

Alternative Nation: Young Art From Estonia

RMIT School of Art Gallery

Melbourne, July 2009

ARTISTS:

Marju Ago & Liina Reismaa /

Dmitri Gerasimov /

INTER FENSTER /

JIM /

Artur Vincent Kerge & Taavi Rekkaro /

Carmen Lansberg /

Loore Emilie Raav /

Anna Shkodenko /

Krõõt Tarkmeel /

MARJU AGO & LIINA REISMAA



Marju Ago
Born 1984
Painting BA

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

Marju: It is a hard decision to become a young artist in Estonia, firstly mainly because of the general contemporary artistic and cultural unawareness of our society. This fact makes it also hard to establish oneself as a professional young artist both in ideological and financial terms. The only possibility and hope in my point of view is international output, at least partly...Of course, it would be encouraging, if Tallinn could sometimes host bigger art events, but in turn this expects enough audience (what we yet don't have) and art-friendly politics as well.

Liina: I think the possibilities available for a young artist to act and generate ideas are rather OK. Many galleries are open for everyone, there are other ways for exhibiting your work, you just have to be active. When it comes to limitations it is important to mention that Estonia is very small, only slightly bigger than the Netherlands - the population is only 1.3 million people.



Liina Reismaa
Born 1984
Painting BA

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? Is it possible to teach somebody how to make art?

Marju: I have studied at the Estonian Academy of Arts but I've also been an exchange student in Switzerland and will continue my studies in the MA-programme in Hamburg, Germany. So I think, that being in an art academy gives you a background, which is important, but not the only way. The main thing is the development of a personality and so communication, information exchange and discussion are the factors that encourage it. The academic system is just one way to meet the right people.

Liina: Our department of fine art is built on conceptualizing. I have to explain everything I do, the explanation can also be "Because I like it!", it just has to work. I think that I have learned to take the consequences. I was in Spain for one semester, there, seeing those masses of art-students, I realized that there are more of them in this world, and a lot more! There's no point in producing art just for quantity, it has to be thought through.



Please tell us about your background: you are both painters but we are exhibiting your artist documentary. What is specific to this kind of format? Where is the artist (in your film)?

Marju: "iDay" is my first documentary. It's staged enough, so considering that it is correct to categorize it as an artist documentary. The format provides you a more narrative approach to the topic, then let's say, a painting would; you could imagine it as a painting that is 14 minutes long. I guess that every idea has in its context the right form/format for it, and to call someone a painter, sculptor or a film-maker has no real meaning. Of course every medium has its specifics and every artist has his/her favourite media, but that doesn't exclude the possibility to experiment or change direction completely.

In our film we are dealing with the artist's personal problem, we are self-monitoring, at the same time we have used different interviews to mix it with information and staged some scenes in the name of expanding the idea.

Liina: Yes, first and foremost I'm a painter, that is one of the most pleasant forms of art and one of the simplest ways to realize your ideas.

Before this film I made a documentary called "Factory and Man" (2007), with my coursemates we went to do some research about how working in a factory affects people. Doing "iDay" was fun, we examined Marju's problem with technology and its possible consequences. When we started we had a lot of trouble with cameras and computers, it made us doubt about if we ever manage to get the film done. But altogether it had a positive effect on the process and added some spice to it.

While I was making the movie I discovered that my own problems with technology are bigger and more serious than Marju's. Now I check my mailbox only once a week and use voice-mail instead of speaking on the phone.



"iDay" 2009
Artist documentary

Technology-addiction is the main topic of your film – of course you are exaggerating a bit, but I guess many people will recognize themselves. Where does art and creativity stand in this world full of online-alienation, what is your message to the people?

It seems that in an urbanized and digitalized world, art and creativity become more and more important; the more distant a man is from nature, the more he needs a constructed mental "click" that contemporary art (culture) can offer.

The main idea of "iDay" really is addiction to technology, and even more it is about the fear that the addiction can have an affect on our social relations and skills. Through conversations with different people related to the topic we tried to get some answers and advice.

