# WHIRLING STORIES

## POSTSOCIALIST FEMINIST IMAGINARIES AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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*To my kindred spirit, my niece Nele, who was born as
I was beginning this research*

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## Acknowledgements

As far back as I can remember myself, my timing has always been somewhat off. So it is quite amusing to me that I started writing about lateness and "lagging behind". I feel at my best when I can take my time, when I'm not rushed. This often means that I have to make great efforts to fit into other people's timelines. Despite my best intentions, deadlines often find me working up to the last minute. In the process of writing this thesis, I have finally made peace with my eternal time optimism that doesn't always match the reality. Although it wasn't always easy, I eventually came to the conclusion that, with things I really care about, it is fine, even necessary, to act as if I have all the time in the world.

I certainly took my time with this thesis. Throughout the writing process, I learned a lot about queer timings and non-normative temporal trajectories and took note of the idea that lateness is not always a negative thing. Yet there comes a moment when time does run out, even if you would like to go on and on. As I'm putting the finishing touches to this manuscript, I am reminded of the myriad of wonderful people who allowed me to take my time yet also made sure that I would not be left lingering in the endless loop of "tomorrows".

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Linköping, March 2013

Redi Koobak

*This is a true story. If it seems strange, ask yourself, 'What is not strange?' If it seems unlikely, ask yourself, 'What is likely?'*

*Any measurement must take into account the position of the observer. There is no such thing as measurement absolute, there is only measurement relative. Relative to what is an important part of the question.*

*This has been my difficulty. The difficulty with my life. Those well-built trig points, those physical determinants of parents, background, school, family, birth, marriage, death, love, work, are themselves as much in motion as I am. What should be stable, shifts. What I am told is solid, slips. The sensible strong ordinary world of fixity is a folklore. The earth is not flat. Geometry cedes algebra. The Greeks were wrong.*

- Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (1997, 9–10)

# Prologue: a matter of whirling

I have never really thought of myself as a leader – nor an activist, an initiator, a "real" rebel.

Except for that one time in kindergarten.

It was 1985 and I was five. On the spur of the moment during play time, I spontaneously led a whole group of about twenty five-year-olds to turn frantically around ourselves, arms reached out, spinning 360-degrees around the axis of ourselves. Just whirling, whirling, whirling… until we got dizzy but giddy with pleasure, high with laughter, enjoying ourselves, our freedom to whirl. Feeling free, on top of the world, as if we could do anything and be anything. How different the world looked, spinning around me like that! A totally new perspective!

Until the teacher appeared suddenly and put a quick end to it.

*"What are you doing? Who started this?"*

She told us to form a row by the wall and those who had led the group into whirling were asked to step out of the row. I came forward, and felt proud, still giggling. The teacher stared at me for a moment and then pulled me even further out of the row, putting me in the forefront of what turned out to be a row of shame and embarrassment. I was made to feel guilty. In front of everyone. In the limelight, lectured and finger-pointed at.

*"Do you know what happens if you follow the lead of this girl? You will make yourselves feel sick and dizzy! Don't ever do anything so silly again!"*

There is something very gloomy, Soviet-era-like in the mood of my

memory of this moment, being told to stand in a line, against a wall, in search of a culprit.

I can never forget how insulting this was. The feeling I can best describe as *hingepõhjani solvunud*, insulted to the bottom of my soul. The unfairness of it all! I had only shown the others how fun it was to see the world spinning around. I had shown them something *fun*. This teacher, whose name and face I have long forgotten, thus effectively extinguished the sparks I had to take up any initiatives again! At least for a long while.

So I became a quiet observer: not of course directly as a result of this particular incident but through time and again running up against invisible walls that I felt prohibited me from doing certain things. I grew accustomed to trying to become invisible, not to attract too much attention, to keep to the back of the class in school, to stay out of trouble, always doing the right thing. I began to avoid the spotlight which had come to equal all my negative feelings. I became a "good girl". Being visible – visibility – turned into something wrought with tension and ambivalence.

While this experience fortunately did not end up defining my life and I grew out of the merely quiet observer position, I am still struck by how strongly I remember the feeling of being punished for whirling and how much effort it takes to reject the impulse to accept unfair situations where people insist on sticking to certain hierarchically situated fixities of "dos" and "don'ts". However, it is in these moments when such insistence triggers disappointment, disbelief, anger and sadness, that I believe in feminism most strongly.

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I imagine Luce Irigaray reading my childhood memory. No doubt, she might link it back to her story of the little girl and her entry into the symbolic order.[1] Discussing Sigmund Freud's story of the scene of entry into the symbolic order, which depicts his grandson Ernst as the main character playing the game of *fort-da* in the absence of his mother, Irigaray makes it

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1   I am grateful to Hanna Hallgren, who pointed out Luce Irigaray's essay "The Gesture in Psychoanalysis" in connection with my whirling memory.

explicit that the character of his story is a boy and that his masculinity is significant to the narrative. "Substitution is not always possible, least of all as concerns sexual difference," she says (Irigaray 1989, 132).

Instead, Irigaray suggests, the little girl, compared to the boy, has very different gestures in the absence of her mother. While the boy in Freud's story plays with a string and a reel with the absent mother symbolically acquiring the objective status of the reel, the little girl does one of three things: she either throws herself on the ground, lost in grief, or she plays with a doll, mothering this quasi-subject, or she dances.

She dances!

Irigaray writes: "She dances and thus forms a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other. This dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to the mother" (1989, 132).

Unlike the boy, who in his game is a director of the circle he has created around him by throwing a reel on a string and pulling it back, dominating the scene of objects that he can make appear and disappear at his whim, the little girl is spinning around her axis, the space around her body that is both closed and defensive as well as open and inviting. Her movement, the whirling through which she creates a circle around her, is at once meant to protect, to refuse access to her territory, and to create an autonomous space, to give birth to the self by building an identity and a dwelling for herself.

Irigaray also says that this movement can be read by the other as an invitation to play or to be with the little girl, a gesture of opening oneself towards the (m)other while respecting the limits of the other. It is a way of attracting the other, a desire to move or stir with the other, to form a dialogue which the female subject will continue to seek in her relation with the other.

Placing the child, the human being, under the sign of the neutral thus constitutes a loss, "a loss of liberty, of imaginary, symbolic, gestural

freedom!" (1989, 130).

In cultures that still expect girls to be in the background, invisible, albeit in subtle, commonsense ways, that punish the female subject for taking up too much space, too much freedom, creating and nurturing autonomous spaces around our bodies becomes all the more important. Whirling becomes important. Even for little boys.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Whirling is about movement that frees, that liberates the body and that grounds the self at the same time, that allows for certain new knowledge to surface through the body. It is also a way of creating moments and spaces of elsewheres within normative and restrictive structures and timelines, an out-of-this-world, otherworldly, experience.

A mystical branch of Islam, the Mevlevi Order of Sufis, also known as the Whirling Dervishes[2], practise in a seemingly trance-like state a whirling dance in the symbolic Sema ritual, a physically active form of meditation. It involves an unlimited number of rotations anti-clockwise, with arms held open, the right hand directed to the sky and the left hand turned towards the earth. The precession represents the three stages of knowledge: *ilm-al yaqin* (received knowledge, gained from others or through study), *ayn-al yaqin* (knowing by seeing or observing for oneself) and *haqq-al yakin* (knowledge gained through direct experience, *gnosis*).

This physical act of whirling is believed to make it possible to unite the mind (as knowledge and thought), the heart (through the expression of feelings, poetry and music) and the body (by activating life). Basic to the notion of whirling for Sufis is that all things in existence revolve, and these revolutions are natural and unconscious. One can participate intentionally and consciously in the shared revolution of other beings.

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2  Thanks are also due to Mariano Alvarez, who drew my attention to a mesmerizing YouTube video of the Whirling Dervishes and to Alp Biricik, who explained to me more about the practice and its meaning in Turkish culture. For more information about Sufis and Sufi whirling, see Hume (2007), Raudvere and Stenberg (2009); or for a quick overview, also the website www.whirlingdervishes.org/index.html (accessed 21 July 2012).

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If feminism were a verb, I would want it to be dancing. I want it to be whirling, spinning, twirling. I want feminism to draw us more towards the processual, the grounded but open part of ourselves and find ways to get ourselves out of the hierarchically situated, fixating positions that lock us in. We need to be able to dance, to whirl, to acknowledge a more mindful participation in the shared revolution of other beings.

I insist on feminism being a whirling verb.

Through holding on to the image of whirling, I want to write about women's relation to each other and to the world. How do women whirl in the world? How do they become subjects? How are they represented, how do they represent themselves and each other? How do they create their own spaces, their own circles of autonomy that protect as well as open up to others? How do questions of sexuality, ethnicity/race and nationalism, differences that are always already inseparable from sexual difference – how do these differences converge and play into their dance? How do they create feminist imaginaries in a context where feminist movements cannot readily be assumed?

As it happens, this thesis is not about my childhood memories, Irigaray, or psychoanalysis, for that matter, and it is certainly quite far removed from Sufis.

But it is about whirling.

I recall these resonating moments, observations, practices – my whirling memory, fascination with the Sufi dance combined with Irigaray's insights into the female subject's entry into the symbolic order – in order to frame my desire to focus the concerns of this thesis strictly around unlocking hierarchically fixed positions. I argue for a more intentional and conscious participation in the shared revolving together, whirling together if you will, with other beings.

# 1

# Introduction

*When I do not see plurality stressed in the very structure of a theory, I know I will have to do lots of acrobatics – of the contortionist and walk-on-the-tightrope kind – to have this speak to me without allowing the theory to distort me in my complexity.*

*When I do not see plurality in the very structure of a theory, I see the phantom that I am in your eyes take grotesque form and mime crudely and heavily your own image. Don't you?*

*When I do not see plurality in the very structure of a theory, I see the fool that I am mimicking your image for the pleasure of noticing that you know no better. Don't you?*

– María Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism" (1991, 43)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *What I Can't See* (2006)

## Locating feminist imaginaries and the visual arts

This thesis explores the role of visual arts in conceiving and reconfiguring feminist imaginaries. It does so on a micro scale, zooming in on the deeply personal and political artwork of a contemporary feminist and lesbian-identified Estonian artist, Anna-Stina Treumund (born 1982),[3] who mainly works with self-portraiture, starting from her embodied and situated self. Focus on representations, in particular on the work of a single artist, enables me "to slow down the world" (Grosz 2007, 248), to make it temporarily comprehensible, to fathom it, to put a finger on it, to construct for a fleeting moment outlines of things that are always already blurry and continually changing.

The reason why I want to "slow down the world" is to grasp some of the entanglements of visual arts and feminisms in a myriad of complex tensions and anxieties around visibilities and visualities, politics, and in particular, geopolitics. Feminist studies,[4] among other fields of inquiry interested in the politics of identity and emancipation, understands visibility and visuality as modes of thinking about power as it is enacted through bodies, institutions and structures of representation. A common tactic for exploring these power relations by feminist art critics and scholars since the 1970s has been to scrutinize and problematize the prevalence of sexualized,

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3   For an overview of Treumund's exhibited artworks, see www.annastinatreumund.com

4   Throughout this thesis, I use "feminist studies" as an inclusive shorthand to refer to Feminist/Gender/Women's Studies as a field of inquiry that explores the socio-cultural implications of the processes of knowledge production for the constructions of subjects and subjectivities, proposes political spaces of resistance to hegemonic discourses and promotes change (Braidotti 1994; Lykke 2010; Buikema, Griffin, and Lykke 2011). I agree with Nina Lykke here in that the term "feminist studies" avoids some of the problems that are linked to both Women's Studies and Gender Studies (terms that have depended on institutional politics and various different strategies to make space for feminist theorizing in academia, which has played out differently in different universities and different countries) because it "does not fix a 'proper' object as the two other names do and, in contrast to 'Women's Studies,' it does not connote a link to only one kind of epistemology, the one that starts from a 'women's standpoint'. Moreover, it does not connote a separation of gender from sex, as 'Gender Studies' does" (Lykke 2010, 12) Like most feminist scholars, I do not wish to offer any final definition of the terms "feminism" and "feminist", but work hard to create openness and facilitate productive links between different ways of "doing" feminism, of feminist theorizing and activism.

and yet mythologized, images of female bodies both in the media and in artistic practice (Nochlin 1970; Parker and Pollock 1981). This critique has shown that the tradition of meaning assigned to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity is not given, but constructed, often through specific visual forms. Consequently, there is a strong belief among feminists that creating counter-imagery for women to identify with and at the same time searching for alternative modes of making, seeing and interpreting visual culture is a precondition for changing the lives and material circumstances of women (Pollock 1999; Reckitt and Phelan 2001).

One of Anna-Stina Treumund's early self-portraits entitled *What I Can't See* (2006), speaks about moments of feeling like an outsider, and also about absences and voids in communication, thus evoking a connection with many works by feminist artists who have used self-portraiture to explore questions of identity, representation, belonging and silences. She portrays herself here as a double or even triple negative: she is standing with her back to the camera so that she escapes the spectator's gaze, she has put on her shirt back-to-front and furthermore, she has buttoned it up the wrong way. She cannot look the spectator in the eye, the spectator does not see her face or meet her gaze. She has no face. Yet she desires to be seen, to see for herself.

A subheading added to a variation of this self-portrait[5] (with the same title) further contextualizes the sense of a void: "Sometimes I am not sure what others are not saying." She ties visuality and visibility to voice and words, to silences and uncertainties. Following from her clear self-positioning as a feminist and lesbian artist, this can be read as suggestive of double standards in the particular society where she is located – that is, postsocialist Estonia – a place where certain topics have been suppressed for a long time, not discussed openly, including questions of sexuality and especially same-sex relations. There is an ambivalence about disclosing her sexuality for fear of what others might think or say about her behind her back or even what they might say straight to her face. But there is also a desire to confront, to speak up, to communicate. Due to the lack of visual representations of lesbians or of non-heteronormative female sexuality, she feels utterly alone with her feelings of not fitting in, without a sense of community or belonging. The woman in this picture has not found an image

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5   This version is available at: www.flickr.com/photos/cabbageworm/122795791/in/set-409356 (accessed 1 April 2013).

culture for herself to explore and understand her sexuality. She does not know if she even exists. She takes it as her task to create that image culture, to imagine herself, to imagine otherwise.

Anna-Stina Treumund firmly positions herself as an artist who is dedicated to carving out a visual, conceptual and discursive space for emerging lesbian subjectivities and lesbian voices in Estonian culture and society.[6] The existence of discursive and visual spaces for voicing lesbian subject positions is not an unproblematic given. It is something that demands struggle, negotiation and critique on many levels, politically as well as theoretically and, importantly, also aesthetically. Her desire to make the lesbian community visible springs from a void, an absence of any publicly accepted/acceptable representation of lesbians in this context. Heteronormativity and heterosexism are pervasive ideologies, seemingly even more pronounced in recent years.[7] The prevailing representations of lesbians in Estonia, if they even enter any public field or discourse at all, are those of deviant, unnatural women. In an interview I conducted with the artist at the beginning of this study, she described her struggle to understand her sexual identity when coming of age and how she tried to use her camera to sort out these painful experiences of self-doubt:

> Why do I photograph myself? In order to prove to myself that I exist. As my formula [for working], it is only now becoming less dominant. Perhaps then the photos will also change. A passport picture is not a sufficient proof. To make [my image] myself, to be present, to decide. But to hide my face – I am afraid of my existence. In other words, I record just an empty case (the body), without identity. There is no playing roles, exhibiting myself, narcissism, need to produce something for the future, to share with others. The one who is in the photo is only an idea of me.[8]

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6   For that, she has even been dubiously called a "programmatic artist" by some critics (see for example, cca.ee/webarchive/treumund/en.html – accessed 1 April 2013).

7   During Soviet times, male homosexuality was criminalized, whereas female same-sex desire as not specifically mentioned in the law – it was considered unthinkable. Soviet times were also character-ized by a very limited discourse on sex and sexuality, which were generally regarded as taboo topics, the implications of which are still widely felt in the society today. Commentators at the round-table discussion organized by Anna-Stina Treumund at the opening of her first major exhibition also sug-gested that the relatively open-minded attitudes towards non-normative sexuality immediately after the end of the Soviet era have been replaced by blatant homophobia, in particular since the end of the 1990s, which saw a turn towards a more neoliberal, right-wing, nationalist politics and the pro-liferation of homophobic comments online by so-called anonymous internet commentators.

8   This is a quotation from the first interview I conducted with the artist. Throughout the thesis, all translations of her quotations from Estonian into English are my own.

Thus, the camera, taking photographs of herself, became a tool for self-exploration, a means of expression where no words or concepts could easily be found. She started taking self-portraits in order to ground her experience, to find out how she looks to herself and how she might look to others, being in control of that image. Treumund's earlier photos do indeed seem very much like intimate, if not existential, therapeutic explorations of her fears and anxieties about not being "real", not fitting in, seeing herself a "faulty product". She is questioning her self, her ability to connect to others, the problems with and indeed lack of communication. Eventually, through a slow process of learning to trust herself and her voice, she transformed her photographs into more performative and conscious political statements, embodying a belief that changing representations, offering alternative imagery, would change lesbian lives and subvert the dominant heteronormative and heterosexist ideologies.

I am intrigued by this feminist desire – the artist's desire – for and faith in re-signifying hegemonic discourses through changing and creating new representations and modes of interpretation, especially in the contemporary context where the accessibility of visual technologies has meant a democratization of all sorts of visual imagery and the meanings of these are said to be in a constant flux. What counts as alternative or subversive any longer? More importantly, "[h]ow do we name what we think we see in bodies and images around us and how do we give this named quality meaning and value?" (Jones 2012, xvii). The question of relationality and interpretation can never be separated from attempts to make sense of and theorize visual imagery.

The self-portrait *What I Can't See* caught my attention at an early stage of this project. It resonated strongly with my own feelings of being an outsider, speaking to the absences and voids I had experienced when coming to feminist studies in academia, but hadn't always been able to name. My trajectory into feminism began with a course on US American women writers in history, when I was a student of English language and literature in Estonia, taking me eventually to study feminist studies across several geographical and disciplinary contexts and institutional settings in the USA, Hungary and, finally, Sweden, where I began a PhD in interdisciplinary gender studies. My relation to feminism has largely been shaped by the English language and academic contexts.

Although feminist studies had a profound impact on me intellectually,

politically and personally from early on, I often felt oddly placed in most of my gender studies classes, where reading assignments included canonical texts by white Western feminists together with some influential critiques by postcolonial feminists or women of colour that powerfully challenged them. I could never quite find where I would fit into this picture as a woman from Estonia, from that ambivalent, in-between, "zeugmatic space" (Mudure 2007), a "semiperiphery" (Blagojevic 2009), the "void" (Tlostanova 2010) that is former Eastern Europe, sometimes called non-Western Europe, the postsocialist space. I felt invisible, slightly off, perhaps a bit like the girl in the photograph with her wrongly buttoned, backwards shirt, the girl who can feel the prying eyes glued to her back but who cannot see how she is really seen by others, who doesn't know what others have left unsaid about her – albeit I remained in denial, unreflective about this for a long time.

Being ambivalently positioned in Western academia, I sometimes found myself intuitively identifying with postcolonial voices, like that of María Lugones in the quotation that opens this introduction, although what I read in these texts did not exactly reference the specificities of my locatedness. Always slightly off, a little late, out of sync, I was unwittingly clinging on to the largely unquestioning "catching up with the West" mode of thought that has dominated Estonian society since the 1990s, with the push and pull to restore our "rightful" place as Europeans, to claim the West as our destiny and site of belonging.[9] In my experience, through the Western feminist discourses that I came into contact with, this "catching up" in some sense also translated into the question of feminism. For me, feminism was certainly part of that "progress", although this was, of course, not recognized by many others in Estonia. When reading feminist texts, my postsocialist Eastern European position became conflated with that of Western feminists, although always seen as slightly "lagging behind". This did not immediately translate into a problem for me because Eastern Europe is generally seen and sees itself as still in the process of democratization or Europeanization, thus uncritically situated with regard to the first world (Suchland 2011). Not surprisingly, then, I found a lot in feminist theory that I thought Estonia *should* catch up with.

In effect though, I became nothing short of the "phantom" that Lugones

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9   For the entire 20th century people in Estonia have been driven by the call to "be Estonian, but become European" at the same time, an often-quoted slogan from 1905, attributed to Estonian writer Gustav Suits. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, from the 1990s onwards, this mindset became almost a desperate obsession, materializing in the invitation to join the European Union in 2004.

talks about, miming "crudely and heavily" the image of the dominant Western feminist figure, though itself another caricature. Thus, paradoxically, my position read as similar to the West but not similar enough. It also registered as different, yet again not different enough to fit into the category of the third world "other", which functions as the ultimate other in the first and the third world dichotomy, as many postcolonial feminist scholars have argued (Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). The image of "Eastern European Woman" has not quite been produced as a singular monolithic subject in Western feminist texts to the extent that the image of the "Third World Woman" has, as powerfully critiqued by Chandra Mohanty in her classic text *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. Yet it is certainly possible, in relation to Eastern Europe as well, "to trace a coherence of *effects* resulting from the implicit assumption of 'the West' (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis" (Mohanty 1988, 334). This realization renders Eastern Europe a "belated copy" of the West in feminist theoretical frameworks, mapping all aspects of postsocialist specificities onto a Western norm.

It was finding this self-portrait *What I Can't See* in the midst of my theoretical ambivalences and queries that eventually brought up the possible connection between the artist's feelings of alienation as a lesbian in Estonia and my own unreflected feelings of alienation within feminist studies as a woman from postsocialist Europe. I was struck by these connections, not least because Anna-Stina Treumund and I were both born at the beginning of the 1980s and share the experience of growing up during the rapid and dramatic changes after the fall of the Soviet Union. From the 1990s onwards, economic growth has been prioritized at the expense of social cohesion and equality, while the rise of neoliberalism has contributed to the sharp stratification of society. This has left many with deeply felt discrepancies between the image of success in the re-integration with Europe that the country is trying to project to the outside world and the sense of everyday realities, haunted by confusing and chaotic pasts and presents. Facing these discordances between what appears to be and what is, how are we represented and how do we represent ourselves? How do we avoid being seen as "lagging behind" or outright "backward"? When and where can we find concepts that correlate with people's lives, activism and self-understanding, theoretical insights that are more attuned to people's geo-temporal realities?

The affinity between the experiences of the artist and myself inspired me to try and focus productively on various aspects of this sense of being an outsider and consider the ways in which visual arts – engaging with visual images situated in a specific geographical and temporal context – could reconfigure feminist imaginaries and push feminist theory in particular to be more mindful of and accountable to geopolitical difference. I became interested in how and to what effects the desire for transformation through representation materializes in and through the works of an artist who is located in postsocialist Estonia. What does it mean to be a feminist, a queer subject in the fluid yet sometimes dangerously fixating formations of postsocialist space? Can artistic practices help us grasp the experience of the self in these changing times? How much of the artist's location and situatedness in postsocialist space seeps into her work, and into our interpretations of her work?

Indeed the turn to imagination – or "the imaginary" – is closely connected to, and overlaps with, the feminist turn to representations and visual arts. The role of the imaginary is to "offer both a critique of masculinist institutions and a creative alternative for how women might represent themselves" (Naranch 2002, 64). The term is also more widely popular within contemporary social criticism because "the image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new" (Appadurai 1996, 31). To name but a few fields, the substantive "imaginary" resonates in psychoanalysis,[10] phenomenology, philosophy, aesthetics, literature, postcolonial studies and political science. Furthermore, it has accumulated a plethora of various modifiers over time, including social imaginary, cultural imaginary, political imaginary, postmodern imaginary, imperialist imaginary, decolonial imaginary, masculine imaginary, female imaginary, feminist imaginary, and so on. All of these terms evoke slightly different meanings and uses, sometimes implying that it is something we

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10 The concept of "the imaginary" originates in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In short, Lacan (1977, new ed. 2007) describes as "the imaginary" a mode of thinking and knowing that originates in the "mirror phase", a prelinguistic phase in which the infant appears to develop an early sense of selfhood and self-identity with the help of its reflection in a mirror. The "imaginary" mode of the mental process is, for Lacan, a mode that looks for and reacts to homomorphisms (similarities in form) that imply sameness or relatedness. Crucially, the imaginary is seen by Lacan as a distortion or misrecognition of the self and is subsequently replaced by discursive cognition, the "entry" into the symbolic realm that is organized through language and reason. Cognition in the imaginary mode is seen as regressive and inferior by Lacan, although some feminists, most famously Luce Irigaray (1985), have used the concept for a criticism of the "symbolic" as the male domain of language and reason.

should get rid of (e.g. imperialist imaginary, racist imaginary) or something we should aspire to (e.g. decolonial imaginary, feminist imaginary) in order to change history, to reconfigure the binary structures of belief about the self and the other.

While traditionally functioning as an adjective of imagination, understood in opposition to reason, as the realm of illusion, misrecognition and fancy, the noun "imaginary" in its contemporary use often seems to emerge as a "ground" for reason instead (Castoriadis 1998)[11]; as crucial to how we know and feel ourselves as part of a community or nation (Anderson 1987, new ed. 2006); as central to all forms of agency (Appadurai 1996); not simply a part of the mind, but fundamental to understanding the interconnectedness of mind and sexed bodies (Gatens 1995). Or, as Donna Haraway put it, "the imaginary and the rational […] hover close together – the one cannot and should not replace the other" (Haraway 1991, 192). Feminist formulations of the imaginary inevitably, and importantly, address the power of images (and not just the artistic kind) to shape one's sense of bodily identity and, acting as modifiers, signal that the body or a sense of self is not reducible to ideology (Naranch 2002). Or, as Jackie Stacey has pointed out, the imaginary implies "a set of structures for the production of subjectivities with the power to draw upon and reproduce unconscious attachments" (2010, 11).

My understanding of the term "feminist imaginaries", while evoking many of the meanings discussed above, is inspired in particular by Graham Dawson's elaboration of the concept of "cultural imaginaries" (Dawson 1994). While the concept of "the imaginary" originates in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is used in cultural studies in a broader sense "to characterize the fantasy images in which a culture mirrors itself, and which therefore come to act as points of reference for its identity-production" (Bryld and Lykke 2000, 8). To put it differently, cultural imaginaries are

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11 Cornelius Castoriadis has allegedly offered the most systematic account of the "creative imagination". His best-known book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* signals a new understanding of society and the self, one that articulates a logic of indeterminacy and situates a creative imagination, rather than reason, at the heart of social and personal life. According to Castoriadis, the imaginary is enlarged beyond a question of visual representation or illusion. Instead, he figures it as the condition for being and for the disruptive temporality characteristic of history. Laurie E. Naranch (2002) has offered a feminist analysis of Castoriadis' concept of "radical imaginary" in relation to emancipatory politics. She sees his understanding that emancipatory struggles need an account of both the "imaging" function of imagination and its "radical" function as a contribution to feminist theory. Naranch also claims that Castoriadis' idea of a radical imaginary is one source of Luce Irigaray's reworking of the female imaginary.

the "vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions" (Dawson 1994, 48). I model the term "feminist imaginaries" after this understanding of imaginaries to discuss the fantasy landscape of narratives and images through which feminism constructs and understands itself. These images are not structured by empirical reality alone but also by "a lottery of desires, repressions, investments and projections" (Dawson 1994, 49), by "the fears and desires organizing a particular repertoire of fantasies that have a deeper, often indirect, set of cultural investments and associations" (Stacey 2010, 11). Thus, importantly, the term "imaginary" stresses the intersections of the social and the psychological, and the mutual entanglement of the work of reason, emotion and fantasy.

From my point of view then, Western feminist theory appears to be something of a hegemonic discourse that continually positions Eastern Europe as its "belated copy", producing a "lag" discourse that is framed by imperialist progress narratives. Even if I am bound to fail to describe exactly what I mean by "the West" and "Western feminist theory" or "postsocialist" and "Eastern European feminism", even if I acknowledge that none of these terms are static and that they function in equally ambiguous, porous and often contradictory ways, I need to use them because we need to define what we are doing using a common language. Their meanings will emerge from the context. You *will* know what I mean. No matter how diverse internally, the category of "the West" functions as a name that designates those peoples and regions that appear superior to other peoples and regions – either politically or economically (Ang 2001). These terms, entrenched in the asymmetrical power relations between the West and the rest, will have to function as a means of framing, a process that is at once impossible and necessary. Despite their slipperiness, I use them because I want to make an argument about the role of "metageography"[12] in shaping feminist discourses. These categories will be instructive for my analysis even though ultimately I want to challenge their coherence and would definitely refrain from claiming any certainties or fixed identities. There are always leakages between the inside and outside of the frame and the best I can do is

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12 I use the concept "metageography" in line with Jennifer Suchland (2011), who borrows it from Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen to denote "the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world" (Lewis and Wigen 1997, ix).

comment on the shifting appearances, locationalities and functions of each frame I put in place.

Adding "postsocialist" to "feminist imaginaries" could potentially be a slippery slope. Why "postsocialist"? What function do I want this modifier to serve? I do not mean only to argue for the more mindful inclusion of the "region"[13] of Eastern Europe into Western feminist discourses. For the purposes of this thesis, I often use "postsocialist", "(former) Eastern European",[14] and the "(former) second world" as interchangeable concepts to refer to those countries that experienced state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Soviet Union. Although I agree with Larry Wolff that the concept of Eastern Europe is in fact a creation of philosophical discourses produced within Western Europe's Enlightenment (Wolff 1996), I choose to continue using the term "Eastern Europe" to refer to the postsocialist states. Furthermore, like Grabowska, I choose to use the term "postsocialist" rather than "postcommunist" to underline that communism was never fully achieved (Grabowska 2012). As Chari and Verdery have pointed out "'[p]ostsocialism' began as simply a temporal designation: societies once referred to as constituting 'actually existing socialism' had ceased to exist as such, replaced by one or another form of putatively democratizing state" (Chari and Verdery 2009, 10). On the other hand, postcolonial studies emerged, not after the sudden collapse of "actually existing colonialism", but

> at least two decades after the highpoint of decolonization, as a critical reflection both on colonialism's ongoing presence in the project of post-independence national elites and in notions of nationalism, sovereignty, accumulation, democracy, and the possibility of knowledge itself. Over time, 'postsocialism' too came to signify a critical standpoint, in several senses: critical of the socialist past and of possible socialist futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed upon former socialist spaces; and critical of the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions. (Chari and Verdery 2009, 11)

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13  It should be noted that there are also controversies surrounding the use of the term "region" in reference to post-state-socialist space. While the concept of Eastern Europe most commonly refers to the central, eastern, and southern European states, the location of Russia within the region remains debatable, as does the shared cultural, political, and religious heritage of the countries included.

