

16.02.—14.04.2019  
Liina Siib

POLITICS OF  
PARADISE



Curator: Taru Elfving

TALLINNA KUNSTIHOONE  
TALLIN ART HALL

## CURATOR'S FOREWORD

There is no politics without a promise of paradise. Likewise, even the wildest ideas of what constitutes a paradise are conditioned by politics of various kinds. However deeply personal a belief in a paradise may appear, it is entangled with collectively shared histories as well as various cohesive and divisive social, cultural and economic forces. Liina Siib's exhibition sets out to excavate this meshwork with a focus on the myriad dreams and ideals that haunt the present.

Siib's work pays acute attention to the minor narratives, which usually persist in the shadows of the attention economy or in the crevices of accelerated lived experience. She turns the discovered stories and characters into prisms that shed light on shifting societal values and persistent gendered imaginaries as they manifest in ghost stories, scientific signs, spiritual beliefs, legal systems, esoteric economies, and beyond. Bringing together new productions and a selection of older works, the exhibition mediates intergenerational conversations between individual lives and complex histories of privilege and power.

Recently, Liina Siib has looked at ongoing regional economic migration through the eyes of Estonian women working in Finland. Her research and documentation from Helsinki and Võru over two years is brought together in the exhibition at Tallinn Art Hall. The installation *Urban Symphony in E-minor III* and the new video *Come and Go* allow for a multi-faceted contemplation of the hopes and realities that drive the departures and returns while also giving form to novel social relations. This contemporary polyphony of personal stories, dreams and experiences is reflected in the exhibition in new installations focused on tragic yet defiant historical and mythical female characters. The inspiration behind the works range from the fate of a Rococo princess to a crew of fraud witches from the 1920s and a folk myth of angelic evil temptresses, all found in Estonian villages and seeped through with hierarchies of class, wealth and desire.

The new works continue Liina Siib's long-term artistic investigations into the intertwined political and habitual claims to space, voice and value. The exhibition builds on the oscillation between social realism and performative narratives in her work. Throughout her oeuvre, Siib has been balancing on and making negotiable the fine line between fact and fiction that is ever more urgently felt in the post-truth culture today. Her work draws attention to various assumed truths as well as the layered constructions and interpretations required to maintain them. Rather than falling into populist relativism, however, the work urges a critical consideration of the social reproduction of power in the seemingly insignificant aspects of the everyday.

For example, by pairing straight documentary photography with subtle references in titles to the given narrative context, works such as *A Woman Takes Little Space* (2007–) draw attention to the societal values and norms projected onto the subjects of the photographs. Meanwhile, the staged pseudo-historical dramas, as in the carnivalesque fortune telling cards of *Séance* (1998/2002), flirt

