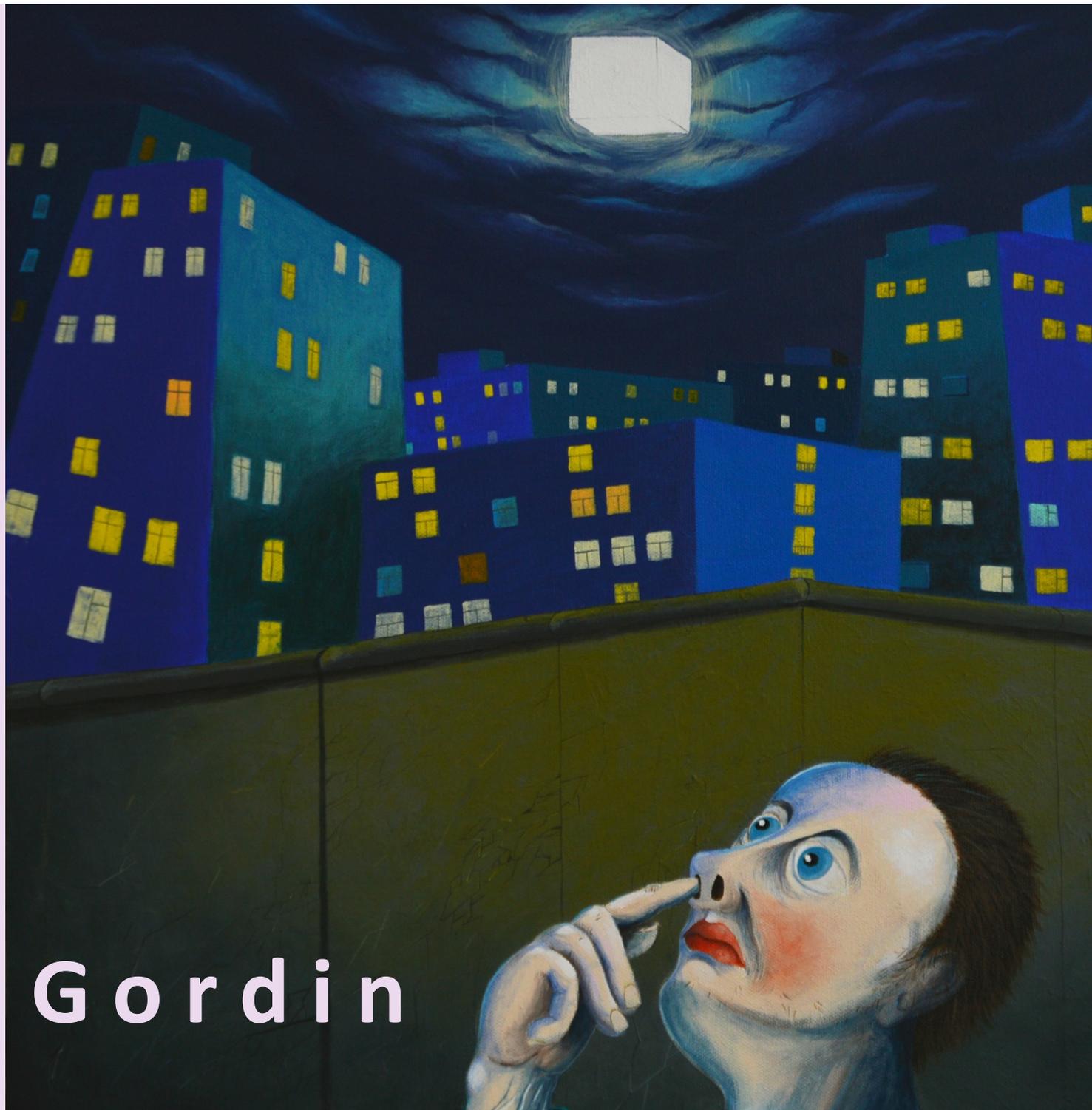


Master Thesis Documentation

Alexei Gordin



**ACADEMY
OF FINEARTS**

**✕ UNIVERSITY OF
THE ARTS HELSINKI**

Master's Thesis Documentation by Alexei Gordin

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Painting MFA

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Tallinn – Helsinki 2016

“Forever not ready”. Personal show in Draakoni gallery, Tallinn, 2.-21.11.15

“Do not disturb me from doing my art project”. Installation at Kuvan Kevät show, Exhibition Laboratory Project room, Helsinki, 7.-29.05.16

„To be honest, I would not like to write anything about the show, because I am not ready to say something specific yet.” That was the beginning of the introduction text to my last personal exhibition in Tallinn, happened in November 2015, in a small white cube type gallery on a touristic street of Old Town. And to be honest, I am still not so ready to write anything about my works here, although the deadline of submitting the master thesis text is irreversibly near. I have made quite a lot of marks with different thoughts on some random papers in my studio and have lost most of them as I have a huge mess here. This year I have already lost 2 notebooks while travelling. And inter alia, I haven't been really thinking a lot about what I should write here. Short snippets of multivocal, controversial texts are typical for the works I have been doing for the last 6 years, but collecting these odds and ends into something constituting a wider picture is almost impossible.

Or maybe these works are just so visually strong, that a big amount of texts starts to scare me. We all lose ourselves between the images and the meanings of images expressed in a textual form, which can be even opposite and do not support each other. Short, capacious phrases written on my paintings and drawings are not even a result of analyzing something, but a sudden splashes of summed up information, coming somewhere from unconscious level, where you are not even an artist, but someone inconspicuous, existing beyond the criteria of artistic expression. That's why being an artist here, on this white sheet of paper, is much more complicated now.

And of course, if we start to look into the works I have done for the last years, we can say, it is hard to be an artist in general. But we will hold on. This idea seems to be as old as civilization is, and sounds pretty much like a cliché, but I have nothing against talking about clichés, as they are something very meaningful, showing us a gap between the fiction and reality, past and future, good and bad, poor and rich. And doing my art, I somehow fall down into this gap, and after a hit, I crawl out, straining and sweating, with a strong will to visualize an image I had in my head at the moment of hitting the bottom.