DMITRI GERASIMOV



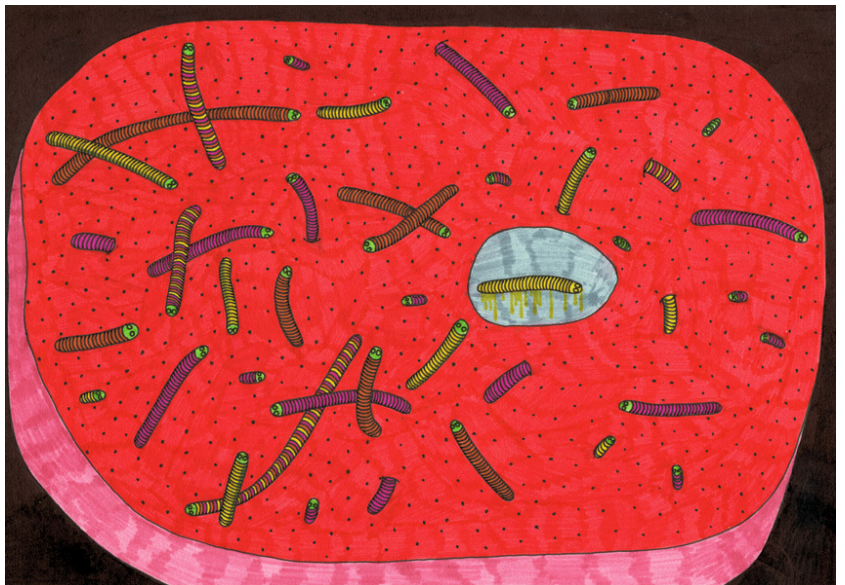
Born 1985
Photography BA

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

The main thing is that people consider me to be a young Russian, not Estonian artist. Some people don't think I'm an artist at all, that is why my choices are limited. But it doesn't bother me, I don't think about it. I'm doing my art for those who want me to do it and who believe in me. I've always paid for my projects, because when I asked money from you know where (I guess he means the Cultural Endowment of Estonia - M.J.)...they didn't give it to me because young artists who have good connections and references are preferred. It pisses me off, but I get over it. I don't hope for anything, I don't have any ideas about the future either, I only think about today, not tomorrow.

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

In the academy system I have learned how and with whom I should communicate with, learned when is the right time to say something, what do you have to do when you have to do something..., who is who in the Estonian art world. And again - learned how a young Russian artist should act in the Estonian system if he wants to be a part of it.





In art I'm interested in: people, unrepeatable process, dead animal, situation nowadays, me and what is connected with me, gray backgrounds, hair, black colour, fast food, emptiness, facial expressions, city landscape, movement, self-development, dolls, WC-pots, big areas, simple forms, renewal, simplification, excrement, problems with recrements, transport, women and their state, eyes, hairstyles, wrinkles, teeth, shadows, slime, slickness, big breasts, tools, unknown places, over lighted faces, smoke-filled places, symmetrical breasts, vividness, 80s, death, murderers, androgynes, Siamese twins, violent blonde chicks, artificial life, Soviet union, threedimensionality, all-over-hairy-men, trash, culinary, breakfasts, street art, light wounds, metaphoric exhibitions, scary faces, skin, fresh meat, softcore pornography, perverts, and all the rest, that is connected with life.

The process of creating pictures itself is out of control. The most important thing is emotion. Thought comes when feelings are long gone. From my artist's position, I try to pass some visual, individual way of seeing things, that is developing within years. In my art the most significant thing is the composition, the way of using colours and choice of subjects and objects.