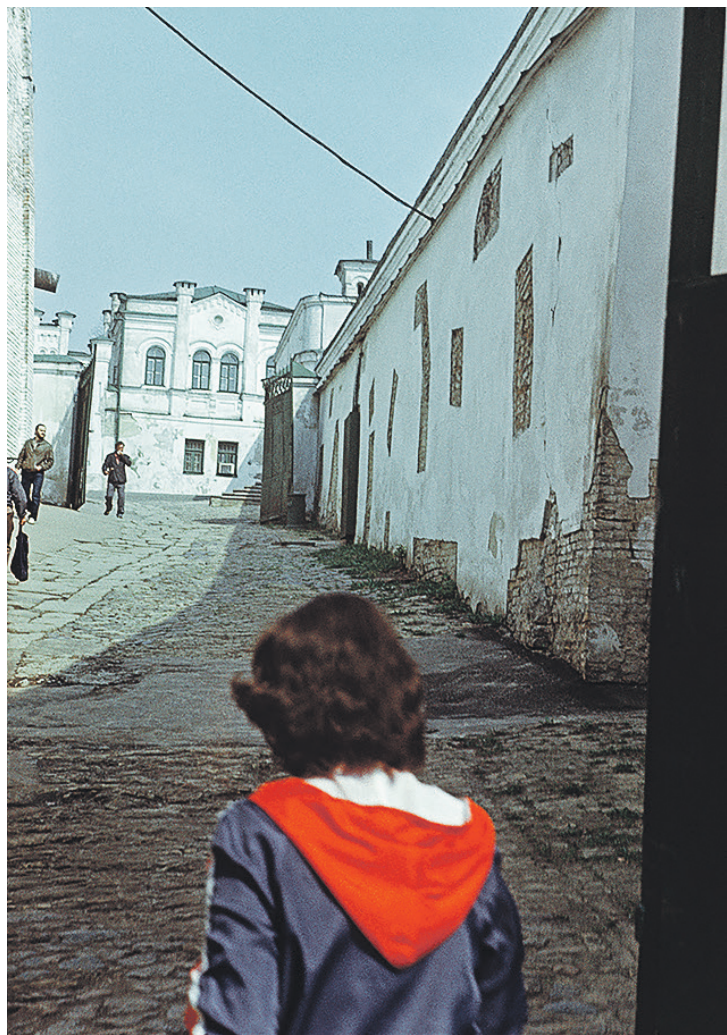
with the social unconscious, where the subjective and shared universes collide. Yet both the obvious performative excesses and the uncertain authenticity of the poses tap into deep-rooted gendered economies of labour, care and desire. Ideas about what or who makes the world go around affect mundane personal politics and vice versa.

With her attentive photographer's gaze combined with playful storytelling, Siib produces witty and seductive yet sharp counter narratives, which encourage us to recognise our own prejudices as well as dreams mirrored in them, albeit slightly askew. Her works produced during the past three decades also reveal how different means of narration and representation are currency at different times in response to the same persistent concerns. Shifts in artistic approaches, methods and materials resonate with changes in society and a visual culture that does not follow the ideal of linear progress but rather loops and leaps about.

A case in point here is the fictional movie poster *Oblivion Bugs* (from the series *Movie Posters*, 2001) welcoming the audience into the exhibition along with original photographs taken in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1986. The recreated installation *Alienus* from the exhibition *Biotopia* at the Art Hall in 1995, meanwhile, invites viewers to trespass across a simplification of scientific language that continues to define not only the hegemonic understanding of biological sex but also the fluctuating promises and fears over human evolution. Siib's work urges a rethink here of whether or how the measures of matter and meaning have changed. Yet, as with the remake of the subtly sinister entrapments of two disembodied figures standing mute in *Them* (1996/2019), the works refuse to offer any exact evidence of shifting standards.

Liina Siib's work rather continues to insist on the simultaneous inadequacy and excess of all possible interpretations and representations of the past as much as of the present. Whether considering geopolitical histories and their ongoing rewriting, traces of xenophobia and colonial baggage woven through national and folklore narratives, or the place allocated for and adopted by women in ancient and living myths, historical dramas and criminal records, or contemporary urban modes of life – these are all endlessly retold stories that frame possible futures and potential paradises to come.

