

Ilia Kuzubov: 'there should be no politics behind art'

Interview from 25th April 2016 by Alice Maselnikova



Ilia Kuzubov is a Russian artist, curator and art coordinator operating in Arkhangelsk region in Northern Russia. At the time of this interview, Ilia has been undertaking a two week curatorial residency in Stockholm at the invitation of [Intercult](#) and their [Young Curators](#)

& [Art Coordinators](#) network. I met Ilia twice: at Supermarket art fair, where his residency took place, and at Intercult's office base to attend his [talk](#) «How is it to be an art curator and art organizer in Severodvinsk in Northern Russia?»

Priviet Ilia, very nice meeting you again. Could you introduce yourself – who you are and what you do in relation to where you come from?

My name is Ilia Kuzubov, I am a Russian curator and manager of different art and cultural project on the shores of the White Sea in Severodvinsk, a town in northern Russia near Arkhangelsk. Arkhangelsk is a capital of the Arkhangelsk region, we call it Pomorie.

So who I am. I am the founder of cultural-ecological free festival called [Taibola](#). I started working as curator and organizer of different cultural events in Severodvinsk in 2005. So I have a very good, first-hand experience of Russian reality and culture, which can be a very different reality from the European one. Here in Stockholm I am for my second time, first time I came here last year. I am a participant of an exchange programme between Russia and Sweden, the Young Curators & Art Operators network. I have been undertaking a residency at Supermarket art fair, which focuses on non-profit artist run galleries and initiatives. It is a large art fair currently celebrating its 10th year anniversary and as part of my stay here I was invited to attend it by its co-founder Pontus Raud. Since I have the space here, I would like to say thank you to Intercult and to TOK [ed. Note: Creative Association of Curators TOK, based in St. Petersburg] to make this exchange programme possible.

Have you been to the Supermarket before? What did you gain from attending it?

It was the first time I went to Supermarket and it was a really busy experience. I have been something like a volunteer here, but most of all I have been talking to people and establishing new connections. I was thinking a lot of how to use this opportunity and I think

that I would like to invite Pontus to Arkhangelsk, if the stars are lucky for us. Maybe we can do something interesting in Barents Bird festival, him and I. Barents Bird is an annual international art and culture festival that takes place in Murmansk & Arkhangelsk.



The Intercult website describes you as a ‘cultural activist.’ It made me wonder what is it that a cultural activist does, since it is quite a specific term. When I think of it, I imagine someone who goes out public and waves a flag, shouting for the liberation of culture.

Joking aside, what is your role as a cultural activist? How would you describe it?

I suppose that I try to make the world and the city around me a little bit better; a better place. As I said, my main project is the Taibola festival, which I started in 2012. Taibola is a North-Russian art festival that takes place on the shores of White Sea and combines arts, culture, ecology, healthy lifestyle and community participation. It is a non-commercial event all built from the effort of volunteers and sponsorship from different sources. But in order to understand what I do, let me explain where I come from.

You see, where I come from is really just a big province in its character, but with the area being larger than France or Spain, for example. We only have 1 170 000 population and half of this number live in three cities, Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk and Novodvinsk. Most of these cities were designed as an industrial soviet area and when you are young you just want to leave the place. As soon as they can, all the young people leave to Moscow or St. Petersburg. When I was maybe twenty five, most of my friends left and I remained by myself, with just a couple of friends. Together we organized all sorts of different events since back then there was nobody else who wanted to do this. I also started playing in a music group, we played self-invented dark Russian folk and even published one kitchen record.

(What follows is a lengthy chat on the nature of Ilia’s dark folk band, you can listen to them [here](#))

The title of the band, *Kogti Ketsalkoatlya* (The Claws of Quetzalcoatl), comes from Aztec mythology. Quetzalcoatl was one of the most powerful gods who brought knowledge to people, something like Prometheus. I don't remember why, but he made a boat, a raft made of snakes, and he went off to nobody knows where, somewhere at the other side of the ocean. When Spanish inquisitors came South American, the native Indians decided it was gods from opposite side of the ocean, the servants of Quetzalcoatl. So that is why in the beginning they did not fight the inquisitors, since they believed them to be gods.

