

**kalle hamm, dzamil kamanger, jyri pitkänen**

republicart-interview on *con-fusion food* and *free palms* (*re:public*)

riga | 08 09 2003

**raimund minichbauer:** you are currently finishing preparations for two projects, which are part of *re:public*. both projects will take place in local suburban pubs: the cooking project *con-fusion food* at lunchtime, and the audiovisual event *free palms* in the evenings. *con-fusion food* is part of the long-term project *pizzeria babylon* – how did this project emerge and how has it developed since?

**kalle hamm:** dzamil and i met at the end of the 1990ies - we were both working in a suburban pizzeria and kebab place. the place was owned by an iranean refugee, and we were moonlighting - i was a student, and dzamil as a refugee couldn't get a legal job. i studied art and dzamil was very interested in art, but in finland he hadn't done anything, he didn't have any kind of possibilities, not the material circumstances, no studio, etc. the project started like a joke, from talking about this kind of concept of a pizzeria. since we are having an ongoing project. *con-fusion food* here in riga is the third part of *pizzeria babylon*, but the parts have their own logic and are independent of each other. *pizzeria babylon* is more like a framework for working together. we have done many different things, just sometimes we have an exhibition and we put it under some theme, like *pizzeria babylon II - home delivery*<sup>1</sup>: at that time, dzamil's son was in iran, and dzamil tried to arrange that the son can come back to his father, to finland. that was the main idea of this 'home delivery', not only the very concrete meaning. i was documenting and i drew some pizza boxes and things like that. there was this abstract theme, but it was somehow joined by this 'pizzeria thinking'.

the third part here in riga is the project that is most drawn to cooking and food. the main topic is the meeting of cultures and questions of 'originality' and 'authenticity.' cooking techniques - different cultures are meeting here, and they borrow and learn from each other. there is cultural exchange happening, and it is very difficult to find something like an 'original.' almost every country's people claim: this meal is something that is exactly from our country, but when you research a bit closer, you see that this element comes from here and that element comes from there, and it is very difficult to find origins for the dishes and cooking techniques, because things have been invented in different places at the same time.

the recipes we use are mostly from dzamil. he has combined - not on purpose, it just happened - things like middle east pizza mixed with finish pizza. it is a question of which ingredients you can buy and what kind of cookware you have to use. when we were in iran last summer, i saw these things and they are totally different, and it became very clear, how difficult it is to even try to do this middle east food here. it gets confused with finish techniques and ingredients - it is not finish and it is not middle east, but it is something new, some hybrid, it is something totally new and in that way unique. - i do not mean this in the way like culinary art, this concept of fusion food, where people try to create new tastes from combining techniques of different cultures, like italian and thai, very trendy. we are interested in home food, people's everyday food. i don't want to be involved anyhow in these culinastic trends.

**raimund minichbauer:** more like 'found recipes?'

**kalle hamm:** yes, i started to see these differences, and also dzamil saying: "i tried to make this but it is not happening like that, like my mother was doing it in iran." and then we started to analyse these recipes, and we were getting this idea, how much actually we are eating this food and we don't realise what is the story behind it. we collected these recipes, we analysed them and then we created this menu list. there are eight meals, like here in the *re:public* program booklet the vegetarian risotto. there is this world map and all the ingredients we need for this meal are displayed in the area, where they come from: sunflower oil is coming from that area, tomato and chilli is coming from this area, potatoes is here, rice, onion, coriander etc. there are also little stories about this. the history of many spices is also the history of european colonialism, actually

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.galleriaheino.fi/hamm\\_en.htm](http://www.galleriaheino.fi/hamm_en.htm)

spices was one reason, why europeans started to find other continents. so this question of origins of these ingredients is also quite political.

**raimund minichbauer:** the project takes place in two cafes in suburbs here in riga. who is the 'target group' - people who just drop in and could maybe not even realize that there is an art project happening?

**kalle hamm:** yes, it is for people in that areas. there are also flyers to promote it, but mainly it is for people who just pop in. and we don't want to make any financial profit of it, the prices will be just what we have spent. i think that people will notice that it is an art project - maybe they will not notice the posters, but they will notice the menu, it doesn't look like an ordinary menu, it is quite big and colourful.

