

Conversation with
MARTEN ESKO,
Contemporary Art
Museum of Estonia
(EKKM)

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

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MARTEN ESKO, Contemporary
Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM)

Marten Esko is a Managing
Director and Curator at the
Contemporary Art Museum of
Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn, Estonia.

With Laurel McLaughlin

LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

What is your role at the
Contemporary Art Museum of
Estonia (EKKM) and how long
have you worked there?

MARTEN ESKO:

Officially, I am one of the managing directors, Johannes Säre being the other. We've been running EKKM since the start of 2016, although we both also joined the team around 2011. In total there are currently four people in 3.5 positions on staff. Roles are a more complex question. In the end, everyone does a bit of everything, though of course, there is some division of responsibility, and each one of us here functions as two or three museum departments. My role mainly consists of programming, communications, fundraising and the paperwork that comes with it, but it's also partly general management and installation.

LM:

When was EKKM founded?

ME:

If I had to name a single year, I'd say 2007, but that's not really the answer. The founding date is somewhere in between late 2006 and early 2007, and EKKM officially became a legal NGO in 2009. EKKM started out as a squat within a three-story industrial building in the North of Tallinn, between the old-town and the seaside. Two artists, Marco Laimre, Neeme Külm, were looking for a potential studio space and they found this building empty and started cleaning it out, and then, two more people, Elin Kard, Anders Härm, came along. Those four founded EKKM. Of course, this is all a rough simplification, and who did what and joined when is still a mystery; but by May

2007, the first exhibition was held under the name EKKM—an abbreviation of *Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Muuseum*, which translates to Estonian Museum of Contemporary Art.

Because there was no contemporary art museum in Estonia, the name was available and there was a need to fill the void behind the name. It was also initially seen as a counter-reaction to the Kumu, a sub-museum of the Estonian Art Museum, which had opened in early 2006. It holds art from the 1700s onwards with one floor dedicated to contemporary art. There were, of course, high expectations for it, as it was the first purpose-built art museum and the first time that it was possible to “re-write,” or even just “write,” the local art history.

One of the many stories of how EKKM got its name involves a conference at the Kumu’s opening where an old-school Soviet modernist—now more of a conservative nationalist—stood up and yelled, “This is not the contemporary art museum we wanted! We should have a proper contemporary art museum of Estonia.” One of the founders of EKKM was also in the audience and initially found the idea unrealistic and stupid. Later on, while looking around in the derelict spaces of the not-yet-EKKM, we thought this could be used as an exhibition venue and even a contemporary art museum of Estonia.

LM:

In your mission statement, you describe EKKM as a space “between an official institution and an artist-run space.” Can you tell me more about that identity? You’re not positioned in relation to the Soros Centers, is that correct?

ME:

The CCA in Tallinn is the organization that grew out of the Soros Center. With regard to the mission statement, I would say that these notions of governmental and artist-run are like brackets around what EKKM does. They help to define the frame but not the content itself. In a way, EKKM has always been defined more by what it does than by what it states, although this can backfire easily when it comes to communication. Obviously the governmental, or the more institutional side, comes from the name and its associations, but it could also be taken as “playing” this role of a governmental institution, using this familiar-sounding name, as it comes handy when lending works from other museums or galleries, or applying for international grants, or in conversation with the government, the media, or the general public. We, of

course, don't aim to deceive, and EKKM still is legally a museum, though we don't have works on permanent display and have never gotten funding as a museum, only as an art institution. To be a museum here legally, you only need to have a collection, and this was already started in 2007 with donations and exchanges with artists. Most of the works in the collection are from before 2010, though there are some additions every year.

LM:

That's really interesting—it sounds like a very conscious performance of institutionality. Names certainly contribute to the credence of museum spaces within public perception. I would imagine that having "museum" within the title provides you with license, both creatively and administratively.

ME:

It's a façade, which is interesting because our actual façade still looks like a squat.

LM:

I was reading online about the building and it used to be a heating plant, no?