Taru Elfving



Kiev April 1986



Kiev April 1986

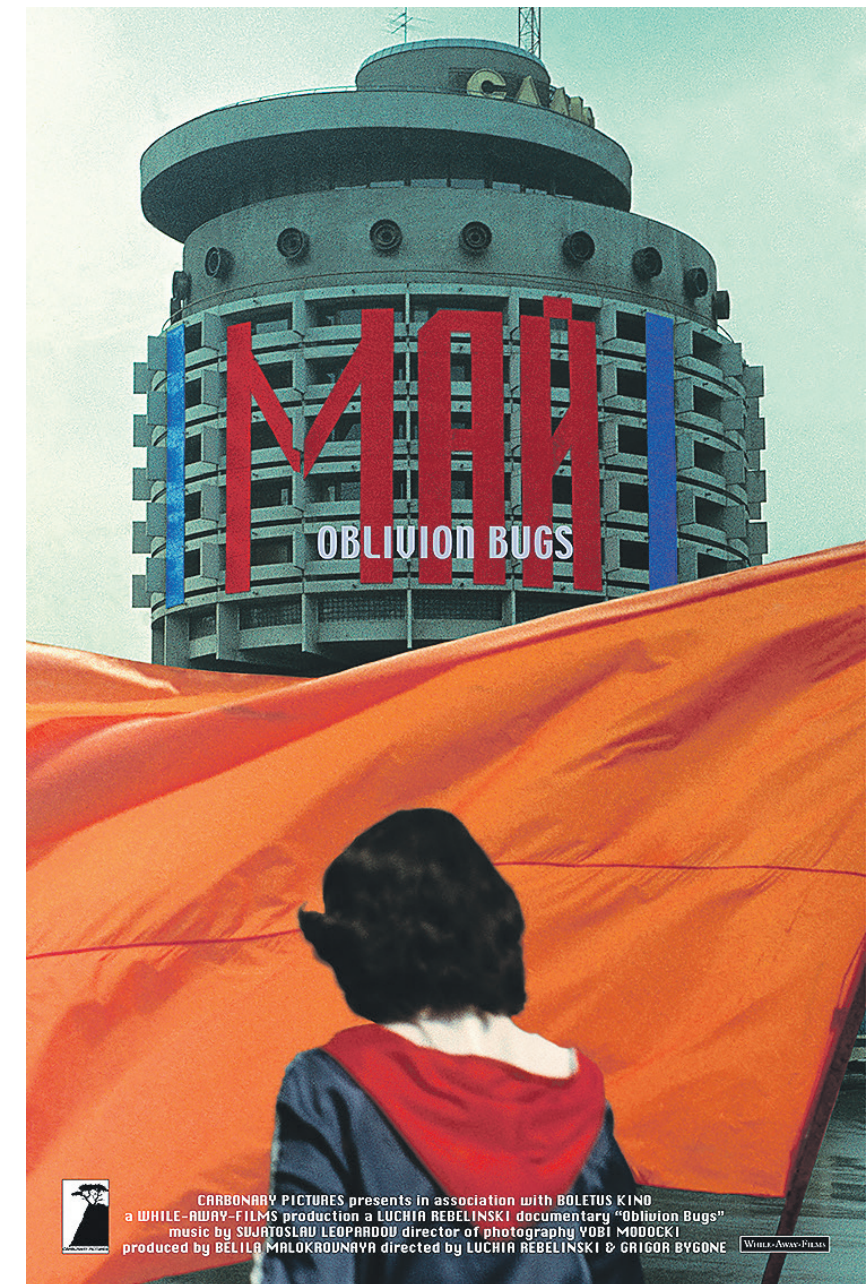
## KIEV APRIL 1986

Digitally edited analogue  
photography, inkjet print,  
light boxes  
43 × 30 cm  
1986 / 2019

## MOVIE POSTERS

Digitally edited analogue  
colour photography,  
inkjet print  
104.5 × 68 cm  
2001

From the collection of  
the Art Museum of Estonia



The poster for the documentary *Oblivion Bugs* is part of *Movie Posters* (2001), a series presenting fictional films in different genres. The series plays with the tropes of cinema, mass media and marketing, giving clues to identifiable narratives ranging from romantic comedies that reproduce normative sexual identities to action and horror films capitalising on collective traumas. The formal cut-and-paste method of the visuals alongside the tongue-in-cheek names of the films and their imagined creators underline the construction of punchy storylines around shared fears and desires.

The presentation of both the poster and, for the first time, the two original untouched photographs draws to the fore the processes of fictioning and framing at play in documentary photography as much as in cinematic narration. Reflected against each other they raise questions about what the artist saw in the photographed scenes at the time of their exposure in Ukraine in the last years of the Soviet Union during the days the

Chernobyl nuclear disaster unfolded, and how they communicate today as historical evidence. What may the movie poster have reflected in the meantime with its partial views, and references to forgetting and unawareness, unexpected faults and pests?

