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When a process acquires form and becomes a canon

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Book *Kreatīvie tīkli* ('Creative Network') by Rasa Šmite (Riga, 2011)

Rasa Šmite, being an artist, organiser, curator and theorist, has to a large extent shaped the new media art and research scene in Latvia since the mid-1990s. Together with Raitis Šmits and a number of other activists, Rasa has taken part in the promotion of new media art as a separate discipline: the year 1996 saw the setting up of an electronic media art laboratory, E-Lab, which was restructured into the New Media Culture Centre RIXC; since 1997, international art festivals have been held, countless art projects carried out and collections of articles and publications have been prepared. In her book *Kreatīvie tīkli* ('Creative Networks'), Rasa presents a critical and analytical view of this process over the course of about fifteen years. The living process and creative quest have now acquired academic form (the book is based on Rasa Šmite's doctoral thesis, defended at the Riga Stradiņš University in February 2011). It is significant that Rasa has successfully combined academic discourse with personal experience. The research paper stems from practical activity, and everything described in the book is related to actual experience.

First, the aspect of originality in an international academic environment. The majority of sources used by Rasa were published shortly before or after the year 2000. This places 'Creative Networks' (which should definitely see an English edition) at the world vanguard of theoretical publications. When E-Lab began working in the mid- and late 1990s, such activities did not yet have a theoretical basis. That was proved by the experience of this review's author who endeavoured to defend her bachelor's paper, "Virtual communities on the internet as a form of global communication" at the University of Latvia in 1998. Although much was possible in practice (for instance, two *Art+Communication* festivals had already been organised in Riga, new media art festivals and exhibitions had been visited in Europe, and E-Lab's ideas fully and organically fitted in with these stirrings), it was too early to theorise about it. The impossibility of testing results, the lack of academic literature, theory, methodology and precedents made the initiative difficult to carry out. This example could be a reminder of how fast the E-Lab and adherents to its cause arrived at the most progressive art territory of the time (and, for instance, without any particular cultural shock regarded as a matter of course Stelark's performance in Rotterdam in 1996), although the existence of this territory had not yet been scientifically proven at that moment.

We can speak of novelty only to the extent that 'Creative Networks' provides a broad overview of the "network" as a contemporary cultural phenomenon at various levels, and highlights the idea that artists and creative personalities are pioneers in the use of new technological possibilities and solutions. E-Lab also was this kind of network, because the internet – the 'net', the opportunities of which were largely explored by the early E-Lab projects – was quite an exclusive and hard-to-access service in Latvia back in 1996 (p. 45). To add further detail, the lecturer from the University of Latvia mentioned by Rasa (p. 49), with whose kind assistance and support we were originally able to get acquainted with the possibilities of the internet and e-mail was computer expert Skaidrite Zariņa. I remember very well my first e-mail that I sent, with the help of Mrs Zariņa, to Jānis Garančs (at the time, a student at the Royal Art College in Stockholm) and then went to retrieve the reply on another day – that was quite an event! Shortly afterwards, electronic communication became a self-evident part of everyday life.

Second, methodology. Rasa has skillfully merged empirical material with academic discourse, which in turn comprises both the latest findings in sociology (Manuel Castells, Saskia Sassen) and academic works by young activists and participants of media art (Geert Lovink, Eric Kluitenberg). Presumably, it is the insider's view that makes 'Creative Networks' not only a significant academic study, but also a landmark in cultural heritage. The effect of the author's presence imparts a broad social, economic and political context to the social phenomena analysed (for instance, a trip Rasa and Raitis took to the conference of the Nettime mailing list members in Ljubljana in 1997, pp. 82–83). While reminding us about practical details – shortage of funds, visas required for crossing the border of almost every European country etc. Rasa also indirectly points to the fact that it was in those years that an international elite of young media art activists was formed which also included the E-Lab. For this was the field in which everybody was a relative beginner – both the Westerners and artists in post-Soviet countries, and differences in the standards of everyday life did not have a decisive significance from a creative or cooperation aspect.

Third, the author offers a good counter-argument to the defenders of the ephemeral nature of the digital environment. The author mentions the "invisibility" (p. 67) of the web culture and immediately offers a solution – mapping, which is a vital concept in this work because it explores and graphically visualises the history of communication – creative interaction – as a map, a spatial structure (p. 71). Creative networks have been graphically represented in association with Valdis Krebs and the Mathematics and Informatics Institute of the Latvian University by means of a tailor-made computer program.

Fourth, Rasa has successfully correlated distinctive local features with global processes (see chapter titled "Networking of local communities in the early days of the internet", pp. 112–137). By connecting the events in Latvian avant-garde culture of the mid-1990s to the global context, a new picture emerges, perchance unexpected for many readers, where a significant role is assigned both to cross-border cooperation (although we did not yet have that word here in the 1990s) and to a local circle of contacts, to alternative culture and meeting places such as the clubs 'Nobody Writes to the Colonel' or 'Secret Experiment', and other spontaneous forms and locations of manifestation of creativity. "By using the internet, E-Lab could build its own "alternative zones" locally and cooperation platforms *trans-locally*. Initially, particular importance was attached to trans-local cooperation networks, which at the time were the chief form of connection through which it was possible to overcome the isolation of the post-Soviet years created by visa regimes, expensive flight tickets, long-haul bus rides and slow train connections" (p. 124, original emphasis). Extremely significant is a comprehensive chronicle of the E-Lab and RIXC projects that in some respects forms a new canon of media art, which in turn is explained from the inside, following the origins and context of the ideas.

It can only be added that a major academic study such as this definitely requires a list of persons.

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Perhaps one could argue against the term '*kreativitāte*' (a direct loanword for 'creativity') conceptually used in the paper. "*Radošie tīkli*" (Latvian for "creative networks") would be as comprehensible as "*kreatīvie tīkli*"; given that we can say "*kartēšana*" instead of "*mapings*" or "*tīklojums*" instead of "*networkings*". This, however, is more a rhetorical issue, outside the limits of the study. Besides, Rasa has accentuated the priority of English as the language of global communication in "creative networks" (p. 33), and the choice of certain terminology may testify to the impact of this phenomenon.

/Translator into English: Sarmīte Lietuviete/

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