

Self-Portrait as an Estonian Artist - Self-image in Media Art

■ In the late 1980s Estonia's switch to the "short-wave of capitalism" and the easing of political tensions coincided with the labour pains of media art induced by the availability of cheap video cameras and other electronic equipment. In a short time a heterogeneous video scene had developed (the last 5-6 years being the most intensive) and covered rhizome-like most of art landscape.

It is only natural that in the tumult of these social changes art suffered from collapses, cataclysms and explosions which changed radically our understanding of art, the artist's status and the concept of art as a whole. If we have a sober look at postsocialist art, in Estonia in particular, and attempt to map the changes, we could point out a possible trajectory, a movement from escapism to exhibitionism.

Whatever the age of the artist, the dominant trend in media art seems to be the self-analytical, exhibitionist and ego-centric video. Their range is wide: from the depressive and poetic video portraits (Kai Kaljo, Tiia Johannson) to self-inflicted violence (Ene-Liis Semper, Raoul Kurvitz, Andres Tali), from media-centred role games (Kiwa, Jasper Zoova, Hanno Soans) to social generalizations and metaphors (Kai Kaljo, Mare Tralla, Marko Laimre), from shamanist spells (Jaan Toomik, Jaan Paavle) to feminist art and identity therapy (Mare Tralla, Mari Laanemets, Killu Sukmit, Kadi Estland). The same features - self-portraiture, egocentrism and egotism seem to characterise not only media art but also Estonian art as a whole, independent of the medium, if we consider Kaido Ole's painting, Marko Mäetamm's pop-conceptualist comics or Mark Raidpere's transgressive series of photos.

During the Soviet time the artist was a dissident-hero, set on a pedestal by the society. There was no special need for exhibitionism, it was even condemned, and self-portrait as a genre had almost been forgotten. If we look at Estonian art from the late 60s to the 80s, we can find only a few self-portraits. The dignified and the serious artists did not like to expose themselves.

In the early stages of capitalism in the 1990s, when the silent dissident was replaced by a media hero, the self-portrait made a real comeback. With the invasion of pop art and mass culture the values shifted, the previous position of the artist in the society was devalued and redefined in the course of social changes. A good example is Kai Kaljo's self-irony in the video *A Loser* (1997), whose title - the artist as a loser - seems to

say a lot about the status of an artist in the new society; it has actually become a grotesque portrait of an Eastern European artist.

The capitalist schizophrenia, as Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out, is a term to describe a double role imposed by the society, the separation of ideals and the reality. In the chaos of the lost identity the status of a human being (including an artist), his role and the possibilities for his self-assertion and its ways as mirrored by the reception of the society become more important than ever. The surplus energy is very often channelled into crossing the boundaries of personality, aggressive self-portraits, hysterical shattering of roles and double games or manipulating with one's self-image.

Below I am going to look into the self-image of contemporary Estonian artists.

Social roles in a distorting mirror

Both Mare Tralla's hysterically grotesque folk singer in an interactive video *Sing with Me* (1999) and Mari Laanemets'/Killu Sukmit's *The Cure* (1998) focus on women's identity in national self-awareness, by looking at gender roles determined by our national tradition. The group F.F.F.F. is photographed in all kinds of roles starting from women rock singers to folk dancers (*F-Files*, 1998).

In their deconstruction of the macho attitude in *Private Dancer* (1999), where Soans plays the role of a stripper-infantryman, Hanno Soans and Catarina Campino reverse the prejudices connected with masculinity. The subtext in Soans's *Backdoor Performance* (1998) and *My Books about Kickboxing* (1999) draws from his own experience. The performance *The Diaries of a Kickboxer* is the reconstruction of part of his life and the obsessions caused by imaginary social ties with the criminal world and its norms of behaviour (an obligation to appear as an *Übermensch* in the Nietzschean sense). The majority of Soans's actions refer to the image-making in macho culture and the concept of a primeval man from a shifted perspective. In *Backdoor Performance* Soans, who has proclaimed the end of Heroenzeit, takes up a pose identical to the Unknown Soldier standing behind the monument, but reverses the iconography of a masculine militarist, suggesting castration and androgyny.

Acting as a neurotic club freak in a music-video-like *Paradisco* (1988), a mixture of different identities and pop icons, Kiwa declares its spiritual belonging to the "scratch" generation of the 80s: fuck-art, let's-dance attitude is part and parcel of his work. The

artist is a pop star and "art is disco". Although the no-problems attitude might contain existentialist tendency to suicide, we have enough grounds to doubt that even this might be a pose and a morsel to be grabbed by the scandal-hungry media looking for eccentricities. The focal point in Kiwa's work is



Kiwa, Euro-Antivizija. Ispod žute zastave / Euro-Antivision. Under the Yellow Flag, 1999.

image: he has made good use of the clichéd slogan: "It does not matter who you are but how you look". Reversing Joseph Beuys's statement "Everyone is an artist", Kiwa's motto is: "The artist may be whoever he chooses to be", that is, he is someone who diligently turns out identities in his own factory. Both Kiwa and Soans indicate in the spirit of Baudrillard that the borderline between the real and the simulative as well as gender differences cannot be clearly defined.

