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Introducing Sexual Difference into Estonian Art
Feminist Tendencies during the 1990s

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When talking about art of the 1990s we cannot overlook the phenomenon designated by the umbrella term Estonian (post)feminist art. Social art history has demonstrated how art does not only represent social relationships and the dominant ideas of its era but is always dependent on major categories of identity formation such as class, gender, race, and others. As artistic representation does not merely reflect but always produces and reproduces these categories, sexual difference has, among other places, been constructed and perpetuated in the visual arts.

Traditional art history defined certain forms and genres, i.e. the hierarchically "lower arts", which allegedly did not require artistic "genius", as "feminine" and therefore as the more appropriate fields for women artists. In his article 'Form and Gender', David Summers presents a historical review of how the ideas of form and matter have been gendered in philosophy and consequently how this has influenced the hierarchical order within the visual arts. He argues that the Aristotelian idea of form, which is perceived as masculine, has been one of the major reasons for the exclusion of women from art history.[1] How similar understandings of "lower" (feminine) and "higher" (masculine) art still tend to influence the hierarchy and interpretations of art becomes clear if we look, for instance, at the undervalued position of applied arts.

Even though modernism seemed to offer artists more freedom and autonomy, for women artists this meant the denial of their gender identity whereas the whole history of modernist art can be interpreted as the glorification of male creativity and sexuality.[2] The position of Estonian women artists has been dependent on both standpoints: certain assumptions inherent to the understanding of art and artistic

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production have directed them towards more "feminine" topics and media, a situation to which many women artists quite understandably reacted with a desire to engage in the "universal" and not to be restricted by gender in one's art. Or to put it simply, Estonian women artists often wished to be 'just an artist' instead of a woman artist, that is, to take up the position that men artists have always held.

One of the most important tasks of the feminist approach is to make visible the construction of the category of sexual difference. Only after having done so is it possible to undertake the questioning or deconstruction of traditional models and roles. Thus, the feminist insistence on introducing the category of sexual difference does not mean either the insistence on gender as something given or on biological essentialism as it has sometimes been conceived in the Estonian context; rather it is a critical analysis of how gender category has been socially and historically constructed. This brings us to the question of the interrelationship between an individual and society and to issues related to subjectivity and identity formation. Or to put it simply, the objects of feminist inquiry are different systems of representations in which gendered positions are being created and made intelligible as well as the development of subjectivity in relation to these systems. Even though the notion of feminist art has been often understood as labelling and limiting, there is no such a thing as 'true' form or subject matter for feminist art. On the contrary, feminist art practices accommodate a huge variety of works linked to each other maybe only by a certain position or attitude. Griselda Pollock has written that 'what makes an art work feminist is the way in which it intervenes in what can be called the social relations of artistic production and reception, the social relations of signification.'[3] Already the notion of woman/women lacks a common single understanding within different feminisms, on the contrary, feminist theory has recently paid more attention to differences between women instead of claiming the commonality of female experiences and existence. "Woman" is not an essential but a changing signifier or an open concept and in certain approaches the term sexual difference is used to designate not so much the binary (female vs. male) system of gender identity as the multitude of sexualities (homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality, transsexuality, etc.) Also art informed by feminism constitutes a perpetual state of provocation, something that 'signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice not a doxa; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention, not a platform.'[4] My presentation here is arbitrary in the sense that it also involves artists who would not necessarily relate their works to feminist discourse; however, their works function as feminist in that they disturb fixed gender roles and their representation.

The emergence of feminist art practices in Estonian contemporary art is quite unique: it was directly connected to socio-political changes and the opportunity to initiate the discussion about gendered subjects in society and culture. This discussion is being conducted in a different mode from promoting traditional gender

identities and without dismissing the importance of gendered identity. Feminism in art is not and does not have to be separate[5] from the broader politics of equality even though in Estonia feminism in art started before any feminist issues had emerged in social and political spheres. The negative attitude towards feminism, still very much present in Estonian society, has left a visible trace on the reception of feminist art practices as well.[6] Thus we could see these practices as the litmus paper of how open minded and tolerant our (art) society is, on the one hand, and as continuous provocation for the development of art and its understanding both by professionals and the general public, on the other. The aim of this essay is to ask what were the social and art world related conditions that favoured the emergence of feminist inquiry in art and what difference does this inquiry make to our understanding of art.