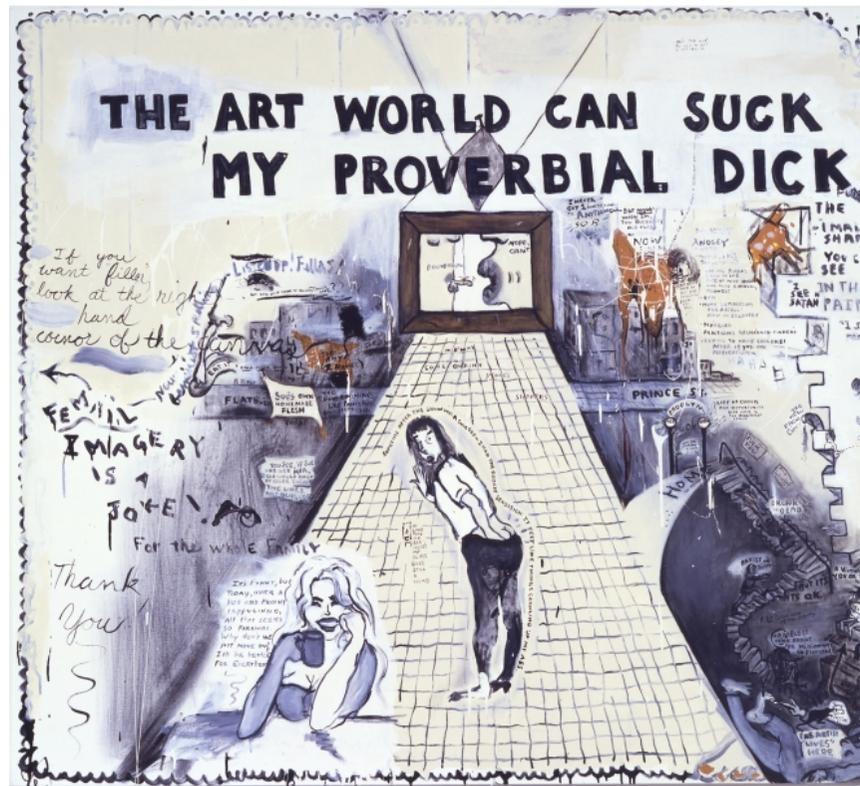
There is a gap between me and the text about my artistic practice, I am writing here. There is a gap between a guy walking by the gallery talking on his mobile phone and the content of the gallery. There is a gap between an artist and an institution. An artist and a viewer. A viewer and his family, going on vacation to Turkey.

Artists try to fill many gaps in their life just by doing art, creating it, making things happen. But there are new gaps immediately extending, between artists and their artworks, when we start to ask a question: “For whom are they?” All these artworks in numerous clean, white and cold galleries all around the world. Hanging on the wall, filling the space or sounding in the air. Who are the ones they are meant to be there for? Is it an artist who just wants to break free through doing it? Or maybe it is a visitor, who barely changes his ignorant points of view after seeing the artwork? Or maybe it is an art theorist, who will find one thousand references in the artwork, making it forever alive among other millions of references and frameworks, constituting the art theory, meant to explain what art is, as it is something too complicated, and needs some support in a form of written discourses.

I have no answer to that. I could answer that art is for everybody. But I am not ready to say it yet. I imagine faces of those people, who have found my lost notebooks with sketches, somewhere in the airport and I am happy for them. But when I see people walking by the gallery and timidly looking inside through the glass for a second, trying to forget what they have just seen and pass by, I feel unhappy about myself.

Interaction with the artwork, seems to be a scary thing. The cold environment of the gallery does not attract people from the street, but mostly only those who ones stepped in and remained here forever as I did. As being a part of the phenomenon from the inner side of the gallery glass, I am questioning myself, what kind of art should I do, seeing that weird alienation from majority, and the uncertain position of an artist in this world, where we all know about the importance of art, but somehow forget about the importance of an artist, because there is not only a beautiful (or attractively ugly) image on the gallery wall, but also a personality and a context, which we cannot leave out of focus, trying to read the work of contemporary art. I have to underline the word “read” here, as something what we usually relate to a text, but what actually can be applied to the whole art tradition, and not only postmodern art. From here, maybe comes my insecure feeling towards constituting this text: you can easily read my works when you are part of art society, and find it funny and informative when you are not. At least I have tried to make it for everyone, but this is not the main idea. There is not such an easy thing happening in the artwork, like “main idea” or “main concept”. I can surely say, that the whole art world, basically, reduces to the more or less same topics in the artworks, discussing the same references and operating the same methods and terms.

