

THE SPACE-TIME ENVIRONMENT IN LIINA SIIB'S ART PROJECT 'A WOMAN TAKES LITTLE SPACE'

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'Life in a post-Soviet country must be very frustrating'

*Comment from the guest book of the
Estonian pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale*

Liina Siib's art project 'A Woman Takes Little Space' represented Estonia at the 54th International Venice Art Biennale in 2011. It is a multifaceted project, consisting of photographs, videos and site specific art mediums. Siib focused on the relationship of her subject (women) to their environment, taking a closer look at the spatial and social practices that exist in the society and the outlets which have been perpetuated in various layers of human activity.

I will place the emphasis on the last word of the title of the project 'A Woman Takes Little Space' – space. Since the entire project has a documenting quality, the current state of the post-socialist society of Estonia and the everyday living environment of the so-called ordinary person has been 'frozen' in Siib's works. I choose the title work 'A Woman Takes Little Space'¹ for my analysis, and I will also deal with the works 'A Room of One's Own'² and 'Unsocial Hours'³. The biennale project also included 'Averse Body'⁴ and 'Apartness'⁵.

In literature, the moods that prevailed in the Eastern European (early)post-socialist society have been evoked by Tõnu Õnnepalu. His novel 'Piiririik' ('Border State') does not reveal the exact origin of the protagonist, but it is known that he was born in a former Soviet Union republic in Eastern Europe, why not Estonia. He comes from 'an array of poor and dark states that feebly lament their stillborn history'⁶. The term 'border state' symbolically entails the undefinable status of the state, standing somewhere between the East and the West. The protagonist has settled in Paris (i.e. the cultural capital of Old Europe), but he is tortured by issues of identity: while wishing to fit into the Western welfare society and trying to renounce his background, he is unable to fully carry it out. His memories keep tearing him back to that bleak (Estonian) land of which he is ashamed.

Even though 'Border State' was written in 1993, it is still relevant, creating a telling background to Liina Siib's works, which outline the borderline and unstable nature of the contemporary Estonian environment. Siib has recorded her works in a relatively short period of time, yet they are surprisingly distinct from one another, oscillating between two poles. A parallel with a roller coaster, or even the hilly landscape of southern Estonia comes to mind, with the rising and falling road making your stomach turn but offering a peculiar thrill at the same time. Francisco Martínez in this issue has also highlighted the incoherence of the post-socialist society, comparing it to a bastard body where each part is growing according to its own will and in different directions without being subject to central control.⁷

The living environment is changing slowly, but these changes all the more honestly reflect the developmental processes in the society, creating transitions, combinations and contrasts between the past, the present and the future. The developments in post-socialist

1. *A Woman Takes Little Space (2007-2011)* exhibited 40 different documentary colour photographs at the Venice Biennale (the size of each item was 30 × 45 cm), recording women in their work environments.

2. *A Room of One's Own (2011)* was a work combining a video (11' 30') and a room installation that took the title from Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*. The room design imitated a household and the television placed in it showed a video about housewives living in the newly developed suburbs of Tallinn, interspersed with clips about women dancing at an outdoor concert in the winter.

3. *Unsocial hours (2011)* was a video installation (10' 02') with two screens side by side showing four documentary videos in sync: in one, the bakers of a night shift were making pastry, on the screen next to it, the pastry was sold on the Balti railway station market; the second pair consisted of videos about people eating pastry in a café in Lasnamäe and by the staff of the Peigulinna maternity hospital. The videos were accompanied by a male voice loudly announcing the names of the various kinds of pastry.

4. *Averse Body (2007)* was a video and room installation (45' 53') consisting of interviews with 11 prostitutes of Tallinn, played over footage of Tallinn by night, shot from a window of a taxi, with the artist asking them whether they like their bodies, their voices, how their clients feel about their bodies, have they ever been dumped, what they would like to change about themselves, etc.

