

Mind-sculpture for Tallinn

Anu Liivak

It is hard to believe that George Steinmann's sustainable mind sculpture "Ruumi naasmine"(1992-1995) at the Tallinn Art Hall was created already 20 years ago. The qualities that still make the "Revival of Space" unique and valuable are the holism of the whole conception and the endurance of its outcome. Although the exhibition space is not as perfect as it was in February 1995 when for one month the visitors could enjoy the special atmosphere created by combining meticulous combination of restored original details of the interior of the 1930s and the newest technological achievements of contemporary Swiss design. The impact it had on Estonian art in the following years was incredible, and it is still the most remarkable and extraordinary experience in my personal professional career.

The project in fact looks even more impressive from the historical perspective of two decades than from a close distance. The Estonian art scene of the first half of the 1990s was rather conservative; it was still dominated by traditional art forms: easel painting and printmaking. Granite and bronze were the most popular materials for sculpture, which was pretty much understood as a singular three-dimensional object on a stand. Against this, Steinmann positioned his interpretation of a sculpture as an atmosphere. Instead of looking at the work from outside spectators found themselves inside the work or even became a participants. And the work did not limit itself to the process of renovation of the actual space. It is impossible to describe all the prejudices and conservative attitudes the process of creating this work had to overcome and transform, as well as the communication trajectories and new contacts it created.

In 1992 the whole building of the Tallinn Art Hall was in a really deplorable state. The house had been built on the initiative of the Estonian Art Endowment at the beginning of the 1930s and opened in 1934. The architects were Edgar Johan Kuusik and Anton Soans. In the second half of the 1930s the space hosted many important exhibitions of international art, among others the legendary exhibition of contemporary French art that

had a remarkable impact on the local, rather provincial art scene. The Estonian Soviet Artists' Association to whom the building had been given in 1944, exploited it mercilessly. The collective body of decision-making never considered renovation. One of the reasons was that from the official ideological point of view, the beautiful constructivist building was a symbol of the short era of the independent Republic of Estonia (1918 - 1940), which the authorities would have rather eradicated from the memory of the Estonian people.

Only a person as sensitive to the qualities of a location as George Steinmann could grasp its potential during his first visit to Tallinn which lasted only 24 hours. What brought Steinmann to Tallinn was his curiosity, the quality that stands also behind many of his other incredible innovative interdisciplinary projects. Estonia had just appeared on the mental map of Europeans, it was close to Finland where George has many personal and professional contacts. I became his contact in Tallinn where he didn't know anyone, through our mutual friend Marketta Seppälä. I introduced George to the people at the Tallinn Art Hall. Before leaving the next day he proposed the idea of renovating the exhibition space of the Art Hall as his artwork and financing it with funds from Switzerland. I was fascinated and pessimistic at the same time. The idea sounded more like a dream that had little chance to become reality. But sometimes most improbable things happen. There was the Swiss economic aid to Estonia, which was not intended for cultural purposes. In both countries Steinman's project found supporters among officials who were fascinated by the uniqueness of the idea and the sustainable philosophy it was based on. The same reasons made it difficult to oppose or criticize it from common point of view.

Most confusing for the various people involved in the process, and even more for outsiders regardless of their background, was the role of George Steinmann. According to the general perception, he was the one who had provided the money, so why was he involved in the decision-making process concerning the design, materials, colours and so on? The interior designer resented him and some of the Estonian artists who considered the Art Hall their communal property were opposed to the idea of a foreigner with money "leaving his mark" on it...

It is difficult to say how many representatives of the Estonian artistic community or even the wider cultural field actually realised the uniqueness and value of the artistic concept of the work. It would be more realistic to presume that it was the practical result that they appreciated and valued. Estonians are not very fond of empty spaces, so when the mind sculpture in the form of the empty restored interior of the Art Hall was open for a month as an exhibition, the objects most of the visitors came to look at were probably the beautiful restored details of the original architecture, meticulous paintwork and perfect oak parquet floor. But the impact of the spiritual atmosphere, which was formed by means of the original, restored details and carefully chosen new details, the result of the process led by George with his characteristically meticulous care to detail, could not be avoided.

There was one more outcome of the project with immense contemporary importance that was also related to the role of the Art Hall during the initial period of its existence in the 1930s. For a while, the place once more became the real centre of the local art scene. It brought the institution and through it the whole Estonian art scene to the sphere of interest of the international art landscape and facilitated numerous international collaborations, which, in turn, had a stimulating impact on the Estonian art landscape and helped it to overcome the isolation of the Soviet era.

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