

Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

Kosmos Architects

TRANSCRIPT

Appendix is an expansion of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2021. It is the result of discussions with members of the six architectural teams invited to work on the project, which took place between March and April 2021. A year of waiting for the opening of the Biennale, postponed by the pandemic, prompted the participants of the exhibition to ask themselves to what extent the themes and solutions proposed in their projects are still relevant in the new reality. In the fourth episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Artem Kitayev with Leonid Slonimsky of Kosmos Architects, authors of the *Countryspine* project.

POLISH PAVILION AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Venice, 22 May–21 September 2021

Trouble in Paradise

curators: PROLOG +1 (Mirabela Jurczenko, Bartosz Kowal, Wojciech Mazan, Bartłomiej Poteralski, Rafał Śliwa and Robert Witczak)

participants

architectural teams: Atelier Fanelsa, GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter, KOSMOS Architects, Rural Office for Architecture, RZUT, Traumnovelle

authors of the *Panorama of the Polish Countryside* Jan Domicz, Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, PROLOG +1

authors of the *Glossary* (online): Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, Wiktoria Wojciechowska, Patrycja Wojtas, PROLOG +1

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Polish Pavilion commissioner: Hanna Wróblewska, Director of Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

Polish Pavilion office: Ewa Mielczarek, Joanna Waśko

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OFFICE BACKGROUND

Rafał:

Leonid and Artem, as you remember you were the first team that we invited into the exhibition and we were so happy you accepted. That wasn't without reason. As we discovered your practice a few years before we immediately felt a degree of familiarity regarding your form of work. I mean the possibility to collaborate virtually, without a real spatial office, developing a methodology that allows each of you to be in different places around Europe, even world at times, yet to retain consistency, careful precision and elaboration in the projects. I guess we all quickly discovered that we are not the only ones, and this condition of collaboration organized in digital space becomes significant to the XXIst century. How did you arrive at the formative process and what does KOSMOS mean for you?

Artem:

I would comment on your statement that we collaborate in such a unique way. I wouldn't say that this digital collaboration is so unique. It's probably how most of the offices started to do competitions with your friends. Often your friends happen to be in the other part of the world because of work or study. That's exactly what happened to us. It just somehow happened that we didn't try to bring ourselves to one point and then ground the office like the traditional buro, but we also realised that this diversity of the contexts we were operating in it's very interesting. During one of the first projects we made, one of us had been in New York, someone had been in Switzerland, someone had been in Moscow and we did a project for the fourth country. It was very interesting the way we discussed it. I remember we were asking each other - What do they do in New York about it? What do they think in Moscow?

It was very interesting to bring together different contexts and make something a good mixture of all of it, because all these contexts are very different. Even in the very typical typology, we look at the attitude, the approach and values of different cultures that are very diverse. I think it helps us to also operate within these values and to develop something more important for us. With the development of our practice, we try to preserve the diversity of views, diversity of contexts. Even though we founded some kind of headquarters where together our collaborators could work in the convenient format, we still keep this freedom and first of all, spatial freedom. Here we are coming to the word KOSMOS, which at the very beginning was an abbreviation of our names - K,S,M,S. What is more important to us, is the space which unites us physically around the planet as well as the space of ideas and the space of dreams. Especially at the very beginning, we made something that we didn't even hope to happen in real life. It was more like some kind of a dream which is supposed to live your practice and tempt you to continue with what you're doing. Do you want to add something Leonid?

Leonid:

I would maybe add the current situation where we are based now, because you are speaking more about the history. Now, we are based in Zurich and Graz in Austria. Our third partner couldn't join now because it's too early in New York and we have ten collaborators who are mostly based in Russia and in Switzerland. Nevertheless we are still considering ourselves a Russian office because we are all of Russian origin, even though we are quite widespread around the world.

At the same time together with our practice we also teach, currently in Vienna and in Geneva. It was great that thanks to the times when we could still travel and meet in person we were invited by a Student Association of Polish Architects (OSSA) to a conference in Poznań where we met you and your colleagues. Then we were very lucky to be invited. You just received the news that you were the winner with your curatorial project.

