

The Virtual Histories of Estonian art



20th century art history in Estonia can be divided into at least three stages: the first was from the beginning of the century to the annexation of Estonia by the Soviets in 1940, the second encompassed 50 years of work and life in a totally closed society, which was then succeeded by ten years of getting accustomed to newly acquired freedom. The 90s are a special decade comparable to the first decade of the 20th century when Estonian professional art developed from practically nothing. In the 1990s there was a similar leap forward although the background was not the provincial drawing classes as in the late 19th century, but an established system of art. I have referred to the period from the late 1950s to the late 1980s as an example of the continuation of modernism in a closed system. What was peculiar about the period was the separation of modernist ideology and form and the lack of what was the most important - the utopian ideal.

For 50 years art existed in a "complete" form, and it was not possible to escape this situation until there was a political turnabout. What happened in social consciousness in the early 1990s would probably be of foremost interest to social psychologists. Suppressed energies, dreams, ideas and aspirations were a wonderful resource that the decade used to create a new start for art in freedom (both of spirit and space). Even if Estonia had been a free country (let us remember that the socialist regime in the Soviet Union was most severe and to travel outside the Soviet Union was almost impossible, there was a limited number of vouchers, and it was a mir-

acle when you got one which was celebrated by the whole family!), the 90s would have posed difficulties and the problems encountered in international art would have put our art in an uncomfortable position. The most important change in the decade was the steady growth and impact of the new media on the whole culture, and on the visual arts in particular. The revolutionary communication technology gave a new meaning to video art, gave rise to Netart and created a condition in which visual culture had to prove its worth and presence all the time. It was this challenge provided by the new type of information society that Estonian art faced boldly. Estonian artists cultivated an original and introspective approach to video art, which has found international recognition. Jaan Toomik displayed his video work at the Sao Paulo biennale and Manifesta, Ando Keskküla represented Estonia with his interactive sound-installation on the 48th Venice biennale and Ene-Liis Semper is going to appear on the 49th Venice biennale, selected by Harald Szeemann for his own exhibition.

Perhaps for the first time in history Estonian art is in a situation when there is no need to talk about provincialism, the catching up and emulating of major international trends. An independent country does not automatically imply independent and innovative art; a country which is situated in the remote north-eastern part of Europe is always in danger of provincialization. However, we are in a happy situation and there is no need to think about it now. Estonian art has made its presence felt with the help of the new media.

Throughout the 50 years our art was presented in a kind of virtual history which was constructed in three different ways by artists, art historians and the state. The state demanded that art should adhere to the principles of socialist realism and prescribed a description of non-existent social relations. Estonian artists withdrew into the world of landscapes, still lifes, baroque flower bouquets and abstract compositions: nothing in these paintings showed what the society was like. Having eliminated the reality, artists continued to exploit formal means of artistic expression. Art historians constructed another reality, giving in to their own secret wish that Estonian art would continue to be linked to Western European art movements and follow Western developments. The alternative avant-garde in Estonian art in the middle and late 1960s seemed to confirm the belief that art can - despite political pressure - develop according to its own rules and create an innovative environment quite comparable to that of the free world. This illusion did not last for a long time: in the late 1970s ideology imposed its own constraints and Estonian art continued its closed existence. The image one got of international art on the basis of magazines and books available in Estonia did not reflect the reality in an adequate way. There never has been a uniform interpretation of art history and the freedom of Western artists has been more restricted than it was imagined. But for us these virtual histories were real, they were part of us and part of Western art history. The shock that came in the early 1990s was great: a critical mind questioned the existence of both. For a moment it even seemed that there were no positive lessons that could be drawn from the past. Estonian art, similarly to the whole of society, had to determine what strategies to use. A few years ago the Estonian Institute described four options open to Estonia, and I have sometimes made use of this ironical parody to describe the art scene in the early 1990s. Four pathways were shown: "Southern Finlandia", in which Estonia is a traditional

country of small-scale farming; "Military Info-Oasis", in which Estonia is a miniature militarized country where most of the budget is spent on the armed forces (NATO!); "Transferrer", in which Estonia as a transit country uses its logistical advantages, and "Big Game", in which Estonia is a country with advanced infotechnology, where it would be totally inappropriate to refer to indigenous traditions. We can regard these four pathways as sceptical anecdotes (although negative as to our national identity), but they describe some approaches to Estonia as seen from within and from the outside. Culture cannot be separated from these processes. We have attempted to show that for the first time in the history of Estonian art the 1990s have represented real, not virtual history, and perhaps for the first time in history art has been related to society and has abandoned the roles of a decorator and an aesthete and assumed the roles of a critic, an analyst and a fool. If we come back to the abovementioned pathways we can see that Estonian art has taken up a position in the "Big Game". The reason is that the starting point in the early 1990s was quite unique. First we entered the international art scene full of positive ideas of its mechanisms of operation, the artists were not spoiled by the network of relations and it gave them freedom to behave just as they thought was right. But I think that perhaps even more important was that Estonian artists entered the new interactivity-based cultural age as *tabula rasa* and were thus more sensitive, more open and prejudice-free as compared to other cultures which were technologically more advanced with all the problems arising from it. We therefore have an enormous potential for innovation and originality of approach which, in the end, is what guarantees the originality of a culture.

Estonian art will face another identity crisis, which is an inevitable fate of small cultures. But it may well be that we will overcome the crisis more easily thanks to the positive energy of the 1990s and the fact that in the (pure, naive) euphoria of the last decade the crises were avoided and art preserved its ability to produce catharsis, which we are going to need now.