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List of Contents

Katy Deepwell Profile of Ostranenie : Women Filmmakers from Eastern EuropeInterviews with Dragana Zarevac, Odiliya Yankova, Branka Milicic-Davic and Ulrike Ettinger	4
Katy Deepwell The Cyberknitting event at Ostranenie, Bauhaus, Dessau and 2nd interview with Branka Milicic-Davic	12
Katy Deepwell Interview with Irina Aktuganova of Gallery 21, St Petersburg	17
Catherine Elwes The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art	22
Rose Issa 'Re-Orienting our Views': A rediscovery of Iran through its cinema and women filmmakers	39
Mali Wu: A Profile	45
Linda Jaivin 'Consuming Texts: the work of Mali Wu'	54
Mare Tralla T.Est.Art : A View of Estonian Feminism	57
Diary of an Ageing Art Slut	66

T.Est.Art

Mare Tralla

August 1995 was the date of first Estonian feminist art exhibition, which took place in three different Galleries in Tallinn: *Vaal*, *City Gallery* and *Mustpeade Maja*. Called *Est.Fem* it was organised by Eha Komissarov, Reet Varblane and myself. *Est. Fem* was sponsored and supported by many institutions, like Estonian Culture Endowment, Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts, Estonian Lesbian and Gay Association, various galleries and lot of private persons, who helped with little things. Twenty-one artists participated in that exhibition, not only by making works, but also taking part in discussions before August and writing short contributions to the catalogue about their works and their thoughts about feminism.

The preparation process for *Est.Fem* was long, beginning as far back as 1992, when Eha Komissarov became convinced of the need for feminist art in Estonia regardless of what others thought. She wrote in her essay, in the exhibition catalogue, about that time: 'My first experiences with feminism soon became conviction, that the questions of gender and identity are completely alienated in Estonia and dealing with feminism would mean voluntarily banishing oneself from society.' I met Eha in December 1993, when she gave me the opportunity to do a performance *Breaking Illusion* in the gallery *Vaal*. Later she invited me to take part in organising a feminist art exhibition. I honestly wanted to refuse at first, but she convinced and pushed me into action. After that I met Leena-Maija Rossi and Asko Mäkelä from Finland and invited them to give talks to Estonian artists about feminist art. They came in spite of the fact there was no money to pay them. Somehow we managed to create the interest around the up and coming feminist art show and through that made our voices heard in many different media channels. Finally the artists were willing to take part - especially the young generation. This exhibition

can be seen as the childbirth or first delivery of Estonian feminist art. Artists who took part in *Est.Fem* are closer to post-feminist thinking, to evaluating tolerance and to introspective thought.

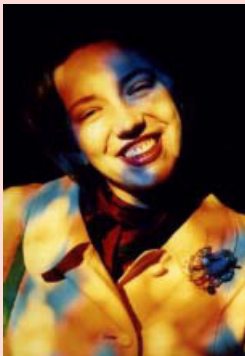
This is a good place to give a light to some points of recent Estonian history, which may have influenced the artists through their personal experience. The following is my personal story or memory.

When I was a child I had many idols based on the female heroines of the Soviet time which had been created by both the totalitarian regime and the media. I grew up in the rural Estonia. My parents valued hard physical work, which is very typical of Estonians. Our national poet Tammsaare wrote: 'You have to work hard to get love.'² This suggests why our idols were always workers and why the communist propaganda succeeded to show workers as heroines: female tractor drivers,

milkmaids, weavers and so on. But it was not simply professions like this who were honoured, the idols were very concrete, namely those who had been given the title of Hero of the Socialist Labour. Strangely enough I knew only the names of these individuals and I had my own fantasy pictures about what they looked like. I thought they must look big, strong and fat with artificially curled hair. My idea was connected to a picture of how Leninist feminism was shown through the ideology. Almost in an opposite manner, Estonian male photographer Peeter Tooming takes and shows the naked female body as a forbidden secret topic. His success is an interesting phenomenon, as the nude photographs he took were not how most of the communist propaganda would show a woman. He has become well known and honoured as almost the only artistic photographer in Estonia. Women in his photos are depicted as pure flesh and naked, nothing about them is heroic. Unfortunately he puts into these images all his masculine long-established hidden desires and a certain sexual sickness because of the contexts in which the bodies are shown. A good example is 'The Hunter's Valley' from the year 1974'. A rising woman's bottom becomes the center-front of landscape, the valley in between two buttocks has been opened by hands on it. I wrote about his works in the weekly 'Eesti Ekspress' to show the point of his photos which had never before been discussed: 'His smutty images pretend to the title of art, to disguise the real meaning'. Most of his photos are made at the time, when pornography was forbidden, single