ME:

It was an annex to Tallinn's former central heating plant. We assume, as no one has bothered to look it up, that it was initially built in the 1950s for handling and transporting coal to the plant and was later repurposed as the heat networks maintenance office. The whole plant was decommissioned in the early 1980s and was out of use for a while.

Currently, the main building of the heating plant is a city-owned creative industry's hub called Kultuurikatel, which was partly an EU project. It was meant to be ready by 2011, when Tallinn was the European Capital of Culture, but was finished a couple of years late. At one point, they also took over the lease for EKKM's building that we had previously arranged with the city, so now they are our landlords as well. They don't really have any coherent program, but they house companies and studios as tenants. They function more as an infrastructural center that can be rented by conferences, fairs, festivals, or larger diplomatic gatherings. In a way, it's good to be in this direct juxtaposition with them, as the differences stand out easily.

LM:

Do you have many exchanges with those organizations? Does EKKM act like a center or is it considered separate?

ME:

Even though legally they are our landlords, EKKM has never been considered as being part of Kultuurikatel. We're also separate from the other tenants, being in a different building with a different address. EKKM had existed there for a while before Kultuurikatel and even the taxi drivers and people who know nothing of the museum know it through that abbreviation. That is also another part of our history: When the venue first opened, it also served as a nightclub in between exhibitions and for most winters. Since we have insufficient heating and insulation, it means we run our exhibitions seasonally from spring until late autumn.

Because of the general gentrification of the area, for which we are partly also to blame, this has now become one of the prime districts in Tallinn. A few years ago, a luxury apartment building, the Kultuurikatel Lofts, was finished close by, and because of that we can't really host parties or bigger events outdoors anymore. It's a classic gentrification process, and there's the constant threat of possible real estate conflicts. Sometimes these threats are carried out, as we are the "ugliest" building in the area sitting on prime city land.

LM:

I was curious about the area surrounding EKKM, as I've been to Tallinn numerous times, but that part is particularly far north from say the Kumu, the Kadriorg, Museum of Applied Art and Design, or other branches of the museum conglomeration. Could you speak about this area's proximity to the city center and then a bit more about the area in which the organization emerged?

ME:

EKKM is located in a somewhat post-industrial area, but from the city's perspective, it is still within the city center and near the harbor, so everything is in walking-distance. The Kumu is indeed further away, but it is also in the central district. Most of the arts spaces and museums, however are in Old

Town, around which Tallinn is historically structured—the center of the center in a way.

Almost exactly around the time that the heating plant was decommissioned in 1980, a huge Soviet Brutalist leisure and culture center called Linnahall, opened nearby, changing the function of this area to be more public. The industrial complex was not repurposed, it just remained mostly disused. By the time EKKM started, both of these massive structures were in disrepair, with Linnahall now being for the most part sealed off from the public due to its risk of collapse. In a sense, then, the area is not exactly post-industrial, because it's had had a cultural function for a while and had just been derelict for some time.

When EKKM first began programming, there were still railroad tracks, with lots of empty space and abandoned buildings around. They were not used, just barely maintained as city property. For the past ten years it has changed drastically, especially around the harbor area, with mainly commercial office buildings operating, but there's also an entire neighborhood to the west of us with older wooden houses and new developments called Kalamaja that's by now almost fully redeveloped into a hipster district with the highest prices for real-estate. Even in the 2000s, it was seen as a pretty rough part of the city.

LM:

Are you still paying rent?

ME:

It's complicated. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, our current temporary lease does not include rent, but I'm also not sure what the situation will be later this year. From 2010 until the end of 2019 we did pay rent, based on a one-month lease of the venue for an event, which after a month, instead of expiring, became an indefinite lease and continued to be our legal permit for being there for more than nine years. The fee was a symbolic 1000 Estonian Kroon, which converts to about 69 USD. As our lease became an agreement without an official end date, there was always the possibility that we might receive an out-of-the-blue three-month notice, which gave a more "temporary" feel to EKKM's existence and held us back from future planning.

