

## Death in Venice

### The Secret Art History of Estonian Occultism

*First, a UFO was sighted. Then another, and another, and another. They kept coming; there were abductions, messages to mankind were sent etc. All the usual stuff. There was a group of Japanese scientists working in my uncle's neighbour's cellar, unearthing the remains of what was supposed to be an ancient alien spaceship.*

*Let me tell ya – during the pre-millennial interregnum, Estonia was the most paranormally active piece of land on the face of the Earth.*

#### The End of History and the First Man

At the end of the past millennium, there was widespread secret knowledge among Estonian intellectuals and authors that due to interrupted history and schizophrenic geopolitical placement, Estonia was uniquely positioned to benefit most from the new globalized postmodern world. In the post-socialist, Fukuyaman post-historical world, where the West and the East found themselves on the same side, the former borderlands obviously end up nowhere else than right in the middle.

The analytical basis for such a vision was given, amongst others, by the leading semiotician Yuri Lotman in his works about *semiosphere* from the early 1980s, where he convincingly argued that it is an inevitable logic of civilization that the cultural periphery and the cultural centre periodically exchange positions.

The end of the 1980s saw the emergence of a literary and artistic movement called *ethno-futurism*<sup>1</sup>, which programmatically managed to connect the mythical Fenno-Ugrian tribalism and envisioned postmodern *neotribalism*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *ethno-futurism* was introduced by Karl-Martin Sinijärv – a poet and essayist, president in charge of the Estonian Writers' Union

<sup>2</sup> As later described by sociologist Michel Maffesoli and others.

During the 1980s and 1990s transition, Estonian contemporary art was characterized by the revival of symbolist painting. Einar Vene, Lembit Sarapuu, Jüri Arrak and others envisioned mythological symbols and plots, often with folkloric origin, which in their disquieting obscurity resonated with the then society's new age premonitions.

The *opus magnum* of syncretic ethno-futurism arguably belongs to the all-time greatest alchemist of Estonian art – Tõnis Vint. A graphic artist, designer and architect, legendary and slightly mysterious guru, whose works, synthesizing Jungian archetypes and both oriental and occidental geomancy, are described as – no less no more – than the search for a universal visual language.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1990s, Vint presented to the public his plan known as “The Big Game”. A large-scale urban planning project which would significantly improve Estonia's geomantic energy-flow.

According to the plan, it was necessary to build a new skyscraper city in an empty place in the middle of the sea – on the island Naissaar close to the capital Tallinn. The skyscrapers would house the banks, science and philosophy campuses, and the island would become the new international centre of free trade and spiritual liberation.<sup>4</sup>

“The Big Game” gathered quite a lot of public interest and discussion, which however did not lead to any real action. And Tõnis Vint withdrew back into the shadows of his studio.

### **Rise of the Intronomads**

On the periphery of the institutional art-world, a new generation of artists emerged: the groupings preferring more ephemeral and tense mediums, performance, installation or

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<sup>3</sup> See: Taidre, Elnara: *Model, metaphor, play: the total mythological work of art in the context of paradigm shift in the 20th century*, 2016, Tallinn

<sup>4</sup> During the 1990s, there were several attempts to address business activities in artistic form. For example, the Bank of Estonia organized performances with the participation of leading Estonian artists. It was only later, when it became clear that art and money are genuinely so closely related, that any crossbreeding should be prohibited as incestuous.

photography. Groupings like Rühm-T, DeStudio and others. The brutal dandies – as one contemporary art critic called them.

After a brief flirtation with ethno-futurism, they decisively turned away from folkloric esotericism and declared their interests to be “rather this-worldly”<sup>5</sup>. Rühm-T’s manifest exhibition in 1988 was titled “I’ve never been to New York”.

Regardless, this declarative distancing from the earlier generation of artists-mystics was rather cosmetic. Rather, it was the continuation of former esoteric practices in pursuit of new symbols. Only, instead of the Ural Mountains, the *wholeness* was projected towards New York.

One could argue that the *brutal dandies* are a typical case of the self-colonization common to nations in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is a demiurgic act *per se*, triggering the explosion of a symbolic economy around the certain great Absence.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, unlike their predecessors, the dandies were outspoken. Happenings reminiscent of mystical rites were accompanied by manifests, broadcasts, interviews... But all this was articulation; it really wasn’t argumentation. It mostly didn’t make sense. And did not have to. It was a spell. An Abracadabra. Magic formulas like: Derrida, Technodelic expressionism, Trixter, Reterritorialization, Einstürzende Neubauten, Intronomadism and others were formatted into sentences just like rosaries – new words to proclaim to new worlds.

The spell worked. “Those Desperadoes are going to Conquer the Art Hall!” – shouted another contemporary Estonian art critic. And oh boy, how they did!

But, what’s next? New York? - Sure, but maybe later. Berlin? - Too post-socialist. Kassel? - What? Sao Paolo? - Too far. Venice? - Yeah, let’s take Venice.

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<sup>5</sup> Rühm-T: Manifest of Technodelic Art, 1989

<sup>6</sup> The concept of self-colonization is developed by Serbian-born cultural theoretic Alexander Kiossev. Literary theorist Tiit Hennoste has used the term in the context of Estonian literature.

<sup>7</sup> See: Kiossev, Alexander: Notes on Self-colonising Cultures, *Cultural Aspects of the Modernisation Process*, Oslo, 1995.

