

Interview with Karin Laansoo

Estonian Contemporary Art Development Center (ECADC) @ Art Brussels and Art Cologne

Author: Tina Kaplár

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The Estonian Contemporary Art Development Center (ECADC) is a nonprofit foundation focused both on fostering international exposure for artists from Estonia and on developing the contemporary art scene in Estonia. Functioning as an umbrella organization for Estonian partner institutions, the center is creating strategic international partnerships in the field of contemporary art. Director Karin Laansoo informed us about the center and its most recent projects at Art Cologne and Art Brussels.



Karin Laansoo Photo by Eleri Ever

Tina Kaplár: Who initiated ECADC and when?

Karin Laansoo: ECADC was initiated in 2012 by a group of galleries and art institutions, with Temnikova & Kasela gallery taking the initiative. The joint grant application to support the center's activities for the first 2 years was submitted to Enterprise Estonia and it was successful. I was invited to join as director in the spring of 2012, and the center launched in New York in May of the same year, with the Estonian Ministry of Culture present to help kick things off.

TK: The two main activities you are focusing on are fostering international exposure for artists from Estonia and developing the contemporary art scene in the country. In what ways can you achieve these goals?

KL: Working to create and feed interest in the art of a specific region takes place on many levels. Because of the small size of our organization, we switch roles as necessary for each project, but mostly from fundraiser to curator, PR person, gallerist, and above all, idea generator. The latter is almost like playing chess – you identify a problem or a shortcoming, find a solution, and make it happen. One of the areas we addressed strongly early on was support of the local gallery scene – not only by training new art professionals (our biannual Gallerist Master Course launched in 2012 and is accompanied by international gallery internships for participants) but also by ongoing international fair support and joint opening nights called “Tallinn Tuesdays.” In short, we initiate and fund international residencies, collaborations, exhibitions, festivals, fairs, events, screenings, and book launches by Estonian artists, galleries, and publishers internationally or support international collaborations with Estonian participants. It may sound a bit clumsy, but this is exactly what we do. We are somewhat like an international agent for Estonian contemporary art, for lack of a better word or title.

TK: How do you evaluate Estonia’s international visibility in the international art scene?

KL: The short answer is this – it is a constant work in progress and it depends on which artist you talk about. Each time an Estonian artist is acknowledged, it naturally results in more attention to all artists from the same country. At the end of the day though, it is not about claiming any visibility points. Rather, I simply believe there are great artists from Estonia already out there who would add so much to the global art dialogue. This is the natural give and take that the inherently social art world relies upon – the more you give, the more you receive back. When you approach everything with this attitude – giving is receiving – doors really begin to open up.



Art Cologne Ludwig Museum stand with Katja Novitskova. Photo by Rainar Aasrand

TK: ECADC sponsors art fair participation for its partner galleries. Who exactly are they and what are the conditions for partnership?

KL: The gallery that has participated in the most art fairs thus far is Temnikova & Kasela. Our second partner in that area is art publishing house Lagemik, which regularly participates in the New York Art Book Fair and book fairs in Europe. The main condition for support is an invitation from the fair to participate, and the rest is based on each individual scenario – is the grant enough by itself or should we collaborate on an additional event to introduce the artist, launch his or her book, or organize a dinner. Or, most importantly, help by getting the word out and making sure that everyone has an audience – this is always the crucial part of our collaboration.

TK: How is your centre funded? What is the institutional structure of the centre?

KL: The centre is funded by grants from the European Union which are locally distributed by Enterprise Estonia. Our team consists of a board, director, project manager, accountant, graphic designer, and two project coordinators. I mostly work from New York and the rest of the team is in Tallinn, Estonia.

TK: Earlier this year you passed an important milestone together with Estonian gallerists when you signed the Best Practices Agreement along with 8 galleries and artist unions. What is this all about?

KL: Yes, it is the result of a longer discussion with local galleries and artist unions as to how everyone should agree to work together. As is very common with smaller art scenes, the same galleries represent the same artists, sales from studios are commonplace, and there are no standard documents for many of the transactions. We addressed all of these questions. Very few galleries can support themselves locally, but before a local gallery can set their sights on the international art market, there should be certain understanding and clarity at home between galleries with respect to who works with which artists. Very few artists in Estonia have representation agreements with their galleries, but these are the same artists who are very active internationally. What makes no sense to do when you are only operating on your home turf becomes a necessity the minute you step out onto the international scene. I hear very often that artists don't want to know about the economic and legal aspects of their practice, but really they should have an easy and reliable source from which to get this information. If all or at least most of the questions are addressed in one document, the whole process is more transparent and there is less confusion about what each party can expect. I was not aware of the positive impact this document would have once we went public with the news. We would gladly share our experience with others who are interested in learning and applying it to their contexts.

TK: You also organise International Gallery Internships – what is your selection process like?

KL: The International Gallery Internships started as the second part of our Gallerist Master Course, which took place for the first time in 2012 in Tallinn and will continue to take place every other year. Each student who passes the course is eligible to apply for the internship. We match the candidates with galleries based on their language skills, preferences, and interests, and coordinate skype interviews with the galleries. The ultimate decision of who goes where rests in the hands of the galleries though. Our current round of interns will start in the fall of 2015 in London, Warsaw, Amsterdam, and Brussels. Needless to say, it is a very popular program.

TK: Apart from galleries you have several other areas of focus. For example, ECADC is running the Visiting Curators Program, which facilitates short-term visits to Estonia by international curators and cultural producers. Whom have you already invited?

