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Avantgarde in Estonia

[Translated by Krista Mits]

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

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.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

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.

Sirje Helme

Avantgarde in Estonia

While trying to rewrite the history of Estonian post-war art we are faced with the problem similar to all Baltic countries, which is, that the development does not seem to be logical or normal. We have to view everything in the distorting mirror of ideology. What we see is an endless number of mimicries, malformation or mutation until we feel that even a painting executed in a truly realistic manner has to have some intricate meanings encoded in it.

In our analysis of the relationship between the international art trends and the local tendencies we cannot use the convenient opposition of metropolis and periphery/province because it might lead to confusion. Our ideological and official metropolis was Moscow, as far as our identity was concerned the metropolis was the first Republic of Estonia and the ultimate metropolis were the artists themselves. This is exactly what the exhibition titled "Personal Time" is all about - independence and personal decisions. This will inevitably raise the question of the Estonian avantgarde? We can chart the Estonian avantgarde through the late 1950's, the 1960's and the early and mid-1970's. It was the artist's personal decision whether to join the avantgarde movement and what method to adopt. While in the West artists took great pains to deconstruct great narratives such as modernism was, for Estonian artists this narrative acted as a filter which worked in one direction only - alternative art gave these artists a possibility to keep their integrity as personalities and artists. This could be treated as a big illusion or idealism or resistance and today's analyses might seem overenthusiastic or simplistic. Without this experience, however, breaking out of the Soviet "melting pot" would have been impossible and there would have been no independence in the development of Estonian art.

The discussion below is my understanding or vision of the avantgarde in Estonia and its future implications for Estonian art. I do not want to claim that in the 1980's stagnation took over completely, but the danger and pressure were certainly very strong. In the late 1980's postmodernism with its allusions to mythology and the striving for another reality, bringing along a diversity of forms and techniques, began filling the gap in art., which by the end of the 80's was confronting the problems of commercialization and the narrowing down of mental outlook. In the 1990's the artistic scene changed beyond recognition, but that would need a separate treatment. The meaning of personal time and personal responsibility changed radically. We have joined the population of the "global village" and we share common worries and problems with the other inhabitants of this village. The next stage - life in a "virtual village", the temptations of the World Wide Web and the problems that art will face in the near future will be the same for artists all over the world.

We are rewriting and re-evaluating our not so distant past, and this is inevitable as information became available to us only in the late 1980's and together with it a possibility to analyse the past in all its complexity was open to us. Among other questions asked was the question of the existence or non-existence of Estonian avantgarde art. Was a version of young art which now makes a claim to the right to exist? Or was it a form of resistance? These questions seem fairly logical. Firstly, Estonian art lacked radicality, opposition to aesthetic traditions, it has never been openly rebellious or interfered social affairs - all characteristic of the avant-garde in the West. Secondly, the political and social conditions were not favourable to the emergence of the avantgarde, there was no welfare state which the avantgarde in the West grew up with in the 50's and 60's. One way of referring to the Estonian avantgarde would have been to call it dissident art. But there was no dissident art in Estonia in its strict meaning, the changes seem to be a logical continuation of the formal changes begun in the 50's. However, we have to look beyond the surface. The relations between Estonian art and international art were shifted in time and space. Estonia was part of an empire with a totalitarian ideology. To gain from its foreign policy the state made allowances for some union republics, another dangerous development. And then there was a rigid understanding of what realism is. Consequently, we had quite a lot to protest against and to demolish. Even if it did not take the form of individual rebellion it still helped forge individual mythologies, privacy and transcendental experience. Thanks to this we survived the period of deep stagnation and total surrender. The question of personal choice and privacy remained essential in Estonian art. Artists used to live in three different times: there was real or daily time, then there was illusory time of Western art projected onto

Estonian art scene and thirdly, there was personal time based on personal mythologies. We can speak of avantgarde in regard to these artists who had chosen their own personal time.

To analyse Estonian avantgarde we have to take into account the dualism in our society and to consider it in a broader social and political context and in a narrower context of mentality, attitudes and innovation in art. In the social context any art that did not conform to the officially approved art and which used innovatory methods or techniques was avantgarde. But we cannot define avantgarde only in opposition to official art and that is why I think that avantgarde as a conscious way of making art came on the Estonian art scene in the late 60's and presented its best examples in the 70's. A group of industrial designers and architects who graduated from the Art University became champions of avantgarde. Two groupings - the Visarid and SOUP '69 made their appearance. Raul Meel displayed his concrete poetry and Tõnis Vint attracted a considerable following, mostly young people. The artists who formed the grouping called ANK '64 went even further and such artists as Malle Leis, Kristiina Kaasik and Jüri Arrak brought pop art to exhibition halls. These are the temporal and spatial boundaries of the avantgarde movement in Estonia.

