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THE ART OF
BEING GOOD

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TALINN ART HALL

THE ART OF BEING GOOD

When living in a world that is consigned to destruction¹, all decisions seem so immeasurably difficult. Should I remain a carnivore while eating only organic free-range meat or do I become vegetarian? Which is better, new sneakers with soles made of naturally and sustainably grown rubber or a second-hand pair of shoes? Perhaps I should only buy coffee in a reusable cup from now on? Does it actually change anything if I go to work by bike instead of car? It is quite infuriating when you read a study in the newspaper that says that after all these precise decisions you have in fact increased the size of your ecological footprint!² And these are only the questions that are connected to consuming. There are also crises of migration, values, energy, economy...

The all-encompassing world-wide crisis is amorphous, it lacks a specific nexus, although all of its components are interconnected. What links them all is "matter", which on one hand signifies natural resources, which are being unstoppably extracted from the earth at an accelerating rate, on the other hand, it refers to material inequality, which is perpetually connected to the extraction process mentioned above. The ecological and social problems plaguing the world are two sides of the same coin. Such a crisis is nothing new for humanity. Obviously, the inhabitants of every era have felt that it is they that are living in a pre-ruin time. On one side, we can console ourselves with the knowledge that the current mass extinction is at least the sixth in the history of the world. On the other, the previous extinction was probably caused 65 million years ago by an asteroid 80 kilometres in diameter colliding with Earth. Now we are the initiators. No wonder that every tiny decision is suddenly so difficult, when for the first time we can draw a figurative line between our everyday behaviour and dangerous world-wide developments.

"The Art of Being Good" is an attempt to put together an exhibition befitting the seriousness of the circumstances. Although tackling the ecological, social and economic components of the crisis is normal in art, artworks and exhibitions rarely direct attention towards their own role in the ruinous sequence of events. Therefore, we see a record of the people living in poverty, who don't receive a cut of the profits from exhibiting the work depicting them, and artworks created from poisonous artificial materials, which warn us of the impending plastic dystopia. Erasing sins also has its place: the largest art exhibitions and prizes are financed by massive international companies with the dirtiest hands.³

The value of each artwork or event certainly cannot be judged based on its ecological footprint alone nor indeed on its social impact, but we can judge the ethical balance between the form and content of a single artwork. Is the choice of material justified in the specific context? How does the artist treat their subjects? In what way do the narratives implemented by the artist differ from those presented by the media? The artists participating at this exhibition work with very different subjects and materials and a variety of methods. All of their work is nevertheless connected to their own values and actions as individuals.

Although artists often like to think of themselves as agents of the avant-garde, whose work combines the newest developments in visual culture with burning political aims, it is hard to judge the actual impact of an average art exhibition on shaping public opinion. Art is a relatively ineffective tool for conveying specific ideas. It is true that this is where a lot of art's charm lies. "Misinterpreting" is part of the deciphering process, in which interpretations compliment the discussion started by the artist. That said, art is usually experienced slowly rather than fast, individually rather than collectively. Consequently, we come to the question that troubles and motivates many artists: what is the role of an art exhibition in the wider public discussion? In the best case, an art exhibition is a safe space where you can talk about subjects that would simply remain unnoticed or would be drowned out by louder counter arguments in the stream of information in the wider media. Furthermore, one can cast light on the darker side of reality or play out possible future scenarios at an art exhibition behind the obscuring veil of fiction.

In the exhibition "The Art of Being Good" you can find more introverted, almost (self-)therapeutic practices, activist documentary and investigative works, dissatisfaction with existing ways of creating and exhibiting art, overviews of the constraining social and cultural limitations, cunning interventions into the commercialised public space, collaboration with other inhabitants of Earth, and more. On one side, these offer alternative ways to continue vital (art) practices in a stressful informationally polluted contemporary situation, on the other, they paint a certain humane and empathic picture of that same world.

Not wanting to shirk all the responsibility to the artists and reluctant to step on the same old rake of ethical incoherence as a curator, "The Art of Being Good" is also an institutional attempt to find an ethically suitable platform for tackling these burning issues. I agree with Beti Žerovc, who distrusts contemporary art curators that indicate the right direction with a moral compass,⁴ and I am sceptical of exhibitions that sincerely claim to be representing the oppressed, using them simply as subject matter.⁵ That is why this time we have excluded all the single use components of the standard recipe for a contemporary art exhibition. Also, we have only used the material found at the venue, and as little of that as possible.

There are those who think the production of art is but a drop in the ocean of wasted material, but great changes start small. We haven't visited the hardware store in executing the exhibition, we haven't ordered any single-use plastic wall text, we haven't applied plastic to darken the windows, we haven't laid down single-use carpets, we haven't rented presentation technology from Central Europe, we haven't flown in artists just for the opening and then back again. We aren't using lamps to light this summer exhibition and the information accompanying the exhibition will be printed onsite, on recycled paper and only in as many copies as needed.

Siim Preiman

1. In November 2017, 15,364 scientists made a joint appeal in which they warned humanity of the impending ecological catastrophe. See: World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229>
2. Maie Kiisel: miks on ökoloogilist jalajälge nii keeruline vähendada? <https://novaator.err.ee/259531/maie-kiisel-miks-on-okoloogilist-jalajälge-nii-keeruline-vahendada>
3. E.g. Unilever Prize at the Tate Modern.
4. Zerovc, Beti. When Attitudes Become the Norm. The Contemporary Curator and Institutional Art, Archive Books. Berlin: Archive Books, 2015.
5. "One of the final and most crucial characteristics of the major is that it always seeks to speak for (the disenfranchised and oppressed, art being apparently the most effective way and place to do such a thing) as if it were a duty, a civic responsibility to essentially ventriloquize." Chris Sharp, in an article in Mousse: <http://moussemagazine.it/theory-of-the-minor-chris-sharp-2017/>

HOW TO BE GOOD IN A DYING WORLD?

Over the last couple of months, a new, strange hope is seeping in through the radio. Day after day, my regular morning news programme produces honest clips on climate topics – the kind I have not heard over the years, even from shows directly concentrating on the topic. I find myself moving to the edge of my seat to listen, like when watching that part of the action movie my mum used to call the “7 minutes of speeding”. Finally, national broadcasts discuss openly and directly concerns I have lived with for the last quarter of a century, digging through confusing and unclear, initially scattered, but lately increasingly extreme material from climate deniers to climate doomsters. Maybe finally everyone is ready to change their consumption patterns and take on the responsibility borne until now by a tiny minority? Maybe I could even lessen my own consumption further within a growth-free circular economy!