But now we get back to Taibola. So it originated in my need to do something in my region, where nothing like this would happen otherwise. I wanted to do something for the people. In Taibola we have no tickets, it is a free festival outside of the city. We choose places without civilisation, without walls or constricting space. In order to get there, one needs to walk certain distance, from around one to five kilometres and also overcome some sort of an obstacle. We usually have a river that everyone needs to cross. It is already in the name – 'taibola' comes from Finno-Ugric culture and it means a way, or a shortcut through deep forest.



So you need to go through a certain discomfort, as a journey liberating you from the civilisation, is that right?

Yes, exactly. It is like an unexplored Disneyland for grownups. It virtually looks like a playground and you can never see everything at the same time. We have more than ten or fifteen places, all with different ideas and workshops. I can show you on our last year's map. So we build yurts, an open library, café, kindergarten, music scenes and places to have

traditional Russian tea. We organise different kinds of workshops, have our small art fair and so on.

Is the festival mostly focused on Russian artists?

Yes, but that is more given by the context it exists in – the province area and initially very limited budget. We try to reach foreign audience too, through work our sponsors and partners or just by a word of mouth, and we are getting more and more visitors from outside of Russia every year.

How is Taibola funded?

Well, first time I used my own money, which was a tiny budget of only 100.000 roubles [ed. note: less than 1500€] and total budget of the first year was 200.000 roubles. It is like, for example, what a company in Stockholm spends on two days of catering. Ridiculous. Last year we had over 1 700 000 roubles available. This sounds like a lot of money but if we translate this to euros it is really nothing. Today most of the money we get from municipalities and region grants – grants for culture, grants aimed at young people, then we also have some private sponsors and in-kind donations. But it is a really laborious process to get those grants. It means that for seven or eight months I need to work with papers, make all kinds of interviews, and well, generally talk to the powerful people of the world and convince them to give me money. As a consequence, the festival will not take part this year, since I just do not have enough time to apply for the grants and thus we do not have the money.

Saying that, our biggest strength are the people, the passionate people who work with us for free without expecting anything back. For example, this guy makes our promotional films for no money. These people make fire shows for free during the festival. And this street theatre takes part equally voluntarily. So many amazing people.

Yes, it is really incredible how much passion and dedication people can show if they really care for a cause. It is great to see it still exists – although mostly in artist-run initiatives and not for profit cultural organisations. I have not really seen it in any other areas.

You can see some of it in the media I work with and who usually work with us at Taibola for free. That is my best success, how I work with mass media. In my city, in my region, every newspaper or television channel or radio station know who I am. They know that I try to make social events for our region out of conviction. Because I have some ideas for the area where I live. This is an area culturally somewhere in the deep bottom of culture activity. Everyone here believes that if you have good ideas, you have to go to some other place to realise them, because otherwise you are stuck just with them in this northern middle of nowhere, in a city where nothing happens. What nobody sees is the natural heritage of this area. This cool nature, this beautiful land around our city. Taibola makes people see this beauty, it tries to make the visitors see the real world as it is; without civilisation, without internet, without stress.

After the success of the first festival, when people realised all this, the government of my municipality made a grant proposal to the festival. Since then we have worked with the regional governments - every time the festival changes the place, we work with different municipalities.

How many in terms of numbers do you actually get in the audience?

First year we had around 1500 people, for three day festival. In the following year we had more than 5000 for the next year we gathered maybe 3000 visitors. After that I decided that I would rather have a smaller amount of visitors, but the ones who would really appreciate the kind of festival we are trying to promote. I want to attract like-minded people who can find rest in nature without alcohol.

But originally why did you choose to have the festival without alcohol? Because of money or because of an ideological reason?

