

Ljiljana Ćinkul: You have participated in International printmaking triennial in Belgrade in 2014 and 2017, and also in April/May this year, as one of the awarded artists at the mentioned exhibition, you had your solo exhibition in Grafički Kolektiv Gallery. How would you compare Serbian and Lithuanian art scene and the mainstreams in the field of printmaking?

Irma Balakauskaitė: I am very happy that I have had the chance to take part in the International Printmaking Triennials in Belgrade and thankful for the recognition of my works. It has been an honor to represent Lithuania in an event of such cultural magnitude, which, in my opinion, gains more and more momentum and importance every year. Not only in Serbia but also in the overall context of European culture as well as in popularization and development of graphic art. I appreciate the enthusiasm of Suzana Vuckovič, the curator; hope that her energy will not subside and that the Triennial will receive even greater support and popularity in the future.

Printmaking triennials are a great opportunity to see and evaluate the processes that happen in the modern day graphic art scene. I think it is difficult to speak of the existence of some kind of national schools in Europe when we live in these times of globalization and multiculturalism. The quality of the art is no longer defined by the schools, but rather the personalities that set the tone for the appearance and development of certain tendencies.

In the short time I spent in Belgrade I did not have the chance to appraise the processes that are happening in the context of the Serbian graphic art scene. My acquaintance with Serbian graphic art is insufficient to make responsible generalizations. I am, however, more familiar with the Baltic context, which I observe in the Tallinn, Krakow Triennials and the personal exhibitions in the neighboring countries... I will share my insight.

Answering your question I will probably not make a mistake by saying that the tendencies of the development of graphic art are very similar both in our countries and the world. The development happens naturally in two directions: 1) traditional view of printmaking is still dominant (the relationship that is based on the use of the craft and technology and satisfies the need for the "true print") and 2) conceptual approach, which is more akin to the usual modern art/interdisciplinary format, is developing (the relationship where conceptual motion is more important than a beautifully crafted image).

Speaking of technique and technology, a close connection with tradition can be sensed in both Lithuanian and Serbian graphic art. Digital graphics (in its pure form) has not taken root and retreated from the exhibition context into the domain of applied arts in Lithuania due a more conservative attitude of the viewers (and the artists themselves); it can be noticed in sheet printmaking/printing art as an element of mixed media. Meanwhile the authors (of various ages and generations) lean more and more towards the old and beautiful techniques. The young generation finds themes and forms in which etching, aquatint, mezzotint, xylography and other techniques ring in a new and relevant way. I notice a similar tendency in Serbia as well. Although digital graphics is not cast off in the context of your exhibits- it tries to take its rightful niche, but as I see it, it still has not assumed the convincing form it needs to equally compete with traditional techniques.

When comparing the formal aspects of Lithuanian and Serbian graphic art I would make one observation: Serbian artists like and use abstraction in a very convincing way, whereas Lithuanian artists do so very rarely. Most currently actively creating Lithuanian artists primarily choose figurativity, which

more or less conceals a narrative. Serbian printmaking has more of abstract exploration. However, I think that this difference is also influenced by some historical-artistic tradition.

As I see it, conceptual printmaking is still just forming both in Lithuania and in Serbia. In conclusion, I would say that in its essence the tendencies of graphic art are similar in our countries, even though the forms of visual expression and issues maintain their authenticity, which would be quite difficult to define in a few words.

I came up with a thought while looking for an answer to your question- I think the best cultural acquaintance with each other could be a combined printmaking exhibition that could be seen by both Lithuanian and Serbian audiences. This exhibition could enable an evaluation of the differences and similarities of Lithuanian and Serbian graphic art. I believe that such an event could become an interesting and significant cultural bridge as well as a very interesting and sensible initiative.

Lj.Ć: You work in different media: painting, graphic art, sculpture and scenography. What is the relation of that rich artistic experience with your personal concepts of art in general?

I.B: Before I can answer your question I should probably present the context of my art...