A Short History of Estonian Feminist Art [7]

The practices of Estonian feminist art did not emerge from nowhere nor did they rely exclusively on Western examples and theories as has been sometimes claimed by its opponents. Eha Komissarov has emphasised in the catalogue of the Est.Fem exhibition that critical discussion on gender was not part of Soviet emancipation, which was controlled by the state. Even when some women artists tried to bring a specifically female (and non-traditional) point of view into art they were caught as if between two wheels: opposition to Soviet power was designated by a strong nostalgia for an independent past and the first Estonian Republic (1918-40), the life-style of which had been patriarchal and stressed traditional gender roles.[8] The high number of women among Estonian artists is largely due to the applied artists who are mostly women.[9] It is also important to keep in mind that the applied arts are not perceived to be of central importance in the present Estonian art world and are often regarded as second-rate and inferior. A large number of prestigious positions occupied by women are related to art administration and therefore the lamentations over the feminisation of Estonian art do not alter significantly the image of Estonian representative artist - that of a male genius.[10] However, much more problematic tends to be the general trend towards conservative values that rests upon the opposition to Soviet heritage as well as upon the social instability of transition. Indeed, in comparison with broader social attitudes the relatively egalitarian art world seems almost ideal, especially since, despite the above-mentioned negative aspects, the remarkable number of women artists and their participation in art production has created a history and a tradition which allows for feminist art, though different in form and ideas, to relate to earlier women artists and their work. From the latter a decades-long succession of female graphic artists, which has visibly influenced the artistic expressions of the feminine psyche within feminist art, is worthy of independent research.

Mari Sobolev has pointed out the early feminist tendencies in the works by groups

Rühm T and S&K at the beginning of the 1990s due to their interest in sexuality and the unconscious.[11] The members of those groups, which have now ceased to exist, continue tackle the issues of sexuality, the body, and the psyche, often influenced by feminist ideas (e.g. Lilian Mosolainen, Tiina Tammetalu, Anu Kalm, Ene-Liis Semper, Tiia Johannson, Kai Kaljo, Raivo Kelomees). Maybe the most well-known images of female erotica from the second half of the 1980s belong to Eve Kask whose later works are visibly related to certain feminist theories and their artistic application. At the same time the emergence of an erotically charged male nude in the works of two young women artists, Maria-Kristiina Ulas and Ly Lestberg, introduced the female (erotic) gaze as well as homosexual imagery (which Lestberg was drawing on) and overstepped the unwritten law of the traditional subject-object relationship between male artist and female model. *Project SHOP* by three women artists (K. Kaljo, A. Lumiste and T. Tammetalu) echoes several ideas presented during the first feminist exhibitions mostly due to its strongly autobiographical approach and anti-aesthetic form. Special attention should be paid to the so-called Linnaps' school from where the younger generation of women artists dealing with the 'deconstruction' of femininity have emerged. Linnaps' school of photography artists was strongly influenced by the scripto-visual practices of Western art during the 1970s and 1980s, including feminist critique of representation. Interest in the interrelationship between power, ideology and art led many artists of Linnaps' group to deal with images and representations of women.

The first overtly feminist exhibition in Estonia, *Kood-eks /Code-Ex* was held in Tallinn in the autumn of 1994 (curators Ando Keskküla and Reet Varblane). Estonian art was represented by older and contemporary works - by Karin Luts (1904-1993), an established woman artist from the period before World War II, and by two contemporary women artists, Epp-Maria Kokamägi and Anu Põder. Since this exhibition a gap has appeared between "active" and "passive" approaches to understanding feminist art in Estonia. Reet Varblane later argued that, while the works by Swedish artists propagated an active feminist standpoint, the works by Estonian artists remained primarily concerned with aesthetic and formal issues [12] – a claim which reflects the lack of social approach in Estonian art of that period. And yet the sculptures by Anu Põder were a clear attempt to refigure the traditional understanding of femininity by uncovering the strengths of the so-called fair sex. In retrospect, it seems that the exhibition *Kood-eks*, though important at the time, was mostly of symbolic significance in that it allowed the term "feminism" to enter the Estonian art world and press.

Est.Fem, the first programmatic feminist show which summed up a two-year-long exchange of ideas between women artists[13], took place in August 1995 in several galleries in Tallinn. Curators Eha Komissarov, Reet Varblane (both contributed to the introduction of feminist ideas into Estonian culture) and the artist Mare Tralla set the terms for a focused feminist critique in a relatively conservative society

reluctant to revise its patriarchal values (Tralla was to become an emblematic figure of the Estonian feminist art scene, see Mare Tralla's article in *n.paradoxa,* issue 5, Nov 1997). This framework explains why challenging and ironic works like Tralla's *So We Gave Birth to Estonian Feminism* or Kaire Rannik's installation *Don't Believe That We Are Equal Since Our Inside Is Different* which offered a "look" inside the bodies of the opposite sexes, lost something of their poignancy in the context of more traditional representations of femininity.[14] To explain this we have to keep in mind not only the reluctance towards feminist ideas but also the aesthetic tradition of Estonian art which in several cases ruled out the programmatic resistance to beautiful forms and images so characteristic to Western feminist art. In short, *Est.Fem* sought to avoid a radical break with the existing cultural context.

