one of the examples of the ways of changing. And I myself believe in evolution rather than in revolution.

**A.T.:** Thank you, Linda. I found really interesting the ways in which Konstepidemin works with the city and different types of funding: governmental and non-governmental. I know that you have a lot of projects in Gothenburg as well as collaborative projects abroad in various countries, for example, in Senegal in Africa. How do artists who form a community react to that: how do they cooperate?

**L.T.:** There are so many questions!

**N.K.:** Select one.

**L.T.:** First of all, we get funding from the city and the region. Then, we are applying for money for different kinds of projects. And for that we can apply for different fundings: governmental funding and so on. But that's mostly the public work. For the studios, we are paying rent. Before it was so much easier because we organized activities for children, now it's more like everyone's studio. But that group is working pedagogically mostly for young people. And that group has since a year ago started a satellite in one of the suburbs. Because we have a huge problem in Gothenburg with segregation. So before we had a studio to which parents could take their kids, and they work with art, with pedagogues. But that's like privileged kids because they live in the city center, so that group that works with the children pedagogy applied for money to do that satellite. They have different kinds of satellites, but they have one space that they actually rent.

**A.T.:** What was the intention of this group?

**L.T.:** I guess it was also to change society. I'm not so much into these groups. It's been going on for so many years, and I guess the intention at the beginning is different from the intention now. Because it's individual studies, working voluntarily in these groups, so it is changing depending on who is in the group. That's one way to work with the city and the region. But then we are also trying to work for the artists in the city and the region. For example we are bringing people to the residency program, but they find time for the people who are coming, but also to bring in knowledge and other people to the city to make it more attractive for the people who live there. And we are also trying to get people and artists in the city, in the region to go out and spread their wings outside, in Senegal for example. I don't know if it was the answer to your question.

**A.T.:** I would question: what is the mission of artists who go to Senegal? Is it, perhaps, some type of an exchange?

**L.T.:** I mean all projects at Konstepidemin are so different from each other, because it is individual. For example, with Senegal: there was one artist from Dakar who came to Konstepidemin and wanted to do a collaboration with Konstepidemin. They have a Biennial in Dakar, and we have a Biennial in Gothenburg, and Konstepidemin is working with an off-program with an extended program of a Biennial. And this artist from Dakar, Mor Faye, he is working with the off-program in Dakar at their Biennial. So the initiative came from Dakar. And we were a group of people from Konstepidemin who were very interested because we don't have any collaborations within the continent of Africa at all, and especially not West Africa. So it's that simple. And then we see where it goes.

**A.T.:** I think these are very good examples. I think it would be interesting for us to collaborate with someone from Asia or Africa too. We are slowly crossing the one hour mark, and I am reaching the end of my questions. But before turning over to the public to ask their questions, I would finish with the following one. I think it will be a question to all the participants, and you can answer it quite briefly without reflecting too much since it can be too difficult. What do you think us, as actors in the art field, can and want to change in our societies and our local context, not only on the world scale? Oksana, let's start with you. You finely described us your activities in Brest and talked about what led you there. Hence briefly, could you tell us what you want and what could you change?

**O.H.:** If briefly, I would like everything we do is trying to change it.

**N.K.:** Nils, what do you think?

**A.T.:** I would agree. That's the role of art. And then I can raise the political questions: global warming, the crisis for ecology. I think an artist must be engaged in one way or another in that issue because it's the question of survival if you want the future. And then in Sweden, we have a quite aggressive ultra-right racist party, so we started a network using Facebook called Cultural Workers Against Fascism, and now we have a network of 4,000 artists and cultural workers. So now we have to see if they can do something. We don't know, we will see if clicking on Facebook translates to a political action.

**O.H.:** And for example, some people from Brest are commenting on my Facebook page that there is no nationalism in Belarus.

**A.T.:** Linda, what about you?

**L.T.:** I actually agree! I always say that art's mission is to make people think. For the rest of the society everyone wants people to think like 'me'; if I am having a company of course I want to make everyone think like me, so they can buy from me. And I mean everyone is sort of trying to force their own opinions on people, but I think the most important thing is to make people think themselves. And doing very simple math: I mean everything you do will make a difference. And I do agree with Nils: I think we have a huge problem with the environment, and it's not something that we can run away from. But then when it comes to art, and we can't put too much responsibility on it... I mean it's up to us as human beings, and then we can use whatever we do. If I am an artist I can use that, and the person who's doing something else can use what they are doing to get some kind of result, to create something. Or we just all keep doing it, and then we are all gonna die and then the problem is solved. Because we are the main problem.

**A.Ch.:** I agree with all the previous speakers. But besides critical thinking, which is unfortunately missing here and the development is not encouraged, I would really like people to start forming their personal opinions in regards to what is happening to them and their environment: because civil society, which is rather nonexistent here, is a group of people who have their personal opinions. And it's not enough to only form it; it is necessary to learn how to defend it.