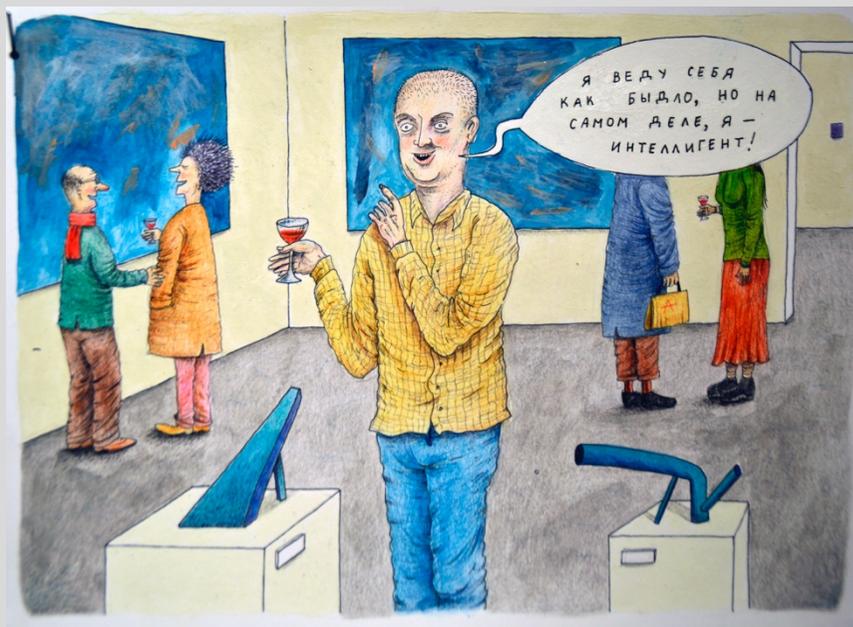
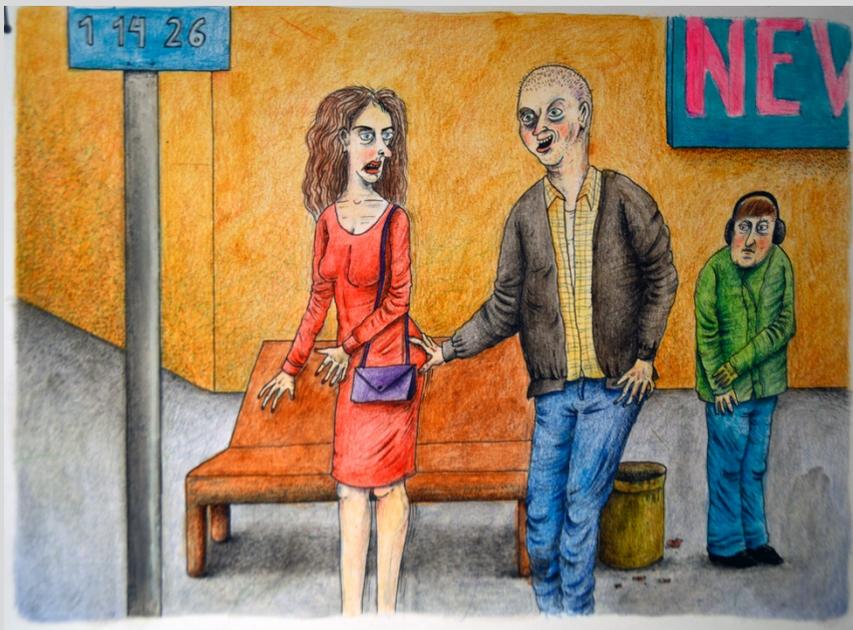
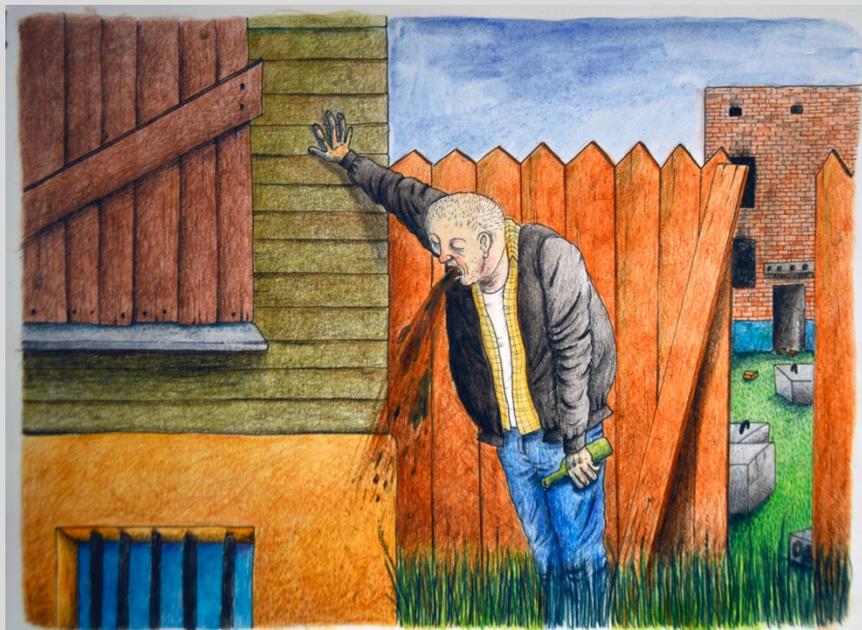
It is political art related to criticize the regime or the consequences of geopolitical traumas. It is sociological art about how the society works and what can be done in relation to that. It is digital and internet art questioning how to be a human in the world of machines. It is philosophical art about being present in room, in time, in memories and also not philosophical art just about room and its affection on the mind. It is just a pure philosophy question about perceiving the visual material and sharing it. Art about gender questions, national identities, minorities, sexualities, and colors as they are. Pure forms, god, artists personality and inner depression. And above it all, there is always art about art. No matter what is your subject of interest, there is any time a place for the art related art. Because every artist is afraid of being an artist in some point, questioning himself if it is really good what I am doing and if there is real need for that?



Here I decided to put a painting by famous, mostly well known as feminist artist Sue Williams as a starting point to my own documentation. Quite a lot of artists have made the same expressions in their works. I even dare to say it is more than typical. Artist is mad about the art world, because the art world is capitalistic. Capitalism is a cruel thing and every artist tries to fight it, being in the art world at the same time, which means it is a fight against yourself. And truly, life is a fight against yourself in many aspects, so there is nothing really controversial and strange about that.

