

Male Artists' Self-Image as Winners in the 1990s Estonian Media

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Summary

Abstract: This article analyses the image of male artists in the discourse of Estonian media, and how the media representations of the artist changed from the Soviet era until the mid-1990s. The object of the analysis is the material published in Estonian papers and magazines between 1986 and 1996 about Raoul Kurvitz (b. 1961) and Mark Kostabi (b. 1961). Relying on various theoreticians of visual culture (Griselda Pollock, Hal Foster, Clement Greenberg and Leena-Maija Rossi), the author examines the values connected with the myth of the male artist in the Estonian art landscape that dominated in media texts and pictures.

Keywords: male artists, identity of artist, media imagery, winner's generation

After the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, the number of Estonian media publications tripled. Establishing numerous magazines and newspapers correlated with the emergence of the neo-liberalist art market that was centred around Tallinn and Tartu, where most of the media publishing houses and editor's offices were located. The new situation in the media market, in which magazines were easy to establish, provided artists with unprecedented opportunities. Expectations about creativity ran high in society and diverse forms of visual culture were born in the media sphere.

In the early 1990s, the booming market of galleries and the coming of advertising, as well as the changing institutional infrastructure for art, notably altered the roles and

functions of creators in society. My study focused on the Estonian media discourses of two male artists, Raoul Kurvitz (b. 1961) and Mark Kostabi (b. 1960). Although their backgrounds were quite different, both of them are a part of the last generation of artists in Estonia to be notably dominated by male artists. Both emerged on the art scene in the mid-1980s. Whereas Kurvitz was educated in the local art system, Kostabi, based in New York, came from a family of Estonian war emigrants in the United States; in Estonia he became known when he organised his first exhibitions on the local art scene in the early 1990s, after already having acquired a scandalous reputation in the American media.

During the Soviet period, there was little art criticism published in the media. In the 1970s and 1980s, the cultural weekly 'Sirp ja Vasar' (established in 1940) held a clearly dominant position in producing cultural criticism. Criticism centred on analysing the stylistic pictorial features and artists' personalities had little importance. Art critics were mainly educated as art historians, and criticism was dominated by female writers. In the early 1990s, permanent cultural pages appeared in many newspapers. The earlier discourses of art criticism were contested, especially in the first Estonian private newspaper 'Eesti Ekspress', which was launched in 1989.¹ The broadening field of critics also shifted the language and methods of evaluating art.

In the general atmosphere of nation building in the young state, there were many expectations for young artists. The discourses of being a hero and winning quickly appeared in the media discourses of journalists and art critics in the second half of the 1980s. The

¹ Of an eight-page issue, two pages remained, throughout the first years (1989–1990), the regular cultural pages of the newspaper.

young generation of artists, born in the early 1960s, legitimised several new art practices on the Estonian art scene: along with performance art, installation, video art, video installations and media activism were introduced. Nationalist attitudes also turned the discourses of criticism in a much more subject-centred direction, and this was reflected in the emphasis on subject position in critical writing.

Both Kostabi and Kurvitz understood the meaning of publicity and tried to generate publicity outside the traditional circles of museums, and even outside art galleries. The theatrical self-images of Kostabi and Kurvitz exhibited in their media performances came to constitute an inherent part of their artistic identities. Art criticism reproduced the imagery of both artists as ‘winners’. In the 1990s, which were labelled as ‘nosy’ later, on the local art scene, the success of the whole generation of artists was due to their projecting new identities in society. Kostabi preached a healthy, no-alcohol and no-drugs life-style in several interviews conducted by Estonian journalists. The interest in personal spheres in the early 1990s media is related to the new focus in society: numerous personal stories provided a means of entering into the private and previously unknown spheres of artists’ personal lives. The media heroes, however, were, for the most part, young men, ethnic Estonians willing to play with their gender images. In art criticism, the same generation of artists have become known as the first media art generation.

In the early 1990s, the language of art criticism simplified, with the headings of articles becoming more appealing and provocative, particularly in the writings of the younger generation of critics. Art appeared more often on the front pages of magazines, and artists became ‘cover boys’, whose personal

lives were discussed in the ‘life-pages’ and in entertainment pages. The art practices of Kurvitz and Kostabi were important indicators in the critical way of perceiving art, accentuating the institutional framework and reception of art in the discourses of Estonian art criticism.

Along with the changes in Estonian media, the former literary culture became much more visual than earlier. During the 1990s, several young artists entered the process of publishing, as photographers, graphic and web designers or freelance contributors. The same generation, which has become known as ‘the winners’, dominated media and art criticism. Sharing the same cultural values, artists were offered opportunities for courageous self-promotion in the media – mythologies and stereotypes acquired new meanings. The mythologies and stories told by the artists became the basis for writing about these artists and also shaped the discourses of criticism. The role of criticism in society changed, as it became an inherent part of the networks of the art scene: the curators, gallery market and museums. Critics described art practices, as well as informing the audience. In the early 1990s, a subjective and ‘yellow-journalism’ way of writing about art was introduced in the discourses of new, privately run media publications. Performance-art was an indicator of art criticism turning into self-reflective writing, as the relation to space and time became more apparent in conceptualising performance art. The issues of power and money were questioned more often in relation to cultural practices. The media created new networks of people and the discourses of artists’ on their art entered the public discourse through the mass media.

The discourses of *yuppies* and superstars in criticism turned artists into media heroes. Kostabi and Kurvitz both experimented with

their identities in creating their media images. Having abandoned the traditional masculine identity, they introduced a range of new urban identities, which led to the media using terms such as *yuppie*, *enfant terrible*, *rock-star*, *bohemian*, and *fashion-guru*. Contributors to the media in the 1990s were predominantly male, although women were more productive as critics. The photographing for the media market was exclusively reserved for male photographers – there were no female photographers working for the media. The practices of women artists also remained marginalised.

Although various Western art theorists have often seen the 1980s as the end of subjectivism and narcissism in art, in early 1990s Estonian art, media-conscious narcissism emerged fully. During the Soviet period, the mythological narratives of artists' lives had spread in folklore and other forms of popular culture. However, in the rising media scene, they were discussed in the web of different media publications. These representations of artists in the media were related to the self-description of one generation, whose stars dominated the local cultural scene during the following decade.

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