

Creating your own voice

Interview with Margaret Tali by Lelde Arnicāne

The work of the Estonian researcher and curator Margaret Tali focuses on the relation between art and politics. Her dissertation discusses identities that are misrepresented or excluded in the national museum collections of Estonia, Hungary, Germany and Finland. Tali has worked and lectured in Estonia and the Netherlands and currently lives in Amsterdam. This September, Margaret Tali gave a guest lecture in Riga at the launch of the book *Revisting Footnotes: Footprints of the Recent Past in the Post-Socialist Region*, published by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, to which she was a contributing author. In the conversation, Tali explains themes central both to her work and to the book *Revisting Footnotes* – representation of diversity in contemporary art processes, including that which deal with the question of the post-socialist identity. In context of these themes there are two broader issues to which Tali provides an interesting perspective: the construction of the national narratives in the art field and the ambiguous presence of the West in the production of the Eastern European knowledge and identities, while acknowledging the fluidity of the division.

Lelde Arnicāne

What motivated you to join the *Revisting Footnotes* project?

The idea of the publication was an outcome of two exhibitions organized by Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and a public seminar. I was approached by one of the editors, Ieva Astahovska, and since the topic triggered my interest, I agreed to contribute. One of the things that I find very interesting is that it is done from a very humble position by not trying to cover the whole Eastern Europe, but rather work the other way around – see what narratives can be created by bringing together personal perspectives and positions of different authors. That seemed sympathetic to me.

This is an interdisciplinary project that joins together people with different backgrounds – art critics, political scholars, philosophers. How easy is it to achieve common goals in such projects and are there limitations concerning different languages of disciplines?

Well, I think that interesting things can happen when some of the same themes are tackled from different disciplinary backgrounds. Yes, language and concepts are quite important, and misunderstandings can happen very easily – but, nevertheless, if the common goal is well defined, then the interdisciplinary perspective can contribute towards a better understanding of phenomena or grasping what is really going on in the complex transitions of the post-soviet societies. From my perspective, there could be much more of this kind of initiatives because the way how we operate is quite secluded: artist historians work in their own box and study artists, literary critics deal sometimes with the same themes but through the work of those who are defined as writers. Same goes for political theorists, sociologists... Interesting things can happen when these perspectives are brought together.

What are those footnotes from the recent past that appear in the cultural processes of the post-socialist societies?

In my essay to the book I approach this question from constructedness of the field and by thinking about the identities that are not present in these processes, because, I think, it tells us a lot about the character of the knowledge that is produced and how exclusive the art field actually is. In my dissertation I dealt with the politics of collections in national museums, both in the level of written politics and in the practice of exhibitions in order to understand what museums actually do not write down but what their practice of making distinctions can tell us. This meant zooming into these moments when important artists or important works of art are not represented in the collections. So, for example, I used the work *After War* (2009)¹ by Kristina Norman to argue that this specific act of its exclusion from the Kumu museum tells us something about the

¹ Norman's work is based on the debate in the Estonian society in the aftermath of the *Bronze Soldier* crisis. Norman created a 1:1 golden copy of the Bronze Soldier monument and placed it in a site from which the monument was removed previously, two years after the conflict.

character of constructing memory primarily as national memory in which the local Russian community's memory is still not considered to form a part.

In relation to the installation *After War* you have said that the way how art is narrated in the museums shows that the national memory is very homogenous and excludes different viewpoints of those living in the same community. Do you think that it is possible to overcome the gap between national identity narratives that attempt to homogenize society and voices that contradict these narratives?

There are always people who operate in the margins and do really interesting things but are excluded from visibility. It could involve different reasons. Also, in the art field there are those big national dinosaurs who have very visible and prominent places, but there always are marginal, alternative spaces that are often more keen on creating discussion and collaboration with communities and artists. Where there is oppression and dominance, there is also resistance. One of the things that there could be more of, is this resistance and consciousness about the kind of power inherent in those nation-building processes that we are going through [in Eastern Europe].

You have compared museums of the post-socialist region and those from the West. Did you see differences in how the collections are created and how national narratives are constructed?

In my research I compared national art museums of Estonia, Hungary, Germany and Finland. In this case I would regard Berlin as Eastern Europe, and Helsinki is comparable in some way too. But I would say these case studies were trying to undo or negotiate this distinction between the Eastern and the Western Europe as something very strong and distinct. Even more because there are Western European private collections that have since become the founding collections of the Eastern European museums. For example, the collection [of Hamburger Bahnhof] in Berlin is based on three private collections of three very well known and acknowledged businessmen. Also the Budapest art museum's founding collection comes from Peter Ludwig, a [Western] German chocolate producer. So this creates a very interesting tension on its own when museums

have to negotiate these private collections in a way that is meaningful for them, sometimes being quite constrained if the owners of collections are alive and are interested in the positive visibility that public museums can create. So, that produces tension also in relation to national narratives.

Who, in your perspective, plays the most significant role in how museum collections are created and thus how the national past is narrated – are these artists, scholars, politicians, businesses and the advertisement industry?