In our situation, the participation of male artists could be seen as an "extenuating circumstance" even though men's involvement in feminism is nothing new or extraordinary in Western countries. Robert Connell has suggested in his book *Gender and Power* that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women.[15] The question of the construction of the male (sexual) identity was foregrounded in the photos by Toomas Volkmann; also, Raivo Kelomees' work drawing on the Jungian anima-animus theory and Peeter Maria Laurits' playful comment on the stereotypes of sexual behaviour opened up possibilities for further exploration of masculinity. The latter may be quite risky: for instance, in the case of virtual gender swapping on the internet it is women who are allowed to take up men's positions much more easily than the other way around.[16] And still the artistic and often decadent imagery of playful masculinity finds less resistance in our art world than the radical and politically charged embodiment of female identity. I do not recall any major outcry from art critics over the transvestite transformations of the male artist appearing in the video *Paradisco* (1998) by Kiwa or the self-destructive, vulnerable and delicate male body so different from the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the photo project *Io* (1997) by Mark Raidpere. Men artists participating in feminist projects themselves have seen it as an opportunity to question narrowly defined masculinity or the traditional binary opposition of masculinity and femininity.[17] Co-operation also prevents the "inside trading" of feminism, i.e. the tendency to assume that 'only women can understand feminine spaces.'[18]

Est.Fem illustrated an interesting situation where different definitions of womanhood intertwined both on an experiential (different generations and personal histories) level and an artistic-theoretical (art examples and theoretical grounds) level which all created quite an eclectic general picture. Many artists started off from their own experience of being a woman, the experience seen both as essential and socially constructed. *Est.Fem* made an important step forward in raising the consciousness of women artists without leaving aside the "must and must nots" of the representation of femininity. *Est.Fem*, as well as '*Code'-Ex*', reflected not only

upon the individual, undoing and redoing efforts of artists but also on the existing restrictions within the art world and society at large. Indeed, Eha Komissarov admitted in the catalogue of *Est.Fem* that in a traditional society feminism can only have a meaning not forbidden by this society.[19] However, all the pessimism expressed in connection with the project does not mean that the exhibition would not cross many artistic and social borders and bring significant changes to the local art scene.

The following period, marked mostly by one-woman or smaller group shows, bears witness to this. Mare Tralla's art, writings, public appearances and her image as "Disgusting Girl" became the most remarkable example of the "bad girls" phenomenon in Estonia. Young textile artists' interest in a specifically female expression in art, already present in *Est.Fem*, led to the exhibition *Caring* in 1996 by Helena Palm, Ele Praks, Merle Suurkask, and Kadi Soosalu who were bold enough to use not just "low" arts such as textile but also traditional handicrafts which are seen not as part of art practice but that of crafts. They formed an informal circle of handicrafts' enthusiasts which started to play a more significant role in later curatorial projects as well. An autobiographical approach, explorations of sexuality and bodily existence found their place in the works of many artists. The powerful emergence of these issues cannot be linked only to borrowing from Western trends because in the West the body art trend was preceded by thirty years of feminist "(art) revolution" without which the present art scene would be very different from what it is. I tend to believe that the interest in the particular issues present in contemporary art globally has necessarily to do with local impulses and problems.[20]

The year 1998 was marked by a "second wave" of feminist exhibitions, *(Meta)Dialogue and Private Views: Space Re/Cognised in Contemporary Art from Estonia and Britain.* Even though unlike 1995, these exhibitions did not emphasise their feminism, they used traditions of feminist art as a starting point and dealt explicitly with sexual difference and expressions of the feminine. The exhibitions were all-women shows with one exception, Kiwa in both cases. However, the participants and the places where the shows took place refer to certain generational differences and a hierarchy. *(Meta)Dialogue* brought onto the wider art arena the lesser known and youngest generation of women artists such as former Linnaps' school members (Mari Laanemets, Killu Sukmit, Piia Ruber) and the so-called circle of handicrafts' enthusiasts (Ele Praks, Helen Lehismets, Helena Palm, Kadi Soosalu). According to curator Reet Varblane the idea for the show emerged during her lectures on feminist and women's art in the Estonian Academy of Art and it is precisely this grass-root nature as well as a certain marginality that makes the event, in retrospect, much more interesting than was originally conceived in the art context mostly dictated by representative and big curatorial exhibitions.

