

## **Jaan Toomik: "If you want to talk about deep, serious, philosophical topics for four hours in a row, it'll become ridiculous."**

Andreas Trossek (1/2020)

Andreas Trossek in a public conversation with Jaan Toomik at his solo exhibition "Selfie as a Seagull".

6. II–7. III 2020

The ARS Project Space of the Estonian Artists Association (154 Pärnu road, Tallinn)

Andreas Trossek (AT): Ladies and gentlemen, let us start this public event, this artist talk with a typical question that journalists and the audience time and again ask on such occasions: how did this solo show come about – where did the ball start rolling?

Jaan Toomik (JT): Indrek Köster [Service manager of ARS. – *Ed.*] made this proposal to me a few years ago, probably in late 2016. He was talking about plans to build a very imposing exhibition space here. And I unhesitatingly agreed – why not, I don't have that many shows in Estonia. The plan seemed promising, and to be honest, this is a very good venue indeed, especially for more traditional art: you can show paintings, but you could also do sculpture. Or show videos, yes.

AT: How would you describe your work process to begin with? Do you work one piece at a time or one show at a time, lay down an initial concept and then start creating the works one after the other?

JT: I like this more general notion that there are two different types of artist: the so-called production artist and then the others who, as it were, die and are reborn with every new work. I'm afraid I'm closer to that second kind. On the one hand, it gives you a chance to get a bigger jackpot, but then you're reinventing and experimenting over and over again with every piece. An artist with a production-based mindset, on the other hand, more or less settles on something and then works in series. Inevitably, there is no clear distinction between these types of artist these days, especially when you get your commission a couple of years ahead; both options will eventually kick in.

AT: But what if I asked an image-based question: is Jaan Toomik mainly a figurative painter or a landscape painter?

JT: Mainly a figurative painter, yes. I am focused on the body, that's who I am; the body as an image has always been important to me. I've never done pure abstraction. For that, there has to be a particular philosophy, a system that you have to be able to develop for yourself and to live inside for a longer period of time. I'd rather experiment, move through these things.

AT: If you think about what art history really is as a discipline, one answer would be that it is a narrative of artists' life stories – everything they did, how they lived. In this sense it is logical, in some ways, that a number of art critics, curators and art historians have been tempted by the biographical method to treat your work as directly, even inseparably, related to your biography. You also quite often use yourself as the model.

JT: Yes, I'm like an instrument for myself or something like that. As an artist, you are always the closest model for yourself. Over the years, I have also learned to view myself in a rather neutral way and as if from a distance. Well, here you go ... [Laughter in the audience as Toomik points to a sculptural installation, "Ritual" (2020), which is a life-size hyper-realistic figure recognisably modelled on the artist's body and face – Toomik comically "levitating" over a toilet, as if suspended from a stream of his own urine. – *Ed.*]



*Exhibition view at ARS Project Space  
Photo by Stanislav Stepashko*

AT: This is not a very embellished or idealised image of you, I agree.

JT: And to anticipate the next question, as to why the exhibition is titled "Selfie as a Seagull" – this actually happened quite by accident. It was, in fact, Vano Allsalu [Currently vice-president of the Estonian Artists Association. – *Ed.*] who suggested that we take the title of the painting of the same name shown here and also use it as the title of the exhibition. And well, an artist is constantly making a selfie of himself. He is usually this "self-centred type", often autistic, very confident in his world view. Or else seeking one. That is, the selfie seemed to be a pretty good symbol.

AT: When I first stepped into this space and grasped the whole set at a glance, I felt, among other things, that this exhibition was rather surprisingly self-ironical. Perhaps this impression or interpretation derived from the title of the exhibition, but there are at least two paintings with straightforward selfie motifs in this space. I also started to think about the fact that "selfie" is a relatively new word. Of course, artists have painted self-portraits since the time of cave paintings, but selfies relate to the contemporary world of smartphones and social networks. This has led to completely new behavioural norms in exhibition halls. In the past, we could all the time see people in the Louvre trying to take pictures of the "Mona Lisa" (c. 1503–1506), but now we see people trying to take pictures of themselves with the "Mona Lisa" in the background.

