

## CLOSE STRANGER

Laznia Centre for Contemporary Arts  
1, Jaskólcza str., Gdańsk – DOLNE MIASTO  
08.08. – 07.09.2014

Opening: 08.08.2014, 6:00 pm

Curators:

Ignas Kazakevicius, Irina Tchesnokova, Agnieszka Wołodźko

To a large extent, social life is defined by the way in which we categorize people into “us” and “them”. The division is one of the universal features of the human culture; it existed in the past in hierarchical societies and among diverse cultures and it exists today – in the globalized society and culture. It will always exist, regardless of the time and place, since, as sociologists put it, building the human identity involves including “those like us” in our group and excluding “those not like us” from our group. Within this meaning, exclusion and inclusion are positive notions since they strengthen the group: “the other”, “the alien”, “the different” is necessary to be looked into as if into a mirror in order for us to see ourselves in them.

However, on the other hand, the effects of those mechanisms can be partially negative, like a ricochet, when we see “an enemy” in the “other”, “the alien”, the “different”. Luckily, according to Zygmunt Bauman, the relation between “us” and “them” can be not only of an antagonistic nature but it can also be based on mutuality. In a situation when we realize that “they” have skills which we ourselves lack (and the other way around), a mutual exchange of services can provide benefits to both parties. It seems that the contemporary world is a medium through which views, values, life strategies or ways of conduct are being fluently transmitted creating an illusion that we are all the same, only a bit different. We wanted to base the key idea of our project on that notion of “the same but a bit different”: the more different we are, the more attractive to one another we seem.

In early 2013, we, partners from Kaliningrad, Gdansk and Klaipeda, commenced the project in order to work on it together for two years. Using the substantial opposition between the words “our” and “alien”, we wanted to study and interpret natural and created prejudices, stereotypes and contradictions which function in our neighboring territories, also trying to find that which is “common”, which makes us closer and more interesting to one another, as if joined by the treads of friendship and friendliness. Russian, Polish and Lithuanian curators and artists were trying to reach the bottom of this mythical duality which both joins as well as divides the three countries. Are we close or strange to one another? How can we answer the question of what we know about our respective selves?

We come from three neighboring states which had common historic, cultural and political ties (until 1945 they were part of Eastern Prussia, Kaliningrad and the Republic of Lithuania



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were part of the Soviet Union, the Polish People's Republic and the Soviet Union were members of the Warsaw Pact). However, history shows that ideological boundaries which destroyed individuality and culture of each of the countries also hampered the connection between us. After political transformations, contacts on the cultural level left a big cognitive gap which has not been filled by anything to date, despite our geographical closeness and common historic-and-cultural experience. It is the goal of our project to go beyond the sporadic difficulties in historic relations and use the culture and art which we deal with on an everyday basis.

The *Close Stranger* exhibition is meant to help us build a permanent link of communication among our cities and states. It was created in the process. In 2013, artists from Kaliningrad, Klaipeda and Gdansk participated in artist-in-residence programs in the partner cities. As a result of those visits, they created projects which constituted their commentaries on the collected impressions. They are extremely varied in their approach to the subject, however it is the consequence of the creators' direct contact with the reality that they found. Sometimes they were very critical about it. It was the case of Angelika Fojtuch whose performance entitled *That which divides us, joins us* presented during the *Close Stranger* exhibitions in Klaipeda and Kaliningrad gave rise to much controversy among the audiences (its film documentation will be showed in Gdansk). Jacek Niegoda's ironic work *Do not throw hot ashes in - FACHWERK*, which refers to the practice of removing Polish-language signs in Lithuania is to this day remembered by Klaipeda's audiences. Piotr Wyrzykowski offers the viewer a tablet application which makes it possible to experience a one-off self-immolation. Artur Gogołkiewicz disassembled Polish and Lithuanian coats of arms to create a hybrid which is full of visual conflicts. The works of Oleg Blyabyas, Alexey Chebykin, Laura Zala and Egor Luchshev present a look at Lithuanian territory from the point of view of history, tradition and memory. Remigijus Treigys offers a view of today's Kaliningrad from the perspective of the non-existence of Königsberg. On his photographs the city looks like a sinking Venice. Yury Vassiliev's video-installations refer to the self-contradictory title of the exhibition. The artist makes the viewer a voyeur who looks at the "stranger" though a slightly open snow-white, brand new doors while the stranger also peeks from behind the bushes visible in the film through the crack. The complex, ambiguous historic situation which is characteristic both for Kaliningrad as well as Gdansk made Lithuanian artists Jurga Barilaitė and Marta Vosyliute express themselves through a game which seems to be played more with themselves than the viewers.

The idea of the exhibition as well as the entire *Close Stranger* project was born three years ago. A year has passed since the artists took part in the artist-in-residence programs. At that time, it seemed that the problems and conflicts among our nations are a thing of the past and a new reflection in new conditions was needed. Unexpectedly, over the past months the political situation among our states has changed completely. Russian occupation of Crimea has given rise to very strong and negative emotions among the Polish and Lithuanian societies as well as fears



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for their independence. Those developments have also made the organizers and participants in the exhibition face new questions of an ethical nature as well as the necessity to make choices. Two artists decided to refuse to take part in the exhibition shown in Kaliningrad. However, it seems that there is one serious argument in favor of presenting the exposition: culture appears there as the only platform upon which we, the citizens of Poland, Lithuania and Russia, can meet despite the current political conflicts.

**Organizers:**

The Baltic Branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts in Kaliningrad, the Klaipeda Culture Communication Centre, the Laznia Centre for Contemporary Arts in Gdansk.

Exhibition architect: Marek Zygmunt

Exhibition producer: Aleksandra Musielak

PR: Olga Jankowska

The program is co-financed by the European Union.

[www.closestranger.eu](http://www.closestranger.eu)