Well, I know that I could make quite a lot of money from selling alcohol. However, am not trying to earn money with Taibola. I am trying to make people think about their lives. I think that many of problems that we have come solely from ourselves, and their solutions rest in our hands. Through selfless collaboration so much more can be achieved. If I work alone, I can achieve nothing, yet if I work with a big group, I can achieve so much. When I started the festival it was very small, the whole grounds just looked like a little village. Four years ago, the first builders of the festival were only five of us: I, my girlfriend and three other guys whom I met in the street. They were in the street playing Frisbee and I said: «Come on guys, I have two big cars with all these materials, let's make something together». And they came.

So the first time we had maybe one hundred or one hundred and fifty volunteers and none of them get any fee. The guys who rent for us the sound system give us low prices. Everyone knows that we try to bring to our big desert something very new and contemporary. In central Russia, such kind of festivals always have tickets and charge up to 5000 roubles, whereas we do not charge anything. We try to show invite different aspects of young culture, new musicians and different kinds of modern music – jazz and ethnic sounds for example, and combine it with old Russian culture.

We are not only for hippies, you know. At Taibola, we show old Russian dances and songs, we demonstrate what is khorovod, which nobody knows [ed. note: Khorovod is of Slavic origin, a combination of a circle dance and chorus singing]. But we also show other different cultures, Asian and middle-eastern, through different crafts and workshops. We try to make events by mixing new ideas with ancient ideas. We try to make people artists. For example three times we made a competition for unprofessional architects and artists to make art objects out of driftwood on the shores of the sea. Yet the driftwood is beautiful, it looks like bones of ancient animals. Very beautiful. People who live in this area only use it as firewood - we use it to create something. This is one of our symbols, one of our main ideas, that everyone can be an artist and everyone can create something. Here you can be anyone: even if on daily basis you work with computers or in a bank, here you can be someone

totally different: a cook, a builder, anything. Everyone uses laptops all the time, designers, programmers, they are all hooked on their computers. But at Taibola, I tell them: “Come on we need to build a bridge.”



Drop you notebooks and let's build a bridge!

Yes! It does change people. Such work has a good influence. It's really rewarding to make something with your hands, it's a totally different experience, making something.

When you mention the technology, do you see here in Stockholm a huge difference, since Sweden is such a technocratic society, everyone staring in their phones all the time? Do you think your project could be transferred to this society?

I think so, when I was first time in Europe, in Norway I understood the difference between my country and northern Europe. In Russia, we can have really a lot of money, but when we have it, we use it to buy the most expensive telephone, newest PC, shiniest car. We have no role models, no social support, we spend money on the wrong things. We have rich tourists, it's like the Chinese, spending money on all sorts of unimportant, material things, but not putting them in the right causes, the public causes. In Norway and here in Sweden it is always that some part of money is spent on public spaces. The society wants to spend it on such public causes. In my city we have no such thing, no modern public spaces. It was designed by the soviet government as a large shipyard, we have a beautiful city that looks like boxes. Boxes, boxes, boxes and that is all.

So I think, the work of a cultural activist, if I get back to your question, tries to show people that they should get involved in these public causes. Even in small ways, people can solve

little problems by themselves. For example, during last two years we gathered people on this public beach in Severodvinsk and gave them tea and coffee for free, and we talked and had fun, and meanwhile we collected rubbish and debris from that beach. Just like that. Together. Each time I show that I am not just a superstar on local tv but that I am real, that I really want to bring my work to them and make a difference, it makes things better. At Taibola, we have different activities and creative associations from Severodvinsk: «Severodvinsk for a healthy lifestyle» (sport activities, work-out), «Zmey Raduga» (street theatre, «Rainbow Snake»), «Inokhodets» (movie makers, «Ambler»), «1 vs 1» (guys who fight for MMA-work without alcohol), «Zimniy sprint» («Winter sprint», make competitions for non-professional drivers on the ice). And we try to involve as many people as we can, and show it to as many people as possible.

