

# On City Agents. Part I

*interviews and text by Sabin Bors*

On August 5, 2016, the exhibition project *City Agents* opened at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) in Tallinn. Curated by Jussi Koitela in the context of his ongoing curatorial research project *Skills of Economy*, the exhibition was intended as a discussion about exhibition spaces and the contemporary cityscape as sites of the accumulation of capital. Its attempt to map out current active agencies that gentrify the city – zooming in on artistic practices that expose and shape forms of social, ecological and economic activation and de-activation of urban space – has provided an opportunity for a broader debate on artistic practices and human and extra-human co-agencies in the public space shift socio-economic structures. The first exhibition extension of Koitela's research project, *City Agents* was an attempt to expose the material flows, objects and densities of the city, seeking to rethink city space from the perspective of more hybrid, blurred and merged notions about contemporary cityscapes and the agencies that form it. Abandoning the binomial divisions of function/non-function, human/extra-human, built/empty, or local/global, *City Agents* was followed by a second exhibition, *Mattering City*, that recently took place at SixtyEight Art Institute. Presenting the works of Melanie Bonajo, The BodyBuilding Project and Asbjørn Skou, *Mattering City* is a more concentrated show aiming to echo various symptoms and reactions to the contemporary city space as an accumulation of capital. The reflections and bodily engagements to neoliberal human-centric urbanism, gentrification processes, and the geometries of city spaces, make *Mattering City* an organic development of *City Agents* that further investigates autonomous and regenerative agency dynamics taking place between human and non-human interfaces, challenging the entangled spaces of ontology, epistemology and ethics in urban areas.

"The whole idea for the research and process started around 2011," says Jussi Koitela explaining the interdisciplinary format of his research. "I realised that a lot of daily discussions in the field of art end up with money and worries about earnings, whatever was the original topic. After the economic crises in 2008 and the full force austerity politics that came into effect, public discussions were dictated by economic discourses. I wanted to develop artistic discourses and acknowledge artistic practices on economy that are not dictated solely by questions of earnings in the creative industry or in lowering public art funding caused by austerity. At the same time, I wanted to test out and develop a kind of 'institutional' setting for my own curatorial practice, to maybe secure some continuity for it. Here is where the concept of *skills* comes in. It is something that merges with your daily efforts for getting paid in order to determine critical curatorial and artistic ways of engaging economic discourses and structures. For me, it is way of 'working' with economy and, at the same time, challenge it with research that takes different formats and presentations. I then started to think about artistic practices that I wanted to present in the context of the project and test different ways of discussing about them. My interest in different disciplines and areas of knowledge raises from understanding that art, economy and other fields of specialised knowledge should always be read and performed through other fields of knowledge, as intra-actors in the

## Exhibition /



### City Agents (August 5 - September 11, 2016)

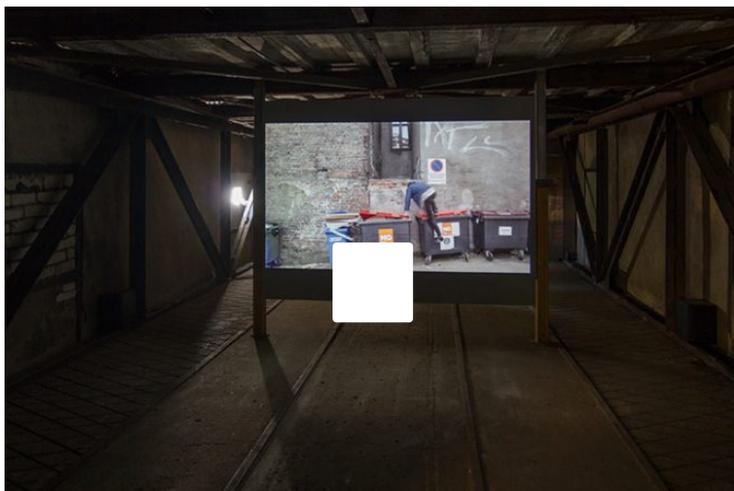
The Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) is a self-established non-profit initiative, that situates itself somewhere between official state-run institutions and artist-run-do-it-yourself venues. It is an unconventional concept of a contemporary art museum that works towards producing, exhibiting, collecting and popularizing local and international contemporary art while altering the prevailing working methods of established art institutions. It is a tool of self-establishment for younger generation artists, curators and art students. EKKM was founded by Anders Härm, Elin Kard, Neeme Külm, and Marco Laimre in late 2006. Since 2016 it is run by Marten Esko and Johannes Säre who joined the team in 2011.