On the other hand, Kaido Ole becomes a character in the *Sprite* adverts whose motto is: It does not matter who you are. Thirst is what pays. This is a flat type of a character, without the pathos of a revolutionary or a super megastar. Which is similar to another character in Ole's paintings and Ole's alter ego - a modular man with a 0-head. This is a "flat modern man, who goes to the polls, helps increase the yearly sale of mobile phones and receives an average salary". Ole attempts to penetrate into the small world of a small employee, making use of this posture for his artist's image. Ole is happy about the daily, the indistinct, the routine. With a theatrical gesture he is prepared to take the middle-of-the-road attitude as only a few artists would.

Damage and therapy

Since the 1970s, because the performance art was practised by a closed circle of artists such as Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and others, and interpreted in the wake of Lacan's psychoanalysis, video has been taken as a psychological medium, as a self-centred instrument, as a reflector of the urges/tensions which constitute the subject's self-awareness and as a therapeutic means for their symbolic manifestation.¹

While in Estonia of the 1980s the topic of (self)aggression came to the fore with the performance art practised by Group T, in the 1990s the same topic was highlighted in the video. One of the leading artists of the group Raoul Kurvitz concentrates on the play of light and material in installations where "the death wish is sublimated in the metaphysics of non-existence".²

The expressionist and symbolistic exhibitionism of Raoul Kurvitz, which used to be an inseparable part of his performance art, is replaced by a more introvert and ascetic self-image which has found its most powerful expression in his video diptych called *Cut I-II* (1999). Kurvitz's body covered with the incision marks symbolises the motif of a silent scream so typical of the body art of the 90s, which is also the hallmark of Ene-Liis Semper's work from the same group. The self-image is there and its presence is confirmed even in those works where it appears as the convulsive body or the culture fatigue. Transgression does not violate norms, but constitutes them.

Mari Laanemets and Killu Sukmit portray a bored and blasé heroine in their video *A Nylon Moon* (2001), who treats her spiritual wound by sewing the invisible wound on her hand, thus trying to confirm her existence by the routine of pain. In a sense, a similar therapy of identity is present in Mark Raidpere's series of photos entitled *Io* (1997) in which the artist, who has covered his face, hands and penis with stigmata in a maniacal phase of his spiritual crisis, captivates everything in his photos. In Andres Tali's video *17* (1998) the faults in the seams which connect self-image and the world are expressed through a punitive act: the voice-over (the artist) repeats a short dialogue: "How much is 8 + 9?" - "17" - "Wrong" and a hand slaps into the artist's face.



Andres Tali, *Video 17*, 1998.

Marko Laimre seems to play or parody this concept of an artist. Let us bring some examples: in the fortnight-long endurance performance *Bonj-njonj-njonj-non-now* (1999) the artist caged himself as an animal and the label read: "The Artist Marko Laimre". In the performance *L'île mystérieuse* (2000) the strait-jacketed artist kneels in the praying posture waiting for the spectator to punish him. The maniac's hystery is openly displayed, which seems to point to the fact that the violation of all kinds of norms and prohibitions has become almost obligatory for every artist. Laimre seems to insinuate that the obligation imposed by the society is to be a maniac.

Conclusion

For the 1990s generation the media age seems to exist a priori and their artistic strategies are adapted to suit this age. Without wanting to introduce a note of radical confrontation, I should say that in the world view of the older generation a superior and escapist attitude to mass culture seems to prevail. They do not see a problem in "living in the world where reality is appearance" and where "a highly gifted artist is someone who is the sole body of legitimisation for himself". The first generation of TV children who represent pop and urban culture do not care much about the elevated and shamanist nature poetry and/or art which exposes the secrets of sexuality. When we watch Jaan Toomik's spellbinding video *Dancing Home* (1995) or Kiwa's androgynous *Madame Butterfly* in the video *Work in Progress* who wanders around in the landscape and sprays aerosol paint to make graffiti, we understand what this means. For Toomik nature is the beginning and the end and in the catharsis of his transcendental experience he seeks union with God. Kiwa, on the other hand, seems to have a vague remembrance of natural harmony and for him the enactment of nature poetry is yet another pose.

- 1 Rosalind Krauss. Video: narsisismin estetiika (1976). *Vido, Taide, Media antologia* (toim. Minna Tarkka). Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, Jyväskylä, 1993, pp. 79-89.
- 2 Hanno Soans. The Violent and Autistic Subject in Estonian Art 1987-1998. BA paper in the Estonian Academy of Art, 1998, p. 38.