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The Change of Simulation Strategies
in Estonian Art

[Translated from Estonian by Riina Kindlam]

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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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The Change of Simulation Strategies in Estonian Art

A Conversion? Points “A” and “B”

If we are to assume that we are currently living in a “period of transition”, we must honestly ask ourselves: *from what* are we switching over and *where* are we going? In the case of a system, a transition means going from one (relatively) stable state to another similarly (relatively) set state, yet different from the previous. A most elementary example would be crossing a river, where the fish mark the “solid ground” underfoot and general sense of balance. Being in the water, or in other words “going over”, we feel unsure, since the structure and logic of functioning of the surrounding environment are not completely comprehensible to us. In attempting to interpret this process, there is an initial superficial desire to want to envision the movement from shore “A” to shore “B” as a one-directional and purposeful activity. Actually it is not like this in the least. Water, as has been said, can be cold and the shore of destination far; or even if the shore we wish to reach is quite close, we need not like it very much. What this in effect means, is that there are people who are desperately trying to crawl back to shore “A”, since it was better there. Working could be acted out for wages, a career was not dependent on one’s abilities and the beef stroganoff was guaranteed.

The shore of destination in our current path of movement has been called “the free world” and “Europe”, but it has also been given the name “like in the West”. In the process of overtaking the river, the progress of neighbours is also being observed and as can be seen, a sport-like passion has erupted to get ahead of fellow swimmers. If you fail to have enough of your own strength left to get ahead, then you may “drown” those around you, splash water in their mouths or criticise their swimming ability for a change.

On the opposite shore there are yet others, hoping that those arriving will also be bringing along something from their shore of departure, be that a different kind of physical appearance or world view; a bit of science, knowledge or different kind of art.

A more stable image can also be envisioned: that we are sitting on a certain shore where foreign articles, phenomena and influences are suddenly available for “import”. Importing is a lucrative business, because the one introducing is in the role of “discoverer”, almost like for children living in seaside places in the USSR, in was a thing of great pride to discover colourful things from abroad, washed up on shore.

It is a generally known fact, that if our generals wish to get into NATO, and economists into the EEC, then the transition of artists will supposedly be into POSTMODERNISM. As described in the examples, a fierce scuffle is taking place here as well. In retrospect, what seem bizarre is the fact that the force behind the movement seems to have been a conference, organised not by **art** scholars but by **real** academics / scientists – sociologists. The conference took place in the beginning of this year (1995) and was entitled “Post-Communism and Post-Modernism”. A switch is detectable quite precisely and as is the rule in the provinces, by the sudden change in **swear words**. “Postmodernist” used to be a swear word and “hardened modernist” has become one now. Even those who as of yesterday loved flaming giraffes and melting watches, art’s borders and Light, avant-garde and jopt-tvojumatt, have joined the ranks of Postmodernists overnight. They speak of beauty, beer and life; their sentences are made up of objects, subjects and acid. The postmodernist view of life has also been adopted overnight: others’ works are expropriated on a whim and presented in arbitrary interpretations (*reconfiguration*); quotes are similarly handled (*reinterpretation*).

A change in the organisation of society is a threat to competence (*knowledge*), which was indisputable up until now. This can be counteracted with *simulation strategies*. As everyone is aware, this word has numerous meanings: starting with pretending (as in the Russian army or Karlsson books), all the way to Jean Baudrillard’s book of the same name, in which there is talk of a situation where the sign (mark) of a thing is more important and influential than “the thing itself”, so to speak. This idea is none other than the striking wording of an age-old experience. We find out that the *meanings* of things are primary, that meanings are *constructions* and that *constructors* of meaning exist, as do *offices of construction*. Simplified into practice, this knowledge is valuable in that it sheds a doubtful light on all absolutes: Gods, theories, religions, laws, history and of course hints at the fact that arbitrary interpretation is relative. Since TRUTH has been certified as being a *value* first and foremost, i.e. a

mechanism for carrying out someone's interest, then it's logical to assume that every opinion, theory and so-on, contains *misinformation* to a certain degree, which is its defence mechanism. Since I have studied information systems/computers, I will briefly take a look at *strategies of misinformation* which frame, form, and tie together the idea of "Estonian Art".