EKKM operates from late 2006 as an ex-squat that has now legalized its premises in a previously abandoned office building of Tallinn's former heating plant. EKKM has been producing exhibits and collecting art from 2007 and since 2010 has established its regular exhibition season that takes place from April until November. In 2011 EKKM initiated its own contemporary art prize, the Köler Prize, that is accompanied by an exhibition of the nominees. From then on, it has become a constantly evolving area of creative initiative where 2013 marks the opening of Lugemik Bookshop alongside the exhibition production company Valge Kuup. Subsequently the student gallery ISFAG and project-space-like EKKM's Café followed.

or urban planning. Much more than merely a metaphor, walking is thus a means to resist the navigational perspective of the city.

“The walking is not a metaphor,” says Jacqueline Schoemaker in her exceptional reading of the city, *The Undivided City*. “You don’t walk hundreds of kilometres through a city actually to refer to something else. At most walking is a metaphor in the literal sense of the word, the meaning stripped of all metaphors, namely the metaphor as a means of transport. (...) Walking from north to south, taking the ferry, crossing, don’t refer to anything else, don’t refer to anything other than their physical reality. (...) The metaphor you take carries all sorts of things, across the water, from north to south, but it doesn’t carry meaning. For the conveyance of meaning there has to be a ground between two things or places, a reason for comparing them. But there is no ground. In your transport of your experience to the text, you inevitably stumble on a gap. Language and design are always metaphor. Between language and design on the one hand, and what takes place on the other, is a wide gap. The text is no experience, the map no space.” [9]

Relating to the exhibition concept, *City Agents*, Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić argue that “Art and culture are catalysts and accelerators of the gentrification of city space. If artists are agents of these processes, the question is then how artists position their production in the process of accumulation of capital. We think that urban movements have a real and significant agency to resist the anti-social urbanisation that is going on. Artists and cultural workers need to be solidary with these movements and join the struggle for a social city.” From this perspective, the artistic construction is a social one as well, to be experienced as *part of and in solidarity with* urban realities, constantly shaping and reshaping social interactions. Within the fluid dynamics of the urban space, this is also a gesture to perform a common ground.



Jon Benjamin Talléräs, *No alternate route*, 2015. Video Installation, 7.15 min (loop). Photo: Johannes Säve/EKKM. Used here by kind permission from curator Jussi Koitela. All rights reserved.

[3] Id., *ibid.*, p. 69.

[4] See Pascal Gielen, “Performing the Common City: On the Crossroads of Art, Politics and Public Life” in *Interrupting the City. Artistic Constitutions of the Public Space*, edited by Sander Bax, Pascal Gielen, and Bram Leven, ‘Antennae,’ Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015, pp. 277-279.

[5] “It is the mixing of diverse elements that provides the materials for the ‘otherness’ of visibly different life styles in a city; these materials of otherness are exactly what men need to learn about in order to become adults. Unfortunately, now these diverse city groups are each drawn into themselves, nursing their anger against the others without forums of expression. By bringing them together, we will increase the conflicts expressed and decrease the possibility of an eventual explosion of violence.” – Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*, New York, NY: Knopf, 1970, p. 162, apud. Pascal Gielen, “Performing the Common City,” *ibid.*, p. 277.

[6] Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political: Thinking in Action*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 20, apud. Pascal Gielen, “Performing the Common City,” *ibid.*, p. 278.

[7] Pascal Gielen, “Performing the Common City,” *ibid.*, p. 278.

[8] Id., *ibid.*, p. 292-293.

[9] Jacqueline Schoemaker, *De ongedeelde stad / The Undivided City*, Eindhoven: Onomatopoe 75.2.2 – Cabinet Project, 2012, p. 55.

