

Between Remembrance and Forgetting

Art as a Medium of Memory in Estonia since the 1990s

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la intrincada relación entre el arte y la memoria en la época post-soviética de Estonia y muestra cómo el arte puede cambiar los límites entre el recuerdo y el olvido. El artículo también investiga el uso de la fotografía y el vídeo como medios de memoria y analiza algunas obras de arte que abordan los temas de la memoria colectiva. El propósito principal de este artículo es explorar diferentes estrategias a través del cual la memoria se revela en el arte.

PALABRAS CLAVE: arte contemporáneo, Estonia, memoria, archivos, monumentos, fotografía, video

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the intricate relation between art and memory in post-Soviet Estonia and shows how art can shift the boundaries between remembrance and forgetting. The article also investigates the use of photography and video as mediums of memory and analyzes some works of art that address the issues of collective memory. The main purpose of this article is to explore different strategies through which memory reveals itself in art.

KEY WORDS: contemporary art, Estonia, memory, archives, monuments, photography, video

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Introducción

“Memories are among the most fleeting and most unreliable phenomena of all”¹

The interest in the subject of memory and its processes intensified after the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was followed by similar events in Latin-America and South-Africa, which resulted in the global popularity of the subject of memory and in a desire to rethink the past.² During the last three decades memory has become an obsession, but it also keeps alive the traumatic events of the 20th century. Although it occasionally seems that memory issues have been exhausted or even overexploited, working with them continues, new questions are being asked and new kinds of memories are being discovered, highlighted and materialized.

Similarly to most of Europe, the WW II and its aftermath brought atrocities and traumas to Estonia, including the loss of the republic, the first Soviet occupation (1940–1941), the German occupation (1941–1944) and the second Soviet occupation (1944–1991), mass deportations to Siberia in 1941 and 1949, terror and repressions. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, it faced the task of constructing a new identity through rethinking the past, especially considering that the events of the WW II had been remembered on the terms of the Soviet ideology. The memory debates of the beginning of 1990s were characterized by the notion of the “crisis of truth” and by popular expressions such as “give the people back their history”, which resulted in a systematic and even obsessive collection of people’s life stories – the claiming and demanding of personal memories to fill in the blank space, or the rupture, as the Soviet occupation was perceived.³ The other prevailing concept in Estonian memory politics of the 1990s was the idea of the return – the return to normality, to historic roots and to Europe.⁴ Thus, the society was simultaneously

1 A. ASSMANN, *Cultural memory and Western civilization: functions, media, archives*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, p. 238.

2 P. NORA, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory", in *The Collective Memory Reader*, J. K. OLICK, V. VINITZKY-SEROUSSI, D. LEVY (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York, 2011, p. 438.

3 Both the Soviet occupation and the re-independence in 1991 have been interpreted as cultural traumas. See A. AARELAID-TART, *Cultural Trauma and life stories*, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2006. And also E. KÕRESAAR, *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafiline minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes (Ideologies of Life. Memory and Autobiographical Meaning-Making of the Past in Estonian post-Soviet Life Stories)*, Eesti Rahvamuuseum, Tartu, 2005.

4 M. LAGERSPETZ, "The Cross of Virgin Mary's Land. A Study in the Construction of Estonia's "Return to Europe"", *Idäntutkimus. The Finnish Review of East European Studies*, N° 6 (3/4), 1999, pp. 17–28.

drawn in two different directions: one being the direction of progress, which was focusing on future and being part of Europe, and the second one concerned with reconstructing the past and claiming the memories.

These two different directions also apply to the art of Estonia in the 1990s. The first one of them concentrating more on science, technology, utopias and future,⁵ whereas the second direction was concerned with memory and can also be linked to working with *les lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, as Pierre Nora has defined archives, monuments, and museums where a nation defines and crystalizes its memories. These are sites that have been invested with a symbolic aura and their main purpose is to “block the work of forgetting” and “immortalize death”.⁶ This article will focus on some of Estonian artists working with such archives and monuments.

