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Wall art by Eli Elysee on the side of a Marijampolė clinic comments on overmedication with pills. Photo Laima Vincė

MALONNY 2022 How Art Transformed a City



Lithuania's First Lady Diana Nausėdienė met with Malonny founder, artist Ray Bartkus in Marijampolė this summer. Photo Robertas Dačkus

By Laima Vincė

Ten years ago, two couples met in Jamaica to spend their vacation together. New York-based Lithuanian-born artist **Ray Bartkus** and his wife, Ina, a fashion designer, flew from New York to Jamaica, while Algirdas Kumža, signatory of Lithuania's Declaration of Independence, and his wife, Toma, and their two daughters, flew from Lithuania to meet them. Even while relaxing on an island paradise, these four Lithuanians could not stop discussing and worrying about Lithuania's transformation from a post-soviet state to a fully independent Western-oriented European country. Algirdas shared his concerns over the small provincial city of Marijampolė, a city that seemed to have been left behind in the dust of the fast-paced progress that had engulfed Lithuania's three major cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda.

After graduating from the Art Academy of Vilnius, artist Ray Bartkus, who had spent most of his life working as an illustrator and painter in New York, suggested that wall art could revitalize the city, especially artwork that carried social meaning and hope. That was how MaLonNY – Marijampolė – London – New York was born.

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The Baltic and Ukrainian Way!

MONIKA KUNGIENĖ



Representatives of the Lithuanian Alliance of America and the Lithuanian National Foundation Laima Mihailovich, Dr. Giedrė Kumpikas, and Paulius Debesis join the Baltic and Ukrainian Way demonstration in New York. Photos by Jurgita Bilvaišienė



From right: Mrs. Paulauskienė; Mindaugas Baršys, Chief of the Kaunas Police; and Arūnas Paulauskas, Deputy Commissioner General of the Lithuanian Police, joined New Yorkers demonstrating against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

On August 28, Lithuanians and Ukrainians in Brooklyn, New York, joined hands in a chain of unity. It stretched three city blocks from the Annunciation Lithuanian R. C. Church to the Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church. The manifestation recalled the Baltic Way, which united Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians in a human chain from Vilnius

to Tallinn on August 23, 1989. It was then a bold expression of defiance against the Soviet occupation and a declaration of hope that tyranny will be vanquished. The symbolic action in Brooklyn echoed local Lithuanian solidarity with their Ukrainian neighbors, who are heroically resisting Putin's war of attrition.

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Gražina Michnevičiūtė, Cultural Attache at the Consulate General of the Republic of Lithuania in New York, and Laima Vincė at Ray Bartkus's Bob Dylan wall.



Ray Bartkus, Astronaut wall, Marijampolė.

All photos by Laima Vincė

How Art Transformed a City: MaLonNY 2022



Eli Elysee, "George and The King of Ethiopia"

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The following summer Ray Bartkus and a team of artists he brought over with him from New York were up on scaffolds painting and transforming the city's neglected gray walls into bright, magnificent interactive social statements.

This year marks the 9th Malonny Artist Symposium. Even during the pandemic, Malonny continued its mission with Ray Bartkus sending detailed sketches and instructions to volunteers in Marijampolė, who painted the murals with the artist overseeing their progress from a distance with the help of internet connectivity that kept us all going during the pandemic.

This year I had the pleasure of attending the opening night program, meeting this year's featured artists, Ray Bartkus, Mike Estabrook, Vandana Jain, and the London architect Paul Anthony Campbell, whose role is to oversee urban planning and conceptual aspects of Malonny.

While the artists create the concept and sketches for the murals based on available walls in the city offered to them by the local city council, it is local volunteers who put in the hours in the hot sun, up on scaffolding bringing the artist's vision to life. Gratitude for the volunteers could not have been expressed enough by Ray Bartkus, Marijampolė Mayor Povilas Isoda, and the other dignitaries who delivered opening speeches. The relationship between the artwork and the city is integral to this project. It is not the goal of the artists to paint their vision onto a wall and then leave but to create a work of

social art that interacts with the daily lives of the city's residents and sparks both joy and discussion.

Isoda stressed this concept in his speech: "This symposium is not just about beautiful colorful artwork painted on our walls but is about how art and culture are a universal language that all of may use to communicate with each other. This is the ninth year already that art speaks out in an especially loud and clear voice in Marijampolė. The fact that the organizers manage to create ever more impressive performances and gift our city not only their artwork, but their positive emotions, is invaluable. I hope that their unique and original ideas continue to influence our city for years to come."