Private Views was from the very beginning conceived as a large-scale event with its international participants, the choice of artists and the place in the Salt Storage Hall of the Estonian Art Museum. The show generated remarkable interest among

art critics as well as the mass media, however, mostly due to the overwhelming interest in the "scandalous" personality of Mare Tralla who was one of the curators and a participating artist. Another problem that emerged was the uncritical use of the term "postfeminism" by several critics, including feminist ones.[21] The use of this term seems to imply that the issues of gender equality raised by feminism have been solved. In the West it may at least refer to the history of the feminist movement and its concrete achievements but to speak about postfeminism in the prefeminist situation of present-day Estonian society implies in the first place a desire to designate the art practices in question with a less radical term in order to facilitate their introduction to a general audience and avoid the negative connotations and prejudices associated with the word "feminism."[22] The term "postfeminism" tends to be more accepted also by artists perhaps due to its 'post'-nature which is fashionable and without making any clear political statement could mean basically anything and nothing at the same time.[23]

To conclude here the outline of an institutional framework marked by different exhibitions it should be added that gender issues have also entered general annual shows: it is enough to mention *Let's Talk About Men* curated by Tiina Tammetalu which was part of the annual painting show in 1998 or Remaining oneself. *Changing Roles in the 21st Century* (curator Reet Varblane), part of a similar show in spring 2000. It has even been suggested that our artists' interest in feminist or gender related art projects is limited to the above-mentioned curated and issue-based events; however, the same dynamics centred on the curatorial projects characterises contemporary art life in general.[24] It is significantly more complicated to determine the specific issues and topics which form the historic, spatial and temporal specificity of the phenomenon we agreed to call Estonian feminist art. Limited space allows me to present only the most widespread themes and important strategies which are by no means representative of the multiple practices embraced by this umbrella term.

Paradoxical self-portraits

One of the most important topics which characterises Estonian women's art in general is the issue of identity or of female subjectivity be it in the form of self-portrait or autobiography. In her account of the autobiographical genre in Estonian contemporary art, Reet Varblane argues that the majority of artistic autobiographies suffer from a lack of connection to reality: they are nostalgic stories aspiring to idealise the past and the identity of the story-teller.[25] Also, women's autobiography in Estonian art as such cannot be automatically identified with feminist intervention. Yet, one of the central subissues of this approach is the problematic relationship between being a woman and an artist/a creator, a dilemma always accompanied by the lack and/or marginalisation of the woman as a historical and cultural subject.

Among the first projects to raise the questions surrounding women's creativity was *Cultural Sushi* by Tiina Tammetalu in 1995. Her exhibition consisting of photos,

old letters, newspapers and other documents which were juxtaposed with abstract paintings turned to face the wall, documented her private and public life as a woman. There is a certain historical contradiction in being a woman and an artist despite the long-standing tradition of women artists in Estonia: the symbolic hero of modernist art is a male artist and in trying to occupy this position a woman creator risks denying her femaleness. Incorporation of her gender identity, however, may lead to marginalisation and a feeling of limitation: 'to be labelled a woman artist is to be placed in a separate sphere where only gender matters, where gender is assumed biologically to determine the kind of art that is made.'[26] It is quite probable that insistent exploration of what it means to be a woman artist in works informed by feminism signifies the extent to which Estonian women artists face this dilemma.

The historical burden of the mutually exclusive identities of a creator and a woman is being lifted through the implementation of laughter and irony, a strategy which has a strong tradition in Western feminist art. The latter in its turn draws on the links between women's culture and popular comic heritage.[27] Rosi Braidotti has called the use of laughter, (self) irony, vulgar folklore and the grotesque in the contemporary works by women, especially in postmodern and cyberfeminist art, the politics of parody.[28] When talking about Estonian (women's) art this strategy is no doubt linked also to the tendency to soften the absurdity of socialist everyday reality with a (self) ironic look, widespread throughout Eastern and Central European culture. Thus, in our particular case it has a wider meaning than just to echo one of the favourite strategies of Western feminist art. One of the best examples of self-irony is Kai Kaljo's *Loser* (1997), an emblematic sign of the Estonian woman artist's personal and professional identity in the end of 1990s. A short and witty autobiographical video piece, *Loser* consists of half a dozen phrases infused with self-irony and accompanied by background laughter, as in a TV sitcom. The artist tells the viewers her age, weight, and marital status – the data on the basis of which women are usually assessed – as well as her profession (Estonian artist) and the ridiculously low salary she is paid at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