The Family Archive: From Personal Stories to Medium Criticism

The tendency of dealing with the processes of memory in Estonian art can be traced back to a critically minded group of students who during the 1990s were heavily influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, especially by the “archeology” of Michel Foucault. They were also the witnesses and developers of new artistic mediums of the decade: photography and video. Until the 1990s, including during the Soviet occupation, photography and video had mainly served the needs of hegemonic powers or were used to document everyday lives, and were not considered as artistic mediums.⁷ However, the story of art in Estonia in the 1990s is also the success-story of photographic and video art; they define the multifaceted and ever-changing face of the decade.

The young artists, who mainly gathered around a photography laboratory called “Faculty of Taste” at the Estonian Academy of Arts, took advantage of the intricate

5 This can be seen, for example, at the annual art exhibitions of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA), which was active between 1992 – 1998 and was part of the system of art centers in Eastern Europe. The first three exhibitions were dedicated to challenging the borders of art, the last one of these exhibitions “Eesti kui märk” (Estonia as a Sign) (1996) was dedicated to the complex issues of national identity.

6 P. NORA, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations*, N° 26, 1989, pp. 7–24.

7 Although there were some groups of photography enthusiasts who experimented with the capacities of the medium, such as BEG, STODOM, A-6, FF and Ring 0. Also, there was the outstanding artist Jüri Okas who started using photography as a medium of art already in the 1970s.

relation between photography and memory. Their obsession with photographic materials and personal stories was partly due to the fact that during the Soviet occupation archives and personal memories were considered as a threat to the dominative and official narrative. Archives were mainly closed institutions and under surveillance, individual memories and experiences were silenced – they can be described as forming part of the forced “collective amnesia”.⁸ This explains why after the fall of the totalitarian regime archives and personal stories gained such an importance. As Pierre Nora has said, after the fall of the totalitarian regimes memory became part of a counter-movement, or part of a protest movement,⁹ especially because the power over archives is also the power over writing the history.

However, it was not the public archives that gained the most interest in the art of the 1990s, but the personal archives, and first of all family albums. Taking advantage of the notion of truth, or the truth value, that has been given to photographs, artists created semi-fictional narratives of their own lives, of their past, and the lives of their close ones. These narratives had only hints of criticism towards the totalitarian regime, but they spoke a universal language by telling the personal stories that for so long had been denied in many aspects, and now had gained importance.

The tendency of using family archives in art for the constant construction and reconstruction of personal stories is exemplified by Piret Räni’s work “My Father” (1996). It consists of several planes of photo-collages and texts: the artist used photographs from family albums and her father’s documents, creating a visual narrative, which is accompanied by text. By changing the sequence of the photographs and the text on different occasions, she also changed the narrative. The photographs she used present the normal life of a man – his family, his work, his identity. However, the text planes that are juxtaposed with these images tell a rather unsettling story. The work is about the artist’s father, a quite well-know Estonian actor, who committed suicide. The text accompanying the photo-collages tells the dramatic story of how her father thought he was being followed by the KGB and that, eventually, it had driven him mad.

8 See H. PÄÄBO, *Potential of Collective Memory Based International Identity Conflicts in Post-Imperial Space. Comparison of Russian Master Narrative with Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian Master Narratives*, Tartu University Press, Tartu, 2011. And also R. HINDRIKUS, T. KIRSS (eds.), *Estonian Life Stories*, Central European University Press, Hungary, 2009.

9 P. NORA, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory" in *The Collective Memory Reader*, pp. 439–440.

In this case, the artist is digging out and collecting the materials and documents about her father, arranging the traces of someone having been there, and reconstructing his story.¹⁰ The content of this work also shows how the oppressions were not only physical – it was not only the mass deportations that had been committed during 1941 and 1949, or the repressions by Stalin, or the numerous incarcerations that had traumatized people – the oppressions were also psychic. There exist two acknowledged paradigms of remembering the Soviet era: the period of Stalin until his death in 1953 is generally remembered as the violent period, and in contrast, the late-Soviet era as rather mild and bright;¹¹ this work shows that this paradigm did not apply to everyone.