What I meant by "recent events" is actually not just the pandemic. In late November last year, Kultuurikatel terminated our lease because our building was deemed hazardous by safety auditors. We received a three-month notice to vacate. Their claims were partly reasonable, as the building and its infrastructure is what it is, but the city started heavily over-interpreting the audit. At one point, one of the vice-mayors publicly stated that there was no other option but to demolish the building and it seemed like a lost battle. But we got a lot of public support, both locally and internationally, and even from

the government. There was a lot of favorable media coverage, which put the city under some pressure, and in the end, brought us to negotiations.

Even now it is still unclear what the real motives were, as so far, the city has said that their termination of our lease was purely for safety reasons, but no one really believes that. In any case, the negotiations ended fairly enough, and we got an initial extension of the lease for another six months, starting from March 2020, with the obligation to take care, with our own means, of all the issues stated in the audit. As long as that is done, we can get another two year lease and can continue our public activities. As of now, we are almost finished with the safety repairs, as initially we were supposed to open mid-April 2020, but because of the pandemic, everything is postponed.

We also had to agree with city that if we wanted to continue to occupy the building at the end of that two-year lease, we would have to finalize preparations for the overall renovation project and come up with funding for it. Currently, we already have some backing from the Ministry of Culture and a possible private partner, but first we aim to start functioning again, and then start considering what would it mean for EKKM to get renovated and "ready."

There was also an option of relocating to another building, which the city wanted to keep on the table, but there aren't many other options in Tallinn. We were, just in case, looking around with some more "motivation." But there really isn't any unused space around the center that is not already in development or in private hands. We could have possibly found something in the outskirts of a suburb, but that's not really an option.

LM:

Would you ever move to another city, such as Tartu, which is a smaller nearby city, if you had to?

ME:

That was actually a real question during the recent events, but Tartu has its own spaces and its own vibe. I personally wouldn't move, and I think none of the current staff would. If EKKM's existence really depended on moving, it would be taken into consideration, but it should then be run by locals in any case. Pärnu could maybe be an option, as three of the four founders are initially from there, but even in this case just ceasing to exist would be a more likely scenario.

LM:

I wanted to return a bit to your mission statement, which is, "[EKKM] is an unconventional concept of a contemporary art

museum that works towards producing, exhibiting, collecting and initiating contemporary art while aiming to alter the prevailing working methods of established art institutions.” Is this recent language?

ME:

This is part of an initial statement, though I’m not sure how initial, and probably put together by Anders Härm who was the previous director. I do remember adding the word “initiating” there at one point, as just “producing” did not really cover our activities. We haven’t really quite defined EKKM publicly very much. The short description where this quote comes from has been floating around since I can remember, but then again, I began working here in 2011. I wouldn’t say it’s inaccurate now, though “collecting” has moved more to the background, and “altering” has mainly concerned the local institutional scene—upon which EKKM has definitely had an impact.

LM:

You’ve used the word “institution” throughout this conversation and so have I, but does EKKM consider itself an institution?

ME:

That’s a question I’ve been pondering quite a lot, but without any definite outcomes. I would use the word in EKKM’s context, but it needs clarification. We already have this name of a proper institution and we play this game, but also, in some of the projects we do, we knowingly overplay the institution. At times, we maybe use the institution as a tool. One thing that is missing from this quote of the mission statement that you provided before is that EKKM is “a tool for self-establishment and institutionalization for younger generation of artist and curators.” This has perhaps also become less relevant now than when EKKM started, but it has also not ceased to be true to an extent.

But we have also tried to avoid institutionalization. For example, we’ve avoided standardizing our activities too much so that they may adapt according to the projects we take on. And maybe foremost, we’ve tried to keep a DIY approach and identify more with grassroots approaches than institutional ones. This is again where this “between governmental and artist-run” comes into play. We’re still trying to stand on two different platforms at the same time.

LM:

What do you consider an institution to be?

