

Labyrinthos

In a labyrinth – the visible and the invisible by Laura Kuusk

Estonian art historian Laura Kuusk describes the media art project “Voolav labürint” that took place simultaneously in Kütiorg, Estonia and Groningen, the Netherlands, on September 29th till October 16th 2005.



“Voolav labürint” was a joint project by the Kütioru Avatud Ateljee and Pavlov mediaLab, during which live video footage from Kütiorg was screened on two displays mounted on the walls of the Vroom & Dreesman warehouse in Groningen. The images were being “crocheted” in Kütiorg by Peeter Laurits and Madis Katz, and in Groningen, curators Nathalie Beekman and Thuur Caris of the PML were coordinating the show. There were live presentations between 9 and 12 o’clock in the evenings (also presented on the KAA website www.metsas.ee). The audience could watch the exhibiton “Voolav labürint” being prepared as well as other events taking place in Kütiorg, and ask questions via SMS and IRC, that were promptly answered by Laurits.

PML’s motive in creating this technological and artistic labyrinth was reinforcing the international web of creative connections following the former Hanseatic trade routes, that, incidentally, made use of rivers too. In their exhibition “Voolav labürint”, Laurits and Katz also connect the river motif with the issues of trade and commerce. “This is our most political-economic work ever”, explains Laurits.

“Voolav labürint” takes the spectator to a world where pieces of one picture can appear as a whole elsewhere, where the flow of the river is “captured in photographs”, “caught” and thus acquired. Laurits has created such composite maps before – he visualizes mental patterns, takes them apart and then puts the pieces together again, creating views (of the world) that might be familiar to some, but new to others. The river is divided into pictures, cut into pieces to fit the frames. This points to the “real-estating” of nature and the capitalist desire for dividing everything into pieces that can be owned. The Western culture is based on the concept of ownership – thus the need to “divide” a place into understandable, describable lumps in order to comprehend it.

“They’re all mad,” says Laurits, disappearing behind a bookshelf. By this he means Beekman, Harens and Caris, the PML team that installed the media bridge between Kütiorg and Groningen. Estonia’s cutting-edge communications’ companies had labeled this feat as impossible. Kütiorg is one of the deepest valleys in Estonia, with uneven and foresty landscape, and fitting it with a high-speed Internet connection took a joint effort of technology companies from several countries. The result was a labyrinth that prompted the question exactly who was the guinea pig. Who was watching who? Was the projection a work of pictorial art, or was it TV, or cinema, or a technological network, or architecture, or conceptual art or just “a hole in the time space continuum”, as described by Thuur Caris?



The perception of the situation and the subject of the experiment kept changing throughout the project’s existence. Were the people on the street (or was Pavlov Media Lab) watching Peeter Laurits and Madis Katz, or were they watching the viewers? Thuur Caris: “Can you create autonomous art while you’re constantly conscious of the audience watching you?” Who was dictating who’s behaviour? Just as an Estonian film crew was capturing the proceedings on the wall of Vroom & Dreesmann – a Swedish film crew working in Kütiorg –, Dutch filmmaker Peter de Kan was filming over the Estonians’ shoulder, capturing the Estonian filmmakers’ work on capturing the Swedish filmmakers’ work. “I can’t understand it either, who was looking at who or seeing what,” Laurits says. “Being on-line and on-screen seems to prove one’s existence. The image prevails reality. During the process the title of Peeter’s photo series became more and more apposite for the whole project. All of us got lost in the media labyrinth we set up ourselves,” says Thuur Caris.

In the evenings there were live presentations: cameras were set up in front of Peeter and Madis, as well as in the corner of the room, where the author of this report was watching the media/art (?) experiment in process, while being watched by the audience in Groningen and therefore becoming a tiny part of the labyrinth itself. Peeter and Madis are tinkering with the photographs and making occasional comments about the work at hand, as well as answering viewers’ questions. Someone asks whether there is life in the forests. “In case one applies “life” to all forms of life, this place is more densely populated than New York or St Petersburg,” says Peeter. Another asks, why does Peeter Laurits depict so much nudity in his works. (This time however the only nudity on the photographs is represented by human heads that act as a melting point of the body’s veins and sinews and the river’s shimmering.) Laurits, who famously used copious nudity in works like “Veeuputus” and “Dining with Worms”, replies that humans are both literally and metaphorically naked at birth and when they die, clothes are of no

importance either – that’s why he depicts them like this when he’s representing these points in life.

In spring 2005 Thuur Caris came to Estonia to widen PML-s network of connections, and among other things, took part in the project “Forestart” in Kütiorg. Once there, he met Laurits, who, according to rumours spreading in Tallinn, was living in very primitive conditions while working with high-end technological equipment, thus combining the pre- and post-industrial ways of life. “He has brought the 21st century to the Bronze Age”, they said of him. Caris and Laurits discussed the Western culture’s deep-rooted perception of nature and culture, the primitive and the civilized as opposing forces; they compared the essential similarities between the Dutch and Estonian cultures and the seeming differences brought on by different histories.



Thuur Caris says: “Besides the obvious things like modern technology Estonia and the Netherlands have things in common like the Northern European (Germanic) culture, seatriade, low flat landscape and very recognisable seasons. But there’s a big difference; in the thinly populated dense woods of the Estonian countryside the influence of Rome, Christianity and modern economic ideologies like Marxism or Kapitalism could not completely wipe out the primordeal European Culture. Kütiorg is located in the far south of Estonia and can be considered one of the most remote areas in Estonia. Being there we suspect to sense hints and traces of a long lost unrecorded knowledge of how to live in harmony with the elements of the natural Northern European environment.” PML’s team’s idea was to use 21st century technology to bring Peeter Laurits’s “Bronze Age” lifestyle to Groningen as a most opposite location possible. “Although the city of Groningen is not very big and situated in the most rural part of the Netherlands, all connection with the natural enviroment is absent. Every inch of this country seems to be submitted to an overall planning serving social and economic purposes. Man dominates everything. We want to investigate the influence of new media technology on society (especially on culture) and share this knowledge. We want to give the audience an unexpected sense of wonder and food for thought right in the middle of everyday life”, says Caris. (See also <http://www.pavlov.nl/> “about us” “mission/philosophy”).

“The importance of the project is to experience the Global Village and the possibilities of telepresence. Issues which are very important phenomena of our modern technology. The consequences to our culture and consciousness are still hard to foresee. If our world shrinks, will different worlds like Rode Weeshuisstraat and Kütiorg merge or supplement each other? Will they collide or simply disappear like matter and anti-matter?

Projects like these have a mind-expanding effect. From a simple reaction like "hey, isn't this a cool city" to deep existential meditation. For the larger audience it's the notion of possibilities of using audiovisuals to improve atmosphere in public space. For a smaller audience the experience of the global village as a reality. For a few, mostly artists and students, reflections on issues already mentioned in this interview. The overall influence is in a way civilizing; bringing people together talking, thinking, relating, communicating, trying to make sense.



Aesthetically it was a beautiful sight. Peeter's images in this street are like lightning in blue sky. But we should not underestimate how deaf and blind people are / have become living in an environment of visual and audible noise where images and sounds pour into their livingrooms just like water and electricity. During these two and a half weeks thousands of people passed by. Most didn't even notice the screening. Of the hundreds that did most were interested in technological things asking questions like "where's the projector?". A few hundreds really took the time to stop and sit down to actually watch Peeter.”