14  For a discussion on the politics of naming, particularly the concept of "former Eastern Europe", see Marina Gržinić (2009; 2010).

I will not always put these terms in quotation marks because I hope it is clear enough from the start that I am using them with caution, out of the need to speak and without gliding over the complexities too easily. What is more, drawing parallels with the term "postcolonial" and its rich history as a theoretical paradigm, I also hope to suggest that "postsocialist" could be used as an analytical category rather than just a geographical label, as it is often commonly applied.

When I add the modifier "postsocialist" to feminist imaginaries I want to do it as a thought experiment and a call for more ethical engagement with the specificities of the former second world and the implications of neglecting to do so within feminist discussions. I want to ponder upon the analytical power this term could have for exploring our understanding of the ways in which culturally constructed postsocialist/Eastern European "others" draw on globally circulating discourses and local histories, none of which are fixed, but constantly evolving. These subjects are unsettled. Their bodies, desires, images and texts *move*, yet in the discursive field of global feminism, they tend to become fixed. There is a tendency to glide over the complex ways in which they react to, resist and define their terms of engagement with the new contexts that have arisen with the demise of socialism and the rise of neoliberalism fuelled by so-called cowboy capitalism. I turn to Anna-Stina Treumund's photographs to find traces of these struggles, attend to the intensities of the ways in which they address contemporary problems of time and space, seeking to reconfigure feminist imaginaries. These are all unsettled questions in a conversation that is ongoing and full of contradictory paths already taken and paths yet to unfold.

Exploring aspects of difference and locatedness is the key to what for many of us as yet remains a "dream" of pluralist feminism and the diversification of frames of reference. The so-called former Eastern Europe continues to be something of a gap in feminist studies, if not entirely a non-place or non-region,[15] where feminism and LGBTQI movements are

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15 Here I am referencing Jennifer Suchland's article "Is Postsocialism Transnational?" (2011) where she, in turn, is referencing the East-West Caucus press release "Voice from the Non-Region" by Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck (1996) and the "Statement from Non-Region" by Wanda Nowicka (1995), which was presented at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The internet links Suchland provides for these documents did not take me directly to these documents when I tried to access them (on 1 April 2013) so I rely on her when drawing attention to these early voices of concern about the disappearance of the former state-socialist countries from global feminist discourse.

still said to be in the process of emergence, often measured against the yardstick of Western histories and genealogies. It is important to indicate that I use the rather crude term "Western feminism" when I refer to certain forms of mainstream feminism that appear as hegemonic on the global scale. In contrast, the term "transnational feminist practices", with their intersectional approach to gender, race, ethnicity and economic relations on a global scale, seems to be a more critical one that can be used as a tool to speak of attempts to be inclusive of diverse geopolitical locations and their intersections within feminist studies. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest in their important intervention in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, transnational feminist practices require "comparative work rather than the relativistic linking of "differences" undertaken by the proponents of "global feminism" (1994, 17). This means that feminists "must question the narratives in which they are embedded, including but not limiting ourselves to the master narratives of mainstream feminism" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 18). Indeed, as Nina Lykke has argued, a meaningful transnational feminism "requires a self-reflexive stance on global/local locations not only in relation to crude and rather abstract categories such as East–West/North–South as the issue of geopolitical positioning is sometimes framed" (Lykke 2010, 55). Thus, she invites an inclusion of transnational economic, political and cultural power differences into the analysis (2010, 55), a statement I could not agree more with.

Due to multiple resonances between the experiences of alienation and outsider status of the artist Anna-Stina Treumund and myself that I have outlined thus far, tracing the ways in which her artwork relates to and potentially challenges the question of the recurring "lag" discourse associated with the former Eastern Europe became my main concern in this thesis.

## Aims and research questions

This research process has undoubtedly been moulded by my own spatio-temporal *location* (Rich 1986; Braidotti 2011) in conjunction with a personal and scholarly interest in the ways in which geographical and political locations affect and shape women's and feminist imaginaries as

well as stories of feminist activism and theorizing. In fact, this locatedness in a particular time and space can be said to be the starting point for this thesis, if there ever was just one clear beginning. I turned to art to look for new sources of knowledge and experience that would be different from what I could find in academic texts. This became more than just an attempt to mine those sources somewhat outside of academic feminism and theoretical texts; importantly, it turned into a conscious effort to widen the community of knowers and knowledge producers, to build exchanges and symbiotic collaborations.

A crucial aspect of such an engagement is, as María Lugones says, regarding the other as a faithful mirror of the self – as reflecting back an image of oneself that one has to take seriously – but also recognizing the other as someone with desires and engagements of her own (Lugones 1991). Through deploying a relational approach to Anna-Stina Treumund's art, I gradually came to realize that although we had slightly different interests we were both driven by the same question: how can we establish discursive sites of resistance against hegemonic discourses and resignify the categories used for classifying, defining, stigmatizing and excluding them? She wanted to put forth the image of a lesbian and resist hegemonic discourses around sexuality in Estonian culture, I wanted to resignify the meaning of feminism in and for the former Eastern Europe. These two desires merged in my project – or rather, engagement with the artist and her works launched me into articulating my own desire for different feminist theorizing. I came to see the implications of Treumund's art as extending beyond her immediate politics of self-representation due to the specificities of her locatedness in postsocialist space and the challenges this posed to the Western feminist genealogies I had become immersed in.

Following on the dialogic engagement with the artist, this thesis aims to contest the fantasy of a "lag" of Eastern Europe within Western feminist discourses through visual arts. I focus on a selection of Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork, situating it in the midst of the ongoing unsettled conversations about Eastern Europe and its feminist and queer discourses, in order to think *differently* about the "lacks" and the "lags" of Eastern Europe. We both use visual arts in our different ways as tools for thinking, as a means of making bold political statements about and through the specific geopolitical location that structures and frames our thoughts, desires, minds and our whole bodies.

In order to achieve my aim, I have built the thesis around two central questions.

First, my more empirical question is: *how does Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork critically conceive of and reconfigure the association of Eastern Europe with "lag" within feminist discourses?*

Second, my overall theoretical question is: *how can this analysis contribute to reconfiguring feminist theorizing in terms of integrating postsocialist feminist imaginaries?*

Although Anna-Stina Treumund does not explicitly say that she wishes to engage with global feminist discourses in her artwork, I assert that questions of sexuality and her specific way of working for the right to appear in public and personal space on her own terms resonate with wider feminist discussions of activism and the visual arts. Furthermore, I want to argue that Treumund's artwork, which I analyze, directly and importantly engages with the local context, while building upon and problematizing the existing discussions of feminist generations, historicizing political subjectivities and telling stories of feminist theorizing and activism (Hemmings 2011). These works complicate and open up the meanings of "lag" in productive ways and thereby provide a different narrative of European feminist genealogies (Griffin and Braidotti 2002) that does not reproduce the contemporary mainstream framing of Western feminist histories.

To be sure, in considering and contesting the question of the "lag" associated with the former Eastern Europe, I do not call for a merging of feminist theories into a grand synthesis called global feminism, but I do wish to shape feminist theorizing through practices of taking responsibility for the effects of our actions, however far they reach, and for our relationships with those upon whom *we* are dependent. As this thesis will show, Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork has functioned as a catalyst, for my own individual interventions into the hegemony of Western feminist theories, for which I have to be accountable as a feminist scholar from the former Eastern Europe, ambivalently positioned within the Western academia.

In particular, I look at a selection of Anna-Stina Treumund's works from three particular exhibitions that engage in various ways with questions of sexuality, social critique and history. I argue that instead of fretting over whether and how Eastern Europe is "catching up", her artwork hints at the latent presence of modern progress narratives and teleological hangups within feminist discourses that still maintain asymmetrical power

relations between the East and the West. Ultimately, I want to show that a geopolitically grounded understanding of visual arts is a unique and powerful tool for producing new knowledge, alternative images and imaginaries, and it can solicit a new way of seeing and feminist theorizing. In particular, I will demonstrate that the imbrication of political subjectivities and geopolitical space that Treumund's artwork highlights allows us to reconceive questions of knowledge production and agency within discursive and visual economies.

Working through questions concerning the force of the visual field (Rose 2012; Jones 2012) and geopolitics of knowledge via Treumund's art, I have been inspired by postcolonial (e.g. Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1988; Lugones 1991) and postsocialist (e.g. Blagojević 2009; Tlostanova 2010) scholars who have challenged the Western image of the Other as distant not only in space, but also, importantly, in time. I also draw inspiration from queer studies and recent discussions of queer temporalities within queer theory (e.g. Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010; Freccero 2007). I challenge the "lagging behind" discourse that often places the former Eastern Europe, including its feminist endeavours, in a perpetual "catching up" mode. I attempt to find ways out of the hegemonic progress narratives and show how Treumund's art carves out her own individual space for difference to come as well as a space for thinking differently about sexuality and gender relations in postsocialist space. This needs to be accounted for locally as well as globally within feminist discourses in order to challenge the complex processes of Eastern European self-colonization and Western hegemony in the production of knowledge.

This thesis is structured and written through the *whirling subject* as a feminist figuration that is simultaneously a reference to the embodied as well as relational structure of knowledge systems. In thinking through figuration, I am indebted to feminist philosophy, specifically to the work of Rosi Braidotti on materialist concepts of becoming and nomadic subjectivity. As she wrote:

> Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated or embedded and embodied positions. ... By figuration, I mean a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective. A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. (2002, 2)

A feminist figuration[16] is thus an alternative subjectivity articulated in a figurative form but it is by no means to be seen as just a metaphor. In outlining the concept of the figuration, Braidotti links the productive engagement of the embodied and situated subject with the meanings being made. Meaning emerges in encounters, in relationships, through figurations. In the present context, such insights explain precisely why whirling could be important, and how it might be understood to play a critical role in the making of the concepts it articulates.

Whirling as a figuration is a provisional, yet powerful, connective trope, deployed to enable us to think through the mutually constitutive interactions between places and subjects in their material and conceptual formations. Whirling suggests a complex engagement with the structures of identity, location and difference in the movement across psycho-social and geopolitical borders. Whirling brings together at once the ease with which a child enjoys the world moving around her and her moving with the world; the dedicated focus of the Sufis to reach higher levels of mindfulness, the grounding of the mind, the soul and the body; the recognition that all things, all beings move, revolve with others. At the same time, it connects to the harm that done by the suppression of movement, of revolution, it links to the way in which the prohibition of whirling fixes selves in asymmetrical power relations and hierarchical timeframes. Whirling is about creating utopian elsewheres for imagining otherwise.

Throughout this thesis, I hold that art is an important starting point for the decolonization of knowledge and imagination (Tlostanova 2010). It is a powerful means through which to negotiate feminist ideas and ways of expressing oneself and to voice critique in a context where feminist concepts and theories cannot readily be found, where these are in a constant process of negotiation. I study Treumund's self-portrait photography with an "ethnographic attitude" which, according to Donna Haraway, entails putting oneself "at risk" through unearthing and undermining one's own everyday and taken-for-granted concepts and knowledge (Haraway 1997). Ethnography entails an emphasis on *processes* and the potential of following processes to reveal challenges to macro-level structures as well as the details of their reproduction. An ethnographic attitude is thus well suited to my study

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16  Nina Lykke (2010) lists the following as the most influential feminist figurations: Donna Haraway's feminist "cyborg" (Haraway 1991), Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic subject" (Braidotti 1994), Judith Butler's "queer" (Butler 1993, 223–242) and Trinh Minh-ha's and Donna Haraway's "inappropriate/d others"(Minh-ha 1986-87; Haraway 1992).

because it helps to grasp the world of flows, relations and interconnections while also making it possible to create connections between micro-level observations and broader interpretations and theorizations.

This study is thus not simply a critical close reading of the artistic production and imagination of one particular artist in the traditional art history sense, but it is also an interdisciplinary study committed to arguing for the necessity of carving out a conceptual and discursive space for postsocialist feminist imaginaries. I hold that one way to do so is through a relational and ethical engagement with feminist visual arts. To contextualize my discussion of Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork, which constitutes my main material, I also draw on my dialogic engagement with the artist herself as well as on my reflections upon various other art exhibitions and conferences focused on feminism and queer activism that I attended while I was conducting my research on Treumund's work. These events establish a crucial backdrop to my study because it is this kind of event that emphasizes the role of art as an important form of knowledge production and world-making.

## Meeting Anna-Stina Treumund

"*There has never been such an exhibition in Estonia before and I just have to do it!*"

After introducing herself as a lesbian and feminist-identified artist, Anna-Stina[17] sounded determined when elaborating on her plan to organize an art exhibition that she had tentatively entitled "How to Recognize a Lesbian".

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17 I noticed during the process of writing this thesis that I kept shifting back and forth inconsistently between sometimes referring to Anna-Stina Treumund casually, just by her first name, and sometimes more formally, by her full name or only her last name. I have decided to stick to the inconsistency and, for example, refer to her as Anna-Stina when mentioning or discussing our face-to-face encounters. Although some commentators on earlier drafts of this thesis pointed out that this might come across as overly familiar and thus belittling her position as an artist (especially because referring to a woman by her first name has been a common strategy to discredit her professionally), I want to stick to evoking the closeness and dialogic nature of our relationship – a conversation between the artist and the researcher – that using her first name allows. Moreover, emphasizing the dialogic nature of our relationship is central to this particular work. I do not see her and her work as just a "case study", an object to be scrutinized from a distance: she is also a close collaborator in dialogue. Also, we are basically the same age and became friends as I started my research, always using first names, so I do not want to create an artificial distance by using her last name when discussing conversations we have shared over the past few years. Most importantly, this is also what *she herself prefers*.

I was instantly struck by her passion, although she had initially appeared rather fragile, modest, shy and somewhat uncertain in her body posture and gestures. As an MA student of photography at the Estonian Academy of Arts, she was preparing for her first big solo exhibition.

It was a warm summer day in 2009 and I had just arrived in Nõva, a small coastal village in the north-west of Estonia for a three-day workshop called [PROLOGUE] EST.18 Gathered around a long table outside the old barn next to the main cottage, we were going through the first round of introductions. Most of the participants at this workshop were feminist artists, curators and art critics from Estonia and abroad, but there were also gender studies scholars, a feminist journalist and also some government officials who work with gender mainstreaming. We had all been invited there to discuss gender, art, society and politics, articulating and exploring feminist ideas about gender from Eastern and Western European perspectives. In retrospect, it is such workshops and events that sustained my point of departure in claiming a relationship between the "microworld" of arts and the macropolitical issues I want to address in this thesis, such as the postsocialist "lagging behind" discourse.

Anna-Stina certainly stood out from the crowd. There was something abrupt and unexpected about her coming out to this group and I think I even heard a striking sense of desperation in her voice when she claimed that there are no adequate representations of lesbians in Estonian culture. For her, lesbian visibility was clearly a feminist question.

My own role at this workshop was to represent the academic and theoretical side of feminism, a role I was used to playing mostly in academic contexts with their own rules, discourses and boundaries. But I also had my own agenda: to do some preliminary fieldwork for my thesis and interview Mare Tralla, credited as the first Estonian feminist artist, also known as "disgusting girl" in the media, about her self-portraiture.

I had decided that a good way to venture into the topic of "feminist imaginaries", women's agency and subjectivity, their relation to representations and the politics of visibility was through looking at women artists' self-portraiture. I was particularly interested in photographic self-portraiture. I assumed that being both the subject and the object of the image, in front of and behind the camera lens, in charge of one's own image,

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18 A short description by one of the participants can be found here: darc.imv.au.dk/?p=352 (accessed 29 July 2012).

somehow generates agency and thus serves as a form of empowerment, providing a space for evoking social change.

Already on the bus on my way to the location of the workshop, I felt strongly that the art world seemed like something else altogether, at least in this embodied, material, moving space that was taking us across bumpy country roads closer to several days of discussing feminist art and politics, sharing a space for talking, sleeping, eating.

I felt strangely out of place, although this bus full of women and I had a number of concerns in common: we were all interested in the position and viability of feminism and feminist art in the post-Soviet Estonia, still perceived as "lagging behind" the feminist discourses of the West – and we were also there to discuss the position of feminism in the "new" Europe and the world more widely. The latter, curiously, was mostly thanks to the presence of some international artists and curators, who kept reminding us to look at the bigger picture when the discussions shifted to concerns about how little there was happening in feminism in Estonia.

Was my feeling of alienation due to the sense of guilt I always felt when asked how my PhD studies in Sweden were coming along? Was it the burden of expectation when questioned about whether I was planning to return to Estonia? *Estonia needs you! We have a shortage of people in this field. You have to come back!* I was certainly confused in terms of coming "home" to do my fieldwork, juggling a sense of belonging and unbelonging at the same time.

As I quickly resorted to taking notes to maintain a sense of my academic self, I was trying to jot down the feeling of the eerie, in-between state of being simultaneously there and not there, insider and outsider, drifting without any concrete constants to hold on to. Against the background of the happy chit-chat of the women from the local art scene, some of whom I only knew by name, or not always even that, I gradually felt I was turning into abstract "theory", the one that is often directly opposed to "practice", the one that belongs to the realm of academia where feminism arguably slouches without sharp teeth to bite back. I always felt that I lacked words and concepts in Estonian when trying to explain what my work was really about.

I felt like an outsider here on many levels. They all seemed to project a sharp division between feminism in artistic practices and feminism in academia. Where theory is powerless in its abstractions and trapped in institutionalized structures, art potentially emerges as fire that stings,

a wake-up call for real change. Or so it seemed right then and there. Art seemed so much more accessible in that sense, universal, recognizable. In your face. *Visible.*

The Estonian feminist art world did not really exist for me until this very moment, when it suddenly materialized in the form of a lively, noisy, critical, chaotic and closely inter-connected crowd on this bus. Yet when I overheard women discussing Estonian art as provincial, feminism as a Western import, local context as entirely different from a wider European context, something struck a chord, although I didn't quite agree with everything they said. Feelings of provincialism and certain incompatibilities between the feminist theories I had become versed in and the local context of "back home" were not entirely absent from my usual academic experience – as a student in gender studies classes in Estonia, the USA, Hungary, the UK and Sweden as well as a participant at conferences and feminist events in numerous other places across Europe where my studies have taken me.

During the workshop, I conducted an inspiring but somewhat challenging interview with Mare Tralla, an established artist known both in Estonia and more widely. It is an experience I will always cherish dearly and in retrospect it seems to have been an important turning point for my project. Everything seemed to work against me during that interview: Mare wanted to do the interview as we were coming back from a late afternoon swim. I was caught slightly off guard, unsure about what exactly I wanted to find out from her, inexperienced in interviewing and with huge respect towards the artist and her work, afraid of saying the wrong things. Moreover, I felt disturbed by the wind and noise from the nearby road construction that was surely going to ruin the recording, the nosy workshop participants who kept wanting to interrupt our interview and have a say in our discussions as we were walking back to the main building from the seaside.

Over the course of the next few days, still frustrated with the interview experience, I kept thinking about Anna-Stina's passion towards her project and about how I might not have found mine yet for my own project. Curiously enough, as I discovered, she was in fact working with self-portrait photography. I caught myself circling back and pondering Anna-Stina's project. In contrast to my admiration towards Mare Tralla's work, which had established her as the first feminist artist in Estonia in the mid 1990s, I was fascinated by something that did not yet exist. It was something that was still waiting to be articulated, looking for its way into this world,

something that was emerging, needing a lot of care and encouragement. I became intrigued by the process of making feminist art, in particular by how art comes to have feminist effects, not simply thinking about what feminist art could be but what it could do. I thought of the challenge of voicing experiences that had not quite been widely represented in the Estonian context: Anna-Stina's insistence on making lesbian experience visible through putting herself at the centre of her art. I became hooked by the idea of following the paths of an emerging artist, especially in Estonia where I had heard so many complaints that "proper" feminism did not really exist yet, not to mention the curious absence of critical discussions of women's sexuality and same-sex desire.

Our first longer conversation during the workshop lasted long into the night and made it clear that we had a lot of things in common. Anna-Stina became intrigued by my stories of studying feminist theory and gender studies in Sweden, while I was continuously fascinated by the way in which her art resonated with discussions of feminism and queer politics in Eastern Europe as well as questions of the politics of visibility. Although familiar with the topic from countless discussions in gender studies classrooms and feminist books, conferences and workshops, I was still struck by how much the issue of visibility seemed to matter to her. What is this need for visibility she was talking about? Why is it important? What are the underlying assumptions of visibility? Does making someone visible, e.g. the Estonian lesbian community, automatically make them recognizable and therefore acceptable? Does making oneself visible equate with becoming acceptable? Was it recognition and acceptance that she was seeking? Was it about identity politics? Self-exploration? Self-celebration? Furthermore, why did she voluntarily want to bring down on herself the storm of nasty homophobic comments that would surely follow? Can a photography exhibition raise awareness and change attitudes? Can art make a difference? I was buzzing with questions!

We started emailing shortly after the workshop: she sent me links to her works as well as to works by artists whom she liked and found inspiring. I tried to encourage her in her work and explorations of feminist and queer theory. I shared theoretical texts with her that I thought she might find useful. I also sent her my initial PhD project description and a link to my own photographs in the "365 days" self-portrait photography group I was participating in that year, taking a self-portrait a day for the whole year

and posting them publicly online. From the very beginning, our exchange of ideas around feminist and queer theorizing and our love for self-portrait photography turned out to be incredibly thought-provoking and enriching, growing out of a chance meeting, like a rare gift that keeps on giving.

Anna-Stina and I stayed in touch mostly over email but we also met occasionally at conferences and art events in Tallinn, Tartu, Vienna, Linköping, Stockholm. We hung out in cafes and museums in these cities, spent time at her home in Tallinn and, much later, at my home in Linköping when she came to the Department of Gender Studies at Linköping University to do her internship. I was humbled by her willingness to share intimate details about her life and her process of becoming an artist and activist, of planning and taking her self-portraits. I was stunned by the trust she put in me to write about it all. I was taken aback by her need to trust theory, to ask for my advice as if my academic position meant I had all the answers. Her work challenged many of my understandings of what feminism could be, both in and outside of academia.

## Anna-Stina Treumund's art and activism

After our first meeting at the workshop in the coastal village of Nõva in the summer of 2009, Anna-Stina went on to proclaim herself Estonia's first lesbian artist who has publicly professed her sexual preferences and who considers that her identification as a lesbian plays an important role in her art. Her solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* (2010) (originally entitled *How to Recognize a Lesbian*) attracted attention both in the Estonian media and from the local art scene. Anna-Stina was interviewed by Estonian national TV and numerous art critics wrote reviews. The Art Museum of Estonia KUMU bought most of the works from this exhibition for their permanent collection. Considering that this exhibition was part of her final work for her MA studies in photography at the Estonian Art Academy, this was a remarkable achievement. She took a clearly political position, arguing for the visibility of marginalized sexualities in Estonia and asserting the right to be accepted the way one is in public as well as in the personal sphere. Feminist art historian Katrin Kivimaa pointed out in the commentary to the exhibition for national TV that Anna-Stina Treumund's exhibition was new and in some senses revolutionary in Estonian art

because no one else had depicted lesbian sexuality so visually, so openly and clearly, in the Estonian context before. She added that her artwork helped to raise an important social and cultural issue regarding attitudes towards non-normative sexualities. Interestingly, later that year footage from Anna-Stina's exhibition was used as the background for a news report about the discussion of a proposal for a new civil partnership law in the Estonian parliament, thus highlighting the important links between art, social and political issues.

With her first major exhibition, consisting of eight photographs and two video installations, Anna-Stina wanted to create a visual image of the lesbian community, to depict women who are not afraid to be openly labelled, most notably herself, as the exhibition provided an opportunity to share her own explorations of her identity. Most of the works are self-portraits but some of these self-portraits include family and friends. She insists on calling those photographs where she appears together with her sister or a friend self-portraits as well. Many of her earlier portraits tend to be exploratory, lyrical and dreamy, while her later work takes a clearer political stance, which has changed the visual language and mood of her images. Her first major exhibition was thus in many ways the exhibition that prompted and guided me towards reflecting on the "lag" discourse associated with Eastern Europe.

In her attempt to create a community, Anna-Stina has also sought inspiration from the past, browsing through Estonian art history for role models and earlier expressions of lesbian sentiments. At the *II Artishok Biennaal* (curated by Kati Ilves, 2010), Anna-Stina presented a self-portrait series called *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2010). In this series, she pays homage to Estonian graphic artist Marju Mutsu (1941-1980), re-creating Mutsu's series of drawings called *One*, *Two* and *Together* (from 1972), which she reads as oozing with lesbian longing. She does not actually make any claims about Mutsu's sexuality but reworks her art in order to reflect on her own sensibilities.

In recent years, Anna-Stina has thus actively participated in the creation of a wider feminist and queer art as well as an activist platform in Tallinn. In 2011, she was one of the initiators of the first Ladyfest Tallinn,[19] together with fellow activists Aet Kuusik, Dagmar Kase, Brigitta Davidjants and others. Ladyfest is an international non-profit platform that was first launched in

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19 The festival blog can be found at www.ladyfesttallinn.blogspot.com (accessed 1 April 2013).

the USA in 2000 and promotes a self-initiating form of DIY feminism. The main aim of the festival is to make women's culture more visible through exhibitions, workshops and other events that are empowering for women. Anna-Stina is also an active participant in the reading group "Virginia Woolf is not afraid of you!" which is a similar platform that was formed in 2010 and focuses on reading feminist and queer theory.

In the summer of 2011, Anna-Stina participated in the international contemporary art exhibition *Sõnastamata lood / Untold Stories* at the Tallinn Art Hall. This exhibition, largely documentary in character, addressed the topic of sexual minorities in Estonia and also, more broadly, in Eastern Europe, considering what "queer" might mean then and there, in various local contexts. Curated by Anders Härm, Rebeka Põldsam and Airi Triisberg, it was part of both the *European Capital of Culture Tallinn 2011* and the *Diversity Enriches* project, focusing on the problems of sexual minorities, primarily as they relate to social, political and historical issues. The exhibition was accompanied by a diverse programme of events that included discussions, screenings and presentations, thus really reaching out to a wider audience. Anna-Stina exhibited two works in this exhibition – a short documentary film entitled *Mothers* (2011) that explored the topic of lesbian mothers in Estonia, and a photograph, *Together II* (2011), depicting the artist seated next to her partner in a style that emulates Victorian family portraits. This portrait can be seen as a continuation of Anna-Stina's homage to Marju Mutsu's drawings. Whereas in the first remake of the drawings, she appeared alone, hinting at the lonely space she found herself in once she proclaimed herself as an openly lesbian-identified artist in public space, she now chose to draw attention to her lesbian relationship. Both of these works highlight family as a strong theme in her work – a theme that runs through her earlier work as well. Around the same time, Anna-Stina also co-curated with Jaanus Samma an exhibition entitled Family that took place in the framework of the OMA festival, Baltic Pride 2011[20] and explored changing family structures from various viewpoints.

Chronologically, the latest exhibition that Anna-Stina has participated in and that I have chosen to include in my analysis is *Lost in Transition*[21] (2011). This international exhibition, curated by Rael Artel as part of the

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20  For more information, see www.omafestival.ee (accessed 1 April 2013).

21  The exhibition press release can be found here: www.ekkm.ee/en/naitused/lost-in-transition_(accessed 1 April 2013).

project series *Your Periphery is My Center*, aimed to bring together various critical perspectives on social realities within the culturally and ideologically loaded region defined as Eastern Europe or the former Eastern Europe or non-Western Europe. It is due to this particular contextual framing that I chose to include the work called *Loser 2011*, commissioned specifically for this exhibition, in my analysis. The three self-portraits and a video from this series are all inspired by Estonian artist Kai Kaljo's video *A Loser* (1997). This work perhaps engages with the "lag" discourse more directly than the others in that it is embedded in the context of an exhibition that specifically sought to address the question of a geopolitical locatedness and the transformation the former Eastern Europe has gone through in the last 20 years, since the fall of the Soviet Union. Anna-Stina's response is a queer feminist statement.

In this thesis, I trace the processes through which Anna-Stina takes her self-portraits and follow the paths into feminist and queer theories they invite me to explore, experiencing how they changed me, her, feminist art and feminist theory along the way with the questions and challenges they pose. I had to make some subjective selections so as to organize her work thematically and ground my explorations and arguments more clearly. Embarking on this journey, I did not see the endpoint, it was not immediately tangible, but I did realize from early on that this journey was always already bound to have multiple trajectories, criss-crossing roads less travelled, moments off the beaten track, loopholes, cul-de-sacs, standings at the crossroads. Such a journey presumes certain positionings in time and space, I am not sure when the journey began exactly but I do know that it will not necessarily end as I put a full-stop to the last sentence that concludes this book. It encompasses multiplicities way beyond my capacities to recount and map them here.

This multifaceted encounter thus effectively changed the direction of my project and I ended up abandoning the other case studies I had planned, although this realization did not hit me all at once. It happened gradually, over the course of a longer period of time, as I came to follow and learn more about Anna-Stina's ways of thinking and working, growing into them through my own ongoing struggles with feminist discussions in academia. The thesis unfolds from our dialogues and my struggles to relate to her art through the framework of feminist studies.