At the entrance to the exhibition, the poster and the photographs map the productive tension in Liina Siib's practice on the porous boundary between documentary realism and performative staging. They challenge notions of transparency while unveiling the ever-changing nature of meaning attached to images and signs.



View from the exhibition *Biotopia* at the Tallinn Art Hall in 1995. Photo: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia

## ALIENUS

Plastic floor mat, cut  
430 × 810 cm  
1995 / 2019

Cutter:  
Mark Antonius Puhkan

Thanks to:  
Indrek Köster and ARS Art Factory

The work *Alienus* was originally made for *Biotopia*, the third annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art at the Tallinn Art Hall. At the time, in the mid-1990s, the work was inspired by developments in research into chromosomes in the field of genetics. The restaging of the work, a playfully reductive sign system that must be walked across in order to access the exhibition, calls for a pause to ponder the languages that are foundational for understanding the complexities of life, here and now.

Genetics, with some of its shadier roots in ‘race biology’, has long been promising manmade natural selection. Twenty years ago, cloning was the buzzword; today battles are being waged over the environmental impact of genetically manipulated food crops and the reliability of ancestry tests, among others. Recently, forecasts of falling numbers of y-chromosomes, which determine the male gender, have also surfaced alongside concerns over the decrease of male fertility in the West. These may well add to the escalating narratives of the downfall of

Man, whose loss of virility is today fuelling regressive patriarchal backlashes across the globe. Utopias for some, dystopias for others.

As science evolves, earlier truths are challenged in their incompleteness or even inaccuracy. *Alienus* also questions the simplifications of popularised science, which can be used to reinforce repressive structures such as the dualist essentialism associated with biological sex. Meanwhile, genetics provides increasing evidence of the complex plurality of gender. Handmade signs here lay a material basis for a path toward thinking about sex and gender, beyond the assumptions of binaries that continue to haunt all representations and narratives even in this exhibition.

## THEM

Zinc sheet, MDF, paint  
186 × 110 × 1.6 cm  
1996 / 2019



*Them*. View from the exhibition in 1996

In the sculpture *Them* some kind of measures, perhaps of size according to imagined standards, gain an existence of their own. The simple metal rings trace an immaterial body in space, marking its location and boundaries. They appear as portraits, or even as beings in themselves. Alien and ever so slightly uncanny, the entrapments objectify the embodied presence that lingers in its measurements. A body could be held here, pragmatically, like a fire extinguisher or another tool, well placed in full view, waiting for its moment of use. The figures seem trapped, or perhaps even more so as traps, suggestive of the mental and bodily means of control and confinement.

Furthermore, as a couple, a twosome of differing measures taken from assumed female and male individuals, the sculpture also connotes projected ideals or cages of societal norms. It embodies the contemporary paradox of desired standards at a time of obsessive individualism, while questioning who fits, who sets, and who flees these measures. The invisibility of any gendered

bodies notably also leaves the door open for alternative associations and resignifications.



Film still

## URBAN SYMPHONY IN E-MINOR

Film  
44 min  
2018

Script, camera:  
Liina Siib

Editing:  
Henri Nõmm

Sound editing:  
Hans-Gunter Lock

Translation into English:  
Erika Jeret

Voices:  
Kristina, Ülle, Liina, Marika, Ilme,  
Katri, Monika, Aide, Britta, Helgi, Eveli,  
Aleksandra, Valli, Mariliis, Marta, Sveta,  
Grete, Elo, Kaili, Reliina, Maria Lisbeth,  
Elise.

Thanks to:  
HIAP, Gallery Sinne, Markus Åström,  
Taru Elfving, Maria Arusoo, Kadi Kesküla,  
Kaarin Kivirähk, Jaana Kokko, Kaire  
Rannik, Kadi Kurema, Signe Liske,  
Svetlana Irval and SB Lux, Ülle Tahlfeldt-  
Muhonen and Café Alejandra, Monika  
Põldkivi and Sivex OY, Aleksandra Nevski,  
Marta Jorits and Dancest dance and  
training studio and everyone who have  
contributed to the project.

