

When installation comes to life

Alexander Reichstein is a Moscow born and educated graphic artist and book illustrator. He grew up in a culture where books were "sacred artifacts". This traces deep back into the culture of Old Russia, while it should be recalled that in the later Soviet Union books were not to be taken for granted. Reichstein doesn't exactly strike you as Russian, and he himself remarks with some amusement that not until he moved to Finland did he become a "proper Russian". He has always perceived himself as Western European and even the books he illustrated in his Moscow days were mainly European classics, which the "young intellectual approached with postmodernist complexity and playfulness".

Then the economy collapsed, the recession hit, work as illustration became scarce and Reichstein moved as his wife's "luggage" to Finland, where the intellectual turned childish. There was a recession in Finland as well, although of slightly different nature, and we have it to thank for the birth of a new kind of installation artist. Reichstein started to work with children at the Finnish-Russian Kalinka child care centre, converting different fantasies into physical form. Later he realized that he had unknowingly been applying the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching. He was the "crazy uncle" the legendary Reggio teacher, Loris Malaguzzi, believed every child should have. According to Malaguzzi, "children have a hundred languages and want to use them all".

Reichstein continued his work at the Voipaala Children's Cultural Centre in the town of Valkeakoski. He looks upon Voipaala as his "university" and the centre's director at that time, Maria Laukka, as his "professor". Ever since, Reichstein has carried out various exhibition projects and installations in Finland and abroad - including Russia; for both children and adults.

The postmodern breeding ground has increased our awareness of metalevels. Reichstein does not regard himself as a maker of children's culture but cunningly more as an artist who brings his installations to life with the help of children - for adults to also enjoy. Thus an exhibition created for a museum context can transform into an ever changing performance.

Reichstein is interested in basics: how "a plant grows, how a person gets to be big, how a bird hatches from an egg, how the world goes round...".

And as for basics, attitude may be of more interest than values: continuous absence of prejudice, continuous curiosity, openness and courage. And participation: a child explores, bites and touches things. This is more to Reichstein's liking, too, than taking notes.

When you are unprejudiced enough, you can even approach such a thing as love-making with the questioning and experimenting mind of a child. Many are the ways in which two forms can become one!

Otso Kantokorpi

Translation: Susan Heiskanen