## Troubling time and space

*"Why are you so hung up on this artist? Identity politics is so 80s!"*

For a moment, I did not know what to say. This casual remark came out of the blue and completely baffled me. The first part of the comment was obvious. I had remained fascinated with Anna-Stina's work and kept going back to it because of the way it surprised me as it evolved and because she allowed me to follow her process so closely. I had completely embraced the productiveness of the idea of tracing and trusting the process, seeing where it leads, finding out what kind of possibilities it creates. I loved having the opportunity to zoom in on the story of the emergence of an artist's works in order to tell a bigger picture.

The second part of the comment, however, was what was truly puzzling to me. At first, I read it as simply dismissive. Fair enough, the feminist author from the USA who had made the remark during a doctoral course I attended had not seen Anna-Stina's photographs. I had only described them, with the theoretical tools I had at hand. Sure, at the time,[22] what I thought I was seeing in Anna-Stina's work was some form of identity politics, which was something I had been taught in gender studies classes to be highly critical of due to the risk of essentializing identities and therefore necessarily premised on brutal exclusions. This produced ambivalence about how to relate to her work: how come she is not more *queer* in her statements? Why is she talking about wanting to make lesbians visible? Does she not know that this is potentially essentializing and thus excluding those who don't exactly fit into her categories and the representations she is creating? I was clearly hesitant about seeing Anna-Stina's art only through the lens of identity politics, but I could not quite figure out how else to describe it.

Later on, however, I could not stop thinking about the "so 80s" comment. Perhaps this was indeed a provocation? I could not help but feel that this cast Anna-Stina's work as outmoded even before it had really been considered. And I had unwittingly done that! While she positioned herself as a feminist, I was lacking the necessary tools to situate her work within

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22  Anna-Stina had just finished her first major exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Do Not Know* (2010), which I was struggling to make sense of outside the identity politics framework that I viewed as problematic.

feminist discourses, unless I accepted the force of the feminist theories I knew, which placed her as a belated copy of Western identity politics. I had been caught in the general "catching up" mode in which Estonia has found itself during its struggle to "become European" again, comparing everything against the yardstick of Western developments. This comment made me realize how deeply unethical this was. Furthermore, I not only came to understand it as unethical but also as politically highly problematic. Perhaps in a way, then, this comment was meant to alert me to be mindful of this strange common-sense idea that some societies are taken to be "stuck in time", despite existing contemporaneously with societies understood to be more modern. Thus, instead of reading her work through the framework of identity politics that are often displaced in the past, I was prompted to build a framework which deconstructs the "lag" discussion as part of hegemonic Western feminism.

It took me a while to realize that much of the "fire" this project needed came from my unexplored feeling, not unlike that of many other scholars from the former Eastern Europe, that I want and need to try to resist and deconstruct the widespread assumption that Eastern European feminist discourse is merely derivative of that in the West and is only about getting rid of the "lag" (Pachmanová 2010). I came to understand that I feel particularly strongly about this when I encountered time and again the "been there, done that" type of comments from other Western scholars who saw Anna-Stina's work and questioned my insistence on working with "identity political" art that was "so 80s", that is, reading differences in terms of progress narratives.

These commentators, although no doubt well-wishing, were trying to make Western feminism into the "neutral" boy of Freud's story about the child's entry into the symbolic order that I recounted in the prologue. They were not seeing that Anna-Stina's whirling was an invitation to her particular autonomous space, which was her own and not a copy of something that had already happened somewhere else. In addition, when the Western feminist theories that I was relying on at the beginning to make sense of her art kept failing me, I realized that it was the politics of time, space and context that became pertinent to consider. The "so 80s" comment indeed made me wonder: what is done in the invocation of late, lagging, or bad timing in relation to feminist imaginaries in Eastern Europe as well as the discursive economies of Eastern Europe more broadly?

What really challenged me in Anna-Stina's photographic artwork when I first saw it and after I started following the trajectories her projects took was the way in which it evoked the multiple temporalities of feminist endeavours in postsocialist Estonia. I came to consider how her work addressed contemporary struggles with time, place, and reality in postsocialist Estonia, caught in the webs of power imbalances that characterize the relations between the former Eastern Europe and the West. Focusing on her work and on our ongoing dialogues led me, perhaps unexpectedly, to investigate the open-endedness of the social world, feminism and feminist art within it, its relationality, ongoingness, multidimensionality, sensuousness. It led me directly into the buzz around the times, the spaces and the entangled relations of feminisms in the visual arts. I had caught my first glimpse of this on that bus on the way to the workshop in Nõva in 2009. I have not stopped buzzing with excitement since.

Thinking of representations as an opportunity to "slow down the world" (Grosz 2007, 248), as I have suggested, it is important to find ways out of the static position that keeps Eastern Europe locked into the "lag" and perpetual "catching up" or "transitioning" frame. The "catching up" timeline can be seen as temporal othering, based on a linear conception of temporality that generates a periodization of chronological sequences and functions as a taxonomy of progress and backwardness. Scholars working with queer, feminist, black and postcolonial studies, activists and artists among them, have challenged normative straight lines and straight times over the last few decades, calling us to consider critically how time informs our understandings of gender, sexuality and race (McClintock 1995; Massey 1999; Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Freccero 2006; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Freccero 2007; Chakrabarty 2000; Freeman 2010; Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011). In order to acknowledge and develop more complicated narratives of the plurality and co-existence of various temporalities and temporal disjunctions in conjunction with conceptualizing the radical changes in the former Eastern Europe, different conceptual frameworks are needed.

## Materials, methods, ethics

My fieldwork for this research was spread across approximately three years. As already mentioned, I started in Estonia in July 2009 by attending the [PROLOGUE] EST workshop, where I first met Anna-Stina. This meeting changed my direction and I then decided to follow her progress as she was preparing for her first solo exhibition. I attended several feminist art exhibitions, conferences, seminars and workshops on the topic of Eastern Europe and feminist art, often together with Anna-Stina, and I recorded my observations and reflections in fieldnotes. I draw on all of them for context. Most of these events took place in Estonia, but I also attended the opening of a large scale overview exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in Eastern Europe* and the symposium Reading Gender. Art, Power and Politics of Representation in Eastern Europe, organized by the exhibition curators at MUMOK in Vienna on 13-14 November in 2009. Participation in this event informs some of my broader theoretical discussions in this thesis.

My fieldwork, of course, included visiting Anna-Stina's own exhibitions. I was present at the opening of Anna-Stina's solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* (2010) in Tallinn Art Hall Gallery and I visited the *Lost in Transition* (2011) exhibition in the Contemporary Art Centre in Tallinn where Anna-Stina's work *Loser 2011* was first exhibited. I saw *Loser 2011* some time later as well, put in a different context at the exhibition *Huh? Pfui! Yuck! Aha! Wow! The Classics of Estonian Contemporary Art* in Tartu Art Museum in September 2012, when I attended Anna-Stina's artist talk at the exhibition. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to participate at the opening of *II Artishok Biennaal* (2010) where Anna-Stina's work *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2011) was exhibited, although I was able to go to the exhibition *Untold Stories* (2011) which exhibited Anna-Stina's *Together II*, a continuation of her *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* series. For my discussion of this artwork, I thus rely mostly on my conversations with the artist and reviews that were written as a response to her work.

I deploy mixed methods, as is common to interdisciplinary cultural studies projects, trying to capture the interplay between lived experience,

discourses, texts and images and their historical, cultural, social and political contexts. My main material for analytical discussions in this thesis is Anna-Stina's artwork. I focus on a small selection of self-portrait photographs and one video from three aforementioned exhibitions. In particular, I do a close reading of *Drag*, exhibited at the exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*; the *Loser 2011* series in the context of *Lost in Transition* exhibition; and the *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* series from *II Artishok Biennaal*. I combine my "ethnographic attitude" (Haraway 1997) with close reading of visual images, interviews with the artist and observations at and reflections about various feminist events. I contextualize Anna-Stina's photographic self-portraits within the local and global feminist art historical framework, and to a lesser extent I also draw on our encounters at various academic and casual feminist and art events as well as my encounters with other feminists and artists at those events.

In addition to our many email and casual conversations, I also conducted two more formal extended interviews with Anna-Stina, one in Tallinn, Estonia prior to her first solo exhibition and the other in Linköping, Sweden after she had completed all the exhibitions I analyse in this thesis. I recorded, transcribed and translated the interviews and used them to contextualize the artworks as well as our dialogues about feminism and the politics of representation in Estonia. Such ethnographic interviews can be helpful in getting access to subject's biography and future plans as well as to the subject's interpretations of others and social interaction (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Seidman 1998) but there are also some shortcomings to such a method of interviewing. First, problems can occur due to the limited narrative focus because it is not possible to access *all* aspects of lived experience through talking and second, the interview situation itself might be limiting because sit-down interviews are essentially static encounters. So while I did find the sit-down recorded interviews with Anna-Stina helpful, I feel I gained more from my encounters with her at art events and feminist conferences. In this sense, my method is more reminiscent of the "go-along" (Kusenbach 2003). Margarethe Kusenbach calls go-alongs "[a] hybrid between participant observation and interviewing", which means that researchers accompany the research subjects on their 'natural' outings and "actively explore their subjects' stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (2003, 463). In other words, by participating in feminist art and academic

events together with Anna-Stina, I was doing more than just participant observation. I was able to observe her in the moments that were as much part of her 'natural' outings as they were of mine, while being able to access her and my own experiences and interpretations at the same time. I was not simply asking questions from her, but I was also immersed with my body in the same events as her. We experienced these feminist events, which all form a backdrop to my thesis, together.

For me, these meetings and conversations, as well as the contexts in which they occurred, are entirely entangled with how I came to view Anna-Stina's art and thus it would be unthinkable for me to focus only on the artwork. At the same time, I do want to ground the discussion of the photographs themselves and engage with them in depth through a more iconographic and formal analysis. My thinking has indeed been informed by my contact with the individual artworks, which were my starting point. I chose to focus on these works in an attempt to dislodge predetermined categories imposed either by culture, aesthetics or representational codes and thereby open up space for new readings. My hope is that this balancing between feminist theory and to some extent art criticism – in their multi-faceted manifestations in texts as well as conferences, exhibitions and artists' talks – and visual analysis of the artworks will help to create some space for the reader to reflect on the relation between visual arts and feminist imaginaries.

I want to underline once again that this thesis is a situated reflection around two crucial moments: my meeting with Anna-Stina at the summer workshop in Nõva in 2009 and the provocative comment about her artwork being "so 80s" that I received during the early stages of my research. During the research process, I was also inspired by a circle of feminists and feminist artists based in Estonia and elsewhere in the former Eastern Europe; reconsiderations of feminist theory and feminist/queer activism; theories and practices of art and photography; entanglements of imagination and knowledge. As a scholar trained in interdisciplinary gender studies, I have embraced a feminist intersectional approach[23] that not only considers

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23  The concept of "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color* (1991), where she discusses issues of black women's employment in the USA. However, the term has its genealogy in earlier writings by postcolonial and anti-racist feminists which focused on the mutual constructions of gender and ethnicity/race and the power asymmetries within feminism (see, e.g., Combahee River Collective 1977). The concept has subsequently been influential to feminist theorizing and underlines the necessity of understanding gender as always mutually co-constructed with other

gender differences but also, importantly, addresses other forms of difference and inequality, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, nationality, age and so on, all of which are intertwined with each other. This point of view has undoubtedly influenced the way in which I have approached my material and the theoretical and methodological frameworks in this thesis. This framework is interdisciplinary in that it draws on feminist studies, visual culture studies, art history, postcolonial and postsocialist studies, queer theory and cultural studies more broadly. I will now describe how these different disciplines are interwoven within each chapter and give a short overview of the materials and methods I have deployed.

In the process of exploring my main concern about the invocation of "lag" in relation to feminist imaginaries in the former Eastern Europe, I cannot but respond to the demands of local specificity with a somewhat general poststructuralist argument—that subjectivities, including sexual subjectivities, must be understood in translocal contexts that are always already internally contradictory and multiply determined. However, as Rosi Braidotti writes, a "location" is "not a self-appointed and self-designed subject position, but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory. A great deal of our location, in other words, escapes self-scrutiny in that it is so familiar, so close, that one does not even see it" (Braidotti 2011, 16). Or, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, "[n]o one can articulate the space she herself inhabits. My attempt has been to describe this relatively ungraspable space in terms of what might be its history. I'm always uneasy if I'm asked to speak for my space – it's the thing that seems to be most problematic, and something that one really only learns from other people" (Spivak 1990, 68).

For me, writing, method, methodology, epistemology, ethics and politics are all inextricably linked. The methodology that sustains my work draws on the feminist "politics of location" (Rich 1986; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Braidotti 1994; Braidotti 2011), one of the central starting points of feminist epistemologies. I also build on the notion of "figurations" which for me means combining aesthetic and epistemological questions with political accountability. Even though, and because, so much about our own locations is ungraspable, we are able to, and must, concentrate our methodological efforts on the analysis of the multiple power locations we inhabit, those

categories/power asymmetries (see, e.g., Brah and Phoenix 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006; Davis 2008; Lykke 2010).

collectively shared spatiotemporal locations, through zooming in on others, through learning from others. Therefore, the methodological tools that shape this thesis are self-reflexive and self-critical close readings of the visual as well as textual and non-textual material, combined with theoretical discussions of concepts in the mode of "criticality" rather than criticism (Egeland 2005; Rogoff 2006; Roseneil 2011). In a sense, I have elevated the experiencing embodied and embedded "I"  – both that of the artist and myself as the researcher – very much into the centre of all discussions because this is the only way I know to remain accountable for my "politics of location". In line with Braidotti, I believe that:

> The "politics of locations" are cartographies of power that rest on a form of self-criticism, a critical, genealogical self-narrative; they are relational and outside directed. This means that "embodied" accounts illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. ... Feminist knowledge is an interactive process that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implications with power, that we had not noticed before." (2011, 16)

Neither attempting to glorify the status of marginalized others (e.g. feminists/feminist lesbians in Estonia, postsocialist feminists in the broader feminist discourse), nor wanting to contribute to their dismissal, I also hope to show the importance of resisting "methodological nationalism" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Braidotti 2011). Despite evoking postsocialist Estonia and postsocialist Eastern Europe as geopolitical locations that need to be considered in their specificities, I hope to make it clear that I do not mean to evoke them as nation states or national identities that are supposed to function as clearly bounded units of analysis for feminist imaginaries. Clearly, the problems and struggles prevalent in these geographical locations cannot be seen only as problems internally, within the interior of the nation state or the "region", but need to be reflected upon globally. Considering Anna Loutfi's notion of "feminist geopolitics" (2009), while it is impossible to isolate the consideration of postsocialist feminist projects completely from nation-building ones in a region that has been shaped by multinational empires, we should be able to consider feminist stories and identities as "more than" or "beyond" national identity. I thus want to attempt to think outside the "national" when thinking "local", following the challenge posed by Ulrika Dahl: how would it be possible to "call into

question the normative tendency to take nations and regions as given points of departure" and examine "how geopolitical categories are used and naturalized in the telling of queer [and feminist, I would add] stories" (Dahl 2011, 146)?

One of my main guiding principles in doing this research has been using writing as a method of inquiry. Writing as a way of knowing and discovering involves writing for the purpose of wanting to find something out, something that is not and cannot be known before writing. For example, Laurel Richardson (1994; 2000; 2005) has expanded the notion of writing from a mode of "telling" to that of "knowing", a way of discovering and analysing, providing thereby a powerful critique of traditional writing practices in qualitative research. The concept of writing as a method of inquiry initially emerged out of her frustrations with the "boring" style of qualitative studies which as she points out, "suffered from acute and chronic passivity: passive-voiced author, passive "subjects""(Richardson 2000, 924) since scholars had for years been taught "to silence their own voices and to view themselves as contaminants", accepting the omniscient voice of science as their own. Following such a mechanistic, static model of writing that fails to take into account the role of writing as a creative and dynamic process results in constructing research accounts that present knowledge claims in a universalizing authoritative manner, "in the homogenized voice of "science"" (Richardson 2005, 960).

Inspired by Richardson and Deleuze, Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre calls her work in academia "nomadic inquiry" and highlights that "a great part of that inquiry is accomplished in the writing because [...] writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled *method of discovery*." (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 967; emphasis in original). Moreover, St. Pierre emphasizes that "writing seems more accidental than intentional" (St. Pierre 2002, 58) and it can also be effectively used "to disrupt the known and the real" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 967). Writing becomes in many ways then a "field of play" (Richardson 1997) that enables us to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently.

Richardson derives the theoretical basis for her concept of writing as a method of inquiry from poststructuralist perspectives on language. Poststructuralism weaves together

> Language, subjectivity, social organization, and power. Language
> does not reflect social reality, but produces meaning, creates social
> reality. Different languages and different discourses within a given
> language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are
> not reducible to one another. Language is how social organization
> and power are defined and contested and the place where our
> sense of selves, our *subjectivity*, is constructed (Richardson 2000,
> 928-929; emphasis in original).

Since we are influenced and shaped by many competing discourses
at the same time, our subjectivities are shifting, they cannot be fixed in
any unproblematic way. The knowing self and what is or can be known
about the subject cannot be separated – they are "intertwined, partial,
historical, local knowledges" (Richardson 2000, 929). This means that, as
a feminist researcher, I acknowledge that I always write from particular
subject positions at specific times: knowledge production is always situated
(Haraway 1988). This epistemological and political stance has indeed
methodological and ethical implications as well as repercussions for the
writing process.

Ethically, it has been of utmost importance for me to communicate
the content of my research to Anna-Stina as much as possible and in a
responsible way. My writing is also very much influenced by the fact that we
became friends during my research process. So in constrast to art critics and
art historians, who normally only look at the artwork at exhibitions, I was
in dialogue with the artist and involved in discussions with her prior to her
making of her artwork. Even though we both take responsibility for our own
work separately, there are aspects of her photographs and my writing that
could not quite have come up if we had not been in dialogue. Throughout,
I thus reflect on the position of enunciation, my own embodied location,
while at the same time reflecting on the politics and ethics of representing
Anna-Stina.

While the notion of the politics of location has undergone a series of
transformations, it has become so commonplace that it is seen as a self-
evident as well as self-explanatory part of doing feminist research. This
has sometimes led to programmatic and abstract formulations that simply
state generic identity categories without taking into account that one can
speak of one's location only through mutually constitutive intersectional
social relations. For example, writing "as a [name the category]" locks

the researcher in an a priori position that can override the changes and challenges that the research process brings. Distinctions such as family history, ethnicity, geopolitical positioning, sexuality, dis/ability, religion, and others are important, but should not be considered obvious or as fixed points. Rather they should be understood as multiple, fluid and contingent on temporal and historical shifts that emerge in the contiguous processes of doing and writing research.

Relating these feminist conversations on the importance of the politics of location to processes of writing brings up the problem of the imperative of "transparent reflexivity" in search for positionality (Rose 1997). As Gillian Rose claims, transparent reflexivity is bound to fail because "it depends on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable" (1997, 311). In other words, it relies on the notion of a visible and knowable landscape of power in which the researcher has an obligation to make herself accountable. In their research on non-western contexts, Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger frame the discussion around two questions which complement their understanding of reflexivity. First, they pose the question how can feminists use fieldwork to produce knowledge across multiple divides (of power, geo-political and institutional locations) in ways that do not reinscribe the interests of the privileged. Second, they ask how can the production of knowledge be tied explicitly to a material politics of social change favouring less privileged communities and places? Nagar and Geiger argue that there is "little discussion of how to operationalize a 'speaking with' approach to research that might help us work through negotiated and partial meanings in our intellectual/political productions" (2007, 7). In my explorations of new ways of writing the 'I' into the text, I thus also look for alternative ways to represent my 'subject' of research, while taking into account the complex interactions of multiple locations and intersecting identifications. I try to do so by inserting short creative stories in the text that emerged as part of my thinking process and that helped me to arrive at important realizations.

It was largely the artworks selected for this research and my engagement with the artist Anna-Stina Treumund as well as the feminist academic and art events that I attended over a three year period that brought up the concepts I consider throughout the thesis. In other words, it was the material that I chose to investigate that "asked" for certain concepts and theories. "Lag", "geopolitics", "temporalities", "postsocialist", "feminist imaginaries",

"politics of location", "self-portraiture", "identifications" and others are all concepts (which I will elaborate upon in Chapter 2) that emerged in the process of conducting this research. So, in a sense, I did not start with Estonia, or with the former Eastern Europe, as a clear point of departure, but began with an interest in the visual arts and the politics of self-representation of one particular artist. Without presuming social categories as given or having clear pre-defined research themes in mind other than an interest in self-portraiture and representation more generally prior to starting my fieldwork, I let myself be surprised by my encounter with Anna-Stina and her self-portraiture. Her artwork and queer feminist political activism led me to questions of gender, sexuality, nationalism and the realization that these are intimately tied to broader questions of subjectivity, time and place in our cultural imaginaries. The multiple relations that Anna-Stina's artwork produce, as I will show in my analytical chapters, only became accessible during the fieldwork, and my interpretations would not have been possible without the detailed knowledge I came to have about the artist, her artwork and her politics through the fieldwork. I did not begin with a bird's eye view of a field, but instead started my work with features of specific artworks that I found striking, my own reactions that were challenged and demanded more thought, more discussion, more debate. I suggest that focusing on one artist, on a small set of images, brought to light and made intelligible a larger set of political and ethical issues. I want to insist on specificity and nuance when discussing these issues, resisting abstraction.

Partly, this emphasis on the process of discovery came about due to taking an "ethnographic attitude" (Haraway 1997) towards my research, which clearly confirmed that as a researcher I was really dependent upon an unknowing relation to the other. In retrospect, I can note that the sense of unknowingness was inscribed in the research design from the start because I became interested in following Anna-Stina Treumund's *process* of establishing herself as a feminist and queer artist and none of her artworks that I focus on in my analytical chapters existed when I began my research. There was no way of knowing what would come next. Moreover, to begin an ethnographic project (although, as will become clear, my project cannot be seen as entirely ethnographic) with a clear goal, a pre-given framework and a set of concepts to be applied directly to the "objects" of research felt limiting. To do that is already "to stymie the process of discovery; it blocks one's ability to learn something that exceeds the frameworks with which

one enters" (Halberstam 2011, 12). I was thus very much guided by the research process itself and, in the end, I came to the key terms and concepts through following up on the challenges that the material I had gathered posed to my previous frameworks of thinking.

Intertwined with these approaches is thus my alignment with "ethnographic attitude" that I have taken for inspiration throughout writing this thesis. Haraway argues that an "ethnographic attitude" can be adopted within any kind of enquiry, including textual analysis. It is a way of remaining mindful and accountable. It is not about taking sides in a predetermined way but is about the risks, purposes and hopes embedded in knowledge projects, it is "a mode of practical and theoretical attention" (Haraway 1997, 191). It is what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls an ethics of witnessing which is both responsive *to* and responsible *for*. Even though I am not doing what could be called a full ethnography, I do find that my inquiries into feminist imaginaries and ethnographic attitude seem rather well suited to each other. Feminism and ethnography – and by extension ethnographic attitude – both have experience, participants, definitions, meanings and subjectivity as a focus and they never lose sight of context.

Being at risk in the ethnographic process means also being at risk in relation to the subjects: being vulnerable, being a co-producer, being an admirer, being both subject and object of the study. It is not just about risk in analysis or abstraction of data. In my understanding, ethnographic attitude is a sensibility and an accountability, it is about entering into relationships, perhaps of a kind of kinship that entails "diffuse, enduring solidarity" (Schneider 1980, 52). My own self-identity has been "as much at risk as the temptation of identification" (Haraway 1997, 190) with the subject of the study. Many of my own previous convictions and stabilities were constantly challenged in unexpected ways that I had to respond to and become responsible for.

I work hard throughout the thesis – as I have done throughout the research process – to maintain the position of an engaged friend rather than a distanced critical researcher, which helps me approach questions of the ethics of feminist criticism. I assume a certain humility when talking about artistic-political communities as an academic theoretician, to resist "the temptation to close the text with statements that assume the position of greater political insight simply by virtue of reflection" (Bell 1999, 3). I thus want and try throughout this research project to extend

the community of knowers and knowledge producers, to nourish exchanges and collaborations beyond academic-theoretical circles. All the realms of creativity, troubled/contingent forms of belonging, political solidarity and affect need to be inscribed within such projects of knowledge production. In order to address the "noticeable gap between how we live [...] and how we represent to ourselves this lived existence in theoretical terms and discourses" (Braidotti 2011, 4), how we reflect upon "the current chasms between bodies and literature", we need to "recognize that scholar, artist, practitioner, activist, and community member are not mutually exclusive terms" (Allen 2012, 218).

In a more concrete sense, the figuration of whirling through which I attempt to write this thesis has enabled me to link two important elements of my own textual method – close reading and writing *with*. In my specific use of the close reading method, I do a close reading through a subjective involvement with the specific materials and modes of particular practices, working towards a form of writing *with* the artworks to explore multivalent connections across disciplinary and medial boundaries (Meskimmon 2010). I do not see myself as just writing about art, but I see myself as creating and exploring concepts, ideas and meanings with and through it in combination with other modes of thought. The conversational moment within such writing *with* is intimate, open-ended, processual and generative of new meanings and affective agency. It functions through the figuration of whirling.

Whirling also highlights the need to approach art relationally. The mode of relational interpretation that affects both "art" and "interpreter" and makes us mindful of how we evaluate and give meaning to art and other forms of visual culture (Jones 2012). Whirling as a figuration helps to articulate the ethical and political importance of taking geopolitical locatedness into account as an axis of difference, being careful not to fix it but to leave it revolving, becoming more mindful of this revolution with others. First and foremost, it is about how looking from a postsocialist feminist perspective might reconfigure discussions of gender, sexuality and knowledge production in the globalized world.

As I will show, a relational engagement with Anna-Stina's art opens up a space for enquiring how crucial postsocialist feminist imaginaries *as* postsocialist are to engendering a global sense of ethical and political responsibility within feminist studies. I do not regard her artwork as

just telling us something about the world or simply translating her, or by imaginary extension my own, experiences into visual form. I see them as active constituent elements of the conditions of the world and the variously located subjects within it. Focusing on her aesthetic and theoretical intervention into the close connection between spaces, subjects as well as discursive and visual locatedness inspires my own desire for a theoretical intervention into a similar imbrication of spaces and subjects. As I will demonstrate, her artwork helps to cohere, problematize and rephrase questions of knowledge, agency and emancipation.

## Snapshot of the thesis

Before moving on to the theoretical discussions that will help me to draw discussions of the visual and the geopolitical closer together as important aspects of transnational feminist discourses, I will give a short overview of the structure of the thesis. I have conducted the research in a twofold movement. First, I propose the theoretical and analytical framework that my engagement with Anna-Stina's artwork through a feminist lens brought forward (Chapter 2). Second, I present a close reading of my experience of Anna-Stina's first solo exhibition (Chapter 3) and a selection of Anna-Stina's images from three exhibitions (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). These exhibitions and the individual artworks function as both sources to identify questions and the tools I need for approaching them from the point of view of the "lag" associated with the former Eastern Europe and also as case studies to test the limits of current understandings of Western feminist imaginaries. I introduce each analytical chapter through a story or an episode connected to each exhibition. This gives an immediate, tangible sense of the issues unravelled within each chapter, but also shows how my own personal experiences and stories were entangled with the stories of the artist and broader geopolitical narratives.

In Chapter 2, "Tools and concepts", I present conceptual tools, situating them in two main frameworks that support the project: those concerning the visual and the geopolitical. I take up various approaches to visual culture, identity and performativity and attempt to navigate the feminist genealogies across the so-called East/West divide. I situate my thesis within discussions of self-portraiture, photography, feminist visual arts

and visual culture studies. I discuss the politics of representation as well as the possibilities and limits of self-referentiality. Furthermore, in order to contextualise these inquiries, I further expand on the possible affinities between postcolonial and postsocialist feminist discourses and discuss the lag discourse in conversation with recent explorations of temporalities in queer theory.

Interlude I, "Inscribed in ambivalence", located in between Chapter 2 and 3, functions as an evocative story that reveals my initial ambivalence towards Anna-Stina's artwork. I situate this ambivalence further in Chapter 3, "Situating ambivalence", where I take a closer look at Anna-Stina's solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*. I explore my ambivalence towards Anna-Stina's self-portraits in this exhibition at length because they somehow did not match any of the analytical frameworks I was trying to use. I wanted to rescue her from the "lag" discourse, but, eventually, it became clear to me that, in fact, I might be the one who needed to be rescued from the position of the "Western" critic. This shift in my thinking was crucial and thus I present at length the process of writing my way through that ambivalence. So Interlude II, "Shifting to whirling the world", placed in between Chapter 3 and 4, finally makes the shift towards deconstructing the lag discourse and as such marks the transition from the so-called building blocks of the thesis to the actual analysis.

In Chapter 4, "Claiming Space: *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*," I zoom in on *Drag* (2010), Anna-Stina's self-portrait from the exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*. Unravelling the intertextual layers of this self-portrait help me to shed light on how Anna-Stina, in fact, carves out her own queer space in postsocialist Estonian context, thereby contesting the fantasy of the lag associated with the former Eastern Europe.

In Chapter 5, "Queering Men: *Loser 2011*," through analysing Anna-Stina's series *Loser 2011* (2011), a remake of Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* (1997), I co-position myself with Anna-Stina as critics of postsocialist Estonian society, which too often accepts the "catching up" discourse and focuses on its desire to get out of the "lag" to be fully integrated in Europe (again). I contextualize Anna-Stina's series, where she performs as men she calls "losers, within the discourses of "winners" and "losers", an outcome of the various transition processes that Estonian society has been going through since the fall of the Soviet Union, and I link these discussions to feminist theorizing and ponder upon the ways in which they could reconfigure the

lag discourse.