JT: Yes, I have certainly become more aware of this topic with this exhibition. The exhibition also contains one of my older works, "Check Yourself" (2018), which is a kind of schizophrenic view of myself: an artist in his studio "going crazy" for hours – and at the same time observing himself from another room.

AT: That is also a rather self-ironical composition, isn't it?

JT: I have always been considered this serious "angst artist," but I think I never am that ... really. I love this oriental saying that if you want to talk about deep, serious, philosophical topics for four hours in a row, without any funny pauses, it'll become ridiculous. So, in my opinion, I always talk about serious things but sprinkle in some self-irony or jokes. And I think there is quite a lot of that [Humour. – *Ed.*] in this show. More than usual.

AT: We see paintings in this exhibition, which shouldn't come as a surprise to the audience, because you are a trained painter after all, but we also see a video, a short film and a sculptural installation – something from every field.

JT: Yeah, it has to be interesting for me too. Usually I get a shape or vision at first, but it is mostly a structure that changes later and I'm myself also all the time discovering something. I very rarely have works where I know that I will get from point A to point B in exactly the same way. There are artists who plan their work to the minutest detail and then execute it precisely, but I can't do that. Of course, you can also use different mediums. For example, the sense of composition, which I have from my art education, gives me the opportunity to sense rhythms also in cinema or sculpture, to somehow work things out spatially. Back in school, they taught us quite a lot of form study. As an artist today you're a bit of a Renaissance man, in that you need to master very different techniques. Or if you don't master these techniques, you must know how to find the people to execute your idea. For example, the plastic part of this installation ["Ritual"] was made by Art Allmägi, a well-known Estonian sculptor.

AT: A work of art always has an author in the sense of a copyright holder who owns the idea, but it's true enough that no one says you can't outsource the execution of your idea.

JT: Yes, this was especially popular in the early 2000s, when a conceptual artist could have a series of paintings without ever having studied painting – everything was simply painted according to the artist's concept. There are always plenty of people who are much better painters, even if they do realist painting. But for me, it is this direct contact and manual thinking that is very important in painting; I just feel good when I paint. Even when I'm not doing a very good job. [Chuckles. – *Ed.*]

AT: This outsourcing thing is like a legacy of Marcel Duchamp in a sense? Because it's not like Duchamp created his notorious upside-down urinal ["Fountain", 1917. – *Ed.*] at his studio; he must have bought it from some sanitary fittings shop.

JT: Yes, well, I also bought a brand-new toilet [Laughter in the audience. – *Ed.*] for this installation.

AT: A brand-new work and already entering into a dialogue with world art history, yes. But as we were talking about painting and other art techniques, I caught myself thinking that you have never actually shown your drawings, have you?

JT: Well, that's a good idea. I haven't, you're right. At one time in the late 1990s, drawing was a big thing, every gallery in New York was full of these strange drawings. Then again, drawing is often the basis for everything, also the basis of classical painting. Especially with composition. You can't compose anything on the canvas without drawing skills.

AT: But would you place yourself in the "form party" or the "colour party" if you were forced to choose one or the other?

JT: This has been different at different times. When I came back from my service in the Soviet Army, from the sunny Volgograd of the early 1980s, I had a very temperamental palette, bright and colourful. But then I became darker again, living here in Estonia again. As a young artist, I mostly used to work at night, so other people's thoughts wouldn't bother me as much. As time went on, I became more conceptual; it was even like I was killing that strong sense of form that I have; I remember this even bothering me. I tend to think that drawing, this kind of sculptural composition, has always been the basis of everything for me. The shape has always been important to me; colour either comes or it doesn't – it is often quite accidental. Right now, I'm actually putting more emphasis on colour than I used to. Let's put it like that.

