

“It is the artists themselves who submit to this exploitation.”

MARGE MONKO is artist, who was active in the art workers' movement in Estonia in 2010–2011 and speaks out against the gallery rent system in Tallinn. She has been active in art since 2006 and is currently living in Ghent.

Can you describe how the different art galleries in Estonia function in regards gallery rent?

The situation in Tallinn and in other cities is different. In Tallinn, there is the art hall, Kunstihoone, and two galleries, Kunstihoone gallery and Linnagalerii, which are free. These are funded by the state and the city, but they receive only small amounts. Despite this, they have managed to maintain it so that you don't need to pay the rent. However, the rest of the galleries, Hobusepea, Draakoni and Hop gallery are owned by the Estonian Artists' Association, that is, the artists' union. The union is applying every year for funding from the Ministry of Culture for expenses relating to running the galleries. For a long time, the problem was that that they didn't get enough funding and therefore additionally asked rent from artists. This was recently changed – galleries that receive funding from the ministry must not ask for rent from artists any more. They now apply for additional funding directly from the Cultural Endowment,

whereas earlier the rent money was channelled through artists. Draakoni and Hobusepea have very short exhibition periods, it is sometimes even less than two weeks. That is crazy. When both of those galleries were still asking rent from artists, they said that no artist is able to pay the rent for three weeks. However, I think that would be a question of reorganising. I heard recently that from 2015 the exhibition period will be extended to three weeks.

Then there are some so-called commercial galleries, which are commercially active in Estonia. For example Vaal. There you also have to pay rent. The thing is that they are working in a different way than the commercial galleries in Europe. When they are working locally they don't have a list of artists that they are only working with as representatives. They just operate by renting out the space.

In addition, there have also been galleries that operate according to a different logic, for example, Rael Artel Gallery: Non-Profit Project Space which was active in 2004–2009, first in Pärnu and then in Tartu. It was run by the curator

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Rael Artel who was defining her practice precisely against the dominant model of charging rent and making exhibition programmes dependant on open application rounds. Rael's emphasis was on having a curated programme, inviting artists and curators to make exhibitions in her space, and offering basic working conditions.

Do you know how the situation developed so that the artists need to pay rent?

I think it began in the beginning of the 1990s when the Soviet system collapsed and the art was not really considered important, and received very small support from the state. The contemporary art in the 1990s was mainly supported by Soros Foundation. I don't have the numbers to compare, but I think that the Artists' Association got a generous support from the Soviet state. Now from the whole budget of the Ministry of Culture, visual art actually gets a rather small percentage. The problem is that visual art doesn't have so many institutions as for example the theatre. Museums, including art museums, belong to a separate section in the state household. The Artists' Association is funded through the so-called head tax which should be distributed to the members as social benefits or scholarships for projects. The union has a lot of real-estate – gallery spaces and artist studios. They have to maintain them but they don't get any subsidies for this purpose from the state.

Did the commercial galleries and the Artists' Association galleries exist also in the Soviet times?

No they did not. They are completely new galleries which started in the 1990s.

So there were much less galleries, bigger institutions maybe?

Yes I think there were even less galleries. Draakoni gallery existed, I think it was established in the 1980s. It is an interesting case as it is semi-commercial. In the back there is a room where they are selling works from the previous exhibitions. This was a very popular system during the Soviet times. Then a lot of people were buying art, but it was also very cheap.

And at the same time it was state-subsidised?

Yes.

Were there grants?

Not grants but commissions. And not only to applied artists but also to visual artists. There was an annual overview exhibition, a kind of salon, in Kunstihoone, where most of the works were bought with actually good prices, so, as I have understood it, those who were recognised and considered good, had a more secure life.

Why do you think that artists accept to pay for gallery?

