

Johannes Saar

Kaljo Põllu

[Translated from Estonian by Liina Viires]

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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In an earlier article (Peremehe Hääl, "Postimees", April 26, 1994) I briefly outlined the cultural phenomenon characterizing the creative careers of many of the artists of Kaljo Põllu's generation, which is that many of those artists who appeared on the scene during the "thaw period" went through similar creative scenarios. Olav Maran, Aili Vint, Tõnis Vint, Malle Leis, and, of course, Kaljo Põllu himself are valuable sources of material for the art historian who is looking to the past for the ideals of different decades. Different trends appear in the works of these artists in such distinct temporal succession that one can actually speak of clearly definable epochs and of moments of fracture between them. This is a phenomenon common to many artists, and we see here one of the most characteristic transformations of the whole of that period of Estonian art. The discovery of these peculiarities also provided the idea for the above-mentioned article: to apply Boris Groys' theories of alternating cultural consciousness to the history of Estonian art. The following essay expands and develops this attempt further.

As I have already mentioned, the art of Kaljo Põllu contains fractures representative of the period. The storms and stresses of his youth broke out at a time when pop and op art, among others, were acquiring a firm hold as dominant trends in the West. It is only natural that, in spite of the meagre possibilities of the "thaw period", the young and defiant body of Estonian artists should endeavour to accompany this development. Kaljo Põllu, who after graduating from Tallinn Art Institute in 1962 and proceeding to work as the head of the Art Studio at Tartu University, turned within a few years into one of the spiritual leaders of such attempts. The art group "Visarid", functioning under the auspices of the Art Studio from 1967 to 1972, was introducing contemporary art literature from the West into local art life. They translated and promoted the ideas found in this material in the

group's collection of translations, and also practiced the respective tendencies themselves. In the period 1967-1972 the group held seven exhibitions in the café of Tartu University, their influence on local art life can hardly be overestimated. Kaljo Pöllu's works from this period unquestionably belong to the "gold reserve" of 1960s' Estonian pop art. His art comprised almost all the principal trends of innovative Estonian art of the time, thus becoming something of a landmark in the art situation of the day. And for the art historian it still is.

It was a peculiarity of Kaljo Pöllu and the whole of Estonian pop art of the time to be somewhat restrained in their development of the ideas of pop art. His attitude is characterized by the synthesis of the elements of pop art and pictorial values, their juxtaposition, analysis and contrast. On occasions one could even employ the term "picturesque pop art" when speaking of him, if it weren't too paradoxical. For we can often see in one and the same painting discernible pictorial brushwork together with the "dull" planar splotches of colour typical of pop art. The oil painting "Sorrow" (1967) is a good example of this paradoxical symbiosis. In this picture we can see an illusionary picture-space - a landscape with the appropriate depth of perspective; and also, the picture-plane - the screen between the viewer and the picture-space. With the neutrality and truthfulness characteristic of pop art, the latter depicts a vinyl record and black and white sketches of human hands engaged in different activities. Technical heterogeneity is at the same time only a means for organizing pictorial intrigues and conflicts. The scenery, the record and the hand motifs do not obey the internal logic of the space - although they are in the same picture, they are still on different dimensions. One space tries to create an illusion of reality, the other emphasizes the illusiveness, the duplicity of this reality. This Magritte-like legerdemain is executed with charming simplicity in the painting "Three Flowers" (1967). Three red tulips in a vase standing in front of a landscape painting painted into the picture. Common prejudice regards the flowers in front of the painting as more "real" than the image of the landscape painting that has been painted into the picture. The fact that both are painted with the same oil colours is dismissed. Here, the intrigue of the subject matter mocks the tautology essential to art, something only pop art dared to declare openly - any picture depicts only itself and nothing else. Resemblance to reality is ascribed to a picture or a style only by agreement, often for the purpose of stylistic integrity. The great truth of pop culture - that culture is a planar picture-screen which completely surrounds us - is quite clearly apprehensible in these works by Pöllu.