Back in the days I was quite interested in the idea of anti-institutional art. Being a young artist always means to fight something, especially the institutions because they don't know about you and don't give money to your solo exhibition. I was fascinated by the idea of being independent from institutions and decided to collect empty bottles and cans from the street, to get money for my show. This was the most absurd way to get your exhibition foundation ever. Even going to a part time job in a restaurant brings you five times more money. After doing the bottle collecting, automatically, day after day, I thought not about institutions and being depending on them, but more about the whole position of an artist related to the nowadays world and society. You don't want to have any restaurant part time job actually. Once you had it part time, you will have it full time and there will be no time to be an artist. You just want to collect some grant from here, grab some benefits from there, and make art, while thinking what is next? Grant is ending and no residencies accept you at the moment. Just the same thing when going to grab some bottles from this and that park and having problems with your future again. How much this alcoholic collecting bottles in the city center is different from an artist if we speak about the position in the society? Here we move to a pretty existential question about being someone, who is not totally accepted by the society, because the society builds its opinion by using aforementioned cliches and established myths. The concept of being useful for the society has some gaps in it. Art is beyond being "useful and useless". The same as any weird guy collecting bottles can be. In my work for the "Forever not ready" show in Tallinn, called "Intellectual", there is a man acting anti-social. He drinks, fights, boldly flirts with women, and in the end, standing with the glass of wine at the exhibition opening, he assures us, that he is a true intellectual. Without taking into account the fact it is quite autobiographical work, there is another level in it. Last autumn Estonian artists together with the ministry of culture decided to run a pilot project of paying salary to artists. Not to all of them. Only to five of them at first, after the tough competition. It immediately caused a huge polemic in the society, as people were angry that the government was going spend their taxes to pay salary to the people who "do nothing and will just drink all the money". How much do we need contemporary art in our lives and is it really possible to change anything through it, if the personality of an artist is understood as someone who just drinks his money and doesn't actually bring anything into this everyday reality?

So, now I am pretty sure to say that art is not for everybody!





Another work of mine from Tallinn exhibition, shows us a weird creature, stealing a painting from the gallery, probably having the idea, that “art is not for artists” as it is written below. Gallery glass is crashed and the moon is mysteriously shining above the calm night city. Did he just break out from the gallery window with this painting, or did he break in at first, took the painting and ran away? This work and the phrase came to my mind as an aforementioned splash, vision from somewhere I cannot dare to go, but the creature appears in different works from various times. It can be a symbolic approach to the phenomena I am not satisfied with, the dark side, the nasty one, who can be considered as an alter-ego, who does not care about things artists usually care about, like recognition, career or education. The creature challenges the established rules, makes it in a cruel way, bringing further the general questions about artistic practice. Artists like to see, discuss, and emphasize the other artists` work. But art is not for artists, states the creature, and it is a violent act of taking artworks away from artists. There is not necessarily a bad outcome; maybe after leaving the cold gallery, a stolen artwork is moving to a better place, much more easily accessible by people, moving to a wider world, out of the border of the glass case. Behind it, appearing on the gallery wall, a painting becomes an object of satisfaction, but also loses its magic of sacred act of creation an art piece. Making painting public, means making it a product. At the same time, as a member of the consumerist society, artist is often facing a problem of financial displeasure, where he rather exhibits painting as a product on the white wall than explores deeper understanding of spiritual urges, making him become something more than just a producer of

intellectual content. There is a constant need of realization from the artist`s personal side, and a constant need of consumption from the social and economic side. **Can contemporary art be something more than just an art in that case?**



It can be many things. It can be pleasure and pain for artist. It can be a political gesture, a statement or a beautiful object to hang above your bed. There are quite a lot of ways to handle it and reflect all you know about art. With time, after thinking about my position, my fears, hopes, and all those things I have not been satisfied with, I can say, that I can not take art too seriously anymore. I consider my working process as an endless questioning of reasonableness of making art while constantly making it, because there are some problems with no solution, beside of letting things just go, and trying to create, as an answer to imperfection of the world, built by humans. That's way, I am never serious, or demotivating, but more like "friendly mocking" on contemporary art, using a lot of black, but harmless humor, as a try to make a viewer see my uncertain position in relation to the global situation of the artist's position in this society.

At first, one might think that I am criticizing the art world. The relationship between the artist and the gallery, the artist and the viewer, the system of commercialization of art and the problem of inaccessibility it by the wider audience. Of course, all of it exist in my works somehow or other. The art world is not perfect, but still it is something much better than many other weird things happening every day on the planet. Controversial feeling about being part of the art world and awareness about it imperfection, would not lead me too far if I criticized it in a way of hoping to change something, established new rules, and made everyone's life better. I do not believe I can really change something with my artworks about the art world and artists. But these works are funny in their desperation. My hopelessness here is not a tragedy, it is just something that happens without any regrets and pain, leads us to the curious of everything we consider important to us, and deduces towards the self irony, the joke, the deconstruction of a sophisticated myth. I try to be stupid intentionally. From time to time I create an absurd situation to avoid being too critical. I show it from another side, which is not the side of answer, but the side of endless questioning the artist about his activity, his urges, his fears. And of course, questioning not only another artist, but also myself. That's why I am quite ironic towards things I see and I do. And the only way to keep doing them is being not too serious, create a joke around the situation, and collect these jokes into a form of exhibition, making them coexist and form a personal narrative.



“Do not disturb me from doing my art project” - says the mysterious voice from the toilet cabin on the painting, made for the Kuvan Kevät show. There is nothing else to say, beside of asking to leave you alone and create what you want. Comical situation, the person doing art in the toilet, brings the idea about the artist’s reality, when most of the things you do, stay actually in the private zone forever, and any publicity changes the things into something different. How much is it possible to see you in your artwork, or should an artwork even be you in that sense? Some of my works are quite autobiographical, inspired by something that used to happen, but mutated into the extremely grotesque way. Some of them are just sided observations, without any personal implication, just filtrated through the mind of my own. There are no anonymous works I have done recently. They are all me in a varying degree.