Stimulation strategies of ESSR Art

Art of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was, like the society, quite a "closed system", which can be viewed as a "small, enclosed town council group". The main info-strategy, which held the system balanced, was *total control*, which has been described by the founder of cybernetic theory Norbert Wiener: "Of all the antihomostatic factors in society, control over communications systems is the most effective and most important. More specifically, a community only extends as far as does the effective transfer of information." (N. Wiener, *Cybernetics or leadership and communication in animals and machines*", Tln. ERK, 1961).

If we direct our attention to the word "effective", it becomes clear that the evaluation of ESSR art took place within the limits of the permitted info-space, i.e. the borders of the USSR, and it was relatively easy to simulate. The *self-evaluation* of ESSR artists and art critics was high. This stand culminated in late socialism with the notion of "avant-garde". The historic argument for this stand consisted of Vabbe, Akberg, Laarmann and others and today of Lapin, Okas, Meel and others as ESSR avant-garde artists. This is a well-known thing. I would still like to toss this high self-evaluation into the arena of strategies of *misinformation*; this could take place only in a closed information space, so-called "information in an area of effective transmission" and only *without adequate opportunities for comparison in an international context*.

In terms of all so-called "neo-avant-garde" phenomena – and what occurred after WW II is definitely that – then there is no other more striking determination than the essay "The Hidden Dialectic" by Andreas Huyssen. On the subject of the socio-economic advantages of the avant-garde, he states the following:

"...art, science and industry were geared towards generating and guaranteeing progress to an expanding technical-industrial civil world. For a world of cities and the masses, a world of capitals and culture... As soon as the bourgeoisie had completely guaranteed its supreme power in the state and industry, science and culture, the avant-garde'ists were no longer at the forefront of the kind of fight that had been predicted by Saint Simon. The exact opposite occurred, avant-garde'ists found themselves on the edge of a very industrial civilisation. A civilisation which they still felt was

an opposite to their ideal out of old habit and which, according to Saint Simon, the avant-garde'ists had been called to predict and proclaim to the world. The loss of power of historic avant-garde may be tied to the far-reaching changes in 20th century Western culture. A link can be traced between the rise of Western mass-culture and industry, which occurred parallel to the lessening of historic avant-garde and even the most basic ideas of avant-garde was thereby rendered meaningless."

This essay describes many other avant-garde "secrets". For example what were the presumptions for the development of such an art-like world view. One of the most important of these presumptions, according to Huyssen, was the connection of art with society's other ideas, foremost with the belief in progress, although the historic, early century's avant-garde was not intended to *mirror life* but to *create life*.

Huyssen continues by saying that following the strangling of avant-garde by totalitarian regimes, art was understandably forced to "distance itself from life" and that the differentiation of culture into cultures of various levels (elite-, mass culture, etc.), didn't seriously begin until after the Second World War. In terms of avant-garde's fate in the so-called East European countries, then the term began to be used here as well, due to pressure by the "dissidents", but in a much more formal meaning, allowing the power structures to play a double game. On the one hand the avant-garde was legitimised and thereby the apparent complexity of the art scene was created, along with necessary contrasts and "dialectics" required for development. However, avant-garde was only allowed to run in a very confined *formalist racetrack* – as innovations in form, in a way which revolutionised art's language of form. Such neo-avant-garde was thereby missing its original, and according to Huyssen, most essential content: it no longer got involved in the innovation of society...

Simulation strategies of art of the Republic of Estonia

In order to effectively judge that which is occurring in the Republic of Estonia, let us begin with a list of things that are obvious. Control over information no longer exist. Peoples' freedom of movement is virtually unlimited, mail, communications and the telegraph are accessible. The sources of knowledge of single individuals are not subject to limitation. As long as the individual deals with receiving additional instruction in a limited manner and no more, everything is fine. Simulations and the spread of misinformation begin from the moment that the person takes his or her newfound knowledge and begins proclaimed it through channels of mass communication. What gets in the way of this person *passing on information effectively*, as is familiar from Wiener's quotation? It is

hindered by *societal hierarchy*, the existing power structure. If you happen to be relatively unknown, a bloke of not very high rank, then the local hierarchical leaders (definers) will attempt to crack your new or beyond-system information for themselves during a conversation at a café – in a short while you will notice how they have published this under their own name. Another tactic is to *misinform* new (beyond-system) information in mass media channels. I will present examples a little later.