Pop culture was and is a complex phenomenon, and the corresponding artistic trend also has several interrelated aspects. The study of Pöllu's illusionary picture-space sometimes takes him very close to Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip style ("Two ideas", 1967; "Greeting", 1972). Pure and bright colours, rigidly and sharply outlined blotches of colour, figures and features sketched with lapidary simplicity. Indeed, the image lacks only Lichtenstein's rough screen process. But the list of Pöllu's sources of inspiration is not yet exhausted. The optical experiments of Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely apparently prompted the birth of works such as "Up and Down" (1969), "Op. -Light Nr. 1" (1967), "Op. Nr. 10" and others. Duchamp's passion for deconstructing the dividing line between life and art is not unknown to Pöllu either ("Increase in Population", 1967). All the technical fireworks of pop art - ready-made, assemblage, collage, etc. - were at that time for Kaljo Pöllu a vitally and artistically activating force which he absorbed by post from the West, and reproduced in his turn in symbiosis with the experience of Estonian art.

Pöllu was not alone in his pursuits. The group "Visarid" had gathered around him and included, among others, R. Tammik, P. Urbla, E. Tegova and J. Olep. The group added verve, volume and intensity to events. During the period 1967-1972 they went through the whole vocabulary of op and pop art, mastered it and employed it lavishly in their own works, and all with remarkable speed. "Visarid", along with other similar art groups, became a phenomenon in the history of Estonian art, standing out in open demonstration of its innovative disposition towards the West. However, it all came to an abrupt end at the beginning of the 1970s, when a far-reaching and essentially new course was imposed on society, which also completely reshaped the image of Estonian art. We should not fail to mention the phase of hyperrealist slide-painting in the works of some artists (R. Tammik, A. Keskküla, J. Elken, and others), which, on the one hand, seemed to expand the artistic creed of pop culture, while on the other hand, as I hope to show here, it paved the way for the transition to a fundamentally different artistic consciousness. The fact remains that by the mid-1970s Kaljo Pöllu had become absolutely engrossed in investigating the Finno-Ugrian ethnographic heritage, Olav Maran had devoted himself to painting only biblically solemn still lifes, transcriptive of nature, Malle Leis had become a realist portrait and landscape painter, Tõnis Vint had begun studying the hidden meanings of ethnographic ornament, and Aili Vint had become an Aivazovski-like painter of seascapes. All of them had to some extent submitted to the official art ideology.

What could be the reason for such a rebirth? Firstly, perhaps, the altered political conditions: the "thaw period" was over, the iron curtain became stronger than ever before, censorship of culture became tighter and the state of "social stagnation", as it was later called, reached its zenith. Basically, the increasing rigidity of ideological pressure did not leave artists much room for play. However, this is just an external cause which only partly explains the issue. Public opinion also oppressed the artists during the "golden sixties", although less extensively. But even then artists were already used to working partly underground, on the border between the prohibited and the permitted. It was customary to divide one's art in two: the public-official, and the hidden, which was known only to close friends. Why was there now such acquiescence to the official "main line"?

The answer might be found, as I pointed out at the beginning, in cultural theorist Boris Groys' discourse on the alternating cultural conscious. Groys' hypotheses are of a psychoanalytic nature, he does not only investigate a single personal case, but more extensive cultural identities and their interrelations. According to him, the socialist and the capitalist ways of social organization were related to each other at the peak of the cold war in the same way as the conscious to the unconscious. The world on the other side of the iron curtain was for both an "area of Utopian and negative phantasmagorias", where the strict rules of everyday life on this side were non-existent. Groys also adheres to an image of the West (widespread among artists working in the conditions of the communist experiment) as a world of unlimited freedom of creation and of proximate self-realization. A world where the artist's creative energy could pour forth, free from restraint and control. He does not, on principle, ponder the question of whether this fancy actually conformed to the truth, but confines himself to understanding the psychological motivation of the artists. He subsequently underlines the resemblance of this fancy to the classical description of the unconscious. For the latter is likewise considered to be an inaccessible force of nature, where the instinctive primeval thirst for pleasure finds direct satisfaction. While the censored, controlled, restrained and formal life-style on this side of the curtain became synonymous with the rational conscious.