On this work called "Painting" from the "Forever not ready" show, there is a pure anonymous painting encroached into the house of unknown people. Art invades the private zone of someone, in quite a rude way, breaking the glass of an expensive huge kitchen window. It is an opposite situation to the aforementioned work where a painting was stolen out from the gallery room. Now it breaks inside, from somewhere else. But we cannot see the painting, as well as we cannot sort the artist. It is just a universal work of art which just exists. There are millions of artist nowadays and even much more people who do not consider themselves as artists, but just able to do images in manual or digital way. The world is overloaded with images and even if your work is personal, after being public, it loses that level, and turns into a public domain. It is actually really hard to be you, in your artwork. Yes, we all know about Barthes "Death of Author", but in the world, where endless images encroach on us every day, without our will, surrounding us with the messages we don't even need, this idea turns into something much more serious. Being an artist, I have caught myself thinking about how many exhibitions I have visited and how few I actually remember. Hundreds of exhibitions every year. Where does it all go? Does that mean that the show was not good enough, although the artist had put all his efforts in it? Two years of work for him, and I just pass through the gallery for a couple of minutes, forgetting about the seen the same night. Is it not awful if to think how many people actually need your own artworks and how long they will remember them? Maybe just for half an hour.





In the upper part of "Black Matter" painting, the recognizable gallery room with the exhibition going on there, is opposed to the unknown, dark, abstract space, with no objects or any references to something specific. I am fascinated with the idea of black matter, developed in quantum physics. According to the theory (or even fact nowadays), we can separate and learn only 10% of the matters constituting the universe. Other 90% stay a mystery for us, forming the unknown substance of infinite black matter. In my case, „black matter“ turns into the symbolic endless amount of the intellectual content represented in a shape of exhibitions and other public presentations, characteristic to the art world; with the endless urge to create and share, but to be lost in time and space due to huge amount of thoughts appearing and vanishing in people's minds, forming the sublevel of unconscious knowledge about art, fated to be forgotten or theorized into the universal scientific idea, so far from the original spirituality of the art work.



I THOUGHT THE
EXHIBITION IS OVER
BUT IT CONTINUES
IN MY HEAD!

Exhibition, which endlessly haunts you in your mind, is something opposite and even much more driven to absurd. The character in the painting looks crazy, being on the verge of mental collapse, shares with us his nightmare about the show, which was ended but still going on in his head. Given painting, contraposed with the „Black matter“, demonstrates the less possible chance of not turning the seen into the black matter, but endlessly contemplates the artistic information. The fact of liking the exhibition, turned into the grotesque way, of being haunted by art. Well, it is maybe fine for the artist to be obsessed with his own art, but quite hard to imagine the person who is haunted by artwork of yours. To make an artwork which does not affect the viewer somehow, is a common fear for the artist, but to create an artwork which would be so emotionally strong, that could drive someone mad, is an idea close to fiction. The majority of contemporary art, does not even mean to wake up the emotional side of perceiving it. If we take a look into art history and think about affection of the traditional art to previous epochs people's minds, we can find a lot of examples of strong spiritual sides of it, even crying in front of the painting, going through the afflatus, because of the ideal conjunction of the content, color, personal meanings and religious references. After the modernist era, the way of perceiving the artwork changed a lot, and even during the postmodernism, till present, the situation went even in more extreme direction. Spiritual approach is displaced with the cold logic of the concept, clearly written down before applying for a grant. Inner urges are meant to be theorized, put into the frame of main philosophical discourses, developed during the 20th century. I am not ready to name it a bad tendency, or something that scares me, but definitely it is the reason of difficulties with the text. Time changes, as well as people do. With the development of contemporary technologies there is not so much place for spirituality anymore. Art is moving into the direction of theoretical sciences, finding its topics much more in the field of social and political, than in spiritual.

In the „White cube“ painting, the typical, recognizable shape of a white cube, is presented as heavenly body. Gallery in its present way of existing and dealing with art, highly associated with the institutionalization of the art world, and dictating its rules, which are shaping the artistic activity into the frames of „present and sell“, seems to be extremely far away from the idea of something celestial. However, the character on the painting, puzzled looking up and picking in his nose, likely doesn't care about the situation, as a sided watcher, passerby. He doesn't have any idea about the good and bad sides of it all. I can say that white gallery walls are attractive to me. Many times, while thinking on the installation, I have had a wish to paint walls, but I have never been able to decide how to do it in a better way, so that everything would work perfect. I can even say, it is risky, to paint walls, if you just want to put your paintings and drawings there. White, shiny color of gallery walls is the purity, virginal environment, wanted to be denigrated by another art project. But every attractive thing hides a danger in it. It is not pure and far away from any idea of the purity, because gallery is a commercial institution, presenting art for somebody who dares to go there. The shiny white cube in the sky distances us from this idea, presenting gallery in the different way, where there is no place for criticizing it, but just perceiving it as a fact. I do not want to think about commercialization of art again, and be against. White walls are just a nice environment to show art, and it is enough considering you are an artist willing to show your art. Art is a gentle thing. Maybe that's why it needs that kind of „virginal“ environment, distanced from the reality and everyday routine.





In the drawing „Vernissage“ artist is actually hiding from this environment, under the table, drinking wine all by himself. Found by one of the exhibition opening visitors, he confusedly offers to buy his art. Even trying to hide from the commercial reality of the gallery business, most of the artists want to sell their artworks. Even if the content of work is extremely anti-capitalistic, it is possible to sell it, and only few will dare to say „no“. The guy hiding under the table, represents fear of the art world, that can happen to anybody, trying to get there. He advertises himself, trying to fit in, with his own ideas, visions, and willing to become famous. Ideally speaking, art is public and it needs attention, of course. But attention can be scary for quite a lot of people, due to qualities of a personality. There is also a phenomenon of hiding art from extraneous eyes, because some things can be personal, and not willing to become a public domain. There is also a fear of hostility from the viewers' side, or even much worse, total ignorance. Being in the gallery is challenging, not only because of the cruelty of the art market, but also because of many personal reasons, forming the way of how you present yourself in this virginal, but cold environment of shiny white cube.