It was a very nice time in Poznań when we met each other and it was a great, great situation how we all met. It's interesting for us to reflect also on the fact that we are being Russian architects based not in Russia, working on the Polish pavilion exhibition for the Venice Biennale. It is such a mix of everything. We are the architects who are not from Poland, reflecting on the topics which we find universal.

Rafał:

It's very nice how you described this nature and how you started to work on these projects, but I was also curious how the physical distance affects your process of work and its efficiency? Was it a necessity also to find a new way to be efficient within this condition? Was it convenient to you?

Artem:

I think so, at the very beginning it was out of necessity because it had been just a group of friends spread around the world, and that was the only way we could work together. Back then, it probably wasn't so popular. Many friends started to work with someone nearby. Back then we worked in big famous offices. Over there sometimes we were a bit overwhelmed with the amount of meetings where 30 people gathered just to get an update, which actually could be just an email. We decided to improve our practice and learn how to communicate sharper to respect the time of each other, because we also didn't have much. We didn't have much time to sit in the long meetings.

The idea was to sharpen the message, make this message as clear as possible, but also while you sharpen your message, you're just sharpening the concept. I think it was very clear because we learned how to first explain to ourselves what we want to say, then to learn how to make others understand this idea as easily as possible. I think this way of communication helps us even to develop our design and conceptual skills and thinking skills.

Since then, we have always collaborated this way. Even when we happen to be in one place, we often write ideas and everything in the same chats. We draw very quick sketches, take a photo of them and send them, or we just even sketch right on the iPhone. Often we also use references and draw on top of reference what we want to say. I would say even an iPhone sketch becomes even more present in our everyday practice. It's actually a really efficient way of communication and a really efficient way of work.

Rafał:

This sharpness and the degree of efficiency are present in every aspect of your work, because one can follow very easily indeed that you make very small objects, pavilions and big competitions like even the recent project, as the example of the airport in Kamchatka. Thinking about this huge variety of projects that also includes the exhibition like this one, somehow maintains an extremely wide interest within the discipline. Is it about still finding your position within the discipline? What are you interested in? Or is it actually one of the conditions to consider as much as possible and from as many as possible places? It's basically a question about the position within the discipline. Did you already find it or you're still searching?

Leonid:

We don't have an exact type of projects which we develop one by one. At the same time, we're quite sure about what type of spheres of public life are interesting to us to develop. Most of our projects have to do with either public buildings or public spaces or the spaces for collective use or collective habitation. This goes quite strongly over all the work.

No matter if we do a small pavilion or an airport, this notion is always very important. We always try to also use this as a design tool. For instance, in the airport, which you mentioned, we have finished the design of this building that

we have worked on for three years. Now the client hired another architect for the facade. It's going to develop in the same shape as we did, but it's not going to be our project, unfortunately.

Even there in this project, which was very complicated for us for many reasons, if we can describe the concept very quickly, it was to create an internal courtyard for the public. This made this airport unique, not the facade, not maybe even this amazing location, but the fact that it would be an airport and maybe one of the unique airports where people can go out to a huge internal courtyard and to breathe fresh air afterwards.

The same, for instance, when we were working on the Countryspine project for your call, for the Trouble in Paradise exhibition. As you can see the collective space was the most important place in our building, which really made its core architectural quality. No matter if we speak about a small project or a huge project, this always is one of the leading things in our projects. This you can really track into many of them.

Artem:

I would even clarify that working in between the typologies, every time we try something new. It's one of the most interesting points to us and also this fresh look at the new typology is what we preserve as a special value.

Architects which certainly work in certain niches, they have certain guidelines or visions of how you are supposed to do it normally. When you come in fresh to a certain typology that allows you to free up your vision of this typology and to propose something, what probably people who work many years there wouldn't do. This kind of freshness, innocence in a way, or naivnes, that's what we try to preserve.

I wouldn't even say it's about public buildings. I think we are interested in the general interaction of the human body and the architectural structures. Everywhere where we are allowed to experiment, we try to experiment.