Tralla is maybe best known for her programmatic use of parody and irony in addressing diverse issues of femininity. In her performance *Kiss*, Tralla projected the faces of Estonian male critics on the mirror-screen where they voice their opinions on the artist Mare Tralla. Virginia Woolf has famously argued that 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.'[29] Now it is men's turn to perform the function of the looking-glass. The artist is only being fair: those who praise her are rewarded with a kiss and those who do not are hit with a lipstick. Tralla manages to distance herself from this discursively constructed "self" only partially. Similar to the Lacanian model the identity formed in the process of performance is illustratively constructed in the symbolic order – in language.[30] It is true that Tralla maintains a certain distance from this discursive "self" but not

entirely. Putting it another way, her artistic persona is constituted in the speech of these male critics and perhaps her playing along only perpetuates the idea of the power of male critics to master language and define her place in relation to what is uttered.

Her CD-ROM *her.space* (1998) presents instead of the official history the small private narrative dealing with stereotypes originating in the history of Estonia. The piece pays particular attention to constructions of ideal femininity in the Soviet regime such as work heroines and women cosmonauts which the artist frequently juxtaposes with those of the West and those currently in the making within Estonian society. *her.space* is not really a self-portrait of the author nor her autobiography, rather it is a presentation of the identity of the Estonian woman as it is being constructed historically through different ideologies and ideals. And as "woman as sign" has little to do with experienced (or imagined, for that matter) female existence,[31] *her.space* is built up as a labyrinth of contradictory signifiers instead of trying to present any coherent identity.

Also the search for specific possibilities of women's art as something positive and not necessarily second-rate contribute to the explorations of the woman artist's identity. I have already mentioned the conscious interest in applied arts and crafts characteristic of the younger generation of women artists which formed around the *(Meta)Dialogue* exhibition. Many authors have written on the empowering faculty of being marginal in one's culture: for instance, bell hooks has stated that '[marginality] is more than a site of deprivation [...] it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.'[32] This is one way, among others, to look at "feminine" and "low" arts.

Politics of Representation and the Feminine

Feminist authors have responded to Freud's astonishment (Was das Weib will?) and Lacan's statement 'Woman does not exist' with the argument that the feminine cannot be represented within phallogocentric symbolic, i.e. in the language and culture, the thinking subject of which is a male person. Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva developed the idea of *écriture feminine* which signifies a nonphallic and nonmasculine subject position. According to them the feminine as different and eruptive in relation to the masculine does not belong exclusively to women even though it is more accessible to them due to their alternative experience outside the dominant and central culture. *Écriture feminine* and its parallel in art, the expression of female experiences (or as Lisa Tickner called it, *peinture feminine*) stands for the destruction of existing "malestream" structures rather than for positing any essentially feminine shared experience.

The interest of Estonian women artists in female sexuality and the specificity of the female body has two major sources: the relevant examples of Western feminist art and the reaction to Soviet (and) patriarchal morality which excluded discussions of female sexuality.

Kaire Rannik's installation *Don't Believe That We Are Equal Since Our Inside Is Different* was one of the few works in *Est.Fem* which questioned the predetermined and biological sexual difference and its social results. Using traditionally "feminine" materials such as cotton wool and jewellery she designed a metaphoric look at the insides of the female and male bodies as if sadly and ironically recognising the impossibility of their equality because of their "essential" inner differences. Are equality and difference mutually exclusive terms? Does being equal require sameness? Rannik's installation seemed to ask the yet more complicated questions of why and how the social positioning of the gendered body is subordinated to allegedly biological determinism. The formal solution of the work does not oppose masculinity to femininity as both insides are presented in soft, "feminine" form. The goal of such a solution may be the artistic and aesthetic wholeness of the piece but the result goes further than that. Such delicate masculinity, indistinguishable from its "other sex" counterpart may function as transgressively as disruptive representations of the feminine do.

Among the works trying to voice specifically female experiences, or as Hélène Cixous has phrased it, 'to speak the unspoken', are the video installation *Hole* (1995) by Mare Tralla which addresses the taboo of representing menstruation and the female sexual organs and Eve Kask's exhibition *291/2* (April 1998) where the female body and its rhythms were directly connected to the mystical power of earth-goddesses. The depictions of female biology do not imply the identification of women exclusively with their bodies; they rather mark the efforts to offer women an opportunity for positive identification with their bodies and bodily functions traditionally left out of representation as well as an intervention into the dominant politics of representation.