But is it possible even then to be good in an environmentally conscious way? To achieve integrity – honesty, sincerity, moral perfection, and satisfaction that arises from ethical choices and harmony between form and content? Would this earn absolution for humankind?

Even the most carefully considered online purchases bring new cardboard boxes into the playroom. The polystyrene packaging materials I have unwrapped with a deep sigh and kept, just in case, have recently been replaced by compostable filling material, rolls of wool, shredded cardboard... Something seems to have changed in my material environment. One box of dog food, showing off its environmental awareness, announces: “We also feed recycling bins. All our boxes are made of 100% recyclable materials, so when you have finished feeding your dog, feed them to the green bin. Mmmmmm, recycling.”

Glorifying cardboard shredding does not cut it with an ex-recycling officer. I heard the same story 25 years ago when the Finns had just discovered recycling. The innocent-sounding word “recycling” justifies rash consumption sprees whilst hiding the actual methods of reprocessing – the plastic melting plants, chemicals used for dealing with coloured paper... I have tried to avoid overfeeding recycling bins in various ways, a pile of ecobricks made from plastic bottles is waiting for their chance of a future life in the shed – but systems for such strange endeavours are still lacking. Eventually, I find someone on social media who fills her tiny car eagerly with my packaging materials to send wedding decorations to her clients. Neither of us knows whether her clients choose her business because of this practice of prolonging the life of boxes, or whether they extend it even further. But we share the feeling that we would prefer never to have met those materials, those perfect containers, only opened once, much better off refilled again and again instead of being destined for recycling plants.

The relationship between humankind and the matter surrounding them is first of all a practical necessity to fit within the boundaries of laws of physics and nature. Being able to do so – reaching a positive outcome in this unfolding action film – is never guaranteed, however. Until recently, it has primarily been individual consumers that have been prodded to make the effort toward that goal. But how can this be realistic? Can honing individual consumer behaviour toward maximum integrity stop the polluting corporations, producing the majority of our CO2 emissions? Perhaps our efforts instead provide indulgences for such industries, enabling them to carry on? At the same time, the sincerity of personal efforts to be good are questioned at every step. The vegan lifestyle is a telling example, an intense juggling with the valuations of bystanders and one's own integrity, worthy of Aesop's fable of the man and the donkey. Those who have made this choice are hit by waves of bile on social media, at parties and in daily interactions – in return for the wrath of some mythical militant vegans, or the flight-mile sins their assumed preference for avocados and quinoa might have committed. Should they switch to oat milk and apples, they are then accused of starving the soil that cries out for nitrogen and microorganisms, provided by beef cattle, of butchering small mammals in grain fields and of living off the pain and suffering of the greenhouse workers. Even if they manage to avoid such reproves, they are still found guilty of both a dubious diet as well as self-righteousness and moralism. The sincere efforts to reach responsible honesty in accordance with their own conscience turns out to inevitably drift towards its opposite – hypocrisy.

In the heart of those seemingly inane efforts, however, something fruitful is happening: a consolidation of matter and morals. Those two have in some ways always gone together – we achieve, assert and display our morality, our goodness, in various material ways, either through top-hat decorum or the reverence of a monk's habit; by showing off presumed moral success with a fancy car, or deciding to donate earthly goods to the poor. Now that the material and natural boundaries are within reach for humankind, this relationship has, however, a more universal and broader role. In recognition of that reality, climate change was rebranded from an issue of consumer choice, or a matter of awareness and ignorance, or technological innovation to that of morality. References to the rights of future generations and of other species, let alone the regions first hit by climate related catastrophes have brought on a significant shift in thinking. Indeed, morality is one of the most powerful moving forces capable of achieving remarkable changes in society. German sociologist Max Weber describes how the Protestant work ethic became the driving engine of capitalism. Similarly, the increasing feeling that there is something fundamentally morally wrong about slavery led step-by-step to abolitionism*.

Truly, the art of being good is the art of moving, step-by-step, through right and wrong choices and decisions made with good intentions, and reaching a new level of conscience and integrity. But what good is all this personal integrity and material morality when the scale of the challenge, such as the climate crisis and environmental degradation is utterly global? When obstacles come from the diverse understandings of morality, and from relentless materialism driven by the competition between countries, companies and groups? Indeed, a universally shared moral conscience, however

ephemeral and fragile it may appear, is necessary to uncover the source of problems, and to search for the solution. The seeds of that have been around for a long time – in environmental movements accused of radicalism, in critiques of the existing system, incapable of recognising its own undoing, pushing people apart through stratification and the shame of failure, making collective empowerment increasingly impossible. Yet to push those seeds of joint integrity into a fertile soil, it is change in individual minds that is crucial. Furthermore, it is the depth and solitude of one's own mind where another mighty force needs to be experienced to become good together – and this formidable power is fear.

„We know we have disrupted your lives. ... We are only doing this because this is an emergency,“ declare the climate protesters from the recently emerged Extinction Rebellion (XR) group, having glued themselves to each other and the entrance hall of London Stock Exchange, preventing the brokers from entering the building. An hour later, the XR protestors climb onto a train in Canary Wharf, ridiculing the annoyed mayor Sadiq Khan who has demanded the widespread and lengthy protests to end so that the town could return to business as usual. The unrolled banners declare: “Business as usual = death”.

Attacks on financial institutions and the daily habits of commuters may seem annoying to some, and insufficiently disruptive, however, to others. Ignorance and indifference make the hopelessness of the future of the human race particularly obvious and render futile all our individual agonies over choices, careful decisions, worry and efforts to be good. Nobody has reliable foresight of the future, or clarity whether fear mobilises and unites us enough to overcome the self-destructive appeal of comforts, or the rifts, strata and barriers created by capitalism and honed in neonazism. We have no certainty even about what a good ending is: the rapid extinction of humans, or a rescue at the last moment, just before the final credits. The art of being good is, in the end, the art of carrying on regardless.

Aet Annist

* Abolitionism – a political movement, mostly in the United States of America, Great Britain and France in 18th and 19th century that advocated the ending of slavery.

ONLY DEAD FISH DESCEND DOWNSTREAM

*The demon is dead,
But I, the small hunting dog,
am nuzzling around the empty crypt.
The world is silent,
But I, the small hunting dog,
see fresh prints in the snow.*

Art as a touchstone of freedom

Art is the touchstone of freedom. Society has separated a space for it where creative freedom exists. You enter the space and someone seems to say gloatingly at the same time, "Well, let's see what this freedom means to you". The door closes and you are left completely alone – with your stone. You have no other tools except for your subjectivity. "What are you going to do?" an unfamiliar voice asks in your head. Whose voice is it? That of your parents, grandparents, teachers? The voice of the ideology or the system? The subjectivity that seems to be our own also belongs to many others.