THE PROJECT

Rafał:

You mentioned before this aspect of mobility, how we met back then in Poland by extraordinary on the one hand, but also kind of typical circumstances for our contemporary condition of studying. The question of mobility is the one that will be somehow running over this conversation, in terms of the nature of your work and in terms of the project. As you mentioned, the project for the Polish Pavilion on your part is called Countryspine. What was the reasoning behind the name and behind the project?

Artem:

To be honest, the departure point for us was when we tried to look at the countryside and try to analyse how we should approach this topic? We try to look at the problems. One of the problems of contemporary countryside is that it develops similarly to cities, but without the clearness of the cities masterplan. Often we can observe this uncontrolled growth of the settlements all around big cities, sometimes in between. Mainly the houses are not so high and they are one, two, three-storey buildings with a small private lot, which takes a lot of land and is not very much regulated. Often its deregulation depends on the relationship between the local planning department and the one who wants to build a house or extend something. That we find a very dangerous situation, because with such a growth of population and constantly increasing speed of development of cities and the built area, we are risking to lose greenland at all and we are risking to lose countryside at all.

The countryside gets eaten by suburbs. We have one city with its concentration and suburbs and then another city. We know several examples in Europe and we find it very important to preserve the countryside, to preserve greenery. On the one hand we want to find a way for the development of the countryside, on the other hand, to preserve greenery.

In these terms our approach was to limit it and find very clear regulations, but also in a radical way, which would allow us to provide values of life in the countryside, for example, on the one hand having a view to the greenery and this kind unobstructed view will allow us to enjoy the landscape. On the other hand, the possibility to access your house by private transportation or even access from the ground.

We decided to stick to already built areas in the countryside. All the countryside is penetrated and cut by the roads, it is something that was already built. We believe that in the coming years, we still would operate with a wheel transportation system to get from one side to another. Therefore the roads would remain. We decided to stick to the footprints of the roads and propose all the new development only on top of the roads. That would allow us to provide direct access from each road to a private house and a direct view to nature from each house. We generally combined housing, circulation and production as well. That was a very important element. We actually had housing, production, social elements and transportation and we decided to merge it into one superstructure which we think could accommodate all of these activities and help to preserve greenery in the countryside while providing the same level of comfort for the tenants and for future development.

Leonid:

It goes metaphorically to the word spine, which we used. In the human body, there is a spine, but also there is a spine in the trees. I think it's a very nice metaphor which goes together with our concept of hardware and software development, where there is a rigid and well-designed core element that allows a certain diversity and interchange of development, of the things around it and between it.

For instance, the same way as the branch in a tree: it's always the same wooden stick, but then it can be green, can be yellow, it can lose leaves, it can become completely lush - the same way here we see that for the country, the roads, they become spines, but not only for circulation, but also for the potential for the development of the greenland. That's where the spine came from if we speak about etymology. Country, that was obviously given from the overall brief of Trouble in Paradise.

Rafał:

That maybe here has to be mentioned, that the brief of the exhibition and for the projects was to develop our point of view on the countryside, which is divided into three spatialities: the territory, the settlement and the dwelling.

Your point of entry was precisely the settlement. I think that this is the exceptional quality that you envisioned here of densification over the existing network of communication to minimise the footprint, but also to manage, as you were saying, this pristine nature of the land. However, how do you envision more in detail, the living inside of a densified structure? Does it have a variety of densification and how is it managed level over the level?

Artem:

We live now in these types of structures. One of the most popular ways of coexisting in the countryside is this so-called row housing, which is technically exactly what we proposed in the housing level. There are private apartments or two-level apartments, which have walls that separate them. They have again, direct view from two

sides and they neighbour with other buildings. In our practice and our projects, especially such speculative ones, we try not to propose too much new, not to go too much in a fantasy sphere.

We try to use the structures, typologies and ways of coexistence, which were already approved by the time. For example, we all know that each settlement starts along the road because of circulation, a point of access, and trade communication. That's exactly what we try to do without giving new settlers the possibility to grow towards the green, they could grow only in height or in length along the road.

