

# THE ESTONIAN EXPERIENCE: NON-INSTITUTIONAL MEDIA ART PRODUCTION IN ESTONIA

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*Speaking about media art in Estonia at the present moment, I will bring out 4 main lines (DIY phenomenon, financial situation, blending of various forms of culture, artist's ironic attitude and manipulation with media), which characterize current media art in Estonia and show us, that Estonia has adopted developments underway elsewhere and thus media art is also moving strongly forwards.*

Artists have always been curious and open to implementing new opportunities. The rapid development of new technologies has given us fantastic possibilities for expressing ourselves in a modern way, and one cannot underestimate the role of media art in our society. By indeed belonging to the group of "Eastern-Bloc Countries" in geographic terms, we can boldly say that Estonia has adopted quite quickly developments underway elsewhere and thus media art is also moving strongly forwards. This has certainly been helped along by an open society and constant expansion of opportunities. This has certainly been helped along by an open society and constant expansion of opportunities – Western countries' artists' interest in what happens in Estonia and efficiently functioning international contacts.

## **About the past and present of Estonian media art in brief**

Speaking about media art in Estonia at the present moment, I can boldly claim that the media art being created is, for the most part, indeed non-institutional and quite self-generating. We nevertheless also have our own historical heritage, the roots of which stretch back into the 1960's (for example experiments in pop- and kinetic art etc). However, a new wave of media art arose in the mid-1990's, when Estonia accepted the Internet as a new tool of creation and when barriers between Estonia and the rest of the world disappeared. During this period appeared the pioneers of 'net art', who actively and freely began asking questions about computer gender (Mare Tralla, e-mail questionnaire and first web pages), the possibilities of social networking (Raivo Kelomees, "Cybertower") and hypertextual poetry on the Internet (Nelli Rohtvee). The majority of media art in the 1990's was created at the initiative of the students and faculty of the Estonian Academy of Arts. The reasons why artists interested in media art at the time carried out activities at the university are simple - a computer class equipped with Internet capability was created at the Estonian Academy of Arts. The E-Media Center was established in 1994 by the initiative of artist Ando Keskküla. In 1995, artists Ando Keskküla, Sirje Helme and Eric Kluitenberg carried out our first international conference "Interstanding – Understanding Interactivity".

In the present age, where Internet and computers are available to everyone, media art is arising in small groups that do not depend as much on a university or official creative organizations - interest-based groups indeed are formed on many occasions by former new-media university students; however fertile activities still take place by artists' own initiative.

## **What characterizes non-institutional media art in Estonia?**

While speaking of non-institutional media art production in Estonia, I rely upon my personal experience organizing the annual media art festival 'Plektrum' in Tallinn. The festival was conceived just as are many good ideas in the world: in a small suburban attic apartment, where young people decided during a gathering of friends to create a festival of club parties. The small party has grown to this year's already ninth-annual, ten-day-long festival comprising music, exhibitions, audio-visual experiments as well as organized initiatives in public city spaces. The fact that makes it fresh and youth-oriented is that festival organization is controlled by young volunteers, students are allowed to speak at exhibitions and a great number of greater- and less-known figures are able to come before the public with their projects. It is foremost a meeting place for professionals and amateurs that certainly does not solve the large problems of media theory, but which showcases significant trends.

Art events and workshops that have taken place at the festival over the years superbly exemplify the DIY phenomenon that I regard the first characteristic feature of Estonian media art - art projects and workshops transpire with low-tech resources, using a hands-on method. The availability and simplicity of technology, which enables us to function almost without boundaries, is the most important aspect in the activities of contemporary artists. It is not a question of a lack of topics or the complexity of tools, but rather the limitation of capabilities and time to ourselves.

The second important aspect of characterizing Estonian media art is problems financing it. Naturally, we possess support structures that also support good projects when necessary; however they do not number many and I believe the constant search for new, alternative opportunities has by and large even benefited art. This leads in turn to looking for cooperative possibilities with foreign partners and the desire to also acquaint one's activities outside of Estonia's national borders.

The third attribute that characterizes our contemporary media art is the dissolution of various forms of culture. Software programming and innovative technological solutions have mixed actual creative works with coordinated events, actual communication holds an important place alongside that done on the Internet and everything seems to be permitted. Therefore it is often very difficult to determine, from what point one is dealing with software art and from what point it is performance or some other phenomenon. This is, of course, not a unique experience for Estonia alone - the blending of mediums is happening everywhere. Yet the fact that cooperation in the field of culture is functioning wonderfully between Estonians from creative backgrounds and those from other walks of life demonstrates greatly that Estonian artists are closely following developments elsewhere and are capable of locating their activities within a wider context.

The fourth phenomenon that I can certainly regard as characteristic for Estonia is a certain joyfully ironic attitude towards widespread problems. Work performed with media artists and exhibition curation has shown that fears and taboos become a part of humorous commentary rather than heavy philosophical discussion. An interesting paradox surfaced while putting together the exhibition "Transparent Generation" in 2008 - the issue, which elsewhere in the world has become popular, did not incite works with fear or negative undertones in the least; our artists regarded the topic rather with happy superiority. Through the works, we found that surrounding cameras and carefully-checked personal data is an unavoidable part of contemporary society with which one must come to terms, and which must be utilized in the very best way in art. It is worth noting that a review of the exhibition in a major Estonian daily newspaper was given the headline: "What the knowledge that Britney Spears is pregnant gives us". Following this, the article, which was published in the online press, received an immense number of views and proved in a lively fashion that manipulation with media is one part of our culture.

## In summary

The current age shows clearly that Estonian media art is generated through very practical activities regardless of the existence of a definite institution. Several artists using new media as a tool today originate from very different fields of life and thus provide media art with ever newer interdisciplinary dimensions. At the same time, the annual festival undoubtedly helps to boost the reputation of media art, to allow people to grasp the coexistence of art and technology as a whole, to work and brainstorm actively in this field. And the most important aspect it helps to foster is the meeting of interest groups.

Estonia has certainly done a great amount of work in the IT sector, however cultural figures must be successful, taking into account their few opportunities. As a small and quite poor country, we are in a situation in which the act of making art and especially "underground" manifestations must successfully make do on their own. On the other hand, such a situation directs one towards greater creativity that is not dependent on material values - towards establishing exciting cooperative groups, high-volume and constant self-learning as well as searching for international contacts.

Nevertheless, I find that the current age provides us with fantastic opportunities because we live in an environment where a high number of both technologies and cooperative networks are at our disposal, several diverse kinds of events take place and all ideas may be realistically feasible in the context of media art.

## References and Notes:

- Raivo Kelomees "The State of Estonian Media Art AD 1998", - *Estonian Art nr 1, 1998*, article is available in *Art Orbit Internet publication*, [http://www.artnode.se/artorbit/issue3/f\\_estonian/f\\_estonian.html](http://www.artnode.se/artorbit/issue3/f_estonian/f_estonian.html)
- *Plektrum Festival 2011 official Web Site*, <http://plektrumfestival.com/en/>
- *Timo Toots's Web Site*, <http://works.timo.ee/>
- *An example of sustainable media art project (Taavet Jansen, Maike Lond)*, <http://www.mimproject.org/>
- *Artists group 'You must relax'*, <http://www.youmustrelax.com/?lang=en>
- *Kärt Ojavee's interactive textile*, <http://www.symbiosiso.com/family/symbiosisw/>
- *The exhibition 'gateways. Art and Networked Culture' (Kumu Art Museum, 2011)* <http://www.goethe.de/ins/ee/prj/gtw/enindex.htm>