**A.T.:** Thank you, Anna, thank you, Oksana. Please ask your questions now.

**Question from the audience:** Oksana, I would like to ask you about the art from people in Brest. You mentioned that you would like to see more local artists in the gallery, but it is problematic on different levels. But what exactly would you like to exhibit here?

**O.H.:** For the last two years we formulated the mission of the gallery more precisely because before it was a bit more blurred. We used to recognize them before, but only now we formulated them directly as follows: we support and are happy to see in the gallery socially engaged and critical art. So considering the artists from Brest... We don't want to exhibit just lovely images with beautiful female bodies, still life painting, or landscapes, as it usually happens here. Though we were thinking, what if we exhibit Yuri Stylski? Just to put a canvas on one wall, a canvas on another, and there will be a crowd and all fans of Stylski will come. In other words, we exhibit art which raises questions about the problems we have in our society. We exhibited and supported here several exhibitions of deviant art – art made by people who live in closed psychoneurological dispensaries. They are really great artists, and they need to be exhibited in order to let the audience know about them. These are the people who cannot exhibit themselves or buy a spot in a gallery. So we would like to work with this kind of projects. Did I answer your question?

**Question from the audience:** Yes, thank you. I will ask another one: is art able to change the world not only in terms of culture but also socially and politically?

**N.K.:** Yes! Art can work, you know... Usually, art wakes people up. It can be like a fire alarm. That can be the function of art.

**O.H.:** When I was preparing for today's event I remembered a case from 2004 when I was invited to the city administration office and had a very difficult conversation there. I was threatened by KGB and similarly was told that my art was a threat itself.

**A.Ch.:** A threat to national security?

**O.H.:** No, that is sometimes worse than direct actions. I was astonished because the theater was only a few years old. In other words, our art was recognized as dangerous, as possessing some potential to change the situation. I was told that I'd better raise my own politics than changing the world.

**L.T.:** I agree with what was said. I mean that the 'bad parts' of politics want to change what art shows, so I guess it has some impact on the society. It is really hard for me to see that but I assume it is some kind of a threat. I mostly think it has to do with free will because it's easier to control people if they don't think so much.

**O.H.:** Can I ask a question? It's a question to you, Anna: these political graffiti which appear in Minsk and which are not here and the development is not encouraged. I would really like people to start forming their personal opinions in regards to what is happening to them and their environment: because civil society, which is rather nonexistent here, is a group of people who have their personal opinions. And it's not enough to only form it; it is necessary to learn how to defend it.

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**A.T.:** Thank you, Anna, thank you, Oksana. Please ask your questions now.

**Question from the audience:** Oksana, I would like to ask you about the art from people in Brest. You mentioned that you would like to see more local artists in the gallery, but it is problematic on different levels. But what exactly would you like to exhibit here?

**O.H.:** For the last two years we formulated the mission of the gallery more precisely because before it was a bit more blurred. We used to recognize them before, but only now we formulated them directly as follows: we support and are happy to see in the gallery socially engaged and critical art. So considering the artists from Brest... We don't want to exhibit just lovely images with beautiful female bodies, still life painting, or landscapes, as it usually happens here. Though we were thinking, what if we exhibit Yuri Stylski? Just to put a canvas on one wall, a canvas on another, and there will be a crowd and all fans of Stylski will come. In other words, we exhibit art which raises questions about the problems we have in our society. We exhibited and supported here several exhibitions of deviant art – art made by people who live in closed psychoneurological dispensaries. They are really great artists, and they need to be exhibited in order to let the audience know about them. These are the people who cannot exhibit themselves or buy a spot in a gallery. So we would like to work with this kind of projects. Did I answer your question?

**Question from the audience:** Yes, thank you. I will ask another one: is art able to change the world not only in terms of culture but also socially and politically?

**N.K.:** Yes! Art can work, you know... Usually, art wakes people up. It can be like a fire alarm. That can be the function of art.

**O.H.:** Let's not forget what Anna was saying: we are talking about a somewhat positive impact of art on society, but there is also art which serves the regime in establishing a system, and I think there are enough examples of that in history.

**A.Ch.:** In the Middle Ages, it was the church.

**O.H.:** Art is influential yet even if it influences the other way round.

**N.C.:** But sometimes... There is an artist in Sweden called Britta Marakatt-Labba; she is coming from Sami minority, and she makes textile art. Sami people are a minority, and they live in the North and quite maltreated by the Swedish state because the Swedish state basically took a lot of their land because the land was rich. She's been active in Sweden, and Norway for many years but nobody really cared about her. But then it was the curators of Documenta, a big European exhibition, and they got interested in Marakatt-Labba's work and showed it on Documenta. And then they made a big exhibition on Documenta with her work about the history of Sami people made in textile, and then afterwards Swedish art curators and institutions started to get interested – that's how it works.

**A.T.:** I think we stop here. Thank you very much for your participation and for being here today; thank you KX for hosting us.