Adequate self-evaluation

Society's internal retentions and bickering are society's "internal business". In an international context the effective working of a society (e.g. Estonia) still begins with adequate self-evaluation. Beautifying oneself with the help of ethnocentric legends and national snappyness only serve to slow the development of a society. As a conquered, repressed and brainwashed people, the contrast for Estonians between the *realistic me* and *imagined me* is especially great. For this purpose, there are large numbers of theories which are suitable for use "within the state"; as soon as they cross the border, they become ridiculous. Estonians, as members of a group of people whose egos are damaged, constantly play and simulate beings higher than they in fact are, which looks good to those approaching from the outside.

Estonia and the information society

Let us begin the issue of Estonia belonging to the "postmodern" world with the question, does Estonia even have an information society? Entering an information society is bizarre and questionable in the case of Estonia. The fact that we have some members of the Internet and other global information networks, does not by any means make Estonia an information society. Access to communication tools must be the norm, not the exception. What kind of information society can we speak of, if we have entire regions (Lasnamäe), which lack the most elementary communicative devices, telephones? (Slide of a line-up at a phone: "Communication ecstasy"?) In a situation where the tools necessary for speedy communication are expensive and only accessible to few, there is a new threat that looms: that essential information will get *concentrated* and along with-it *power* will concentrate as well.

This unfortunate example shows the need to explore whether Estonia has fulfilled the requirements for the pre-information society's "motor era", the major requirement being an efficient transportation system. Strange, but even this is doubtful. At the time when the "Eurotunnel" was being

opened in the Dover Strait, trains on the century-old Tallinn-Haapsalu line stopped running.

As a rule, an information society is usually characterised by a high level of information *organisation*. Let's take libraries for example. The Estonian National Library still uses mainly old card catalogues which are firstly inconvenient and slow (an information society however, cannot stand slowness); secondly it is beyond the means of the National Library to keep up with the systematising of new information. Try for instance, to find necessary newspaper articles. I use such an example because for the last few years Estonia's most essential information has been found in newspapers (including most essential *art ideas*). Magazines/almanacs cannot keep up to the new speeds. Firstly, it is dragging about 2-3 years behind what is being published. In terms of journalism's more picturesque side, Germans published a book on newspaper photography from the middle of the last century up to the 1920's and photographic illustration was yet practically non-existent in Estonian print media at that time (!).

Translating information and “speaking the language”

On account of more recent information on art reaching Estonia very slowly, this brings out one sad fact. We are dealing with poor language ability. Both “Art Forum” and “Kunstforum”, as well as more specific publications reach us in the physical sense. But what does not reach readers, is the *information* they contain. Language ability or lack of it, is what will begin to restrict the distribution of information. As Foucault has expressed so well – it is only possible to see and notice that which we have been taught to see. Thereby the physical proximity of journalists may in fact prove useless.

I intentionally use the term “restrict”, since pictures can simply be looked at in magazines without texts being understood. (Obviously an important observance.) Behind this is something which has been best described by Peeter Ulas: “*You look at the trash carted into galleries abroad – art, without a doubt. But take a look at our piles of junk – you could melt it into tin, but it sure isn't art.*”