I have been drawing all of my conscious life from the time I could hold a pencil. I do not know how but the very clear understanding that I want to be a puppet theater artist came when I was about ten years old. It was quite a weird sensation because I have never been to a theater before and only acquainted myself with puppet theater much later in life. All of the dolls that were given to me as a child were disassembled and rebuilt in my own way.

I was thoroughly reaching for my goal- preparing to study scenography. The year when I was applying to the Institute of Arts (now Academy of Arts) there was no admittance to scenography as the course was only assembled once every two years. I very successfully applied for a painting course thinking that I could switch to scenography in a year. But that did not happen... A group of very interesting personalities had gathered on the painting course, friendships and creative connections had come to life and it would have been a pity to lose them. Moreover, after associating myself with the students on the scenography course, who were working in nearby auditoriums, I realized that they were being profiled in a very narrow manner – being thought based on a template of only one tutor.

On the painting course I became friends with Vytautas Pakalnis – a deep thinker and an original writer. He was always open to all kinds of creative experiments and very easily accepted the idea to start a puppet theater together. He was writing the texts and creating the mechanisms and I made puppets and was working on the scenography... This is how an experimental mechanical theater “Ū” was born from a game. We felt completely unrestrained as artists by the limitations that are typical to the medium of theater. “Ū” existed for 5 years and was even invited to festivals...

Graphic art only came into my life by accident... I had the chance to acquaint myself with the technologies of graphic art when I was studying in my second year. I fell in love with etching – it turned into a passionate hobby of mine. I would spend all of my spare evenings in the etchery (etching printmaking studio) of the Graphics Art Center, where I was let in by my printmaker colleagues. Over

time, graphic art has become my main passion (in 1999 I was admitted into the Lithuanian Union of Artists as a graphic artist).

Unexpectedly, during my student years, painting, printmaking and the childhood dream of mine – Puppet Theater had organically intertwined in the time of creative experiments and experiences.

Interdisciplinarity is a natural state that meets my inner and creative requirements and does not allow me to drown in the routine or constrain myself within the boundaries of any one discipline/one guild. The fact that I was not constrained by the teachings of graphic art and scenography always gave me more freedom to experiment and combine various plasticity, expanding the boundaries of the traditional understanding. Whilst I was trying to understand what differentiates me from other artists and what characterizes me as an artist and a personality, I was looking for authentic form or system which could house all of my professional interests.

After my friend Vytautas Pakalnis had tragically left life I had decided to create my “Artists Theater” on my own. This had become my long term strategy and a creative goal – script of my creative life, where individual works or cycles of works, sculptures, mechanical, graphical objects and installations would over time fall into place as puzzle pieces of a coherent system that represents my worldview.

Not one of my exhibitions or cycle of works is ever final. I try to solve specific questions of plasticity in each of the interim results that are always oriented at the end goal – the “Artists Theater” as a means to understand myself. On my way towards this goal I experiment, combining modern and traditional printmaking techniques; discover own/authore's techniques which allow me to conjoin graphical aesthetics with spontaneous painterly texture and color symbolism; working on graphical objects I transfer graphical images into voluminous form; and I combine all of it with the plasticity of sculpture and mechanics working on my mobiles...

Politics, economy and social context are not my fields of interest. In my works I am interested in the contemplation of the issues of the human condition. One of the core topics in my art is the problem of the relationship of free will/freedom of choice and predetermined fate/destiny.

I often feel as if I was a mechanism controlled by some higher power, and this sensation has pushed me to choose the puppet as the main actor in my art – it is an intermediate form between a person and an object. Materializing and reproducing my heroes in my prints, sculptures and mobiles, I take on the function of the puppet master, forcing my characters to act and live out various situations in my stead. I allow myself to deform and transform them so that their bodies would fully communicate my feelings and ideas.

On one hand, I act as the director throwing characters into situations, and, on the other hand, observing the world I have created I seek to know myself. I try to ascertain the origins of my artistic stimuli, aesthetic and ethical priorities within the chosen field of formal and semantic problems.