Second, it's the typology of the housing. It's again, what exists - row housing, which is very popular and proofed typology. That's what we propose on the second level. On the third level we have also very proofed typology, what we call among us a public boulevard. It was this public, semi-public production street where we try to bring together production, different public enterprises and also a place for leisure. That's how all the main streets in the cities look like. It's a place where people could circulate, where they can relax, where most of the shops are, where the most services and offices are often located. That is exactly this type of what we can find in contemporary cities, what we just elevate on top. In these terms, it's a very familiar structure which has existed for centuries in our built environment, but we just proposed to arrange them differently.

Leonid:

Answering your question about these different degrees of densification, I can say that in this project, particularly for Biennale, we purposefully made the crop of the model, which you can see in the pavilion and visualisations. We purposefully made it continuous and homogeneous in order to underline our idea, in order to make it more contrasted to the land. Of course, we can imagine that if we could continue this concept spread, it will have a certain kind of densification, growth and degrowth. The same way as roads, and as rivers, they keep their continuity, but they become smaller, then they become wider. That is obvious. Especially for this type of speculative project where we want to underline something, we found it very important to keep this density. I remember, the discussions which we had with you, Rafal, and the other participants, there were some people who were asking, why is it so homogeneous? Why is it so much? I always explain that this is in order to underline this idea. If we implement it later, of course, it can follow certain contextual things.

I would also like to add that as a starting point of a reflection was this idea of the urban sprawl, which kind of gives a false sense of this idyllic life, because when you have your little house with like a playground, with a bicycle, with a child playing the ball, maybe a cow here, a tractor there, it can kind of give you this idea of maybe this idyllic countryside life and this whole idea of trouble in paradise. But I think that in the bigger scale, this urban sprawl actually only spoils the land kind of more or less equally on all sides and creates neither city nor nature - very vast land, which is very difficult to get the infrastructure to go there. That was one of the key reasons in order to bring back density to the countryside. For us it is a reaction to the urban sprawl, which is perceived by many as a cute, idyllic countryside living in which we believe is not, on a big scale.

THE PROCESS

Rafał:

All right, so thinking about the scale of territory, it is precisely here where your project somehow cannot be misread as too radical for one purpose that it underlines the current problem of this urban sprawl, moreover, we are losing a vast amount of land. It simply underlined what is at stake in territorial development. I was also thinking about the process of work, because something that was going on from the very beginning, was your interest in that transformation. I think I call it transformation, but you called it very nicely - the relation between hardware and

software. I think this is also part of your ongoing interest in other research projects that you developed also. How did you find the relation here to what is software, what is hardware and what is it meant to be maintained? What is meant to be transformed? What kind of role does it play?

Artem:

I would say it's a very practical role. We do believe that hardware, first of all, is a structure and its infrastructure, or sometimes it's merged together. It's something that could be built and stay forever, like viaducts or aqueducts, which provides water or transportation and connects. Actually, it's an interesting reference to our project. We somehow didn't discuss it, but it's almost a direct reference. I just mentioned it. These linear structures which have the scale of nature, it's like built nature, also in terms of the reply in a previous comment about the homogeneity of our project. We try to operate here with the scale of nature and unlimited within a certain plot.

The hardware is something that should stay permanent. The hardware should retain certain flexibility and allow for preserving space for individuality. We have this kind of slabs and the structure which connects cities and which defines space for the development. Then this structure is accommodated by different functions, which would be flexible, which could be changed, which could be built, rebuilt, self built, which could reflect ideas and let's say, aesthetic preferences of the owner. What's very important as well is that it shouldn't be one totalitarian structure controlled completely by the architect. There should be more a place for individual expression of each settlement, or each owner.

We have tried to leave certain spaces for the people to adjust, to make it more comfortable for them. We assume that's very important especially when we speak on such an enormous scale like the road from one city to another one. It's very important to leave certain freedoms, first for the tenants and second for the growth in the future, because we never can imagine what will happen in the future. We try to design buildings to make our proposals flexible from the very beginning. To lose in a way in terms of the design that anything could happen and even can happen before we finish our design and construction process.

Leonid:

I would also say that speaking about this hardware, software and infrastructure, that this type of development is not new. There are so-called utopia projects from the beginning of the century, which even proposed to live above the roads or which combined housing. I think maybe the novelty, which is also probably a very old novelty, is to use the existing roads, because all these kinds of heroic projects, which we were discussing previously in our calls, were always proposing to build a new road with a linear skyscraper on top. Whereas here, when we were asked to think about the new settlement, new development, we proposed to look at what you guys already have at the existing roads which already occupy the land. Why not focus our construction development there?