Are you trying to make any political statements with this festival, and do you think it can have political impact?

We have our rules, we never work with politicians, political parties, religious parties and tobacco & alcohol companies.

Why not?

They would dictate to us some rules and I am trying to show something else. Something good, healthy, uncorrupted. I think that we are trying to show maybe simple things, but interesting things. And Taibola that is the place for freedom and not for propaganda. And if government decides to use this money they give us for propaganda, I would stop. And really, they are rules applicable to all of us.

For example, Supermarket started as very non-commercial art fair, but today they turned much more commercial, you can see this happening to small festivals and institutions, but you seem to be very opposed to this. Is that so? Why do you think this happens?

Everyone tries to survive, of course. And indeed we also need to make some commercial things and we have some commercial aspects. We sell souvenirs and stuff... but only the things that we can produce by our own work. I am trying to show that in the society there are walls only created by people. Walls between people. But they can be overcome, torn down. My idea is that everyone who lives in Taibola can take part, not be afraid of trying new things.

You see every time you go to the police, or governments, institution, it feels like everyone will be against you, that it will be a huge fight. Often I am surprised at how cooperative people can be when you really take the effort to explain them your cause and show your strong points. I like explaining these things to the official people. Which is what I really like, in the end, that everyone enjoys Taibola.

And why an alcohol-free festival? I think that for example in Norway there is no big festival without beer. But the real magic can be without alcohol. I have been working in night clubs for three years and I have plenty of experience with alcohol, I have seen everything. There is

no real club culture, just alcohol. It washes the soul away. That's the same thing why we don't work with political organisations, religious organisations and others.

What do you think of the Russian politics? Do you think art can have political impact?

If I start to work with political images it will be the end of my work, of the festival. Sometimes I think I am like Robin Hood, that I take money from the rich and give it to the poor. If I was just a street activist with a poster, saying «come on I want this and this and that», and «all this is wrong and terrible» and «I hate you», this makes nothing, no real outcome. We have a very different reality in small towns in Russia, such as mine.



So would you say this is one of your main goals to bring art to local communities?

Not only local communities, I think art can be really useful not just for little group. I use art not for high quality aesthetic pleasure, I understand that art and its way not only for rich people and collectors and curators, but everyone. You can sell a lot to the normal people who watch the tv and read newspaper, but the tv, newspapers and radio, they are only everyday propaganda. I am not dogmatic, I do not want to present just one idea of the right or wrong. I make a festival that contains different aspects, different angles and you can see different people in different countries, ask them what you think about this this and this. It is no propaganda, a visitor can compare all these aspects and make their own opinion.

I try to make people believe that they can be everyone. I do not like politics really, as I can see that the guys in politics do not try to solve problems of the society. All of them are only concerned with their own interests, their children and friends. Just themselves. In Taibola you never see banners, posters, advertisement. We have only one place, just a board, which provides pictures a map and of our direct supporters and workers. A simple little piece of advertising.

It is maybe my mission to say in St Petersburg, Moscow, other regions that we are still alive and that we do this this and this, that we exist and matter.

But we are running out of time, is there something you want to finish with?

I would like to mention Mikhail Lomonosov, do you know who he was? I will speak in Russian. Lomonosov was born in Arkhangelsk region and left home when he was nineteen to study in Moscow. Lomonosov founded the first Russian University and thanks to his broad education he was a true renaissance man. He was successful in physics, astronomy, all around knowledge, but still he came from a village of what, five hundred people maybe. In principle, he was such a person who made himself, a self-made man. Every man would like to be like Lomonosov. Although I don't want to compare myself with him, my parents also come from a small village, I'm living in a small town, I am a very ordinary man, utterly ordinary, I don't have any privileges, no rich parents. I can speak and think well, but that is all. So I would like to say that everyone can be that person which he or she wants to be. You just have to believe in own strength, your ideas must be really bright and useful for the world and you will get a successes surely.