Studio space is different. Private environment gives more freedom to interpret things, to be yourself and not to think about any other opinions. The body of the artist sits still in the middle of the darkened studio, while the head is wistfully smoking, looking into the white emptiness of the window, the way outside, bright like a gallery wall. Personality, splitted between the physical and spiritual, personal and public, dark and light. That's how you feel while doing art. And there is no way to find a perfect solution. At least I am not redy for that, neither many others are. Aspect of being ready, generally is an arguable thing, because being ready, means to stop the activity, sum up the things, finalize everything. Of course there are always different stages of any activity you can imagine. All artists should go throught many stages before making something visible for public, many steps before the content will look «acceptable» enough. But even acceptance can be a cruel thing. A person recognized too much, is usually under the biggest risk of finalizing and staying at the same place forever, with the feeling of being ready. The character on the drawing, floating in the semi existential mood, between the spaces and times, can be easily opposed to the «dead artist», who has this perfect, ideal look from the window, compared to the first character, with the white emptiness outside, looking like the challenging whiteness of the gallery.





This successful person decided not to exist at all. Probably nothing was challenging enough for him at this moment of life and he escaped away from his cozy, light environment. A tragic situation of somebody's suicide still seems quite comic here, as an extremely rich artist, before his death, decided to make some kind of non commercial graffiti work, on the wall of his studio. Slogan, written with the blood, explaining his decision, can be interpreted as an exhortation, a call for all artists to stop and think. But this would be too utopic and idealistic. Of course in this world everybody has a right to be successful in the way our social construction provides it. The conception of a successful artist is something widely discussed in every art university. In one of his interviews for «The Guardian», Gerhard Richter mentioned that he was shocked about the amounts of money being paid for his paintings on the auctions. ...“artists cannot develop slowly. And the business is getting more anonymous. In the end it just comes down to the price”.- he said about the situation with the contemporary art market. The value of the artwork is quite an arguable thing, as well as the value of many material things is. Of course, there is not only a material aspect behind every artwork. There is always something beyond. Anyway, the fact is that in every show, you can see that big paintings cost usually much more than the smaller ones. And another frustrating thing is that a buyer of an artwork usually does not even have a will to meet the artist. He just anonymously takes the work from the gallery as any other product from the shop. In the local art auction I participated in, it was even prohibited to tell buyers` contacts to the artist ! Recently, I have practiced a different way of pricing my paintings, trying to put the price depending on the personal meaning of the artwork to me. In that way, some smaller works, that seemed really good for me, had higher price than the bigger ones that succeeded less. Logically, that after some time I faced a reaction of people who asked why the prices are so weird and small works cost more than the big ones?

We are used to paying more for a bigger house or a bigger bottle of beer. Does then the extensive meaning cost less than the narrow one? There can be an endless amount of arguments about that, but anyway, the art market should function, and artists should be successful and happy in some point. The only question is how much we should believe in the power of art in the situation, where it is logical to charge the price according to the size of the artwork. And to whom actually does this power spread? Mostly to the artists I guess, and much less to the viewers. Art always influences people who make it. It is not a rule, but something you can usually experience. On the next drawing, the gallery is like punishing the ungrateful visitor. At the same time, the room is collapsing together with the artworks inside. The visitor is probably dying and the space is not going to exist anymore, leaving the question open for interpretation: are the art world and artists guilty in not having enough power to hold the “roof” or is it the audience who is forever not ready to accept things as they are?



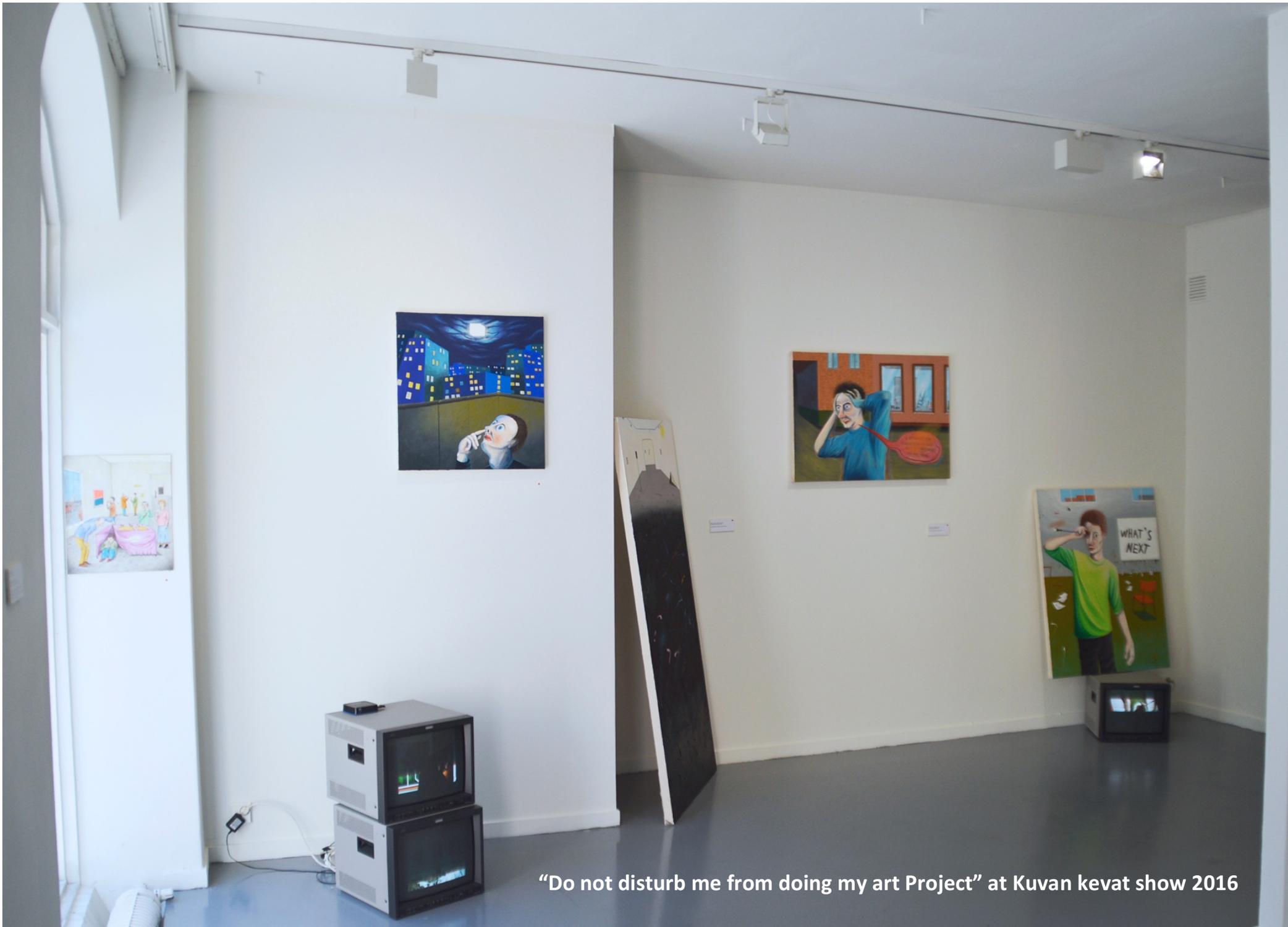
For the Kuvan Kevat show, I also produced a few video performances, where me, as an artist was the main character. Five short videos were shown on the small screens on the floor, like expanding the narrative of the drawings and paintings, but bringing them into more personal level. Once I had a studio visit with the American painter Byron Kim, who immediately asked me "is it all you on the artworks, or the persons you want or don't want to be?" That was a surprisingly relevant question, as I was asking myself the same. I had to admit that the answer will be all of three options. It is like a holy trinity, where all of the essential elements are different, but they combine the integrity. It is an existential conflict, where different sides of one personality are playing the game which is resulted in a diversity of artworks, connected in their irrationality, inspired by the irrationality of all vital things. In that sense, I deeply sympathize to the Albert Camus idea of "absurd" as something, that actually makes you free, if you understand it as a complex idea of everything happening around you, while being unsatisfied with it all. In the videos, there is not so much of the white gallery walls or any white cube aesthetics if we compare them to the drawings and paintings. However, studio space, as something different, still exists there. In some point, I made myself free from that environment, performing in front of the camera. My character, who has my face, but plays many symbolic roles, runs mainly along the street or even nature environment, exists between the walls of abandoned buildings, urban street crossings, wastelands. He is an "art related creature", but the absurdity of being, brings me or him to the unpredicted solutions of fighting the true facts, making it even in a vandalistic way. I am writing on building walls and destroying artworks in the performances, relating this rebellious style to the absurd position, which turns things upside down, making the seriousness not serious anymore, but funny and stupid. On the video "Mask" I am openly turning into an anti-hero creature, from the "Art is not for artists" painting, and some other paintings made earlier.