5. *Apartness (2008)* was a photo and room installation. A room presented as a bedroom had two beds and a bedside table with a mirror between them. Above both beds, there was a large photograph of a middle-aged woman (139 × 94 cm).

6. Tode, E. (2003). *Piiririik*. Tallinn: Tuum. p 12.

7. Martínez, F. *Postsotsialismi ahistus. Veel kümme aastat hiljem*. *Vikerkaar* 2013, nr 3, p 78.

countries are different, but what they have in common is a consensual note that they were part of the socialist bloc and it is post now. It is difficult to find a new footing when one great ideology collapses. In the Soviet regime, the future of the city was written down in a specific form, whereas in the following period, there was no single leading ideology. On the one hand, there is a constant retreat from the socialist legacy in the urban setting and meeting of immediate needs. On the other hand, in recent years, a certain nostalgia for all things 'from the Soviet times' has been spreading, which in turn means treasuring the past. Therefore, the general picture is rather inconsistent and diverse, which is also evident in Siib's works.

The photo series 'A Woman Takes Little Space' features images that fully comply with our understanding of a successful society, side by side with images that look exactly like photos from the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (with improved colour quality), yet belong to this day. This way, the keywords in the environments recorded by Siib are 'Euro-repairs' and a suburban one-family residential home with a contemporary plan, yet also old factory buildings and the forgotten corner shops of Lasnamäe. Between these two extremes, there is a borderline area, a mixture of old and new, different memory images. The assembled result could be described as a postmodern collage.

Siib's works reflect the link between the relationship of space and people and social conditions. For instance, the so-called weaker (in this case, women and ethnic minorities) are driven to the margins: Siib has recorded women working in less prestigious positions and in poor conditions; in terms of living conditions, however, it is the ethnic minorities that 'take little space'. The latter is linked to developments in the ESSR. With the directing of labour, (mostly Russian-speaking) immigrants from the USSR were resettled in newly-built residential regions and industrial areas. However, with the rebuilding of capitalism in the 1990s, entire economic sectors were reorganised. Having lost their jobs and not speaking the now compulsory national language, the immigrants felt increasing uncertainty. On the one hand, this situation drove them to the margins in the social sense, but it also confirmed their isolation in the spatial sense: the Russian-speaking population lives in residential blocks located outside the city centre. In general, the sites that have a strong air of socialist heritage are also the sites that no one wants to deal with and where everything unimportant or problematic in the eyes of the society is shoved into. These sites do not carry the image of a successful Estonia, instead they are marked and problematic.

If Liina Siib's work 'Unsocial hours' did not have hidden clues that it was filmed shortly before 2011 (for instance, the price tags of pastry have prices in both Estonian kroons as well as euros), one might think that it is filmed much earlier: all technology and rooms, also the clothes of people are part of the past. The images circulated in the media usually present a sleek and shiny Estonia, whereas 'Unsocial hours' features people in their everyday situations and environments that are usually left unreported. Only the clips about hospital staff show a contemporary environment. However, a hospital is an institution that is carefully upgraded (EU standards being the keyword). Also, the offices and trendy shops in 'A Woman Takes Little Space' demonstrate an accordance with the modern Western ideology and therefore, the readiness to take on the future.

In her project 'A Room of One's Own', the author presents young families in suburban residential houses and also highlights the attempt of Estonia to rid

itself of the past and create something new. Anu Kannike has described how the 1990s brought about a restructuring of the private sphere and a reshaping of it to fit contemporary European standards. In a way, it was a rite of passage, where the interior design dictated by the former regime was replaced with a new, westwards-looking model.⁸ In addition to the 'EU repair works', a suburban (semidetached) house is also a sign of the times. Suburbanisation, that picked up pace in Estonia especially in the noughties, is linked to the restructuring of post-socialist space. The series 'A Room of One's Own' highlights this phenomenon well. Siib also imitated the style of the residential houses depicted in the video at the exhibition venue of the Venice biennale, presenting a home, which we have come to understand as average, as a staged production. Her presentation of a living room with a large television, sofa and knick-knack has an alienating effect. Liina Siib has commented on the work as follows: 'The Estonian woman wants to live the American dream, but to achieve that, she goes to work in the city, her children go to the kindergarten in the city, because there are not enough places near their home, the nearest shop and even bus stop are several kilometres away.'⁹ However, one must keep in mind that it is a dream, not reality. Reality itself is a hybrid that blends together the dream and actual practical needs.