Produced by:  
EV100 art programme "Comers, Goes and  
Stayers", Center for Contemporary Arts,  
Estonia.



Urban Symphony in E-minor II. Installation views at the Sinne Gallery, Helsinki, 2018



## URBAN SYMPHONY IN E-MINOR III

Installation  
2019

Mannequin heads: Svetlana Irval, Hellika Nõmmsalu, Anneli Tunger, Victoria Korpi  
Mosquera

Thanks to: Markus Åström, Peik Neovius, Pro Artibus / Sinne Gallery, HIAP, Svetlana Irval  
and SB Lux, Klaasissepa OÜ, Laas Mahl, Jana Huul, Monika Põldkivi, Kaire Rannik, Jaana  
Kokko.



Film still

## COME AND GO

Film  
26 min  
2019

Script, camera:  
Liina Siib

Editing:  
Liina Siib, Henri Nõmm

Sound editing:  
Hans-Gunter Lock

Translation:  
Tiina Randviir

Thanks to:  
Helgi Kuusik, Kaja Tullus, Kristina Lepistik,  
Jana Huul, Merit Süving,  
Artur Ruusmaa, Aleksandra Nevski,  
Parksepa Secondary School,  
Leivo Laats, Kuperjanov Infantry  
Battalion, Võru Police, Hotel Tamula, Võru  
animal shelter, Café Steding

For over two years now Liina Siib has  
examined the work-related migration  
of women from Estonia to Finland. The  
exhibition at the Art Hall brings together  
research from the two ends of this  
ongoing movement that has already  
affected generations over the past three  
decades.

More than thirty thousand Estonian  
women are estimated to be working in  
Finland today. Siib met about thirty of  
them in and around Helsinki, of different  
ages and with jobs across various sectors.  
Some have developed thriving businesses  
of their own, while others have met with  
less success. Some are happily settled,  
while others stay purely out of economic  
necessity. What emerges out of the  
extensive documentation and interviews  
is a rich diversity of individual views of  
the city they have adopted as their new  
home and the societal context, the myriad  
cultural differences experienced in the  
everyday, the communities formed with  
other Estonians, and the hopes for a future  
that empowers their lives.

The other side of this story is told from  
the perspective of Võru in south-east  
Estonia, one of the towns that many leave  
in search of work and opportunities. Siib  
has documented what appears to be the  
slow pace of life, an idyllic proximity to  
nature, and comfortable infrastructure.  
Among other places, Siib visits a military  
base named after a local war hero, a quirky  
angel museum, and a private rose garden.  
The garden appears to be a personal  
paradise for one of the women, who  
returned regularly from Helsinki to tend  
it carefully until her retirement when she  
moved back permanently. Yet what might  
be the many aspirations that continue  
to urge the young to look for a better life  
elsewhere?



Photo from the album of the Võru Criminal Police, 1922. EFA.312.A.230. Film Archive of the National Archives of Estonia

## WITCHES

Installation 210 × 240 × 138 cm  
Photograph 53 × 38 cm  
1922 / 2019

We thank:  
Estonian National Archive Film Archive,  
Pearu Tramborg, Aap Tepper,  
Anna Michelson, Viktor Gurov

The inspiration for the installation *Witches* was a black and white photograph of three women that Liina Siib discovered in the album of the Võru Criminal Police from 1922, now held in the Estonian Film Archive in Tallinn. The album in question depicts wanted suspects in a wide range of photographs. Another album contains more formal police mugshots of the accused. Most of the images portray individuals, but the photograph of the three grouped together stands out as an anomaly.

