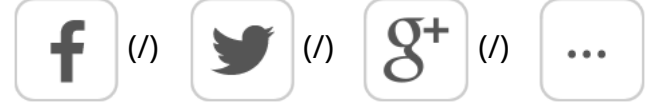




Jaanus Samma on His “NSFW” Estonian Pavilion in Venice

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | JUNE 29, 2015



“Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale”
(Jaanus Samma)

Estonian artist [Jaanus Samma](http://www.jaanussamma.eu/) (<http://www.jaanussamma.eu/>)’s Estonian Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia continues the artist’s ongoing research into the stories of gay lives in Soviet Estonia.

Titled “[Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale](http://chairmanstale.com) (<http://chairmanstale.com>),” the project follows the story of Juhan Ojaste (1921–1990), a war hero, family man, and the successful chairman of a collective farm in Soviet Estonia who was arrested in 1964 for his involvement in homosexual acts and was later sentenced to one and a half years of hard labor.

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Following the loss of his social status, dignity, family, and job, Ojaste was forced to move towns, where, as an ex-convict, he was only offered menial, low-status positions. Ojaste was murdered

in 1990,
allegedly by a
Russian marine
and male
prostitute, just a
year before
Estonia
regained
independence
and
homosexuality

was decriminalized.

“The social debate on LGBTI rights intercepts the wider issue of the violation of fundamental human rights, so common in the past and the current day alike. In this sense, the Chairman’s story becomes the tip of the iceberg for a broader denouncement addressed at all kinds of discrimination: cultural, social, political, religious, sexual, and racial. Therefore, once again, in order to remind us that art is always for the co-existence of differences,” explains Curator Eugenio Viola.

To find out more about “Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale,” BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Jaanus Samma and asked him a few questions.

Your Venice Biennale presentation in the Estonian Pavilion is titled “Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale.” Could you explain the origins of the title and what it reveals about the presentation?

The exhibition is based on my research on homosexuality in Soviet Estonia and I have chosen one man’s personal story to illustrate it. The man was called the Chairman and he got that nickname because he used to be a chairman of several collective farms or kolkhozy from the 1950s until mid-1960s. But his career was ended abruptly by a prison sentence for homosexual acts. So this leads us to the first part of the title; he literally wasn’t suitable for work and lost his position because gay sex was illegal at the time.

But we wanted to play with the words, so NSFW can also refer to the sexually explicit materials in the show.

What was the initial inspiration behind “Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale” and how did it develop into the presentation that visitors will experience in Venice?

When I started to collect the materials about this topic I did many interviews with elderly gay men to hear about life in Estonia in the 1960s and 70s. And then I also heard about the Chairman. He started to interest me because of his colorful life and with all these ups and downs, highlights and disasters. He was in a way the quintessence of the Soviet gay man.

Putting the story together it started to remind me of a libretto of an Italian opera and this gave me the idea to use a kind of theatrical filter for interpreting the material. For example, in the videos we have used painted backdrops similar to the ones used in theatres. There is also a showcase with some props, and in the last room there is a real opera loge with red velvet and golden wall sconces.

How has your past practice influenced and informed your Venice Biennale presentation?

I have always worked with an installation where I combine different mediums together.

Of course it means collaboration because I also want to use mediums I am not at home with. This makes the process hard but also very interesting because you cannot control everything.

But it’s not only a question of medium, sometimes there are other artists who inspire me and with whom I want to collaborate. For example, for the show in Venice I did videos with the Estonian film maker Marko Raat and I commissioned composer Johanna Kivimägi and writer Maarja Kangro to create an aria.

In what ways did you engage with the architecture and characteristics of the Estonian Pavilion with “Not Suitable For Work. Chairman’s Tale”?

The Estonian Pavilion is a five-room apartment in Palazzo Malipiero, a very old and beautiful palazzo with history that goes back to the times of Casanova, who apparently also lived in that building.

When my curator, Eugenio Viola, and I started to work on the exhibition we went to look at the rooms and built the show considering the particularity and characteristics of that space.

And since I often flirt with camp and baroque aesthetics, this place went very well with my works.

