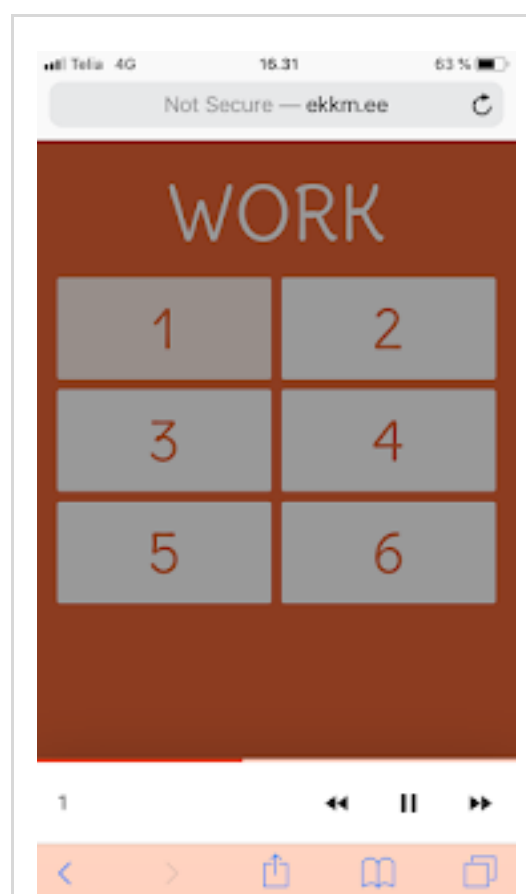


SIGRID VIIR - FALSE VACATIONER, EKKM, TALLINN, 27.04.-16.06.2019

The [EKKM](#) building, formerly part of a coal plant complex, has received a fresh coat of paint and is now sporting stripes, which might or might not be the look of Summer 2019. Inside, people aren't working to produce energy for Tallinn's 430 000 consumer-citizens anymore, but to satisfy the needs of mostly European professionals of the contemporary art industry.

This target group is neither big nor influential, at least in comparison to the energy industry. And unlike the latter, the members of art industry spend most of their time talking about itself, like I'm doing here. To make amends for this closed-circuit discursive bubble, which is supposedly immoral and thus not a great look, the professionals work very hard.

[Sigrid Viir](#)'s exhibition, spread across five rooms in two storeys, is breathtaking in its scope. Literally, I feel exhausted after witnessing the full exhibition. In the best precarious-worker fashion, I feel bad for not putting in the effort to see and hear everything. There's a 10-minute audio piece made by the curator, as well as a second audio guide.



Upon entering the exhibition space, you must choose between Work or Holiday (I chose the first one, of course), then pick up a pair of headphones, jack them in to your phone, go to a website, and press a number in accordance to the number in the room you're in. Some of the audio tracks are longer than others, and I run out of things to do in few of the rooms, which can make the listening feel more of a task than an aesthetic experience. But the narrator is a perfect fit: English with Estonian accent, ie. international art, but with the nation-state bleeding out from the cracks.

So many things have been produced for the show: an actually functioning carousel, a single-channel video loop, fake sewers from where the voice of the curator can be heard, sun decks made out of wood, a fake column with a microphone and speaker include inside so as to amplify the sound of you knocking on it (something the audio guide encourages you to try out), a room painted from floor to ceiling in red-and-yellow stripes, and a mind map made on found porcelain plates, just to name a few.



Installation shot. All pics by me.

So many things. Where will they end up? In Henning Lundkvist's book "[Planned Obsolescence](#)", the Copenhagen-based protagonist looks at a

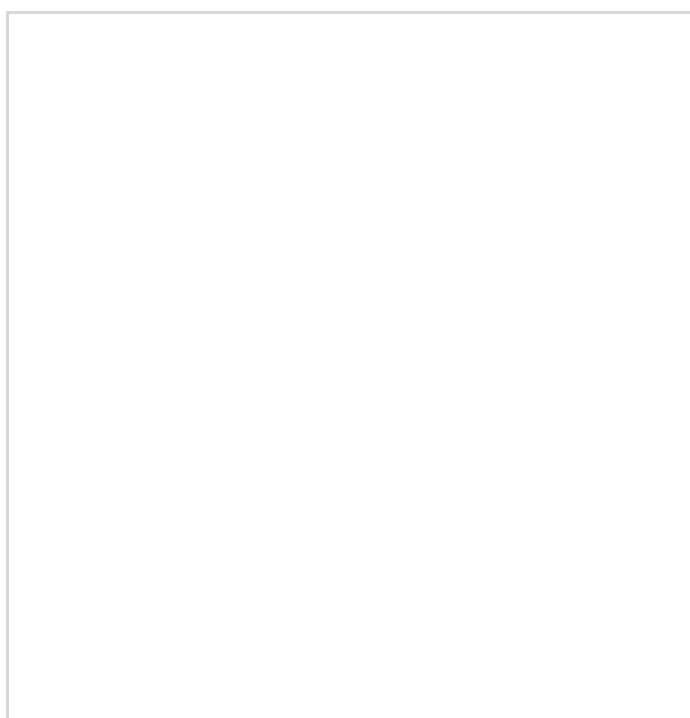
Pelican storage building that resembles a minimalist serial sculpture, and wonders if that's where their friends put all the artworks that didn't get sold (ie. all of the artworks) after an exhibition is over.

Lundkvist writes also about the p2p file-sharing culture that took place some 20 years ago, and muses if our insistence on filling your hard drives with thousands of films and audio tracks were the precursor for this planetary mess we're in, where people and corporations produce and share copious amounts of things for which nobody wants to pay any money.