Lj.Ć: You said that your each print represent a kind of small theater, a small scenography... Is there a certain measure of that synergy of scenography and graphic art and how do you explain it?

I.B: This is a very difficult question. Truth be told, I have never tried to evaluate it. Different creative experiences entwine themselves in my art in such an organic way that I have barely thought about it at all. But now, after hearing your question, I have looked over the development of my work and can name a few moments of synergy.

Studying in my third year at the Academy, when the academic curriculum was nearly overcome, the problem of self authenticity had sharply arisen: Who am I? What is it that could make me interesting/different as an artist?

When studying painting I started to show interest in printmaking, playing theater. Once, when I was presenting my creative sketches to my tutor (whom I immensely respected and still do) I heard a phrase from his lips that my „thinking is graphical and I should change direction – transfer to the graphic artist’s specialism“ (back then different creative guilds have been separated into very strict sectarian lodges). I did not intend to switch: I loved painting and printmaking had already become my daily joy (the tutor did not know that).

I took his words as a challenge to use my different/“unpainterly“ thinking in order to create an original form of painting. I rejected oil paints and started using construction filler and glue; consciously rejected color (it was quite a brave challenge to the school of coloristic painting which we were being taught)- I chose achromatic or monochromatic colors; rejected the brush – started using a knife to etch textures onto plaster on canvas... Trying to avoid any possible painterly influences and citations I looked for inspiration in theater, mechanics and the assortment of DIY stores... And this was my victory – I had found my own language in painting.

I was looking for the possibilities to „break down“ the graphical sterility and the constraints of the drawing in graphic art. For me it is very important that there would be „live meat“ in a painting – spontaneous textures, the live nerve of the drawing, painterly fortuities, multiple layers... In printmaking I have raised a challenge for myself to create something akin to a „reproducible painting“, a synthetic product, where the principles of painting would combine with technologies of printmaking and would fulfill my need for painting and printmaking all in one. I am on the way towards this goal. I use different unconventional materials (filler, plaster, polisterene, clay, glue, etc.) when working on my prints. Their qualities, that I have gotten to know through painting and work in the theater, allow me to free the drawing and easily modify it, to etch quickly and to create painterly textures... I often use unconventional tools for etching: chisels, saws, forks, brushes, soldering irons, sandpaper. I print on canvas. My view on reproduction is quite loose. I think that reproduction is the most boring part of the process of printmaking. I try to add some variation to it. Even though I make small editions, I try to create a different mood in each print by painting straight onto the cliché, I permit myself to try different color or tonal variations; I print by hand which makes each print unique. I know that this is outside of the canon, but, without the ability to improvise at least a little bit, reproduction would become a ritual that is difficult for me to understand and justify. These days the only point of reproduction that I see is that

it allows the author to separate with his work in a less painful way when selling it or sending it to exhibitions.

In my opinion, graphic art is the most open and democratic in terms of discovering new forms, technologies and possibilities for expression; out of all of the artistic domains that I like, it is the least bound in terms of the „format“. I chose graphic art as a priority for implementing my ideas. As an addition, the synergy of the technologies and tools of painting and printmaking allows me to be unique in the context of Lithuanian printmaking.

Scenography (that is to say, notional direction of theatrical plot and the “puppet-ification” (stylization, objectification) of characters) is the red strand that stretches throughout the entirety of my art whatever I choose to do.

Asking the question “how graphic art and scenography interact in my works”, You probably were talking about my exhibition “Būsenos/States” at the Grafički Kolektiv gallery..? When presenting the exhibition I mentioned that “I place my visual reality in a 2D format as scenography”... I will try to clarify the working principle of the synergetic connections between theater and printmaking in my works by illustrating with a specific example.

In “States”, by using a visual form I sought to express my relationship with reality and the internal (spiritual/emotional) states that arise at this junction: solitude, resolve, longing, tension, despair, resistance...