Nevertheless, there are few depictions of female sexuality and embodiment in Estonian contemporary art. For instance, images of lesbian sexuality are almost absent with the exception of metaphoric works by Lilian Mosolainen. Does this gap relate to our unconscious fears or is it a result of the trivialisation of sexual imagery in popular culture which influences artists in the way they try to avoid being accused of creating pornographic imagery? Perhaps both reasons are valid even though the former seems to be more relevant if we take into account the rarity of the transgressive and abject body in our art culture. This can be explained not only by aesthetic reasons which play an important role in incorporating certain images into art and dismissing others; it is also the necessity to abject and control certain images such as the transgressive, uncontrollable and sexually insatiable body, especially the female body. Thus, most of Estonian body art deals with representation rather than embodiment [33] as if bearing witness to the poststructuralist and postmodern understanding of reality as the result of representation. On the other hand, as it is true that the female body is caught up in representation and constructed in this process there is no clear-cut separation between the "real" body and its

representations[34] although recently there has been a growing number of diverse art practices seeking to convey the message lying outside the representations.

The issue of embodiment or what it means to live in a concrete material body is taken up, for instance, in the video *I Clicked My Heart* (1997) by Tiia Johannson. In this piece addressing the story of the author's illness echocardiogram photos of her heart are used to produce a visual narrative of her illness. The fragmentation of the bodily image manages to escape the burden of cultural representations of the body.

The main proponents of the video installation *A Toy* (1995) by Mare Tralla are young women with not quite "ideal" bodies performing striptease. The video installation consists of two TV sets opposite to each other, one showing a man holding a remote control in his hand and gazing at the women taking off their clothes on the opposite TV screen. At a certain moment he loses control over what is happening on the other TV screen and the power relations between the male and female figures are suddenly blurred, even reversed: the women subordinate the male viewer to their power not by fulfilling his fantasy but by destroying his pleasure. Finally, the female bodies escape control completely and start to change form, to grow and diminish uncovering grotesque, mocking bodies behind the surface of nice tamed femininity.

The popularity of the critique of representation in Estonian art of the 1990s is linked to the striking emergence of photo art. Already in *Est.Fem* scripto-visual photo works turning their critical eye towards the existing norms and stereotypes of femininity attracted attention. Piia Ruber presented the female "words of wisdom" addressed to a young girl, comprising instructions of how a "real" woman should act and be while Piret Räni documented the process of becoming an "ideal" woman. Both projects were especially relevant at a time when a new cult of the "real"/"ideal" woman (either home-made Estonian mothers or imported Barbie-dolls of standard measurements) was gaining ground in Estonian society. Blurred images of a young woman in the photos by Margot Kask work against the terror of representation as if affirming the belief that the feminine cannot be subordinated to the logic of (phallocentric) representation.

The importance of the critique of representation is inherited from historical practices of representing women. As women have mostly appeared to the gazes of other people as and in images and representations, the latter has creative power over the dominant constructions of femininity which in their turn have determined the real experiences of real women as a result of the process of internalisation.

The project *A Dream* (1996) by Piret Räni, which takes a look at the daydreams and fantasies of young women, underscores that fantasy and our most intimate and private experiences 'can be shown to be coded and made visible through discourse.'[35] The photos for which different young women had to pose illustrated how certain emotions are inscribed on our bodies in specific ways. The major idea was to play out one's dream role in the "compulsory" setting of a toilet, the environment which set the (visual and contextual) limits of sameness, anonymity and triviality that

participants had to transgress to express their individualities. The patterns of bodily expressions, the repetition of day-dreams and fantasies, and the similarities in living through what is commonly designated as "personal" experience brought the women in the photos together in some kind of uniform and as if common dream. It seems to suggest that our dreams and fantasies are, at least to some extent, ideologically and socially produced. Yet, behind those empty, often self-ironical roles and signifiers there lurks a certain nostalgia – an impossible dream of winning back the time of innocence when sincere identification with those images was still possible.