In Chapter 6, "Affective Histories: *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings*," I look at Anna-Stina's series entitled *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2011). I trace the way in which Anna-Stina constructs a queer history of sorts by building temporal connections with Estonian graphic artist Marju Mutsu (1941-1980) and her series of drawings called *One, Two* and *Together* (1972). Through the discussion of both series, I hope to flesh out the importance of reconceptualising time and temporalities for discussions of feminisms, gender, sexuality, geopolitics and space in ways that would allow us to move beyond being merely critical of the "lag" discourse.

In conclusion, Chapter 7 ties together the issues raised in the previous theoretical and analytical chapters to assert how visual works of art help us tell different stories about feminist theorizing when it comes to the lag discourse and thus open up for creating new imaginaries and frames of thinking, based on embodied experiences, embedded in the local context.

# 2

## Tools and concepts

*Time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning, on this journey. All times can be inhabited, all places visited. In a single day the mind can make a millpond of the oceans. Some people who have never crossed the land they were born on have travelled all over the world. The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and the lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.*

- Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989, 80)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Kissing Two Reflections* (2006)

## The visual and the geopolitical

In this chapter, I unravel two important conceptual frameworks that theoretically frame the project: those concerning the visual and the geopolitical. Building on previous research, I discuss in some detail the different scholarly debates to which I wish to contribute. I have already hinted at a number of terms and concepts that need some further clarification, though more often than not I remain entangled in their messiness and contemplate what they have come to mean for my specific project. These concepts grew organically from a cluster of central and interrelated ideas that emerged from my fieldwork and the dialogic nature of my relation to the artist, Anna-Stina Treumund and I will use them as tools in my analytical chapters. I try to keep my discussion of these tools and concepts focused specifically on art and visual culture as much as possible in order to keep a tighter focus on the main theme of this thesis.

Significantly, I will elaborate on various approaches to visual culture, identity, performativity and feminist politics of representation and in/visibility. I contend that visual arts, in particular self-portraiture, provide a space that allows marginalized subjects to voice and explore their concerns, to imagine otherwise. I thus situate my thesis within discussions of contemporary feminist art and visual culture, in particular drawing on feminist approaches to photography and self-portraiture. Furthermore, I outline the current metageography of Western feminist thinking in relation to prevalent understandings of time and space. I navigate feminist genealogies across the so-called East-West divide and explain how I understand the term "postsocialist" in relation to Western feminist theories. In relation to that, I expand on the possible affinities between postcolonial and postsocialist feminist discourses and strike up a conversation with recent explorations of temporalities in queer theory. Finally, I ponder the possibilities and limits of self-referentiality. I thus lay

the groundwork for exploring the role of self-representational visual arts in creating forceful considerations of multiple, non-normative timelines and geopolitical location as important but often rather neglected axes of difference. Unless we bring the specificities of geopolitical locatedness into the discussion, we run the risk of remaining stuck in temporal models of unidirectional progress, masked as spatial difference.

## Art and identity: identification and disidentification

One of the core tenets of this thesis is that art is always already *about* identity, or rather identification (Jones 2012, 2). Drawing on Amelia Jones' work, I hope to offer a way of thinking that moves beyond binary models of identity in favour of multiple, intersectional and relational processes of identification, including the concept of "disidentification" (Muñoz 1999). In her recent book, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, Jones traces the development of beliefs about art that define it as a product of a self-contained psyche as well as the history of binary models for understanding identity that have emerged out of European colonizing and industrializing processes. These are models for what came to be understood as "identity politics" in the 1960s and 1970s, which contemporary feminist studies has become extremely critical of.[24] Through mapping this history, she claims that the work of art is "central to the Euro-American construction of the modern subject" (Jones 2012, 3), thus establishing an important link between the art world and the persistence of "beliefs" in art discourse specifically and visual culture more widely about identity and identifications, about who the subject "is". I find her critique of oppositional models of identity useful because it highlights the political imperative of accounting for the processes of identification and disidentification that still determine the way in which we give value to art as well as other bodies and cultural artefacts in the world more broadly. This also has important implications for my own project.

Following Amelia Jones's helpful overview, I use the terms "identifications" and "disidentifications" in this thesis rather than "identity"

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24 For recent debates on and reconsiderations of identity politics, see for example Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M.L. Moya (eds) Identity Politics Reconsidered (2006).

because they allow me to stress the fluidity of the concept of intersectional identity. Identifications are processes that are "relational, flowing among subjects" (Jones 2012, 8). This understanding builds on the work of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, who sees identification not as an essence but a *positioning* (Hall 1994) and Gloria Anzaldúa, who highlights the in-between status of identifications across class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in her theory of borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987). Other feminist, queer and anti-racist thinkers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), José Esteban Muñoz (1999) and Rosi Braidotti (1994; 2011) support these approaches as they have developed complex models of identification, drawing together relationality, intersectionality, hybridity and affect in resisting structural terms of simplistic binaries. However, as Sedgwick importantly reminds us, "it's far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking – and to expose their often stultifying perseveration – than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought" (Sedgwick 2003, 2).

In recent years, the concept of "disidentification" has been used as a theoretical tool to grasp intersections of gender and generation and to critically conceptualize political tensions among different feminist "waves" (Henry 2004; Dean 2008; Tuin 2011). This concept has also been related to intersectional processes of de/colonization (Fuss 1995) and to Marxist critiques of ideologies (Pêcheux 1983). Nina Lykke (forthcoming) has recently explored disidentification as an intersectional writing strategy. My understanding of the concept of "disidentification" is shaped by the work of performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz. In particular, Muñoz looks at the positionality of queers of colour through the analysis of the work of contemporary queer African-American and Latino performance artists. He sees "disidentification" as a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (1999, 11). Disidentification is thus a means of survival for those outside the racial and sexual mainstream in negotiating majority culture. They do so not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. It is thus a mode of critical cultural reception that interprets and unpacks hegemonic discourses and a mode of cultural production that turns these discourses into performances with worldmaking

political power to make a performative difference. In short, it is a kind of "working on and against" at the same time as it aims to transform a cultural logic from within. Through a study of the workings of disidentification, specifically addressing visual imagery and performance, Muñoz develops a new perspective on minority performance, survival and activism, positing disidentifying as a particularly minoritarian strategy.

While I tend to side with Amelia Jones to some extent in her scepticism about whether the minoritarian and majoritarian binaries are still so unambiguously clear in the contemporary world as they might appear in Muñoz's description, I do find his concept of "disidentification" useful in its emphasis on the performative quality within the logic of identification, the "shuffling back and forth between reception and production" (Muñoz 1999, 25) in negotiating tactical identifications within representational systems that aim to displace or ignore a marginalized subject. As a so-called third option between identification (as assimilation under the pressures of dominant ideology) and counteridentification (such as utopianism which, through its oppositionality in its attempt to break free, validates and reinforces the dominant ideology), disidentifying emerges as a workable strategy for both Anna-Stina Treumund and myself in our respective struggles for lesbian visibility in Estonian culture and a postsocialist feminist positioning within transnational feminist discourses. We are both in many ways working "on and against" the majority discourses in order to change the cultural logic from within, performing a sort of decoding of cultural fields from the perspective of our marginalized subject positions.

## Imagin(in)g selves: "what can a woman do with a camera?"

My venture into the topic of the genealogies of feminism and visual representations, defined in this thesis as the question of the relationship between representations and subjectivities, was quite genre specific. I began with an interest in self-portrait photography and the notion that being in charge of one's own image that self-portraiture implies yields agency and thus serves as a form of women's empowerment and provides a space for evoking social change. In this section, I will situate the concept and uses of "self-portrait" within feminist art discourses and previous research in visual culture studies, thus paving way towards my analysis of Anna-Stina

Treumund's self-portrait photography.

Although the origin of self-portraits is "always explained through male examples" (Borzello 2002, 21), women artists have a long history of using self-portraits as a vehicle for identity constructions, self-exploration and self-affirmation, representing themselves through their own bodies since the body is seen as a locus from which to explore their experiences of womanhood, motherhood, sexuality and so on. Furthermore, studies by feminist art historians (Nochlin 1970; Spence 1986; Holland, Spence and Watney 1986; Romero-Cesareo 1994; Spence 1995; Meskimmon 1996; Borzello 1998; Chadwick and Ades 1998; Rideal, Chadwick and Borzello 2002; Solomon-Godeau 2007) indicate that, for centuries, self-portraits have provided women artists with "an opportunity to explore a complex and unstable visual territory in which their subjectivity and lived experiences as women intersect with the visual language which has historically constructed 'woman' as object and other" (Chadwick 2002, 21).

Feminist artists' use of their own bodies, their own selves, to challenge and pose questions about women's identity and subjectivity and their role in society has by now been well-documented. Since the early 1970s, when women artists in the West mobilized the female body as the marker of a new sexual and cultural politics, they have continued to use the body to challenge social constructions of gender and sexuality. It was also at this time that the self-portrait photograph in particular became an important medium for artists from marginalized groups, for example, women, gays and lesbians, since it served as "a primary tool in the visibility politics, a visual statement of: 'I exist'" (Avgitidou 2003, 133). Self-portraits not only communicate "I exist", but also "I exist and I control how I am seen."

Due to their promise of showing or revealing what is "real", photographs have often been used to call for social change – whatever that might mean in different contexts – and Jo Spence, a pioneering British feminist photographer, has been one among many feminist artists who have found the format of photographic self-portraiture particularly useful for posing critical questions about women's identity, subjectivity and role in society. Spence, who also wrote important theoretical reflections on photography, famously posed the question: *what can a woman do with a camera?* She had a rather simple answer: a woman can use her camera to empower herself (Spence 1995). She was driven by the desire to eradicate the disparity between how we are seen and how we feel. Throughout her work, which

she developed into a phototherapeutic practice in which her body became a theatrical performance, Spence was interested in how we present ourselves as who we really are in terms of images and asked: why should it matter that we do? Since Spence saw identity as neither static nor unified in one essential self, only coming into being in relationship with others and through constant encounters with the representations around us, taking photographs of herself enabled her to give material form to her subjective self. It became an important means of deconstruction and a way to explore societal and relational connections in an attempt to break down the fiction presented as Woman.

This control exercised by the artist leads to important reflections about feminism, social stereotypes, female performance and the artist's identity. Thus, the self-portrait becomes "the artistic arm of the feminist slogan that the personal is the political" (Borzello 2002, 31). Interestingly, it has been claimed that many feminists and progressive/left photographers of the early 1980s[25] encountered a situation in which "the act of photographing someone had become so analysed as a relation of power that representation of persons became embargoed" (Evans 2000, 110) and therefore, allegedly turned to self-representation as the only politically acceptable way out. Although, as Jessica Evans points out, other possible reasons can be found for why a lot of the photographic work in the West in the late 1980s focused on the self and identity, there is a certain appeal to self-portraits as less threatening, as a more empowering and fair means of representing the human subject.

In addition to delineating the genre of self-portraiture, the term self-representation now encompasses a wide range of practices through which contemporary artists are enacting their personal and sexual identity and situating themselves in relation to social and cultural frameworks. The term implies active agency, often through deconstructive strategies or through the use of symbolic and metaphorical personas – to represent aspects of self. The specificities of the photographic medium, of the visual object, are also important to note because "the very language of self-representation, including its artistic languages, differs from medium to medium, genre to genre, and context to context" (Solomon-Godeau 2007, 338). In each instance self-representation requires a careful attention to the specificity

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25 For example, Jo Spence and her colleagues from the Hackney Flashers feminist photography collective.

of the visual object in question – its forms, its resources, its conditions of possibility, its location within concrete and material circumstance and historical determinations.

In the context of this thesis, I take photographic self-portrait or self-representation to refer to photographic artworks in which the artist herself is visually present. The different ways of being visually present have been very important for Anna-Stina Treumund to explore in her artwork. As I came to see it, her journey towards defining herself as a lesbian feminist artist began with self-portrait photography because art allows elsewheres and other ways of being and a camera became a handy tool for exploring just that. Not least importantly, while art generally allows us to become socially engaged and to pose questions, photography as a medium in particular offers opportunities to show "evidence" of different ways of whirling in this world or to stage imaginary personas or scenarios that bring parallel worlds into existence.

The popular digital turn to the self has brought about shifts in the way in which bodies are imagined and perceived, selves are performed and negotiated, people are monitored, by themselves and others. As Celia Lury has suggested in her book *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity,* the way in which we achieve our self-identities is changing (Lury 1998, 1). She elaborates on the emergence of a new type of "experimental individual", whom she sees as an extension of the classic, freely determining and self-responsible "possessive individual" of modern liberal democracies. According to Lury, vision and self-knowledge are "inextricably and productively intertwined in modern Euro-American societies" and photography "offers one way into an exploration of the historically specific and dynamic relations between seeing and knowing" (Lury 1998, 2). Furthermore, she asserts that photography has transformed our current self-understandings and acts as both a technological and perceptual extension to the new type of "experimental individual", insofar as photographs are not merely representative but enabling ways of seeing, which in contemporary culture has come to mean seeing photographically.

Lury also locates these changes in the nature of identity in what she describes as a current shift from a "synthetic" to a "prosthetic" culture. She suggests that in this culture "the subject as individual passes beyond the mirror stage of self-knowledge, of reflection of self, into that of self-extension" (Lury 1998, 3), referring to what Barthes calls "the advent of

myself as other" (Barthes 2000, 12). The prosthesis, which may be either mechanical or perceptual – we can easily think here of our contemporary attachment to digital cameras and the sharing of our lives on social network sites, which is becoming increasingly popular – is what enables that self-extension. To make her point even more pronounced, she says "[i]n adopting/adapting a prosthesis, the person creates (or is created by) a self-identity that is no longer defined by the edict 'I think, therefore I am'; rather, he or she is constituted in the relation 'I can, therefore I am'" (Lury 1998, 3). The transformation of a socially and naturally constructed individual into a technologically enabled one thus translates into a situation where the newly "experimental individual" has the potential and capability to perform in a hi-tech theatre of possible "selves to be". In exploring the "prosthetic", Lury relies on Baudrillard's thesis in *Simulacra and Simulation*, in particular his argument that technology has entered so deeply into our bodies that we can no longer understand prostheses simply as artificial extensions of our organic bodies, but need to think of the body as being technologically "modeled 'from inside'"(Baudrillard 1994, 101).

Since visuality, the way one looks, is an important mode of subjectivity, a mode of being in the world, I find that the norms and binaries that are commonly used to define us are at least partly constructed and fixed through photography and the multiple as well as contingent relations that photographs evoke and provoke. Photography has arguably become a central ideological marketplace of capitalist society, which offers us identities to inhabit by inviting us to contemplate the probabilities and possibilities of our lives through the systemic regime of the images it constantly constructs and circulates (Holland, Spence, and Watney 1986). Photographs are part and parcel of our "cultural imaginaries" (Dawson 1994) that entice us into a wide range of social relationships. The majority of public images, most of which are photographs, position and organize us on the basis of photographic conventions that sort out differences of gender, race, class, age, sexuality and so on, having "real" effects on us. This regime of images does not always live up to our needs or expectations as it is full of repetitions and various exclusions; thus, from an emancipatory perspective it becomes crucial to create counter-images and counter-stories. So when the dominant visual culture fails to reflect your experience, a common strategy has been to create your own images or search desperately for the few alternative ones that are out there.

Discussions of the visual necessarily evoke questions and anxieties about power; the study of visual cultures, including art photography and photography more broadly, has been and continues to be an unarguably feminist issue. In fact, feminism has "long acknowledged that visuality (the conditions of how we see and make meaning of what we see) is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture" (Jones 2003, 1). Feminist scholars who have considered the politics of representation within the fields of feminist film theory, photography and art history as well as cultural and media studies (Betterton 1987; Mulvey 1989; Evans and Hall 1999; Jones 2003) have often pointed out that not only do visual images present power relations in a narrative form but that these relations are embedded "within their very formal structure and in their conditions of distribution" (Jones 2003, 3). Thus, an alliance between visual culture studies, including studies of photography, and feminism makes sense since they share a common interest in positioning culture and art in a more general sense, without the pretentious capital A, within social and political contexts with the help of interdisciplinary methodologies. Moreover, feminism – which, it has to be acknowledged, is not an easily or singularly defined discourse and can mean and include many things; I am not interested in defining and policing its borders here – may be said to have played "a central role in the development of critical models of reading visual imagery in visually oriented arms of media, new media and cultural studies" (Jones 2003, 3), although its role is not always recognized as such.

In the most general sense of the word, representation refers to a process of using language and images to construct the world around us and make meaning from it (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 15). Throughout various debates in history, representations have been seen as reflecting the world as it is, mirroring it back to us as a form of mimesis or imitation, or they have been considered from a social constructionist point of view, which argues that the world is not simply reflected back to us through the systems of representation that we deploy, but we in fact make meaning of the material world through these systems in specific cultural contexts. When contemplating the visual, we can look at many different systems of representation. We can focus, for example, on a film, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement, or a television programme. Clearly, the rules and conventions of different means and forms of representation vary, as do the cultural meanings we attribute to them, and sometimes it

is not easy to distinguish between the idea of reflection or mimesis and representation as construction of the material world, especially when it comes to photography.

Interestingly, as Sturken and Cartwright point out, a lot of images that belong to the spheres of fine art, public art, advertising, popular culture, alternative media, the news media and science are produced through photographic or electronic technologies, a fact that is sometimes understated or overlooked (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 16). These images are photographs and should be viewed as such because there are certain important features and paradoxical moments that differentiate photographs from other kinds of images. More often than not, a camera image is still regarded as "an unmediated copy of the world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 16). Although the creation of a photograph through a camera lens always entails a certain degree of subjective choice through selection, framing and personalization, "[a]ll camera-generated images, be they photographic, cinematic, or electronic images (video or computer-generated), bear the cultural legacy of still photography which historically has been regarded as a more objective practice than, say, painting or drawing" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 16). The perception of camera-generated images as simultaneously subjective and objective thus forms one of the central tensions of photography.

The myth of photographic truth still haunts the common understandings and uses of photographs and renders them seemingly neutral in their structures of meaning. Susan Sontag aptly noted in her well-known work on photography: "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (Sontag 1977, 5). For example, in everyday settings photographs are often associated with the truth-value. They are commonly used as proof of certain events such as family gatherings or birthday parties having taken place or as evidence that someone was alive at a certain time and place in history. In the same vein, photography carries the burden of positivist science, which has used the photographic camera as a tool for establishing empirical truths, for registering reality, as machines were and often still are taken to be more reliable than humans at representing the world accurately. But clearly photographs are not simply mimetic representations of the world they show and can tell different "truths" depending on the social and historical context. They are produced and reproduced, displayed and redisplayed,

reduced, cropped, retouched, doctored, bought and sold, to specific and diverse effects in countless different contexts. Therefore, the conditions under which something is defined as a photograph and what that means may not be straightforward.

The confusion remains as to what photographs actually are. The ways to explore them are incredibly diverse, particularly considering the changing commercial and technological factors involved: new modes of production of photography, new types of audiences, and new spaces of consumption. On the one hand, photographs – especially amateur snapshots – are everywhere, yet on the other hand, they remain somewhat invisible, almost non-objects in their everyday ubiquity. We are involved in taking photographs, looking at them, carrying them around, keeping them in frames on the walls and shelves or carefully preserved in albums, sharing them with family and friends and, in fact, with the help of the Internet and mobile phones, with the whole world at the simple click of a mouse. What makes photographs elusive, then, despite their pervasive presence and "naturalized" commonality as everyday objects, is the fact that they are inextricably interwoven into the very practices of our daily lives, practices so routine that we are not always even aware of them.

As has been established by many theorists of photography, photographs are never just static objects that reflect back reality as it is. In fact, they do not have a clearly demarcated beginning and a predictable end. Ariella Azoulay has argued that photographs are not entities – which would suggest a certain kind of fixity and stability of a sovereign point of view – but events (Azoulay 2008; Azoulay 2010), the material outcome of which, produced out of an encounter, invariably contains both more and less than that which someone wished to inscribe into it. So, ontologically, photographs resemble actions rather than objects or products of work (Azoulay 2008). Furthermore, "the photo acts, thus making others act" (Azoulay 2008, 137). The photograph is not a freezing of a moment in time, it is an action that yields others' actions in unpredictable ways. It retains its event-ness even after being transferred into a computer or printed and framed, made to appear as if it is a final product of work. Importantly, it yields a different, undetermined and indeterminable array of ways of seeing.

It has been pointed out that feminism has had a somewhat uneasy relationship with photography, as feminist work on the politics of representation and the visual image "has tended to privilege *textual*

investigations based on the rhetoric of the image, drawing out the *effects* of representation in terms of ideology and power" (Evans 2000, 105). What this means is that images produced with the help of a camera lens often tend to be viewed as "visual constructions, as texts, like any other", as though photography were only "the effect or product of a set of determinations that are logically prior" (Evans 2000, 105), disregarding the relevance of the ways in which photographs are produced, distributed and used, what their movement and circulation involves and means. Thus, whatever the particular object under scrutiny in the earlier feminist analyses of images happened to be – a film, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement or television programme – "the politics of representation turns out to be the same politics" (Evans 2000, 105). Evans is thus importantly highlighting the possible limitations of sticking to only a representational approach to photography, i.e. analyzing photography as just texts and scripts. She calls for a consideration of the extent to which we can think about:

> the specificities of a medium, its conditions of production, distribution, consumption and practical use, without subsuming them under a more universalising assumption that since its products are "representations", this is only what we must analyse. When we are thinking about photography, we should keep in mind the way it is often discursively put to use in order to make appearances equate with reality; to reduce the field of what can be known to what is observable; to entice us with "evidence" for which viewers are interpolated as "witnesses". We should be wary of claims to "see clearly" and without distortion, for these are always entangled with power relations and with *a priori* frameworks that regulate the relationship of seeing to knowing. (Evans 2000, 107)

In this thesis, then, I want to consider a more nuanced approach to the political potentials of photography. Photographic history has often been investigated from a historiographic perspective, grounded in the tropes of traditional art history. In the light of current changes in the ways in which photography has become incredibly more widespread and accessible to most people, it is crucial to look at photographs not only in terms of artistic aesthetics or of scientific description – as many critics have done and still continue to do – but as cultural documents that shed light on historically, culturally and socially specific ways of seeing the world as well as the self inhabiting the world. I would argue that this also applies to art

photographs. As I will show throughout this thesis, they can be usefully analyzed as cultural documents or as "theoretical objects" (Bal 1999).

John Berger's well-known argument about "ways of seeing" resonates with what I call a relational approach to photography. Berger argues that images of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite. He emphasizes that "we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger 1972, 9), importantly establishing the connection between the image and its spectator. Taking an image seriously requires reflecting on how it positions you, the viewer, in relation to it. Furthermore, we should equally importantly pay attention to the practices of photography, not just focusing on the images and what they represent, but on the embodied social practices and performances involved, the ways of looking for, framing and taking photographs, posing for cameras as well as editing, displaying and circulating photographs.

Photography evokes questions of time which are always related to space and understandings of change. Conceptualizing photography as action means that, due to its indeterminacy, it can be seen as oriented towards the future, rather than just tied to the past. This aspect of temporality in photography also resonates with my discussion of the "lag" discourse and with Anna-Stina Treumund's art photography in particular. Following Ariella Azoulay's insightful analyses of the aesthetic and political in photography, I want to highlight that photography is "a sampling or a trace of a space of human relations whose existence cannot be reduced to a mere status of raw material or just objects of an artistic image" (Azoulay 2010, 251). I see photographs as *spatio-temporal events* that open up space for an understanding of the political as "a space of human relations exposed to each other in public" (Azoulay 2010, 251). Viewing photography in this way helps to establish a relational approach to Anna-Stina Treumund's art that I wish to develop.

For Anna-Stina Treumund, her camera, which she always uses in a very careful, planned and considered way, enables her to take action, to visualize her personal politics. It allows her to whirl in the world, to open herself up to the other, to create a subjective space around herself to relate to the other. Figuratively, her whirling takes place within the frame of the photograph.

## Performativity and the politics of in/visibility

Engagement with Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork during my fieldwork gradually established the sense that self-portraits are not always bound by identity politics as I had expected. Instead, self-portraits have the potential to offer new understandings of gender, sexuality, difference, dis/identifications and, importantly for my argument, new configurations of feminist imaginaries. Importantly, representing oneself, both in art as well as in feminist discourses, evokes questions about performativity and the politics of in/visibility which I will take up and elaborate on in this section.

The idea of self-representation, which in photography often amounts to a rather exaggerated mode of performative self-imagining, seemed to me provocative, both simple and complex at the same time, when I started this project. As Amelia Jones has pointed out, it is no wonder that "the practitioners of such dramatically self-performed images are all women, not aligned with Euro-U.S. whiteness, and/or otherwise queer-identified in some way" (Jones 2002, 948). Photographic self-performance often transforms conceptions of the subject and thus "opens up an entirely new way of thinking about photography and the racially, sexually and gender-identified subject" (Jones 2002, 948), holding out huge potential for marginalized subjects.

This brings me to "performativity" as another term for which I need to provide a working definition. Performativity is an interdisciplinary term that has been picked up in philosophy, theatre and literary studies, cultural studies and feminism as well as queer theory. Many scholars have made use of the linguistic notion of performativity, first developed by J. L. Austin (1975) and later revised by theorists from Jacques Derrida (1988) to Judith Butler (1990; 1993), to open up the process of meaning production with respect to narrative/temporal arts (such as theatre and film), or in relation to the experience of subjectivity and identity in the postmodern world. It is often used to name the capacity of speech, as a production of the "speaking body" (Felman 1980), as well as other non-verbal forms of expressive action, to perform a type of constructed identity. Judith Butler introduced the notion of gender performativity, which constitutes her elaboration of Jacques Derrida's notion of performativity through Michel

Foucault's understanding of the productive effects of regulatory power. Butler claims that gender should not be understood as an essence, a set of static attributes, but rather as a "doing", a performative enactment. She describes performativity as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (Butler 1993, 3).

In the context of this thesis, I also consider performativity to be the capacity of art – of self-portrait photographs – to perform and thereby explore types of constructed identities pertaining to gender and sexuality. Anna-Stina Treumund's photographs, like all self-portraits, are decidedly performative. She purposefully and self-consciously stages the self in her artistic practices and hence problematizes the idea that a portrait is meant to convey some "truth" about the subject's inner life. The performance of the body as an artistic practice is a mode of textual inscription. By performing particularized bodies, marked in terms of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and/or class, artists may dramatically unveil the processes by which non-normative subjects are conventionally excluded from the canonical narratives of art history.

Considering the performative dimensions of meaning-making more broadly is also important for my work. Interpretation is after all, as has often been argued, a kind of performance (Jones and Stephenson 1999b). It is a process of enactment, a mode of communication that never resides in one place. Adopting the notion of performativity as a critical strategy within the study of visual culture "enables a recognition of interpretation as a fragile, partial, and precarious affair and, ultimately, affords a critique of art criticism and art history as they have been traditionally practiced" (Jones and Stephenson 1999a, 2).

Like many feminist scholars engaged with contemporary art practices, I also see art as an active and forceful mode of visualization and materialization, a vital means of articulating and producing the real (Meskimmon 2010; Jones 2012). I see art as a social practice that involves power relations and ideological practices, rather than just an amalgamation of elements such as production, criticism, funding, stylistic sources, marketing, publications and so on (Pollock 1988). Moreover, art allows us to create elsewheres and imagine otherwise. It has the potential to push the boundaries of imagination and change the way we imagine, understand and participate in the world and relate to others who are different from ourselves. I rely heavily on this potential of artworks here: they do more

than simply represent and mirror the world back to us. They engage in the critical dialogue between imagination, embodied ethics and locational identity, enabling us to encounter difference and imagine change, creating space for something new to emerge.

The question of self-portraiture in feminist and lesbian feminist art as a critical intervention into representational economies that have defined marginalized subjects negatively also brings up the question of whether performing oneself, staging the self in front of the camera, necessarily entails cultural visibility. In Western societies, discursive visibility is often equated with power: to be visible not only equates with having power, but it also means, more generally, to exist. The question of visibility and the politics of representation have been of immense importance for feminist, post-colonial and minority struggles. In these arenas, visibility has been "less a matter of becoming physically visible than a matter of attaining discursive attention and recognition, of which being visible simply serves as a metaphor" (Chow 2010, 64). Put in these terms, visibility connotes attention and recognition, which is desirable to many but only accessible to a few. This carries with it a sense of injustice that needs to be challenged politically.

In the feminist cultural studies of late 20th century identity politics, visibility emerged as the privileged strategy that various groups used in order to lay claim to demands for social justice, forged by the celebration and reclamation of the signifiers of difference that dominant ideologies had once used to discriminate against and define minority identities negatively. The focus was not always on social visibility as "a measure of recognition" but also on the "visible performance of difference as a locus of political agency" (Walker 2001, 7). For instance, the Black Power Movement's slogan "Black is Beautiful" emphasized visible signifiers such as skin colour and ethnic styles, which could also include dress codes and hairdos. However, while this strategy of claiming or reclaiming is often affirming, it sometimes leads to the dropping of relevant social categories and analytical perspectives such as critical gender approach from the agenda. For instance, black feminists have pointed out that in the context of the Black Power Movement it is often women who are expected to perform the cultural codes in the process of empowerment and resignification of racial markers, such as hairstyles. Black women's straightened afro-hair might be perceived as a betrayal of their race and the movement, or as an aspiration to look more white.

Consequently, in this issue black women are fixed in a racialized position and denied the fluidity of a feminine gendered identity, i.e. this reading does not allow for an interpretation that straightened hair might be just about a woman's desire and right to play with her hairstyle however she wants (Kawesa 2006).