The women in question were sentenced for fraud for masquerading as a witch and her two accomplices targeting villagers at markets and fairgrounds. The papers writing about the case identified the victims as superstitious country folk and referred only to women who paid for witchcraft to assist in their pursuit of love. The media seemed to cherish this opportunity for a witch hunt and repeatedly called the women sorcerers even while accusing them of fraud. As in the photograph, the women are still wearing their costumes as exotic fortune

tellers and a broom-flying witch. Once they were called witches the label stuck.

The historical witch hunts were part of a process, whereby women's reproductive labour and societal role become devalued and controlled in the transition from medieval feudalism to capitalism in the enlightenment era. A curious detail in the news from a hundred years ago is the role of money as a magical instrument in the witchcraft of the three women. Money had to be laid on, in close contact with the body, for it to become a source of luck in the scheme. What kind of magic power does money hold in today's esoteric beliefs?

## SÉANCE

Digitally edited analogue  
colour photography,  
lambda C-type print  
47 × 30 cm  
1998 / 2002



This earlier installation of photographs by Siib is exhibited alongside new works examining female figures in myths and esoteric economies. *Séance* is an example of Siib's method of engagement with the collective unconscious through performative masquerade and staging. What appear as historical or fantasy scenes removed from the present social reality allow access into otherwise hidden or ignored phenomena and experiences.

The work takes its inspiration from old Estonian fortune telling cards, which the artist's mother found as a child in 1944 during her family's failed attempt to escape the Soviet troops and flee to the West. According to an advertisement from the 1920s, the Santapuur Mary cards promised a 'universal science', applicable to anyone and everywhere.

The photographs in *Séance* form a deck of cards picturing young women in domestic settings, boudoirs or bedrooms. Their poses flirt with sensuality and intimacy, veiling and unveiling, while the mirrors and windows provide symbolic references

to the boundaries of private and public or subjective and shared realms. The images play with femininity and its tropes as both deviant and banal, not unlike the dreams and desires projected onto the cards. These are also spaces and events from women's sociality, rather stereotypical yet subtly unsettling, like the witches and the evil spirits.



Video still

## ORBS

HD video  
3 min 15 s  
2016

Written, directed, edited:  
Liina Siib

Produced with the support of  
the Civitella Ranieri Foundation

Actors:  
Anna Weidenholzer and  
Ross Gay

Sound:  
Liina Siib

Sound editing:  
Liina Siib and  
Hans-Gunter Lock

In the video *Orbs*, two people are playing with an armillary sphere, one of the oldest instruments of astronomy in the world invented separately by the ancient Greeks and the Chinese. It represents the objects in the sky, with the stars orbiting around the sun in the centre, while also setting measures for time.

In European science, the geocentric view revolving around the stationary planet Earth was replaced with a solar one, the Copernican heliocentric model, in the 16th century. Earth appears here as part of a larger cosmic order of things, its fate connected to that of the other bodies in ceaseless motion. The detached eye of the rational mind is replaced in the video by two embodied subjects. Hesitant and exploratory, the hands appear in search of a shared rhythm rather than assuming the place of a universal man making the world go around.

The physically manipulated orbits seem in stark contrast to today's technologically mediated satellite imagery guiding us on Earth and beyond. The desire for the

illusion of all-seeing control persists, while the simple holistic system has evolved into a fragmented collage and overabundance of images. *Orbs* resonates with nostalgia for lasting and all-encompassing truths in the context of ever-more complex and accelerated change. Yet the hands meddling with the order of the heavens here do so with a sense of cautious care and accountability, aiming perhaps to restore some lost balance through their collaborative effort.