AT: You studied painting in Tallinn in the mid-1980s and graduated in 1991. What was that time like?

JT: We studied for six years. It was a strange time, as if something was starting to crumble. Even the old faculty were no longer quite sure how to go on teaching. In this sense, Estonian art education has always been "neither meat nor fish": in the past, we had been able to put on some kind of modernism and avant-garde here in Estonia, but at the same time did not need to be very academic, which was something they required in Saint Petersburg, for example. So, in the end it was neither this nor that. When I enrolled at the academy or institute [Estonian Academy of Arts, then the Estonian State Institute of Art. – *Ed.*] here, I was thinking I'd want to completely master realistic painting and only then allow myself to experiment. But formally, the training looked like this: we had two hours of drawing and four hours of painting every day. For five years in a row. By the time the Berlin Wall began to crumble, which must have been my third or fourth year, I was already making works that left the teachers clueless. In my fourth year, I was already trying out all sorts of new things and I think I was rather avant-garde for a student at that time.

Vano Allsalu: If I could just butt in with a remark from the audience here: it was an interesting time in the sense too that no one would dare to condemn a student anymore. For example, I remember, at a third-year assessment, I guess, the face of Ilmar Kimm (1920–2011) as he looked at Jaan's large-scale painting "Menstruation" (1989)... [Everyone chuckles. – *Ed.*]

JT: Yes, but I got a five. And now the painting is in the Kumu Art Museum. But yes, it was a strange time when you had to go through the little information available and use it to do your own thing. I did acquire actual drawing and painting skills during my studies, however. Or as Peeter Allik (1966–2019) – may he rest in peace – used to say: painting skills come by the square metre.

AT: When Allik first emerged, art critics labelled him as neo-pop – those brash colours and striking images that you will remember the first time you see them. Was this part of some more general spirit of the era – you had to be able to stand out with new things?

JT: The thing is that when I had to do my diploma work in my final year, I was completely fed up with painting. I was already practising land art and performance, discovering new mediums for myself, such as video art. And somehow, I just hit the right wave and got going really well. That is when I decided that I was done with painting because it makes you feel like Christ, having to carry this burden all the time – all those big paintings, transporting them, all that was so annoying. I told myself I would practically give up painting for at least ten years. But as I am rather impatient and inquisitive by nature, I soon felt I couldn't carry on coming up with these videos all the time either. For me, painting is also a kind of meditative activity that involves sublimation and relieving tension, so I'd even say I needed it for my health.

AT: But before that, in the Soviet army, I bet you were the company artist?

JT: The story with this is that I narrowly escaped being sent to the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), because I served in a very specific training camp where there was always a shortage of recruits. I raised my hand, as I knew that in two months I would be sent to Afghanistan. This was in 1981. At home, I had been told to say everywhere that I was an artist because artists would do better. So, they took us to that new military unit and lined us up. The old soldiers punched us in the stomach or in the face and wanted to know who we were. So, I said I was an artist. Next, I was taken to the dormitory where this real oaf of a man was lying on a bed with his boots on. They gave me a pencil and some charcoal and I was able to sketch a pretty good likeness of him – the guy was absolutely thrilled and told me to just let him know if anyone tried to harass me. I remember asking him later in my broken Russian if he was some kind of tough guy there or what... [Laughter in the audience. – *Ed.*] I even had people in line to get their portraits. It was just a way for me to survive the army, drawing all these red slogans and Lenins and all that.

AT: How much do you think back to the Soviet period or compare it to today? We had roughly 50 years of occupation and now we've already had 30 years of freedom and capitalism. So, do we need to wait another 20 years for Estonia to stop being a so-called post-Soviet society, this traumatised subject?

JT: As it happens, I asked one of my friends, Russian artist Vladimir Dubossarsky, the same question and he said he still has dreams about his military service. And about ten years ago, I also had this recurring dream that I still had a year of service to do and was still in the Soviet army, which felt strange because by then I was a man of almost 50 and a citizen of another country... [Laughter in the audience. – *Ed.*] So, it is deeply embedded in the subconscious. Around that time, I also made a short film about military service, "Oleg" (2010), which is almost 100% based on a true story.

