

Indrek Grigor

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The first Estonian manifesto was the album *Noor-Eesti I* (Young Estonia), published in 1905 [the literary group associated with the powerful entry of modernism into Estonian culture – Ed]. Starting in the 1920s, this was followed by a number of social manifestos, which nearly always indirectly tackled the issues of figurative art. As texts produced by writers, these have been primarily viewed as part of literary history.

The most significant pre-WW II organisation in Estonia to deal with figurative art was the Art Society *Pallas*, established in 1918. In 1919 it founded an art school of the same name. Unfortunately we cannot talk about a manifesto regarding the *Pallas* Society or its school. The main reason was probably the indifference of the leading artists towards theoretical questions, caused by their reliance on the tradition of the French free studio, where the artist-teacher had the status of a genius. It was especially obvious in the *Pallas* school study plans, which were also studio-based, whereas taking theoretical subjects, such as the theory of perspective, was not really necessary in order to graduate. This, incidentally, is typical of the entire history of pre-war Estonian manifestos whose content was not the theoretical issues of poetics, but primarily the confident establishing of the artist as a creator.



Henrik Olvi. *Venice*. 1928. Oil on canvas. 112 × 69 cm. Art Museum of Estonia. Olvi was a member of The Group of Estonian Artists

*The Group of Estonian Artists*, mostly made up of people educated in Pensa in Russia, was formed in 1923. In 1928 it published its almanac *The Book of New Art*, which constituted the first Estonian manifesto of figurative art.

The almanac, first of all, explained the nature of new art; it did not postulate and consciously avoided talking about -isms. At the same time, it is remarkable that sticking to cubism as a form was compulsory for the *Group* members, and any deviation meant expulsion from the *Group*.

The title *The Book of New Art* seems to allude to an opposition to the old, which, considering the brevity of Estonian art history, was almost a grotesque aim. Although the memoirs of Eduard Ole, one of the founding members, in which the role of the old belonged to expressionism, which was cultivated by the *Pallas* artists, contain some opposition, this was mainly caused by the need for an enemy figure, which everyone relying on modernist rhetoric had to have. *The Book of New Art* is therefore not a classical modernist opposition manifesto, but one of the basic texts of Estonian figurative art.

The stabilised situation in Estonia and elsewhere in Europe also brought about a calmer life among artists, and thus the manifesto of the *Group of Artists* remains the only one of its kind in pre-war Estonia. During the subsequent period of Stalinist socialist realism, manifestos of any kind were quite out of the question. That is why we find the next art manifesto only in 1960, at the time of the so-called Khrushchev thaw era, when a group of young artists, known as the *Tartu Fellowship*, displayed its work in a recently opened Tartu schoolhouse, ie in unofficial territory. Like the *Group of Artists* before them, the Fellowship added an explanatory wall text to their paintings, which, according to its author, Heldur Viires, was meant as an explanation and not a statement. The text acquired the dimensions of a serious manifesto only in post-exhibition meetings, where the artists were finally accused of anti-Soviet activities.



Cover of *The Book of New Art*.  
Design by Märt Laarman. 1928

The text of the *Fellowship* remained the only one in the post-war period for quite some time. The next manifesto was signed only in 1971 by Kaljo Põllu, head of the *Visarid* group, which operated at the University of Tartu. The manifesto was written in the final days of the group's existence and is, as such, an attempt to conceptualise the activities of a group that was extremely pluralistic in terms of its membership, art form and general direction of activities. Form-wise, the text is remarkable for its name, which at once states the nature of the manifesto. Contextually, the text stands out primarily for its political approach, containing specific opinions about the state art and culture policy. *The Visarid Manifesto* also has strong theoretical leanings based on Viktor Vasarely's social utopia, which mixed with Kaljo Põllu's national romanticism.

At the same time as the *Visarid*, other groups operated in Tallinn – *ANK'64* and *SOUP'69*. As a summary of the aims of these groups, we can take a look at the text titled *Objective Art*, presented by Leonhard Lapin at one of the most famous exhibitions in Estonian art history, *Harku 75*. The rather long text, which tackles only the theoretical aspects of art (ie aspiring to be scholarly and thus not political), postulates an aestheticism in the spirit of classical modernism. *The Visarid Manifesto* and *Objective Art* both prove the triumph of theory in Estonian figurative art and confirm its high standard against an international background.