What do artists do with their creative freedom? Usually, their practice centres on themselves. This requires a lot of material because their thought processes consist of the movement of bags of cement, plasterboard and tins of paint. Despite this, art is considered part of the intellectual world. When most artists use their creative freedom to consume and act in the same way as the rest of society, we can be sure that our society has the blessing of the intellectual world. There is a transcendental bag of cement behind the physical one. Therefore, it is completely natural that the funding given to art moves directly into the pockets of the producers of cement. Understandably, this sometimes raises the question, should cement really be preferred above people. However, no one forces artists to buy cement – they write the projects themselves and apply for the means to produce them. Consequently, that is what they want and that is their freedom.

The bag of cement is nothing more than the embodiment of the contemporary world and its mentality. The weight of a bag of cement accompanies the whole of our existence. Because living in the contemporary world, merging with its rhythm and pace requires something more from us than draining swamps. Swamps were already being drained for the betterment of human civilisation in the previous century and the century before that. We should now thank our ancestors, it seems, for leaving us asphalt, cement, glass and steel, and plough the field of the digital world. We have banished the weeds to the ghettos and the periphery. There is nothing natural about weeds anymore – they are treated like harmful bacteria or like a fetish, a value. Cities grow and destroy forests, parks and other greenery, yet small green pots are screwed to the most modern of skyscrapers. Nature is taken away from us and then sold back to us in a deformed state. The same happens to creative freedom, which is nothing more than a sign on the cell door: we use our freedom to connect

ourselves with the chain of dependence on mass culture, because that is the only connection we can have with the contemporary, with society.

Our modernity as pressure

The weed-free mentality of contemporary people relies on pressure. That said, weeds are loved in the cultural field – the miracle of art relies on how a tiny weed survives against pressure. The public looks on and applauds: "What a character, it does not want to concede!". And yet it is just a spectacle. The true weeds are too abject to be allowed to take the stage. Although the limits to which the abject is accepted have been greatly broadened, this broadening is more an appropriation and utilisation, as well as a postponing of the crisis. Art, which relies on commercialisation and authorship, is all unnatural – to the last. And this unnaturalness is compensated with a late modernist self-justification, that everything in this world is cosmic and natural.

Art is an extremely pressurised world, which still stands on the feet of modernism. From my first artistic education, I remember the unwritten law that you must make sacrifices for art. Because there is nothing more important than the artist, their idea and the work. Human relations, the physical and mental wellbeing of people and other weeds have to suffer in the name of art. Such a mentality of draining the swamps has led to the emergence of a whole bunch of aggressive people acting like bulldozers for whom compromises and retreats rule out development. Development is a massive steamboat being pushed through the jungle to the top of a hill.¹ And indeed, masterpieces require sacrifices, exertions require the whip. And this is one of the difficulties of being human, which has made the world the way it is.

Human freedom has resulted in nuclear bombs, space rockets and rubbish, which is left over after producing the touchstone of freedom. Humanity is larger than ever before and threatening to become even larger, to grow infinitely. It is a continuously expanding desert, an eternity of rubbish, plastic and construction waste in which time moves formidably and fast like the years spent online. There is no sky above this desert, there is only one great radiant screen, which is simultaneously small and worthless. And there is no universe or infinity, there is only a finite and human-made, memoryless and meaningless surface. Current artists are not different from other people today. They all want more or less the same things. It is sad, but expected, that there is nothing in art that is radically different from the rest of the world. The freedom to be different is also the freedom to step out of modernity and decline something very important. This is actually an opportunity open to everyone and does not have to be the realm of the artist.

Our modernity is a fast-flowing river, which rushes along the system of pipes. To live nowadays is to let yourself be swept off by the current, slide around on the surface and perform masterful jumps. The other option is to fight – to bravely swim upstream, surpass waterfalls. The third option is to find a quiet place behind some stone and not rely on the current. At one point I thought artists lived in such quiet places. And some of them move from behind one stone to another, but always against the current. All fish that swim against the current stop at intervals in quieter places. Only the dead and the sleepy move downstream.

Art has become completely homogenised and part of mass culture. "But look at how skilfully they are sliding across the surface and what jumps they perform in the waves, like trained dolphins!" many think. "That is the culture of dead or sleepy fish moving downstream!" I think. Why did these fish die and who tranquilised them? It is possible that they ran out of the energy to swim upstream or did they achieve their goals. Many fish that swim upstream in rivers to their spawning grounds die after achieving their goal. It cannot be excluded that art has reached some goal, fulfilled its function. The avant garde had strong ties to progress, and progress has reached a crisis. In which direction was the avant garde swimming? Like the whole of the modern world, it was probably swimming in the opposite direction to the laws of nature, attempting to change the flowing direction of the river. Our contemporary art is now bobbing backwards like a dead fish along the dirty river of progress – as ever, downstream. Postmodernism offered the disguise of irony, which has now become worn leaving behind only a waning cynicism and ignorance.

Downstream Boat

Boris Groys speaks in his book *The Flow* about activist art, which he defines as artists replacing artistic quality with good moral intentions. He adds a very ungainly concession to this already rather ungainly approach, saying that the avant garde turned ideas of artistic quality on their head already during the 20th century. He looks for arguments to undermine activist art from activism itself instead of art. And he hits upon rather important points; for example, that art turns many serious problems into spectacles or marginalises them through its own unpopularity and limitations.

It is true that an artist encroaching on some social problem can bring about more bad than good. As a rule, the result is more often money and a few additional stars on the lapels of the artist. Crises and the suffering of other people are good creative resources for many artists. Like bees, they extract the necessary nectar for themselves and then send the commercialised products into circulation. Because progress makes people thirst for the newest films, books and other art. It also makes people produce new films and exhibitions, to write more and more new books. And these all have to offer an experience, a jolt. Experience Economy is a course that can be studied at Tallinn Technical University. It is remarkable that the structural need for experiences has been created in the context of the economic sciences. I am unsure, though, which institute teaches that art is an experience that should constantly be industrially manufactured. Then again, aren't there already enough films, books and other art in the world? It would take many lifetimes to peruse that which has already been done. How do we imagine the future? Should such a process of accumulation continue for ever?