This kind of construction of personal stories through appropriation became a quite common tendency in Estonian art. However, one side of it was the use of photographs from family albums to reconstruct familial narratives and challenging the ideas of memory and identity by constructing these semi-fictive memories, but the other side of it was the challenging of photography and video themselves as mediums of memory. Photography and video are being seen, first and foremost, as mediums of memory, because memory processes can't be addressed directly, they need some kind of mediators.¹² A purpose of a photograph, that in itself is an image created by the reaction between light-sensitive surface and photons falling on it, is to capture a fleeting moment, to hold on to a dear one, to provide a memory picture of a certain place or a certain time.

A photograph is considered to be an indexical record of reality,¹³ it is believed to depict reality and show things that were really there, and this connection with

10 The construction of memories was conducted mainly through photography and appropriation, although there were also other approaches, for example in Mati Karmin's installation "My Father" (1994), which is a construction of the artist's rigorous father through the details and traces of his agronomic work, it is an archive of photos, sample bottles of soil and grain, notebooks, etc – an archive that is the representation of the artist's father and the personal relationship between the two.

11 See E. KÕRESAAR, *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafiline minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*, Eesti Rahvamuuseum, Tartus, 2005.

12 A. ASSMANN, *Cultural memory and Western civilization: functions, media, archives*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, p. 137.

13 R. BARTHES, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2010 (1981), pp. 76–77. The photograph's indexicality is a term developed by Charles Peirce; however, Barthes also describes the essence of photographs as *ça a été*, or that-has-been, claiming that photographs signify the real situations that have taken place.

reality has been put to test, for example, in the work “Grandfather” (1997) by Mari Laanemets. Her work is a collection of family photographs, constructing a story of a man who could be, but might not be, the artist’s grandfather. These are personal photographs showing a man in his everyday surroundings – standing with his bicycle, at a birthday table with other guests, holding the hand of a small child – but the face of the man has been scratched out on each photograph, challenging the connection between the image and reality. Mari Laanemets indicates that the work is about a girl, who after the death of his grandfather scratched out his face on all the photographs because he wasn’t there anymore. If he was gone, then he couldn’t exist on the photographs either. The effect of the work is somewhat traumatizing, the scratched out face functions as a rupture between reality and image. We are so accustomed to believe what we see, to take the two-dimensional piece of paper in front of us as a proof of something that is real and true, so that the scratched out face works as a shock, making the whole work somewhat uncanny and eery, and reminding the viewer that one day all that is left are the material traces of one’s existence. But even the materialized memories are fleeting and disappearing.

Although being a characteristic of the art in the 1990s, working with family archives, and criticising or challenging the function of the medium through them, is still relevant in the contemporary art, and can be seen for example in the work of Laura Toots. In several of her works she points out the medium’s inability to function as a medium of memory and emphasizes the moments when it fails. For instance, her work “Howevermuch” (2010) is a 6-minute video that she compiled from hours and hours of her personal home videos that had been taken during the 1990s. The scenes she has collected demonstrate the medium’s inability to capture a moment; these are the moments when immortalising a person or a place has failed. The video shows scenes that are out of focus, or moments when the camera has been put on the table and was not turned off, or scenes of someone filming their own feet by accident, and so on. At first sight the whole video is a blur, but then the fleeting details that have been captured elicit some equally vague memories from the turn of the century. Therefore, her video is a sequence of representations that represent nothing more but a time when making home videos was highly popular. Laura Toots also challenges the photograph’s function as a medium of memory in her “Lovers’

Discourse» (2012) [Image I], which consists of wedding pictures from her family archive and passe-partouts that cover the photos so that only a detail, a glimpse of a photograph beneath it, is seen. The passe-partouts indicate to the importance of the scenes under it, but the photograph, again, fails to convey the memory traces that have been captured on it. If a photograph would be compared to a memory puzzle, which would provide answers to such questions as who, where, when and why, then the work of Mari Laanemets would be a puzzle with one missing piece, and Laura Toots' "Lovers' Discourse" would be a puzzle with all the pieces missing but one.