Artem:

To intensify use of this land. Back to our point about this speculative project, we tried to ground as much as possible. It's exactly an existing road system of settlement along the road, a system of public boulevards which connect private areas. We tried to operate with something that is proofed by age and what already exists, and just make this combination more radical, but not propose new types of accommodation or settlement.

Rafał:

We will come back to the idea of referencing, because I think that there is a particular tradition of the linear projects that your project very much calls to. If you were to call it, what are the Commons in your proposal? The commons in terms of practices or in terms of ownership.

Artem:

We spoke about the structure and infrastructure and one common element - this hardware which defines the project and which provides a life of all the units in the project. We also have common circulation in the form of the road which exists. It's common and even in the legal aspect it is common and belongs to the state. I was talking before about this public boulevard, this top level, it's one common area which connects all the private units and also offers a place for common coexistence and common development of the spaces. In short - circulation, structure and common activities, common life.

Rafał:

Let's try to maybe push this project to the end, with this idea of thinking about it territorially. I'm very interested in this notion of the possible limit of the project, because if this general strategy that you impose is precisely to densify the urbanised, minimise the footprint of the built environment and the impact on the land mass. I'm curious here if we would push it to the end. Is this the kind of alternative to the existent model or is it a replacement?

Leonid:

I don't see a very big contradiction, alternative or replacement. I think it is an alternative model. Especially because the way the model looks - as if it is a crop of the land - it looks as if we would allow the structure to just occupy the whole globe like a web.

I think that is maybe too utopian, too radical and too monotonous. For sure, it is an interesting type of development which the people do not consider ecological, because it doesn't have this image of this idyllic countryside. It has quite a strong architectural language. It has a linear structure. It's quite dense. But we just wanted to make a point that this type of structure can really solve some issues. Therefore it could be a locally applied alternative model. I'm pretty sure, especially looking at other projects for instance Rural Office of Architecture or Atelier Fanelisa, which have a very different approach. I think if there is any good idea, the complete opposite of it should be also a good idea.

Therefore, I think that it's not that you have to do all the linear structures in the land and that will solve all the problems in the world. I think that is probably quite an interesting and radical alternative model which can be used with all respect to the fact that the completely opposite can also make complete sense. For instance, the Rural Office, when they explained the system of nodes in the countryside, in which I kind of saw some similarity to the thinking process, but it came up with a completely different project. They were also having certain structures which would be placed in nature and would be occupied by people. I found it a very nice project, which looks completely different than ours.

I would agree with all the points that they made, for instance. To sum up, I think it's an alternative model. That would be my answer.

*THE REPRESENTATION***Rafał:**

I like very much that you compared it to these to other projects, because indeed from the very early point I saw the tension between the project of Fanelisa in terms of mobility, that you both tackle. First, mobility of people between the land and between the Polish German border that Fanelisa somehow takes care of. Secondly, your mobility just

literally in terms of the network and also the hardware software relation in comparison to the Rural Office for Architecture proposal and their totems.

That brings me also to the images and models. The audience can look up the catalogue, which is available online. At this moment we may look at your images and also the model, which is extremely well elaborated in this project. I think that the images you provided perfectly express your trademark. I would say trademark of KOSMOS approach with this sort of imaginary, which is somehow partly a fairytale, but very well elaborating the potential of this work. And I'm very curious about the idea to visualise it with the illustration. What is your conviction behind it and what is your idea to use this sort of visuals within your work?

