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PROFILE | 10 FEB 2017

In Profile: Stefan Kalmár

The new director of London's ICA discusses rebuilding, restructuring and the integrity of culture

BY PAUL TEASDALE

Stefan Kalmár

Paul Teasdale: Stefan, you've been in the job for two months now. What have you focused on so far?

Stefan Kalmár: To fully understand the conditions, the culture of a place, you have to listen to the people who work there. So right at the beginning I spoke to all 37 full time members of staff – in alphabetical order rather than by ranking. That way I got a mental picture of the place. I obviously also looked to the ICA's history.

For me the ICA has always been at its strongest when performance, music, cinema and art have been held in equilibrium. Think of the ICA's talks programme – who hasn't spoken here? From Roland Barthes to Allen Ginsberg, to [Jean-François] Lyotard … that list alone is amazing. At some point, the ICA even used to co-produce films, too. When all those elements worked together, inspired each other, that's when the ICA was at its strongest. For me it's also important to acknowledge what might be considered the institution's 'crisis points' and to understand the causes. Was it the culture, the economy, the working structures, or was it just that the ICA didn't adapt?

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PT: One might see parallels between 2009, with the uncertainty after the financial crash, and the mood now with Brexit and Trump. Do you see an opportunity within the current political climate?

SK: Recently I was reading Michael Kustow's 1966 essay, 'A Task for the ICA'. If you didn't know when it was written, it could've been written today. Kustow was the director of the ICA when it relocated to The Mall in the spring of 1968. He was an outspoken Marxist who had worked in a kibbutz before he left Haifa via boat to Marseille. He later joined Roger Planchon's Brechtian theatre group Théâtre de la Cité, Lyon. In his short text, Kustow writes that he hasn't seen such an existential crisis in society in his lifetime. The same is true for me today. For me the question then and now is: What is the institutional model that can respond to this crisis and lead us out of it? The ICA has all the right tools – a bar, the book shop, a cinema, the galleries, a stage – it is a place that can try to make sense of the complexities of today. A place that can propose an alternative reality and work in a way that in itself shows that a different more just organizational form is possible.

How can we be truly progressive in dealing with today's world, but be equally progressive as an institutional model? That challenge was acute to Kustow in the 1960s, as it is for me today.

LOUIS GINSBERG AND ALLEN GINSBERG

Allen Ginsberg will be reading with his father, Louis Ginsberg, at the ICA on August 22nd at 8 pm. Louis Ginsberg, who is on his first trip to Europe, was born in 1896 and having retired from High School teaching now teaches poetry at Rutgers University. He has published two books of poetry "The Attic of the Past" and "The Everlasting Minute" and his work is represented in the Untermyer Anthologies and other magazines. During the past few years Louis and Allen Ginsberg have given a number of readings together in Boston, New York and other American myriad generations".

Admission will be by ticket only. Tickets are obtainable from the ICA – members and students 5/- non-members 7/6

A listing for a talk at the ICA, London c.1975, featuring Allen Ginsberg and his father, Louis Ginsberg. Courtesy: ICA, London

PT: Do you think those questions and challenges can be answered by an arts institution?

SK: It's worth remembering that the ICA, our ICA, has been the model for many ICAs – it literally invented the format. From the outset, the early days of Roland Penrose, co-founder of the ICA, this meant that it was always a social, politically, outspoken organization that saw cultural production within the socio-political conditions of its time. My job as I see it is to reconnect the ICA to its own historical legacy, and to update it for today.

Someone here in the organization said recently to me: 'Stefan, since you arrived things have changed, you're putting culture first.' It makes you wonder, what else would I put first? This really is the problem with many cultural institutions today: secondary interests have taken over. Of course we act in a field of interdependencies – let's face it, true independence is probably a fiction and always has been. But those secondary interests have distracted many organizations from their original purpose.

PT: Where do you see the main potential for change?

SK: Change has to start on all levels but first we have to listen to the people who work here. There is a projectionist who has worked here since the 1950s. It's quite amazing. He is the ICA's longest serving employee, and that's because I assume he loves what he does and he is also removed from the bureaucratic apparatus. It's fascinating and inspiring to talk to him about the culture of this place. In many ways you should be interviewing him!

Everybody joins the ICA with some sense of idealism because of its amazing with amnesia. You know nothing about the ICA's past, and you work through this building. What would you think? What would you see? It's great to raise awareness of what we have done, but it's only interesting when it serves our present. Let's not fetishize our own past, we are not here to be a museum to our own history.

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PT: As a German who has lived and worked in Germany, London and New York, you are in a rather unique position in relation to Brexit and the rise of Trump. How does that inflect or influence the way you would like the ICA to respond to those events?