This somewhat naïve sentence contains important verification for my final thought – art strategies that have arrived here from metropolises, are only able to be read by their “external factors”, be that *form, manner or look*. This is also the reason why the art seen here is only *outwardly* similar to European art, while at the same time the majority of non-formal levels of meaning there, characteristic of prototypes, remain illegible to regional simulations. A good example is Raffael Rheinsberg's exhibition in the Art Hall, which consisted of “configurative” arrangements. Lennart Mänd's

installation at the ['mobil] gallery opening exhibition here at the Academy of Arts can be compared to the latter. The works have a certain physical similarity (slides: R. Rheinsberg/L. Mänd). What is the difference between the two examples given? If the objects shown in the gallery by Rheinsberg were meaningful (e.g. the tools of illegal gold drillers), then Mänd simply exhibited a series of certain hooks, taking the work to a more "complicated" level via formal methods (mirrors, peep-holes, etc.). The problem here is the same ability to interpret, which becomes apparent in art practice. And it actually makes no difference whether someone claims to have "understood" a catalogue text or recent "Art Forum" article...

A similar "weak grasp of the language", where comprehension is but simulated, can be seen from time-to-time in art reviews. A good example of this is Ants Juske, describing the works of foreign artists at the Saaremaa Biennial in "Pühapäevaleht" (Aug. 5, 1995). According to him, Dunker's photographs are merely "everyday scenes from the life of farmers" (slide); Anne Testut supposedly made "photos from family albums" (slide), and Vibeke Tandberg's photographs were "studio shots of couples getting married" (slide), etc., etc.

Estonia's provincial society also simulates *high tech*. I described earlier how the group of "Stuudio 22" artists use computers and achieve a décor or moving mitten pattern similar to a kaleidoscope; the CD-ROM of Estonian art also contains a religious manifesto about *Mannerism* in a 19th century *Kunstwissenschaft* spirit, among other things.

Strategies of misinformation

If the ESSR's main information strategy was to stop the spread of information, then that of the Republic of Estonia has somewhat become misinforming, resulting from poor language ability or intentional wish. Since it is difficult to effectively block the spread of information during the information era, then in order to simulate competence and to protect the value systems that have existed thus far, information must be converted to misinformation. It is characteristic of transitional periods that value systems are shot to pieces and replaced with new ones. The development of new value systems brings along with it the devaluation of existing competence, to which potential losers of competence react very strongly. It is not easy to endure a situation of certain *punks* saying whatever they want to say. What kind of possibilities then remain for those who stand out in society, those of the hierarchy until this point?

Even though life has become more difficult and is leaning towards the side of "the honest fight, as in nature", some opportunities still exist. It is always possible to state that the new is not new, but that ... "the ancient

Greeks already...”. Or that “in the 1970’s already”. It is always possible to alter the meaning of “new”, tear it from its context and *re-contextualise*. In the literary magazine “Vikerkaar” Tiit Hennoste described modernism’s three arrivals into Estonian literature and the battles surrounding the importation of postmodernism to Estonia have been just as painful. With no change from earlier attitudes, postmodernism is treated as yet another –ism, style, or trend, even though we are dealing with an overall **operation, environmental requirement or condition**, which is moreover a frame-construction, a chess board, on which styles, -isms and trends are moved around like pawns. Up until today, people have attempted to decide, with the help of certain “field guides” (soil in a gallery, shards instead of a whole, and so on), whether one or the other work is “modernist”, “follows modernism”, is “rear-modernist” or “postmodernist”. Just as before, people attempt to organise pedestals, pyramids and caste systems using these names. We continue to witness naïve attempts to create new meta-religions, the clearest current example being Linnar Priimägi’s “beauty religion” (slide). That beauty is of utmost importance, beauty is art’s axis and a “beautiful person” is supposedly the centre of the world. Etc.