INTER FENSTER



(Back row, from left to right)

Jarmo Nagel aka Baron von Dom (b. 1986)

Paul Kuimet aka Paul is a Dead Man Kuimet (b. 1984)

Madis Luik aka Madis on Square Garden Luik (b. 1988)

(Front row, from left to right)

Maarja Vaher aka Mia (b. 1987)

Olga Logvina aka Olga Logvina (b. 1988)

Photography, 2nd year

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

It means hate, celibacy and poverty

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

Being in the academy system has given us the elementary possibility to act in the art-field. And that's how it works. It is possible to develop student's critical thinking and get him/her acquainted with what's happening in the art world at the moment. But you have to make art yourself.

What is INTER FENSTER? How was INTER FENSTER born?

INTER FENSTER is a post-productive concept band/movement. INTER FENSTER was born when Paul is a Dead Man Kuimet accidentally put his finger on page 84 in Peeter Linnap's (*Estonian artist and theoretician - M.J.*) book "Photology".

What possibilities does being a band *qua* artist-group (and vice versa) offer?

Working together is one possible way to organize a conceptually complete exhibition. Avoiding the format of a classical student exhibition (i.e. everyone hangs up his or her work and the only thing that connects them is being in the same course etc) is good!

In addition to that you can blame somebody else for your own fuck-ups.

How did INTER FENSTER become a political party? Please describe your campaign at the EAA's election for the student government, its aims and results?

We just had to (form a party). Our political climate needs a strong hand, not weak-handed wankers. So was our campaign a political *bukkake* to the opponents' faces. We were the only ones with explicit slogans - PICK CHAOS - PICK INTER FENSTER! CHANGE (*an ironical commentary about the Estonian Central Party's campaign, in which the slogan was just "change" -M.J.*); or INTER FENSTER CARES (at least 34% more than the other candidates). Of course we didn't set up an official candidacy. (*INTER FENSTER got 9 votes but no seats at the council and it seems they were satisfied with how things turned out – M.J.*)



“INTER FENSTER”
installation
2009

Installation with a sofa and a
TV-set in the EAA Gallery
(winter 2009)

Inter Fenster paying homage to the Beatles and at the same time crossing the street where a group of EAA's students once painted a false pedestrian crossing and got in serious trouble with the law. The crosswalk connected the Art Academy with a department store. People still cross the street there all the time.



ARTUR VINCENT KERGE & TAAVI REKKARO



Taavi Rekkaro

Born 1988

Graphics, 2nd year



Artur Vincent Kerge

Born 1986

Graphics, 2nd year

Answers by Artur:

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

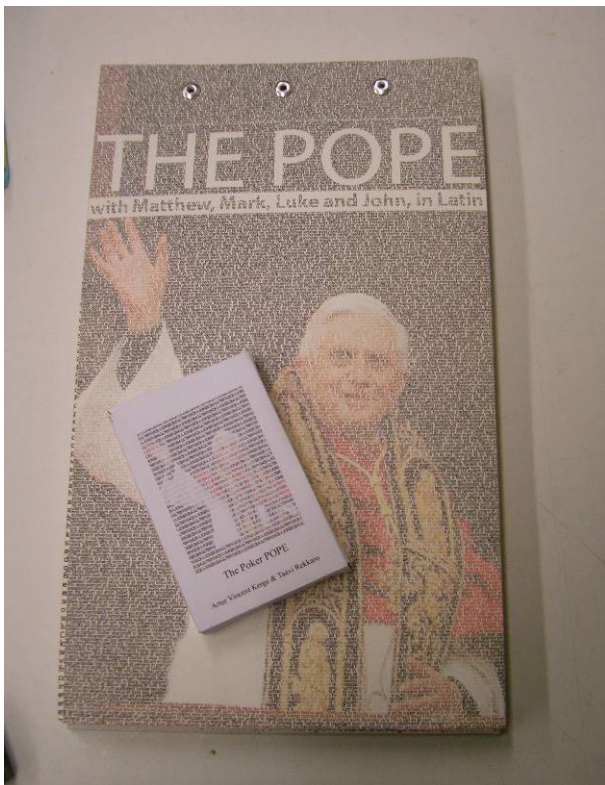
To be a young artist means being a split personality. Firstly, you try to be normal - go to work, pay taxes, vote at the elections, be an active citizen. Secondly, you have to prove yourself that you are someone, something special, facing the common idea about the artist *qua* village fool ("Poor thing, no profession and no hope to get a decent job..."). The jar-thing (*I guess Artur is referring to a famous Estonian nineties' art work by Jaan Toomik - the artist exhibited his excrements in a jar; it has been seen as an homage to Piero Manzoni's "Artist's Shit" but the problem is that in the Estonians' mind all contemporary artists are still seen as "Jar-shitters" - M.J.*)

