Estonian Art Manifesto

Through the fabric of modernism that with minor or major cuts has a century long history in Estonia, there runs a particular continuous pattern: manifesto! manifesto! manifesto! Manifesto is not simply a phenomenon that belongs to the documentalistics of cultural history, but it is also a specific avant-garde genre: thesis-based in its format, essentially young and idealistic towards the future and nihilistic towards the present. "Manifesto is the weapon of modernists"¹ as Tiit Hennoste, a manifestologist concluded the manifest as a genre, "a programme declaration of a radicals' group"².

Manifestos and groups generally appear hand in hand in Estonian culture. Groups often make their public appearances with the escort of stunning texts, the programme provides the group with sharpness of ideas, the group synergy gives the manifesto radiancy. Studying manifestos as a genre is a rather new field in Estonia, the first discussions on the topic originating from literary scholar Tiit Hennoste. However, the present text is the first attempt of providing an overview of the manifesto story of Estonian visual arts. When, according to Tiit Hennoste, a literary manifesto requires a great narrative³, then in art, the genre invented by the modernists, seems to work also in the postmodern era.

Unexpectedly, we cannot find the first Estonian visual art manifesto when looking at the activities of the Art Union Pallas (Kunstistühing Pallas), founded in 1918. The reason probably lies in the indiscipline that the artists of these days shared towards theoretical matters, which derived from the French atelier libre mentality where an artist enjoyed the status of an opinionated genius. Another reason would probably be the fact that as the Art Union Pallas consisted of artists and writers, then, in a way, the latter manifested for both. For instance, let us recall "Tarapita" (1921), where not literary matters, but rather "the swamps of opposition where we’re doomed to decay"⁴ held the central position.

Another significant grouping apart from Pallas was the Group of Estonian Artists (Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühm), founded in 1923 that consisted mainly of artists who had received their education in Penza, Russia. In 1929 the Group finally published a long awaited almanac "The Book of New Art", which contains the first manifesto of Estonian visual art, entitled "About the New Art". The title "About the New Art" implies somehow an opposition against the old, which in the light of the shortness of Estonian art history strikes as a somewhat grotesque implication. The memoirs of one of the founding members of the Group, Eduard Ole contain an amount of opposition, where the expressionism, which was popular in Pallas appears in the role of the old. However, it is probably a bare necessity derived from the modernist rhetoric that demands a construction of the enemy.

The stable political situation in Europe and Estonia respectively calms the artists down and the manifesto of the Group remains the only early bird during the pre-war period. After the Second World War, during the period of Stalinist socialist realism, an artists credo or, even more, manifesting the pursuits of an entire group were totally out of the question. So, the next art manifesto dates back to the times of the Khrushchev Thaw, to the year 1960 when a group of young artists known as the Tartu Company (Tartu Sõpruskond) presented their works in a newly opened school house – therefore in unofficial grounds – and supplied the exhibition with an explanatory text on the wall “Young Art Friends!” that was meant specifically as an explanation rather than an opinion, as claimed by the author of the text Heldur Viirres. The meaning of a real manifesto was attached to the text only after the exhibition, on the allegation meetings on the basis of which the existence of an anti-soviet group was constructed.

As late as 1971 the leader of the art group The Visars (Visarid), Kaljo Pöllu creates the next art manifesto. "The Manifesto of Visars", compiled in the final stage and by the members of the group that had been active since 1967 at the Art Studio at Tartu State University, is their diversified attempt to conceptualise ex post the membership, the activities and the practiced art forms of The Visars. In addition to that "Manifesto of Visars" is remarkable for being, besides a "Manifesto to All the Peoples of Estonia" our second text carrying the title "manifesto". The contents of the text strike us as mostly political, containing concrete viewpoints in regard to the republic's cultural politics. Another novel angle of the manifesto is the strong theoretical engagement that derives from the social utopism of Victor Vasarely, although it already gets mixed with the author's personal national romanticism.

Simultaneously two groups were active in Tallinn – ANK'64 and SOUP'69. Their claims can be concluded on the basis of the text "Objective Art" which was delivered by Leonhard Lapin at one of the most famous exhibitions in Estonian art history – "Harku 75". A rather long text purposefully addressing only theoretical matters of art and therefore striving towards a scholarly as well as apolitical approach, postulates classical modernist aestheticism.