AT: "Oleg" is certainly an extremely dark film, but this show has a lighter air to it, doesn't it?

JT: I've become a bit tired of this angst thing, yes. And I hope this exhibition is more positive. Someone here already told me that this sculpture, for example, was already on Instagram. Today's society has become so very tolerant, you know; we are considerate of everyone and our every move is based on some rational consideration, but at the same time, we lose the opportunity to make jokes, because a joke always offends someone. Still, you can always make jokes at your expense. No one says you can't; it's politically correct.

AT: At the same time in this exhibition, several works use the image of a fish, which is an ancient religious symbol. So could there be a potential conflict here with audiences in Catholic countries, for example?

JT: On the contrary. For example, I had a major solo show in Milan in 2012, where curator Marco Scottini said that he did not see any anguish in my work at all, that there were some other problems there instead. I have been very well received in Italy in general, although the typical cultural person is rather gloomy there.

AT: Why?

JT: I suppose the cultural history is so substantial there that it is beginning to feel oppressive; Estonians, on the other hand, are a rather young culture, with everything so fresh, in high culture in particular, and we do a lot of things with enthusiasm.

AT: As a matter of fact, you are still one of the few artists in Estonia who can compare their reception in very different countries. For example, last year you had a kind of retrospective solo exhibition in Moscow, curated by Viktor Misiano.

JT: The Russian audience has also always sat well with me, because that is where I first made my acquaintance with the history of world art – at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts and the Hermitage. I suppose the Russia–Germany–Italy axis is where I have in fact had the best reception. There I am not considered quite as gloomy an artist as in Estonia. I don't know. Maybe I have enough of this kind of crudeness, but without being vulgar.

AT: But in today's global art world, have you been misplaced in terms of your region of origin? As in, maybe Jaan Toomik comes from Norway, for example, because you have this Edvard Munch-like expressive formal language.

JT: To be honest, no. Today's art is very international, you know, and artists are like a separate nation. I often feel more like one nation among artists than anywhere else. It doesn't matter much in art if you're from Italy or Germany, or from Estonia. But of course, I am connected to Estonia by my roots and language, our unique nature, our cultural sphere, and all the other myriad things, though I don't want to go all misty-eyed here. The truth is, I have travelled little as a tourist, but as an artist I have probably done exhibitions everywhere in Europe.

AT: There is one rather large painting in this exhibition ("Initiation", 2019) – I would say at least two metres by three metres – did you not pause and think that you wouldn't even be likely to show this in smaller venues?

JT: ...and even less likely to sell it, you know [Chuckles. – *Ed.*]. Well, the soul just cries out for this sometimes. It's more like my studio doesn't allow me to do bigger painting right now, or else I would.

AT: Let's also talk a bit about the short film "Fish" (2018), which is premiering here in the ARS Project Space now. This is in itself a sad story about a father teaching his son to fish, but it is also somehow life-affirming. Saying, this is how life is. Fathers try to pass on their knowledge to their sons, but at some point the fathers simply disappear from their children's lives, and then the children need to cope on their own. The tragicomic punchline of the story for me was that, after his father had drowned, the boy still took his father's bucket with him as he left the river...

JT: Yes, a practical decision, as it were. And life goes on, that's just the way it is. You basically said it all; I don't think I have anything more to add. By the way, this film, too, is based on a tragicomic event in my life, to which I added the ending. I went fishing with my son and accidentally fell into the water, but still tried to hand him this fish [Laughs. – *Ed.*]. At the Oberhausen short film festival, where I first showed this film, some people were downright angry about the fact that the boy didn't cry and so on, but later at Asian film festivals it went down very well. There is this fairy tale-like aspect to the story, the passing on of a legacy, not just the fish as a symbol of Christianity.

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