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

As much as I have observed the situation I could claim that the academy is producing the same kind of offspring...a closed circle. You cannot teach someone how to be an artist but it is possible to teach how to use your creativity and thoughts, and how to materialize an idea. Our school is going along with the overall flow - higher education isn't what it used to be, BA-programme is like being at high school. You have to do so many things at a time and never get to do anything extra "fierce". Or is it just me. I don't know.

How did you and Taavi started working together and why an artist-book? Artist book as a special form of art - what does it mean?

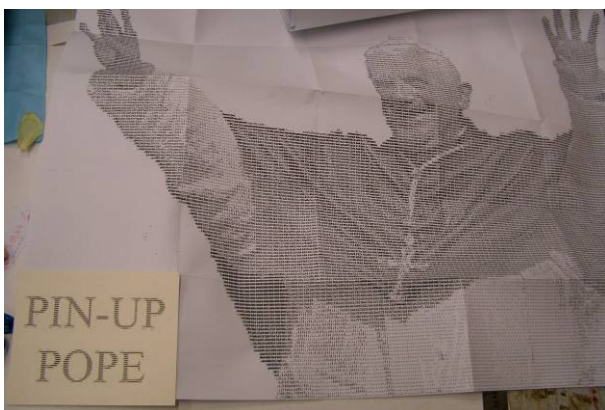
Me and Taavi are coursemates. The collaboration began in a specialty elective course organized by Eve Kask (*Estonian graphic artist, teaches at the academy - M.J.*) - the idea was to create an artist book. I was bored and I started surfing the net. That was how I discovered the Homokaasu sect's webpage. In their secret



"THE POPE", 2008



"The Poker Pope", 2008



"The Pin-Up Pope", 2008

laboratories they have been creating the Rasterbator - human testing (and not only...) is involved! Rasterbator is a programme that works on the user's psychoenergy and enables the soulless, low-quality images to achieve huge proportions that can eat your soul out. Since I was bored, I wanted to try it. We did it. The teacher had to leave and in the meantime we printed out the image of the previous pope (John Paul II) and started to put it together. When the teacher came back, she discovered it and thought it was good - good enough to let us poor souls send it to the artists' books biennial.

The tradition of creating artists' books, says Eve Kask, is missing in Estonia. That is why she is doing everything to promote it. But sometimes the format isn't the goal in itself.

The Pope and poker. Are you referring to people's hypocrisy and moral degradation? The Pope has already been laughed at in art many times, think about M. Cattelan...

During a short brainstorm we realized that we needed to come up with some new products. It was necessary to invade the new market! Since there is a new Pope and religion sells as good as sex, we decided to use His Holiness and the Old Testament. The result was something that is a must-have for every self-respecting religious person.

We know that no-one is perfect. We sin, too (sometimes) and that is why we have those playing cards with His Holiness on them, you can read extracts from the Bible from them and pray. In addition, the chance to win is bigger because of the Pope's image. Many Christians spend a lot of time on business-trips and cannot take a poster of Pope with them. That is why we have created the "Pin-Up Pope". Easy to take-away! The God will be with you always!

Have you ever played cards and thought "Man I have lousy cards, please God, help me win this"? I guess not. The work is actually a result of boredom and motivation to do something. Yes, it is controversial - as was the problem we tried solve. But we don't want to insult anyone. We try to show that religion is commodified nowadays. Or maybe it was also an attempt to understand religion, considering the fact that we all create our own worlds and the one world we all live in.

