

LETTER FROM TALLINN

Dis/Identification

The purpose of my brief two-day visit to Tallinn, Estonia, was to review the international group exhibition 'The State is not a Work of Art' curated by Katerina Gregos to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Estonian Republic and held at Tallinn Art Hall and its adjoining spaces: Art Hall Gallery, Tallinn City Gallery and the nearby Vabaduse gallery. Journeying from Tallinn's contrasting city centres, the glass-fronted financial and shopping urban axis and the UNESCO protected Old Town, I bussed it to Kumu Art Museum in snow-covered Kadriorg Park hoping to garner some awareness of my location from its permanent exhibition of Estonian art from the 18th century to the 1990s (opened in 2006, the museum also presents temporary contemporary art exhibitions but, on my visit, it was between shows). Given time constraints, I raced through the impressively extensive Leonhard Lapin retrospective 'Void and Space' and focused on the fourth floor's permanent display 'Conflicts and Adaptations: Estonian Art of the Soviet Era 1940-1991'. Each gallery was flanked by vertical lightboxes presenting what to an outsider is a fascinating and perplexing social history of these decades via archival photographic images and succinctly informative labels. A young Estonian assistant at Tallinn's most international commercial gallery, Temnikova & Kasela, later impressed on me the importance of this museum display for her generation who, born in the 1990s, know little of this social history. I was especially struck by two video screens. One showed an oral history project begun in 2013 called *Kogu Me Lugu* (Collect Our Story) in which survivors of deportation who escaped from or arrived in Estonia as a result of the Nazi and Russian occupations recount their harrowing memories. The other showed *Monolith*, 2007, Kristina Norman's experimental documentary exploring the tensions between the Russian-speaking community in Tallinn, who comprise approximately 29% of the population but are only granted citizenship if they speak Estonian, and Estonian ultra-nationalists, which came to a head around the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument dedicated to Russians who lost their lives in the Second World War. These works prepped me for the tensions explored in 'The State is not a Work of Art' which assembles 24 international artists in total, including five from Estonia, and features Norman's *Bring Back My Fire Gods*, 2018, as one of 13 new commissions. Norman's video features Ethiopian/Swedish

opera singer Sofia Jernberg singing an adaptation of a Russian folk song dedicated to the second Anglo-Boer War at the site of Estonia's national awakening, the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, where, between 1987 and 1990, masses of people assembled to sing Estonian folk songs banned by Russia. Norman's video, which works better as a sound piece or performance documentation, advocates a sonorous polyvocality beyond univocal nationalist sentiment, her work rendering more complex the impression I gleaned from younger Estonians working in the cultural sector who opined that Estonian school education is slowly erasing the problem of Russian-speaking ethnicities.

Interestingly in this regard, the black block lettering of Lise Harlev's fabric banner which covers the facade of the Art Hall, thereby being the first work encountered in the exhibition, reads *Mõtleme oma emakeeles ka siis, kui selles ei räägi* (You think in your own language, even when you don't speak it), 2018. For me, the work refers not only to bilingualism but also to sense memories that are carried in the body that, while not being outside language, are not quite the same as it either. A series of six posters by Harlev entitled *People Who Speak Your Language*, 2018, will be posted around the city in English, Estonian and Russian, the various Barbara Kruger-like slogans raising questions about national dis/identifications.

Although there are far-right elements in the Estonian Parliament, nationalism here is also connected to liberation from Soviet oppression rather than simply the retraction of territory, so it seems fitting that part of Gregos's exhibition premise is to ask whether there can be a civic nationalism rather than an ethnic one, a kind of transnational democracy that does not ignore national ties in the way of the elitist cosmopolitanism so pervasive in the art world. (This issue and its connection to the exhibition title, a phrase lifted from Hegel, are addressed in the beautifully conceived exhibition catalogue.) Art, however, is not always up to the task of exploring political issues without being illustrative or didactic. A lot of text-based works circulate in the show, from Thomas Locher's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 2005-06, and large-scale pile of cardboard dice *A Hundred Thousand Billion Societies*, 2017, to Femke Herregraven's *Liquid Citizenship*, 2018, an installation version of her 2015 online V&A commission that also presented stacked cardboard boxes, but bearing the astronomical dollar prices that those who have the fiscal means to do so can pay to access their citizenship of choice. The work posited much less of a 'liquid modernity' than that envisaged by

philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. Interacting with the online version, I was allocated the identity of a woman from Bhutan who was not considered eligible for citizenship or for smuggling.