„To be honest, I would not like to write anything about the show..." - that's how I started the text, and after making myself write 7 pages, I will close it with the same phrase, because I do not really believe something important was said here. I wrote from time to time during the summer and autumn, added, then deleted some sentences and this work was not a pleasure to me. But I figured out a lot of thoughts which were hidden before and I already used quite a lot of ideas from here in writing other things like applications for the shows and competitions. And I have no idea about finalizing the text, and maybe I shouldn't do it. Because in some point I don't want to make any conclusions about my art. While working on the text, I was doing some new drawings at the same time. Mostly, they are strongly related to the topic of the thesis and described exhibitions. I do not know where it is all going, or maybe not going at all. The main idea is still just to work, and to create something I consider important at the moment, without asking too many questions about the future.



Stills from video performances





“Do not disturb me from doing my art Project” at Kuvan kevat show 2016





“Forever not ready” in Draakoni Gallery, 2015

Ул. СВОБОДЫ

ART
GALLERY

50%
FUTURE IS
BRIGHT 50%

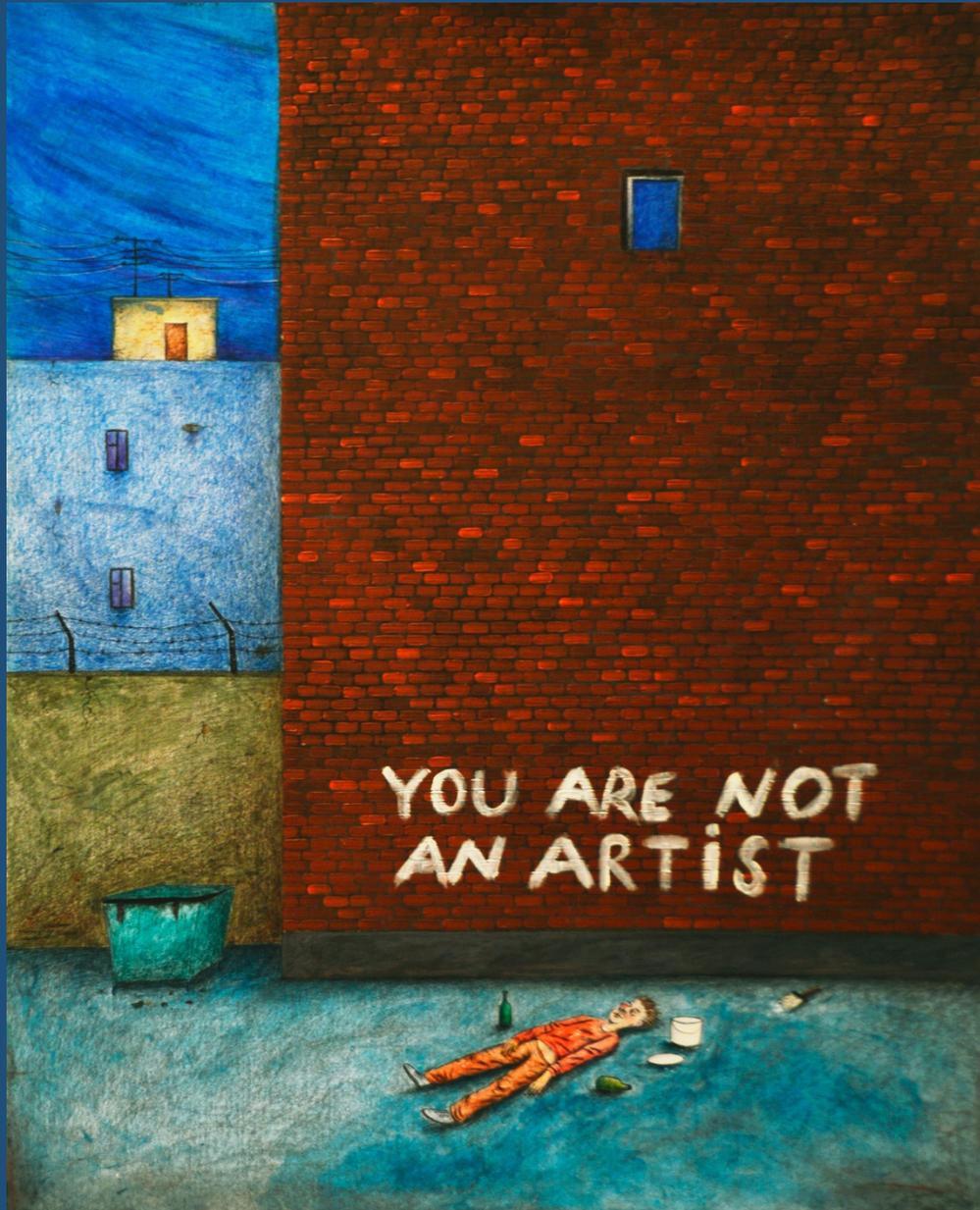
ИСКУССТВО УБЕГАЕТ ИЗ
ГАЛЕРЕЙ ИЗ ЗА НЕПРЯТЫХ
ГАЛЕРИСТОВ