ME:

In addition to standard definitions, perhaps the simplest thing to say is that an institution is impersonal, something more than, or beyond, a group of people. That it functions outside of individuals.

LM:

As in, it could run outside of the ways and separate from the individuals that have previously run it?

ME:

Yes. As charged as it may be, the term "institution" does not really convey much else without further elaborating what one means by it, or which theoretical interpretation of "institutional" is invoked. For obvious reasons, "institution" also tends to carry a connotation of rigidity and set standards. When we over EKKM in 2016, there were some standard approaches to how things were done, as we had already been established for five years, but there were never any guidelines or even a mailing list to take over. From that perspective, the "institution" that we continued running was more of an understanding of the idea of EKKM than an actual structure or a system.

LM:

Returning to the collection, what types of works does EKKM collect, and do you have strategies of collecting?

ME:

There are no strict strategies other than finding alternative methods of acquisition. The strategies don't really concern what we collect but how we collect. There has so far been one exhibition based on the collection and it was curated by Anders Härm in 2011 with the title *Museum Files I: Collected Principles* that highlighted this story-based approach. The basis of the collection is that we exchange, and it depends on what the artists want. For example, the first work, a sound installation by Raul Keller, was acquired for 1 Estonian Kroon that was found in the yard of the neighboring yet-to-be Kultuurikatel in 2007. The collection then began to self-generate. Artists participating in the exhibitions didn't want to store the works themselves, so

they left them at EKKM. Some were deposited, others donated, and some have been exchanged for even weirder things. As another example, one work was supposedly acquired in exchange for a taxidermized pigeon, but when I was putting together some new texts for the collection and was asking around for artist statements, I found out that they hadn't yet received their pigeon. In a strange coincidence, there was a stuffed swallow laying around in one of the sheds at EKKM, and when I offered this instead, the artist accepted it and we finalized the transaction. Of course, there are more pragmatic versions as well, like with Laura Kuusk, whose two lightboxes are with us in exchange for an exhibition invitation that she realized in 2013.

LM:

These methods of alternative transaction are already occurring in a way; and yet, people perhaps aren't acknowledging them as such, or making them transparent. This is both inventive and problematic. It seems useful that you're working with the artists on transactions that their practices and Estonia's arts economy can accommodate. This seems more ethical than some exhibitions in the U.S. where artists are not compensated at all, and it leads us into questions concerning budgets and funding. You've mentioned that you receive government funding but what does your funding look like overall?

ME:

Yes, we are almost entirely publicly funded, but a lot of it is project-based funding. Since 2017 we have received regular funding from the Ministry of Culture, though that amounts to about one fifth of our annual budget. Our salaries come entirely from a yearly grant from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, and so does most of the exhibition budget. Every exhibition is a separate project, so it depends on its specifics to determine which international fund we could apply for. In addition, we have our own income as well. For 2019 and 2020 we received a two-year maintenance grant from the Foundation for Arts Initiatives, which could be considered private funding, but

in general, we do not get much private sponsorship. There is not much funding for the arts locally, and the ones that exist are already tied up with theatre or film or bigger festivals. There's no financial support from the city, but they consider charging us very little rent as sufficient support.

LM:

Do you charge admission?

ME:

We don't charge for entrance, but we have had some pressure to do this, as free admission is not that common in Estonia. And because we do operate with public funds, we would like to consider ourselves as part of free public space as well.

LM:

Do you have a financial board, or are they an advisory board?

ME:

There isn't such a structure specifically, but as a non-profit, EKKM has a six-member board of legal representatives. It is made up of the four people who founded EKKM, with me and Johannes joining them in 2015. It functions partly as an advisory board and has also some more specific tasks, like appointing nominees for the Köler Prize for example, a contemporary art award we give out that was initiated in 2011.

LM:

What is your overall operating budget?

ME:

I would say, roughly, 175,000 Euros, which is about \$190,00 USD per year, consisting of about 12–15 separate grants.