In 1997, the Estonian artistic delegation – a triumvirate consisting of Siim-Tanel Annus (“the Priest-King”), Raoul Kurvitz (“the Brutal Dandy”) and Jaan Toomik (“the Father and the Son”) – participated for the first time in the Venice Art Biennale. True to its time it was a frisky improvisation, leap into the unknown, where afterwards even those most closely involved cannot recall the exact circumstances of why or how the decisions were made. One thing is sure: the permit to perform in the city (as there were no resources to rent a pavilion) was obtained only thanks to the fact that the mayor of Venice was an extremely nice person. All sorts of things happened. According to legend, the 22 coffins needed for Jaan Toomik’s installation were packed into the same container with a white concert piano intended as a gift from the Estonian government to the European Council. On the way to Venice, Brussels was the first stop, the packages of course got mixed up and... ..you get the picture.<sup>8</sup> Crazy stuff.

All in all, it was a successful venture, and the rest is history.

## **New Normalization**

The turn of the millennium and the beginning of the new one in Central and Eastern Europe has been described as a period of *new normalization*. It is a condition where societies that have undergone deep transformations feel an exaggerated need – real or imagined – to *be normal*. The paradox lies in the fact that *normal* is then perceived as the opposite of *natural*. Sure, *natural* is no less a constructed concept than *normal*, but generally the former can be associated with a magical view of the world, and the latter with a rational one.

In the context of art, this is a situation where the local art scene may be imbued with magical thinking but the empowered art institutions start to contribute exclusively to rationalist artistic strategies. And, in the context of the Estonian art scene, *la Biennale di Venezia* played a special role in that.

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<sup>8</sup> Actually, never happened

No matter how inspired or impulsive the first step in 1997, it had found solid ground. The much-criticised nation-pavilion-centred structure of the Venice Biennale also meant that this was the place where the Republic of Estonia could show itself in the company of decent, normal states. Therefore, representation at the Biennale became the main output of the Republic's contemporary art policy. As almost all contemporary art in Estonia is state-sponsored it surely affected Estonia's art scene. Qualities desired by the state were now expected also from contemporary art: transparent, tolerant, open, educated, reasonable, with a complicated history yet with a good sense of humour etc. The obscure and esoteric needed to be rationalized, the savage mind domesticated.

In the early 1990s, with the support of enlightened magnate George Soros, the *Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia* (SCCA) was established. As in other Central and Eastern European post-socialist countries, the institution was dedicated to integrating the local artistic community into the international art world. The conglomerate of state authority and global capital proved to be a juggernaut.<sup>9</sup>

In 1999, the *Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia*, an institution formed on a basis of the SCCA, took over the task of organizing the exhibitions for the Estonian pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale. Then it took only a few years to reach from the first dodgy experiments to the point where the Estonian Republic's new "official art" was the biennale art.<sup>10</sup>

The desperadoes were pacified and, if needed, humiliated ("Then they opened the new National Art Museum<sup>11</sup> – and I wasn't even in the permanent collection! I wanted to die," stated one of the wizard kings of the 1990s<sup>12</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> Serbian-born artist and theorist Miško Šuvaković has used the term *Soros realism* to describe the post-socialist cultural environment – therefore, drawing an ironic parallel to the normative practices of totalitarian *socialist realism*.

<sup>10</sup> Art critic and curator Ants Juske, <http://www.cca.ee/veneetsia-biennaali-erinumber/234-10-aastat-eesti-paviljone-veneetsias>

<sup>11</sup> KUMU Art Museum was opened in 2006.

<sup>12</sup> He was later pardoned and his position at the national museum restored

The magical chant of the 1990s artistic avant-garde – all the Derridas and post-apocalypses – was trivialized in the 2000s into the linguistic practice of *namedropping* which had then been absorbed into the creole of *International Art English*.

The most established fringe of contemporary art in Estonia has since been discourse-heavy, research-based, self-consciously trend-wise or plain playfully ironic, but never again genuinely arcane.

### **Now, here**

Did the esotericism disappear from Estonian art? Not exactly. Visionism and esoteric artistic practices took refuge in the institutional periphery, inhabiting the obscure territories between disciplines.

The ritualistic-performative neo-tribal artistic tradition was continued in the 2000s by the art group/school Non Grata from Pärnu.<sup>13</sup> Differing from the 1990s *brutal dandies*, the group requested straight collective anonymity and forbade any paid-job for its members. Therefore, this effectively avoided the 1990s burden of self-colonization, while maintaining the universal ambition.

Despite considerable international activity, Non Grata never gained institutional recognition at the national level; they were called the southwestern-Estonian anarchists, the sectarians or even straightforwardly – madmen.

On 2004, the art school, a resource base for Non Grata, was closed – it failed to meet European educational standards – and it didn't take long for the group to break up due to suppression and inner conflicts. The leader of the group Anonymous Boh has now vanished into the jungles of the international art underground from where he occasionally sends memos about new conquests.

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<sup>13</sup> Pärnu is the fourth largest town in Estonia

The demiurgic language-creation persisted in narrower circles, mainly in the literary societies of Tartu<sup>14</sup>, where the text-occultists are now gathered around the Paranoia publishing company, established in 2014.

And there was one video on YouTube – I cannot find it any more – from 2013, showing the ritualistic artistic performances, where a dozen masked participants quote quantum-physics and play techno-music as they burn desktop computers, all on Saaremaa, a remote Estonian island.

Otherwise, everything is pretty normal now.

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*Who were the aliens? Let me tell ya – we were the aliens.*

*What did they want? To become us.*

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<sup>14</sup> Tartu is a second largest town in Estonia