But it is a very interesting question because Venice biennial is very particular in the way that contemporary art is shown in these palazzos, together with chandeliers, frescos on the walls, marble staircases etc. It is a real challenge for an artist to make it work.

“Not Suitable For Work. A Chairman’s Tale” is described as a work that “links the public and collective dimension of History with the private and biographical qualities of the chronicle.” What do you want visitors to experience when they visit the Estonian Pavilion this year?

I wanted to use the micro historical approach because I think it makes us more emphatic about that topic. Seeing what that one particular person had to go through should make us question ourselves and the time we are living at the moment. Although working with historical narrative, I am actually interested in the present and the future.

What does it mean to you to be selected to represent Estonia in Venice and how did you approach the opportunity in terms of the development of your own practice?

Even though I feel that I am representing myself and not the country it is a big responsibility and I tried to give my best. But still I decided to take risks and to do something that was new and different from my earlier practice.

Also, I have never worked with such a big team and it was interesting to experience that in one point you have to let it go and follow the flow not knowing exactly where it will end up. Because there is no point of collaborating if you don't give the freedom to your colleagues.



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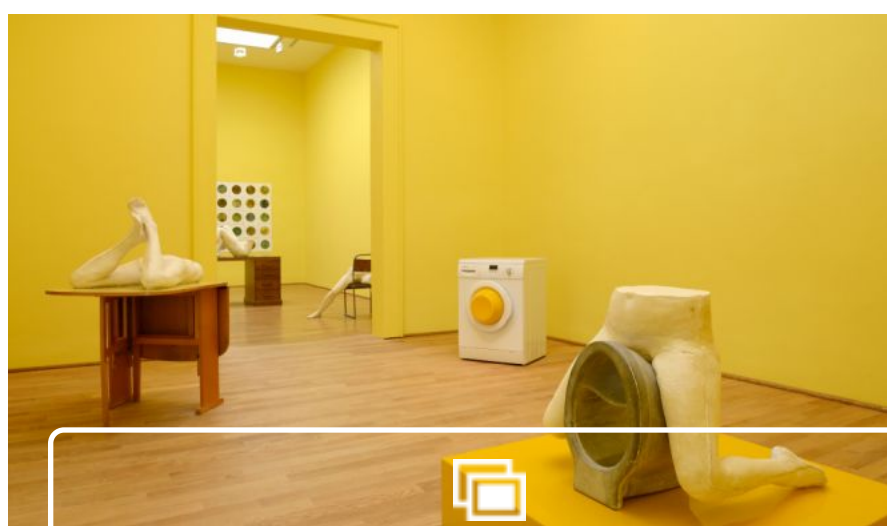
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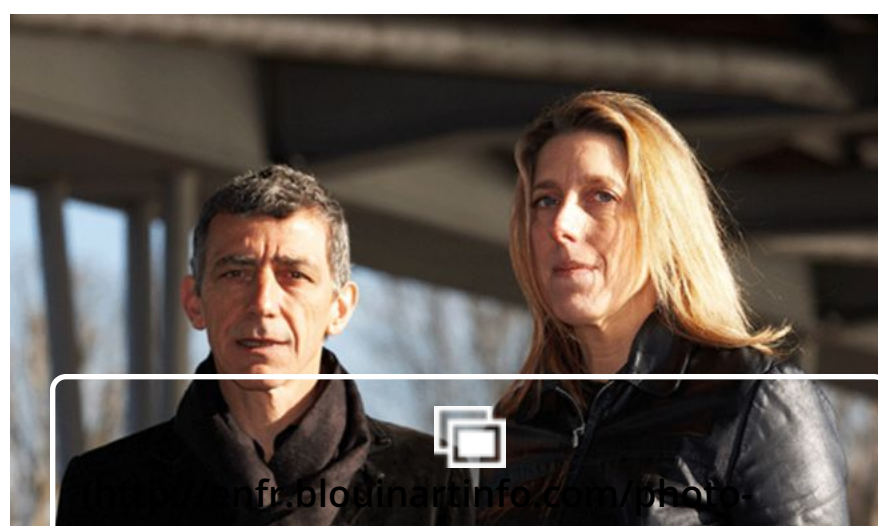
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