LM:

Thanks for that—it gives a sense of scale.

ME:

Indeed, though that's an accumulation of various projects per year and that changes a bit from year to year. As I mentioned, we also mediate grants for artists. When individuals don't meet the criteria for certain grants, we can help them in applying with the intention to mediate the funds for the artist, and at

times help with production. This is also another way we can use the institution. Some years, we have more of these mediations and this makes the budget larger. We also tend to prefer more international shows, as these usually have additional funding options and then we don't have to rely only on local funds. It's a bit ironic, but perhaps, from the funding perspective, it's more difficult to have an Estonian artist's solo show in Estonia, because you can only rely on local funding.

LM:

Are these international partnerships mainly within the Baltic states or all over Europe?

ME:

We don't really have many concrete partnerships as such, but we do have a network of connections made up of collaborators and friends. There is an exchange of ideas with other venues or individuals, some in the Baltic countries, but mainly from Nordic and central European countries, as well as Ireland. We have started sort of a partnership and an exchange of ideas with HIAP residency (Helsinki International Artist's Program) as well as Frame Contemporary Art Finland, to keep up conversations across the bay. Helsinki is the closest city to us, even closer than other larger Estonian cities, so we almost consider it as "local."

LM:

I ask that question because a stereotype still persists from the Soviet era that the Baltic states are insular and "separate" from Europe, even though that's not the case. I've spoken with folks from Rupert and LCCA and seen their international reaches and I was curious if you have goals for further collaborations.

ME:

We try to do as much as seems possible and reasonable, but our resources are obviously limited. We don't really seek institutional collaborations, because most of our energy goes into maintaining the venue and producing the exhibition season, so there really aren't any specific goals as such.

One thing that's crucial about how we work is that we aim to be a producing or initiating institution that's focused on commissions. That's why

we also don't have an open call and tend not to take in ready-made proposals or host touring exhibitions, and so forth. Because our main program only consists of a few exhibition slots, and our capacity to manage things is limited, the projects which eventually get done are chosen a bit more carefully. In that sense we prefer to work with a curator or an artist, who we usually invite with a carte blanche offer, to conceive a new project for EKKM, which is more informed and suitable to our specificities, both materially and immaterially.

LM:

I think spaces like this are so needed, especially when touring exhibitions can feel like packaged, consumable productions. What does an exhibition season look like at EKKM?

ME:

It's different every year, but recently the focus has gone more towards projects that bear some socio-political or also everyday relevance. Our last season started with a focus on the almost non-existent boundaries between work and leisure. It continued into an essay-like view of xenophobia and otherness, in light of Estonia's elections that led to a partially far-right government. Then, there was an ecologically motivated investigation into our relationships to land and earth—do we belong to it, or do we own it? The final exhibition, which was cut short due to issues with the lease for the venue, pondered on a more generalized social gloominess and the pressurized feelings of the inevitable end, which at the time seemed also eerily prophetic concerning EKKM.

There are typically four or five main exhibitions per season, with the season starting in April and ending in December. In addition, there are usually a few projects abroad as well. Earlier this year we also had an exhibition in collaboration with Beursschouwburg in Brussels, a solo show of Ingel Vaikla's work curated by our own Laura Toots, which was unfortunately also cut short by the pandemic. But in general, we've also tried to do less now than we did maybe three or four years ago, as we were burning out, and in a way still are.

Now, with the pandemic, our initial plan of five projects has so far changed into two exhibitions, a screening and an event series, with others postponed to the next season. Thankfully, as we almost lost the building last year, we were not making many plans for 2021, so now we don't have to cancel any ongoing plans and can postpone more easily. Funding is not really increasing, and currently it seems that we can expect that it will decrease. Expenses inevitably rise so we need to account for this and to start doing less to maintain some quality.

LM:

Could you share any frustrations that you've had in your role?