If art wants to re-establish its avant garde position, it has to start moving at the vanguard of ceasing progress. It has been late in doing this, though, because these movements have already been taking place for some time everywhere else but in art. Only ten years ago we were living in a seemingly safe and slightly boring world, where history was dead and the room was stuffy. Then the creative antagonism and evoking of dead spirits was like a breath of fresh air. All of a sudden, the spirits came alive. What does the tracker dog do when it has reached its quarry? They start barking and

await the hunter. There is no hunter, though, and the world is silent. The sound of the barking dogs in the village can be heard far off. Eventually the quarry also starts barking.

Barking is not enough. It is hard to get used to this fact; it is hard to leave one's ego behind, to leave one's burning creative ideas, which, in the best-case scenario on this planet, will cause only a few shouts, in the worst case, will leave behind a lot of rubbish. Progress would not retreat except through political will – a retreat cannot be culturized nor placed on the shoulders of individuals. Although individuals and cultural people could inspire quite a few so as to bring about larger collective decisions. It is hard to expect something like this from current art. Would Tartu Art Museum be willing to forego their new building, for which a park will be destroyed? Could the expenses for the Venice Biennale be remarkably decreased?

This year's Venice Biennale is crowned by Christoph Büchel's "Barca Nostra" (*Our Boat*). The artist brought to the biennale a wreck of a boat that sunk between Libya and Lampedusa in 2015, causing the deaths of around 800 people. Naturally, presenting this boat as an artwork is cynical, but there is nothing surprising in this. The artist has taken upon himself, all the perversion of our contemporary Europe – as I have understood, various governing bodies decided to send this boat to the Venice Biennale, because there was an even more absurd idea on the table, which planned to drag this boat through the jungles at the periphery of the European Union. Now tourists can take selfies by this boat and this work will be incriminated with all the costs covered by Italy tied to looking into the sinking of the ship. Consequently, the work stands in Venice gathering popularity at the expense of the deaths of close to a thousand people, which cost around 33 million euros. This is the ship aboard which progress is drifting downstream – empty and broken, without people. Worth millions.

Tanel Rander

1. See Werner Herzog's „Fitzcarraldo“ (1987).

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

DYLAN RAY ARNOLD (1982) is an artist living and working in Helsinki, whose work includes drawing, sculpture, video and installation. Arnold mainly uses recycled materials, which he collects during his everyday activities, for instance while walking. His sculptures are born through negotiation – on one hand, the material itself provides the direction, on the other, the feeling caused by handling the material is also important. The latter can rely on a poetic reading as well as the physical characteristics of the material.

It is difficult to find a suitable word with which to define the materials he uses. The usual “suspects” like garbage, litter or dust call up connotations of rubbish, whereas these sculptures aren’t made of rubbish; instead, they are made of everyday objects that we find on the edges of tables, behind a cupboard or in the attic. We aren’t surrounded only by rubbish! Dylan Ray Arnold describes these plentiful objects as temporary prostheses, phantom embodiments of contemporary material systems that are intertwined with us.

Arnold works with objects in a variety of ways, but even when he cuts them or puts them together in an incorrect way, the initial form of the objects is easily discernible. It is strange for example, that a basket chair, which is no longer a basket chair, cannot get rid of its basket chair-ness even once it has lost its functionality. On one hand, for Arnold his work documents the over-saturation of fossil materials, on the other, it is a nervous and playful reaction to the future ecological fragility and emotional uncertainty. If everything is coming to an end anyway, why not have fun through the tears?

CARL GIFFNEY (1983) is an Irish artist whose main working method is performative research. Over the past ten years, his work has taken him to all the corners of Europe, from the Northern Finnish tundra to the Balkan Peninsula. As a visitor, he often references the specificities of the local inhabitants and the constructed nature of national traditions. For example, he lived for two weeks in the open-air museum in Sirogojno in Serbia, wore the clothes that were sold there as souvenirs and sought new activities each day in that stylised theme park. The locals were perplexed when they were shown the video completed during the residency – the jumper Giffney was wearing was certainly traditional, but they had never met a local wearing such a jumper every day.

At this exhibition, Giffney will show for the first time the video work “Iarnród”. Most of the film consists of footage that the artist recorded while having afternoon naps and driving. Since there is minimal camera work, we start looking for meaning in the (half) coincidences he recorded. During the naps we hear the sound of snooker in the background, during the driving we hear Irish radio. How could these be connected? We can also consider the action taking place outside the shot. Is an artist who works with performative research also working when he is sleeping or driving? Or is this in fact his leisure time? But what happens when the arbitrarily recorded events acquire a meaning only later?

In the second half of the video Giffney reaches Iarnród Street in the centre of Dublin, which is known for its criminality. Since Giffney has not looked through the viewfinder of the camera and directed its lens towards anything specific, the result is reminiscent of a security camera recording. It is visible that Giffney has later worked on the digital material by enlarging and cutting it. That said: did he go out onto the street to record something specific or is it all just a coincidence?



DYLAN RAY ARNOLD
Studio file (2019)

CARL GIFFNEY
Still from the video „Iarnród / Ironroad“ (2019)

THE IDIOTS is a temporary collective formed specially for the current exhibition, consisting of musicians, artists, writers, voice generators, someone else's pets and thoughts from various locations like Italy, Estonia and Russia. The Idiots may be seen as an on-demand service in the diffused field of art activism which, they say, knows only addition, accumulation and never disruption.

The group takes their name from the eponymous novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky, which is a novel of failure and impotence, manifested in the protagonist Prince Myshkin's powerlessness to change people for the better. In addition to taking the name for themselves, they project it to describe the wider artist-kind, neither as a compliment or an insult, but as an acute description of the hopelessness of being good as an artist.

The video installation „The Hazard of Being Good“ is a collage-essay that includes original materials and Youtube-sourced excerpts from films, series, theatre plays and tutorials. Challenging the high expectations that the exhibition sets on artists, the video – which runs just as many seconds as is the gross artist fee paid for its production – explores the real material and social conditions that dictate artistic production.