In this regard, Peggy Phelan has also raised an important question about whether visibility is indeed a desirable goal for subjects seeking to reject or transform their marginalized position (Phelan 1993). Adopting a more psychoanalytic perspective, Phelan underlines some problems with representational visibility politics that are characteristic of progressive cultural activists who have emphasized the need to increase and expand the visibility of racial, ethnic and sexual others. She draws attention to the implicit assumptions of both so-called progressives and conservatives about the connection between representational visibility and (political) power:

> Visibility is a trap …. Yet it retains a certain political appeal. Visibility politics have practical consequences; a line can be drawn between a practice (getting someone seen or read) and a theory (if you are seen it is harder for "them" to ignore you, to construct a punitive canon); the two can be reproductive. (1993, 6–7)

Arguably, the "ideology of the visible" presumes a linear trajectory between representation and identity ("what one sees is who one is"). Phelan thus attempts to highlight the fact that the common understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity and liberation tends to be limited and limiting and calls for a deconstruction of "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility" (Phelan 1993, 6). Interestingly, she claims that power can also be found in remaining unmarked, unspoken and unseen, and suggests a more nuanced account of the power of visibility.

The trope of "visibility"/"invisibility" incorporates the experience of marginalization and privileged identities in a way that the trope "marked"/"unmarked" does not. As Walker argues, "unmarked" has connotations of invisibility, but "lacks the sense of erasure behind the term invisibility because it is associated with privilege" (Walker 1993, 868). "Unmarked" signifies the anonymity of privilege rather than social and political marginalization. In its technical usages within feminist and cultural theories, the apparatus "marked"/"unmarked" designates the way

in which minority identities are constructed as "marked" while dominant identities are positioned as "the unmarked generic" – most usually white, male and heterosexual (Walker 2001, 14–15). In some ways, the "visibility"/"invisibility" trope is less sensitive to power relations than "marked"/"unmarked" because it does not indicate whether the condition of visibility is a function of self-representation or of attribution, whereas marking implies both noticing and attributing. However, these binaries are not always neatly aligned; in fact, they are entangled.

Overemphasis on visibility as a key to understanding "true" identities allows us to "imagine that we can 'see' difference and that we always 'know' to what racial, gender, class or sexual orientation group someone belongs" (Moya 2006, 107). Paradoxically then, seeing visible differences may not automatically equate with knowing. Reiterating this, Rey Chow cites Gilles Deleuze to argue that visibility is not to be confused with visible objects and that just as "visibilities are never hidden, they are none the less not immediately seen or visible" (Deleuze 1988, 57 cited in Chow 2010, 66). Furthermore, individuals can negotiate both their marked and unmarked characteristics, but what gets foregrounded is contextual (Brekhus 1998, 48). For instance, white women embody both a white unmarked racial identity and a marked gender identity, yet these identities are not always foregrounded in the same ways, at the same times.

In a sense, my thesis is framed by attempts to intervene in the problematics of visibility/invisibility on at least two levels. On the one hand, there is Anna-Stina Treumund and her insistence to focus on the politics of lesbian visibility in Estonian context. On the other hand, I myself struggle to articulate the importance of making postsocialist feminist imaginaries more visible within transnational feminist discourses. We both perform and represent ourselves in certain ways and rely on certain understandings of visibility politics. Treumund has enacted her body in/as the work of art to insist upon the specific identifications of the subjects who participate in and give shape to culture. My own hope has been to analyze her self-portraiture in order to show in particular the importance of new ways of interpreting feminist art and by extension feminist thought in relation to the lag discourse, pertaining to the relationship between postsocialist Europe and Western hegemonic discourses.

### Feminism and geopolitics as an axis of difference

*I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me… I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice – that space of theorising.*

<div align="right">- bell hooks (1989, 16)</div>

Angela Dimitrakaki has called for "a rigorous analysis of space and the subjectivities it produces, destabilizes or consolidates, and governs" in order to explore the silent connections between cultural spaces that "remain asymmetrical within the wider field of hegemonic discourses" (2005, 271). It is a call that responds to my desire in this project to conceive and reconfigure postsocialist feminist imaginaries. In my experience, thinking about Eastern Europe, is incredibly challenging. At the same time as it appears to be unstable, contradictory, disappearing, re-appearing again, queer-ish, it also remains bounded by temporal marking, by 1989 and the end of the Cold War, which was supposed to have done away with all the divisions between East and West, yet time and again this marking works to reify these resurfacing divisions. How does it happen that even though there are profound similarities between people's experiences in different cultural, social and geopolitical locations in current neoliberal times, they still tend to materialize into subordinating hierarchies? How can we think beyond the tired and tiring discourse of Eastern Europe as "lagging behind"? How can we avoid the reproduction of Western stories within feminist imaginaries?

As I have briefly sketched out in the *Introduction*, I think it is immensely important to pay closer attention to the role of "metageography" in shaping feminist discourses. Transnational feminist studies have tended to exclude perspectives from the former second world, non-Western Europe, prioritizing the dialogue between the first and the third world and thus cementing a binary between the Global North and the Global South. Postsocialist space gets lost because it is "largely presumed to be a process of democratization or Europeanization and thus uncritically positioned vis-à-vis the first world" (Suchland 2011, 839). A number of feminist scholars from the former Eastern Europe have recently argued

for the need to "bring the second world in" (Grabowska 2012) so as to challenge the binary hierarchical frameworks that are continuously being perpetuated by transnational feminist scholarship and arguing for the importance of the role of the second world in the ongoing formulations of global understandings of feminism and gender theory (Lukić, Regulska, and Zaviršek 2006; Blagojević 2009; Pejić 2009; Suchland 2011; Grabowska 2012).

Often, I feel, these attempts have had little effect as it seems impossible to escape the use of hegemonic Western formulae for advancing gender equality and other democratic rights as a yardstick against which the "advancement" of the former second world is measured. In this, I side with Clare Hemmings, who has convincingly argued that contemporary discourses tend to frame gender equality as "Western, capitalist, and democratic, and the West, capitalism, and democracy themselves as sites that create the possibility of, and reproduce, rather than hinder, gender equality" (Hemmings 2011, 9). This framing of gender equality is based on a temporal fantasy of "a shared oppressive past, already moved beyond in the West, but culturally present for the South and the East" (Hemmings 2011, 149). In such a framing, gender equality and feminism are described in the former Eastern-European or postsocialist context as a Western trademark that can be exported globally.

One explanation for the absence of Eastern European perspectives from feminist theory is Eastern Europe's historical immersion in Western culture, although it is not perceived as belonging to the "West" yet/anymore. In the context of gender, it bears the imprint of the Soviet Union and its formal gender equality ideology, while also saturated with sexualized consumer culture and essentialist gender ideologies. It boasts high employment rates for women, but the women remain wary of gender equality. Yet its difference from the "West" is not sufficient for it to be a postcolonial "Other". The "grey zone of Europe", as Eastern Europe is sometimes nicknamed, is neither in nor out. It is situated somewhere in between (Pachmanová 2010, 37–38). It shifted, after all, from being the West of the Soviet bloc to becoming the East of the West (cf. Kivimaa 2009, 15). This period is not characterized by a simple replacement of one ideology with another, as the metaphor of transition would imply, but by a multiplicity of co-existing viewpoints and anxieties about location, globalization, ideology, nation and, above all, the aspiration to "return to the West" (e.g. Rosengren, Lauristin and Vihalemm

1997) or, more accurately, to be accepted in the West as Western. These paradoxes do not fit into the pre-existing frames of reference of Western feminism.

The irony is that the issue of locatedness, of naming and reflecting on the place from which one speaks, has become one of the epistemological foundations of feminist theory and gender knowledge over the past few decades. In other words, the shift towards differences and the local has occurred while Western feminist theory has remained hegemonic. Since its inception, the concept of a "politics of location" (Rich 1986) has been aimed at fostering reflection on and responsibility for how feminists know and act within the locations they inhabit, reproduce and transform. Focusing on the politics of location has emerged as a strategy for thinking beyond the construction of simplistic essentialist positions, both individual and collective feminist subjects. As Mary Eagleton states "[t]here is a move from the encouragement to claim an 'I', a subjecthood, certain rights; to an awareness of difference, how one person's rights might be the next person's further exploitation; to a position where any collective identity as 'women' is radically questioned..." (Eagleton 2000, 301). This has a bearing on how we write and produce knowledge as feminists.

Since Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who laid out the theoretical premise for "political sisterhood" and provided an early critique of bourgeois-patriarchal ideology, the politics of location and experience with a privileged focus on the embodied self has served as the anchoring point and ground of validation for feminist theory. In her often-cited piece, *Notes toward a Politics of Location*, Adrienne Rich takes this idea further by considering the experiences of women of colour and lesbians within feminism. She argues for the importance of "[r]ecognizing our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted," in particular taking her own "whiteness as a point of location" for which she "needed to take responsibility" (Rich 1986, 219). By deconstructing the hegemonic use of the word "woman", Rich simultaneously questions the effects of racism and homophobia inherent within the women's movement in the United States. In doing so, she highlights the fact that, although white women can be marginalized as women, they also marginalize others. For Rich, "a struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability" (1986, 211) is embodied and material and thus has to begin with the body – the body which has "more than one identity" (1986, 215), which takes us away

from "lofty and privileged abstraction" (1986, 213), back to specificity, "to reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual – a woman" (1986, 214). Rich's framework of analysis extends the foundational category of "experience" by emphasizing diversity and multiple power locations. Importantly, attention to the politics of location then brings into focus the differences that exist between women despite sharing common situations and experiences, and cautions feminists against the perils of speaking "for" other women from any universalist "we" perspective. However, on a more critical note, Caren Kaplan points out that "[a] politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be reestablished and reaffirmed" (1994, 139). Thus, she questions conventional oppositions between global and local, Western and non-Western that Rich's formulations uphold and argues that Rich conflates Western and white, reinscribing the centrality of white women's position within Western feminism.

These discussions of the politics of location are paralleled by the writings of Donna Haraway (1988; 1991), who argues that scientific and scholarly knowledge is not value-neutral and disinterested, but is to be understood as embedded in its contexts of production, which include the researcher subject's location in time, space, body, historical and societal power relations as well as the research technologies as part of the research process. In short, "[f]eminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge" (Haraway 1991, 188), which allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints. "Situated knowledges" are marked knowledges that produce "maps of consciousness" reflecting the various categories of gender, class, race and nationality of the researcher (Haraway 1991, 111). This perspective not only enables and encourages feminist researchers to bring their own particular location and position into the research, but demands that they do so before any discussion of another's reality can be brought in.

Moreover, understanding repression and resistance as dialectical, bell hooks emphasizes the necessity of material displacement for rethinking one's location in shifting power relations, albeit from the point of view of marginality rather than centrality. She highlights the political and productive potential of margins, which she refers to as "this space of radical openness", "a profound edge", a site of political resistance to hegemony (hooks 1989, 206). As she suggests, there are no fixed meanings attached to specific locations, nothing is intrinsically positive or negative, inside

or outside because centres and margins have been historically produced. Like hooks, Mohanty speaks from a marginalized position which for her "forces and enables specific modes of reading and knowing the dominant" (Mohanty 1995, 82). She uses the term "politics of location" to refer "to the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition for contemporary US feminists" (Mohanty 1995, 68). She articulates the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of locations and modes of knowing and knowledges that arise from them.

Questions of location and space always inevitably bring up questions of time. In "Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space", Doreen Massey indicates that the conventional conceptions of the geographies of globalization are not in fact spatial, but temporal. These conventions tend to neutralize difference and erase those distinctive enunciative positions which can redress power relations between various centres and peripheries. As Massey argues:

> Most evidently, the standard version of the story of modernity – as a narrative progress emanating from Europe – represents a discursive victory of time over space. That is to say that differences which are truly spatial are interpreted as being differences in temporal development – differences in the stage of progress reached. Spatial differences are reconvened as temporal sequence. (Massey 1999)

Massey is clearly concerned with the limits of cultural geography's ability to address globalization through the logic of stages of development that construct the centre – broadly termed the West – as the origin, the most advanced. In the context of my thesis, this argument indeed explains how the mechanisms that generate the "lagging behind" mode that Eastern Europe is perceived to live in are created and maintained.

When taking up this question within the histories of feminist art practices, Marsha Meskimmon finds that contemporary feminist art discourses are similarly plagued by a "dependency on temporal models masquerading as spatial awareness" (Meskimmon 2007, 324). Importantly, Meskimmon delineates the difference between a temporal mode and a spatial mode:

> In a temporal mode, international connections are "mapped" through a linear sequence of origin, influence, and development.

> This timeline inevitably justifies mainstream interpretations of feminist art by reading differences *in terms* of progress narratives. Where works differ significantly from the norm, they do not call the definitions of the center into question, but instead are cast as less advanced and "derivative" or marginalized into invisibility as inexplicable unrelated phenomena – perhaps just not "feminist" or not "art". Thinking, spatially, however, we can admit the coexistence in time of locationally distinct narratives and connect disjointed temporalities, thus asking vital questions concerning networks of relation, processes of exchange, and affinities of meaning. (Meskimmon 2007, 324)

So rather than reproduce an uncritical chronology, I want to argue for a critical cartography in order to remap our engagement with the world as situated participants in dialogue with difference, to begin "a process of conceptual decolonization" (Meskimmon 2007, 325). Common to a certain kind of US-based feminist art practice and discourse, which is taken as an unmarked norm, uncritical chronology problematically does not allow for differences within and beyond the US American context and assumes that everyone else will inevitably catch up with the "feminist revolution".

Recently, many Eastern and Central European scholars in various fields have taken up the question of how to find interpretative frameworks that would not be teleologically biased, that would not always necessarily start from setting up Euro-centric or West-centric comparative structures, that would not fix Western arrangements and developments as norms to be followed by other regions of the world (Kuus 2004; Mudure 2007; Pejić 2009; Pachmanová 2010; Tlostanova 2010; Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011b; Annus 2011; Tlostanova 2012).

These attempts to uncover the imbalanced power relations between scholars from Eastern and Central Europe and scholars in the West, who are seen as producing widely circulating "master narratives", bear a close resemblance to the efforts of postcolonial critics to expose and heal "the epistemic violence of imperialism" (Emberley 1993, 5) and to challenge the expectation to subscribe to the unifying intellectual traditions of Euro-America (Sangari 2002). Scholars from the third world talk about "asymmetric ignorance" (Chakrabarty 2000) or "sanctioned ignorances" (Spivak 1988, 287) to characterize the epistemic relations between hardly dislocatable centres and peripheries, contesting the power that the former holds over the latter.

In this thesis, I want to relate the question of geopolitics of knowledge to feminist discussions and visual arts in particular. Shifting the tenor of discussion is an incredibly complex process, although we are often forced to contend that Eastern Europe gets left out of Western feminist discussions. My hope is to contest the fantasy of the lag between Western and former Eastern Europe within feminist theorizing through a micro scale focus on the deeply personal and political artwork of Anna-Stina Treumund.

## Affinities between postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives

*The geographical imagination is far too pervasive and important a fact of intellectual life to be left alone to geographers.*

- David Harvey (1995, 161)

As I have already highlighted, along the changing local-global axis, the specificity of the Eastern European positioning and the postsocialist condition tends to disappear. Politics of location as a tool for critical intervention is defused in the case of the former Eastern Europe because of its purported identification with the West, even if marginal within it. Much of feminist research, by Western and Eastern European scholars alike, seems to take categories of difference, such as "Western" or "Eastern European" for granted, without attempting a relational reading of how such difference is constructed in the first place, or to what end. Consequently, as is familiar from many postcolonial feminist accounts, "the descriptive labels that mark different women also often end up naturalising these differences" (Sarkar 2004, 321). In this section, I want to spell out some of the affinities between postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives because I believe drawing on some of the similarities and differences between the two contexts will help to highlight the importance of paying closer attention to geopolitical locatedness as an axis of difference.

Despite many similarities between the way in which the former second and third world become positioned in relation to the first, there is no easy alliance[26] between postcolonial thought, which has been rather well-

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26  The most frequently cited article on this topic is "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique" by David Chioni Moore (2001). Recently, the Journal of Post-colonial Writing dedicated a special issue to this topic (volume 48, issue 2, 2012).

established since the 1980s, and the postsocialist context, which still seems to be searching for its theoretical grounding, at least when it comes to feminist theory. Traditionally, postcolonial theory, which was largely developed in North America and Western Europe, has been applied to the (ex-)colonies of various capitalist empires representing "the bad conscience of Western civilization" (Annus 2011, 24) or, in the Cold War order of things, to the so-called third world. Russia and its colonies could not easily fit into this picture because Russia was not Western enough and the European parts of its colonies were not non-Western at all.

Postcolonial theory has evolved a sophisticated theoretical apparatus for the investigation of the power imbalance, economic as well as intellectual, between the West and the rest and it would be a logical theoretical paradigm to employ in order to illuminate the postsocialist condition. Indeed, postcolonialism and postsocialism are both concerned with legacies of imperial power, dependence, resistance and hybridity (cf. Moore 2001, 112). For instance, Gayatri Spivak (2006, 828) concedes the appropriateness of postcolonial terminology for the former Soviet sphere of influence.

Bringing together scholarship on postcolonialism and postsocialism – as both problematize the use of "post," and plumb the power relationships sometimes obscured by the transnational traffic in theory – could be a very productive avenue, but one that has found relatively little application thus far. Although scholars of the former Eastern Europe have not embraced postcolonialism, for various political reasons, there have been productive debates about this theoretical cross-pollination (e.g. Moore 2001; Annus 2011). The attempt to connect the postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives makes sense on several levels because there are certain key terms and concepts that relate to both postcolonial and postocialist contexts. For example, Kołodziejczyk and Şandru's list of key terms that have already been productively explored in postcolonial studies includes: "structures of exclusion/inclusion (the centre/periphery model and theorizations of the liminal and "in-between"); formations of nationalism, structures of othering and representations of difference; forms and historical realizations of anti-colonial/anti-imperial struggle; the experience of trauma (involving issues of collective memory/amnesia and the rewriting of history); resistance as a complex of cultural practices; concepts such as alterity, ambivalence, self-colonization, cultural geography, dislocation, minority and subaltern cultures, neocolonialism, orientalization, transnationalism" (2012, 113).

However, as Annus (2011, 19) observes, often the discussion of affinities between postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives stops with just the acknowledgement of the utility of postcolonial analysis in postsocialist contexts. Many existing texts limit their statements to one discipline, such as economics (e.g. Kandiyoti 2002) or literature (e.g. Kelertas 2006). Most interestingly, these analyses have not deconstructed the power differential between the "West" and the "East" in knowledge production.27 Annus ironically speaks about the disconnection between the isolated "locals" and ill-informed outside observers that still characterizes writing about the former Eastern Europe (Annus 2011, 18).

Yet, this is more than we can find in postcolonial theory. As Kołodziejczyk and Şandru point out, "in the postcolonial scholarly arena per se, the intersections between these two paradigms [postcolonial and postsocialist] continue to be of marginal significance" (2012, 113). Blagojević explains that we need to deconstruct "not only the theoretical universalism of the core but also the universalism of post-colonial theory" (2009, 55). Others have used stronger metaphors: Moore speaks of silence (2001, 115), Tlostanova of a void (2012, 131). For example, Shohat quotes almost every geographical area (including the USA) except the former Soviet sphere as postcolonial (1992, 111) and only acknowledges the former Soviet Union as a source of hope for "Third World peoples". Standing between the First and Third World seems to render postsocialist Eastern Europe inconvenient or invisible. At times, indeed, the postsocialist countries of Europe (especially the Balkans) are referred to via "Third-World" frames of reference, but then in rather derogatory, racialized terms, not in an attempt to trace similarities between them and the postcolonial space more broadly (cf. e.g. the politically influential R. Kaplan 1993). In short, the resonance between postcolonial feminist epistemologies and Eastern European experience (in relation to Western feminism and its temporal othering of Eastern Europe) is yet to be productively explored.

What makes a critical application of postcolonialism especially relevant for Eastern Europe is its complex and continuing process of (self-)colonization: in rejecting the former colonizer (Soviet Union, Russia), the region has constituted itself as a periphery of the "West" (cf. Blagojević 2009, 34). In Moore's perceptive words, "postcolonial desire from Riga to Almaty fixates

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27 For example, Chari and Verdery (2009) address the disciplinary gaps of the Cold War era, not those of East-West.

not on the fallen master Russia but on the glittering Euramerican MTV-and-Coca-Cola beast that broke in. Central and Eastern Europeans type this desire as a return to Westernness that once was theirs" (2001, 118). This desire for "Westernness" is perhaps one of the reasons why Eastern Europeans are uncomfortable with the postcolonial frame of reference, which seems to relegate them to the periphery instead of the desired centre. Several authors from Eastern Europe have written about "self-colonization" in relation to the geopolitical positioning of the former second world. Most notably, authors like Alexander Kiossev (1999) and Bojana Pejić (2005) disclose the "technologies" of "self-colonization" or the "(self-)production of otherness". As Pejić writes: "We, as the margins or the others, actually produce the center ourselves and hence make it the center"; and she adds: "I am interested in questioning our share in the constitution of ourselves as marginal and/or peripheral" (cited in Hock 2009, 27). Furthermore, (self-) colonization continues in the guise of the transfer of neoliberal economic and social policies, which, among other things, have serious consequences for gendered realities and feminism (e.g. Marling 2010).

Yet caution is warranted before conflating different theoretical paradigms and concepts. We also need to heed Anne McClintock (1992) who, talking about postcolonialism, questions the viability of the prefix "post-" when colonial legacies are anything but gone. Eastern Europe, as both a part of the Eurocentric tradition, and marginalized within it, "the Other within", cannot automatically copy postcolonial deconstructions (Hock 2009). This is why Eastern European feminists have described Eastern Europe as an "in-between" or "zeugmatic space" (Mudure 2007) between East and West, indicating that cohesion with either is not really possible.

We thus need to be careful about merely applying yet another Western theory to yet another terrain, re-creating the old imbalance of the Western theorists and the native raw material (Mohanty 1988; cf. Suchland 2011, 854). In this spirit, Tlostanova suggests that instead of arguing about how well Western theories of postcolonialism can be applied in the postsocialist context, we need "true intersectionality" to open up a real dialogue, "not a comparative, but … rather an 'imparative' – from the Latin *imparare* (to learn in the atmosphere of plurality) – approach" (2012, 131). According to her, this would shift the emphasis from using ready-made discourses and theories that are always based on Western ideals to a mutual learning process, attending to "various local histories marked by colonial and

imperial differences (or their combination) within modernity/coloniality"
(2012, 132). According to Tlostanova, it is important to make a distinction
between "colonial difference" and "imperial difference". I find her description
of these terms incredibly helpful:

> The colonial difference refers to the differential between the
> capitalist empires of modernity (the heart of Europe) and their
> colonies, which became the third world in the 20th century.
> This is the absolute other of the first world, translated into the
> concept of the west and, today, the global north, characterized by
> market economy and (neo-)liberal democratic societies, dispersed
> geographically but united economically. The imperial difference
> refers to the various losers that failed to or were prevented by
> different circumstances and powers from fulfilling their imperial
> mission in modernity, thus taking second-class places. They were
> intellectually, epistemically or culturally colonized by the winners
> (Great Britain, France, Germany and the US today) and developed
> a catching-up logic, a whole array of psychological hang-ups,
> schizophrenic collective complexes, ideologies of the besieged
> camp or, alternatively, of victory in defeat. (2012, 134)

So when I am talking about Western feminist theories being hang up
on a lag discourse that produces postsocialist perspectives as belated and
backward in relation to those of the West, it is important to acknowledge
that this problem is part of a wider set of issues. In order to find new ways
of getting at these complex issues, Tlostanova suggests beginning from
"the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge growing out of the local
histories, subjectivities and experiences" (Tlostanova 2012, 132). She calls
this approach decolonial[28] (cf. Tlostanova 2010; Mignolo and Tlostanova
2006). Central to the decolonial approach is the concept of 'coloniality'
coined by Anibal Quijano (2000) and developed by Walter Mignolo, Nelson
Maldonado-Torres, Maria Lugones and other members of the decolonial
collective (Mignolo and Escobar 2009). In brief, the term 'coloniality' refers
to 'colonial situations' in the present in which despite the eradication
of colonial administrations from the capitalist world-system, cultural,

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capitalist world-system, cultural, political, sexual, economic and epistemic exploitation of subordi-
nate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant groups persists.

political, sexual, economic and epistemic exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant groups persists. In her discussion, Tlostanova finds that decolonial option and the concept of coloniality can act "as a common ground for postcolonial and postsocialist experiences" (2012, 132). In light of the recent discussions of the "coloniality of power", Tlostanova further suggests that rather than study and analyze existing (post)colonialist phenomena and processes and keeping the boundary between the studied object and the studying subject (like postcolonial studies have done so far in her reading), the decolonial approach helps "to take any research through the scholar into the world and deal with problems not with disciplines" (Tlostanova 2012, 134).

Based on my own previous research experience, it is incredibly productive to attempt to take a decolonial approach to research material and "learn in the atmosphere of plurality", exploring the resonances between postsocialist and postcolonial contexts through a personal politics of location. For example, together with my occasional co-author, postcolonial scholar Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, we began thinking about our location, the literal and metaphorical places from which we speak and write, when we were inspired to write a paper entitled *Becoming Non-Swedish* (Koobak and Thapar-Björkert 2012) as a result of our extended discussions on visibilities and invisibilities in our experiences as migrant women (Suruchi from India and me from Estonia) living and working in Sweden. This led further to reflections on the politics of location and how our geopolitical location informs the way in which we position ourselves in our research and writing – and to another paper (Thapar-Björkert and Koobak forthcoming). Our conversations arose from our friendship and shared experiences of living in Sweden as "non-Swedes", disidentifying with Western feminist academia through our specific postcolonial and postsocialist positions. These discussions generated a productive dialogue on the methodological and epistemological dilemmas endemic to research work. Not only did our postcolonial and postsocialist positioning give us an analytical tool to resist hegemonic practices in largely white Western academia and everyday life, but it also foregrounded the importance of intersectionality in the way we write. Our shared perception of being both "similar" and "different" in our positioning vis-à-vis the Swedish context enabled us to bring the commonalities between us into sharper focus and brought us together to reflect on our ever-shifting sense of identity and place. We found that

our outsider/insider location was a "space for theorising" (hooks 1989) and for articulating multi-layered subject positions. In order to do that, it was indeed important for us to begin with the body and the geopolitics of knowledge.

In this thesis, I draw on Madina Tlostanova's point about art as an important starting point for decolonization. It is indeed in the arts, cinema, theatre and fiction that we can find "[t]he most revealing instances of this complex intersection of postcommunist, postimperial and postcolonial discourses and imaginaries" (2012, 138), not in scholarly publications or official state policies. She explains further:

> In contrast with postcolonial countries whose artists, writers and intellectuals have to negotiate and subvert the dominant western tradition and the local indigenous ones, decolonial art in the world of imperial difference and its secondary colonial difference is more complex due to the multiplicity and contradictoriness of the colonizing agents, impulses and influences. The national brands of modernity today in the newly independent states add a specific flavour to the global coloniality of being and of knowledge that decolonial artists and writers incorporate critically into their works. As a result we face a stratification of colonialities, and postcolonial/postsocialist subjects have to negotiate even more numerous traditions, cultures and influences. (Tlostanova 2012,138)

While the decolonial sensibilities that Tlostanova is talking about are already emerging in the arts, it is equally important to start developing academic, theoretical language that would be capable of understanding and analysing this phenomena. In this respect, developing "decolonial "communities of sense" at the level of audiences, critics, writers and artists themselves" (Tlostanova 2012, 138), there is still a lot of work to be done.

## Lag discourse and queer time

*Definition belongs to the definers, not the defined.*
                                        - Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1988, 190)

As I have tried to highlight throughout my discussion of the geopolitics of knowledge, the so-called East-West difference is naturalized through certain

specific discourses. Most pertinent for my discussion is the persistent trope that depicts the postsocialist Eastern European feminist movement and studies as "lagging behind" the "West", the so-called lag discourse. Spatial and geopolitical differences are projected onto a temporal plane, with Eastern Europe positioned as "catching up". This stance is, indeed, reproduced by many feminist thinkers from Eastern Europe because of the dominance of Western feminist paradigms. As Eastern Europe is accustomed to thinking about itself "through the concepts which are being imported, and it observes itself through the eyes of others" (Blagojević 2009, 57), the phrase "catching up" recurs, perhaps somewhat subconsciously, in the work of Eastern European scholars (Blagojević 2009; Grabowska 2012).

   To be sure, the concepts of "East" and "West" remain slippery and inadequate and, moreover, they are not only – and perhaps not even primarily – geographic designations. They are also loaded ideological ones, denoting the distinction between "civilization" and "backwardness" (cf. Wolff 1996). This distinction is especially tense in Eastern Europe, where countries often seek to draw the dividing line to the east of themselves. Using the categories of East and West, even as ideal types, always brings up the question of people and phenomena that do not fit comfortably into either category. "West" often appears as a hyperreal term, a socially, economically, culturally defined "conceptual space that is neither restricted to the geographies with which the term is conventionally associated, nor necessarily representative of all intellectual/political/cultural/social spaces within such geographical boundaries" (Sarkar 2004, 319; cf. Chakrabarty 2000, 27–28); while "East" remains a temporal geographical term. Moreover, there are great differences between Central and Eastern European countries, both in terms of the past (religion, process of colonization) and the present (membership of the EU, economic situation), not to mention the gulf between the so-called "winners" and "losers" in the countries themselves (cf. Buchowski 2006, 466). Regional affiliation is a construction, and at times a necessary one in the academic literature, but it has serious effects on the people designated as belonging to a particular area.

   I feel that in some sense the biggest concern for Western feminist discourses is what is read as Eastern European women's lack of enthusiasm for feminist interventions (especially during the 1990s, cf. e.g. Watson 1993a). Even though the initial bafflement has been replaced by different case studies, there is no dearth of descriptions according to which Eastern

European women have "stubbornly refused to develop a collective gendered identity to advocate for their own rights" (Ghodsee 2004, 727). In Jennifer Suchland's apt phrasing, postsocialist women are often seen as suffering from a "false consciousness" (Suchland 2011, 850) or, in the blunter words of Kornelia Slavova, as "backward, apolitical, full of apathy" (Slavova 2006, 248). These descriptions convey a sense of perceived failure to live up to a standard of feminist expectation.