What is served up as the ideal and what many young families are striving for looks like an empty bubble to an outsider, leading one's thoughts to the bank loans too large to pay back, taken out to acquire the desired suburban home. The fact does not make it any less desirable: it is a life model that is promoted in current (Estonian) society. Therefore, the value of space depends on the accompanying ideology, which gives it a certain meaning: the space itself is neutral by nature, it gains value and meaning through the power relations surrounding it. By presenting certain spatial notions as the only right and true ones, a demand for them is increased, which, in turn, reproduces this ideology. In one of his interviews, Foucault has summarised that the truth is not a universal phenomenon located above us, outside power relations – on the contrary, the truth is linked to certain procedures of a certain society, and therefore changing in time and determined by the historical and social context.¹⁰

A disruption has taken place and the period following it has been called post-socialism, which tends to imply a negative judgement, like the comment from the guestbook of Liina Siib's project ('Life in a post-Soviet country must be very frustrating'). I am moved to ask 'Why?' There is no blood or violence in these works, they are also not 'depressing' views. Rather, the photos are colourful and bright, young families and women living calmly at their daily pace. One could agree that the project deals with a delicate subject: minority groups, discrimination and prostitution. However, these keywords are known in both the West as well as East, in socialist, post-socialist, capitalist and also post-capitalist society – they do not signify anything positive anywhere. This assessment probably comes from the attitude that different is strange and therefore automatically negative. Here, it is the case of creating opposites, which can be viewed in the light of performative utterances that have the 'ability' to create what it names: by affirming something we are simultaneously negating something else. Therefore, creating opposites is an important strategy for self-creation – one must find something or someone that repels. A certain phenomenon is explained by its negative, bringing the latter to life in this way. This is how post-socialism and (post)capitalism (i.e. the West) contrast, the latter being the dominating side and by contrasting with it, the negative is created. To avoid this contrasting and prejudices related to his

8. Kannike, A. *Privaatsuse otsinguid. Üksikisiku strateegiad ja kultuurimuutused Nõukogude Eestis. - Constructed Happiness - Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era. Võistlevad õnned - elukeskkond külma sõja perioodil.* Ed. M. Kalm; I. Ruudi. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005, p 83.

9. Soomre, M-K. Liina Siib: ruum defineerib naise. *Postimees* 18.06.2011.

10. Kruul, H *Järeisõna.* A. Fontana; P. Pasquino, Michael Foucault. *Tõde ja võim.* Vikerkaar 1992, nr 3, p 52.



Liina Siib
Apartness (2008)
Venice Biennale exhibition view.

origins, the protagonist of 'Border State' lied that he was Swedish when going out. Estonia tries to count itself among the Nordic countries and shake the legacy of socialism and the 'Eastern bloc' status - as if a mere verbal group could change the status of a country.

As a photographer, Liina Siib has skillfully recorded what is 'in the air': without verbalised comments, she has managed to capture something that is characteristic of a post-socialist society. She has honestly recorded examples of both successful Estonia as well as the so-called second Estonia, providing a cross-section of current life in Estonia. The photos show an unevenness, rootlessness, but also the attempt to find a firmer footing in the future. Indeed, it is probably the multilayered quality radiating from 'A Woman Takes Little Space' that speaks to people: namely, the post-socialist urban experience is hectic, one can see and experience a lot within a kilometre. Siib began her photo series 'A Woman Takes Little Space' in 2007 and continues it to this day. In this way, it is a historical document, which offers an opportunity to watch the changes (or stagnation) in a young country.