

## Attempting to be more present. Interview with Sigrid Viir

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“Purpose of the Universe and the Flickering Funnel”, exhibition view, Hobusepea Gallery, Tallinn, 2014. Photo: Sigrid Viir

Sigrid Viir (b. 1979) is a playful artist living and working in Tallinn, whose repertoire extends from a rational analysis of economic systems to absurd linguistic games. Her artistic mediums range from photography, spatial and sculptural installations to performance. Viir graduated from the Estonian Academy of Art in 2009 and has participated in exhibitions since 2007. Her works have won several prizes and rewards including the Pulse Prize (2012) and the Baltic Assembly Prize for Arts (2012), among others. In this interview Anneli Porri discusses the contemporary art world as seen from Viir’s perspective whilst looking more closely at the links between photography and installations.

**Anneli Porri: The Estonian Academy of Arts’ department of photography has played a huge role in being a seedbed for various prominent contemporary Estonian artists like Marge Monko, Paul Kuimet, Anu Vahtra and Dénes Farkas among others. What aspects in the department’s curriculum and in the academic environment were the most influential for your professional development?**

Sigrid Viir: People. People studying and working there. One could say that we were a good working ensemble. Even though we were not really hanging out after hours, we did function quite well together inside the university, influencing each other in some discreet ways. I did enjoy it.

**AP: You have a wide experience in participating different kind of shows, from big internationally acclaimed shows, to art fairs and smaller solo shows. How different are they for you as an artist? What are your personal highlights?**

SV: I have some experience, though I wouldn’t call it a wide one. For me, there isn’t really a difference in making an artwork for a big international show or a smaller solo show, I try to give both cases my best. So in that sense, they are quite the same, there is no difference in how big the exhibition is. The difference lies in certain details like the budget. Even big international biennales lack money, though it is easier to get the full finance for production for international shows than it is for local ones. The main difference between big and small exhibitions lie in their publicity; big ones are more talked about in the media so they have a wider audience, meaning even people at home, like my grandmother, know that I have taken part in this show or that show.

Of course art fairs and exhibitions are different. For the viewer or the collector, there probably isn’t that much of a distinction, but for the artist there is.



Highlights. Maybe all of the first shows I did; my first participation in an exhibition in 2007 *Consequences and Proposals* and *Something is Wrong* at EKKM, there were actually two openings at the same time. Then in 2010, first Visible Solutions LLC exhibition, my first big international biennale Manifesta 9, Genk, later in 2012, my first not so nice exhibition experience in 2014 and my first solo exhibition *Purpose of the Universe and Flickering Funnel* in 2014.



“Hoisting the Banner”, Manifesta 9, Belgium, Ghent, 2012. Photo: Visible Solutions LLC





Trading Post in Manifesta 9, Visible Solutions LLC, 2012. Photo:Visible Solutions LLC

**AP: Can you describe the influence each show had on your career or creativity?**

SV: The first shows were the first, so probably in some ways my career started from there, or the idea that I might become an artist evolved from doing these. It was a pretty eerie thing to show in public, and I still sometimes have that feeling when I have to put my ideas out there and quite often see them for the first time like this myself.

*Visible Solutions LLC* in Hobusepea Gallery in Tallinn was my first collaborative project. We worked together for a year to make our first exhibition and I learned many skills like how to work with a drill and build things, about the ups and downs of working in a collective. I did get quite a lot of new skills out of this experience.

Manifesta (2012) was harder to handle afterwards because it was quite a big thing for us to work on, so I was not prepared for landing in a way.

Not so nice experiences keep you in good shape, so long as it doesn't happen to you too often. That way you learn for sure what you want from what you don't want.

With my first solo exhibition at Hobusepea Gallery, I got to know the differences of not working collaboratively and not being part of a group show. I like working in a collective and working solo, both of them have their advantages.

**AP: It is quite strange that most of the artists with a background in the photography department have moved to working with installations and spatial mediums rather than photography. Why is that?**

SV: I would say that in most cases photography is part of it as well. One of the reasons might be that we were not approached as much as photographers, but more as artists, and of course the students in some ways also adopt the approach of their professor. But a wider tendency in art in general seems to be to stage exhibitions, to think spatially and of space, to make paintings appear as objects, bringing images from the wall to various spots in the room. In my opinion, the latter loses a certain festivity, making the artwork easier to approach from more sides or viewpoints.

Or maybe we have an urge for objects because it's easier to relate to them. Perhaps since we are spending a lot of time among images, we end up wanting to create something with more dimensions to it than just two.

In my case, adding legs and wheels to a photo frame was somehow part of my thinking. It was quite a challenge to show just one simple image, without so little stage direction as I did in the *Artishok Biennale* this year. I needed this extra layer to get rid of, or play around with, the referent that is always present in a photograph; that is glued onto it.