**raimund minichbauer:** the political implications you mentioned, in which way are they being communicated?

**kalle hamm:** the main theme of the whole *pizzeria babylon* project is: how does it feel to be a refugee in finland? so there are political implications, but we don't want to underline this. it is more like: "ok., sit down, order some food, and maybe you can read a little bit this menu." and maybe he or she starts to think about what has happened in the world... we don't give any solutions, we want to make people think by their own. of course it is political, and also, after the terrorist attacks in new york, everything which is linked with muslim countries has been somehow politicised.

**raimund minichbauer:** how did this change the project?

**kalle hamm:** it changed very much - not our way of working, but it changed the way in which the audience looks at it, and interprets it. in this way it has been politicised. i don't mind it, but i never underline it so much. because i want it to be easy to find, easy to feel it, not too complicated and not too big a message. i am more interested in the experience - like i told, the whole *pizzeria babylon* project is the form where refugee people can give his or her voice. they cannot speak our language, the language is so difficult, but the images are a possibility to say how does it feel.

**raimund minichbauer:** you travelled to iran in the course of the project last summer?

**kalle hamm:** it was not defined as part of the project, but of course everything you do is linked to the project. the setting of *pizzeria babylon* has been that i am a native in finland and dzamil is a refugee, and we had planned for a long time to change that, so that i am in his home country and to get to experience this feeling as a foreigner in the other country with a totally different culture, and he is feeling home. and i took some photographs and video, and was getting to know the music. there will be some material in the *free palms* evenings.

**raimund minichbauer:** what did you learn about the current situation in iran?

**dzamil kamanger:** iran right now is not like for example twenty years ago. there has been change. but i can say again, right now it is not like ten years ago. again it changed. some 25 years ago, there was the shah time, and after the shah was gone with the islamic republic everything changed. there was not any restaurant, any cafe... no alcohol, 'no' to many things. the situation was so rigid, especially the young people felt that they could not be in any way free. but within the last five or six years there has been some change.

**kalle hamm:** but i think it is sometimes like one step in one direction and then two steps in the other direction. so maybe there is some opening happening, but it still is really slow. and when i understood correctly what people told me, it was the problem of the shah time, that he tried to westernize the country too fast, and this brought this counter-reaction that the very hardliner things could get so popular.

**dzamil kamanger:** the shah said that within five or six years he was going to make iran like sweden, the second sweden, with all the freedom. but the people, they were muslims of course, they didn't like this idea, they didn't want this kind of freedom.

i had been missing iran more or less for twenty years. i was a prisoner of war for ten years after the iraq-iran war, then i got back to iran for almost one year and then i got out of iran. when i

went over there now, for me it was nice, i had been missing this country and these people. but when i talked to people, they don't like the situation right now, they want everything to be changed.

**kalle hamm:** one of my projects was related to isabella bird. she was a writer and traveller. more than one hundred years ago, in 1893, she travelled to kurdistan. she wrote two very big books about this, with nice drawings. one project for me was to follow her footsteps and to photograph the same places where she had been, and i interviewed people, how they deal with isabella's thoughts about themselves. what i found very clearly, was, that in the countryside, in the mountains, it doesn't matter, if the shah is in power or the ayatollah.

**dzamil kamanger:** no, it doesn't matter.

**kalle hamm:** the gap between the ordinary people and the ruling elite is enormous. and the elites and the ayatollahs use all the money out of them. and it has been like that for hundreds of years. the power-relations haven't changed a lot in the long period.

**raimund minichbauer:** as one part of *pizzeria babylon* that happened before *re:public*, there was a project in southern spain...

**kalle hamm:** we planned to go there together, but then dzamil got a visa and went to iran, and so i did the project on my own. andalusia - the morisque culture, the border to north africa. i drew little portraits of illegal refugees from northern africa, a series of 130 portraits. and i also had a project to photograph the trespasses of europe, like also bosphorus in istanbul or aran islands in ireland, and i have also photographed finlands border, where refugees try to get into europe. this has been a very long-term project, because it is expensive to travel. but now it is finished.

**raimund minichbauer:** *free palms* are audiovisual events that take place in the evenings, in the same suburban pubs here in riga. you did this project in finland before. how did the project come about?