The group F.F.F.F (Kaire Rannik, Kristi Paap, Berit Teeäär, Ketli Tiitsar and Maria Valdma) is perhaps the most prominent women artists' group in Estonian art of the 1990s. Their project *F-Files* in the exhibition *Private Views* concentrated on the gap between ideal and real women, between ideal gender roles and individuals. All five women dressed up and played through different female identities: we can see girls in national costume, girls in a rock-band, nice women from the 1950s, homeless women. With these group photos the artists point to the dramatic conflict arising from obediently fitting into prescribed visual identities while at the same time trying to maintain one's individuality. The F.F.F.F artists have chosen to play mostly with ideal images and then suddenly, totally negatively coded (or rather absent role in a cultural imagery) homeless women "spoil" the picture. Their action is very close to what Braidotti calls an act "as if" which treats femininity as an option, that is, 'a set of available poses, a set of costumes rich in history and social power relations, but not fixed or compulsory any longer.' [36] Liina Siib has demonstrated a strong social sensibility and interest in the marginal, often most vulnerable people in contemporary Estonian society. In her show entitled *The Presumption of Innocence* (1997), she exhibited colour photos of female prisoners and teenage girls studying at modelling school. In both cases the traditional understanding of femininity as based upon a "natural" female feature - innocence - is taken as the object of analysis: How can a female prisoner wearing a wedding veil (thus doubly coded as innocent) fulfil the ideal of purity embodied by the innocent/virgin bride? Do female prisoners fall outside the prescribed limits of femininity? Does the process of learning of how perform a "real" femininity, which guarantees certain power for women in patriarchal structure, is just another expression of "innocent" and "sincere" femininity? We can talk here about femininity as masquerade, widely used concept in feminist research and art. This concept can be seen as liberating in its ability to undermine the notion of femininity as something given, inborn and essential, yet it is easy to misunderstand it as free play with costumes and attributes. Keeping in mind Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity it becomes clear that even if gender is performative, i.e. expressed through actions, gestures and speech and constantly in doing it is not 'a set of free-floating attributes', rather it is 'compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.'[37]

Among works intervening into the local tradition of depicting the female body

Ly Lestberg's Pietà which introduced the naked body of an old woman and connected this image to the mystic powers of female sexuality and motherhood should be mentioned. Ene-Liis Semper has challenged the idea of inborn and "natural" maternity in the video installation Natural Law which together with her other works dealing with corporeality, mortality, the female body and images, has left its mark on what can be represented in art and how.

Going back to the question of how much the examples of Western feminism have influenced local art practices, the issue I have been briefly trying to touch upon throughout the whole essay, it must be added that this influence is perhaps strongest in works dealing with representation. Why I keep coming back to this question in the first place is because of the ever recurring accusations of feminism, including feminist art, being nothing but an imported Western "vice" which has nothing to offer to Estonian women and it not is relevant to our social and cultural reality. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look this question loses its validity as not only cultural expressions of "Estonianness" but also local and national identity itself is formed in the dialogue with other identities among which Western or European identity is of central importance. Thus, even if feminist art uses imported theories and examples they are being transformed and rethought relying on local necessities and the private experiences of local artists.

A topic on its own is the relation of Estonian feminist or critical women's art to the cyberfeminist movement but this would require another essay to be fully explored. In any case, Estonian women artists such as Mare Tralla, Tiia Johannson and Nelli Rohtvee have made an entrance onto the international new media scene. The question of how important a role the ideas of cyberfeminism will play in Estonian art will be answered sometime in the future. After all, new media at least offers an attractive promise to liberate the expressions of the feminine from the historical burden of representation and gendered identities as they appear in traditional arts. Even if it is true that the male human was the only human in the past, the future will reveal if the female cyborg is the only cyborg.[38]

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Notes

1. David Summers 'Form and Gender' in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds) *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover/ London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

2. Griselda Pollock 'Inscriptions in the Feminine' in the catalogue of the exhibition *Inside the Visible* curated by Catherine de Zegher.(Boston: MIT, 1996) p. 68.

3. Griselda Pollock 'Feminism and Modernism' in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock(ed) *Framing*

Feminism: Art and Women's Movement 1970-85 (London: Pandora, 1987) p. 93 (my emphasis)

4. Griselda Pollock 'The Politics of Theory' in Griselda Pollock (ed) *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) p.5.

5. Widespread understanding of artistic practice is in Estonia constructed as the self-sufficient expression of the artist's personality which has nothing to do with cultural and social conditions. The relationships between art and ideology are especially problematic. My understanding of the artist's activity links it, similarly to any other human activity, to the realm of ideology and its material expressions in the form of social institutions, values, rituals, etc. (see, for instance: Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall.(eds.) *Visual Culture: The Reader (*London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage, 1999).

6. See, for instance: Ants Juske 'Abi, Ants.ks pisibluffijale: feministlik kunst' *Sirp*, 19 June 1998; Linnar Priimägi 'Feministlikust' kunstist (On 'feminist' art)' *Eesti Päevaleht,* 29 August 1996; Johannes Saar 'Eraeluline kunst (Private art)' *Postimees*, 5 June 1998.

7.The chronology of events and the interpretations of some works have also appeared in the article 'Revolting 90's in Estonian Art' Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia. (London: Women's Art Library, 2000); Now published *Private Views*, distributed by I.B. Tauris.