The Idiots can also be seen as parasites that examine and test their employer. They participate on their own terms and include the inviting party in their criticism. This is to show that no one in the art world is immune to being an Idiot. And so we see in the video two rats, perhaps a curator together with an artist, passing through the halls of the Louvre, exclaiming: „We can't feed off the culture industry, despite our sharp teeth.“

Video materials

“The Night porter”, Liliانا Cavani (1974)
“Judex”, Georges Franju (1963)
“Trick Dice Hack!”, kipkay (2010)
“The Idiot”, Akira Kurosawa (1951)
“Keep Your Right Up!”, Jean-Luc Godard (1987)
“The Interview”, Harun Farocki (1997)
“Better Call Saul S1E1”, Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould (2015)
“Faces Places”, Agnès Varda (2017)
“Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels”, Chantal Akerman (1975)
“The Good Woman of Setzuan”, Bertolt Brecht / Nationaltheater Weimar (1988)

Sound

Song “According to me I know” (“Per me lo so”) by CCCP – Fedeli alla linea (1987)
Song “Cultural Production” by DFVM (“Your mother's maiden name”) (2019)
Original soundtracks from borrowed film fragments
Sound recordings from freesound.org
Amazon Polly programmable voice generator

Words, ideas

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DIANA LELONEK (1988) is a Polish artist, whose working methods include photography, living organisms and found objects. She often tackles the relationship humans have with other species and criticises the selfish attitude towards nature that comes with unstoppable economic growth.

In 2016, Lelonek founded the “Center for the Living Things” with the aim of researching and experiencing new hybrid forms in nature. The collection includes autogenous rubbish dumps and artificial objects found in urban thickets, on which various plants and mosses have started to grow. The centre collection includes, for instance, shoes, electronic devices, packages as well as lampshades with organisms living on them, which are accompanied by the name of their species, their distribution, preferences in terms of water and soil. The centre's permanent exhibition is located in the botanical gardens of Lelonek's hometown, Poznan.

Lelonek talks about one of the unknown aspects of the decline of species diversity. With the disappearance of suitable environments, various species make a desperate effort to acclimatise to the new environment. For example, walrus, which are used to living on Arctic ice, have been forced to live on top of each other on narrow strips of rocky ground due to the melting of the sea ice. The “Center for the Living Things” shows us other species that have been forced to make similar desperate decisions to survive. Recently, there have been numerous visions of the future in art inspired by apocalypse-anxiety, where there are new, half-natural, half-artificial organisms. Diana Lelonek's “Center for the Living Things” shows us that such new hybrids have already been sharing the planet with us for some time.



THE IDIOTS

Still from the video "The Hazard of Being Good" (2019)

DIANA LELONEK

„Yesterday I met the really wild man“ (2015)

TAUS MAKHACHEVA (1983) is an artist living and working in Moscow, whose main media are video, photography and installation. The re-evaluating of the history and art of her family's country of origin, the Republic of Dagestan, is important in her work. Another repeated motif is a pointed questioning of the paradoxes and cross-roads of the international art world. For example, the dolomite sculpture "Ring Road" (2018) depicts the peak of Makhnot mountain, around which an encircling highway has been established, which is not connected to any other road in any way. Buying the sculpture obligates the actual establishment of the depicted road.

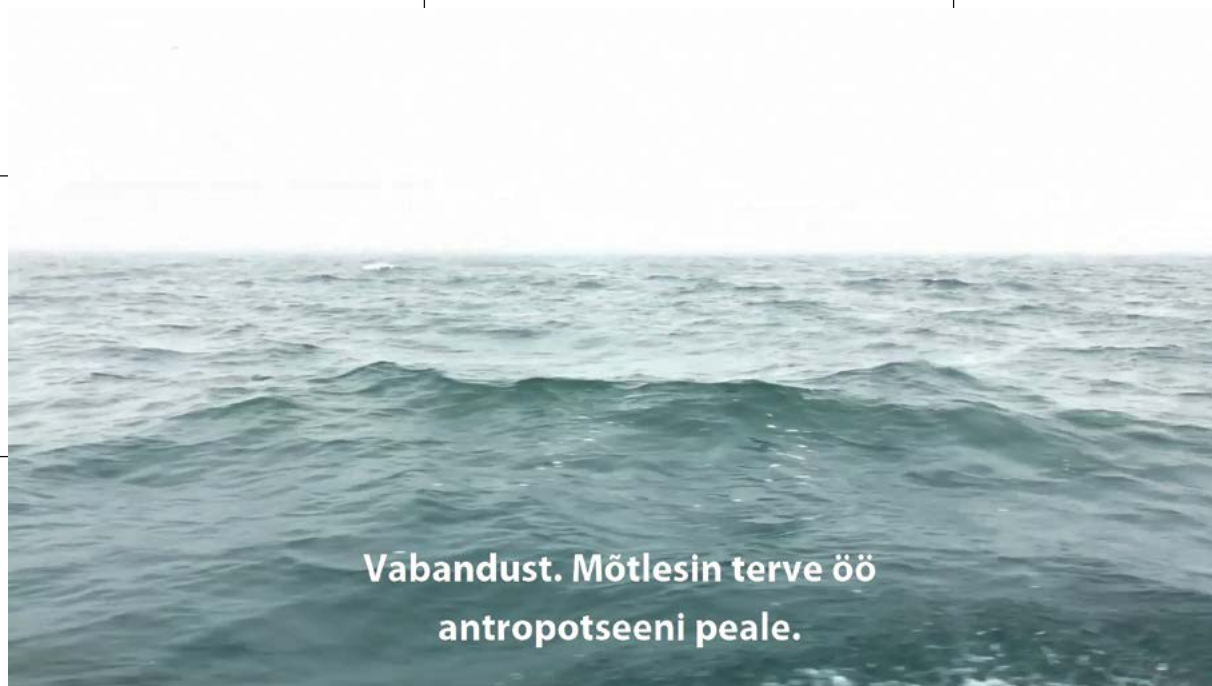
"Baida", the video work exhibited in the show, also combines the life in Dagestan with the specifics of the art world. The video, which was initially created for the 2017 Venice Biennale, documents a boat trip by three art workers to the location of the performance that was to take place at the biennale. The work started its journey in the village of Starii Terek, where the artist interviewed fishermen as groundwork for the project. Many of their stories revealed a fear of capsizing during a storm and going missing. This is how Makhacheva found out that it was customary among fishermen to tie themselves to their boats. In this way, in the case of an accident, it is possible for their families to find the body and bury it, so they can mourn the deceased respectfully.

The title of the work is ambiguous, because in Russian the word "baida" can mean a boat as well as something of little importance. In the video, we hear a discussion between the protagonists – the artist and the participants themselves – during which we learn more about the action that was to take place at sea. At first, the apparent shallowness of the three participants surprises us considering the seriousness of the subject. That said, everyone who has visited an international mega-exhibition knows how mind-numbing quickly passing through an exhibition can be, and therefore, how little one can attentively delve into the work of the artists participating in the exhibition.

GEORGI MARKELOV (1929–2014) is an Estonian sculptor born in Narva, who lived and worked in Tallinn. His works, almost solely made from wood, include portraits, natural motifs as well as political commissions. For instance, he has depicted many Soviet heroes such as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Vilhemine Klementi.

