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Story

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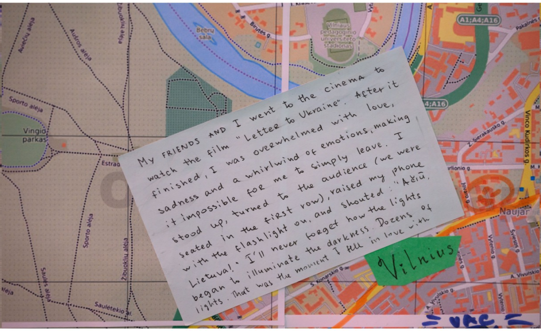

My FRIENDS AND I went to the cinema to watch the film "Letter to Ukraine". After it finished, I was overwhelmed with love, sadness and a whirlwind of emotions, making it impossible for me to simply leave. I stood up, turned to the audience (we were seated in the first row), raised my phone with the flashlight on, and shouted: "Ačiū, Lietuva!" I'll never forget how the lights began to illuminate the darkness. Dozens of lights. That was the moment I fell in love with

Written by
Silke Lange and Markas Klišius

Published date
12 February 2024

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Supporting new and exciting practices, the Central Saint Martins Creativity in Action Fund gives staff the opportunity to propose small-scale collaborative projects. With backgrounds in participatory arts practice, Silke Lange and Markas Klišius created an educational programme in Vilnius bringing together Ukrainian teenagers to explore urban spaces and related cultural practices.

Following an invitation from Marija Marcelionytė-Paliukė to exhibit at the 5malunai gallery – an experimental, self-curating exhibition space at Vilnius Academy of Arts, Silke proposed to transform the gallery into a participatory workshop space.

Almost a year later and with hours of planning and video calling, we co-led a week of creative workshops with teenagers from the Ukrainian Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania - a city many Ukrainians had sought refuge in due to the ongoing military invasion.

Having registered over 70,000 Ukrainian citizens since February 2022 with 25,000 being under 18, the war in Ukraine and the widespread displacement caused by the relentless Russian military attacks can be felt in every thread of Lithuanian urban fabric. Amidst the wider challenges of providing consistent psychological, legal and more specifically pedagogical support to Ukrainian communities, particularly younger generations, Ukrainian Centre has been at the forefront of enhancing more meaningful and inclusive integration of Ukrainian refugees into their new physical and social environments. Established in cooperation with the Ukrainian Embassy and Vytautas Magnus University, the centre facilitates cultural, educational and other social opportunities in Vilnius, providing their residents resources and space to learn, connect and share.

Coming together with Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Ukrainian Centre, the participatory programme was co-led together with Marija, local artists, and staff from both institutions. Collectively, we created a structure for participants to experiment with various art forms whilst developing propositional, technical and communication skills to creatively reflect on their immediate lived environment.

Curated workshops and activities were site-specific and focussed on the Vilnius Central Railway Station; a place of familiar and strange encounters, of arriving and departing, of being in transit. Stitched together by leftovers, fragments, rituals, routines and improvisations that form people's day-to-day realities, these sessions offered an opportunity to create fantastical worlds, tell new stories and propose alternative imaginaries for this site, how it functions and who it belongs to.

Through writing, image, sound and other media, participants were encouraged to develop their reflective and propositional skills to observe, read and think creatively about their lived environment. Throughout the programme they were invited to combine these different creative practices to develop the stories they wanted to tell. As participants were keen to engage in every stage of the production process, this approach was also applied during the curation of their group exhibition aimed to host and display ideas, conversations and playful materials produced throughout the programme

During the opening evening, Marija welcomed the large turn out; it was the highest number of people in the nine years the gallery has been open to the public. It was delightful to watch parents discovering the potential of their children's creativity and all guests engaging actively with the exhibition. The participants were visibly proud to show off their achievements and their parents shared with us some of the positive outcomes:

> “Thank you for the incredible creative experience our children received. My daughter enjoyed the program every day, actively participated in creative challenges, and enthusiastically shared her impressions. The organizers managed to captivate teenagers, which is no easy task in my opinion. The process looks intriguing in the photos, and we all saw the result of the collective creativity of the project…
>
> — Parent

Reflecting on the project

Whilst the participatory programme was carefully structured and planned, the outcomes of the project were not anticipated in advance and for us the value came from just being in the same space.

For Markas, developing these provocations, learning resources and methodologies was also an opportunity to reconnect with Vilnius, their home city, inviting participants to formulate their own experiences and interpretations of the city’s unique landscapes:

> “Whilst most of these educational methods are not new to either of our practices, it is the site specificity and context that we were situated in that dictated what we proposed and thereafter participants’ creative outcomes. I did not envision or seek out a replicable model and was more curious about participants’ interpretations and appropriations of these very specific local spaces they have been invited to inhabit for the foreseeable future – spaces I grew up with and stories very much familiar to me as someone whose family members have also been displaced due to the same military conflict. This was also a unique opportunity to occupy the halls of an art academy with a bunch of teenagers for almost two weeks and translate these playful stories into an exhibition.”