8. Eha Komissarov, . The catalogue of *Est.Fem.* (Tallinn, 1995) p. 4.

9. Ringvee brings the data from 1988 according to which 60% of women artists belonged to the applied arts section of Estonian Artists' Union (see: Selve Ringvee. Naisvaatenurk eesti skulptuuris (Women Sculptors in Estonia) BA thesis, Tallinn Pedagogical University, Department of Art and Art History, 1996, app. 1.)

10. For instance, the list of the most influential avantgarde artists compiled by leading art critic Ants Juske in 1998 named 2 women out of a total 18. (*Eesti Päevaleht*, 24 January 1998) 11. , Mari Sobolev 'Feministlikke tunnusjooni 1980. aastate lõpu-1990. aastate eesti kunstis'('Some Feminist Features of Estonian Art in the End of the 1980s and in the 1990s.') BA thesis. Estonian Art Academy, Tallinn, 1996.

12. Reet Varblane, . Introduction. The catalogue of *Est.Fem.* (Tallinn, 1995) p.7.

13. Komissarov p. 4

14. Participating artists also had quite different opinions on that account. For instance, one participating male artist, Toomas Volkmann, severely criticised those works which perpetuated rather than deconstructed traditional gender roles, in an interview given to me. (see:Katrin Kivimaa 'Kunst ja feminism EKMi konteksis (Art and feminism in the Estonian art world)' *Sirp*, 23 October, 6 and 20 November 1998.)

15. R.W. Connell. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

16.See: Elizabeth Reid 'Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination' Steven G. Jones (eds) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1995).

17. This became clear from the interview given to the author. (Kivimaa, 1998)

18. Diana Fuss *Essentially Speaking.* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989) p.115.

19. Komissarov p. 5

20. The fact that *Est.Fem* and the personality of Mare Tralla have played a significant role in getting young artists interested in feminist issues was several times mentioned in the interviews. (See: Kivimaa, 1998)

21. See: Varblane, 'Uued ja vanad ruumimängud'. *Sirp*, 19 June 1998; Mari Sobolev 'Võti naiste loogikasse' *Sõnumileht*, 4 June, 1998; Ants Juske 'Ihule lähedalt ja kaugelt' *Eesti Päevaleht* 4 June, 1998.

22. This effort, while understandable in itself, remains both theoretically and politically dubious. On the complicated relationships between feminism and postmodernism, including in art, see, for instance: Craig Owens 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism' Hal Foster (ed) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983); Janet Wolff *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture.* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.) Chapters I and VI.

23. Angela Dimitrikaki tackles this quite dubious use of 'postfeminism' in a book which grew out of the 'Private Views' exhibition. See: Angela Dimitrikaki 'Space, Gender, Art: Redressing Private Views' in *Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia*, London: Women's Art Library, 2000;

24. Griselda Pollock 'Inscriptions in the Feminine' p. 71.

25. Varblane. Autobigraafia--üleminekuaja lastehaigus või sotsiaalse kunsti võimalus? (Autobiography: An Infantile Disease of the Transition Period or a Possibility for the Development of Social Art?), in *Changes in Art and Understanding It: Materials of the Autumn Conferences of TUA and the Estonian AICA, 1994-1995.* Proceedings of Tallinn Art University 4 p.44.

26. Pollock 1987 p. 87.

27. Jo Anna Isaak *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter.* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996) p.19.

28. Rosi Braidotti 'Cyberfeminism with a Difference' . Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires.(eds) *Feminisms* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.525.

29. Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own.*

30. *Kiss* invites a Lacanian reading as well: references to the mirror stage and the process of the constitution of the self through others and in the symbolic order, that is, in language, are explicit in the work. On the importance of the mirror stage as a primary site of identification (or rather as méconnaissance or "misconstruction") in the development of the child, see Jacques Lacan 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp.1-7. Lacan's account of the relationship between language and the unconscious, and subjectivity as constructed in the acquisition of language is presented, for instance, in his essay 'The Agency of the letter in the Unconscious or reason since Freud' in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 146-178.

31. See: Elisabeth Cowie. 'Woman as Sign. In Woman in Question' Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (eds.) *m./f* (London, New York: Verso, 1990) pp.117-133.

32. bell hooks. 'Marginality as Site of Resistance' Fergusson, Russell and others.(eds.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusets University Press, 1990) p. 341.

34. Elizabeth Grosz *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. x.
35. Betterton p. 12.
36. Braidotti p. 528.
37. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 24.
38. The original phrase by Sadie Plant is as follows: 'If the male human is the only human, the female cyborg is the only cyborg.' (Plant, Sadie. 'Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism' Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires(eds) *Feminisms* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 506.)

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