Who is included, who is excluded was poignantly scripted in Loulou Cherinet's two-screen installation *Statecraft*, 2017, in which a camera, continuously panning across adjacent yet disjunctively separate screens, captures diverse groups of people in semi-circles, some having dinner, discussing the Swedish term *utanförskap* (outsidership). The work sets up a hypnotic relay between groups of migrants, people of colour, homeless persons and the parents of autistic children, who challenge the entrenched nature of *innanförskap* (insidership) in Swedish society. In the durational montage, statements become divorced from on-screen speakers, the dislocation generating questions about how judgements are



made of others on the basis of where they are perceived to have come from, what they look like and how they speak.

Other works in the exhibition signal how primal forms of national identity are performed via costume, (Jaanus Samma's *New Year's Boy*, 2018) and insignia (graphic designer Ivar Sakk's *Borrowed Identities*, 2018). But the star of the show has to be Szabolcs KissPál's *From Fake Mountains to Faith (Hungarian Trilogy)*, 2016, which includes a fictional museum, *The Chasm Records*, and two fictional documentary films, *Amorous Geography* and *The Rise of the Fallen Feather*, whose footage, sourced from MaNDA, the Hungarian National Digital Archive,

fabrics the truth of nationalism as a kind of mythic religion whose unfounded belief systems are always ready to be activated by irredentist zeal. The ambitious work draws parallels between the resurgence of this zeal in Viktor Mihály Orbán's Hungary and the fascist-nationalist era (1920–1944), making associative connections between the national trauma of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, as a result of which

Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory and more than half its multi-ethnic population, and the Holocaust of Hungarian Jews. Normally I bore easily in relation to museumified art, but the meticulous and sensitive balancing of information and fantasy drew me in, affecting me with an encroaching bodily awareness of the vitality of totemic warmongering sentiments at work today.

Lise Harlev
You think in your own language 2018

Femke Herregraven
Liquid Citizenship 2018

Loulou Cherinet
Statecraft 2017 video installation



KissPál's speculative look at the past was complemented by *New Unions*, 2018, an installation by Studio Jonas Staal exploring future imaginaries. Staal is founder of the artistic and political organisation New World Summit and the campaign New Unions, which creates assemblies with transdemocratic political parties and platforms with the goal of imagining alternative choices to either nationalistic separation from the EU or subjection to the austerity politics of the economic elite. The installation consists of a black-and-white carpet of an inverted Europe on which these alternative groups, from Podemos to DiEM25, the pan-European political movement launched in 2015 by former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, are mapped. Footage of various assemblies, one featuring Varoufakis, another showing the party Feminist Initiative (F!) in Sweden, is projected in the space. The work's direct communicative aesthetics – it also contained sculptural renditions of broken star shapes sinking into or rising up from the carpet – made abstract and activist ideas materially palpable.

On a more prosaic level, Kristina Solomoukha's and Paolo Codeluppi's *The Monument Contest* displayed maquettes by 13 invited local artists of proposed monuments for an unspecified location. The 'winning' proposal was a smell monument by Anna Mari Liivrand. Its scented shape-shifting spumes seemed like an appropriate symbol of both the primal and the mutating aspects of identity. Before leaving Tallinn, I trekked to the harbour to view the Baltic Sea, which I have vivid memories of walking over its frozen surface during a school trip to Russia prior to glasnost. Overcast cloud shifted to reveal cliff edges and city spires on the far horizon, a view which gradually returned to a Vija Celmins-like greyness. I was reminded of Julia Kristeva's admonition in *Nations Without Nationalism*, my reading matter on my trip, that national identity is not just about – and need not be about – territory and ethnic purity but rather the affective ties of atmospheric strata and sounds that allow for a porosity to others that precedes the clannish totem. The clan defends borders to the death. Sonorous atmospheres, although too ephemeral to be overtly political, are an aesthetics that links us in our differences and needs to be formally recognised. 'The State is not a Work of Art' opens this difficult discussion in a Europe in crisis. ■

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