Working with the family archive appears to form a significant part of Estonian post-Soviet art. Although the tradition of working with archives and appropriation can be traced back to conceptual art and is one of the characteristics of postmodernist art, in Estonian art there is a tendency to associate addressing the issues of past, memory or archive with the Linnap's School of the 1990s. It consisted of a group of young artists who were immersed in the subject of memory and identity, and who were also fascinated by the mediums that were primarily connected to their (re)construction. However, working with family archives can be seen as part of the general ideology of the memory politics of the newly independent country, and the construction of personal memories can be interpreted as the creation of counter-memories – a rebellion, but at the same time as a common tendency in most of the post-Soviet countries. Contrary to the general belief, working with memory is not something that characterizes solely the art of the 1990s, it's a tendency that by no means shows signs of disappearing. The photographs from family archives haven't lost their symbolic aura, if anything at all, they have regained it due to the materiality-obsessed propensity of the digital age.

Memory Wars: Art as a Critical Medium of Memory

When analyzing the relation between art and memory, Aleida Assmann has emphasized the importance of art in challenging the boundaries between remembrance and forgetting.¹⁴ These boundaries exist both on personal and collective

14 A. ASSMANN, "Individuelles und kollektives Gedächtnis – Formen, Funktionen und Medien", in *Das Gedächtnis der Kunst. Geschichte und Erinnerung in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, K. WETTENGL (ed.), Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2000, p. 27.

levels and are inextricably bound. On the collective level art often questions the formations of collective memory, since there is always something that has been left out. The term “collective memory” was coined by Maurice Halbwachs during the first half of the 20th century and has been since developed by many scholars, including Aleida Assmann, who connects this term to two fundamental ideas that emerged in the humanities during the 1980s and 1990s: the first one being the understanding that past is always being reconstructed based on the present needs, and the second that all kinds of cultural symbols (including literary texts, photographs, monuments, rituals) play an important role in construction of identities.¹⁵

The construction and reconstruction of collective memory during the 20th century has resulted in several memory conflicts and memory wars. The artists addressing the obscure areas between remembrance and forgetting are often working with the cultural symbols in which collective memory is being crystalized and processed, they are working with *les lieux de mémoire*, or memory sites, as Pierre Nora has defined them. Artists working with collective memory are often addressing the issues of collective amnesia, bringing out bits and pieces that have been suppressed or left out, because forgetting, including deliberate forgetting, is often an inseparable part of the collective memory, or as Andreas Huyssen as pointed out, “every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence”.¹⁶

Several works of art drew attention to the issues of the construction of a new identity by reconstructing memories during the 1990s. As mentioned before, artists were compelled by the ideas of the construction and reconstruction of identities and memory. However, there is one work of art that perhaps most effectively exemplifies the existence and the conflict of different collective memories. The work “Summer 1955” (1993) by Peeter Linnap connects personal archives with the issue of collective amnesia at the beginning of the 1990s, when a newly democratic country was concentrating on moving forward. The work itself is a collection of old family photos he found on the attic of his father-in-law. They depict young Estonian men in Soviet army uniforms, posing with revolvers. Their pose is relaxed, one arm reached out

15 A. ASSMANN, "Response to Peter Novick", *GHI Bulletin*, N° 40, 2007, p. 34.

16 A. HUYSEN, "Introduction", in *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsest and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 4.