At this point, it is also perhaps important to note that, although many Eastern and Central European gender scholars resent the lack of understanding of "Eastern European exceptionalism" in Western feminist discourses, they are themselves ready to assume that there was, during the 1960s and 1970s, a seamless, unified and unproblematic feminist front "elsewhere" in the West. Many theorists from the East looking westwards demonstrate little awareness of or concern for the divisions, fragmented alliances and the impact of later backlashes that have characterized the Western movements, an oblivion that contributes to the creation of a simplified theoretical discourse that retains a fundamental binary distinction between the "West and the rest". From such perspectives, the West comfortably features as the "have-it-all" party while the East self-tailors the identity of the Other, or the "have-not". Allaine Cerwonka points to the irony that much of the critique of "Western feminism" derives its tools from selective reference to representatives of Western feminism (2008, 821–822).

This, however, does not really undermine the prevalence of the so-called lag discourse. As already mentioned, the issues arising from the Western practice of applying a unitary, transhistorical "measure of achievement" (Sarkar 2004, 326) to experiences from diverse contexts has been productively critiqued by postcolonial feminists. Sarkar believes that "one consequence of fetishising a particular set of experiences as 'progress' is to interpret all difference in terms of 'distance' (temporal, as in 'lagging behind', and/or substantive, as in 'different/deviating') from that ideal and apparently common end, forcing them in the process into a hierarchy, rather than to consider them laterally, in their full measure of complexity and richness" (Sarkar 2004, 326). Importantly for my discussion, Sarkar also demonstrates that such an approach leads to "the denial of coevalness", that is, the arrangement of contemporaneous events into a temporal hierarchy of development/progress. As a result, difference "is understood as points

on a vertical scale of inferiority/superiority, presence/lack or advancement/ backwardness, rather than on a horizontal field of plurality in which no point has definitional advantage over the others" (Sarkar 2004, 326).

Madina Tlostanova points out that, although mind-colonization has been a target of attention in postcolonial studies, less attention has been dedicated to the "rhetoric of salvation" or "a missionary syndrome paradigmatic of the modern/colonial matrix of power" (2012, 132). In the context of the lag discourse in feminist theory, Western feminism positions itself in the role of saviour. Even if difference is formally acknowledged, Western feminism retains its position as the normative point of reference. This happens over and over again despite the fact that the differential paths of different Eastern-European feminisms have been traced (see e.g. Grabowska 2012).

Marina Blagojević sees Western analyses of gender in the region as being of limited value because of the unilinear development model that is applied and the "we-know-what-is-good-for-you-because-we-have-already-done-it philosophy" (2009, 32, 37). Importantly, she addresses the huge amounts of energy directed towards a misguided and unhelpful project. The problems inherent in this unthinking flow of ideas have been analyzed by Ghodsee (2004), albeit from an outsider's perspective and with a focus on the "project feminism" furthered by international organizations. Although this study makes quite a number of large-scale generalizations about "Western feminism", its role in the region and, in particular, the value of internationally funded NGOs, it at least draws attention to the unequal flow of ideas and the complicity of certain forms of feminism with neoliberal projects. Furthermore, as Allaine Cerwonka has aptly noted:

> Analysis of social processes and identities particular to Eastern Europe can certainly challenge current theoretical paradigms developed from the specific context of the United States or elsewhere. However, it can do so not because CEE [Central and Eastern European] feminists are theorizing from a position outside Western feminist theory or because they articulate an authentic and distinct Eastern European gender experience or identity. Rather, they might do so because they offer analyses of phenomena specific to the region that prompt us to see complications and new dimensions of existing theoretical concepts. (2008, 822)

In all of these discussions, Western feminism is seen as the hegemonic

centre against which the hoped-for non-Western feminism is to be framed. As Daša Duhaček put it, "how do we speak of feminism which is other than Western Feminism, if not as feminism which is other to it, which would presuppose Western feminism as the parameter?" (2000, 129). What is more, Western feminism, as Clare Hemmings has pointed out, has been characterized by a distinctly dominant developmental narrative, which not only oversimplifies the diversity of feminist thought but also forces non-Anglo-American feminists to "reposition themselves in line with the former's logic", even when being critical (2005, 116). This belief in the universal trajectory of feminism lies behind the "lag discourse" as well. Blagojević concludes that "theory is almost always, and in a globalized world even more so, created in the centre. The perspective of the semiperiphery is simply incorporated into the already defined theoretical framework, thus silenced even when officially present" (2009, 51).

This awareness needs to be brought more clearly into feminist theory, and not just as a perfunctory verbal gesture; understanding the complex tensions between gender and postsocialism is relevant to women everywhere because the collapse of the former Soviet bloc resulted in the loss of socialism as a viable alternative to Western capitalism. The post-Soviet period has been characterized by the global rise of neoliberal policies and the erosion of the welfare state, both of which carry serious gendered consequences. Thus, it could be argued that the post-Soviet condition "refers to an ontology of time, not an ontology of the collective"; in other words, it is not limited to people from the former Soviet Union, but "we are all post-Soviet. We are to understand this situation as our own" (Buck-Morss 2006, 10). Postsocialist is thus not just a geographic label, but also an analytical category (Owczarzak 2009, 4).

Marina Blagojević uses the concept of "semi-periphery" (2009, 32) to describe Eastern Europe, showing how the lack of a consistent label in international discussion leads to silencing. This parallels ideas in transnational feminist studies. For example, bell hooks highlights the political and productive potential of claiming a marginal position (1989, 206). As she suggests, there are no fixed meanings attached to specific locations, nothing is intrinsically positive or negative, inside or outside, because centres and margins have been historically produced. In this sense, I share Blagojević's vision of the semiperiphery as a "strategic standpoint for knowledge articulation" (2009, 63) as a result of its hybridity and

"intensified diachronicities" (2009, 48).

The debates and sentiments around the lag discourse powerfully evoke contemporary struggles with time, place, and reality in postsocialist Estonia/ Eastern Europe, entangled in webs of power imbalances that characterize the relations between Eastern Europe and Western Europe. Scholars working with queer, feminist, black and postcolonial studies, activists and artists among them, have challenged normative straight lines and straight times over the last decades, calling for a critical reconsideration of how time informs our understandings of gender, sexuality and race (McClintock 1995; Massey 1999; Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Freccero 2006; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Freccero 2007; Chakrabarty 2008; Freeman 2010; Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011b). I want to connect these discussions with recent work on queer time which I think offers a promising set of analytical frames for thinking about troubling times, times out of joint, departures from ideal-typical narratives about progress as well as people and politics that cannot be assimilated to normative timelines.

If normative straight time depends on arranging one thing after the other in a temporal sequence, a queer time works with the idea of a coexistence of different times and privileges simultaneously. As Kulpa and Mizielińska suggest,

> "queer time" will be a time of mismatched models and realities, strategies and possibilities, understandings and uses, "all at once". It is the time when "real" and "fake", "the original" and "the copy" collapse into "the same"/ "the one"; and yet, nothing is the same, nothing is straight any more. (Had it ever been?)" (2011a, n.pag.)

Queer time thus challenges the way in which we orient ourselves in the world. However, while postcolonial and postsocialist scholars often seek to reframe the critique of divergent timings into one that insists upon multiple ways of being in time – as, for example, in Walter Mignolo's (2011) or Lisa Rofel's (1999) theorizations of multiple modernities – queer theorists have also sought to embrace the charge of "being backward". For example, Kate Thomas writes that "a tacit consent in queer theory and culture [is] that queer time is predominantly about being late, or *seeking lateness* [italics my own] whether that be through turns to antiquity, cultural disobedience, or affective allegiance to mourning, memory, and melancholia" (Thomas 2007, 622). Seeking lateness is, of course, a different proposition than refusing to

be defined as such, and I wonder how this articulation of queer time might be a productive lens for my study of Anna-Stina's artwork. What might be done if I were to think with this particular articulation of queer theory as I consider invocations of temporality, and lag in particular?

Articulating more strongly the queer impetus in such discussions on temporality, Heather Love "traces a tradition of backwardness in queer representations and experience". For her, backwardness – meaning "shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame" – is "a queer historical structure of feeling" and "a model for queer historiography" (2009, 146). In turn, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) challenges the focus on loss and trauma in queer theory, emphasizing the intertwinement of temporal and sexual dissonance to opt for the use of "queer asynchronies".

Thinking of representations as an opportunity to "slow down the world" (Grosz 2007, 248), as I have suggested, also evokes a sense of delay, lateness and lag. It thus unwittingly conjures up and links to the problematics of "lag" associated with the former Eastern Europe, the way in which it is constituted by a "temporal drag" (Freeman 2005; Freeman 2010), plagued by the visceral pull of the past, the temporal transitivity that carries "all the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present," alongside its associations with crossing and performativity (Freeman 2010, 62). Discussions of lag in general and queer time in particular thus inspire me to rework linear temporality.

I should also note that in Estonian context, the term "queer" has not merited much (scholarly or other) attention yet it is sometimes used in artistic communities where it is often taken to mean LGBT (and more recently LGBTQI) people and LGBTQI rights. The term "queer" itself is not translated into Estonian but it is used as a loanword from English, often creating puzzlement as to what it is supposed to mean exactly.29 For Anna-Stina Treumund, "queer" in a narrow is a term that can be used to refer to sexual minorities but also to the unconventional sexual practices of heterosexual people. In her artistic practice, "queer" is a socio-critical method that helps to deconstruct fixed structures and patterns in the society (quoted in Artel 2012, 39).

Picking up on resonances with the observation made by Toni Morrison in

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29 For a discussion of the genealogy of the term "queer" in Sweden, which bears some resemblance to how the term has been taken up in Estonia, see Rosenberg (2008).

*Beloved* (1987) (in the quote beginning this section), Blagojević's vision for a common strategic voice reflects the desire to be "the definers" rather than "the defined". It speaks of the need to muster accounts from the perspective of those who are marginalized or whose experience does not quite fit the dominant theoretical narratives. Yet, if definitions indeed belong to the definers, all forms of self-representation or self-definition also point to the tensions in which any definitional project is inextricably and inevitably caught. Is it not the case that the hitherto defined become in turn the definers and authoritative interpreters, while resisting the imperialism and violence enacted by the interpreting practices of other definers? Before I launch into specific issues pertaining to Anna-Stina Treumund and her feminist endeavours in postsocialist Estonia, I want to return for a moment to some theoretical puzzles around the concepts of identification and (self-)representation that the discussion of the geopolitical specificities of postsocialist space also evokes. I want to connect these questions to the so-called self-referential turn in feminist studies.

## Should one only represent oneself?

Many feminist and otherwise minoritized artists and scholars have tried to bypass the problem of representation in writing and research through turning to self-representation as a more ethical alternative. In a way, this is what Anna-Stina Treumund does in her queer feminist artistic and activist practises and this is also what I am arguing postsocialist feminists must do: to become whirling subjects, claiming their space on their own terms. I am particularly indebted to cultural critic Rey Chow and her discussion of the possibilities and limits of self-referentiality in considering and clarifying the stakes that I see women, Anna-Stina Treumund among them, might have in the question of representation (Chow 2001). As I am in fact troubled by Chow's scepticism towards any possibilities that self-referentiality is imagined to open up, I want to spend a bit of time unfolding her arguments in more detail.

Conventionally, the term "representation" is understood in two ways: in an aesthetic sense and in a political or legislative sense. In the aesthetic sense, representation refers to the process of "creation and manipulation of signs – things that 'stand for' or 'take the place of' something else" (Mitchell

1995, 11). It is a two-part structure where "one of the two parts is supposed to be a copy, a replica, an objectified 'stand-in' for the other" (Chow 2001, 38). This binary structure remains the source of contentious debates about representation because binary structures are inevitably value-laden and lead to a process of hierarchization. Another aspect that concerns Western debates about aesthetic representation is the assumption of mimeticism or resemblance: signs should imitate, be similar to, the "reality" they represent. The implications of this for gender emerge when we consider women's relation to representation. Feminists have for a long time been interested in representation particularly for this reason: women have not only been restricted in their ability to take up active positions to create as men do, but they have often been represented by men in their acts of representation as passive symbols for meanings that they, men, want to communicate. In other words, as the argument goes, women have been objectified as the devices of representation that are supposed to "bear specific moral or artistic significance in a world created by men" (Chow 2001, 40).

In the political sense, representation has the same binary structure as aesthetic representation except that the sense of "standing for" is shifted to a political or legislative arena. Representation here means the "condition of serving as the delegate, agent, or spokesperson" (Chow 2001, 41) and this "stand-in" is not an object, symbol or abstract sign but an individual who functions as a "representative" speaking for a particular group of people and having the power to "represent" them in their absence. By extension, this brings up the question of agency and the notion of the political when juxtaposing the political or legislative definition of representation with the issue of gender. Politics should thus be understood in a more general sense as an act of power which involves the ability to speak for others.

Here, instead of asking how are women represented or made to represent certain ideas, it becomes necessary to ask who is engaged in "representing" women in a certain way and why: "are the representers being descriptive or prescriptive? Are they portraying things as they are or are they imposing on readers preconceived ideas? Are they speaking for women at the expense of women's views of themselves?" (Chow 2001, 41). These questions have led to numerous feminist accounts of problematic assumptions about women by male authors as well as recurring attempts to find specifically feminine or feminist elements in aesthetic representation.

Furthermore, as Rey Chow among others convincingly argues, these

disputes over masculinist representations of women are intimately tied to disputes over Western representations of non-Western peoples and cultures. For instance, Edward Said in his book Orientalism powerfully critiques the distorted, phantasmatic depictions of non-Western cultures by Western imperialism and shows that representation is also a form of imperialism, one that works by "culture" rather than brute force. When considering both senses of representation, the problem here is that representation in the legislative sense becomes a questionable privilege. In colonial contexts, certain representers "have been representing others (in the aesthetic sense of creating signs, making stories, drawing pictures, and producing theories about them, and so forth) even though they have not been delegated to do so" (Chow 2001, 42, emphasis in the original). Thus, however neutral aesthetic representations may seem to be, they are seen as acts of cultural and political domination.

The conclusion that Chow reaches from these considerations is that it is no longer enough simply to seek more "objective" and "accurate" representations when the emphasis shifts to representation as an intersubjective activity, that is "involving not only signs and their creators/ users but also one group of people turning another group of people into signs" (Chow 2001, 42). This means that there cannot be "objective" or "accurate" representations as these always already disguise gender- and/ or culture-specific criteria that one group imposes on another. An example here could be what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls the habitual portrayal of "third world women" as "victims" of their own societies by Western feminist scholars (Mohanty 1988; Mohanty 2003). "Third world women" are thus made into boundary markers for "first world women", just as women more generally are being used as boundary markers for men. Where the so-called "second world women" fit into this picture, however, I have yet to figure out.

In the midst of these difficulties around representation, what emerges as an alternative – a controversial one for Chow and, as the thesis unfolds, for myself as well – is self-representation. The logic of this alternative is rather simple: when one cannot represent others without always being suspected of a lack of valid representational delegation and therefore of sexual, racial or class discrimination, should one only represent oneself? Sure, looking around at contemporary cultural politics, there is no shortage of self-referential genres these days. Take, for instance, the increasing popularity of autobiographies, memoirs, journals, diaries, "putting yourself

out there" in new social networking sites, also the self-reflexive trend in more scholarly venues. Not to mention self-portrait photography, the ease with which one can, and is encouraged to, take a picture of oneself with mobile phones and digital cameras. Some scholars link this self-referential turn to postmodernity: metanarratives that once used to have a universal explanatory power have now ceased to maintain their legitimacy. People's own experiences have taken centre stage, which has led to an increasing relativism in representation. It is as though all experiences now seem to be equally valid and the emphasis is on trying to capture the unique and particularistic rather than making generic claims, as expressed through self-referential articulations in particular.

This is where the controversial aspect that Chow mentions comes in: "even as we understand the trend of self-referentiality as the result of an epochal transformation of the ethics of representation – a transformation that questions the politics of 'standing for' that divides representer from represented – the turn toward the 'self,' together with the accompanying claim that metanarratives no longer exist or hold relevance, is far from being unproblematic" (Chow 2001, 44). Chow brings out three problems, which she categorizes as historical, technical and political in nature.

Firstly, historically, the notion that a return to the self is "emancipatory" is a myth. Chow explains this through the work of Michel Foucault, who claims that the emergence of the "self" as such is part of a changing organization of power in Western society (Foucault 1979). To put it very bluntly, power in modern society is distributed among society's members, down to the minutest details of the care and uses of the most private areas of existence. So the "liberation" of the self means at the same time a repositioning of the sources of power that structure social processes and thus the "free" or "freed" individual as such is already a "representation of the changing conceptions of power from an absolute to a relative, discursive basis" (Chow 2001, 44). Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, the current corrective urge of the self-referential turn that has gained legitimacy as a resistant and liberatory discourse, as a way "out of" metanarratives and the "crime" of speaking for others, is nothing but a trap. It is a trap because it enables us to regard self-referentiality as an unproblematic representation of reality, that of the self. The assumption that the act of referring to oneself is direct and unmediated means that self-representation is paradoxically thought to be non-representational and becomes equated with the expression of truth,

or what Michel Foucault terms confession, "the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage" (Foucault 1980, 59–60).

Through Foucault's analysis we can thus see that self-referential speaking is in fact a symptom of a collective subjection, "to represent, to examine, to confess about oneself are compulsive acts that imagine the self as a refuge outside power – an alibi from representation, so to speak – when the self is merely a rational systematization and a relay of institutional forces at the individual level" (Chow 2001, 46). Disturbingly for feminist and postcolonial perspectives, for instance, Foucault's analysis of power can only be concluded with an unappealing acknowledgement that while the insistence on the marginal, the local, the personal and the autobiographical, that is on the supposed liberation of ourselves from subordinating powers through representing ourselves, may seem radical and empowering, all this may in fact allow such powers to work even more effectively. In other words, for the self to make sense in this context, certain kinds of metanarratives must somehow remain in place.

Secondly, Chow points out that technically, because representation always inevitably becomes something other even when referring to "itself", there is always the problem of differentiation and deferral. The self cannot necessarily "know" itself as it "cannot be reduced to the realm of rational cognition" (Chow 2001, 46). Thirdly, politically the question of "standing for" needs to be asked even in the case of the most self-conscious descriptions of the self: "what privileges allow one to speak narcissistically about oneself? How far are such personal experiences supposed to be 'representative' of the group from which the speaker originates? Is the act of referring to oneself not at the expense of others who may not have the opportunity to speak in the same manner?" (Chow 2001, 46). These questions become especially important if the one speaking self-referentially does so in the name of resisting subordination on behalf of an entire group. Here, Chow raises another important issue: "when non-white women academics resort to speaking self-referentially as a way to avoid the pitfalls of Orientalist and masculinist representations, should they be subjected to the same criticism that is made of men and Western women – the criticism that they are self-serving and representing others without delegation – or should an exception be made in their case on the basis of their gender and racial

difference?" (Chow 2001, 46–47).

Despite the limitations convincingly outlined by Chow, I remain deeply sympathetic towards women's attempts to control how they are represented and to find self expression. As Marta Zarzycka has argued, "art and creativity can provide the self in crisis with the chance to become a speaking (and heard) subject, taking up a perspective on one's own body and carving up space for one's own discourse" (Zarzycka 2007, 209). This is where I also lean towards Luce Irigaray. From an Irigarayan perspective, women can be said to be in perpetual crisis in the phallogocentric culture where sexual difference does not exist, where women do not exist as women (Irigaray 1985a; Irigaray 1985b; Irigaray 2004; Irigaray 2005). Women thus have a strong need to resignify themselves, to claim subject positions, even if only for a short while and even if this approach has its limitations, because that is the only way to reconnect to the world in new ways. It is not enough to resignify, to challenge the previous "wrongs" of representation; there is a danger of getting stuck in resignification, but we are always already something more than we can grasp, we do not always have access to all parts of ourselves – and this should be encouraging rather than discouraging. These limitations are not necessarily negative as they leave moments for us to be surprised. They create openings for new meanings to emerge.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Drawing on the theoretical tools and concepts I explored and contextualised in this chapter, I want to offer my analyses of Anna-Stina Treumund's three exhibitions in the analytical chapters that follow as intensely relational, actional, social, emancipatory, empowering, whirling stories. As I have suggested, I imagine Anna-Stina and myself as whirling subjects. In these whirling moments that I talk about, we have co-shaped each other's work, co-creating new visual imaginaries, worlding together. Through the figuration of a whirling subject, I want to try to make the case for asserting that contemporary emerging postsocialist feminist imaginaries are both embodied and embedded in their own time and space that should epistemologically be considered as coeval with different cultures. I want to argue that they share time with broader transnational feminist imaginaries and discourses from historically and culturally different and distant moments. This involves a shift from history to historiography. On the

one hand, it evokes Clare Hemmings' argument about the importance of interrogating stories that are already circulating in order to analyze "what political, epistemological and ontological work they are trying to achieve" (Hemmings 2007, 72). On the other hand, it entails creating entirely new stories. Through my "whirling stories" about experiencing and analyzing Anna-Stina Treumund's artwork and Western feminist theories as a multiply positioned feminist subject, I want to show that at the same time as Anna-Stina's self-portraits function as historiographical "theoretical objects" that trouble the Western fantasy of a "lag" within Eastern Europe, they also create a vocal postsocialist queer feminist subject. This creates resonances with my own experience in ways in which help me to articulate my own positioning as a whirling subject within feminist theorizing.

## Interlude I

# Inscribed in ambivalence

I first met her on my birthday at the breakfast table. I had wanted to talk to her the day before but the ever-changing constellations of conversations around us killed the possibility. There was always someone else who grabbed her with words, always someone else who cornered me with an endless exchange of niceties. She appeared so frail, so fragile, so far away. And then suddenly she was there sitting beside me.

*"Happy birthday! Are Leos really good keepers of hearth and home?"*

She is Art, I am Academia, both shifting and balancing between small and capital As. Serious representatives of our fields – or at least aspiring to be – and caricatures of ourselves at the same time, blown out of all proportion. We speak in separate tongues, light years apart. Twisting, turning, touching, almost, but not quite. She sends me photos, I send her texts. She is puzzling, obscure, intimate, fragmentary, elusive. I am self-explanatory, overcautious with words, distant, but appear to be complete, together. Two mismatched worlds, each unsure about the other. She has what I have been looking for. She is what I have been looking for. A case study, an object/subject of analysis, ample material for testing theories and methodologies. I have what she yearns for with her body. Words, concepts, theories, explanations.

*"Can we talk outside? It's crowded here."*

OMG, what did I do? So sorry, I'm very clumsy today. I spilled influence all over, contaminated my research data, ruined the results! She read my text, she responded. She asked me if she should change her title. She asked me if she should change. Am I allowed to affect my research subject, to mess with her mind? Can I analyze and criticize her art project idea before it makes it to the gallery? Can I teach her, give her advice, point out what I think are her theoretical blindspots and then write it into my thesis? Who am I to guide Art?

But what if she asks for it? What if she wants to be taught, criticized, pushed further? I don't understand her. I don't understand art. She hides it all so well between the lines. She is teaching me, isn't she? We are both each other's teachers. Where do we draw the line? Would we necessarily have to be bounded?

*"I left. I wanted to leave you your space."*

Look, this is not just any conversation. Let's set the record straight. I mean, I have to. I am being held accountable for my words. My words will be weighed against other words, compared and contrasted, interrogated and cross-examined. My sentences will be tested for quality and compliance with ethics, my chapters searched thoroughly for suitability and substance. What do I take from her? What do I give her?

*"Yes, write about me! Your analysis will maybe make me understand myself better."*

Is she giving me anything (besides my dissertation)? What is she taking from me? Everything and nothing, give or take. It's all up for grabs. My struggles, my ignorance, my insensitivity, perhaps also my over-sensitivity, always trying to do the right thing, carefully constructing boundaries between Art and Academia, stubbornly sticking to capital As. She takes it all. My knowledge, my experience, my position as somebody within while she is not entirely without. I'm just as much of an informant to her as she is to me, an insider, a native, an expert who is in possession of something she doesn't quite have yet. She is preparing for a potentially provocative exhibition, I want to get my PhD. She has her stakes, I have mine.

What if we both just yearn for a dialogue? What if we just need to talk? We make each other vulnerable. I am no more secure in my world than she is in hers. We are both searching. We feed off each other's vulnerabilities, but also rely on each other's knowledge and experience. We desire a symbiosis that reaches beyond our immediate selves.

*"Let's educate the other photographers, let's publish an article together in Cheese,*[30] *let's take over different media forms and channels."*

She's on a roll. We'll be on a roll.

<center>***</center>

I wrote this short piece on the train while commuting from Linköping to Stockholm where I was living at the time, shortly after I had met Anna-Stina. I wanted to include it here after the chapter that has explored theoretical puzzles around the visual and geopolitical aspects of my project because it captures the most striking emotion that has consumed me during the process of writing this thesis: ambivalence. I wrote this reflection out of the need to make sense of what my relation was to her and her artwork and what our sharing of thoughts about feminist art, theory and activism, my guiding of her and hers of me meant for my research. It was on the spur of the moment that I let my fingers dance on the keyboard. As the landscape rushed past me beyond the window of the train in a continuous flicker, I gave in to words as if wanting to paint a sketchy picture with quick bold brush strokes, to blow the elements of the story a bit out of proportion, to capture a bird's-eye view in the exaggerations, in excess.

Sense in this case emerged out of that dash of creativity that I associate with the bodily sensation of being transported somewhere, of experiencing the movement of trains, buses, bikes. The body is in motion while the mind can become quiet, still. You can hear your own voice again, coupled with the excitement of going somewhere, the anticipation of arrival, even if it is just a mundane commute between workplace and home. The mind picks up the speed of the body on the moving train, the body relaxes yet retains the

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30 Cheese is an Estonian photography magazine.

feeling of being in movement. The stillness of the mind suddenly sprints. In fact, it gathers its strength from the leftover energy of the body because the body is really just sitting still. Once I even dreamed of writing the whole thesis while criss-crossing the country on the train, buzzing with that constant creative rush.

After pondering on the theoretical locations of this thesis, I want to stay with that sense of movement for a moment, with that sense of sitting still yet rushing ahead. Looking back at the first time I met Anna-Stina, the time I attended her first solo exhibition, or the countless hours I have spent contemplating her pictures and discussing them with others, I see now that the reason that pushed me into writing this story – ambivalence – is in fact the feeling that accompanied me throughout the initial stages of the research process. From early on, ambivalence was the sense I had to make, even when I still could not quite put it into words and was just wishing for clarity once and for all. I was ambivalent about Anna-Stina's photos and what I thought they represented; I worried about how I should approach them as a researcher, a friend, a fellow feminist; I was ambivalent about my relation to feminism, to Estonia, to my feminist education from "the West"; I was intensely ambivalent about writing, as a researcher, about just one artist and, moreover, about one who indeed had become my friend.

I remain ambivalent. The difference now is that I know this ambivalence is not nothing, I know it does not have to be suppressed or willed away, not yet. I know now that I can claim it: touch it, feel it, hold it up for closer inspection. This ambivalence has meaning. This ambivalence is a reaction to the abyss that separates "me" from "you", "us" from "them", the chasm between one person, one group, and another, differently valued one. It is a response to the void between different differences, hierarchically arranged binaries that time and again present themselves as symptomatic of contemporary ways of organizing knowledge. It wasn't until I went into that meaning, that ambivalence and stayed there that I got somewhere. Finding a way in, not in order to explain it away or move quickly beyond it but rather to get closer, slowly, to that ambivalence, was the key. Making that ambivalence tangible turned out to be a central thinking tool for me. I rely on this ambivalence to think in this chapter, to help this chapter unfold. Ambivalence is my argument, my argument is ambivalence. Not only my own, as I will show, but also that of Anna-Stina and the photographs I analyze in the following chapters.

For Hélène Cixous, to think is to think creatively and to think creatively is to have a courageous relationship to difference. Having a courageous relationship to difference involves a movement towards the other, a crossing over, getting a good grip on the fear of the unknown which feeds destructive thinking. Cixous likens the courageous relationship to difference to "a question of dancing, of the aerial crossing of continents", "a question of acrobatics" (Cixous 1991, 79). She talks of acrobats, who do not focus on separation but "have eyes, have bodies, only for there, for the other" (1991, 79). For acrobats, there is no in-between, no turning back. There is just that "yes" to jumping forward, to that leap of faith. Likewise, I needed to move towards the other, to leap, to jump, to fly straight ahead across the abyss of difference without concentrating on what separates "us", but rather, on what connects "us".

In the context of this thesis, "us" is both the micro-level "us" of Anna-Stina and myself, an artist and a researcher, our relation to each other, and the macro-level "us" that is the more ambiguous relation between feminists in the former Eastern Europe and "transnational" feminists who have tended to exclude or repress perspectives from the so-called "second world", non-Western Europe, prioritizing the dialogue between the first and the third world and thus cementing a binary between the Global North and the Global South. The attempts to "bring the second world in" (Grabowska 2012) in order to challenge the binary hierarchical frameworks that are being continuously perpetuated by transnational feminist scholarship argue for the importance of the role of the second world in the ongoing formulations of global understandings of feminism and gender theory (Blagojević 2009; Pejić 2009; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Suchland 2011). Often, I feel, these attempts fall between the chasms that separate "us", rather than keeping the focus on what connects "us".

However, before I can leap towards Anna-Stina, before I can make that courageous connection, I need to stay with the ambivalence for a while, to understand how this dizzying array of mixed feelings is produced. I need to stay in that moment where the body with the racing mind is sitting still on the train. I need to root myself before shifting for I can only cross over towards Anna-Stina through deconstructing the homogeneous representation of second-world women as "lagging behind" in relation to the West while "catching up" is seen as not only imperative but also as just a matter of time. I need to spell out that ambivalence, created at least partly

by the friction between the multiple contradictory allegiances I constantly negotiate, simultaneously: on the one hand, there is my fidelity towards my feminist education from "the West" which evokes certain reductive readings of Anna-Stina's artwork and, on the other hand, my desire, sometimes, to defend the place that I come from, a desire that might not be any less limiting. Rejecting either position in favour of the other is not a viable option because that would entail rejecting a part of myself.