— Markas Klišius

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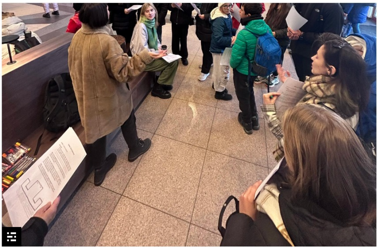

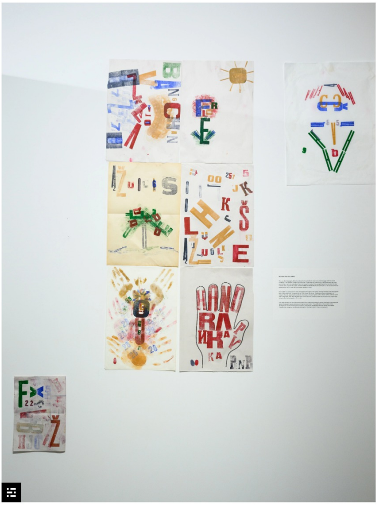

> 'Being together' underpinned each session and activities from the first day of the programme. Participants were invited to set up the work-creation space themselves. They went around the Academy building for half an hour and brought back what they liked and what suited them: wooden boxes and panels, blocks, tables and chairs, as well as Simba, a soft toy lion, they found in one of the corridors. Looking at some of the photographs taken throughout the week, Simba definitely contributed to creating comfort in the working space and bringing the group together. The same could be said about sharing food; which we did each day. Eating together created moments of sharing insights into each participants' experience and life generally, contributing to building trust amongst the group, and planting seeds for new friendships.
>
> — Silke Lange

New narratives

With Markas, the group to engage in an emotional mapping activity; marking and archiving their experiences of Vilnius. Participants were invited to work with very fragmented (and sometimes incomplete) maps, focusing specifically on community spaces and spaces of care available to them in Vilnius, allowing participants to shape their own interpretations of those terms. The underpinning reflections and motifs would later inform the worldbuilding exercises as teenagers used extracts from Ukrainian poetry, archival paintings depicting urban life in Vilnius and their own experiences of the city to reimagine the railway station, moulding new characters and speculating upon their collective futures.

To continue building a colourful and imaginative portrait of the site, sound artist and illustrator Cecilia Noiraud of Hungry Eyes Studio invited participants to go on a sonic treasure hunt, opening their ears and tuning into the sounds that can usually be ignored, capturing their feelings and associations with the Vilnius Railway Station.

Participants' cultural and personal experiences and perspectives came to the forefront during a session focusing on words and images led by Silke. Participants used photography to interpret the city, capturing its symbolic meanings and exploring the self in relation to the external world.

Moving from the familiar use of their smartphones, the group then explored traditional printmaking in a workshop led by Marija with the aim to inspire participants to rethink conventional, direct ways of visual creation, portraying a character active in their city using wooden letters.

After working with each other for almost one week, participants had built trust and were comfortable in each other's company. This was quite an important ingredient for the concluding workshop which invited participants to use bodily and interactive practices to highlight the current state of being. Textile artists Jelena Škulienė and Aleksas Gailieša from Vilnius Academy of Arts brought participants together for a collective activity where each person left their body shape through stitching, application, print –and the emotions accompanying them in Vilnius and their experiences during the week.

Co-curated by its participants, the exhibition fromNovember 9 – December 8, 2023 at 5malunai gallery displayed the ideas, conversations and playful materials produced throughout the programme.

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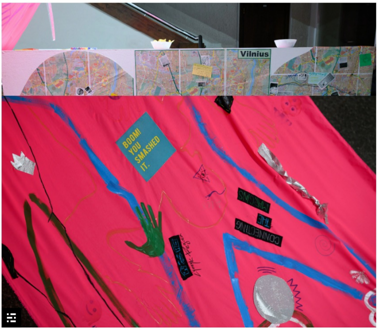
> …thank you for providing children with the opportunity to participate in such a unique project! It was delightful to see how my daughter, a lifelong creative individual, was able to discover her potential and make a public statement for the first time through your efforts and our exhibition.
>
> — Parent



The project has brought a closer relationship between Central Saint Martins, Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Vilnius Ukrainian Centre and brought the gallery its first experience of hosting participatory activity. In conjunction with the educational programme and exhibition, a Christmas art fair took place in the same space, fundraising for Ukraine.

> “Thank you for the unforgettable impressions and experience. Your work not only inspires but also creates an essential foundation for the development of creative thinking and cultural interaction.
>
> — Parent

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