[10] These ideas, based on Jacques Derrida’s “Point de folie: Maintenant l’architecture,” published in Bernard Tschumi, *La case vide: La Villette 1985*, trans. by Kate Linker, London: Architectural Association, 1986, p. 4-20, have been commented in Sabin Bors, “The Curative Sensorium of the Architectural,” in *SITE UNDER CONSTRUCTION*, catalogue of the Romanian Pavilion at 14 International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale Di Venezia, Ministry of Culture / Site Under Construction, 2014, p. 65.

[11] See Sabin Bors, “Anticipative Geographies and Experimental Archaeologies” in *The Would-Be City: In(ter)ventions in the post-communist urban space*, edited by Ina Stoian and Daniela Calciu, Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House / asociatia plusminus, 2012, pp. 265-271.

[12] Chantal Mouffe, “Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention” in *Institutional Attitudes. Instituting Art in a Flat World*, edited by Pascal Gielen, ‘Antennae,’ Amsterdam: Valiz, p. 66.

[13] Id., *ibid.*, p. 67.

[14] Id., *ibid.*

[15] Id., *ibid.*, p. 68.



*City Agents* exhibition, installation view. Right: Uku Sepsivart – *Rise of the Beaversculptor*, 2016, installation. Left: Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić – *Real Struggle, Fake Estates*, 2016, textile flags and acrylic. Photo: Johannes Säre/EKKM. Used here by kind permission from curator Jussi Koitela. All rights reserved.

While Alma Heikkilä feels the title *City Agents* “gives space for and hints towards multiple viewpoints and various agencies in the city terrain,” allowing the artists in the exhibition to play a role and get involved in actual situations, Uku Sepsivart understands it “as a title for an exhibition that gathers artists who have in some way integrated the city as a location or a process in their work practice. They must be somehow interfering in it or working with it.” This interference – with urban spaces, terrains, and architecture as well – needs to counter the functionalization and instrumentalization of spaces, and institute a constitutive indeterminacy; for when turned into an aesthetic experience, the formal language of built space becomes an open semantic system that ensures ‘dysfunctionality’ and deinstrumentalization. [10] Interference is a performative gesture and, as such, a political act that challenges normative semiotic paradigms and consolidates imagined space geographies that shape the anticipations of participative dynamics arising within the city. [11]

“I understand this [title] as the art institution, the exhibition and then the artwork as an agent for politics, thought, critique, and material production in the city, but also understand the artistic production as an agent for gentrification,” explains Barbara Knezevic. The various forms of production breed novel types of resistance that also depend, as Pascal Gielen has shown, on the context in which artistic interventions are performed, raising questions on what types of relations need to be established with the institutions. It has been argued that art institutions share a complicit relation with capitalism and reproduce the system, thus being no longer able to be perceived as sites for critical artistic practices – and that in order to be effective, artistic practices need to be constituted outside cultural institutions. Such a perspective is profoundly mistaken, argues Chantal Mouffe: “To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting for subverting their form of articulation.” [12] By advocating for a strategy of ‘engagement with institutions,’ Mouffe relies on a theoretical approach where society is always politically instituted and the social is “the realm of sedimented political practices, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution.” [13] Because every order is the expression of a particular structure of power relations, hegemonic confrontations and disarticulations take place wherever one finds constructed hegemonies. “Artistic practices have a necessary relation to politics because they either contribute to the reproduction of the common sense that secures a given hegemony or to its challenging. Critical artistic practices are those which, in a variety of ways, play a part in the process of disarticulation / rearticulation which characterizes a counter-hegemonic politics.” [14] Artistic and cultural production are agents for gentrification because of their strategic importance in how the modes of subjectivation underlie the reproduction of capital. The capitalist system needs to mobilize people’s

[16] This question is all the more relevant in the context of audience interaction today. On the one hand, whether performative, participatory, co-productive, reflexive, or dialogical – the various forms of artistic practice need not only to challenge hegemonic socio-political constructions but, perhaps more dauntingly, the dominant commercial model for audience interaction imposed by neoliberalism and the ideologies of financialization. On the other hand, as curator and writer Simon Sheikh noted, “the quintessential modernist object that was the gallery space [has] remained intact,” and continues to be “socially tilted towards a certain group – the upper class – and their cultural rule and political hegemony.” – Simon Sheikh, “A Long Walk to the Land of the People: Contemporary Art in the Spectre of Spectatorship” in *Future Publics (The Rest Can and Should Be Done by the People): A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Hlavajova and Ranjit Hoskote, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015, p. 242.