# 3

## Situating ambivalence

*A great many think that they know repetition when they see or hear it but do they. A great many think that they know confusion when they know or see it or hear it, but do they. A thing that seems very clear, seems very clear but is it. A thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it. All this can be very exciting.*

- Gertrude Stein (1988, 173)

## Deconstructing an impasse in feminist theorizing

In this chapter, I want to unpack the story of my ambivalence. I do so by situating myself in relation to Anna-Stina Treumund's exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know,* which opened at the end of March 2010 in Tallinn Art Hall Gallery and was also shown in the Y-Gallery in Tartu in October of the same year. As part of my fieldwork in Estonia, I participated in the opening of the exhibition and found myself struggling to make sense of this event, the photographs exhibited and my own troubled relation to them through my Western feminist education. This struggle launched me directly into exploring the "puzzle" that became the main focus of my research: articulating and exploring the theoretical impasse Western feminist theorizing has reached when it comes to recognizing postsocialist feminist imaginaries as self-sufficient and also distinctly different from those in the West.

Allegedly, Anna-Stina's *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* was the first art exhibition in Estonia to focus on lesbian visibility and politics of representation as its main theme. The title of the exhibition is a friendly nod, with a twist, to contemporary artist Miranda July and her film entitled *You, Me and Everyone We Know* (2005).[31] Anna-Stina's exhibition gathered eight photographs, entitled: *Drag, Queer, Eli, Sisters Baby Gerda and Pussycat I, Sisters Baby Gerda and Pussycat II, Rehearsal for My Wedding, Kissing Two Reflections and Negligee,*[32] and two video installations, entitled: *Princess Diaries* and *We Are Going to Have a Baby.* It formed the visual component of her Master's thesis that she then went on to complete in June 2010. She received considerable attention from the public for this exhibition. She was interviewed by national TV and several newspapers in connection with it, a

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31  Miranda July's film *You, Me and Everyone We Know* (90 min, 2005) is a romantic comedy-drama that revolves around an intertwined cast of characters and deconstructs preconceived notions of sexuality and relationships.

32  All of the photographs, except for *Negligee*, are self-portraits.

number of reviews of the exhibition appeared in art and culture magazines and, eventually, most of the photographs were bought by KUMU, the Art Museum of Estonia, for their permanent collection. This is not at all a small achievement for a young artist in contemporary Estonia.

Within the framework of this exhibition, Anna-Stina organized a public seminar that she called "On the Possibility of Life on the Rainbow", bringing together artists, academics and activists and clearly linking the exhibition to her activist ambitions and to discussions of heterosexism, homophobia and queer politics in the Estonian context. She invited me to moderate the event and asked if I could later write a piece about the exhibition for *Cheese*, an Estonian photography magazine. For that, we conducted a semi-structured interview, extending to several hours over two days. To my great dismay, I utterly failed to live up to the task, a failure I attribute at least partly to my ambivalence. . I came to view this ambivalence as symptomatic of the hegemony of Western genealogies and narratives of feminist activism and lack of theorizing on the specificities of feminist and queer imaginaries in the former Eastern Europe. In order to move forward from what I felt was an impasse in feminist theorizing, I had to deconstruct it.

### Exhibition opening

On the day Anna-Stina's exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* opened, I got a ride from Tartu, where I had been visiting my family, to Tallinn with Minna Hint, a friend of Anna-Stina. As this was the first time we had met, we spent an enjoyable two and a half hours on the way to the capital getting to know each other. She, an artist and documentary film maker, talked about her ongoing film project for the documentary film series *Estonian Stories* for national TV. She was making a film about happiness, a topic that resonated strongly with her as she had discovered that many of her artist friends were severely depressed while everyone else was talking about a general increase in happiness. I, in turn, talked about my studies in Sweden, my relation to feminism, my PhD project and my interest in Anna-Stina's art. Writing in an academic context suddenly seemed somewhat dry and secondary, fading away in the light of her enthusiasm towards the immediacy and liveliness of the video format, towards showing "real" people on the screen rather than turning them into text, scribbles on a

piece of paper. For some reason, I had often struggled with the sense that art seemed a potentially stronger, often more radical form of activism than academic research, when I thought about some feminist visual artists and their brave, memorable acts and statements.

On a small side note, almost a year later, when I accidentally saw Minna's film, conspicuously entitled "Gross National Happiness" on TV, I discovered that it was in fact Anna-Stina who was one of the "unhappy artist friends" interviewed in the film. Not that I had not known about Anna-Stina's struggles, but somehow seeing her interviewed on TV, talking about very personal battles with depression, I felt she suddenly stood in stark contrast to that strong-willed woman, boldly looking back from the pictures of the *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* exhibition where she seemed to be challenging the viewers, holding the remote control of the camera, head held high, fully in charge, utterly passionate about women's agency and their right to self-expression, not least importantly through sexuality. Yet no matter how much "you" disclose yourself, "I" disclose myself, "we" disclose ourselves – "you", "me" and "everyone" we know or do not know can never reach full disclosure. Even with these strikingly public self-revelations, both in her photographs and in her friend's documentary, there is a lot that remains unknown and inaccessible, even to herself. There are only new webs of relations to be formed, new layers of meaning to be woven together.

Later that evening, just before the exhibition opened, I found myself in a rather embarrassing situation. Somehow I was under the impression that the exhibition was going to be in the same small back room on the second floor of the Art Hall where the PROLOGUE [EST] presentation had taken place that summer when I first met Anna-Stina. As I was carrying my bag for the overnight stay in town up the stairs, I suddenly realized I was in the wrong place. I noticed some groups of older ladies everywhere, keenly scrutinizing rather traditional-looking paintings hanging on the walls. The two big halls were buzzing with excitement. I could not recall ever seeing so many people at an art exhibition in Estonia. I stormed right to the room at the back, just to confirm the certainty that had begun sinking in from the moment I spotted the ladies and the paintings: I was in the wrong place. It had not even crossed my mind to ask anyone, and how did I miss those big posters everywhere, advertising the exhibition *From Köler to Subbi: 150*

*years of classical Estonian painting from Enn Kunila's collection*[33]? How had I managed to get past the ticket office unnoticed, with that bulky luggage? I was like a young girl from a small town who arrives in a big city for the first time, visibly and painfully out of place yet strangely invisible. Ironically, I had been to many art exhibitions in much larger cities before – London and Paris, Brussels and Mexico City, Budapest and Vienna, Stockholm and New York City – not once getting lost or confusing a classical painting exhibit with one of contemporary art.

Realizing that the place to be was the Art Hall Gallery and not the Art Hall itself, I quickly found my way down the stairs, out of the wrong door and in the right one, hoping I was quick enough for no-one to notice me. The gallery was quite full, though not with such great numbers as upstairs; the place felt small and intimate, cosy actually. The speeches were just about to start. Everyone was ready with their flowers and hugs and congratulations. And pink champagne. Strangely enough, the feeling of being out of place stayed with me, it might even have intensified. There were Anna-Stina's friends, family, fellow artists, members of the local LGBT organization and community. Her people. People I did not know, mostly. People who had their own diverse connections with Anna-Stina, with her art. In that moment, I was sure I had felt more at home at the large *Global Feminisms* exhibition in New York in 2007, admiring works of art by famous feminist artists as an enthusiastic, anonymous visitor who had read about these works for class, such as Judy Chicago's well-known *Dinner Party* that broke new ground in the 1970s. There, I did not have to feel out of place. There was *the* feminist art that I knew. The classics. The highly esteemed legacy. In a way, these works did not have to ask me who I was or why I had gone there. They did not need to know me. They did not care. My relation to them was built on the mutual expectation for me to come and witness their greatness, which was already established in the feminist books I had consumed as a graduate student of gender studies. We kept a safe distance. Or so I thought.

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33 In the cultural weekly *Sirp* (30 March 2012), Anders Härm discusses and gives an overview of the number of people visiting contemporary and so-called classical art exhibitions. Härm points out that *From Köler to Subbi*, an exhibition of classical Estonian paintings from a private collection, drew the biggest crowd to the Art Hall since the beginning of the 1990s. It brought close to 13,000 people to the exhibition hall. In contrast, for example, around 300 people visited Anna-Stina Treumund's exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* in the Art Hall Gallery. The topic of audience numbers has been a question of considerable contestation since a new director was appointed to lead Tallinn Art Hall. The new director has fiercely criticized political and critical exhibitions, especially those dealing with feminism and sexual minorities, calling them "niche exhibitions" and condemning them as destructive of the "trusting relationship" between the audiences and art (Härm 2012).

But then and there, in Tallinn, I was a researcher who was local, yet also from abroad. I was still a feminist, yes. I also knew this work beforehand. I was very closely involved in it, in fact. I definitely knew the process through which these works had been conceptualized better than that of the so-called classics I had admired at the *Global Feminisms* exhibition. Anna-Stina had sent me the photographs in an email prior to the show. We had discussed them extensively over the previous year. She had shared half-baked ideas with me, I had given her feedback. I had seen the photos unfold from vague impressionistic thoughts to very concrete artistic visions, if not to say visual statements. I had recommended her theoretical texts she was looking to read. She had educated me about art by sharing links to photographic art by more and less well-known artists, mostly working with self-portraiture. I probably knew quite a bit more about the photographs at the exhibition and Anna-Stina's artistic process than many of the people who had gathered there that night. But I was still a stranger in a way that I felt I was not at the exhibition in New York. I was estranged. I was close, but not close enough. There was a local dimension to the relations and opinions that unfolded in that gallery that I did not quite recognize. I was someone who had never lived in Tallinn, had never been too knowledgeable about Estonian art before taking up this project. I did not know the exact locations of various galleries in Tallinn. I was someone who had not even lived in Estonia for the past three years at that point. And here I was, wanting to write about all of this. To figure it out. So I did what I often do as an academic. I turned to text. I turned to read the artist's statement on the wall:

> With my exhibition at the Tallinn Art Hall Gallery, I want to start a discussion in the media about heterosexism and homophobia. I feel that it's about time for lesbians to introduce themselves to the public and create an adequate image of themselves, not to let it be created by someone else. Is it possible to recognise a lesbian among others? At the moment, I find that it is not possible for heterosexuals to recognise us because we are located in a society that cannot be read/fixed by a stranger (a person who is outside the community). We (LGBTQTI people) are not accepted and we are not welcome. We are pushed further than the periphery because even a meaningless space has to be claimed. It cannot be said that we are doing that: there are unfortunately no determined activists in our country. Mostly, we have settled for existence in a dark bar on a side street and some websites, to be a victim in feature films. Without our permission, we have been planted

in heterosexual men's fantasies as objects of desire. We exist as visible in reality as much as harry potters or little red riding hoods. The reason why I am studying lesbianism in this exhibition with the help of my own body is not related to narcissism or to satisfy the need for self-exposure. My incentive was the fact that up until now no lesbian artist or artist who studies lesbianism has spoken up in our culture. Fortunately, the local gay artists do not have such a desire to hide. But why such a difference? Are women afraid to represent their sexuality, suppress it or hide so well that only "their own people" can see it? Or maybe nobody is interested in us because stereotypically lesbians are bitter women whom no man desires; they are very masculine in their appearance and behaviour or, in other words, not exciting to the male gaze.[34]

While I understood where Anna-Stina's drive for increased visibility was coming from, I initially reacted strongly to the way in which this artist's statement seemed to presume and project an essentialized lesbian subject. Furthermore, what would count as an "adequate image" in this context? Can sexuality be represented at all, let alone "adequately"? In the light of feminist and poststructuralist critiques of identity politics, this idea seemed incredibly reductive to me. Not to mention the presumption that art would or could be the place from which to start a dialogue in the media or that this indeed could be a desirable goal for an artist. For an activist, perhaps yes, but wouldn't an artist want her art to be an open space, open for new connections, meanings, attachments, criticisms? Art often seems irrational, inexplicable, sometimes irritating, perhaps even at its best when leaving the viewers with a certain sense of ambivalence, unease, resisting rationalizing accounts of its supposed inherent meaning. Why close off the myriad of potential readings by giving an explanation and asking for a unidirectional reading from a rather limited viewpoint?

The overwhelming ambivalence paralyzed me because I also realized that the underlying discourse of "minority sexualities", the issues summarized in the statement, were extremely important to her and while she might have closed off certain readings by casting her art as politics that aims to serve a very concrete purpose, she did so because she had to. She found in her art a platform for speaking out. I could not deny her that.

Furthermore, this ambivalence seemed to link to a larger context of Eastern Europe. The issues she raised and the way in which she did so were

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34 My translation.

probably not so different from similar issues raised and methods used in other Eastern-European countries that have recently seen increased attempts to bring questions of sexuality onto the public agenda through Gay/Queer Pride parades and other types of organizing, through so-called identity political work. Although Anna-Stina did not directly engage with the wider context of Eastern Europe, her statement did evoke these discussions. The prevalent perception of East as a copy and West as the original is often based on the presumption that the American gay and lesbian rights or queer movement are necessarily to be taken as the model for sexual minority rights movements elsewhere, both by American theorists who dominate the field of queer and sexuality studies and by the activists from "the East" themselves who are endlessly awaiting "their own Stonewall" (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011a). The hegemonic over-determination of American historical models in Central and Eastern European queer activism and queer studies has been documented and challenged in recent work in sexuality studies by scholars from this region, who have tried to de-centralize Western sexualities (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011b).

I figured, as a feminist scholar, that I could only approach Anna-Stina's exhibition from a feminist standpoint. This meant that my critical reaction towards her exhibition could only be a good thing. For women cannot be represented, they cannot be fixed. As Julia Kristeva has pointed out:

> we must use "we are women" as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, woman cannot "be"; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it." In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. (Kristeva 1980, 137)

Kristeva's intuition about feminism captures one of its most important dimensions: that it is an insistent practice of critique rejecting what is unsatisfactory in the present. Feminism, in short, is a radical oppositional project in the sense that it is both inherently critical and political. What seemed to be unsatisfactory in the present for me, what I wanted to reject, was the way in which certain hierarchies still seemed to function and persist in feminist thought, my own included, having grown into feminism between various identifications and disidentifications with perspectives from

Western feminist theories. But this did not mean that Anna-Stina's work necessarily had to remain within those hierarchies, did it?. Perhaps part of my problem was the way in which I read photographs, the methodologies I used to approach visual images?

I realized that while I wanted to claim a feminist position, I also wanted to insist that feminism turn the practice of critique towards itself and always continuously ask what is unsatisfactory within feminism in the present. I wanted to remain at odds with so-called Western feminism – and I thought it was an important partial rejection that did not entirely constitute betrayal – that neglects Eastern European specificities too carelessly and merely expects Eastern Europe to catch up with it unproblematically. At the same time, I wanted to remain at odds with the establishment of such rigid constructs as first and second and third world that inevitably popped up when I tried to point out the exclusion of Eastern European perspectives from Western feminist thought. Saying "that's still not it" enabled me to stay with the movement of critical feminist thought.

### How to recognize a lesbian

*What or who is it that is "out," made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything? What remains permanently concealed by the very linguistic act that offers up the promise of a transparent revelation of sexuality? Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?*

- Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991, 15)

When Anna-Stina's exhibition project was still a work in progress, she had a different name for it. She called it *How to Recognize a Lesbian*. The name was borrowed from the title of an article, subtitled *The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are*, published in 1993 by Lisa Walker. This article had served as an inspiration for her. I had not heard of this piece before she mentioned it and attached an electronic copy of it to one of the first emails we exchanged after our meeting at the summer workshop in Nõva in 2009. The feminist theory I had previously read on the politics of visibility and

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Sisters Gerda and Pussycat I* (2005)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Sisters Gerda and Pussycat II* (2009)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Rehearsal for My Wedding* (2009)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Negligee* (2010)

feminist strategies to make women's experiences of power and oppression visible, to create positive images of women, definitely related to this piece, but it also opened up yet another angle by guiding me to think specifically about lesbian identities and visibilities.

Having read numerous theoretical accounts of the tensions and presumptions surrounding visibility politics during my studies, I was sceptical, to say the least, towards the possibility of increased visibility having any simple direct empowering effect. Rather, I was convinced that overemphasis on visibility as a key to understanding "true" identities problematically allows us to "imagine that we can 'see' difference and that we always 'know' to what racial, gender, class or sexual orientation group someone belongs" (Moya 2006, 107). However, paradoxically, seeing visible differences may not automatically equate with knowing. Moreover, within this framework, race/ethnicity and gender often come to function as the "penultimate visible identities" (Alcoff 2006, 6), while sexuality, class and age, for instance, can sometimes be rendered invisible, although this may not always be the case of course.

The question of visibility in connection with sexual identity haunted me for a long time. Meeting Anna-Stina and seeing her determination to create an image of and for lesbians in Estonia triggered memories of the first time I encountered a "coming out" story and how it had come as a complete "shock" at the time. To be sure, I was rather naïve then, with little experience, and with a family history of witnessing men's violence against women, thus by extension I was deeply distrustful of men's relationships with women and therefore more inclined towards trusting women than men. Looking back, it is clear why I would become interested in feminism. Yet I never quite seemed to question the prevalent heteronormative expectation that a girl would be attracted to boys. That was the only option in the society I grew up in, no matter how dysfunctional and disastrous a lot of the men seemed to be in my immediate surroundings. This was a society and a time when there was a lot of hushing and suppressing going on in terms of opinions about sexuality. Sex was a private matter and homosexual sex a taboo: I do not even remember hearing anything about the possibility of women being attracted to women or men being attracted to men when growing up, not even in derogatory terms. It was simply not discussed.

As I learned much later, both male and female homosexuality had been decriminalized in Estonia between the two World Wars when the country

was an independent republic, but this was "not an expression of sympathy on the part of the people in power towards homosexuals, but rather a result of the wish to be regarded as a democratic country" (Kotter 2001, 23). Male homosexuality was re-criminalized after the Soviet occupation, leading to arrests and repression of various degrees of intensity over the decades, depending on the changes in the political situation. Female homosexuality was not specifically mentioned in the law, but it was far from being accepted (Kotter 2001). What is more, homosexuality was regarded as a decadent product of the capitalist West, of which Soviet society was supposed to be free (Veispak 1991). It has also been pointed out that articles on homosexuality in the Soviet media seemed to be a greater taboo to the authorities than those criticizing the basis of the Soviet social, political or economic system (Parikas and Veispak 1991, 74).

Anna-Stina's exhibition and the question of visibility reminded me of a friend from the USA I had when I was a third-year English major at the University of Tartu. She was an exchange student, there for a semester. She was fun, engaging, very smart. She was beautiful. We grew close over a short period of time that spring, and I spent many days and weeks hanging out with her, discussing life and all these existential questions that you go through when you are in your early twenties. She was older, more experienced, like a breath of fresh air, I felt. I invited her to my home in Võru for a visit, a small provincial town where I had grown up and where my mother still lived at the time; I spent a lot of time in her dormitory room. We laughed, we giggled, we shared everything. I was an open book to her. During the trip to St. Petersburg and Moscow that the student organization I was part of at the time had organized for the foreign students at the university, she came out to me as having fallen in love with another foreign student from Denmark, a girl who was part of our small circle of friends, a girl with the lightest blue eyes I have ever seen. She swore that this changed nothing in her relationship with me and that she had felt obliged to tell me upfront shortly after this relationship had started. But I could not help feeling cast aside. I was deeply hurt but not sure whether this was because I felt she had somehow betrayed our friendship or because I was secretly jealous of the girl with the light blue eyes.

I had not seen it coming. Neither of them "looked" lesbian to me. Not that I had any idea what lesbians might have "looked" like as I did not know any women who had intimate relationships with other women at the time,

but strangely enough I had an expectation that there would be a "look" to tell them apart from others. Not to mention the fact that I was completely confused about my own feelings. I may have been more "innocent" about these issues than my peers due to my specific family background, but sexuality was generally a deeply suppressed topic for me and even the possibility of being attracted to a girl had not crossed my mind. In retrospect, I am glad I did not turn away from her – my initial reaction – and we stayed in touch for some time after she left Estonia and after I, in turn, left the USA where I studied as an exchange student at her university the following fall semester. She and her girlfriend were the ones who showed me that a relationship between women can be exciting and fun and, above all, *normal*. I am glad I had this encounter long before homophobia and disparaging stereotypes about gays and lesbians became an almost commonplace part of the mainstream Estonian media. I attribute part of my confusion then to the confusion of the times when in the Estonian context it was not common to discuss about any aspect of sexuality outside of heteronormative family structures, no matter how destructive these might have been in day-to-day life.

Here, I am reminded of Judith Butler's argument insisting that often "oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability" (Butler 1991, 20). That is to say, while lesbianism in the Estonian context has not been subject to acts of overt prohibition (which is certainly not unique to Estonia *per se*, as this seems to be a more widespread situation), the oppression of lesbians works covertly "through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects – *abjects*, we might call them – who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law" (1991, 20). The reason why lesbianism has not been prohibited can thus be partly attributed to the fact that "it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable" (1991, 20). When lesbianism does not even qualify as an object of prohibition, when it is utterly invisible in the political and cultural discourse, it is all the more difficult in a sense to take up a position from which to oppose or reverse the prohibitive discourse.

The question is then "how to 'be' a lesbian in a political context in which the lesbian does not exist?" (Butler 1991, 20). That said, it is difficult to deny the relevance of the question of visibility and the politics of representation

for Anna-Stina in this context. Acknowledging her attraction to women in a situation where it is difficult to find any representations or discussions in society that would reflect and connect with her experience must have been a devastating and lonely process. Her desire to increase the visibility of lesbians in Estonia and to open up space for critical discussions of sexuality is thus timely and crucial.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, visibility has been of immense importance for feminist, post-colonial and minority struggles in Euro-American societies over the past few decades. Quite understandably, discursive visibility is often equated with power: to be visible means to have power and also, more generally, to exist. Here visibility is not so much about becoming physically visible, but rather it becomes "a stand-in for something other than itself, namely attention and recognition, which everyone wants but few people get" (Chow 2010, 64). The sense of injustice it evokes is the driving force behind identity-based activism.

I believe this sense of injustice is precisely what inspired Anna-Stina to explore the question of lesbian invisibility in Estonia. As she claims in her artist's statement, "we [lesbians] exist as visible in reality as much as harry potters or little red riding hoods". In other words, she finds that lesbians are constructed as just imaginary characters, caricatures; they do not really exist in real life except as stereotypes, "bitter women", "masculine in their appearance and behaviour", as merely "the object of desire in the fantasies of heterosexual men". Lesbians are unrecognizable, forced to be invisible; rendering them visible thus becomes an important political imperative. The question is: how can we do that without becoming entangled in the existing regulatory regimes?

In line with various strands of late 20th century Western identity politics – be it gay and lesbian politics, black rights movements, feminist cultural activism – Anna-Stina privileges visibility as a strategy to lay claim symbolically to demands for social justice. To clarify, in the Western context the impulse to privilege the visible often arises out of the need to reclaim signifiers of difference that dominant ideologies have used to define minority identities negatively (Walker 1993, 868). The focus is not always on social visibility as "a measure of recognition" but also on the "visible performance of difference as a locus of political agency" (Walker 2001, 7). For instance, the ways in which gay and lesbian communities in the USA give symbolic power to cross-dressing as a signifier of homosexuality –

they select a drag queen to be "Miss Gay Pride" for the annual June Pride march in New York City and send her down Fifth Avenue in a convertible. However, while this strategy of claiming or reclaiming is often affirming, it can also replicate the practices of dominant ideologies that use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion.

To simplify: to demand visibility is to demand recognition. But the aim of making lesbians visible also problematically constructs "lesbian" as an identity category. As Elizabeth Grosz among many others has argued, "if politics constitutes itself as the struggle for recognition, the struggle for identity to be affirmed by the others who occupy socially dominant positions and among peers for mutual respect, it is a politics that is fundamentally servile" (Grosz 2005, 194). This was also a point that one of the critics of Anna-Stina's exhibition was quick to flesh out:

> Given the prevailing homophobia within Estonian society, it is difficult to criticise the validity of those demands. However, from a more radical position, it is worth considering the extent to which the inclusion of sexual minorities in the public sphere also entails invisibilities and exclusions that are dictated by the logic of that very same liberal public sphere. (Triisberg 2010)

If we follow Judith Butler on this question, we might assert the need to appear under the sign of lesbian if that is needed on political occasions but, overall, we should leave "permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies" (Butler 1991, 14). In short, we should refrain from essentializing identities.

## What I can't see

As I was walking around the gallery, I was at first trying to figure out the photos on the basis of what I liked and disliked. I immediately liked the two black-and-white photographs of Anna-Stina with her younger sister: *Sisters Baby Gerda and Pussycat I* and *Sisters Baby Gerda and Pussycat II*. I was enchanted by *Rehearsal for My Wedding. Negligee*, the photograph I could not quite make out when I first saw it in an email attachment (without the title then), suddenly became understandable, blown up on the exhibition wall. This was the only non-self-portrait at this exhibition. There was the sweet,

innocent-looking *Kissing Two Reflections*. The three photographs in colour, *Queer*, *Eli* and *Drag* (see Chapter 4), were the ones I had to wrestle with most. I was not sure if I particularly liked them but there was something there that suggested these three were the most important images for Anna-Stina herself.

Significantly, there was *Queer* in the middle, *Eli* and *Drag* first on the right and left-hand sides respectively, *Eli* followed by *Kissing Two Reflections* and *Negligee* towards the middle and *Drag* followed by *Rehearsal for My Wedding* and the two pictures of Anna-Stina with her sister towards the middle from the other side. These three colour pictures, all taken in the same old house, weaving them visually together, seemed to be framing the whole show. No matter in which order I looked at these photographs later in an electronic form on Anna-Stina's website and on my computer, or as low-quality printouts arranged on my office wall, these three coloured photographs somehow became clustered together in my mind as a set that is consciously pertaining to and constructing what would be called LGBTQI politics, exploring questions of the agency and visibility of lesbians in Estonia. These three photos stood out for me at the exhibition because they seemed to constitute a shift in Anna-Stina's style of photographing.

Anna-Stina's earlier, often black-and-white, photos – those that were part of the exhibition as well as those early self-portraits that I had seen online – could be seen as rather inquisitive, almost intuitive and exploratory of existential questions. She seemed to be asking herself: who am I? How do I look? Where am I? When am I? What's going on with me? Where do I belong? Am I real? Do I exist? For me, these early pictures seemed much more frail and uncertain, layered images, if not to say lyrical, sensitive and searching, than the three later ones, the more self-assertive, perhaps even slightly arrogant, "identity political" portraits as I started calling the set of three, despite the negative connotations of the term.

For the longest time, I could only connect to the second set, the so-called "existential" pictures. Through a genealogical move, in light of the colourful "identity political" images, I came to see these black-and-white works as her soul-searching images, as a basis for the later self-assertive portraits. I saw a woman there who wanted to find out who she was and how she appeared to herself, to the world. I saw her desire to show her relations: with her sister, with her lesbian friends, with her lovers. She herself said that she only made these images for herself, with no one else in mind. The intended

audience for these portraits was herself. She needed proof that she exists. Proof for which passport photos, for instance, were not enough. She needed to decide for herself how she appears. To prove that she was there. That she was present. That she decided. I saw a woman who was trying to imagine an identity for herself that she could freely inhabit, a woman who was seeking acceptance, a relation of understanding from and with the world. I saw this woman who was trying to imagine, to create a space to call her own. A whirling woman. I saw softness, spontaneity, searching, perhaps even smoothness, calmness, definitely intimacy.

Anna-Stina's earlier photos seemed indeed very much like intimate, therapeutic explorations of her fears and anxieties about not being "real", not fitting in, seeing herself as a "faulty product". She was questioning her self, her ability to connect to others, the problems with, and indeed lack of, communication. In one of the self-portraits, Anna-Stina kisses her own reflection in the mirror; initially called *Is This Love?*, she changed the title to *Kissing Two Reflections* for the solo exhibition. It reads as an attempt to face her fears about accepting her sexual identity and to show this self-acceptance in public. Renaming the photo was motivated by her desire to draw attention to the girl whose picture is included in the frame in the right-hand corner of the mirror. The bright lamps on top of the mirror give an almost altar-like impression of the image, creating a theatrical frame, further accentuating her desire for the girl in the picture. We do not really see Anna-Stina's face, her closed eyes appear only as a reflection in the mirror. As in many of her earlier self-portraits, she avoids direct eye contact with the viewers. The multiple reflections and mirrorings – reflection of her through the camera lens and reflection of her in the mirror – seem to testify to the futility of the attempt to record and find answers to the fleeting question marks: do I love this girl? Do I love myself? Somehow it also reminded me of the innocence of the scenes from early teenage years, often depicted in films, where a young girl is seen practising kissing in front of a mirror.

Anna-Stina's desire to make the lesbian community and its politics visible springs from a void, an absence of any acceptable representation of lesbians in this context. During the 1990s, when sexuality was much more openly discussed than during Soviet times, the main representation of lesbians in the Estonian media was as of deviant, unnatural women, as Lilian Kotter, the founder of the first Estonian gay organization (Estonian Lesbian Union,

1990-1998 and Estonian Association of Lesbian and Bisexual Women, 1998-2005), told the story at the roundtable seminar the day after the opening of the exhibition. From her, Anna-Stina inherited a collection of bound newspaper articles from the beginning of the 1990s that mention or discuss lesbians. Almost all the articles gathered in the light-pink binder seem to be accompanied by images from Western porn magazines (although the articles themselves are not about pornography), showing two women together in a way that reflects being targeted at heterosexual men and their sexual fantasies. At the seminar, the discussion concluded that the 2000s saw again a shift towards more conservative attitudes in society in terms of politics that have become more neoliberal and controlling, not least pertaining to normative sexualities and protecting heterosexual family structures for the sake of safeguarding the survival of the Estonian nation. The general rise of homophobia is manifested especially blatantly in the homophobic content of online newspaper comments by anonymous commentators, but also in many statements by certain spokespersons and public figures.