"Art is running away from galleries because of unpleasant gallerists" 2015

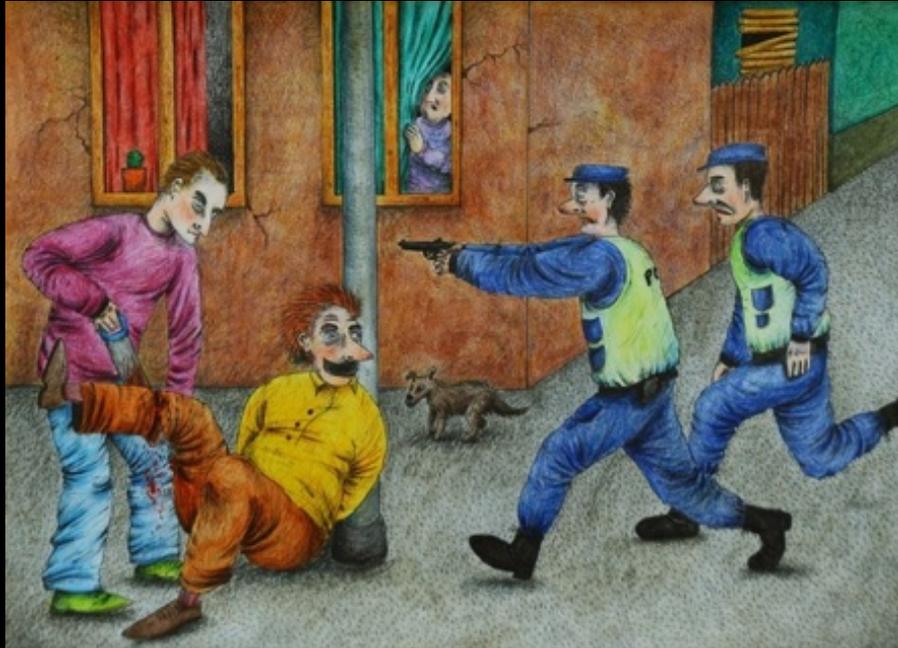
One and only, 2015



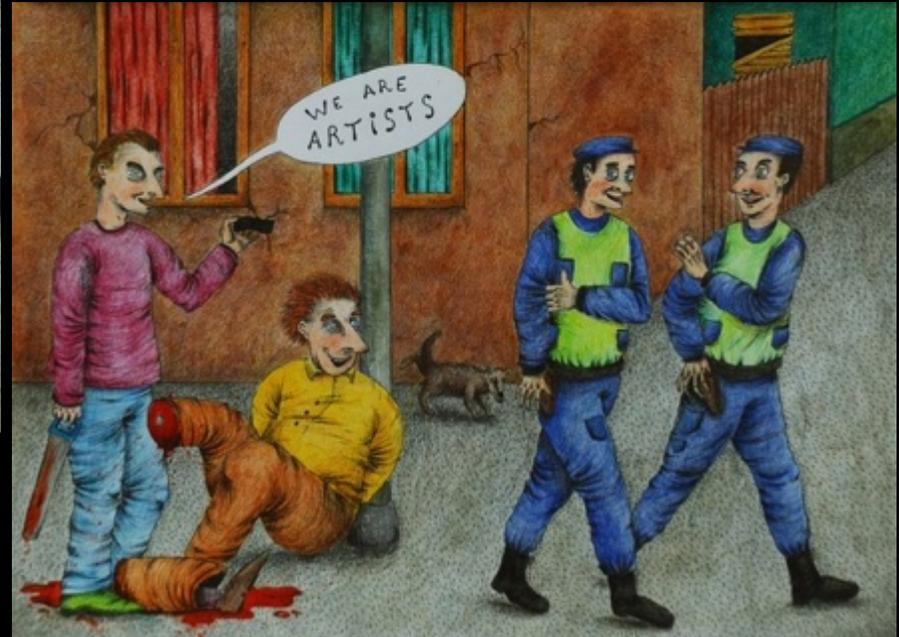
You are not an artist, 2015



"Do you remember these beautiful times?" 2015



"We are artists" 1-2, 2014



T H E E N D