In 1975, Markelov exhibited his series of sculptures "Never War!" ("Ei iial sõda!") in the battery tower of Kiek in de Kök, which consisted of anti-war pieces made over ten years. The cycle includes sculptures of prisoners, soldiers and mourning mothers, but also the mould "Birds" ("Linnud") and the almost two-metre-tall "Pillar to the Victims of Fascism" ("Fašismiohvrite sammas"). Although these were not commissioned works, most of them were acquired by museums for their collections due to the subject matter that suited the times. In an interview with Martti Soosaar, Markelov said that these works were created foremost due to an internal need and eventually only he himself knew whether the works reflected political opinions or were rather based on personal memories of war.

Among other changes, re-independence muddled up the power structures that had existed in the art world up to that point. The previous state policy of acquiring art disappeared and the necessary funding for producing art dried up. The few sources of funding favoured new mediums: installation and video art. Curators and conceptual solo exhibitions appeared on the art scene. Between 1994 and 2009 Markelov created approximately 6,000 wooden flowers at his Raja Street studio, which had the combined title "Flowers for Mother" ("Lilled emale"). At an exhibition at the Raja Street gallery in 2009, the flowers covered almost the entire floor of the gallery and at their centre was a portrait of the artist's mother. The flowers created through machine-like repetition are like an intimate conceptualism – the idea is clear and the production methodically simplified. Artist Uku Sepsivart has said that it seems as though Markelov started depicting the truly important things toward the end of his life.



Vābandust. Mõtlesin terve öö
antropotseeni peale.



TAUS MAKHACHEVA
Still from the video "Baida" (2017)

GEORGI MARKELOV
Portrait of Vilhemine Klementi (1975)

ELÉONORE DE MONTESQUIOU (1970) is a film artist of Estonian-French origin, whose films often give voice to those ignored by official narratives. For instance, in previous projects she has recorded the inhabitants of Sillamäe, Paldiski and Narva. There still exists a considerable lack of comprehension between the Estonian and Russian speaking inhabitants of Estonia, even now close to 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A strong indicator of the marginal status of Russian speaking inhabitants is the fact that the President of the Republic of Estonia addressed them for the first time as “fellow countrymen” only in 2006.

De Montesquiou’s activism also reaches beyond the art world. About ten years ago, she established a fund to support the children of Kopli, which assisted parents with kindergarten tuition and helped cover the cost of attending summer camps. She also actively participates in the work of the social project Neue Nachbarshaft in Berlin. Language lessons are organised for refugees in a café there, but also other collective activities like a women’s group and mountain climbing.

In recent years, Eléonore de Montesquiou has got to know many refugees seeking asylum in Estonia and “Hope Is No Home” at this exhibition, which consists of posters, postcards and films, presents only a few of their stories to us. We hear about the journeys refugees undertook to arrive in Estonia, their life here in the detention centre and getting out of there.

The work puts our understanding of the truth to the test. The development of an opinion that is independent and as objective as possible requires comparing different sources. The stories recorded in Montesquiou’s films cannot be checked in any way, however. It is also difficult to find additional information about the detention centre, which has now moved from Harku to Rae. Information on the police website and news portals pertaining to the centre is meagre. Although the emotional stories of the characters in the films of Eléonore de Montesquiou present only a part of the truth, they are currently one of the best documentations concerning the experiences of people seeking asylum in Estonia.

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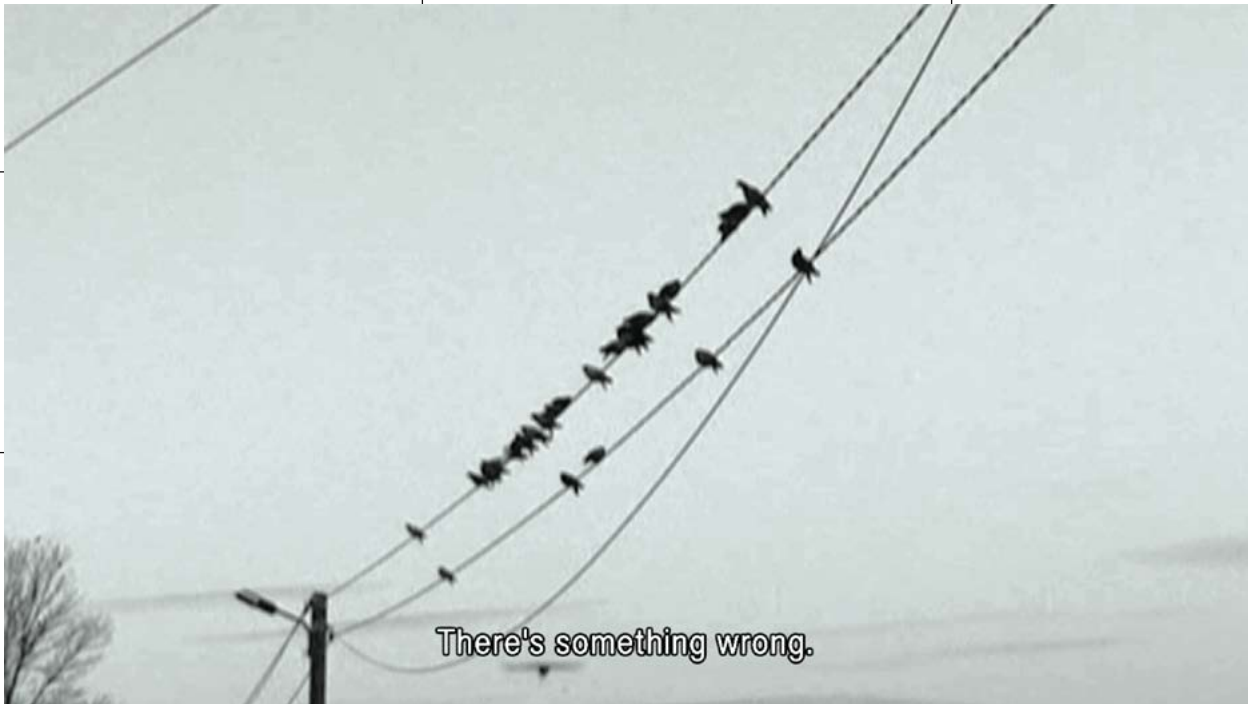
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HANNA PIKSARV (1989) is an artist living and working in Tallinn. The process and physical work are an important part of her practice. For example, her master’s project at the Estonian Academy of Arts, “November-May” (2015) included collecting firewood in the forest, sorting and packing it and eventually displaying the bundles that took months to amass. It is easy to assume the existence of a meditative and therapeutic dimension in her work.