Working on these pieces, it was exceptionally important to maximize the communication between the viewer and the piece; to express myself in the most obvious way so that what I am trying to say would be clearly read/understood. I had thought of ways to achieve this and theatrical experience had suggested a solution.

In the most straightforward sense, I tried to imagine how would a director, working on a silent spectacle, express a feeling using only the motion and the scenic image; visualize it so clearly that it would resonate with the viewer.

The cliché has become my stage. There must be nothing accidental, unnecessary or pointless on stage. For this reason my scenography only has the most necessary objects-symbols (mountain, ground, house, chair, tree, well, balcony), some “special effects” (water, wind, smoke), minimum props (rock, ball, plane) and light. My characters communicate with the viewer through symbolic action, which they act out in the scenography that I have prepared for them. The action in the image is still but it can be easily extended with a thought; combine all the actions together and see the melancholic life on stage which is, in essence, life itself.

Lj.Ć: In your work you are focused on emotional and spiritual states which emerge through human interaction with nature and/or reality. To what extent is that related to local tradition and heritage of Baltic space?

I.B: Of course, a person is shaped by the environment they live in. Introspecting, contemplative/observational relationship with the environment is typical for a Lithuanian spirit. The

symbolism of sad Lithuanian songs, dark expression of the folk tales, silence and implied meaning in relationships, restrained and refined aesthetic taste... - all of this is reflected in my world view, one way or the other. Although, I would not say that this defines my innermost choices. It is difficult for me to pick out details from a complicated and intricate field of various influences.

I am not a pure Baltic nugget. I was born to a family of mixed ethnicities, spent my childhood in Kyiv, my circle of communication has always been multicultural and multilingual. As an influence to the development of my world view I would reflectively mention only one thing – a Jewish anecdote. Anecdotes that Hebrews tell about themselves, in my opinion, is the most unique form of folk art, where the painful reflection of reality is intertwined with existential philosophy, wisdom, paradox and incredibly funny, lively and optimistic auto-irony.

I think, that a person brings a bouquet of existential questions/touching problems as they come into the world. Geography has nothing to do with it.

Lj.Ć: Titles of your works have literary and poetic tone. How much are these titles important to you, your work and communication of your graphic art with audience?

I.B: Words are very important to me. Often a concept, an overheard phrase or an anecdote becomes an inspiration for my art, a starting point for the choice of the theme. Usually, I work in cycles, where I seek to ponder the meanings encoded in words or phrases in a visual form. The cycles “Exodus”, “Conversations”, “Antique Landscapes”, “States” came to be this way... The names of the cycles usually serve as frames that help to concentrate on a topic and define the boundaries of a chosen problem.

In some works I use personal symbols that may not be understood. In such cases the titles serve as communicational bridges that guide the viewer towards the thought I am trying to express without showing it in an obvious manner.

My titles are usually very simple: “Waiting Ones”, “Watching Ones”, “Standing Ones”, “Ones that Walk Together”, “Fear”, “Silence”... I wouldn’t say that they are very literary or poetic... Maybe the theatricality and some sort of Poesis arises at the relation between the title and the image..? In that case it fits the purpose.

More often than not, the titles of my works are completely opposite to the image that viewer can see. This way I create a paradoxical situation where the mismatch of image and text enables the grasping of semantic layers which exist between the words and the images.

Lj.Ć: Use of different materials is typical for your work in graphic art. What is the ratio of Poesis and Techne in your work?

I.B: The Poesis of the image is something I think about the least. Poetry in a piece of work comes to be naturally or does not come at all. The artistic truth is much more important to me, it can be whatever you want. And sometimes it is not poetic at all... I do not attempt to consciously enrich/poeticize the image.