**jury pitkänen:** some one and a half years ago i got to know kalle and dzamil a bit closer. we had many things in common, because i had also worked with refugees during a longer stay in slovenia, mainly refugees from former yugoslavia and the balkans. i went around whole slovenia to refugee camps and immigrant centres. i did interviews and took pictures. for more than a half year i was actually living with them, more or less every day i went to one of these places, listening to the stories of the people there. i published a book about it, mostly photography, which is called *blue book*.

*free palms* developed from small pieces of bar-talks between the three of us. we were discussing how we could bring some different music to the 'normal' audience, who normally only listen euro-pop and things like that.

**kalle hamm:** at the time when we started this project, i was living in lahti, a medium-sized city hundred kilometres from helsinki. in lahti it is really bad with racism, there is very open racism. we wanted to provide a possibility to get to know other cultural expressions, and we thought that music might be a very good way because it is easy to adapt.

**jury pitkänen:** the first evenings took place in a finish bar which was owned by a croat.

**kalle hamm:** actually, there were not many refugees coming. we wanted to play the music for them in a finish bar, but these suburban bars are of a very racist attitude, and finish people are very aggressive, when they are drunk. but we got some contact. it was not easy. we had six nights, the local customers started to like it, but first they were really openly against it.

**jury pitkänen:** and when the whole series of these happenings was over, they started to ask: "when are you going to arrange a new party?" and they started really to feel in that music - arab music and eastern european music, which has many influences from arabian music.

**kalle hamm:** we had some little activities for the customers. like we just left papers and pens on the table, and we had this kind of puzzles, so people can a little bit do something. we also had videos from the countries which we projected on the wall. giving a voice, showing the country and people's everyday lives, completely different from the cnn-propaganda.

**raimund minichbauer:** videos from your trips?

**kyri pitkänen:** experiences of the areas we are showing.

**kalle hamm:** for example here in riga we are going to have a video from iran.

**kyri pitkänen:** and i have been working with balkan people, who are living in lahti, for the video; so there will be some portraits.

**raimund minichbauer:** what is the style/aesthetics of these videos?

**kalle hamm:** my video is a road movie, landscape, people's everyday life. no text, it is not like a movie but video for a bar, with music...

**kyri pitkänen:** mine is more like a hypnotic portrait from these people from balkans.

**raimund minichbauer:** what is the situation in lahti where the project was originally conceptualised and created?

**kyri pitkänen:** lahti is not a centre for refugees, there are only a few refugees living with their families.

**kalle hamm:** they are really isolated.

**kyri pitkänen:** there are three or four cities in finland where there are more refugees, but not in lahti. those few families are just with themselves.

**dzamil kamanger:** lahti is a relatively small city, i think that is why only few refugee families live there. most of them cannot live in a small city. many people cannot get jobs, and in a small city, they can just stay at home, because there is nothing else. when i came to finland, they sent me to a small city with 10,000 inhabitants. it was so difficult there. for me it was so small, i couldn't go on sitting at home everyday. i have to go to a restaurant, but how many times i have to go there? i can't go to the restaurant every day - always restaurant, restaurant, restaurant. it is much better to live in a big city like helsinki, there are many places, where i can spend my time, i can go out, go shopping, i can visit many places.

**kalle hamm:** we wanted to somehow open the situation, but as i told, they didn't really come because of this restaurant culture in finland.

**kyri pitkänen:** but because the owner of the bar is a croat, i think people from the balkans living in lahti, they came over to see what happened. and there were also arabian nights events and so, and they came to see what is going on.

**kalle hamm:** it was a try. and at the end many people were coming...

**kyri pitkänen:** and it was a success, it became a cult in lahti.

**raimund minichbauer:** how did the project transfer to riga?

**kalle hamm:** we also wanted to find out about refugee people here in riga. but there are not so many, not that scale as in finland. and then we just thought, we could play the music for the local suburban people. i was here in spring and found that people in these suburban areas have been living quite isolated lives, they don't know for example about different music styles like arabic music. so the project intervenes in that situation. and we also invited local djs and vjs to come to these suburban areas.

**raimund minichbauer:** thank you very much!

**current exhibition by kalle hamm & dzamil kamanger  
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