CARMEN LANSBERG



Born 1981
Painting, 3rd year

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

It seems to me that it's really nice to be a young artist in Estonia. From the geographical and climatical point of view Estonia is situated in a good-for-creativity position - the winter is long, darkness and coldness is overhumanly testing, makes you depressed and anguished, puts you en face with nature and the existentialist heaviness of yourself. And add to this the submissive, silent and unspeakable character of Estonians, the difficult historical past, the small and mobile society and the contemporary cult of youth, here comes the artist who has everything to make art in the year 2009.

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

I think that the problem of teaching art is not different from teaching anything whatsoever, let's say mathematics. Learning a formula doesn't tell you anything about mathematics, but you need it. It's the same with art. Everything else is the question of "sensitivity". Everybody has their own way of learning something, there's no universal method of teaching. I am an autodidact who needs a support-structure in some portions. I have found this at the Estonian academy of Arts.

Like The Serge Gainsbourg's track itself is titled ambivalently (a la "I love you, I love you neither"), your work posits many questions as well. What do you puke on? On yourself, the patriarchal system or the art-world.

It's very difficult to answer. In some sense the work is personal, but on the other hand it's intentionally ambivalent, an "exemplary" work. In the work I'm interested in the relationships between beautiful and ugly, power and violence, love and hate. I want to know what these things are, how do they work and manifest themselves.

It's amazing that you have created such a compelling work of art with such minimal devices. Does it relate to feminist body art? Altogether, what are the topics that you are dealing with in your art?

I have no special intention to make feminist body art or deal with some other particular topic. I'm dealing with so many different topics it's impossible to say what the topic is exactly. One thing I can say is that I'm mostly interested in human beings, with all their edges and relations to everything else etc. And a body is the only thing that a human being really has – that we can see. Body is the only supporting point that from this seductive unreality brings me back to reality ...



"Loves/Loves Not"
Stills from the video
2007

LOORE EMILIE RAAV



Born 1987
Sculpture, 3rd year

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia?

First thing that comes to my mind is that “it is not easy”. Some possibilities seem to be there but basically it seems impossible to live out of just being an artist. But in spite of this I hope I do not have to take daily 9-5-job after graduating and have no time for being artist. These are the pressures mainly caused by money because there is no structure to support “making art” in Estonia.

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

Even if I have had some second thoughts every then and now, I am now very happy about the 3 years at the Academy. It has definitely been teaching something. I have realized what it is that I want to do and why. And less important isn't the understanding about what it is that I don't want to do.

It has given me some understanding about the structures and systems inside the local art world, without what it would not easy to orienteer in the field. Of course there are some skills that come from elsewhere; and you have to have contacts with lecturers/artists outside Estonia, without whom you might never find out about some things.

The possibility of teaching someone depends about his or her prejudices, amiability and wish to learn something. Probably the possibility of teaching someone is thinkable, but not with everybody and always. But I do believe in the development of a human being...

And I guess you shouldn't underestimate the value of self-education but sometimes it is certainly easier if some things are brought to you.

What does it mean to be a young (animal rights) activist in Estonia?

Some of the answers you can see in the documentary. But in general it is not very simple or easy. In Estonians' conscious the whole civil society topic is quite new and every kind of activism is seen more like dealing with imported pseudo-issues and problems. And there is an attitude that „normal people do not go on the streets to demonstrate“ even though “we all have a lot of things we are not happy with” and have a lot to say about, but only when we are at home, sitting on our soft couches. But let's hope that things will turn for better in the future. Estonia and Estonians just need to get used to what democracy is actually about.