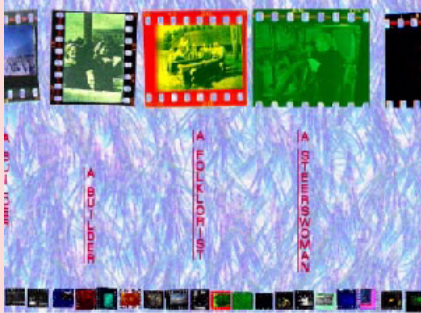


Mare Tralla performance
Estonian Dreams (Tallinn
Art Hall, 1996)



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Mare Tralla CD-Rom
"her.space" (1997)

Right: Mare Tralla
performance *Sun-
Time-Games* (Vaal
Gallery Tallinn,
1995)



Below :Peeter
Tooming *After Army
Has Gone* (1989)



examples of porno magazines smuggled to Soviet Union and the illegal photo-cards did not fill the need to look at naked bodies for men.³ Tooming's nudes aren't far from bad pornography. Shortly after Estonian Singing Revolution, in summer 1988, he made a series titled *After the Army Has Gone*. That series became extremely significant. Tired, old, used female bodies are photographed like abandoned coffeepots in the middle of waste land -

the land raped by Soviet Army. The body seems raped too, just an army bitch, whom nobody needs. This became a real example of the survival of the former Soviet woman. Nobody thought that his works may insult women. After my criticism was published I was accused, by another woman, of being immoral and mad, because I had said in words, what he thought.⁴ I used a finger to point it out but this other woman disagreed with me.

Estonian artists like And Keskküla, Andre Touts, Tiit Pääsuke, Urmas Pedanik, and others have painted at the same time ideal landscapes - still-lives, beautiful paintings in which one can almost fully smell freedom - as if this were a reaction against the official soviet art-world. Under communism, a woman became a hero, if she managed to have kids and take care of her husband who was often just an alcoholic, or she successfully made a career for herself. It is known that women were forced to make a career, it was forbidden to stay at home and to be just a housekeeper. As we used to think then and do think now, woman is behind everything. Even when a man has always been on the screen or in the news, he is led by a woman. This is a common misconception. Nowadays it is even more obvious. Woman don't like to be seen, they want to lead but remain hidden by themselves. To talk about women's liberation and feminism in Estonia is the same as making bad jokes. Hasso Krull has seen it as a scandal for intellectuals.⁵ All woman are happy! At least they appear

to be like this, because it is bad to talk about red herrings. And they are happy indeed because they got tampons with the independence!

It is not correct to say that women in Estonia have not had their liberation movement. During the era of national awakening, in the second half of 19th century, women, like poet Lydia Koidula, were extremely significant political organisers and educators. Before the Singing Revolution women had their liberation movement, too. The aim was to get the right to stay at home and look after children. The family became, for a short period, extremely important for Estonians. By 1988, it was established, that woman could stay at home till her youngest child is three years old. The state subsidy was not sufficient for living, however the right to stay home was a victory. I guess it is not so easy to understand for western people, who live in society with high unemployment how women felt in the Soviet Union after they got that right. I can talk only about Estonia and about the feelings there, what we felt was that there should be more children in Estonian families. A song, which has a chorus: "Our country must be filled with kids, and with kids, and with kids..." became popular before the Singing Revolution. During it, it was repeated thousands of times by tens of thousands of people. In the summer 1988 tens of thousand of Estonians gathered together under Estonian national flag 'blue-black-white' tricolour to sing about freedom at nights on the song festival dais in Tallinn. Musicians wrote lot of songs and rock-bands were playing and singing together with people at the same stage. The common feeling amongst all was a compassion for the people you met and a shared nationality. While formally Estonia still remained under the rules of Moscow, there was the feeling of independence. Indeed, the future seemed brighter and that had an impact for everybody, firstly for families: 1988-89 were the years of baby-boom. It is difficult to see any specific role for women in the Singing Revolution, only during the communist period women were perhaps the more active part of those who carried on the tradition of Song Festivals. The Singing Revolution was generally a political liberation movement, men and women were together for an independent Estonia. Creative people: artists, musicians, poets were those who played significant role in that movement. At the congress of Estonian Creative Associations 'The Declaration of Independence' was ratified on 15th of November 1988.

