

Curator Alfredo Cramerotti: society must speak uncomfortable topics - in doing so, we improve

by Solveig Jahnke
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Estonia will be at the 56th Venice Biennale of contemporary art for the tenth time. The new project in the coming year will be the Estonian pavilion, whose artist was selected from among eleven ideas at the end of April 2014. The jury awarded the preference to Estonian artist Jaanus Samma and Italian Eugenio Viola curatorial project "NSFW. History of the abyss."

The jury comprised members of the Council, the World Expo Milano 2015 Project Office in Estonia, Andres Birch and artistic advisor of the Ministry of Culture Maria-Christina Soomre. The international dimension to the choice was brought in by Alfredo Cramerotti, who works in Wales and curated the Wales in Venice and the Maldives Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. Solveig Jahnke talks to him about Venice at the Contemporary Art Centre of Estonia in Tallinn.

What brought you to Estonia, what did your visit involve?

I was here as part of the panel selecting next year's Estonian project for the 56th Venice Art Biennale. Mine was an invitation to provide an international point of view on the proposal submitted. Besides that, I have spent full four days visiting artists and their studios, galleries, museums and off-site projects. However incomplete, I think I got a pretty good idea of the contemporary art scene in Tallinn.

What significance does Venice biennial hold (for you)? (What is and why Venice biennial?)

Well, the Venice Biennale is for visual artists what the Oscar season is for filmmakers, or a bit like the Football World Cup for football enthusiasts (which I am part of). It's a very important event - lasting six months every two years - for which artists have the chance and the drive to produce new work, and the general public to 'take the temperature' of what is going on in contemporary visual culture. It's something that we will find to discuss or read or watch with our families or friends maybe years later, as one artist or an artistic project 'sipped through' the broader cultural manifestation. A bit like the film being noticed at the Oscars; not necessarily a full-blast present impact but something we find ourselves discussing years later.

What are the criteria you consider while selecting artwork and artists for the biennial?

Big question; in principle, originality in the approach, relevance to their time; quality of the project presented in terms of content, medium or media, mediation of the public and also presentation; and finally, something that tells me that the project is right for the space and the location in which it is supposed to happen. This latter is a criteria that really depends on the sensibility of the artist presenting the idea, as there is no difficult spaces if one has good ideas.

You met with several Estonian artists during your visit. What do they think/talk about, what does their art talk about? Is it relevant?

I met twelve artists, and all with a very robust practice in terms of vision, media, exhibition career and future opportunities. I believe Estonian artists don't have anything to envy to anyone, especially taking into consideration today's mobility of cultural producers. If fees are low and perhaps the commissioning context not vast, on the other hand there is easy access both to East and West Europe (several artists have already galleries or exhibitions abroad) and the fact that it's still economically sustainable to live in Tallinn (unlike London, for instance) this provides mental space for producing work. One cannot think and produce art if he or she works ten hours a day on other jobs just to pay the weekly rent.

What did you think about the Estonian projects presented for the biennial and what made the winning project a strong candidate, what made it stand out (amongst the rest)?

The projects were generally well presented, and argued; a few didn't have enough legs to sustain a context like Venice, or such a long duration like six months. For those which passed the first and second round, we thought they were not only well conceived and presented, but organisationally viable and financially sustainable - all aspects have to be considered at that stage. More importantly, my approach was to choose a project which is relevant for today's societies (I use the plural as the Venice Biennale draws a truly international audience) and that can effect reflection, debate, change, but also the opportunity to pick that line of thought and transfer it to another context. Jaanus Samma's is one of those rare beasts. And it has a fantastic theatrical / performative element that makes it utterly universal.

Same question in different wording: How did you find the current projects (what do you think about their quality and relevance in the global context), which competed for the 56th biennial and why did you choose Jaanus Samma?

as above.

What makes the biennial significant for small countries or why is it important for small countries to participate in the biennial or how should small countries take part in the biennial, how should they position themselves? (You may select the version of this question you feel you'd like to answer :)).

I would argue the Venice Biennale is even more important for 'small' countries than for 'big' ones. I have curated two 'small' countries recently - Wales and Maldives. Very different in every sense, since the respective pavilions were on one side organised by the government-funded body and totally self-organised by artists and curators on the other side. But the

relevance came through because it provided a huge, important and even combative occasion to talk about why a culture would need a representation as such in the cultural field, to what extent this was representative and to whom, and - if anything - were there no other ways to capitalise the international attention to that country? You see, all questions that could be equally applied to Estonia or Italy or the US.

I have now some answers; it is less important to 'represent' a culture than to open up that culture to discussion and even controversial matter - a society won't develop in time if not tackling what is uncomfortable or controversial to talk about. A society is made up of men and women that necessarily are different from each other, and the basic agreement to live together has been achieved through centuries or millennia precisely by negotiating those uncomfortable or controversial matters that have different value for each individual. If we stop listening, taking and opening up to each other, there is a huge risk to become irrelevant for ourselves, and for others. I know I took a long perspective on your last question, but that provided me with the opportunity to put it frankly why I work in the art sector, and why I consider this job to have some relevance. It's not the only one obviously, but it's a good start.