I was always more interested in the Poesis of the creative process – a dialogue which happens in the work process between me and the matter which I am trying to defeat. I believe that all matter is alive: it is always resisting, trying to test me, taunting, trying my patience and the sincerity of my intentions... Any chosen material (whether it is paper, metal, wood, plaster or clay...) has its own character and caprices... as well as its own authenticity which it sometimes reveals by suggesting a solution that I would have never come up with on my own. I always value the „kicks“ and accidents that happen when „torturing“ the cliché: ulcerating, etching, rubbing paint on it, printing... The process of the emergence of graphic art is a magical act which enchants me. Graphic art can be printed from anything onto everything – the spectrum of options is infinite! Every time I choose a new and untested material, I experience the childlike joy of discovery: “Oh! It can be done this way too!”, “and afterwards like this!”, “and then this can be combined”, “what if I...” and so on... I am never bored in the relationship of “me and my cliché”.

I never know what the result will look like beforehand. But that is exactly what I like! That is why I choose different materials for different ideas, come up with new ones, experiment. I do not have images in my head. I have only abstract blueprints in there. A work is born only out of the relationship with matter which always resists at first and then it takes the lead, corrects, suggests and even does some things on its own. Poesis and Techne in my work meet outside of the image.

Lj.Č: You also work as a professor. How does the exchange of creative energy in communication with students affect your work as an artist?

I.B: Teaching is a large part of my life. Most of my creative energy gets invested into it. I have worked with children aged 3-15, students and adults who wish to expand their view or acquire creative experiences. It is a very interesting and controversial practice.

But I will start the answer to your question from a little bit further out...

I call my generation the “turning point/ sudden change generation”. I think that people of culture of my generation/artists in Lithuania (and not only them...) had to experience all of the changes of the historical and the value system paradigm shift, both for the better and for the worse, on their own skin.

In 1991, after the collapse of the soviet system, when the capitalistic relations were only developing, the public attitude towards art and the artist had changed drastically. Art (and culture in general) had lost its privileged position. Culture had been pushed out of the elitist status. It had to adapt to the new “product-value” relationship, which it was not ready for. An entire generation of artists who had been “vaccinated” with an idea that “the object of an artist is to create things that nobody needs” (that is to say that art is not supposed to please utilitarian consumerist needs but rather has to be something much more than that; it is supposed to express the “artistic truth” without indulging and adapting to the tastes of the public, “to be *art!*”), suddenly was met with a unavoidable demand of the market – “create a *marketable product*”. Keeping in mind that the modern art market in Lithuania has only started developing very recently (the modern art fair “Art Vilnius” had started only about 5 years ago; only about 3 years ago the “Modern Art Museum” that buys art for its collection had been conceived by the efforts of one private entity), many of the talented people could not deal with this paradigm shift: some

went into commercial work, some into advertisement, some into religion, some left life, and some have dived straight into teaching... From our marvelous course of 16 people only two remain "in the art".

I can say that the fact that the "position of the artist in the context of the market" is still a very delicate problem because that was the topic of the dissertation of one of the Graphic Art masters students written this year.

Most of the artists in Lithuania are forced to work very diverse jobs in order to secure at least minimal financial stability so that they could work on their art. The fact that teaching is a very difficult job that takes away a lot of time and energy from creative work is not a secret to anyone. Educators by calling stop working in any other creative fields and realize themselves through teaching. But for those artists who have at least some creative ambitions, education becomes the most favorable compromise; it takes away time from your main job – art, but still allows to stay close to it as well as ensures a humble living. In this sense I am not an exception.

After graduating from the Academy, I was looking for my "place under the sun": I worked on costumes for the drama theater, made scenography for projects of questionable quality, made illustrations for text books, worked in advertising... But after the only (and not very successful) attempt in my life at directing I gave myself my word that I would never again work with people (at that time I didn't have enough experience and energy to control the live matter of the actors). I left theater completely and decided to only direct my own paintings and objects...