The division of art into two - the official and the unofficial - is applicable to the division of the human psyche into the conscious and the unconscious. The existence of the latter - of the desires and urges of the unconscious and of underground art - had become an open secret but it was not customary to talk about it openly in the official art world. One went there to fulfil one's civic duties, the forbidden games were warded off to the

unconscious, so to speak - to the studios, into drawers and out into nature (actions, happenings). This warding off mechanism started to delimit more and more the Estonian cultural conscious and unconscious.

During the "thaw" of the 1960s, when the official and unofficial art lives (the conscious and the unconscious) were at least communicating a little with each other, cultural (pro-mental) integrity was still possible. The fall of the rigid and impenetrable curtain between them during the stagnation period of the 1970s caused a mental split (schizophrenia) and the resulting classical neurosis. Hyperrealist slide-painting, now appearing on the scene, was, on the one hand, acceptable in the Soviet canons of realism, on the other hand, it revealed the unconscious thirst for Western freedom. However, this was only an overture of a psychiatric phenomenon - the great game of forgetting. There is a term used in psychoanalysis called "active forgetting". In the case of mental split, rigid defence mechanisms begin to work between the conscious and the unconscious, preventing any kind of unconscious irritants from reaching the conscious. The latter withdraws into an escapist ivory tower where there is no room for the unconscious urges. Rigid aestheticism, introversion, escapism, metaphysical exclusion - these were the epithets most often used to characterize Estonian art of the 1970s. This definition can also be applied to the works of Kaljo Pöllu's new phase. With selfless devotion the former pop artist starts to study the ancient rock engravings of the Kola Peninsula and Karelia and organizes many exploratory expeditions to these places. Utterly dedicated to ethnographic mythology, he fills all of his works with it, and studies are carried out with persistent productivity on the "Permian Wild Animal Style", "Ancient Northern Sculpture", and on the folk art of our numerous other kindred peoples. These themes are "neurotic" in a very specific sense of the word. Their subject matter is of a national character, and therefore acceptable to the exalted thoughts of a small occupied nation. At the same time, studying and propagating the common Finno-Ugric roots fits in perfectly with the official ideology of the unbreakable union of the "brotherly Soviet nations" and of their common future - building communism. In 1974 already, Kaljo Pöllu receives the Kristjan Raud Award for the series "Ancient Dwellers". In 1985 he wins the same prize for his print series "Kalivagi". When we add to this the series "Heaven and Earth", completed in 1994, we have quite a good survey of Kaljo Pöllu's artistic beliefs, to which he has remained faithful until today: his solemn respect for our primeval forefathers, the search for ancient wisdom from our ethnographic heritage and the glorification of preservationist life-style. All that which in his youthful zeal of negation had been warded off into his deepest subconscious, now seized the artist's creative consciousness

more impetuously and extensively. It was a dramatic somersault which actually shaped the biographies of many Estonian artists.

At the same time, changing times have played another trick on the artist. The reception of Estonian art has, since the end of the 1980s, inclined again towards a more favourable view of pop art and the artists of the 1960s. The reason is a recent upsurge of pop art among the younger artists. The reintegration of contemporary Estonian society with the West would have brought this about sooner or later. These revaluations have lured several "oldies" into practising and exhibiting once more the art of their early years. In 1994 Kaljo Pöllu also put his early works on show in the Tallinn Art Hall Gallery to great critical acclaim. However, this time he did not win the Kristjan Raud Award, even though he was unanimously nominated for it by the critics. But his winning would actually have been rather strange, for Kristjan Raud and pop art really had nothing in common - they were of different space-time continuums.