It is a good question. When we were discussing with Airi and others from the art workers' movement, Airi was suggesting a boycott. But it was clear that there never could be a boycott as there always would be artists who just want to show their work and can pay, even if they don't sell anything. It is anyway hardly the case in these galleries, or in Estonia at large, that you can sell. It is connected to a wish to show your work. That is why you are an artist at all, and you still want to

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continue, even when you are not paid and you are in such a miserable condition.

But is it also connected to the  
need to show to the grant givers  
that you are active?

Yes, of course. You need it in your CV. These spaces have a good reputation and Hobusepea is a nice space. And the main thing is that you don't have many alternatives. The other alternatives are the galleries of Kunstihoone, which are for free and are also fine. But I haven't exhibited there due to ideological reasons.

Since when?

Since the last director Karin Hallas-Murula was selected in 2011.<sup>1</sup> She made some announcements in the public stating that she wants more audience in the exhibitions and she knows how to do it with traditional exhibitions. She claimed that contemporary art exhibitions have pushed the audiences away and we don't want to be the scene only for feminists and sexual minorities and so on.

But there is an exhibition by  
Teemu Mäki starting tomorrow?

Yes probably he doesn't know about that. And it doesn't mean that they would not accept projects that are socially committed, as the projects are selected by the board and not by her personally.

Are there also many other  
local artists who are boycotting  
the Kunstihoone?

Yes there are some, but not many. The scene is so small and there are not so many alternatives, not so many spaces.

There are always different ways to be active and people are trying to find those possibilities.

What is the range of prices in  
which the gallery rent moves  
in Estonia and what do you get  
with the money?

I'm not aware of the prices in commercial galleries but I could not imagine any artist paying 1 000 euros, it must be less. The Artists' Association galleries have been rent-free for members since 2014. Before that the rent in Hobusepea gallery was around 300 euros for a period of 2 weeks. The rent for those who are not members of the artists' union is now 107 euros for a 2 week period. When artists are applying for the production money from the grant givers, they include a budget line with the gallery rent. Mostly they get this money from the Cultural Endowment and in the end it does not come from their own pocket. But the rent-free situation is very much connected to state support, so there is no guarantee that the rent for artists will not be re-introduced, for example, if the Ministry of Culture funding to the Artists' Association galleries is denied in future. At any case, you get the space and you get the services. You can also have all the equipment that the gallery has, which in the case of Hobusepea, is quite good projectors. And they also employ people who install your work.

How many people are working  
in those galleries?

In Draakoni gallery and Hobusepea there is one person managing the gallery, and then one person who comes when the exhibition changes, de-montaging

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and uninstalling. And of course there are the guards.

What else does the artist get, opening drinks, flyer...?

Yes, flyers. They also post them.

What about curatorial assistance or production assistance?

You have to do that yourself. They go over all the texts, the description of the exhibition, and they might ask more questions. But they don't write the texts.

And do you discuss the content of the works with them or where to place which work?

No. This would be quite impossible, every two weeks.

Have you been trying to resist the gallery rent?

Not really. It's also the question of lack of alternatives. I don't show in the commercial galleries because I don't see the point of paying the rent for them. A couple of years ago when the artists still had to pay the rent in galleries, the board of the Artists' Association was saying that if they were not charging the rent they would need to close down the spaces because it is impossible to manage only with the money they get from the government. They were saying that the financing from the Ministry of Culture was not giving enough support, because places all over Estonia are applying for the same subsidies. But anyway, the majority of support goes to spaces in Tallinn.

I have also been complaining about the short exhibition periods, that it is

completely insane. As an artist, you have to work a lot and then you are just able to show your work for less than two weeks. Professional people just don't manage to see it because it is going on for too short a time. However, I heard the exhibition period will now be extended to three weeks which is much better.

It is the artists themselves who submit to this exploitation. As long as there are artists who are willing to pay the rent, it can carry on. But if we all say that sorry, it doesn't go like this, then they have to reconsider. But as I said, in Estonia there are always these artists who are ready to pay.

1. Karin Hallas-Murula resigned in October 2014 and the new director was appointed starting from January 2015.