## HAESKA

Film  
8 min 30 s  
2019

Actors:  
Veljo Hämäläinen, Katharina Kuusemets,  
Elo Elmers, Ott Bergström, Piret Nõmmik

Direction:  
Liina Siib, Henri Nõmm

Camera: Henri Nõmm, Ott Bergström  
Costumes: Maiu Rõõmus  
Editing: Henri Nõmm  
Music: Thurídur Jónsdóttir *Farvegur*, 2018  
Violin: Una Sveinbjarnardóttir  
Sound editing: Hans-Gunter Lock  
Colour correction: Tiina Haak

Thanks to:  
Ülo Valk, Tiina ja Ants Ale, Tuulingu  
Holiday House, Leili and Indrek Jõgisoo,  
Kogre Pub, Estonian Academy of Music  
and Theatre

A new film *Haeska* is based on a folk myth where the keeper of the storehouse at Haeska estate strolls home from the village pub on a rainy autumn evening. Beside the fields of the estate he encounters two young ladies dressed in white, who begin to walk him fast towards the manor house, yet never seem to reach their destination. As the cock crows the female spirits vanish and the man finds himself on the seashore of Saardu, standing deep in the mud.

In Estonian folk beliefs, female demonic spirits often appear together rather than alone and wear white instead of black like the evil male figures. The temptation of purity, innocence and youth is unveiled as a dangerous trap, while the story also gestures towards the seductive presence of class and cultural difference. The blond ladies with an aristocratic flair of Baltic-Germanic origin appear as temptresses threatening to destroy the poor common man of the land.

The story is usually told solely from the viewpoint of the man captured by the

seductive spirits, but here the perspective shifts and quivers. Who are the young women beyond the male protagonist's imagination, externalised fears and dreams? *Haeska* points to the ongoing violence of othering at play here, as the myth reproduces the age-old fear of female sexuality deemed deviant and in need of control. The man who falls for their charms is not to be blamed for any abuse, except maybe for taking excessive amounts of alcohol. The women's power in numbers may be a queer promise of independence, rather than a sign of the weakness of their sex.

Film still





A Woman Takes Little Space, 2018

## A WOMAN TAKES LITTLE SPACE

Analog and digital photography, inkjet print  
à 30 × 45 cm  
2007 – ongoing

The catalyst for this ongoing series of photographs was the discussion surrounding the gender pay gap, when the difference in wages for women and men for the same jobs in Estonia was reported to be one of the worst in the EU. Two researchers responded at the time that “women take less space”. The unequal treatment was not simply essentialised as rooted in the biologically determined weaknesses of a gendered body or mind, as the argument still often goes, but also spatialised. Because women take little space, they do not need as much income.

This bizarre logic directs our attention to the surroundings rather than the female subjects themselves. Accordingly, Siib began to photograph women at work in a wide array of different roles. To date the series consists of approximately 60 pictures. The jobs in question range from cleaning, manufacturing and sales to managerial office work. Rather than portraits of the individuals, the artist emphasises that these are images of the spaces. The spaces tell us about the people occupying them, but in addition,

at least as much about the society, the changing times, and what remains unchanged.

It is significant that the photographs do not capture the individuals in private domestic settings, which the debate indirectly identified women with. They are at work, out in the world, but still not always as recognised for their labour as their male counterparts. At times, there is nobody in the photographed space, only some objects or clothes left behind. These clues reveal, however, little of the identities of the workers.

## AUGUSTA OR POLITICS OF PARADISE

Installation  
2019

Film  
28 min 20 s  
2019

Actors:

Henessi Schmidt as Augusta Caroline von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel

Tanel Saar as Reinhold Wilhelm von Pohlmann

Jan Christoffer Rutström, Freda Purik, Ilme Jammer, Marge Neggo, Lotta Kõvatomas, Saara Kõvatomas, Maria Izabella Lehtsaar, Loit Lepalaan, Liis-Marleen Verilaskja, Mark Kristian Hiir, Jane-Liis Koppel, Jane Susi, Heily Koppel, Emmalin Jammer, Erika Pillak, Liidia Pillak, Raivo Fedorenko, Merike Hark, Liina Markus, Lea Valdna, Toivo Metsa, Greete Sirgo, Maaris Neggo, Hanna Mariis Gustavson, Carolina Gustavson, Laura Naudi, Sigrít Jürise