with a gun, their faces looking even playful, as if they are having a good time in the summer somewhere in greenery. The poses are heroic, one might say that even romantic, as something off from a movie poster. Peeter Linnap, himself an influential artist and professor of the time, appropriated these photos, enlarged them one meter high and placed them in an exposition hall. During the 1990s the Soviet occupation was considered as a rupture, as something abnormal, something not inherent to Estonia or Estonians, a disturbance in the existence of Estonian republic. Any kind of connection to Soviet regime was quickly disclaimed and silenced, and Soviet era identity was something to be ashamed of.¹⁷ Belonging to the Soviet army and especially presumably having fun, as these photos suggested, was not something to be proud of. In a way, this work by Peeter Linnap is the ideal example of the constant construction and reconstruction of self through the collective amnesia of certain aspects of the past. Peeter Linnap's act is an example of an artist digging in the past and just putting it out there – an example of brushing the history against the grain¹⁸ and making it uncomfortable for the viewer, or for the society, who was trying to forget or had already forgotten.

Working with collective remembrance and forgetting, and with the sites of memory, intensified during the 2000s. This includes working with public archives, as in the works of Marge Monko, who has gone through the archives of several abandoned manufactures that used to be the emblem of hope and progress during the Soviet period but lost their meaning after the independence.¹⁹ Or the work of Jaanus Samma whose installations are based on archival materials and oral stories about the life of gays in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic during the 1970s and 1980s when homosexuality was criminalized.²⁰ However, there is one work that perhaps has drawn the most attention to the delicate nature and the multiplicity of collective

17 E. KÕRESAAR, *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafilise minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*, Eesti Rahvamuuseum, Tartu, 2005, p. 107.

18 W. BENJAMIN, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, pp. 256–257.

19 For example Marge Monko's works such as "Fall of the Manufacture (2009–2012)", "Nora's Sisters" (2009) and "8 Hours" (2013) use the archive materials of old abandoned manufactures. She is often drawing attention to the conditions of the workers of factories, especially women, during the industrial prosperity of the Soviet period.

20 Jaanus Samma has been working with archives and oral stories concerning the lives of sexual minorities in "Stories" (2011) at the exhibition "Untold Stories" (curators Anders Härm, Rebeka Põldsam, Airi Triisberg), and in "Chairman. The Opera" (2013) displayed at "Kõler Prize 2013. Exhibition of Nominees", the latter was developed into the project representing Estonia at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015.

memories. That is Kristina Norman's "After-war" (2009), which concentrates on memory wars, and which also represented Estonia at the 53rd Venice Biennale.

Kristina Norman often deals with memory conflicts as an artist and the protagonist of her installation "After-war" is a monument, the Bronze Soldier, a cultural symbol that has different interpretations in different collective memories. The monument was opened in 1947 and is dedicated to the Soviet victory over Germany in the WW II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is known in Russia. It was also known as a monument to the "Liberators of Tallinn". It has a different meaning for Estonians and for the Russian minority in Estonia, symbolizing victory for Estonian Russians and, in contrast, symbolizing the Soviet occupation, mass deportations, etc, for Estonians. The monument has been problematic, its relocation from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery in 2007 led to a conflict between the two separate memory collectives, and resulted in two nights of rioting on the streets of Tallinn. As an artist, and due to her mixed background of Estonian and Russian descent, Kristina Norman places herself in the middle of these two memory collectives.²¹

The work "After-war" addressed the issues of different memory collectives – or different collective memories – in Estonia only a few years after the riots. But first of all, it has to be pointed out that not only the monument itself has symbolic value for the Russian community in Estonia, but also the place itself in the center of Tallinn, being the burial place of Soviet soldiers. It has been a ritual among the Russian-speaking minority to bring flowers to Tõnismäe, the place where the monument used to stand, on the 9th of May, celebrating the Victory Day, the defeat of Nazi Germany.²² On the 9th of May in 2009 Kristina Norman erected a golden model of the soldier at Tõnismäe. The artist claims that her purpose was to create a video piece asking the general opinion of people standing by. In her words, the golden soldier was supposed to visualize the emptiness of the place and the conflict that still existed. It was also supposed to raise discussion on the subject.²³ However,

21 K. NORMAN, "After-War", <http://www.kristinanorman.ee/after-war/>.

22 More on the subject of the war of monuments in Estonia in K.BRÜGGEMANN and A.KASEKAMP, "The Politics of History and the "War of Monuments" in Estonia", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 36, N° 3, July 2008, pp. 425–448.