ME:

To pick a few, I'd say the lack of certainty and the lack of rest. Most of the things I could list could also be considered slightly beneficial, or at least productive, except for being overworked and underfunded obviously. Still, this temporariness is also helpful—we can't settle down too much, feel too comfortable, plan too far ahead. We have to constantly adapt, be flexible, rethink, but avoid overthinking, and continue to change, though not necessarily grow.

LM:

The need to be responsive and adaptive is what many institutions are defining as the contemporary condition. I'm curious if that definition resonates with you, or if there's another way you view the contemporary?

ME:

Maybe. But to go more in depth, the contemporary for me is more directly connected to temporal issues, meaning something similar to being synchronized with time. The term "contemporary" can be a bit devoid of general meaning due to its overuse, but I find that there's at least some potential in it when seeing it as a method of understanding how we consider "time." Contemporaneity is essentially postmodernist, but it has started gathering more philosophical meaning from the 2000s onwards as discussed in the work of Peter Osborne, Terry Smith, or the Contemporary Condition Study Group at Aarhus University. As a simplistic comparison, whereas modernism was to some extent a linear and progressive understanding of the movement of time—where perhaps you could think that some parts of the world were "behind the times"—contemporaneity sees these differences as being parallel, in sync and also related. In the context of EKKM's name, I wouldn't consider the contemporary to have any idiosyncratic meaning, as it is still essentially a readymade institutional combination of words.

LM:

Turning to audience, I'm curious about the cultural ecology of Tallinn and further afield, with

which institutions do you see yourself in dialogue?

ME:

Because the scene is so small, everyone knows almost everyone. There are dialogues, to an extent, or at least conversations on a personal level, amongst most of the venues and museums here. Still, I wouldn't say there's a particular institution that we are in constant dialogue with. There's also not much competition or conflict, but also not really many partnerships or collaborations, though there are helping hands if needed. In that sense, with the recent issues around EKKM's venue, the previous director of the Art Hall, Taaniel Raudsepp, gave a nice and slightly idealist answer when asked in the media about EKKM and why he supports us—he said he does not see us as competitors. The answer clarified that as a cultural institution, our competitors are not other cultural institutions, but rather “uncultured-ness” or the lack of culture.

When all institutions are mostly publicly funded and the attendance numbers are not really that decisive, there are some inevitable conflicts when it comes to sharing our “common” funding sources. But as the visual arts sector becomes more marginalized and significantly less funded when compared to theatre, music, or film, there's also some inherent unity to that end and actual cooperation toward having increasing the sector's budget in general, as opposed to increasing particular institutional budgets with cuts from other similar institutions.

As mentioned, EKKM has been and still is considered to be a counterinstitution in some sense, and we do tend to counter certain approaches or attitudes that we see other institutions or individuals taking on. However, I wouldn't say there are any direct oppositions or any specific “us” versus “them” divisions taking place either, at least not from our perspective. Of course, there are some institutions we respect, some we can't take seriously at all, and I don't think there are any which we would consider exemplary and free from criticism. The latter principle also applies to EKKM, though I'm not sure if this answers your question at all.

LM:

I think your answer resonates with other answers to this question from institutions in the Baltic region. Others have mentioned the fact that there aren't many other institutions with which to align, so they try to focus on their own identities. It's

interesting to see how alignments or non-alignments compose an arts ecology. Perhaps this relates to how audiences perceive EKKM as well. Do you have a specific audience and does this differ from your community?

ME:

I'm not fully aware who exactly constitutes our audience, though we do keep track of attendance numbers, which have continued to grow over time. In recent years, a typical six-week exhibition has had around 2,000 visitors, with seasons totaling between 8,000–10,000, but we don't count openings and most other events. A large percentage of visitors are also tourists or people who searched online for a contemporary art museum and ended up at EKKM, which is another benefit of the name. This year, the attendance will inevitably decrease because of the pandemic.