I was afraid and avoided the work of an educator. However, when the situation had reached an absolutely critical point in life I had accepted an offer to work with children aged 3-5 at a private school. This job demanded maximal concentration of all my abilities: during lessons I had to improvise and labor so quickly and creatively that after a year I was completely drained. But in return, I had gained invaluable psychological, creative and even directorial experience that completely freed me from all my fears! After this I could teach my subject to anyone and anywhere. I was invited to lead the practical Art course for the art critics at the European Humanitarian University; gained a few years of experience at distance tutoring at the same university; for 10 years I worked with children aged 5-15 at an arts studio; now I teach a Basics Course of Composition and Graphic Art course at the Vilnius Open Art and Design School by the Academy of Arts.

Working with children and students I realized that there is a lot of theater in education: same directing, same creative process, same dialogue and confrontation when trying to overcome the resistance of the pupils (which is inevitable); same "accidents" and creative joy when your effort reaches the goal, resonates, and reflects back in the form of the pupils' astounding results and the backlink in relationships!

My relationships with students develop in various ways, but, in those cases when resonance happens, both sides experience strong feelings that tie them together and become the basis for a long-lasting friendships.

When teaching, my goal is to help develop the individual authenticity of each and every pupil/student (originality, in my opinion, is one of the most important aspects of the quality of art). My practical experience allows me to show different approaches for expressing and technically realizing that authenticity. I never force my own style or taste onto my students, I try to notice that which comes from

within them and suits their needs. As an educator I am very proud of that the works of all my students are very different, not similar to any of my works or the works of each other. I manage to be genuinely happy for the achievements of my students.

You asked how the communication with my students affects my own creative work..?

Due to the specificity of the discipline that I teach, I get to work with people that come to me while still „very raw“. When I manage to raise them to a level where we can both communicate in the same language they usually leave to study at a higher level of education. I get the responsibility to “put on a good primer” (basis): to teach them to see, get to know and understand the causational and semantic connections in a piece of visual art, to think conceptually, to provide a possibility to touch the grammar of the visual language. In this stage I am forming the artistic viewpoint of the students, I am dominant.

Even though my students cannot influence my creative work as much as I do theirs, they still strongly polish my character- develop the positive aspects of my personality. Sometimes I can be very critical and incisive. The contemporary youth is very vulnerable and sensitive. They teach me to be softer, more tolerant, to express my thoughts carefully and correctly. I always communicate with them in an open and respectful manner, as I would with my equals. I never try to be omniscient. Sometimes, when I am explaining something or when I have to quickly adapt the task, I must find the alternative solution/suggestion very quickly. In those moments I have to admit that I am improvising and trying this new thing for the first time together with my students. Very often I find something new in this spontaneous improvisation, something that I later use in my own work. Students do not give me time to relax, they force me to always be in my best shape, develop myself, and not fossilize with their provocations and by asking their “uncomfortable” questions.

Once, I was demonstrating one of the graphic techniques, one of my students cunningly asked me: “What art is? Is art technology?”. I answered: “No. Not only that. But do you want me to tell you what art is in one word?”. She asked for exactly that. I needed some time to think about this. For a few days I was intensively looking for this one word that could define art. All of the definitions I found were not precise enough – none of them could contain all of the meanings that define my understanding of art. After long deliberations, I remembered one Russian term: “Сопромат” (Sopromat, rus. сопротивление материалов – the resistance of matter). In soviet times this word was used to call the most difficult discipline of engineering which analyzes the properties of matter, resistance and hardness- a student’s nightmare. When explaining the meaning of this term (in context of my answer) I said, that, in my deepest understanding, art is born when an artist working in the creative field manages to defeat the resistance of matter on the physical (technological, formal, ideological) level and to transcend matter as substance. To brush against the transcendent dimension. To find that “something”, which turns Giorgio Morandi's bottles, painted in the centre of square format in two brushstrokes, into the mystery of cosmic majesty.

I always look for this dimension in art. Sometimes, I cry in front of works – I measure the highest quality of art in tears.

Thank you for your interesting and difficult questions. I felt it was very useful to once again rethink my practice.

Belgrade, July 3rd, 2017