Recently, Piksarv worked for two and a half years as a manual arts teacher at a special needs primary school in Tallinn. She knew that her subsequent work would include both teaching and caring. That has said, it soon became apparent that the job description didn’t include even half of the responsibilities that fell to her, since the actual nature of the care work is hard to define in words. While the preparation for teaching is easy to describe (e.g. getting to know the techniques, preparing the teaching materials), relating to each person requires a specific approach. The result of the teaching work is perhaps a wonky spoon or a wobbly stool, while the care work may be best expressed as someone else’s worries that you take home with you.

At the exhibition “The Art of Being Good”, Piksarv exhibits materials from the offcuts box that amassed during her 1,421 working hours in the manual arts classroom, laying them out on the floor like a circular mandala. We see very different pieces of wood. Some have been sanded, some drilled, some have had a piece cut out of their centre. “The quality of my work tends to be judged by how beautiful or good the pieces are that my students have made,” Piksarv says. Such an evaluation does not take into consideration the great emotional work made by teacher and pupil in the process of making the piece.



ELEONORE DE MONTESQUIOU
Still from the film „Le General“ (2017)

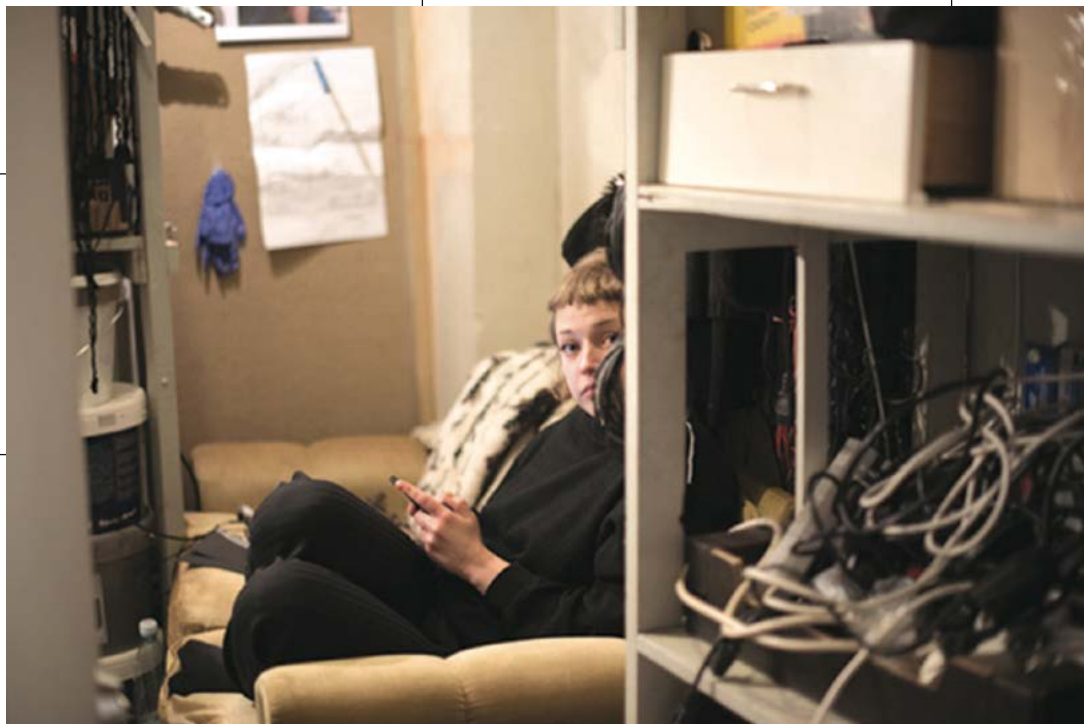
HANNA PIKSARV
Residual Material (2019)

LIINA PÄÄSUKU (1990) is an Estonian artist living and working in Vienna, whose practice is characterised by a DIY-aesthetic (they often use domestic materials such as felt tips, biro, drawing paper) and a deliberate non-action as a reaction to the creative pressure directed toward them. For example, they participated in the 2014 group exhibition “Disconnection of Space” (“Ruumi Lahusus”; curated by Marten Esko and Sten Ojavee) at ISFAG Gallery via video transmission, deciding to sit at home on their corner sofa during the opening hours of the exhibition and crochet themselves a bikini for the summer. In this way, Pääsuke waited for inspiration at their own tempo and under their own conditions. In 2015, they were invited to participate at the exhibition “DOings and kNOTs” (curated by Margit Säde), but the invitation coincided with a period when Pääsuke was working out some important problems connected to the (art) world. The cramped artist spent the whole of the exhibition period in the storeroom of the Art Hall reading books and drawing.

For the exhibition “The Art of Being Good” they have erected a military tent in the large hall, where we can hear their discussion with friends Mari Kuuse and Lee Taul exploring subjects important to them. The current political climate has activated Estonians again after some time and many family and other gatherings most likely end with a careful feeling out of the political views of the attendees. Liina Pääsuke has called their work “All My Friends Look the Same” (“Kõik mu sõbrad on ühte nägu”) a vocal exercise. How to start espousing your opinions clearly and loudly, when you feel you are naturally a rather closed, patient and restrained Estonian? Perhaps it is best to start with two good friends secretly in a tent. And then?

BITA RAZAVI (1983) is an artist from Tehran, living and working in Helsinki and Tartu. The familiar and foreign as well as reconciliation are some of the important subjects in her work. For instance, she has interviewed the parents of a number of Finnish artists to find out how they see the profession of their children. The work “Pictures from Our Future, Pictures from Our Past” (2018) started from a situation on the street in Tartu where a young man called Razavi a “symbol of the future of Estonia”. In the series of photographs, we see Razavi embodying the average Estonian woman in various everyday roles and photographs of empty country houses that have been abandoned due to the recent era of rapid change. Why have Eastern Europeans forgotten that many of their fellow citizens were recently refugees themselves?

Now Razavi exhibits a new version of her work “A Coloring Book for Concerned Adults”. The initial drawings that were produced with the public in New York, USA, have now been redone considering the burning issues in Estonian society. Colouring books are becoming ever more popular – they are produced for adults as well as children, you can buy mandala-books or versions with characters from your favourite films. But what happens when serious subjects, which are difficult to form an opinion about, confront you on the pages of the colouring book? The data has been left unspecified in Razavi’s work and the colourer can decide themselves how the information is categorised on the graphs. The colouring pages set out at the exhibition are meant for everyone and public group colouring sessions will be organised during the exhibition.