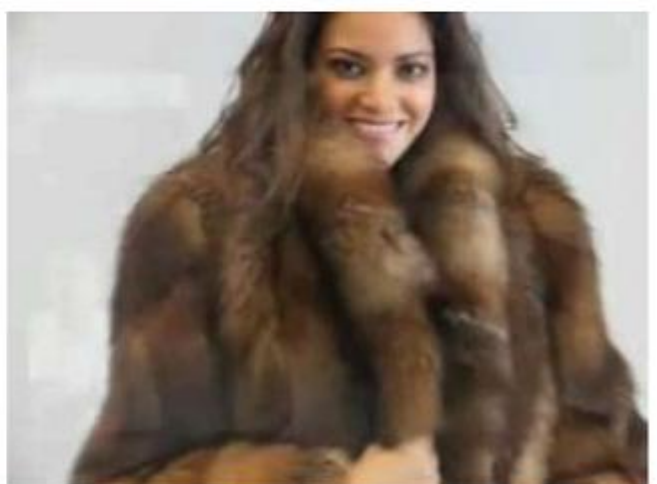
What is art as activism or vice versa (for you)? What new forms of expression does it offer and what are the results you are aiming for?

I have set myself a tiny goal to make something better (in my opinion) or create some positive change around me, to produce knowledge which might produce knowledge etc etc etc. For me one way to do this is a combination of art and activism. I don't find it extremely important to define what exactly is the line between the two things because finally the thing that matters is the good intent, positive change or spreaded piece of information (by an art piece or act/activism).

Untitled

Video is edited mixture of visuals from fur fashion shows, presentations, photo shootings and movie clips. Most important part of the video is creepy and disturbing sound which is real fur farm recording of red fox in distress.

looping video (1:35)



Authoritarian liberality

My latest project is a documentary about the situation of democracy, civil society and activism in Estonia. Documentary ("Authoritarian liberality") speaks about some lately happened repressions on different activists and I am asking a question that what can be the prise of social activism in nowadays democratic Estonia. (17:50)



ANNA SHKODENKO

Born 1986
Painting, 3rd year

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia (possibilities and impossibilities, hopes, pressures, money, future etc)?

It is hard to identify myself as a young artist in Estonia. Possibilities, hopes, pressures and especially future here are subjects of isolated individual choice and imagination.

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

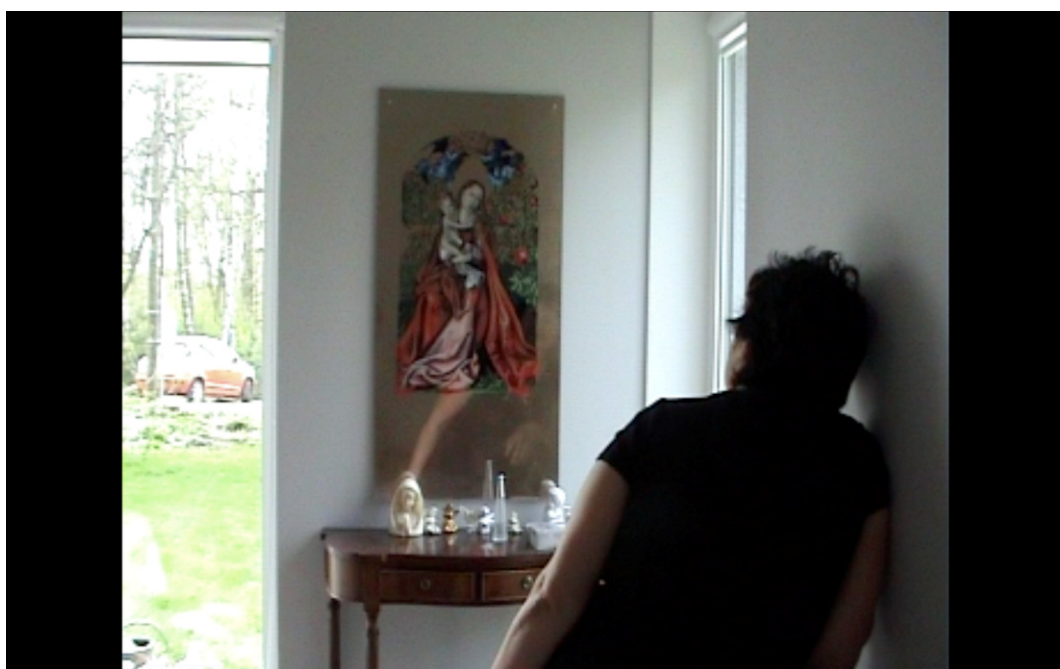
At the academy, I was studying in the department of fine art and it used to be out of any sort of school system discourse. And I suppose, that the same kind of disconnection takes place inside the local academic system. However, communication, contextualization and a sort of critical dialogue are the things, that should be developed during the study.

