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The first time I met Kris Lemsalu, she was lying under a giant polychrome tortoise shield in the Temnikova & Kasela booth during the Frieze Art Fair in 2015. At first, she could have looked squished under the turtle ceramic armor. However, her silent, resilient and almost imperceptible movements denoted she was okay seeking protection under the reptilian shelter and being isolated from the frenzied crowd of artists, gallerists, curators, and collectors. All of whom were spinning around the Frieze's isles to-do that meeting, to meet that collector, pass-by that booth, or attend that performance.

Whole Alone, 2015. Photos: Piible Kolka



**Things
Yet to Come**



Whole Alone, 2015. Photos: Piible Kolka

During the 36 hours in which the fair was open to the public, she lay still and alone – as the title of the piece says “Whole Alone” – spreading the feeling that something was about to happen. Like an absent presence, an embodied spirit inhabiting the spaces of the art fair, as a prophet would do in the areas of a conflict zone, Kris was infusing her mystic oracles into its over excited atmosphere and reminding to people that something has always yet to come. Usually, galleries recommend that artists who have a solo booth presentation attend the art fair to get connected with their potential collectors. Lemsalu was present, but as the embodiment of her work. It was not the first time that she performed with one of her sculptures to bring it to a new stage of existence, playing a sort of initiation ritual. But the artist’s presence inside her work would also simultaneously increase the market value of her installation, and question the contradictory nature of the art market: how could a collector or an institution acquire an installation comprising of the artist lying under a ceramic turtle shield surrounded by piles of egg boxes filled with fresh eggs?

Certainly inherited, from the visual language of one of her life mentors and friends – the artist Sarah Lucas, the organic element of the egg, which has been quite a recurrent feature in Kris Lemsalu’s work, and it has accompanied most of her performances as a *leitmotif*. In one of the earliest performances from 2010 called *The Birth of Venus*, Kris dressed up in a costume that recalled the exaggerate abdomen, hips, breast, thighs and vulva of Neolithic goddesses, like the *Venus of Willendorf* or the *Venus of Hohlefels*. Lying down on the floor, the artist-Venus would inflate a big white balloon through an electric pump located in the lower hip of her costume until the balloon would explode. The bladder symbolised the egg, the emblem of potential life and its explosion recalled the glimpse in which life begins (but also ends): with a bang, a cry, a scream, which materialises in a fraction of seconds something that is about to come. In a fraction of seconds, a sperm fertilises an egg, a baby inhales their first breath, a car crashes, a body exhales for the last time. In between these fractions of seconds, we live, meltdown, meet people, make noise, escape life, come back, change the shape and nature of our bodies, and create stories to order the chaotic mess in which our matter puts itself together in the world.



The Venice Biennial crowd will come across this weird, convoluted mess of organic and inorganic matter by navigating the Estonian pavilion. The title of the show *Birth V* pays homage to the city of Venice as a Venus, or rather, as a mother goddess: aged, beautiful, fascinating, mystic, wise, and wild as a mythological figure, who nevertheless receives her charm from being an island, detached from the stability of the mainland. Every year, from her wet and fraught humid streets, she gives birth to another carnival of life, creating a stage for new plays and stories to take form and for characters, roles, and horrors as well as fairytales to come into being. *Birth V* is a ritual-exhibition, where the artist and her entourage of *weirdos* – musicians, friends, artists, curators, and people who have meant in the artist’s life – will be screaming and crying prophecies, altering explosive moments with still quietness. The public is invited to join the exhibition as if it were a carnival, a magic ritual celebrating birth and life, and yet still a masquerade where death camouflages and silently hides behind moments of joy and exuberance.



Birth of Venus. 2010

Birth V will be a party, a masquerade ball, and a celebration of life to keep death waiting a little bit more. Populated by ghosts, impalpable presences, memories, friends who were and friends who will be, sculptures of giant vulvas, pools of water, women mannequins, and other totems fraught with feminist characteristics, the artist and her works will perform and inhabit new corporealities throughout the duration of the exhibition. Corporeality designates multiple modes of en fleshed political and desiring existences.

As a term, it replaces and critiques the problematic ontological ambivalence contained in the expression 'the body'. This time, the artist will dress in the role of the muse rather than that of the shaman and the show-woman. She and her extended artistic family will make a singularly glorious mess in the warehouse hosting the pavilion. Music will breathe a new agency into human bodies and inorganic sculptures.

Lemsalu's ability to inhabit less recognised and recognisable identities through her performances has assigned her the reputation of a person with an eccentric and extravagant personality. However, her identity play is part of years of artistic search on the self, far away from the narcissistic social-media instinct that brings people to self-consciously perform desired or sought after personalities. Lemsalu's work is an imperceptible signal sent out in a black void to check if anyone responds. Sometimes, only ghosts are able to capture those signs.



3 of Life. 2017. Photo: Tatjana Pieters



In Heaven Everything is Fine. 2017

In Heaven Everything is Fine, a performance curated by the David Robert Art Foundation in 2017 and staged in an old-fashioned Edwardian theatre adorned with red velvet and golden stucco decorations, a piece of music played by Glasser, one of her musician collaborators, resounds in the dense darkness. Suddenly, a follow-spot light begins tracing a trajectory that goes from the stalls area up to one of the small balconies where Kris Lemsalu appears as a punk Madonna, wearing a white vest with feathers and her characteristic thick black eyebrows. She hesitantly places herself at the centre the light, and gently starts singing a melody that carries the titles of the performance "In Heaven Everything is Fine". By the time the audience begins repeating the melody of the song, four men with a familiar look join her on the stage. In a few seconds, everyone recognises the doppelgangers of David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Prince, and George Michael. They are evidently actors playing the part, but their little apparition in the vest of 'archangels' feels gentle and good. Through the performance-ritual, Lemsalu accepts the game of life, where death is constantly present but has, yet, to come. She seems to say that she is "fine with [the] afterlife" echoed by the title of one of her early works.

Her artistic practice consists of a series of transitory amalgamations of political, somatic, sexual, and aesthetic counter-natural inventions that manifest through various corporealities. Kris Lemsalu's imagery brings



Fine with afterlife. 2015. Photo: Roman Maerz and KAI10 | Arthana Foundation



So Let Us Melt. 2017. Photo: Robert Glowacki



Kris Lemsalu in collaboration with Kyp Malone, Going Going, 2017, for Performa 17. Photo: Paula Court

together secularity and religion, mythology and history, horror facts and fairytales, sorrow and joy; creating installations, objects and (mostly) situations in which life and death are simultaneously perceived and experienced, creating suspended, weird conditions in which 'things' happen but are yet to come.

Part Kris in Feature Kris

First I want everyone to know that Kris has no idea what I am going to show you here! And for the second I have to ~~be~~ give credits to Kris's parents who have made great work of documenting every step of their daughter. There are numerous albums filled with photos of dressed up Kris, taken just before going out. Oh boy, how I love these albums. I love them because they are entertaining but also because it gives this unique opportunity to track down ~~her love~~ the roots of her ~~love~~ love for transformation and understand that it has always been part of her. I really would not be surprised if she was not born naked but all ready in full costume and a grin on her face 😊

With the best
Edith