23 K. NORMAN, "Mis keelt räägib kuldsõdur", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 12.05. 2009.

the wound was too fresh and her act ended with the intervention of the police. Her golden soldier was removed and she was transported to the police station.

The response to Kristina Norman's golden soldier was ardent. It seemed as if it had been too early to talk about this, most people were afraid that a conflict would burst out again. Besides, the golden shimmer of the model-monument had been too similar to the shimmer of victory, the soldier had been too real, resulting in the impossibility of turning it into a generalization, or a metaphor. It was all too personal. What the golden soldier did was to draw attention to the symbolic cultural power of the monuments. It showed that monuments, as well as archives, are places where this collective memory is being constructed. And that there are competing perceptions, separate collective memories, different kind of memory that can be connected to the same place. It also drew attention to the fact that it's not only a monument where the collective memory is being processed and crystalized, because the conflict was still there even after the removal of the monument. The place at Tõnismäe still had symbolic value for the Russian community, because collective memory was being processed by continuing the rituals of gathering on the 9th of May and putting flowers where the monument used to be. The conflict of collective memories and the issue of memory wars is bigger than a sole sculpture of a soldier.

Both works, "Summer 1955" by Peeter Linnap and Kristina Norman's "After-war", disturb the construction of a collective memory, unsettling the dominant narrative, and bringing up issues that were destined to be part of the collective amnesia. These two works of art highlight the latent issues of constructing an identity, and show, as Aleida Assmann has said, how memory is always reconstructed based on the needs of the present.

The resistance of traumatic memories

The obsession with memory at the end of the 20th century has been explained by François Hartog as a change in the regime of historicity. The previous regime, which dominated throughout the 20th century, was a future oriented one; whereas the contemporary regime has been influenced by the atrocities of the previous century,

which had been committed in the name of the future, and now the future is being perceived as a menace, a threat, and the present has become a sort of a standstill, “pondering on a past that is not passing.”²⁴ It might be that by now working with memory has lost some of its novelty, and a certain “memory fatigue” has settled in, as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out,²⁵ but rethinking the past, including the Soviet past, still continues. There are still many aspects that haven’t been addressed, or that resist being addressed.

There have been several attempts in literature and film to address the deportations of Estonians to Siberia. It’s one of the major collective traumas, almost everyone in the country has a relative or someone they know that had been deported and probably never came back. The success of “In the Crosswind” (2014), a film based on one person’s story that universally speaks to everyone who is familiar with the stories of the deported, is closely related to its aesthetics. The film is made in the style of a “tableau vivant”, consisting of black and white scenes that look like photographs, with only the camera, or the viewers gaze, moving in it. The stillness of the scenes gives unbearable amount of space and time for the viewer to think inside of the scene, to relate to the story of the protagonist – to the woman narrating her story in the form of letters. It is the audience creating the information, instead of it being fed to them. There is an absence, a void that the viewer has to fill, there is a place for contemplation.

It seems that the aesthetics of absence is the crucial component of telling these traumatic memories. The aesthetics of minimalism, leaving a space in which one can contemplate, or “the indirectness” as Cathy Caruth has mentioned, might be the acceptable and potent way to approach the issues that resist addressing them directly. Caruth’s example is how the filmmaker Alain Resnais refused to make a documentary about Hiroshima, indicating to the indirectness in psychic trauma.²⁶ Instead it is through a fictional story (“Hiroshima, mon amour”) that the historical specificity

24 F. HARTOG, "Time and Heritage", *Museum International*, N° 227 (Vol. 57. N° 3. 2005), Unesco 2005, p. 16.

25 A. HUYSEN, "Introduction", in *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsest and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 3.