[17] Jacqueline Schoemaker, *De ongedeelde stad / The Undivided City*, *ibid.*, p. 49.

[18] Odile Heynders, “Cities & Signs: Rethinking Calvino’s Urban Imaginaries” in *Interrupting the City*, *ibid.*, p. 66.

[19] *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 68.

[20] Andreas Huyssen, ed., *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 3. apud. Odile Heynders, “Cities & Signs,” *ibid.*, p. 73.

[21] Odile Heynders, “Cities & Signs,” *ibid.*, p. 77 and p. 81.

## Keywords /

accumulation, activism, aesthetics, agency, agent, Alma Heikkilä, Antti Majava, Anu Pennanen, architecture, artistic practices, Arttu Merimaa, Ashjorn Skou, austerity, autonomy, Barbara Knezevic, capital, capitalism, City Agents, city space, cityscape, communication, conflict, context, control, conversation, creativity, criticality, critique, culture, curating, democracy, division, ecology, economy, environment, ethics, exhibition, extra-human, financialization, gentrification, global, hegemony, ideology, imaginary, infrastructure, Ingel Vaikla, institution, institutional, instrumentalization, intervention, interview, intra-action, Jon Benjamin Talleras, Jussi Koitela, knowledge, local, materiality, Melanie Bonajo, Mona Vätämanu & Florin Tudor,

*Estates* that was in the same room with my work; to Asbjørn Skou's *Golden Cities Golden Towns* in its criticism on 'struggle' and commentary on economic utopias; to Barbara Knezevic's *Lumps* and the topic of production; and to Jon Benjamin Tallerås's *No Alternate Route* in how it discreetly and almost inevitably breaks the boundaries – but I also have affinities with Antti Majava's work."



Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić, *Real Struggle, Fake Estates*, 2016. Textile flags, acrylic. Photo: Johannes Säre/EKKM. Used here by kind permission from curator Jussi Koitela. All rights reserved.

"The point of departure for our artistic intervention is Gordon Matta Clark's *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*, a critique of private property," explain Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić. "In 1973, Matta Clark acquired tiny pieces of unusable and sometimes inaccessible surplus land in Queens from the city of New York. At that time, industries relocated their production to low-wage, non-union states and the warehouses and manufacturing sites of Queens became an abandoned place with its inhabitants left without jobs. The current development of Tallinn's former workers' quarter Kalamaja into a hipster place of the creative industries and the selling out of state-owned land at Tallinn's coastline to real estate investors is an example of appropriating the city space. The social structure of the city is already changing and the less wealthy population, students, unemployed, Russian speaking marketers, artists, drug addicts, homeless, and other in precarious life situations will be driven out of the inner city. In Tallinn, we gathered information about the ongoing processes and talked with people involved in citizen associations that try to influence the politics of the city. For the work, we developed a set of flags named *Real Struggle, Fake Estates* the shape of which is derived from the lots of Matta Clark's *Fake Estates*. On one side of the flags, drawings show the contradictions or agents of gentrification that have targeted the city as a speculative financial object. The city space today is not shaped by the social, economic and democratic needs of its citizens but by the interests of real estates and other businesses. Art business and creative industries, tourism and leisure industry, create a bubble identity of the city to attract solvent consumers. Public space is privatized and protected by security agencies, another blossoming industry in times when social justice is off the agenda. The other side of the flags is painted with signs of the Ironworks ABC, a sign language derived from sculptures that emerged from the creative collaboration of workers and artists in self-managed Socialist Yugoslavia in the '70s. This side of the flag stands for the agency of the artists, cultural workers and all the others who with their daily activities reproduce the city. With the flag we call for a new collectivity that overcomes the division of labour and the individualization and fragmentation of life and working relations. Flags are often used to claim ownership of colonized and privatized land. With the *Real Struggle, Fake Estates* flags we (re)claim the class position and consciousness of solidarity of art and cultural workers with all other workers whose productivity is exploited. The installation *Land Distribution* by Mona Vătămănu and Florin Tudor addresses the redistribution of land in a very direct and irritating way, physically