LIINA PÄÄSUKE
Liina Pääsuke at the exhibition „DOings&kNOTs“ (2015)

BITA RAZAVI
Front cover of „Coloring Book for Concerned Adults“ (2017 – ongoing)

UKU SEPSIVART (1988) is an artist living and working in Tallinn, whose main working method involves collaboration with other animal species. This form of making art started in 2011 with the work "The Itch of a Lumber-Jack. Irrational Ready-Made" ("Puuraiduri kihelus. Irratsionaalne ready-made"), where he exhibited pieces of wood found in the forest that had been gnawed at both ends by beavers. Later, he developed the work and produced the "Beaver Art Museum" ("Koprakunsti museum", 2015), where he exhibited various found forms produced by beavers.

"Bee Dependent Existence" ("Mesilastest sõltuv eksistents") is a project that started in the summer of 2018 at the MoKS art residency in Mooste, for which Sepsivart produced a hive in his own likeness and introduced bees to it. This exhibition presents a video documenting the process along with the honeycomb bust.

It is not easy to decide whether the animals are equal collaborative partners for Sepsivart or whether he is exploiting them. The animals are certainly not conscious of their actions, which the artist directs them to perform. That said, we shouldn't doubt the artist's noble aims. He has said that he dreams of a utopia where animals and people would live in a real symbiosis, and it is obvious that he is making steps in his work towards achieving this. The title of the work "Bee Dependent Existence" also refers to the understanding of the intertwined nature of living beings. The number of bees has started to decrease in recent years due to the use of pesticides in farming, mono-cultural agriculture and the warming climate. If there were no bees, there would not only be no artworks by Sepsivart, but also none of the many plants and their fruit that depend on pollination, the animals that eat the fruit nor ultimately the sweet-sweet honey that people put in their tea and cakes.

JANA SHOSTAK (1993) is an artist of Belarussian origin residing in Poland, whose work includes video art, performance as well as installation. Her main strategy is tactical intervention into the everyday. At the exhibition "The Art of Being Good" Shostak presents three previous works edited into one television programme compared by the artist herself.

The video "I Love You" consists of candid camera footage. Shostak visited various places where lottery tickets are sold and said "I love you", which is also the name of a widespread scratch card in Poland. Most of the shopkeepers simply ask "how many?", but a few comment on the contradiction between the name of the scratch card and the real meaning of the phrase: "Wouldn't it be great, if we said that to each other more often?"

"Nowacy" documents the artist's attempt to find an alternative to the Polish word "uchodźca", which means "refugee", but which has a negative, shaming connotation. Shostak offers the conciliatory alternative "nowak", which means newcomer. Nowak is also one of the most widespread surnames in Poland, the history of which dates back to the middle ages, when manor owners gave this name to new serfs.

Currently, Jana Shostak is preparing a staged documentary film together with **JAKUB JASIUKIEWICZ** (1983) about her candidacy for a beauty pageant, which has been ongoing for years, wherein the artist does not make concessions to the jury in terms of her character or her profession. In the film programme exhibited at the exhibition, we see only the trailer of the in-production film.



UKU SEPSIVART

Still from the video „Bee Dependent Existence“ (2018)

JANA SHOSTAK

Still from the video „I Love You“ (2016)

ROI VAARA (1957) is an artist living and working in Helsinki. Although his work includes video and installation, Vaara is mainly known for his performances. He has been a member of the performance group Black Market International since 1988. Vaara has said that he considers his work to be living poetry, which equally includes himself as well as the public.

The exhibition "The Art of Being Good" is introduced by Roi Vaara's work "Artist's Dilemma" (1997), which humorously refers to the greatest question in the art community: art or life? In the video, we see Vaara on a desolate field of ice in front of a road sign indecisively walking back and forth. Artists are also people who have to constantly juggle their priorities in everyday life. Probably everyone has felt at times that they are alone at a crossroad in their life, in the middle of an empty field of ice not knowing which direction to go in.

Although Vaara's work, which is based on a simple gesture, does not divulge for us in any way the complicated obligations or relationships that are behind the options, we know from experience that life is not just for living, but instead, consists of countless such crossroads and junctions. Although at this exhibition we see artists making selfless gestures to improve the world, we must remember that they do not have any better equipment for this. They too take that time at the expense of the family, friends or half-finished renovations. The real art of being good is for everyone to practice and it takes place everywhere else but in the exhibition hall: at home, school, on the street... Wherever there are people moving slowly but with determination towards betterment – decision by decision.

MARI VOLENS (1981) is an artist living and working in Tallinn, whose work includes both installations as well as photography. Previously, she has for instance depicted the greenery of Tallinn's Lasnamäe residential district in a series of photographs titled "Same Difference" (2013–2016). In the photographs, we see the natural areas of the district established in the 1980s, the strict order of which copies the uniformity of the prefabricated buildings around it. Volens is also one of the founding members of the artist-run-space Rundum.

"A Quiet Turn" ("Vaikne pöörd") is an expansion of Mari Volens' exhibition of the same name at Draakoni Gallery in 2018. The installation with a calming soundscape, dim lighting and slowly moving office curtains combines elements that usually never meet. The light and sound seem to belong to a yoga class or a calming afternoon, whereas the office curtains belong to an anonymous working environment. According to the artist, the work speaks of a surplus of external stimulus and the need to hide from it.

In the globalised world, the working day lasts 24-hours. It is always day somewhere and if you want to do business globally, you need to be contactable even at night or on the weekend. Freelance creative workers are also agents of such a rhythm of life; their work and free time are hopelessly entangled. And even if you have a part-time employment contract, it may be unclear precisely when your work takes place. Maybe you should even work a little more? You can take a bit of time from here and a bit from there, can't you? Volens' installation is like a suitable hybrid environment for this new circumstance. Can you imagine yourself spending your work/free time in such a strangely practical/spiritual environment with your friend/boss?



ROI VAARA
Still from the video „Artist's Dilemma“ (1997)

MARI VOLENS
View from the exhibition „Slowly Revolving“ (2018)

THE ART OF BEING GOOD

Tallinn Art Hall

22.06 – 1.09.2019

Artists:

Dylan Ray Arnold, Carl Giffney, The Idiots, Diana Lelonek,
Taus Makhacheva, Georgi Markelov, Eléonore de Montesquiou,
Hanna Piksarv, Liina Pääsuke, Bitu Razavi, Uku Sepsivart,
Jana Shostak, Roi Vaara, Mari Volens

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Installation:

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Tamara Luuk



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