26 C. CARUTH, "Duras, Resnais, Hiroshima mon amour", in *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 27.

is conveyed. In regards of mourning, which in itself is a way of remembrance of the past, Marita Sturken has written that “emptiness, in the form of contemplative spaces and voids, is a primary aesthetic of the memorial design”.²⁷ In art, as in architecture, often the most devoid space might be the most eloquent one.

However, it's not only the aesthetics of absence that provides the necessary means to convey traumatic events. There has to be an acceptance, a tradition, or a way of talking about it. In Estonia's case, there is still the feeling of being unprepared. The question is always “Is Estonia ready?” and there are several things that Estonia is not ready to talk about. Things that are destined to be forgotten, but still, and especially through critically minded artists and curators, emerge from time to time. One of these subjects was revealed as a result of the exhibition “My Poland. On Recalling and Forgetting”,²⁸ which opened in 2015 at the Tartu Museum of Art and displayed works by Yael Bartana, Zbigniew Libera, Joanna Rajkowska, John Smith (Marko Mäetamm ja Kaido Ole), Wilhelm Sasnal, Art Spiegelman and Artur Żmijewski. Even though all of the artists are quite well known, the exhibited works caused a fury among the Jewish community in Estonia, which resulted in the removal of two works from the display. This conflict has been interpreted as the result of the lack of context in Estonia.²⁹ If there is no common tradition, no language or history of talking about Holocaust, then a conflict of perceptions emerges. The incident shows that talking about Holocaust is something still unfamiliar to Estonia.

In the end it is still art, as well as literature and cinema, that is in charge of the boundaries of what is being remembered or forgotten. It's the artists bringing up these uncomfortable issues again and again, making people notice and understand. Or, at least discuss it, and perhaps give these memories the importance that they demand. It's through art that some memories that resist the attention because they are too uncomfortable, alien or unsuitable to the common collective memory, get

27 M. STURKEN, "The Aesthetics of Memory: Rebuilding Ground Zero", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 31, N° 3, August 2004, pp. 311–325. "The aesthetics of absence" is something that Marita Sturken presents in her article on the 9/11 and the missing towers. In her words "... their absence has spoken more loudly, and with more resonance, than their presence ever could have", drawing attention to the power of absence.

28 "My Poland. On Recalling and Forgetting" 07.02.–29.03.2015 at Tartu Art Museum, Estonia. Curator: Rael Artel, artists: Yael Bartana, Zbigniew Libera, Joanna Rajkowska, John Smith (Marko Mäetamm and Kaido Ole), Wilhelm Sasnal, Art Spiegelman and Artur Żmijewski.

29 E. LAANES, "Holokaustikunst ja kontekst", Estonian Cultural Paper *Sirp*, 20.02.2015.

acknowledged. But what happens when a way of talking about certain events develops and becomes a tradition? There is always the risk of overexploitation, as in the case of Holocaust, and traumatic memory in general. The conflict that emerged from the exhibition "My Poland" in Estonia might be a positive sign. The lack of tradition does mean that there hasn't been enough discussion on the subject, but the mere reaction to the exhibition gives another perspective. It's a sign that not everyone has gotten too comfortable with Holocaust – the atrocities are still unimaginable. After being to several museums and memorials of Holocaust, after seeing the photos of the concentration camps over and over again, after reading books and seeing films on it, the unbearable human cruelty behind it often tends to fade.

Rethinking the 20th century continues, new suppressed memories emerge every now and then, often because of artists who aestheticize and materialize them, and there seems to be no end. Has memory become a burden as it was, according to Nietzsche, in the 19th century? Will the intention to remember everything drive us mad as it drove mad "Funes el memorioso" of Borges? Or will it just produce numbness? Either way, history has a tendency to repeat itself, therefore, it seems better to try and learn from it.