Estonian avantgarde had as a point of departure the art of the 1920's, when a group called Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhm (Estonian Artists' Group) was active. Their art with its logical construction of form, a straightforward relation between the elements and intellectual clarity is probably something inherent in Estonian artistic preferences. Our art has taken more to geometric abstractionism than to surrealism. Estonian architects and Leonhard Lapin, in particular, wrote about the traditions in Estonian art such as post-Cubism, about functionalism and about Russian suprematism and constructivism. The introductory articles on Estonian art of the 20's, and the Russian avantgarde were important in the development of Estonian theoretical and historical thinking. Through drawing parallels and discussing historical artistic trends it was also possible to introduce the problems of contemporary art.

The second big stimulus in the development of Estonian avant-garde was the end of the 1950's when artists were concerned with the problems of abstract art and when they tried to replace the illusionist art by exploring the surface of things, their texture and media. In Tartu collage art was secretly practised, never officially displayed until in 1993 when these experiments were publicly displayed on a retrospective show of Estonian art at the Estonian Art Museum. The period from the mid-50's to the early 60's has

also been dubbed as the period of "thaw". This brought along firstly, the regeneration, that is the return to pre-war values, the revival of form. The centre of this movement was Tartu where the Pallas Art Academy was located, closed down by the Soviets as the "den of formalism". Apart from regeneration there was a search for a new artistic idiom which would differ from socialist realism. In this connection the appearance of abstract art onto the Estonian art scene is of utmost importance. On the one hand it meant the revival of the painterly Parisian school that never really raised the question of emptiness, of the total loss of the image. On the other hand, it meant intellectual discourse in painting (Henn Roode). The 1966 exhibition of young art summed up the development and here two generations of art innovators met - the artists who had graduated in 1957-59, including the ones who practised abstract painting and collage (the childhood of Estonian avantgarde?) and the grouping ANK (a group of young students from the Art Institute (the puberty of Estonian avantgarde?).

ANK '64 is the first organized grouping of artists after the Estonian Artists' Group in the 1920's and it has become legendary in very many ways. ANK did not have specific goals, its manifesto was openness. It meant a return to multi-layered aesthetic thinking, it showed concern with and tolerance to modern art. They were well informed about the trends in Western art, they arranged lectures on artistic and philosophical topics. The influence of Tõnis Vint, leader of the group, his personal tastes and preferences was certainly very strong. We cannot speak of a specific style, there were experiments in the field of abstract and surrealist art, in collage art. The artists who participated in the work of the group developed differently in their later years. In this connection the role of Ülo Sooster has to be mentioned. He bridged Tallinn with Moscow. He introduced a world of dissidents to Estonian artists. Their art had very little influence on Estonian art in general, although Sooster's own preference of surrealism was adopted to some extent. However, it helped foster a sense of freedom and the link with Moscow avantgarde artists remained strong throughout the 70's and began to break down with the emigration of most of the Moscow artists in the 1980's. ANK did not question the ambiguous role of art in the society, at least, not on the surface. It fostered the positions of aesthetic art. This period was important as a lot was done to deideologize art, to restore tolerance in relation to art and to restore art as an independent means of expression. In the late 1960's the intellectual landscape was changed by the appearance of two groupings of artists called SOUP '69 and the Visarid. As a matter of fact, there was only one exhibition that the group arranged using the name SOUP '69 at the café called the Pegasus. The leading artists in the group were mostly industrial designers and architects by profession, such as Leonhard Lapin, Ando Keskküla. Andres Tolts, Sirje

Runge, Vilen Künnapu, Ülevi Eljand, Jüri Okas (did not participate in the exhibitions).

The most obvious was the change in orientation, Paris was replaced by New York. A new type of society and a new period of time were entered, although only in theory. The artists began criticizing the new type of society and communicating with it. However, they did not handle social themes. They just probed the state of art and artist in the society, the possibility of enhancing the role of artist in the society, which was really the first attempt to cross the boundaries. They tried to question what was considered to be typically Estonian in art and they were open to international experience, which by then had branched into conceptual art and offered a lot of material for discussions. It was the first post-war generation who had not witnessed mass deportations and was not afraid of physical repressions. On the other hand, Russian tanks had reached Prague already and the illusion of liberal freedom - if they had cherished any - had vanished. They could not believe in the liberalization of art or in the restoration of the rights of aesthetic art, for them the alternative was to ignore the conventions, to build a new artistic reality. In the late 60's pop art, land art, conceptual art, happening and minimalism, all appeared on our art scene and were here to stay. This was the basis for development even for those artists who did not identify themselves with the avantgarde.

In 1967, under the leadership of Kaljo Põllu another grouping was formed in Tartu called the Visarid. Their aim was mainly to advocate new trends and new techniques in art and to bring new life to a stagnant art life. In this respect they could be compared to ANK although their relationship to avantgarde art was more obvious. Thanks to the experiments of Kaljo Põllu, op-art, kinetic art, assemblage, ready-made and cliché were introduced into Estonian art.