Now, Estonians are too much involved to observe the formal beautiful sides of capitalism and it is hard to believe the idealism of Singing Revolution ten years ago. I don't know how long it will take till the people will start again to value something other than money in my homeland. This will not happen until there are other grounds for discussions, until the newspaper editors will truly understand the effects of publishing advertisements with the text which suggest that only 25-year-old male will get a profitable job and only good looking females need apply. All the society is orientated to youth. And that was obviously one of the reasons why Mari Sobolev, Marko Laimre and me got the opportunity to make monthly TV program in Estonian State TV in 1994. We called the program 'Yesno'. It was great experience to work in

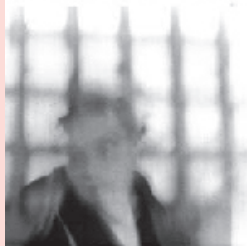
the real media world. And for me it was my pre-feminist period fruitful for later projects. We were idealists who thought: NOW WE WILL DO REALLY INTERESTING TV PROGRAMS, which will not talk about the official art-world and we'll have the opportunity to raise some issues around society and art. We wanted to do something alternative. Luckily none of us had had a TV at home and we had only seen one rarely, just enough to know what is going on there. The first demand for us was to make a show, which was accessible for everyone, so that even Louise, the former Soviet heroine, should like it. However, thanks to the other suggestion that we should look a bit more interesting than we did at that time, we took the word to dress at first greasy and then -- if you give the finger to the Devil, it will take the hand. So we almost created a show that we wanted in an ironical way. Art is mostly seen as extremely serious thing, in a way as a science, in Estonia. We didn't think so. The show had different parts in it. It introduced young artists, who were not known much. Then we talked about multimedia like 'Multimedia for beginners', in which we wanted to get to know the actual situation with multimedia in Estonia at that time. The situation was very bizarre, we found out, that even 'the experts' didn't know what it was although we let them show on the programme that they didn't know. Sometimes we used badly the misfortune of persons we interviewed. This was our method of ironic criticism and although we did make an art-show, we are artists and not TV journalists. We also discussed some general topics such as *money and art* or *social realism versus social art*. Finally after introducing 20th century art through visualised performance Louise, the heroine, got angry. We don't make the shows any more because we were called 'immoral. This means we were not normal. We do more art and we write more articles now. The reaction to *Yesno* was the first time I found myself being accused of immorality. I opened the Campbell soup and left its content in the street. The content of modern art looks really like vomit. Later I acquired the title of *disgusting woman*. At first this was because of Est.Fem and my scratchy video-installation - an ironic criticism of Estonian feminism. During the emptiness the illuminating text appeared on wall of the gallery 'So we gave birth to estonian feminism'.

While I was organising Est.Fem and talking with artists and critics I saw how many of them took it only as an opportunity to be in a show, which may have some points of scandal in it, and may be liked by the media. Feminism was often seen merely as a fashion - a trend. And I remember my co-curator telling me how in the West they are waiting for the feminist art from post-soviet countries to emerge. As an artist I needed to react against this. So I made a video mixing hard-porn and old photos of my mother as a flower-girl and the local news. I added the text from my own pioneer-diaries and from the beginning of eighties all the wonderful backgrounds I have developed. Sometimes the lights were turned off and you saw on the wall light letters: 'So we gave birth to Estonian Feminism'.

Most of the artists in Est.Fem were very young, some of them still students. They

were looking at gender and their personal stories, nothing too political or shocking, using different mediums from painting till video-installation. Many artists used photography, which was relatively novel for Estonian art-world. Margot Kask made a series of photographs, set as a panorama of unidentified women. Grey blurred images. The artist writes about her works:

'...to recognise very familiar object, one does not need a detailed image. Because it could be very close, a very well known form. In this case the blur is equal to a



Margot Kask *Unidentified woman* 2 photos in series, *Est.Fem*, 1995

feeling of comfort and certainly which - through the incomprehensible form of movement in one moment - has obtained easily a sensible meaning of something already known, something that has been familiar for a long time, something does not have to be clearly understood.'⁶ Something familiar and recognisable without explicit description was often searched for by artist. Anu Kalm was similarly observing her family story through women's eyes in her mixed-media work 'Four Generations: Great-grandmother, Grandmother, Mother and Me'. Little things, letters, buttons, scissors, that once belonged to those women were attached to four plywood panels. Piia Ruber made an installation around parental knowledge. Small photographs and images in light-boxes representing different everyday activities in layers, attached with mothering texts - all, what influences your understandings about life. 'A person finds him or herself dealing with the thoughts and matters which are not meant to be dealt with. Everything happens by accident and seemingly guided by somebody else. "THESE ARE FILES FED INTO (US) BY THE ANCESTORS.'⁷

Piret Rāni tried to find out how to become an ideal woman in her diary photo-collages and how that ideal woman feels. Black and white images of all time idols are combined with handwritten text on diary's black background. Somehow naive, yet still convincing: to sleep, to smile, to forget, to bitter. Ideals are incurable sickness, is her conclusion.

