

## **Friendly Zone, Kaunas LT.**

### **An interdisciplinary art project addressing public space in Kaunas**

In September 2008 Kaunas Biennial, with funding from the Culture Ministry of Lithuania, invited artists to address what people feel about Kaunas City. The Biennial initiative called Friendly Zone inaugurates a new year round *Art and Public* programme and is informed by two concerns about the life of the city and the role of artists.

#### **Life of the City**

If you get a chance to visit Rotuses Sq. and read the tourist information board you may notice that a word in the phrase 'welcome to the friendly city of Kaunas' was crossed out by someone and replaced with the word 'unfriendly'. Too often the experience of life in Kaunas city is unfriendly, downcast, and glum. Is there some resonance in this experience to the suffering during Soviet control of public space? Alternatively it may reflect some innate national trait like reticence or reserve in unfamiliar places beyond the home or the sauna?

Whatever its roots the experience of inertia, coolness, indifference overshadows public space. Of course, public space or being-in-public also carries its own set of questions and complexities. Can our desire for freedom from alienation and isolation be met by withdrawal from public space into private territory? Why are plans for new interventions in public space so obsessed with the sterile, stacked and vertical rather than the human? How is it that urban centres and peripheries register with the economic interests of city municipalities, planners, architects and developers rather than citizens. These questions suggest that ordinary people are instinctively suspicious of public space.

#### **Role of Artists**

What can be said of the impact of contemporary art education in Kaunas on emerging art practitioners. Art education like public space is overshadowed by inertia with no short-term cure for the clogged arteries of institutional visioning. Many young artists leave college, turn away from art in favour of some degree of economic security. There is no transfer of capacity to engage with society, with life, outside of tired frameworks and formulas of studio, stage, and audience.

When Friendly Zone was launched in September 2008 some artists wondered if the task was to produce a social advertising or some form of naïve propaganda on behalf of the Municipality. Rather, the intention of Friendly Zones is to build the capacity of artists to engage with publics who in turn might be provoked to re-imagine how public space in Kaunas is produced. An act of agency is where

the artist can assist through aesthetic means what the American critic, Rosalyn Deutsche has called, 'the experience of being public'. Friendly Zone is conceived as a project whereby artists and art address an experience of being-in-public even though the problems associated with both artists and public space may be indissoluble.

The results of Friendly Zone is work involving three artists working collaboratively viewing Kaunas from the inside and one from Vilnius with a view from outside.

**„I love“ playfully explores positive energy and emotions.** Project Author: Vilnius based Eglė Ganda Bogdaniene, Director: Aleksas Gailieša, Technical: Audrius Lašas

**„Lost“ uses the device of a poem by Patackas to evoke a forgotten memory of the Kaunas.** Project author: Inga Likšaitė, Animation: Claudia Rohrmoser, Poet: Gintaras Patackas

**„Dam the anger – produce electricity“ *Psilikono teatras*** uses the metaphor of transformation: the Kaunas dam with its potential for violent energy is released into electricity that lights-up the city. (*Psilikono teatre* is Auksė Petruilienė & Darius Petruolis).

During the final week of November three Katos video advertising screens showed one part of each series of work without promotion. This tactic was used to rely only on the practitioners' artistry to ignite interest and open-up often closed down pockets of memory or experience. In January 2009 the projects will be publicly launched and screened over a three-week period.