"Manifesto of Visars" and "Objective Art" point at a formulation of theoretical discourse in Estonian visual arts. The second half of the seventies is once again a quieter
period in regard to manifestos, the single programme worth mentioning here would be a painting by Ilmar Kruusamäe “Dedicated to Ants Juske” (1980), where we find the authors opinion on the question of hyperrealism: “99% WORK, 1% PHOTO”.

In the second half of the eighties a new young generation of artists crops up, headed by Group T (Rühm T), who present a short manifesto at their first exhibition in 1986. In 1988 “Manifesto of Technodelic Expressionism” was added. It is important to note from a manifestological point of view that the manifests of Group T influence the reception of the work most of all, which cannot be conceived without references to the writings of the leaders of the group Raoul Kurvits and Urmas Muru. Later come texts by Hasso Krull – one of Estonia’s most significant figures in popularising poststructuralist ideas, who was also a member of the group.

Another art collective with a strong theoretical background was DeStudio, created at the beginning of nineties by Peeter Laurits and Herkki-Erich Merila, that produced a fair amount of manifests, which already speak the language of postmodernism.

Another grouping that, for a short period, was active in the beginning of the same decade and was also notable for a multitude of manifests, was called the The Switch (Lülit). We can find at least three texts bearing the name of manifesto and in addition one text, which was presented during one of their performances. The Switch also consisted of just two artists – Navitrolla and Toomas Roosimölder, however, the pair were a very vital company. Therefore, their manifests “for obtaining a better style” were written in co-operation with the literates Karl Martin Sinijärv and Sven Kivisildnik. The latter can be considered a professional manifesto writer – as one can find his signature below the largest number of most uncharitable texts. The Switch manifests have an ironic tone and classical format: first a destructive judgement of the present situation in Estonian art followed by The Switch’s positive programme.

The youth who entered the art scene in 1960’s and 70’s, formulated a new art nomenclature after the regaining of independence. The autodidacts Navitrolla and Roosimölder were rejected by the official art world. Navitrolla did not manage to get accepted into the Art Academy and for not being members of the artist union they were not even able to buy brushes for themselves. Out of anger and defiance derived from the situation real anti-manifestos are born that call for the overthrowing of the dominant art culture.

We can find numbers of such texts by the writers, starting already from Henrik Visnapuu’s “Green Moment” (1914). From the second half of the nineties two manifestos could be mentioned. Firstly, another attempt by Kaljo Põllu to gather his students, this time the company that had joined him the Art Academy’s anthropological trips into a grouping called Pith (Ydi), that were accompanied by an almanac and “Manifesto of the Art Group Ydi” (1998), both derived from The Visars experience. Unfortunately, Ydi did not gain as much attention as did The Visars.

In the late nineties after a long period of hesitation, Estonian art received its first major wave of outsiders. A gang of punk-related transpoppers revealed the evils of transitional society and the requests of the generation were concluded in a manifesto – “Transpop – Art without Past” by the charismatic leading figure of the transpoppers Mari Sobolev (now Kartau).

Another outsider phenomenon evolving in the nineties and actively performing in Estonian art scene today is Non Grata. “Manifesto and the Main Foundations for the Activity of Non Grata” is a document that rather strictly establishes the bases for the activities of the above mentioned performance group and school.

Manifestos of the new millennia also carry a significant world-bettering claim. The manifesto of the Female Artists’ Sing’n’Play Society Share Joy (Naiskunstnike Lauluja Mänguselts Puhas Rõõm), propagates joyful tactics in dealing with serious social issues. Marco Laimre as a single artist has come forward with manifestos, which combine deeply personal and social matters.

An overview of the manifestos of Estonian visual arts unfolds in front of you. The special edition contains full texts and abstracts, comments on concrete texts are to be found next to each.

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The comments of the manifestos written by Indrek Grigor (p. 5, 7, 9, 11, 15, 19, 21, 29) and Liisa Kaljula (p. 13, 17, 23, 25, 27)