Artem:

We use these images more for speculative projects. Our idea is that this kind of drawn, a bit naive style could eliminate some questions, which we touch now, because in all speculative projects, usually we try to focus on several aspects. We don't try to solve all of the problems in life. We try to highlight only what we want to do. All of this project did not mean to be built in a way. They mean to raise the question and to discuss the ideas and to think about. We use this visual language, which helps us to remove matters which we don't like to touch in this project and to highlight understanding what we're interested in. Moreover, we believe that image is very important for architects and very important to be well understood. Therefore we experiment with the graphics every time, but since quite a long time we have already found that particular style which we used to explain our theoretical or speculative ideas.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rafał:

Coming back to our current situation, as you remember, it's been exactly one year from the time when we were finishing the projects. It was also there at the threshold of March and April last year. All of us have learnt that the exhibition is set in delay and we didn't know if it will be finished. We still maybe don't know right now as we keep on talking. With this one year of time, every one of us had time to reflect upon the project and upon the entire work. Is there anything at the moment that you would change in the project knowing about the pandemic? Keeping the fact that we started to work on it before the pandemic. Did it change anything?

Leonid:

I would say that although one may think that for an office like ours, which was used to working in distance, it didn't change much. In a certain way, it is true because we didn't change the exact way of communication. For instance, with our job one year ago, we were still talking the same way. Nevertheless I think it changed, of course, a lot in general perception of meeting, of physicality, of necessities of certain things. I can say for sure that there were many big new thoughts, feelings that I thought and realised this year. Maybe some of the reflections I can share.

One of them is that unfortunately or fortunately, people really need to see each other and that even though you can manage to run a business and do practical things only via online meetings, it's really important to see each other.

I can see how this really deteriorates many people and they become depressed, they become sad, they lose motivation and that the only thing which maybe is kind of preventing them from being happy again, is this sense of being together, seeing each other, meeting. For instance, that is why after one year of not having a physical office, which we closed right after the pandemic started, we are again opening a physical space in Moscow.

Second thing is about the real meetings that we are discussing with Artem. We think what we really missed in this year, was this type of event which brought us together with all of us - this type of happy get together with the random city with random people, which then become your friends, which then become your collaborators with whom you develop longer relationships with.

I don't actually know what would be the reason why I would meet some other new people, which would bring such an interesting topic on board, which would bring other six interesting architects. After having these ZOOM meetings, you don't really feel like writing to the other guys to say - it was so nice yesterday in Zoom, let's keep in touch.

Artem:

Especially, you don't have a chance to meet someone from a non-organisers team. The coolest in public events, in real time events and those events when you can really meet in person someone who you're not supposed to meet. That's like this kind of unexpected communication. That's very important.

Leonid:

For instance, also the fact that it's always recorded. We were discussing yesterday in the CCA Conference, which you also mentioned, that you don't feel completely yourself. You always feel like you're on the stage. Even now we're talking with you. We were talking with the others. But you always feel that this is a formal moment because ZOOM kind of always makes it formal, even though you're kind of all together in one digital room.

I think it actually changed. We're really with all of virtual collaboration, we are still looking for the Venice Biennale to open in person, to see the model, to see the pavilion, to see the prints which you made, and to see especially what's most important, to see the people, because it's really a great event for sharing and meeting other people.

Artem:

I think the Venice Biennale is much more about people than about exhibited objects. Objects often you can see online much better and then in a much more comfortable situation.

If I go back to the project, what would change in our project or how would it look differently? I think, a year ago we would question the brief - that Commons. When the pandemic started that common was the most dangerous and almost prohibited type of pre-existence. Everyone was in self isolation mode. Now with the time, I think we are getting back to more or less normal life, beside all the lockdown's, masks and so on.

More and more events happen now in real space in analog format, in so called pre-pandemic format and in this case probably wouldn't change so much. I mean, when you asked this question, I tried to reply to myself. What would be a corona proof design? Corona-proof design would be a private unit with independent access with minimal interaction with other people and also possible access to nature, which everyone was missing so much, a good balcony or facilities to go out was missing so much during hard lockdown. That's what exists in our project. The most interesting, charming and special element is common ground of production, common coexistence, and social ground - the third level where people combine agriculture, civic activities, social activities in one common, let's say either boulevard or living room, depending how you wish to call it.

That's the most important element, which I would say, defines our society. That's what Leonid said, we missed personally the most. That's what we also could see through the pandemic, anyway we respect the most. And now with all the cruel regulations we're getting back to this public life.

I do hope that we would need to change so much and I do hope that we will find the way to get back to the moment where we could meet in person, communicate in person and the space which allows unpredictable and very fruitful interaction of different social players, will be returned to society and to humans.