Isn't it striking we artists do this as well? Fill our small sublet rooms with our art junk, in a capital city of our liking, eventually renting a Pelican storage box for said junk, and finally burdening our loved ones with our oeuvre after we pass away. Why have we accepted overproducing and senseless working so willingly?

Titled "False Vacationer", Viir's solo show ruminates on the pervasiveness and endlessness of modern work by building a monument for it. Like visiting a palace from past centuries, you can't help but to think of the human energies that has gone into erecting it. I shudder from the idea of having to do all that work.

There's something very powerful in the exhibition's totalizing vision. The upstairs space, an eerie spa, is perfect for letting the concepts of the show sink in. When I enter, there are three friends hanging out for a long time there. Some rest at last.



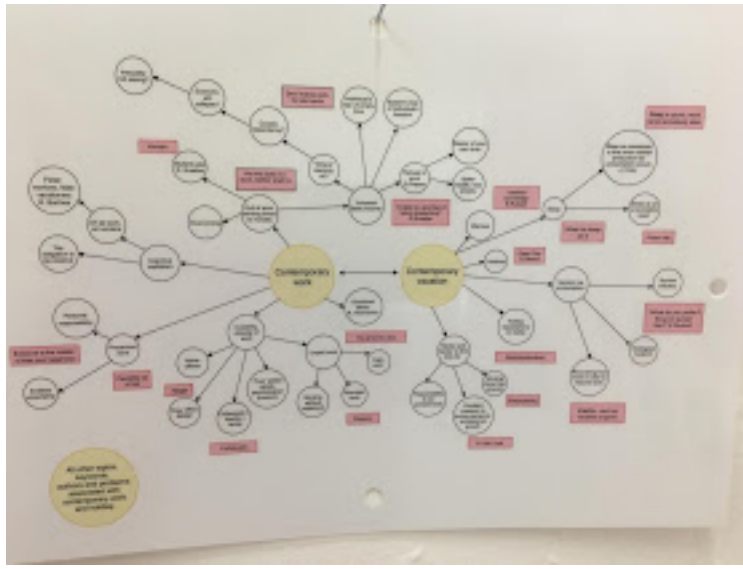


Installation shot from upstairs.

The column, mentioned earlier, doubles as a returning metaphor and a material object. You could take it as a symbol for our attempts to keep both the historical significance of art and our personal-professional lives together. It makes me think of the HBO show *Barry*, where a hitman in LA finds a new beginning in amateur theatre group. The people there really want to believe in the fairy tale of arts as an elevating force. But Mount Olympus seems to be closed for renovations indefinitely.

EKKM is known for very physical production of exhibitions. Each show usually means not just a fake column or two, but almost a different architectural floorplan for the whole space. I've marvelled at this before, this mix of immersive exhibition-building and hands-on attitude. I wish a Finnish art institution would have a director who can actually do things with their hands.

And if you're thinking that's an unfair comparison, you're partly right. Maybe sometimes it's good not to have any skills, and de-skill your way around making an exhibition. It can provide for a more relaxing, and less sweat-inducing experience for the artist, the institution hosting the show, and the audience doing the work of seeing the show. OK never mind there's no perfect solution here either way.



Mind map

The exhibition truly lives up to its name: this is nothing if a false vacation. You could compare the strategy of making the exhibition to method acting: In order to make a film about a raging bull, the actor must become one. The method has been criticised for how ripe it is for directorial abuse. Also, doing a thing doesn't turn you into an emotional-aesthetic author on a given subject (not that Viir is claiming anything like that). And finally, maybe seeing someone faking it gives us much more surprising viewpoints than the real thing. Maybe a false vacationer shows us things we never thought to think about the city, in which they are tourists, but we must live.

Is this Viir's artistic mission? To exhaust themselves and their resources in order to depict how futile it is to find meaning in hard work? But what if it's not: What if you like working and can't relate to endless seminars and workshops in the contemporary art industry where people talk about their burn outs and make a career out of providing "softness" and "care" for whoever is paying? What if you just like it hard?

The exhibition, naturally, doesn't provide me with an answer. Or maybe I missed it. Perhaps I should've listened to the other audio guide, spend more time in the carousel-and-column room, or just worked more for the experience. Am I lazy? Is this what peer pressure feels like? And most importantly, who has the chance to do easy shows, or take holidays?

When you find something you don't agree with in an exhibition, or decide

to project your frustrations onto someone else's work, you become part of it. [Tristan Garcia has described](#) how the frustrating thing about things is that if you count something out as not being a thing, you just make it even more of a thing. *“Things have this terrifying structure: to subtract one of them is to add it in turn to the count.”*



installation shot.

That's how contemporary art works, too. All your feelings and thoughts about it will immediately become part of it when you share them. Like modern work, contemporary art will not rest until it has colonized every last bit of your life, once you've let it enter. Viir's exhibition is a point in case. It deals with work, looks at its logic, and ends up copying that very logic. And when you experience the show, the logic is copied onto you, on top of the copy you already had. As it says somewhere in the audio guide, you already know all this.

Visiting exhibitions today means revisiting your hatred, frustration, desire, and addiction towards the contemporary art industrial complex. It will always-already fail you, because you have failed yourself by letting yourself be defined by such a system. You know what you're doing is not good for

you, but you don't know what else to do.

It's so easy to mix 1. that what was supposed to be symbolic critique with 2. your life. And then you're not sure anymore if making and witnessing exhibitions is your life, or if it's something you do in the meantime, when you're not living your real life.

The vacation might be false, but the burnout will be real. Happy holidays.