The late 1970s and early 1980s again formed a rather quiet period in Estonian art. The only exception may be the painting of the hyperrealist Ilmar Kruusamäe *With Dedication to Ants Juske* (1980, Tartu Art Museum), which bears a text dealing with the author's opinion of hyperrealism: "99% work, 1% photo".

In the second half of the 1980s, a new generation of young artists emerged, led by *Group T*, whose first exhibition in 1986 was accompanied by a manifesto. From the point of view of the history of manifestos, *Group T*'s manifestos (1988 brought the *Manifesto of Technodelic Expressionism*) are significant, not for their content but primarily for their impact on reception, not possible to consider without referring to articles by the leaders of the Group, Raoul Kurvitz (until 1990 Kurvits) and Urmas Muru. In addition to these texts, others appeared later by the most significant promoter of post-structuralist theory in Estonia, Hasso Krull, who also belonged to the group. What was new about *Group T* was that the text, including independent reviews in the press, became an organic part of the art they cultivated. One reason was the emergence of a new generation of critics much more oriented towards theory.

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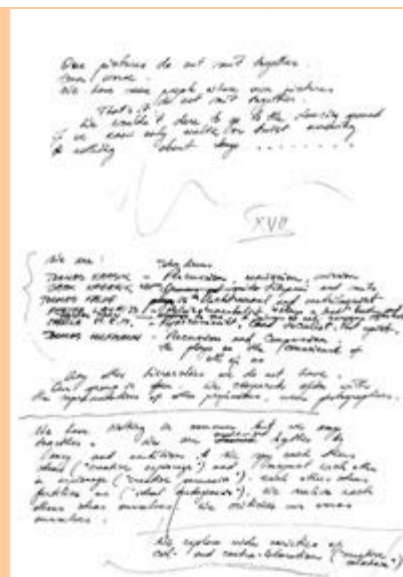
Group *Lülit* (Switch), which operated relatively briefly in the early 1990s, produced quite a few manifestos. At least three texts referred to as 'manifestos' have survived, plus a text presented at a performance of *Lülit*. The group consisted of two artists: Navitrolla and Tarmo Roosimölder, but it attracted a number of followers, so that the manifestos, 'in order to achieve a better style', were compiled with the help of writers. The content of the manifestos was ironically classical. Initially the first counter-manifesto in Estonian art called on people to overturn the previous art culture, and it was followed by *Lülit*'s positive programme.

Two manifestos from the second half of the 1990s should be mentioned. The first was Kaljo Põllu's new attempt to gather his students, this time those who had participated in anthropological trips over the years under the auspices of the Academy of Arts, into a group called *Ydi*. In the vein of *Visarid*, this brought along the *Ydi Manifesto* and an almanac. Alas, the activities of *Ydi* never attracted as much attention as did those of *Visarid*.

Another group that appeared in the 1990s, and is still very much around, is *Non-Grata*. Their programme, which eschews attention and official recognition, was expressed by Mari Sobolev in her article 'Art of the invisible – voluntarily out of focus'.

The connections of Estonian figurative art in the early 20th century with radical modernism were quite feeble and hence the number of manifestos was modest as well. More remarkable are the manifestos of the 1970s. At a time when the West was governed by post-modernism born out of the theoretical crisis of modernism, the aesthetic theories of modernism in the peculiar circumstances of the Soviet Union turned into counter-reaction to, essentially, modernist mass building. The situation became even more paradoxical in the second half of the 1980s, when a new generation, with a considerably better overview of what was going on in the world, rode the wave of neo-modernism. Under circumstances in which post-modernism in Estonia practically did not exist, they thus gave reason for Leonhard Lapin to claim 'what they are now doing here, we did 20 years ago.'

The late 1980s and early 1990s, as had the 1920s, brought about a wave of manifestos, only this time figurative artists were quite active as well. After political circumstances normalised and society stabilised, only artists with an exceptionally sensitive social awareness displayed any programmatic activity.



Hand-written manifesto of *Forever Yours* (1990–1992), group of young photographers. The text has been written by Peeter Laurits (see also *Estonian Art* 1/2004)