KL: Our current list includes Niekolaas Lekkerkerk (Rotterdam), Dimitri Ozerkov (St. Petersburg), Niels Van Tomme and Jessamyn Fiore from New York, Ellen Mara de Wachter and Nur El Shami from London, Magdalena Kröner (Düsseldorf), Hunter Braithwaite (Miami), Luigi Fassi (Graz), and

Ilaria Bonacossa (Genova), among many others. Our next visiting curators are Nazli Gurlek from Istanbul and Carmen Ferreyra from Buenos Aires. In fact, all our institutional partners are suggesting visiting curators and critics that are relevant for their projects. Constant exchange is very important and we are now adding group visits into the mix. ECADC has started collaborating with Curatorial Program for Research (CPR) to host a larger group of curators visiting Estonia in the fall of 2015.



Sam Martineau and Katrin Koskaru Photo by Jessamyn Fiore

TK: Now let's turn our focus to current issues. At Art Cologne between April 16th and 19th, artists [Katrin Koskaru](#) and Sam Martineau participated in the NADA + Art Cologne Collaborations 2015, backed by [ECADC](#) and [Rawson Projects](#) (New York). Could you give us some insights into this collaboration?

KL: Sure, Jessamyn Fiore from Rawson Projects contacted me last fall with this idea. In fact, we had previously been searching for a good platform to bring together Estonian and American contemporary art for a while, and in the end we focused on the Collaboration platform at Art Cologne. Most of the artists at the Rawson Projects program work in an abstract or minimal way, and discussing different artists we ended up picking Paris-based Katrin Koskaru and Brooklyn-based Sam Martineau. Both prefer abstraction and love to experiment with untraditional or found fabrics as their “canvases” – Katrin prefers 100% cotton that is used for covering furniture and Sam chooses t-shirts and dress shirts or fabric samples. Katrin bleaches the cotton before covering it with multiple layers of watercolour, and one can find marks from coffee or other organic materials on Sam's pieces. We saw the works placed together for the first time while unpacking in Cologne, and the result was exceptional. The artists were very happy and we got amazing feedback from the audience and galleries alike. There is so much joy in working with people you have a history with because you know you have each other's back. Jessamyn has been increasingly interested in what is happening in the Estonian art scene. She was also a jury member for our ISCP New York residency grant this year, and, as part of our Cologne project, had a layover in Tallinn for studio visits and a talk. To be continued, as they say.

Screening and conversation

MARGE MONKO

ELÉONORE DE MONTESQUIOU

LOLA LASURT

Screening and conversation

Screening

MARGE MONKO
Nora's Sisters (2009), 7 min

ELÉONORE DE MONTESQUIOU
Women of Cerbère (2014), 24 min

MARGE MONKO
Misses (2007/2013), 16 min

LOLA LASURT Non, Je Ne
Regrette Rien (2010/2014), 15 min

Saturday, April 25th 4-6pm
Estonian Embassy
Rue Guinard 11/13
B-1040 Brussels
Lines 1, 2, 5 or 6 to Metro stop
Arts-Loi / Kunst-Wet

The screening is followed by conversation with Marge Monko and Lola Lasurt, moderated by Caroline Dumalin (WIELS).

RSVP required. Please email by Friday, April 24 to info@ecadc.ee

ECADC at Art Brussels

TK: At Art Brussels this week you've organized a screening and conversation with mostly Estonian artists and curators. Who are the participants?

KL: The screening program will show films by 3 artists – Lola Lasurt, Eleónore de Montesquiou, and Marge Monko. The conversation that follows is moderated by Caroline Dumalin from WIELS. Marge's central interest has been the representation of femininity through video and photo work, and she curated this screening program by finding related themes on womens' work in other artists' practices. Caroline has been following the work of Marge Monko and Lola Lasurt since 2013, when she was a visiting lecturer at HISK, Ghent. If you're in Brussels this week, please come by to meet us on Saturday, April 25th at 4pm at the Estonian Embassy.

TK: [Marge Monko](#) is the first Estonian artist participating in the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) this summer to do research in New York for her 2016 solo exhibition. How do you support this program?

KL: Yes, Marge won our international jury's votes. We provide a full residency grant for a selected artist or curator to work in New York for 2 months, meaning that the grant covers a studio, flight, housing, and a stipend. We support the program with funding from Estonian Ministry of Culture. ISCP is an amazing opportunity to really focus on one's practice and connect with everything that ISCP's

program and the New York art scene both have to offer. I believe this residency comes at the right time for Marge's practice and hopefully will nurture and support her work immensely.

TK: In May in New York at Frieze, an ambitious installation with a performance by artist [Kris Lemsalu](#) at [Temnikova & Kasela gallery](#) booth in the Frame section can be visited. Have you supported this participation as well?

KL: Yes, ECADC is supporting it along with the Estonian Ministry of Culture. It's a project that I am very excited about because Kris is such a unique artist and obviously because it is in New York, my home base. Also because it is Frieze, where, although Estonian artists have previously participated, no Estonian galleries have until now. So it is very important on many levels. I know Kris is in the process of making the work now and everyone is keeping their fingers crossed that the gamble to create such a large ceramic piece will pay off. I can't reveal everything though, so you simply have to come and see it in New York.

TK: What we have talked about is your agenda for only the first part of 2015, which is already fairly busy and impressive. What are your long-term goals and plans?

KL: Thank you. Our fall looks equally busy – I can only mention cities but we'll be in Milan, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and London. As for long-term plans, our goal is to provide contemporary art the most comprehensive support, from fundraising to the finished product, continuously backing artists' careers internationally and bringing forth a new generation of Estonian art collectors and patrons who consider contemporary art an inherent part of their worldview. Funding and a strong vision have to go hand in hand. Because of an initiative by ECADC, Estonia will also join the Outset network this year to further the support of contemporary art production, with 100% backing coming from Estonian private patrons. It's nothing short of a landmark change for Estonian contemporary art, the kind of change that gives wings.