Rafał:

There is something that you guys nailed. I must say that I was struck by a hit right now. I feel quite the same as we are talking right now and it is being recorded - it is all staged. It is all prepared. It is all constructed. I mean, this is not a kind of normal, physical, spontaneous thing. Even after we will close this discussion, maybe just speak for five, ten minutes more and disperse to our own things, we will still be somehow entangled within this condition. I have the same reaction to all of this. It is a call to somehow strengthen the necessity of physical presence.

One of the elements that we are also discussing with other curators, in fact, with the curators from Switzerland was the necessity to enforce on the Biennale as an organisation for the event to happen and take place despite the current condition. Somehow it doesn't make sense if there are no people, it doesn't make sense if there is no kind of time for a spontaneous exchange. It is not a kind of show off of the best projects and puppets, at the end of the day.

It leads me back to this simple thought. What are your guys thoughts about returning to normal or getting into a new different condition? Is it rather like the will to return to the way of life that there was before or a kind of new priority that was maybe accelerated by this pandemic? What are your experiences on that matter?

Artem:

I believe in the past. I think this pandemic teaches us many very important things. One of them is to accept technological progress, which has been here since decades. Somehow in our practice, we believe that we have many very progressive clients, often online meetings were something a bit like a lack of respect to the client, lack of time for a client.

I often find myself with Leonid and the other members of our collective that you sometimes have to fly thousands of kilometres just for the meeting, which would last 40 minutes or one hour and a half, and then flying back. It is extremely not ecological and very time wasteful. Even though we learn how to work on trains and the planes, everywhere, but of course, jumping from the bus to transfer and passing all the controls, it would never be as efficient as when you have a quiet room and can really focus. First we accept that we could make these calls and sometimes meetings when someone walks or passes airport controls, but now we accept just the fact that there's no need to fly. I do believe that during pandemic time, we learn how to do normal business remotely, but we also learn how important it is to meet in person from time to time. I think it was very popular, this hybrid format, that would just stay for now. We would keep personal meetings for personal direction, for more emotional direction and more business questions, more technical questions. We now learn how to be close digitally. I think it would be both.

What's also very important to me is the meaning of your smartphone. I feel it's a constant substitute for a constant, instantaneous presence in life. I would probably step back because we also start to evaluate this and give stronger value to the moment when you can meet someone in person. At the moment when the iPhone will just really go back and we will stick to each other in a physical way, we will be focussed on each other much more when we have a chance to contact each other physically.

Leonid:

Coming back to your question about the Biennale and the physical presence. I think it was, for me, just a personal experience. I knew about it because we have relatives, friends and employees in Russia, but basically the attitude to the covid regulations in Russia and in Europe are very different. I recently had to go there for a business visit and I was quite surprised that life there goes quite normally. I wouldn't say that this is the way to go. I would just say that you realise that on one side there is something wrong or the truth is somewhere in the middle, because now we go to countries where nothing except grocery stores is open. Then there is the country where the people gather in stadiums and nightclubs and eat in restaurants together with people of all ages and so on.

I think that for the Venice Biennale, which is still not a stadium, not a nightclub, you're following the good direction of trying to convince the organisers that it should stay public. Maybe it can be a reduction of the public. It can be mostly in Giardini, where you are anyway partially in the garden. I think that it should happen and it will have a big value if it happens. It would be a very big disappointment if it will be again cancelled or postponed again, because when it occurred a third or fourth time, then you kind of forget about it.

Artem:

Then the Biennale 2022 already will come.

Leonid:

I don't even want to know what will be the fifth or the seventh reopening or reconciliation. I think we'll reach a kind of psychological barrier. Either if it happens or no one would actually care if it happens or not. Anyway, good luck with that.

Rafał:

That's being spoken in a time when, of course, we will be able to discover and see if it opened or not. Guys, thanks very much for your time. It's been a great pleasure.

Artem:

Thanks very much for talking to us. Thank you all.

Leonid:

Thank you all your colleagues for inviting us and for having trust in us and to give us this opportunity. We're very happy and in freedom in a way.

Rafał:

Thank you.