Costume designer: Maiu Rõõmus  
Costume designer's assistant: Freda Purik  
Make-up artist: Kersti Laursoo  
Assistant: Maria Izabella Lehtsaar  
Camera: Henri Nõmm, Ott Bergström  
Sound: Tanel Tännä  
Editing: Henri Nõmm  
Direction: Liina Siib, Henri Nõmm  
Voice over: Vilma Lang, Hans-Gunter Lock  
Translation: Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, Juta Ristsoo

Thanks to:  
Tiina and Aivar Reivik, OÜ Argonfeld, Loit Lepalaan, Kullamaa church, Kaire Rannik, Ilme Jammer, Kristel Jammer, MTÜ Lemme, Marge Neggo, Rietha Kühle, Pille Kippar, Ants Hein, David Vseviov, Taru Elfving, Anna Weidenholzer, Koluvere community house, Kullamaa Pärli Pubi, the Wolfenbüttel Branch of the Lower Saxon State Archive, dr. Silke Wagener-Fimpel, Siiri Laid, Airi Reinhold, Marko Nautras, Elvira Mutt, Avo Tragel, Pirje Kõvatomas, Deevy Pukk, Kustav-Agu Püümann, Tallinn City Theatre costume rental, VAT Theatre, Hans-Gunter Lock, Estonian Academy of Arts and many others.



Film stills



The work that provides the exhibition its title is an unconventional account of a curious historical minor narrative about a princess, whose tragic story ended at the Lohde castle (now Koluvere) in 1788. Before her mysterious death at the age of 23, Augusta Caroline von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel had been unhappily married to Duke Friedrich of Württemberg, given birth to four children, and befriended Catherine the Great at her court in St Petersburg. The Tsarina sent her alone to Lohde after Augusta's father refused to allow her divorce.

It can only be speculated upon whether this exile out of sight became an asylum or an escape for an inconvenient lone aristocratic woman amidst the upheavals of enlightenment Europe. What remain as documents of Augusta's two years in the castle are legends, a grave stone, and archived letters from Augusta to her father and Catherine, the former busy with the war in America and the latter with Crimea amongst other battles. The letters are poignant records of the troubled position of a privileged woman, whose

fate nevertheless rested in the hands of others. Her short life, along with the postal network of the time, also maps how inherited power was entwined between the royal courts across the European continent.

Siib's work retraces these routes between historical characters and contexts, while reflecting on them through the prism of today's society. The work engages not only with the existing material evidence and the castle itself, now hired out for weddings, but also with the presence of the local community and the haunting of Augusta. Haunting appears here, as in other works in the exhibition, as a social phenomenon rather than a question of individual psychosis or collective superstition. What haunts is that which remains silenced or unseen in the past as well as in our present society. While resisting attempts to exorcise or capitalise, erase or own the haunting, Siib's work challenges us to reckon with it.

# POLITICS OF PARADISE



Liina Siib

Liina Siib. POLITICS OF PARADISE. 16.02.—14.04.2019. Curator: Taru Elfving.

Texts: Taru Elfving, Liina Siib. Exhibition design: Kaire Rannik. Graphic design: Indrek Sirkel, Ott Kagovere. Installation: Valge Kuup.

Technical help: Maiu Rõõmus, Freda Purik, Henri Nõmm, Ott Bergström, Hans-Gunter Lock, Tanel Tanna

Artist's assistants: Maria Izabella Lehtsaar, Mark Antonius Puhkan. Exhibition team: Siim Preiman, Sirli Oot

Translations: Refiner OÜ, Laura Rohtla, Darja Nikitina. Public programme: Annely Köster, Minni Moyle, Sally Stuudio; Darja Nikitina

Thank you: Estonia 100 art programme, Estonian Academy of Arts, Film Archive of the National Archives of Estonia, Vana-Võromaa Museum, Galleria Sinne Helsinki, Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, OÜ Argonfeld, MTÜ Lemme, Kuma, Ledzep OÜ



KULTUURIMINISTEERIUM

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