SK: How do we relate to discussions of Europe? How was it possible that Trump and Brexit could happen with organizations like the ICA around? Put it in another way, how was it that nobody working in the cultural field was able to predict it, let alone prevent it? The real question might be when do we ever engage with people who don't work within our culture? Maybe we need to admit to ourselves that it seems an inherent structural problem that culture in the 21st century is largely only produced for the people who actually work in culture. Can the ICA be an organization that revitalizes the belief of civic responsibility in cultural institutions, but also of progress within society? I think that we have the right conditions to make a strong case for that.

'Bernadette Corporation: 200 Wasted Years', 2013, curated by Stefan Kalmár, exhibition view, ICA, London. Photograph: Mark Blower

PT: So, you see the role of the ICA as fulfilling a social responsibility as well as an artistic one?

SK: We certainly have a social-political responsibility, yes. It can be a format of change that challenge the status quo, but it needs to go beyond that. We must try to create an organizational structure that not only disclaims its contradictions but actively tries to overcome them.

PT: What is the place of an ICA in a city like London now? Is your location on The Mall a help or a hindrance?

SK: The good thing about our location on The Mall is it can hardly be gentrified can it? There is value to being here. In symbolic terms, we can act as a foil to power, to the political institutions surrounding us.

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Our role today has obviously changed. Just as the conditions for students has changed, for example. Today you have to ask the question, can people afford to study art, not just in London but anywhere? Future generations have become disenfranchised from the access to study art, literature or film. Nobody seems to understand that for society to progress, culture is as important as, say, Biochemistry.

cementing the conditions we live in. But then there are others, like me, who still believe there is a place, indeed a need, for art; but we need to give it back its integrity. We have to believe that it is possible for an institution to be utopian and visionary because if we can't be, who can?

For me the ICA is not a space it's a place; not an institution but an organization.

PT: In terms of programming, what are your ambitions?

For me the ICA should be a place that produces new ideas; new ways of thinking, and therefore my job is to produce new works, whether that is music, theatre, films, exhibitions, talks, architecture – not 'just' exhibitions. That's the challenge to try to create conditions where we'll be able to invest more funds to make the ICA a producing organization again. For me the ICA is not a space it's a place; not an institution but an organization.

The biggest responsibility about running such an organization is that you're in a position to create the place that you would love to go to. Right now I know what I'm missing: an organization that takes risks, that expresses its opinion and that challenges the status quo. Even if we might hold different viewpoints, we are joined in a mutual desire to look for progress. Where can you find that in London these days?

A task for the ICA
a first statement by Michael Kustow

Michael Kustow, 'A task for the ICA: a first statement', 1966

PT: How do you view the institutional landscape in London?

SK: There used to be a time when museum directors would teach collectors. Now it seems it's the collectors lecturing museum directors. Essentially, you're not dealing with curators anymore, you're dealing with directors of development, who are also 'directing' the exhibition programme.

It has all become a bit like Formula One. The director is the driver: when you move to a different institution you take your sponsors and patrons with you. This is how the whole economy works and nobody steps outside of the mess and asks: What are we doing and whom are we doing this for? At the ICA, I know whom we're doing it for: artists.

Unlike other organizations, our prime concern should be how we advance the discourse surrounding, contemporary culture and art. It won't appeal to everybody and nor should it have to. Our mission is to inspire. To inspire artists, inspire other institutions, inspire bureaucrats, inspire change. Our job is not just to show new things. Our job is to think differently and foster new ways of doing things.

PT: Are there any plans to redevelop the building?

SK: Yes we are working on some major renovation plans. The potential is tremendous. The building has experienced many subdivisions and not been renovated since 1968, that's almost 50 years. So, it needs care, and it will get it.

But we all also have much larger issues to be concerned with other than the size and shape of our space. 'Alternative facts', for example. We are up in light of all this, a discussion about architecture seems small, but we do need to also have the right space for dissent.

PT: So you see potential in these times?

SK: It's explosive, but there is potential. It's scary because the Trump inauguration looked like North Korea to me. As if we all woke up to the wrong channel. The days after, with the protests that took place, I saw the New York that I know and love. It was like observing two different countries, two different realities folded into one.

The main question that will keep us busy for a very long time, not just here at the ICA but in the cultural field in general, is what does this mean for us? How do we translate, say, a magnificent Rauschenberg exhibition to make it relevant to current political conditions? The integrity of culture, the possibilities of culture, in relation to this situation is greater than ever.

Has a museum ever improved the lives of those living in a council estate right next to it? Maybe we need to actually start transforming the economic conditions – moving beyond just pointing at them. We need to provide greater access to education. That's something I'm currently thinking about: How the ICA, can assist those disenfranchised by current political conditions.

Stefan Kalmár became director of the ICA, London, in November 2016. Prior to which he was director of Artists Space, New York (2009–16); director of Kunstverein Munich (2004–09); director of the Institute of Visual Culture in Cambridge (2000–04), and artistic director at Cubitt Gallery, London (1997–99).

Helen Johnson 'Warm Tea' and Sonia Boyce 'We move in her way' at the ICA, run until 16 April.

PAUL TEASDALE
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