I think it is a constant struggle and it is defined through practice, the role of these actors differ in relation to every exhibition that is made, not to say in every museum. I would say that all these parties are involved. Museum professionals themselves tend to present the story of exhibition solely from a [art historical] curatorial perspective. What they don't tell is how important and influential are collectors and sponsors involved in the process. Sometimes there is also ideological influence from the state, defined in the official documents, which constrain how museums operate. One of the parties that I would hope to see as more influential through defining their own terms when entering into collaborations are the artists.

You wrote an article about the recent exhibition in the Tartu art museum *My Poland – On Remembering and Forgetting* [2015, curated by Rael Artel] that raised controversy in Estonia with two works that were subsequently taken down. How does this event characterize politics of contemporary art in Estonia?

Well, the exhibition was presented and advertised as the first exhibition to discuss the Holocaust in Estonian context and it was based on the works by Polish contemporary artists. In addition to that there was one work by Estonian artists duo Kaido Ole and Marko Mäetamm. The exhibition caused a lot of controversy, especially in relation to the two video works by Artur Żmijewski² that were considered offensive by the head of Estonian Jewish community and also other people. Many people from the contemporary art scene took a stand in favour of the museum saying that contemporary art should not be censored, that this is a free country and a democracy and all of

² In one of the video works, "80064"(2004), an ex-prisoner of a concentration camp is shown, who lets his prisoner number be re-tattooed by the artist. In the other video, "The Game of Tag"(1999) several naked people play a game of tag in a room that resembles a gas chamber.

that. The two works eventually were taken down because of public pressure. The thing I was criticizing in my article was that the museum took a role that was not self-critical enough: the exhibition was positioned to talk about the Holocaust for the first time in Estonia while at the same time excluding any form of interaction or engagement with the local Jewish community whom as we know the Holocaust most gravely affected and whose position remains rather sensitive in Estonia until nowadays. The majority of people who work for the museum have an ethnic Estonian background. This case thus reflected the question about voice and to whom it is given in the public space that the publicly funded museums present when talking about such a sensitive subject.

But how do you see the solution between the artist's freedom of expression and the opinion of Jewish community?

One of the things I proposed in my article was that the museum could also commission a new work by an artist who finds a way to engage with the Jewish community and listen to some of the stories, use them as her starting points. Exhibitions are also often joined by public discussions and conferences with historians speaking about matters that contemporary artists deal with, but then more broadly contextualized in an historically embedded way – but none of this happened in this case. The Holocaust has not been openly discussed in the public context [in Estonia], and although we use the term ‘Holocaust’, it is still dominated by a very Western understanding, so as long, at the end of the day, we don’t know what the Holocaust means locally, it is difficult to talk about it. Since this is lacking at the moment – the exhibition had a great potential to open such a discussion up, but the curators didn’t invest in this, or perhaps were not interested in it.

Would you agree that it reflects a broader problem: that much knowledge from the West has been imported to Eastern Europe and adapted to the local context without deeper reflection? How does it affect the production of new knowledge and is it not so that the Western audiences are perceived to be more important than the local ones?

I will approach this from a theoretical perspective. A very grave problem, for example, in the case of literature about the Holocaust, is that we deal with Western authors who have based their theory on the research done in the Western context. It means that to use their work in Eastern Europe, we need to constantly approach these concepts critically by analyzing where do these notions come from and what do they mean in our context. The same actually applies for many contemporary theories that come from the Western world and are sometimes applied quickly and uncritically. There is a rich and uninterrupted theoretical tradition in Western political science, literary theory, art history that we are lacking because of particular historical developments [during the 20th century]. So there is a need for theoretical perspectives. Clearly the role of the Western commission still being dominant is tricky here, because writing theories is a slow process, and making art is also a slow process, and if the constraints are there it becomes very complicated and the important space for self-criticism shrinks.

In your lecture, you mentioned the debate about refugees in Western European media and how in this context Eastern Europe is depicted – that it affirms old stereotypes about Eastern Europeans. What did you mean by that?

The response that we have towards refugees coming from Syria to Europe is one including extreme violence in rhetoric and deeds in many countries like Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia, and it is difficult to explain this violence – these images of police spraying teargas or brutally beating people are daunting. There was recently an article published in *New York Times* that asked: how is it possible that the societies that have gone through so much trouble during the Second World War themselves are treating people like they were not people at all³. I think this complex political situation is bringing something new out in people. On the one hand, this is a reaction in which fear towards Russia that is so embedded comes to the fore; on the other hand, it is also based on deeper historical struggles that touch upon the pre-Soviet time that have been suppressed in the course of history, and still they seem to be vivid enough in some form of bodily memory of people. It seems to me that through these images, the Eastern European

³ Lyman, Rick. Treatment of Migrants Evokes Memories of Europe's Darkest Hour. - NYT, 4 Sept 2015. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/treatment-of-migrants-evokes-memories-of-europes-darkest-hour.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1

‘Other’ as being barbarian and savage, wild and not really civilized, is being confirmed in Western media – but this reaction has reasons and as the West is not particularly interested in traumas of Eastern Europe. These reasons need to be explained, analysed and brought to the fore by Eastern European researchers and activists themselves in order to undo them.

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