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A trip around Zemaitija

The idea of a *trip around Zemaitija* is well known – a group of students takes the challenge of exploring a given territory. History of art and culture or a map of institutions responsible for culture animation may be a key.

Holy Old Man, Crazy Painter, Japan Lover, Traditional Weaver, Folk Artist, well-mannered Businessman supporting Arts, King Ryngold, these are only some of the characters which appear in the weird play *Polish-Lithuanian trip around Zemaitija*.

15 students from Kowno and Warsaw participated in the trip which took place in August 2003. Our goal was to set such a route of the trip as to learn as much as possible about cultural activities in Zemaitija, a region of Lithuania which is thought to be the most traditional.

On one hand, the trip may be said to be a total failure. We encountered a number of peculiar human types usually called 'freaks' instead of inspiring examples of cultural activities. Is such a definition unjustified in the case of a person who transforms his house into a palace of a pagan king in which eternal fire is kept alive by propane-butane from a little red bottle, or in the case of a person who has his own pieces of arts on the walls of his house where pagan saints are facing a naked woman with a panther (inspiration: a car with frozen food, an American poster on its doors)? In the situation where the language does not reflect the reality and does not provide us with any basic comfort that we have 'grabbed' something, how to describe a man from near Telsz, who has transformed his house into a Japanese garden in which he put paper-mass Fujijama, a plaster Buddha, but also an old Lithuanian knight weighted down with an old Lithuanian acorn. In the centre of the Japanese garden there is a little house belonging to Lithuanian guerrilla: a wall made of cone, residues of armament and historical sausage.

The language which usually effectively describes different training experiences proved to be completely useless in the case of the trip. Either, it was not a language used and understood by those we met during the trip: none of them spoke about „local community“, „culture animation“, „bond forming character of actions“. There was no language „exclusively used by them“, any unified dictionary of terms defining such actions. Everything we came across had its roots in individual actions or individual passion sometimes called weird. On the other hand, however, all those activities must have served „local community“ and must have „strengthened bonds“. What was very characteristic of them all was the assumption that such actions were considered to be partly private and public, individual and social. We did not visit any institutions, we visited only people most often in their houses, most often unmarked by any doorplate.

All the time we had a funny feeling that what we were dealing with was something ridiculous or absurd; the basis of an unambiguous affirmation was not helpful in eliminating the feeling of helplessness that accompanied us – how to write about such an experience and what to do with it?

When we came back, we had notebooks full of notes taken during meetings and conversations, we remembered intensive impressions – from astonishment to hysterical laughter, hundreds of photos on films, but in our address books there were no more additional addresses. None of us got any additional phone numbers we would like to use searching for Lithuanian co-authors to work with us on the next project. It obviously was a failure – it is good when experience gives a man a feeling that, fighting with his ideas and actions, he can benefit from somebody else's experience and support. Everybody who has experienced such practice knows how important it is.

We could stop at that point treating the whole enterprise as a failure. Somebody tried to organize something but he didn't know how to do it, everything was surrealistic, we experienced something, but, simultaneously, wasted time. We may demand experience to be perfectly organised, not to surprise anybody, to educate us in the fields we want to be educated. And first of all, we can demand the

experience not to put us to tests if we were not warned about them. *We did not agree on that.*

Wonderful!

We were forced to stop using our language.

We had to shape our experience and go beyond reporting –what are the things to be reported?

People we met became the Characters and the whole trip was limited to a board game. We liked the form a lot – while playing, you go beyond the poetry of „stories of the trip” and the order of anthropological interpretation. The rules of the board game seemed to be suitable – they determine desirable and acceptable behaviour and the ocean of possibilities ends with a finite number. It also ends with a mechanism which makes the game exist, there is a throw of a dice – it also influences the game whose result is unpredictable.

We are not certain if the main characters of our stories would recognize themselves in them. It is certain, however, that if our experience was given a different structure – we could not get rid of uncertainty. We are in danger (I don't think it is possible to escape from it to a distant place one day so as not to feel its hot breath on our back) – *don't say anything about yourself*. It is unavoidable and cannot be settled, we cannot use different words, it can be particularly experienced in such a form, the form we have chosen: a man talking is unbearably present.

It is worth mentioning that *a trip around Zemaitija* had its follow-up – a year later there was a Polish and Lithuanian excursion around north-eastern Poland. It is a completely different story what role it plays in our experience. A meeting in Kowno followed the trip. Students, historians of art, curators and directors of theatres came to the town. They did not play any board game but they played more serious games which resulted in joint actions.