What's the story behind the icon? Do you or your family have an orthodox-christian background, why are you experimenting with that genre?

One day, after I was once again accused of being an egocentric and old-fashioned "art person", I was asking people to tell me what is the perfect painting according to their opinion. Everyone was talking about something pure and sincere, but nothing specific. By the end of the day my mother came to me with a postcard of Madonna with a child, stated that an icon is the best painting possible and that I should paint it to her. OK. Then, then I spent a couple of days with religious books at the EAA's library, made my first visit to a local Church and my new strategy of painting was the result. So, my struggle with the genre came out of this ironic joke, aiming to solve the unsolvable problems.

Why video-icon? Traditional icons should work with their „holy presence“ but you present us a video of the artwork and so since it is mediated, the icon, I guess, loses some of its (to refer to W. Benjamin's term:) aura.

First of all, this „holy presence“ of my icon is tied up with the person whom it was done for. Traditional icon is designed to represent and embody the spiritual side of the world – to be the situation. My icon is designed to initiate, set up the situation. Secondly, I think that I am more interested in becoming something rather than being something. I would like to leave a space for personal interpretation and imagination while moving to some particular place. That is why I feel attached to the idea of documentation and in this case, to following the narrative of development.



"For My Mother" 2009
(07:38)
Stills from the video

KRÕÕT TARKMEEL



Born 1985
photography, 3rd year

What does it mean to be a young artist in Estonia?

I have not yet positioned myself geographically. Estonia is not a factor by any means. At the moment I am doing my work first and foremost for myself – some people need meditation, others rehabilitation and some artistic production for their therapy...I have a feeling, that if I ever want to become an artist working in a certain place then I wouldn't want the place to be Estonia.

What is the main thing that being in the Estonian (or some other) art academy system has taught you? How does the system work? Is it possible to teach someone how to make art?

It is possible to set up an orienteering course, where you have to dig around in the dirt to find some directions. But in my opinion, that's about it. And sometimes the directions may lie.



"Wanna Touch My Favourite Band?" 2007

Installation

Braille and fan t-shirts? What is it, handicap-pop? Where did this semantic shift come from?

I had a dream about Marko (*Marko Laimre, head of the EAA's department of photography*) and in the dream he was wearing all his band t-shirts (Sonic Youth's and others') at once. When I woke up the dream started to haunt me, as if asking for an expansion of the idea. My affection for shifting and dislocating lead me to Braille. Yes, it is rather pop, t-shirts and fandom... Before the project I had no knowledge of Braille and the last time I ever wore a fan t-shirt was in my teens – it had Marilyn Manson on it.

Fragile masculinity, children's book goes masturbation – these are just some keywords when it comes to your other artworks...

I'm usually very self-centered and autobiographical, projects like "Wanna Touch My Favourite Band?" are born for amusement and because I do not want to completely lose contact with the outer-world. I'm interested in myself. I use my private life as material for my artworks – without hesitation and shyness. Just to get some answers, because I'm vain, because I want to confront my fears. Case closed – I move on.

And lastly, I ask this just out of curiosity – haven't you considered marketing those shirts? You could patent them, you know.

When I am finished with school, then I'll start thinking business. Don't have time for it now.