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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

The Venice Questionnaire 2015 #13: Jaanus Samma

Representing Estonia at the 2015 Venice Biennale, Jaanus Samma answered our short questionnaire

ArtReview sent a questionnaire to artists and curators exhibiting in and curating the various national pavilions of the 2015 Venice Biennale, the responses to which are being published daily in the lead-up to the Venice Biennale opening.

Jaanus Samma is representing Estonia as a collateral event. The pavilion is at Palazzo Malipiero, campo San Samuele, San Marco 3199.

What can you tell us about your exhibition plans for Venice?

The exhibition is called *NSFW. A Chairman's Tale*. It is a story of a man who was living the Soviet dream: he had a fantastic career in the 1950s being chairman of a kolkhoz [collective farm]. But in 1966 his life changed dramatically for good when he was prosecuted for homosexual acts. After the prison sentence he became socially very active and became a notorious cruiser in the university town of Tartu. In 1990, he was murdered, allegedly by a Russian male prostitute.

My exhibition is an installation of fragments from a fictive opera where visitors can follow different episodes of his life and finally put the story together individually. However, I would like to point out that the exhibition does not just tell a story of one man, but a whole era and mentality, that still haunts the whole world.

Are you approaching this show in a different way as to how you would a 'normal' exhibition?

Yes, I always try to work context-specifically. Making a show in Venice means that the audience is overwhelmed by the amount of art they go through in a day. Thus, this time we are focusing very much on clarity of the ideas. Also, this exhibition is the biggest and most important show I've done until now and I'm very happy that I have such a great team to work with.

What does it mean to 'represent' your country? Do you find it an honour or problematic?

For me it means a great responsibility as la Biennale exhibitions always play a meaningful role in Estonian art scene as everywhere else. I can be proud that our project *NSFW. A Chairman's Tale* was selected by an international and very professional jury. Therefore, I have never considered the Estonian pavilions at la Biennale as a nationalist representations, but instead as professional and meaningful contemporary art exhibitions. On the other hand, it is true that some countries have a different approach to la Biennale.

How are you approaching the different audiences who come to Venice – the masses of artist peers, gallerists, curators and critics concentrated around the opening and the general public who come through over the following months?

La Biennale di Venezia is a prominent art exhibition, which has an important role in contemporary art market while remaining something else than an art fair. The main exhibition of la Biennale is always different and is trying to propose approaches to contemporary society. While the national pavilions usually seem to be friendly expositions for all art lovers. In my opinion, la Biennale is not an event that would try to convince people that art is important, it takes it for granted.

What are your earliest or best memories of the biennale?

My earliest memory of the biennial is when I hitchhiked from Estonia to Venice and spent a night in a tent next to the Giardini. I didn't know almost anything about the city and only later I understood how absurd the plan was since the city is so tight and it's a luck to find a hidden place where you can put a tent up.

It was the year when Mark Raidpere was representing Estonia with his exhibition *Isolator*. Coincidentally enough, Raidpere was the first Estonian artist who attracted the attention of my exhibition curator Eugenio Viola and they have continued their cooperation ever since.

You'll no doubt be very busy, but what else are you looking forward to seeing?

I haven't made a proper research yet about other pavilions but I am very curious of Dainius Liškevičius's *Museum* (Lithuanian pavilion). I think we might have some similarities with the historic approach. But maybe not, we'll see. And of course, I am very much looking forward to Okwui Enwezor's curated main exhibition.

How does a having a pavilion in Venice affect the artscene in your home country?

I think it adds an excitement. And because we have a pavilion in Venice it is quite common among the Estonian art scene to visit.

[Read all responses to the Venice Questionnaire 2015 edition published so far](#)

[Read all 30 responses to the Venice Questionnaire 2013 edition](#)

Online exclusive published on 21 April 2015.

2015 Venice Questionnaire

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