The development of Estonian avantgarde is a complicated and sometimes even a painful topic as Estonian art had never really complied with all the rules of socialist realism and had never really been totally ideological and bombastic, throughout the whole period Estonian artists had been able to retain some originality of thought and representation. As the critic Ants Juske has said, Estonian artists had fought for the right to boil their own soup in one part of a big pot. An intricate system of defence mechanisms had been developed. It included the emphasis laid on a sense of colour, a perception of form, discreteness and clarity, on post-impressionist painting.. It was precisely these defence mechanisms that Estonian avantgarde attacked. The struggle on the artistic arena was really a political

opposition in disguise. The situation was even more complex - opposition to traditions and to the establishment was coupled with the opposition to the defense mechanisms developed by the previous generations of Estonian artists. The young artists who fought against pure painting attacked, as a matter of fact, a fairly weak identity. The debate between tradition and avantgarde was not only a cultural debate, it also meant opposition on an institutional level. The art officials who were afraid of losing their jobs were not the only ones opposed to young art. There was a danger that Estonian art would lose all the privileges gained during the previous period. The fight went on until the mid-80's when the mainstream which had jealously guarded everything (and had encompassed everything, including avantgarde) was not able to produce anything new and had to find new marginal areas for expression (the emergence of poster art in the late 80's).

Let us also discuss the question of terminology. Estonian and Western usage differed in their meaning. For example, contemporary art was an ambiguous term and its meaning depended wholly on the context. The official term meant cliché image; the inside meaning was information about Western contemporary art trends. But no criticism was included - neither criticism of artists or art. This shows an idealistic attitude and an uncritical acceptance of the avantgarde models.

Then there is the question of the radical left so typical of the avantgarde. In Estonian it did not mean anything as the whole society used the slogan of the left. The outbursts of many a Western radical were perceived as a joke by the Estonian artists and although there was some genuine interest, for example, in Marcuse, the understanding of what was going on was very often confused and the problems were avoided or channelled into a fight on the local art scene. Thirdly, we have to speak about the relation to popular Western myths and idols, such as Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley which were part of our pop culture, too. At the same time, Che Guevara embodied an abstract idea of freedom, the representations of Vietnam war were highly ambiguous and were probably the expression of the aggressive nature of the avant-garde, I do not know of any representation of Mao. Fourthly, we could mention the influence of psychedelic art, which was felt to a certain extent, thanks to rock music. No psychedelic videos were available. It was not possible to clarify terminology or to establish any terms because of the ban to appear in the press. There was an unwritten law: even if the artist could produce works in the modern idiom, they could not write about them, or give information or spread knowledge. That was one of the reasons why terms were very often ambivalent. For example, the term

“geometric art” which embraced a large part of the Estonian avantgarde, from the machine-series by Lapin to abstract painting by Meel. Another of these terms was "slide painting" to denote photographic realism. Although this meant that it was different from a similar trend in Western art. The avantgarde art was often called young art, innovative art, etc. although their content remained extremely vague.

One of the peculiar features of Estonian avantgarde is form. The means at the artist's disposal was quite limited. To be able to display your art you had to comply with certain norms, which were set by the official ideologues as well as the local arts councils who wanted to avoid any confrontation and were doubly careful. To reach a compromise was extremely difficult and very often it meant a compromise with your conscience. There was an unwritten rule - form had to be aesthetic. This must seem like a paradox, but one of the reasons was in the society itself, in its absurdity, its sloppiness, in its lack of constructivity. A striving for constructiveness competed with a striving for deconstruction. Estonian avantgarde could not criticize something which was not there, namely the well-organized bourgeois culture. The state had taken upon itself a task of demolishing, of deconstructing. And the Estonian avantgarde was tempted to aestheticize, to tidy up. Social criticism was also weaker as the relation to the object attached was not so clear.

Then there is the question of the availability of information about avantgarde art. Local knowledge rested largely on reproduced art. The information was received gratefully without much criticism. Art which had moved from the canvas to space, into movement, into the human body, into action was presented as a two-dimensional art on reproductions. Most of the young artists had never experienced live art. This, in its turn, fostered the aesthetic approach mentioned above.

The postmodernist ideology of the 80's attacked the positions of Estonian avantgarde. Postmodernism used the terms discarded by the avantgarde, such as human being, human centred, mythologization, symbol, history, ambivalence, national, ethnic, faithful, memory, etc. The avant-garde had not tried to find equivalents to these terms. The avantgarde had also ceased to produce new ideas to be able to attract the younger generations. In the changed world something was needed which was stable, which you could hold on to, which could offer humanly feasible solutions. Postmodernism met the requirements of the day. The people had got tired of fighting the windmills in the totalitarian society, art had got tired of being in an eternal opposition. The avantgarde was considered to be a failure.

But the 80's were very successful to a large number of our avantgarde artists, they sent their works to international exhibitions where they received a wide critical acclaim. This is only logical as the art which had fostered its own identity for such a long time proved to be competitive on the Western art scene. The avantgarde in Estonia, however, is art history. The 90's are feeding new names and new possibilities into Estonian art and its reputation abroad. But this is the beginning of a new chapter.