The description of the opening night performance as impressive is an understatement. That evening's improvisational jazz concert, based on the composition "Nojo Airlines" by Lithuanian jazz musician Dalius Naujokaitis, was performed by 40 musicians who'd traveled to Marijampolė from New York, Berlin, and various regions of Lithuania. Conducted and led by Dalius Naujokaitis and American saxophone player Jonathan Haffner, the cacophony of sound and rhythm and the improvisational light show was beyond impressive – it was phenomenal. Part of what made this concert unique was that it was not held in a concert hall but outdoors at a usually busy traffic circle. The musicians were situated in the pedestrian overpass above the improvised stage below on the highway. Using Butch Morris's conducting signals, a musical conver-



Ray Bartkus, "Floating World" (2015) in Marijampolė

sation took place between the 40 musicians above and Naujokaitis on drums and Haffner on saxophone below. New York light designer Kacper Dolatowski created a fantastic spectacle of lights illuminating the concrete walls beside the highway and the pedestrian bridge above.

I admit that at first, I was baffled when I arrived in Marijampolė and asked for directions to the concert and was told, "Go to the intersection of Ged-

iminas, Geležinkėlis, and Stotis streets."

At dinner after the show, I sat in conversation with New York artists Vandana Jain and Mike Estabrook, who had flown in that day. Both stressed how important it was for them to work with the local community and create art that gave to the community in unexpected ways. Their humility and grace are humbling.

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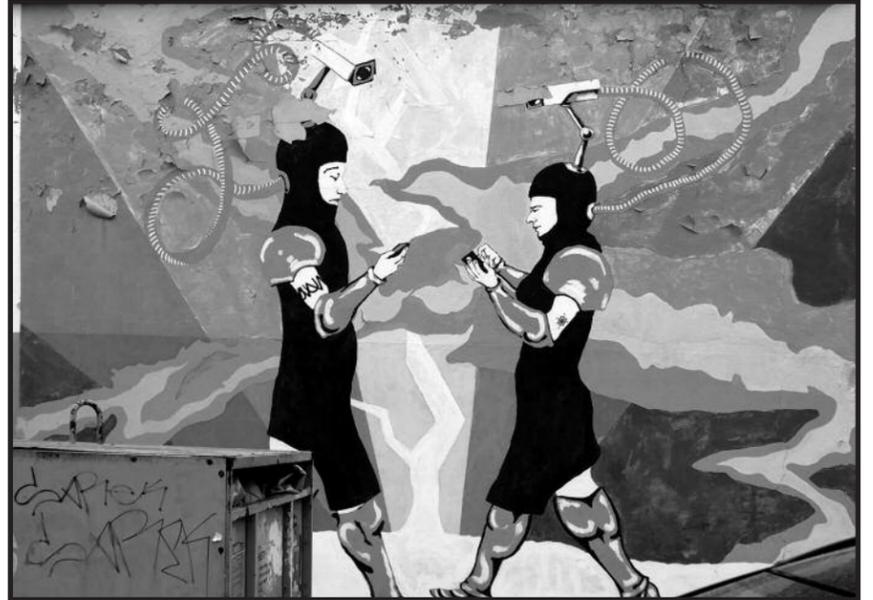
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How Art Transformed a City: MaLonNY 2022



Jurgita helped paint this wall during the pandemic with directions sent from the U.S. by Ray Bartkus. All photos by Laima Vincė



Mike Estabrook, "Seeing Life Through Cameras," Marijampolė.

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The following day, Gražina Michnevičiūtė, Cultural Attaché of the Consulate General of Lithuania in New York, and I met with Jurgita, a local volunteer and tour guide, who took us on a walking tour of almost all of the 34 murals that have been painted in Marijampolė over the years since the festival began.

We began by viewing two murals on opposite walls in the P. Butlerienė Cat Courtyard. Perhaps this 17th-century noblewoman who loved cats may now be remembered as a "crazy cat lady" inspiring cat sculptures and murals throughout Marijampolė, but in fact, Pranciška Ščiukaitė Butlerienė (1693 –

made Marijampolė a touristic destination."

We walked over the mural, "The Bus Stop" (2017), where Gražina and I posed for a photo beside Bob Dylan on a motorcycle and Leonard Cohen waiting for the bus to Vilkaviškis. This mural honors the roots that these two famous Litvak performers have in Lithuania. Ray Bartkus, the author of this mural, emphasizes that Leonard Cohen's family came from Marijampolė. Thus, the mural commemorates a type of homecoming.

It's not possible to elaborate on each of the murals here, but I will highlight a few to give a sense of the breadth of themes the Malonny wall art seeks to embrace.

Located near the Maxima shopping plaza, American artist Mike Estabrook's triptych "Cave Wall Art" (2015) draws our attention to how iPhones have changed our perception: We no longer interact with the world directly but negotiate the world as though we were viewing it through a camera attached to our head.