“Purpose of the Universe and the Flickering Funnel”, exhibition view, Hobusepea Gallery, Tallinn, 2014. Photo Sigrid Viir





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**AP: You are referring to constantly living among images, which means different mediums, screens, magazines. Is that kind of installation-based photography trying to oppose vernacular photography and establish itself as a new art from, while being more ‘everyday’ than a random Instagram snapshot?**

SV: I think the aim is not about trying to be more ‘everyday’, but attempting to be more present in a sense that with installation-based photography a viewer could be further engaged with an artwork. It is also a bodily experience in that way, so one is more part of it and maybe the dialogue is also likelier to happen then. Perhaps what the installative photography is trying to do is to show an entrance to begin with.

Exhibited in my photo installation entitled *Snapshot Photos on the Moon, Black Holes Filled with Sugar Cubes, Snowball as a Noble Gift, Polish Apple in a Lift* (2016) 12 photos of *Hans\_55* are metal and concrete legs which have a conceptual means, but also let me to use spatial elements in the favour of my idea. The work would carry a totally different meaning if those images in it would have been presented on the wall. They would act less as character and be seen more as photographs. It is not that an image to be seen as a photograph is something I want to get rid of, but in that particular case, I wanted the images to become other things as well.

**AP: Next to your subtle sense of colours you seem to have fancied using odd materials for your art pieces. Among these, you have used agar-agar to make a sea-water cube, human fat, a dirty pile of half-melted snow, kitchen utensils, spat out pieces of chewing gum and a stuffed seagull. Some of these materials could be considered quite repulsive, don’t you think? How do you consider these physical materials you are working with?**

SV: All of those materials naturally came out my working processes, from the content of my work or alongside it, and that’s how I, or we, have found them. I think repulsive is quite flattering. In some ways it is like with any other subject; if you get close enough to it, it will probably turn into something else. If you are certain that it’s a necessary thing to do or a material to go with then quite often something that seems not doable, at first, actually becomes done. Working with human fat, for example, was pretty hard and got quite disturbing at some point, but other materials that I have been using don’t seem repulsive at all. Instead of gelatine, I used agar-agar instead because it can withstand higher temperatures and was also suitable content-wise since it is part of the sea. Materials also have quite a strong sensory part in what I do, so it is on some level a bodily experience even if it’s just an image on the wall.

**AP: Many artists consider it to be quite important how their works are depicted in photographs documenting their installations in the gallery. That is because there are more viewers on the Internet or readers of art magazines than there are visitors to the gallery space itself. To what extent do you think about the aesthetics of photographic documentation while planning your installations?**

SV: Not at all. Until now, I have only made exhibitions in physical spaces, and I do not think about documentation at all while making them. Rather, I think of the viewer who will step into these physical rooms themselves.





"Icelanders Enjoy Living in a Postcard", Reykjavik, 2010. Photo: Sigríður Viir





“Icelanders Enjoy Living in a Postcard”, CAC, Vilnius, 2016. Photo: Andrej Vasilenko

**AP: Currently, you are exhibiting an installation entitled *Icelanders Enjoy Living in a Postcard* (2016) at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius (CAC), which involves the use of fir trees, office furniture and TV sets with video. How do you think you or the viewer should approach this installation according to your plan?**

SV: According to my plan, the viewer should approach this installation with curiosity, read the title, walk around the installation, look at the different components that it is made of, smell the tree and come up with an interpretation of some kind. If they feel they are too lazy or not interested, they should walk to the next room and try to find ways to get a connection in there.

I have not yet made an exhibition for the Internet, so I have no idea at the moment how I would present this artwork online or even if it can be presentable there at all. With physical space, I usually have an idea of where the viewer is entering, so there is a front side and a back side and not so many moving trajectories. I understand of how the white cube exhibition works. Digital space, however, does not necessarily have walls. I can't touch things even secretly, or see other viewers in the flesh, so it is a different logic to how I would present and look at things in there.

**AP: How much do you control the quality and spreading of images depicting your works or installations?**

SV: Not at all really.

**AP: In addition to your renowned solo career as an artist, you have collaborated with a number of different artists including Kristiina Hansen and Johannes Säre, and you are member of Visible Solutions LLC with Karel Koplimets and Taaniel Raudsepp. Why do you find such creative collaborations interesting?**

SV: I get a different outcome working with other people than when I'm working solo, and it gets pretty lonely without collaborations. Maybe I should see what happens with some of the ideas/exhibitions that I have made individually if I were to redo them in collaboration.

**AP: Could you perhaps describe what might change in the process?**

SV: I hope we're not that fixed within our collaborations that we can already predict what the outcome would be exactly. Perhaps it's a bit easier to imagine what might potentially change to certain processes in the context of Visible Solutions LLC because we have more precise borders that we operate in.

If, as an example, I was to take the exhibition *Import Export* (2016) together with Jimmy Limit, the topic could easily be suitable for Visible Solutions LLC in a collaborative manner as well. What might change is that the two photographs, *Gift* and *Polish*, would probably not be there as we would have bought them from Jimmy Limit to send them to Surma people or on some kind of world tour to gain more symbolic value that could be used later at home, or we could have made some kind of deal with Coca-Cola to sell art as a soft drink.





“Pjotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky meets with Turritopsis Nutricula to admire the drifting swans and discuss the possibility of neglecting the linearity of time in the near future”, Kristiina Hansen, Johannes Säre, Sigrid Viir. Exhibition view Haapsalu City Gallery, 2014. Photo: Sigrid Viir

**AP: The output of your collaboration really differs in topic and form. In the works you’ve made with Kristiina Hansen, there’s a lot more playfulness and absurd humour, as well as technical mastery with Hansen and Säre. Visible Solutions LLC has defined itself as an artwork/enterprise that deals with art transactions exploring the economics of art and business.**

SV: It somehow seems logical that every collaboration should differ, since the individual particles that these collaborations are made of differ each time, and I am at least acting differently with Kristiina Hansen than I am in Visible Solutions LLC.

**AP: Would it be wrong to claim, for example, that all your works are collaborations with other parties – this time with Temnikova & Kasela Gallery – and that perhaps you have no personal artistic practice at all?**

SV: I myself do not see it like this. Collaborating with a gallery has never been the same as collaborating with fellow artists. In one case we work together with an idea, form and content. In the other case, a ready idea is taken and presented/distributed the same. When making work on my own that Temnikova & Kasela Gallery is representing, I don’t think about what work sells better or to whom I’m making it for, so in that sense I am able to act more freely in my decisions.

**AP: In the last few years, there’s been a notable shift from presenting social content towards a more general anonymous aesthetic form. Art seems to not be commenting on social issues and relations around us anymore, but to issues between artists and their**



**imaginative idiosyncratic worlds. There are no universal signs to interpret, but all items on display are part of some auto-communicative play. This felt similar to your last two solo exhibitions *Awful Pretty Pipe Neck* (2016) and *Purpose of the Universe and the Flickering Funnel* (2014). How would you respond to this analysis?**

SV: I think art does comment on social issues and relations, but perhaps using a range of different perspectives. Of course art reflects the world around us, so it could be that it is some kind of warning that we've become too egocentric. Maybe it has to do with the fact that everything around us is moving so fast and it's important to be present all the time. There is an overflow of information which is in many cases mixed with confounded meanings. Equally, you could say that entertainment has taken over our lives and we are also sold on how important personal stories are. We assume things happen constantly, and we do too many things at once, so we do not have time for longer devotions anymore and have difficulties concentrating. We also seem to have too many roles simultaneously, being an employee and an employer at the same time for example. One becomes more egocentric because he or she wants to be surer of his or her existence. Of course I am exaggerating, but in the most part this is true. Or maybe it is like this due to having an artistic position in the society, or with the fact that creativity is booming at the moment.

*Purpose of the Universe and the Flickering Funnel* was, in a sense, about personal issues; it was about being an artist with an artistic practice in general, and I'm part of it. However, it was not a personal story I told, and from my perspective, the signs to interpret there were universal. *Awful Pretty Pipe Neck* was probably a lot more complicated for the viewer to approach since its content was a lot more open ended and experimental.

**AP: On the contrary, to me your piece entitled *Hans\_55* (2016) – from the exhibition *Import Export*, held last spring with Jimmy Limit at Temnikova & Kasela Gallery – had a social story that was brilliantly clear within its contemporary aesthetic form. You used a fake documentary picture of an Ethiopian tribe and juxtaposed it with real items of Western civilisation – bottles of Coca-Cola, pen lids and post-it notes etc. In more detail, please tell me what your perspective is on this work!**

SV: *Hans\_55* was part of the installation *Snapshot Photos on the Moon, Black Holes Filled with Sugar Cubes, Snowball as a Noble Gift, Polish Apple in a Lift* (2016) that was about the urge for the exotic. The photograph I used was made by a German photographer called Hans Silvester and comes from his book *Natural Fashion. Tribal Decoration from Africa* (2009), which is about the Surma and Mursi ethnic groups in Ethiopia. I came across this image on the Internet and soon found out that this book had started some kind of photographic treasure hunt. Western photographers began travelling out there in an attempt to capture these exact images of the 'exotic' life. What happened was a masquerade acted out to them, where the exoticism of these tribes' poverty was used as a resource and photography shifted their reality. And then there were the sugar plantations that took various tribes and traditions out of their homeland and into the Diaspora so that we could drink Coca-Cola. So it's a wicked circle of supply and demand. The world is distorted to look like what we see in these photographs, making exoticism a resource that is continually exploited and reproduced.





"Awful Pretty Pipe Neck", exhibition view, Draakoni Gallery, 2016. Photo: Sigrd Viir





"Awful Pretty Pipe Neck", exhibition view, Draakoni Gallery, 2016. Photo: Sigrid Viir





"Snapshot Photos on the Moon, Black Holes Filled with Sugar Cubes, Snowball as a Noble Gift, Polish Apple in a Lift". Exhibition view, Temnikova & Kasela C  
Photo: Stanislav Stepaško





"Hans\_55", detail, 2016. Photo: Sigrid Viir

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