A significant part of our audience is local professionals and people who, in one way or another, have links to EKKM. Most local artists and curators who are currently active have participated in projects here, and some still help us get by. The history of the social parties held at EKKM has also had its impact. It could be seen as a community, though not at all a homogeneous one, and it was incredible to see the amount and range of support we were given when our lease was terminated. It looked as though a wider cultural scene felt that something of "theirs" was going to be taken away and reacted accordingly. Without them, the city probably wouldn't have considered us relevant enough to negotiate with, nor would we be relevant in the city anyway. It's a form of constructive peer-pressure.

In general, I would say our approach toward our audiences is to simply not prioritize them, though we still aim to host as well as we can. I've mentioned this in other conversations, and it's often misunderstood as not caring or being unprofessional. What I mean is that we prioritize the people we work with: curators, artists, installers, designers and so forth. This is, of course, a conscious and somewhat inevitable choice, as our scale and capabilities don't really allow us not to set these priorities. But this does not mean we don't care for our audiences. We do, as a host, rather than as a service provider. One point of our free admission is also to avoid ending up in a service-relationship with the audience where we treat them as customers with expectations and preferences. By not charging we also don't really have to deliver on any expectations or trim our projects for the widest possible target.

We also don't have an educational program as such, and our sporadic side programs are mainly just talks, tours, and project-specific events, mainly

aimed at professional audiences. But a healthy scene also needs an institution to function more towards itself in this way—"itself" being the scene, of course, not the venue. There are already high functioning institutions that focus perhaps too much on education and outreach, with a mission to teach and bring in new audiences. The institutional landscape needs more variations, especially if the essentials are covered.

LM:

Thus far, we've obliquely referred to the political context in which you're constructing this amorphous institutional identity. You mentioned the far right is growing, but you also have pressures due to your proximity to Russia and the turbulent recent history. I'm curious in what ways this has bearing upon EKKM.

ME:

We're not openly political in this sense, perhaps only as political as our projects are, but I'd say we are politically aware. From a day-to-day perspective, there's not much direct bearing, especially concerning Russia. Still, we are neighbors, there's history, and as a NATO and EU border country, there's obviously some general anxiety and paranoia.

Because there is a far-right party now in the government coalition, with quite a significant base supporting them, it's inevitably a wider and more complex social issue than just party politics. However, these elections have managed to make party politics a daily issue. I'm not sure why—perhaps because they have so far managed to come up with something laughably incompetent almost on a daily basis, the situation just doesn't feel as despairing as it might sound. Nevertheless, they somehow continue rising and falling.

LM:

Looking toward the future, what are you looking forward to, institutionally and curatorially?

ME:

Until late last year I was still looking forward to moving on from EKKM at the end of 2020, as our initial plan was to run it with Johannes for five years, until another rotation of management. Our contracts will be expiring, but

they will probably need to be extended because it seems we'll have to at least continue work with the renovation project, without which we would have to move out of the building in 2022. There are also currently no obvious replacement candidates in sight for us and it would be fairly complicated, but not impossible, to have an open call. There is not much to guarantee and little to comprehensibly pass on, and it has now become one of our aims as well, to use this pause in our public activities for reviewing and restructuring how EKKM operates, and maybe, to an extent, just "institutionalizing" a bit more, and if possible, also changing.

This year our staff has increased by a third, with Evelyn Raudsepp joining us as a creative producer. As of now, there's slightly more than a month to go until we plan to open the first exhibition of the season, which was initially meant to open in April. The venue has not yet been re-audited, but planned repairs are almost done, and after all that, when a new 2-year lease has been signed and we have the season running, we can start to move forward with planning the renovation and considering our options. Personally, I am busy with and looking forward to realizing a project that has been in the making for a while now that will be co-curated by myself, Vanina Saracino, and Lea Vene. It evolved from various ideas examined in a travelling residency we attended in 2018 into an exhibition focusing on the notion of energy and the economy in a more general sense. Georges Bataille's understanding of energy has been one of the influences here and he has also provided us with the title—*Tiger in Space*. After rescheduling EKKM's season it now looks like the exhibition will take place most likely in September, but we'll see!