Around the corner, there is perhaps one of the most controversial murals – controversial because it sparks weekly debates on Sunday mornings among older Marijampolė residents as they leave Mass at the Basilica close by. "Saint George

and the King of Ethiopia" (2016) by American artist Eli Elysee is a true merging of overlapping colors and cultures. Marijampolė's coat of arms is Saint George slaying the dragon, symbolizing good defeating evil.

This symbol in the mural ties Lithuania to Jamaica and Ethiopia by replacing a Lithuanian Saint George with Rastafarian Bob Marley on horseback. The Rastafarians symbolize their movement with the same colors as the Lithuanian flag – yellow, green, and red. However, the colors are inverted. This mural challenges local people to see unity and connection between cultures on opposite sides of the globe.

Lithuanian artist Ignas Viewerys's mural "Do What is Not Allowed"

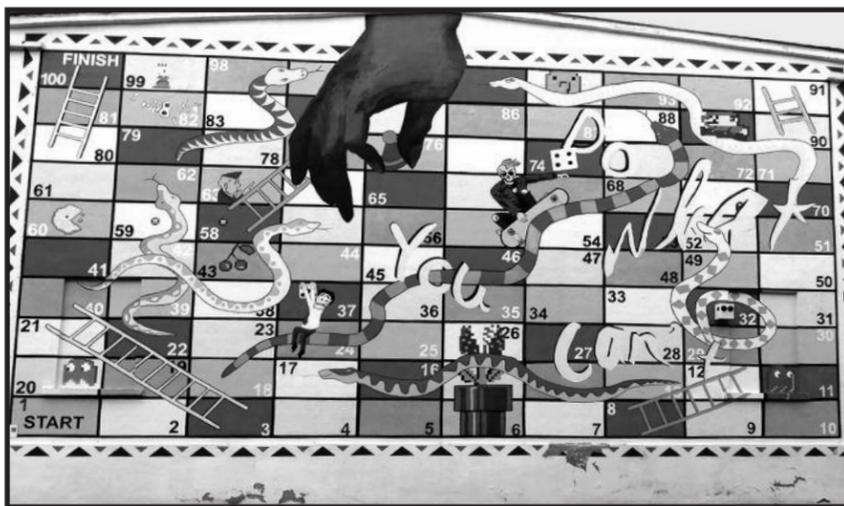
(2018) depicts the children's game "Shoots and Ladders." This is a statement about choice; however, the skeleton seemingly making the wrong choices is advancing faster than the person seemingly making the right choices! Painted onto the side of the local high school, this mural invites young people to ponder the weight of their own decisions.

A few blocks away, the mural "Pills" (2019) by American artist Eli Elysee makes a statement about modern man's overdependence on pills. Ironically, the mural is painted on one of the outer walls of the city clinic.

During the pandemic, the world stood still. Lithuanians, having spent half a century cut off from the world by the Iron Curtain, embrace the freedom of travel. People in Lithuania were especially frustrated by the travel restrictions of the pandemic. Jurgita proudly posed for a photo beside the mural she painted, Ray Bartkus's "Greece" (2020). Directed by the artist from across the world over a computer screen, a local team painted this mural in the summer of 2020 when Covid-19 was raging and vaccines were still not widely available. The Greek backdrop gave people the opportunity to picnic, take photos, and feel as though they'd left Lithuania for someplace exotic that summer of the lockdown.

Perhaps one of the most impressive of Bartkus's murals is "Weightlessness" (2021), a powerful statement on the ravages of Covid-19, global warming, war, and Elon Musk's ego-driven flight into the cosmos.

This year's mural theme is "Under the Bridge." As I write, the artists and the volunteers are putting the final brushstrokes on three murals located under bridges in Marijampolė. I will say no more but invite all of you to come and visit this beautiful city of wall art and excitement for the future. To see them all, you must plan your own trip to Marijampolė!



Shoots and Ladders Wall.

1769), wife of nobleman Morkus Antonijus Butleris, is responsible for bringing the Marian order of monks to Marijampolė (hence the name – city (polis) of Marians) and establishing a monastery and school, and funding and organizing the construction of the Basilica of Saint Michael the Archangel. According to our guide, Butlerienė disappeared one day, riding off in her carriage, never to be seen or heard from again.

Today her memory is playfully marked by American artist Meg Regelous's "Cat Wall" (2017). Opposite the cat wall, there is a wall of vibrant blue with white birds swooping down, creating the feeling when you stand close to the wall that the flock is descending upon you. "The Flock" (2018) by Will Teater is a favorite location for wedding photographs, according to our guide.

Jurgita stressed, "In the early years, the older residents did not understand the murals. They grumbled about the paintings on the walls, but over the years all the residents of Marijampolė have come to identify our city with these beautiful murals. Now people travel from all over to see the murals, take photos beside them, spend the weekend in our hotel so that they may see them all. These murals have



Opening night of Malonny 2022 was an improvisational jazz concert and light show held outdoors at a usually busy traffic circle.