There were also three male artist taking part of the show. Toomas Volkmann, a gay artist had his series of portraits, in which he juxtaposed two traditions: the Renaissance portrait and the 19th century photo-iconography that has been established according to the ideology and definitions of the time. He explains himself: 'Reducing the social hints in my portraits to a minimum and freeing models from the 19th century ironic *man* and *woman* body-language attitudes, I have tried to attain a state where the image on the picture is not only assurance of which should be patriarchal *virile man* or *womanly woman* at the end of 20th century. It is on the contrary.'⁸



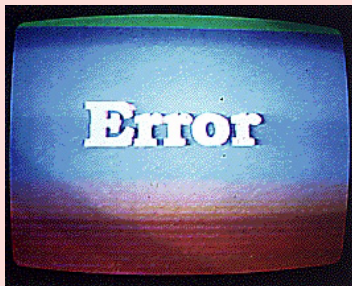
Above: Piret Ráni *Ideal Woman*, shown in *Est.Fem*,1995. Above right: Toomas Volkman David and Warren 1994 shown in *Est.Fem*

Est.Fem was important experience for artists and for all Estonian art-world, if not more. Several articles were published, not talking so much about specific artworks, more observing and analysing the phenomenon in general.

If I try to analyse why I call myself feminist artist or why I became one, it is not linked with theory or specific written works by feminist thinkers, simply because those works were very difficult to access in Estonia. I became feminist because of the Estonian society and how people and women were treated there. Consumerism was novelty for us and it's way of going over people. Old behaviours and convictions from communist period added some pepper to new problems. In some situations I just did not know how to behave or how to fight with stupidity or ignorance. As the time passed I felt the need to do something more radical or shocking to make those problems, which were bothering me more visible.

In my video-installation *A Toy* for the exhibition Biotoopia, the 3rd annual exhibition of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts in Estonia my friends and I were finally naked. Two monitors were placed face-to-face. In a one there was a Man, choosing and controlling a Woman in another screen. The Woman did at first, what he wanted, what he always wants with a kind smile: feeding, undressing and sex. The world was nice and perfect for him until the woman turned in on herself. He got lot of *error* signs and finally lost all the control: the woman transformed the Man: 'Welcome to a Mans World!'

In June 1996 at the Vaal Gallery in Tallinn I made a show called *Second-hand Lovestories* and later several performances. The Last one *Kiss* was a *break-through* for me. Even the male art-critics like Harry Liivrand who didn't accept me before did



Images from MareTralla's video-installation *A Toy* (1995), *Biotoopia*, Tallinn Art Gallery

so after that performance, because, wonder of wonders, I didn't undress myself and I was not considered immoral : I was kissing them - Estonian Male Art World - while they were talking about me. I have passed all the necessary Western and Leninist feminism exercises now I can start to create my own feminism. However, in spite of this, I am afraid, feminism can be successful in Estonia only through a miracle. (The ignorance and selfishness of people is too great).

Internet projects have offered me new experiences to learn and new ways of making art, as well as to show my ideas to new audiences who have no access to the galleries which I previously used for exhibitions. The internet gives me an opportunity to use different kinds of language and types of communication with people, it is playful environment and I am exploring it. *Loveline* plays with the idea of love advice and different subjects around love. How to succeed with love? What to do in certain situations, etc. It is fun project, which somehow continues the ideas I started in my exhibition *Second-hand Lovestories* , only it is more entertaining and at the same time I am manipulating the audience. Some parts of it might be seen pornographic, they aren't that, they are simply there as areas around love which come close to forbidden areas.

After a year in London I went back to Estonia and what happened was rather shocking. Harry Liivrand, the critic, said in public that wanted to see what is under my shirt. This was early in the morning on the street which was full of people, the participators of the *Interstanding2* conference. He was the member of the jury and I an artist whose work was on the show and which they were assessing. We have never been good friends, but he thought that he could make those kind of jokes. When you call yourself feminist they think they can do what ever they want. Unfortunately the society supports that kind of male attitude, more than it listens to words which might criticise common behaviour. Personally it is sometimes difficult to get over being insulted, yet ideologically things are moving. Only in which direction? The *Est.Fem* project will continue as there are artists in Estonia, who are interested to risk their personal comfort to say what they feel.



3 images from Mare Tralla *Second-hand Lovestories*, Vaal Gallery, Tallinn, 1996

Notes

1. Eha Komissarov 'Testing Feminism' *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn, 1995) p.4
2. Anton Hansen *Tammsaare, Tõde ja õigus I* (Tallinn 1964)
3. Mare Tralla 'Kaameranarkomaan' weekly *Eesti Ekspress* (23.02.1996)
4. Elonna Spruit 'Kes Te olete, Mare Tralla?' weekly *Eesti Ekspress* (22.03.1996)
5. Hasso Krull 'Feminism and the Estonian Community' *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.9
6. Margot Kask *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.12
7. Piia Ruber *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.22
8. Toomas Volkmann *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.47

For more information on Mare Tralla and her work : go to her website
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