I use the word “religion” with total confidence, since a theory shares at least two qualities with religion: 1. the lack of a rational argument – “beauty” is supposedly a principle and its forms of expression are thereby the physical manifestations of that principle. (Sounds like God and his earthy representatives.) 2. A religiously meta-social approach to society. After having lived in ruins, in a community made up of ugly-looking people and effected by decisions of the Supreme Council, it would be great to *become subjective, become daring, mobile* (fast, beautiful cars) and *omni-communicative* (mobile phone mania). It’s natural that the cult of all that is beautiful, strong, fast and full of life-blood shall have a large user-base, and because of this Priimägi’s “beauty religion” can get a foothold – it has users/consumers. Following a more practical path, we arrive at an **early-capitalist simulation** – advertising as the highest form of art, “advertising as art”. In constructing a scheme in which *everything* beside Mannerism is declared out-of-date (social-, following- and rear-modernism), it must be kept in mind that such a scheme is valid only up to the border of the Republic of Estonia. Basing his ideas on heavenly principles, Priimägi is obviously not in close contact with practical art experience. If he was, then he would see how the West’s so-called “Mannerist” is complaining on the TV screen (for instance Richard Avedon’s performance on the BBC this year), that no one takes him seriously as an *artis!* And although I have nothing against Avedon or Priimägi’s other favorites (Herb Ritts and Toomas Volkmann), I would like to draw the attention of the honourable maker of absolutes to the fact that today, an artist’s status is determined by

the *area* in which the works are used, more than by any other – so in this sense castes still do exist. In fine art as well, many examples of ugliness exist (slide: Beuys' "Fat Chair"), and also of beauty, which is however taken to the limit of self-irony (slide: Pierre and Gilles). "Beauty" cannot be viewed separately from the forms it has embodied, in cases of applying beauty there is inevitably feedback in terms of its leading principle. And as you saw in the slides, this can decrease the value of a genuinely good idea.

It can also not be said, that social-problematic art or art's so-called "critical practices" are "yesterday's news", or that they greatly preceded the much-praised Mannerism (slide: Conde & Beveridge and others). But it can be said that a large part of contemporary art *is* socially critical and does not acknowledge or accept any absolutes or untouchable sanctities. As an Estonian example, let us look at the transformation of our own central national symbol from something held high to something increasingly ironic (slide: Raud, Kallis, Sarapuu, Tralla, ENE).

A second, and quite enthusiastic misinformer is Ants Juske. I shall present an example of his manner of quotation culture. In an article about the Saaremaa Biennial, he allows himself the freedom to quote Thomas McEvelley in the following manner: *"...even the most renown (here we cannot get by without the specification "most") critic present, Thomas McEvelley said, that postmodernism is the hangover of postmodernism."* And charges onward with the suggestion, that hangovers are generally cured by drinking ("Pühapäevaleht", Aug. 5. 1995). If we take a look at this same sentence from the "Helsingin Sanomat" of July 29, we than see (and this is confirmed by the recording of the presentation), that the actual sentence was in fact the following: *"Postmodernism was like awakening from modernism's hangover – ... during the course of which it becomes clear, that everything up until now has been a dream."* This is an example of how misinformation occurs during events, right before the participants' noses. In semiotics, the general notion of *seem* is used ("seme": see e.g. Umberto Eco, *Critique of Image*, Rmt.-s: Ed. by V. Burgin, "Towards Thinking Photography"...). This implies a smaller word/thought construction, in which the meaning of what has been said is retained. This is a good example of how nothing alarms people in the face of maintaining "competence". The same idea exists in the case of Linnar Primägi's reference to Altti Kuusamo, who supposedly has said: "The only language in which we are able to speak, is the mother-tongue of modernism." I wonder why, but Kuusamo himself says he does not recall ever saying such a thing.

With these two examples I am not trying to attempt anything but to legalise the mechanisms for the birth of Estonia's newer theories and of course their foolproof qualities. Juske, who otherwise considers himself to

be a tolerant person, has reached the *concept of a postmodern person* via distant routes. This kind of identifying is similar in its “tolerance” to the concept of a Bolshevik, freemason or even vegetarian. We find out what a postmodernist should not be like. They never play with weapons, do not found schools or movements, or if they do, then they do not do so according to Jüri Okas’ “language of photography”; they do not argue with their parents, they eat their cream of wheat and generally are happily in agreement with absolutely everything (“everything goes!”). No problem – if everyone around us conformed to those ideals, it would be so easy for theorists to live peacefully and constantly come up with new “theories” while snacking on honey biscuits. Until then we continue to live in a society that is teeming with gangsters, shady businessmen and terrorists. And it doesn’t really matter one way or the other, whether they are worthy of the postmodernist era or not.