Even in the light of all these circumstances, Anna-Stina's bold, colourful "identity political" set of portraits just did not seem to work for me, no matter how I tried to approach them. I tried to match these photos with one theory after another; I went through a long and painful phase of considering everything from identity political perspectives to assemblage to articulation theory. Nothing seemed to work. I could not write about them. There was a sense of dislike in me and what is worse I felt very strongly that I could not *not* like these photos. Disliking them was like disowning her, abandoning her, denying her the support she needed and was looking for and that I wanted to give her. I was not prepared to take on the role of a distanced critic. I could not separate my relation to her from my relation to her photos. She was her photos, her photos were her. I had completely, utterly conflated the two, not least because she herself appears in almost every single one of them and it is difficult not to read them as autobiographical.

### Am I that critic?

When I read Rita Felski's essay "Everyday Aesthetics", I got the unnerving sense that there is always some arbitrariness in the interpretation of art from a social theory perspective (Felski 2009). This includes feminist art and feminist perspectives. There is certain rigidity in trying to force the elements of the artwork into a coherent social and political framework and pin down its political meanings, test it against the message one feels it should have. Most often this happens either in the form of eagerly asserting the transgressive and subversive meanings one wants to show that the artwork contains or in the shape of criticism fixated on why so and so does not quite live up to expectations.

I did not and do not want to be that critic.

Feeling this way completely overwhelmed me when I first looked at Anna-Stina's "identity political" self-portraits at the exhibition, in the light of the artist's statement that most of her critics also seemed to have taken as a starting point. Approaching her photos with the usual feminist tools of close reading for moments of critical intervention in unequal social structures and simply celebrating her work as an important example of the emerging lesbian feminist identity politics that has finally caught on in Eastern Europe – which was what I felt she and the Estonian context were asking from me – seemed insufficient, too narrow, too easy. Yet what would be the less arbitrary, less reductive, less rigid way of interpreting her photos? Furthermore, to claim that from a feminist theory perspective that has deconstructed identities and rendered identity-based politics basically futile, something in her art project did not quite work, seemed awful and out of place, if not impossible. I was her friend, a fellow feminist, a fan on her side. I did not want to be that critic.

To say that social functions cannot directly be deduced from aesthetic form is not to say that art is (or should be) otherworldly, cannot be understood as having political relevance or always fails to be translated into social meanings (Felski 2009). On the contrary. Art often does and should engage with the social. So what was perhaps disturbing for me was the way in which texts – and images are types of text – are often linked to contexts in arbitrary ways, reducing art to a narrowly utilitarian function. Interestingly,

it is sometimes the artists themselves who package and present their work in this way, making it speak for specific and clearly identifiable political goals, thus predetermining and limiting the possible response they will get – celebratory from those who agree with the goals, derogatory from those who do not. Is that what Anna-Stina was doing? I felt she certainly invited this kind of reading. She accompanied the photographs with an artist's statement explaining the exhibition as a means of starting a discussion in society about heterosexism and homophobia, making the exhibition thus stand for her lesbian/queer/LGBTQI politics, using the text to add political weight to the images. Perhaps that was the problem all along. But what if this particular aesthetic form, the self-portrait, had come to be so strongly associated with a certain social function – self-representation and the-personal-is-political kind of feminist identity politics – in one context, for instance, in the West, but did not quite work the same way in another, for instance, in Eastern Europe?

My fear of being a critic was connected to the question of what it might actually mean to critique a work of art. It does not automatically equate with disparaging or devaluing works of art, as a common assumption seems to be, one that seems to have plagued me as well, but I am also not sure that it does not just redeem them "by turning them into versions of itself, revealing them to be engaged in subverting and self-questioning, defamiliarizing and denaturalizing, pulverizing the banality of the commonsensical and the commonplace" (Felski 2011). In line with Rita Felski, who wonders whether we would not do better justice to our aesthetic attachments by stopping the critical machinery for a while, I wanted to ask: what would it mean to treat my experience of ambivalence or even dislike not as evidence of "failed" or "unoriginal" art but as "clues to why we are drawn to art in the first place" (2011, 3)? In other words, Felski suggests exploring the rich and varied textures of our attachments to works of art, "to treat texts not as objects to be investigated but as co-actors that make things happen, not as symptomatic but as singular, not as matters of fact, in Latour's sense, but matters of concern" (2011, 3).

Rita Felski's suggestion to treat works of art as co-actors neatly ties in with Irit Rogoff's term "criticality". Rogoff offers "criticality" as an alternative to having to choose between "criticism", which is "a form of finding fault and exercising judgement according to a consensus of values", and "critique", which means "examining the underlying assumptions that

might allow something to appear as a convincing logic" (Rogoff 2006, 2). She sees "criticality" as a way of moving beyond critical analysis, beyond finding flaws and detecting omissions, towards being embedded. This means that "criticality" is "a mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary" (2006, 2). It is a mode that leaves you at once empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing. It acknowledges the fact that, despite all our theoretical knowledge and complex modes of analysis, we are always also "living out the very conditions we are trying to analyse and come to terms with" (2006, 2). Thus, by staying with my experience of ambivalence and frustration, by "embodying criticality", I was able to refrain from looking for ultimate resolution and find a different mode of inhabitation, a heightened awareness.

In short, it became clear to me that I wanted to endorse Anna-Stina's works of art but at the same time I was not interested in merely celebrating or merely criticizing, merely focusing on searching for meanings presumed to be fixed in the object of scrutiny. I needed to disentangle myself from the problem of our mutual locking each other in: her expecting me to give some sort of affirmation to her work as a feminist and academic theoretician, me not quite being able to give it to her in the form in which I thought she sought that affirmation. I could only move forward by embracing my ambivalence and reading it as symptomatic of wider issues pertaining to the relative absence of postsocialist imaginaries from Western feminist theorizing and the lack of academic language capable of perceiving and analysing this phenomenon.

I certainly had to contest any perception of Anna-Stina as indeed just "doing identity politics" because I felt it was exactly this reading that would position her as a "belated copy" of the West. In the process, I realized that the way to do so was through moving away not only from the text – the artist's statement – but also from the widespread feminist approach towards the politics of representation, which has tended to privilege *textual* investigations based on the *rhetoric* of the image. Problematically, this has subsumed the specificities of a medium, its conditions of production, distribution and consumption, under a universalizing assumption that whatever the particular object under scrutiny – a film, a painting, a photograph, an advertisement – "the politics of representation turns out to

be the same politics" (Evans 2000, 105). Furthermore, I also had to refrain from the textualist approach that is common to many visual culture critics, who tend to write "as if their judgement was self-evident, the only one possible, as if their account of a visual work is a process of description or revelation rather than construction" (Rose 2012, 547).

I had to locate Anna-Stina's photographs as social, affective and political *events*, not merely judging them on the grounds of their political effect. In other words, I had to work out a relational approach towards her works of art in order to be able to produce an account that can render them not simply as objects to be interpreted, not merely as illustrations or visual representations of theoretical and political accounts, not conflating the artist and her politics with the self-portraits, but showing them as incredibly complex objects that came into being only through the webs of relations between numerous actors. As a researcher, an analyst, I was just one among the many actors – and certainly, I was one that had to begin from decolonizing my own thinking.

Interlude II

# Shifting to whirling the world

These leaps and crossings that I eventually needed to make in order to connect with Anna-Stina's artwork thus brought up the question of the politics and ethics of critique. She trusted me with so much, with her pictures, her stories, her self. I needed to get past the guilt and the sense of betrayal. I needed to understand how I got myself into a situation where I felt cornered, frozen, unable to speak. Was this in fact produced by the pictures, by Anna-Stina, or did I create all of it on my own, in my head when stubbornly trying to match her pictures with the theories, measuring her against the yardstick of Western perspectives? Was it in fact the case that I felt I was letting down "feminism in Estonia" or "LGBTQI politics in Estonia" when I wanted to say that Anna-Stina's art did not quite work theoretically?

Was I deep down regarding Anna-Stina's art as a mere copy of similar art made in the West? Did I perceive certain theoretical weaknesses in her conceptualizations because of my focus on the artist's statement, on the text that I thought reeked of an identity politics I had grown accustomed to criticizing? Did I perhaps only have eyes for the text which declared that her aim was to make lesbians visible in Estonia? A text that from my feminist theoretical viewpoint I saw as lacking what I deemed to be the necessary critical depth? Did I in fact overlook the actual photographs, dismiss her art in my initial ambivalence? Did I automatically position her art as just a backdrop to her queer politics, a series of posters for the slogans, a wallpaper, a decoration for identity political claims? What made the photographs become elusive, escape my attention? And finally, after all this, what sustained my continued attachment to them, what nurtured my

desire to keep coming back to them?

All this intense questioning eventually led me to claiming ambivalence. I realized that claiming ambivalence did not mean neglecting the position of an engaged friend and becoming a distanced critical researcher. Staying true to the relations in time and space, in fact, helped me home in on questions of the ethics of feminist criticism which have been crucial for me throughout the research process. Putting relationality at the centre of my inquiry proved to be the key to achieving that.

My initially ambivalent reaction to Anna-Stina's artwork made me ponder how this ambivalence tied in with the "so 80s" comment the US American feminist author gave as a response to my presentation of Treumund's work at an early stage of this project. This comment in turn triggered my main interest in this project in tracing the trajectories through which postsocialist feminist imaginaries become cast as belated copies of Western feminist discourses. I was troubled for a long time by my initial reading of the photographs and wanted to save the artist from the "lag" discourse I thought she was caught up in, until it became clear to me that in fact I was the one who needed to be rescued from the position of the "Western" critic.

Recognizing the need to save myself from the position of the "Western" critic really brought about a shift towards embracing whirling as a methodological tool. I began seeing both Anna-Stina and myself as *whirling subjects*. I felt this figuration truly captured the embodied and the relational structure of knowledge systems and world-making that I wanted to arrive at. Whirling became my way of connecting beyond my ambivalence. Whirling is indeed about creating a space with our own bodies. It is about moving ourselves between the inside and the outside, towards and around others, but also around ourselves. This space that we create with our own bodies is a space in movement, at once closed and safe as well as open and inviting. Whirling expresses the sense of being embodied and embedded in both time and space. It is intensely relational, actional, social, emancipatory, empowering.

How we whirl in the world is a particular practice of worlding, of world-making. Haraway's concept of "worlding" is a useful one to invoke here due to its focus on co-shaping and relationality, on "becoming with" others (Haraway 2008; Haraway 2011). What does it mean to make a world, to sense it, to exist in it? In Donna Haraway's model, worlding means an overlapping and intersecting of both tangible and intangible practices that shape who

or what exists, how, when, where, and why. In other words, worlding is about how worlds are established, maintained, ordered, deconstructed and reconfigured. A "world" is a possible unknown made up of multiple and diverse entities. These entities are part of each other's presence, they are "response-able" to and for each other (Haraway 2008). Responding to and for each other is an act that draws ontological entities into figures or figurations which Haraway understands as "material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape each other" (2008, 4). The figuration is a co-shaping, a "becoming with", that for Haraway is also a "becoming worldly" in a practice of conceiving and inhabiting a certain kind of world where the humans grapple with retying the knots of multispecies response-ability. The worldings conceived through visual imaginaries and narratives are not pre-existing and fixed, but constructed, or in the process of creation. These worlds are flexible and thereby open to numerous complex interpretations. In the context of this thesis, worlding thus involves the relational work and play of intersectional feminist world-making. Worlding involves shifting to whirling, of claiming one's own space.

My shifting involved facing my unreflected position on the former Eastern Europe and changing the way in which I approached Anna-Stina's work. Making this shift implied I was finally able to read her art through the lens of challenging the hegemony of unidirectional progression narratives that still haunt Western feminist theories, through decolonizing hegemonic frames of thought.

# 4

## Claiming Space: *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*

*You can't be a main character, he said bluntly. Why not? I said. Look in the mirror, he said. You're an exotic. What do you mean, an exotic? I said. I'm a respectable person. I don't do kinky dancing.* Exotic, *he said in his bored voice. Consult the dictionary. Alien, foreign, coming in from the outside. Not from here. But I am from here, I said. Do I have a funny accent or something? I don't make the rules, he said. Maybe you are, I'm not denying it, but your appearance is against it. If we were in some other place you wouldn't look as if you'd come in from the outside, because you'd already be outside, and so would everyone else there. Then I'd be the exotic, wouldn't I? He gave a short laugh. But we're here, aren't we. And there* you *are.*

- Margaret Atwood, *The Tent*, (2006, 56)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Drag* (2010)

**Opening: I am here**

A brightly coloured photograph entitled *Drag* (2009) pictures a woman posing as a man posing as a woman. Inevitably, there is a high probability that for many gender studies students this image conjures up Judith Butler and her politics of performativity and parody. Anna-Stina Treumund, the model in the picture, seems to be the embodiment of Butler's notion of gender as a copy of a copy without an original. She is putting on a performance, exploring the constructed nature of gender and sexuality and playing with a mixture of exaggerated signifiers. On the one hand, her tall slim body is recognizable as feminine, her slender figure and curved hips unmistakably female. On the other hand, she is trying to downplay her femininity by binding her breasts tightly and suggesting a possibly male body underneath the long men's underwear that she is wearing, complete with a pair of socks for stuffing, although it is perhaps doubtful that she would really be seen as a man. Rather, the bound breasts would suggest that she could be a butch lesbian or perhaps a transgender person in the process of transitioning. Her excessive, doll-like make-up and an electric blue wig give the impression of a face made up for a drag queen performance. There is a mix of masculine presence and female masquerade in her face, a mix of masculine and feminine identity markers. *Drag* could easily work as an epitome of permanently troubled identity categories, what Judith Butler calls "invariable stumbling-blocks", which she understands and even promotes "as sites of necessary trouble" (Butler 1991, 14).

A copy of this photograph sits in a large silver frame on the top shelf above my writing desk at my home in Sweden. It was a present from Anna-Stina. I am sometimes afraid that the cheap, frail IKEA bookshelf that supports the picture might one day succumb to the weight of the frame and fall down. I have thus come to ponder the weight and impact of this photograph during the late evenings I spend at my desk writing. When I first saw this image, I cannot say that I understood it too well or thought

much about it. It seemed like something I might have already seen a long time ago. Perhaps at an exhibition, most certainly in a book, a website, a film. There was something very familiar about the striking pose, something recognizable about the drag, the disguise. It could have been a photograph taken by someone else, some other time, somewhere else. Yet it appears highly specific in the contemporary postsocialist Estonian context where it was created.

I could not get this image out of my head. I could not help but feel there was something more to it than the vague sense of familiarity and I had to dig deeper. Eventually, I absorbed this image so much into my mind that it turned into a poster of sorts for Anna-Stina's solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*, which opened in March 2010. After my shift towards embracing my initial ambivalence, it became an iconic image for me, a visual statement that epitomizes the main theme of this particular exhibition and Anna-Stina's journey towards claiming a lesbian identity. It is one of her first self-portraits where I can really see that she is confident. She claims her space and does it powerfully. She draws a circle around herself with her body, she marks the time and space she inhabits. *She is whirling*. I am here! For the first time, she dares to show her face to the public in her photographs, to stare right into the eyes of the viewer, to put herself on the pedestal.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In a way, Anna-Stina's artist's statement was the source of many of my initial anxieties about *Drag, Queer* and *Eli* and the whole exhibition more broadly. Following the route suggested in her statement, Anna-Stina appeared to be stuck in the limiting rights-based discourse because, in my reading, she seemed to favour the explicit and essentializing construction of a lesbian subject as a minority. Making the relationality of the images and myself as a spectator the field of inquiry, I came to view her approach to claiming visibility and recognition as much more ambiguous, uncertain, different from what I took it to be in the context of the East-West binary. I saw her exploring, expanding and reclaiming the act of looking, the act of making meanings within cultural production for herself – within Estonia, within the world. As a way of coming into representation for women, self-portraiture for Anna-Stina is a means to conceive of how she looks in the

sense of how she sees rather than how she appears. *Drag, Queer* and *Eli*, among others, suggest ways of understanding how she sees her relation to herself, to feminist and queer activism in Estonia, to feminist and queer movements elsewhere. It is our task as spectators not to deny her work the ever-changing web of relationalities it produces.

I have already extensively discussed my initial ambivalence about the exhibition as crucial for informing my theoretical ambition in this thesis. So my main focus in this chapter is on a close reading of Anna-Stina's self-portrait called *Drag,* which I contextualize through references to two other self-portraits, *Queer* and *Eli* . I chose to focus in more detail on *Drag* because it intrigued me the most and opened up some avenues for considering my main research question. I describe and analyze how, together with *Queer* and *Eli, Drag* addresses questions of gender, sexuality and the politics of representation. Drawing on Anna-Stina's comments about these artworks during our interviews and conversations, my general concern here is the question of how she expresses her subjectivity and lesbian politics through her specific locatedness in postsocialist Estonia and through her own citational practices, which she uses to negotiate and make sense of her politics of location. Moreover, I explore how this self-portrait connects to the fantasy of the lag discourse pertaining to Eastern Europe within Western feminist discourses. I draw on some art historical and cultural references that Anna-Stina makes through *Drag* and link my discussion to some critical readings of this exhibition from the Estonian context in order to contextualize her work within current discussions in Estonian art criticism.

I also want to make a note of the title of Anna-Stina's exhibition, which is a reference to the film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005, 90 minutes) by contemporary artist Miranda July. In the film, July observes a small community of adults, teens, and children pursuing ordinary impulses. Most memorable among them are perhaps two young kids, who gaze with steady calm, through windows and computer screens, at sometimes shocking perversities. July conceives of her own character, a conceptual artist named Christine, as a quiet wallflower full of romantic yearnings and confident in her eccentric ideas. July's movie illuminates the ordinary, parodies the intrinsic weirdness of sexual desire, and reminds us what it feels like to be human. July's character Christine and a shoe salesman named Richard (John Hawkes) are nodal points in a web of odd, lost souls who slowly, by

the film's end, form a sympathetic, eccentric circle. In accordance with the film's title, Miranda July thus proposes an idea of community, albeit a little strange. In short, she deconstructs preconceived notions of sexuality and relations, suggesting that totally regular people can have unexpected and queer encounters.

In general, Anna-Stina's concept for this exhibition strongly resonates with July's film. But the shift she makes from July's "everyone we know" to "everyone we don't know" is semantically significant. While she wants to evoke the positivity of the message that there can be multiple queer ways for people to connect and form communities without having to essentialize their identities, it also feels like her shift signals a more scary aspect as well. She complicates the merry picture of queer connections by hinting at those around us whom we don't really know. For me, this evokes again Anna-Stina's self-portrait *What I Can't See* (2006) that I discussed at the beginning of the Introduction. Not knowing someone may indicate a sense of fear and uncertainty, of not knowing what people might be talking about you behind your back. This sense of not knowing evokes a fear of homophobia that Anna-Stina knows is definitely there.

### Troubling *Drag*

*There is a sense of freedom in having a desire that has never been labeled.*

- Nan Goldin, *The Other Side* (1993, 7)

Anna-Stina's self-portraits *Drag, Queer* and *Eli* seemed to become glued together in my mind, a triptych of sorts, from the moment I first saw them. Contemplating W. J. T. Mitchell's question: "what do pictures want?" in his book of the same title (2006), I began trying to unravel why I felt such a powerful response to *Drag, Queer* and *Eli* specifically. I was prompted to ask myself: what do Anna-Stina's photographs want from me? How do they influence me, demand things from me, persuade me, seduce me, and also lead me astray sometimes? Following on from there, I also began to wonder what do Western feminist theories want from me? It is no wonder that I got myself too paralyzed to say anything at all. Linking my struggle to make sense of *Drag, Queer* and *Eli* with the "so 80s" comment I received at a

seminar at the beginning of my research freed me of some of the rigidity of my initial approach and changed my perspective. That *anything* could be a copy of something that appeared so ambiguous, ambivalent, contradictory and elusive as various forms of feminisms was beyond me. Furthermore, why was it that the Western "master narrative" of feminist theory kept appearing as this clearly bounded concrete monster when in fact all of it seems a lot more vague, its contours fading every single time we try to pin them down? Grasping its size and texture, surface and depth is so much more difficult than it is made out to be. In whose interest has it been to keep fixing Western feminism as an ideal type against which everyone else is judged? What kind of mechanisms allow for these constructions to be continuously fixed? How does feminism fit into the wider context of a Western culture that keeps trying to maintain its grip on the rest of the world, thus often just unwittingly replicating some of its colonialist ambitions?

In the case of art and self-portrait photography in particular, it seemed to me that one of the ways in which the binary of the "belated copy" that is non-Western Europe and the "original" that is the West is produced is the predominant reading of visual images from a representational perspective. From this perspective, a representation is taken to be a copy of reality, a reflection of the real world that is taken to have fixed meanings. Thus, when analyzing a piece of art, the common strategy is to look for and uncover these fixed meanings. Such a way of looking for expected meanings uncritically produces situations where a photograph from Eastern Europe called *Drag* or *Queer* that looks like a photograph from the gay and lesbian rights movement in the USA twenty years ago is read as a copy of that photograph, an imitation of the "original". Or if *Eli* bears a striking resemblance to photographs one has already seen at lesbian photography exhibitions in the 1990s in Berlin, this must mean it is a mere replication of the same. "We" have already seen this before. Finally, "they" in Eastern Europe are catching up.

In her review of the exhibition, cultural critic Airi Triisberg points out that there are in fact a lot more ambiguities and ambivalences in Anna-Stina Treumund's images than the artist's statement leaves space for in its explicit declaration of wanting to increase the visibility of lesbians and create an "adequate image" of lesbians in Estonia. Although it is difficult to disagree with this perspective, as photographs cannot be said to have any fixed meanings despite the feeling that certain meanings might seem

to prevail over others, I do not want to render them just wonderfully ambiguous. I want to stay with the tension, if at all possible, the tension that I specifically sense these three photographs to create in relation to the so-called "identity politics" of the artist's statement. These three images seem to trouble gender and sexual identity categories more explicitly than the rest of the photographs in this exhibition, which renders them infinitely variable. They are also the ones that initially spoke most to the ambivalence I felt concerning the way in which the exhibition was framed by the text and how I framed it myself through my own positioning as a feminist scholar from the former Eastern Europe working in the Western academic context. My eventual shift beyond ambivalence illuminated new ways of reading *Drag*.

  As already mentioned in the opening to this chapter, *Drag* (2009) shows Anna-Stina in drag. We can see her pictured full length in an empty, rather confined space. The whole setting looks quite bleak: a small, run-down room with torn wallpaper and paint stains on the floor of what appears to be a dilapidated old house, probably about to be renovated, as the construction site trash in the corner suggests. To add to her looming presence in the photograph, Anna-Stina is standing on a foot-stool, creating an image of herself in control, in a power position. Her head is held back high, her face in an almost frozen, arrogant pose, one hand placed self-importantly, authoritatively on the hip, her gaze fixed on the viewer. The arrogance is achieved through the slightly elevated chin, which further elongates her long neck. It appears that she is almost looking down on the viewer. Furthermore, her other hand is firmly holding on to the remote that triggers the camera's shutter release to record the image. The figure in the image is not very well lit – there is some light coming in through the door behind her but it does not quite illuminate her. She remains in shadow. This adds some gloominess to the image and suggests a sense of danger perhaps. The door, a bit broken, looks as if it might have been forced open, as if someone has tried to break in. Or rather, break out, from the inside to the outside. Seeing the photograph printed in a large format framed on the exhibition wall, I noticed that Anna-Stina's face is in fact slightly blurred and the focus falls on the open door behind her, with light sneaking in. Looking even more closely, I see that someone's shadow is reflected on the door, suggesting there is another person in this room with her, probably standing by the window that has made the reflection possible.

What is obvious about the image is the way in which it chronicles the act of taking a photograph, a performance, rather than showing a two-dimensional print of a subject. This is manifested through the cord that Anna-Stina is holding, which indicates that she is the one recording the carefully crafted and posed image. This photograph is characterized by direct address – its subject looks directly at the camera, at the viewers, fixing us with its rather cocky-looking stare. Since there is no doubt about the image being posed and performed, since it is a far cry from an ethnographic recording of an objectifying "presence", we know we are being addressed directly. She has climbed onto that stool to make a statement. She refuses to be a subject "captured" on film. She is a subject who is capturing you: you are its other, through which she defines herself with a vengeance. Your presence is acknowledged. This is a world where to perform is to control. This photograph is an image of fantasy – it represents the dream of total control, the icy demeanour of mastery, like a *femme fatale* preserved on film, the classic phallic woman.

*Drag* certainly does quite a bit of gender troubling. It took me a while to realize that Anna-Stina's performance of a drag artist in this photograph could in fact be read as a form of drag kinging. As practically a stranger to the culture of drag in both the Western and Estonian context, I had been so caught up with figuring out the blue wig and the imitation of a drag queen that I had failed to capture the fact that, as a woman, Anna-Stina was first and foremost performing a mixture of certain types of masculinities. On the one hand, she adopts the style of a male drag queen with the wig and the make-up, but on the other hand, she elucidates the typical features involved in a performance of female masculinity: the bound breasts, the stuffed crotch. Drag kinging is rather different, for instance, from the presentation of butch or from various transgendered performances as it relies on "the matter of a female body for its work, as opposed to an essentialist definition, in a shape that is coherently female outside the enactments of the drag king performance" (Berrick 2008, 209). It does this through combining various forms of self and other identification as well as a variety of codings and meanings attributed to embodiment that "femaleness" has in society.

In a way, making the link to drag kinging gave me the clue that allowed me to understand Anna-Stina as not just "doing identity politics" and claiming "lesbian" as an essentialized identity category. I realized that all this time I had seen "lesbian" as a fixed category as opposed to "queer", which I took

as much more free-floating. She was in fact very powerfully challenging and troubling all gendered and sexualized identity categories, putting a queer twist on claiming any category in particular. To call her a drag king would be reductive as that would capture only the performance of her body from the neck down. To call her a faux queen, a woman who performs as a drag queen, also described as a "biologically-challenged drag queen", "female female impersonator" or "female impersonator impersonator" would not quite work either as that would only apply to her drag queen face. Her look, her performance, thus does not fit neatly into any of the gender-troubling categories. Nevertheless, she claims a lesbian identity.

In my specific reading of this photograph, whether I encounter it in the exhibition hall, in my writing space or online on the front page of Anna-Stina's website, I see her masquerade and parodic performance as capturing the necessity and impossibility of fixing identity through representation. Our identities are always under (re)construction, no name can do justice to our shifting selves. In this sense:

> every identity is retroactive: Identity comes to us from the future, rather than the past, and is what *will have been*, a defensive editing of the past (even the past of the body in transsexual and cosmetic surgeries) to make it all come out right, with the proper ending – for that moment. "I" will be another all too soon... (Tyler 1997, 121)

I know that Anna-Stina herself considers this photograph to be particularly important for this exhibition: for the first time she is very strongly claiming her own space, claiming her agency to define herself however she pleases. She makes herself very visible, marking a shift in her attitude. Significantly, she is showing her face, albeit in drag, unlike in many of her earlier self-portraits. Her gaze is turned right at the viewer. I begin to see it as a confrontation. She is no longer that shy girl who felt confused and in conflict with herself and with those around her. This portrait constitutes her shift: I am not going to be silent any more, I will claim myself, I can be whatever I want to be. It is a clear declaration of independence. It is as though she has shed the burden of restrictive norms and conventions off her back and she stands up high, almost like a sculpture, a statuesque figure. She looks proud. Proud to show herself. She has a sense of security. No identity is more or less constructed than any other.

## Intertextual allusions

It should be underlined that Anna-Stina's artworks are often ripe with intertextuality. The citational tactics she uses are always in dialogue with both the historical context of Estonia and Western feminist and queer theories, activists and art practices. They are embedded in her embodied experience of her immediate surroundings, the things she reads or artworks she finds inspiring. Before Anna-Stina made *Drag,* she closely studied photographs of drags and cross-dressers. She noticed that the authors and/or subjects of such photographs were often men and that they tended to dress up as style or pop icons such as Marilyn Monroe or Madonna. When women dressed up as men, they often did not have a clear character in mind. One of the most impressive works of androgyny and cross-dressing for Anna-Stina was Kelli Connell's series "Double Life"[35] where Connell explores questions of identity, gender roles, and expectations placed by society on the individual. The series, which depicts Connell in a romantic relationship with herself, shows the "couple" having intimate and private moments in their lives, moments experienced by the artist personally, witnessed in public or seen on TV. The events portrayed in these photographs look believable, yet they have never occurred: they are composite images, created from scanning and manipulating two or more images in Photoshop. Representing the duality or multiplicity of the self, this series experiments with the polarities of identities, with the masculine and feminine psyche, defined by body language and the clothing worn. Inspired by this work, Anna-Stina wondered what it would take to perform a man performing a woman. It turned out, as she said in the interview I conducted with her prior to the opening of the exhibition, that all it took was some make-up, a wig, binding breasts and working with the body posture.

Drag queens, cross-dressing men characterized by conspicuous displays of female glamour, have been the subject of many 20th century photographers such as George Brassaï, Lisette Model, Weegee and Diane Arbus. In the early 1970s, Nan Goldin famously began photographing the drag queens and transsexuals who were hanging out in a Boston bar called *The Other Side*. Goldin's photographs are distinguishable from the earlier photographs of

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35 Kelli Connell's works are accessible here: www.kelliconnell.com (accessed 8 September 2012).

drag queens due to her relationship with her subjects as well as their self-presentation. Some of these are pictures taken in public but there are also many intimate ones, the result of time spent together. Goldin approaches her subjects in a straightforward, non-judgemental way, her pictures suggest a family album, a community and a struggle that the viewer is asked to empathise with. Goldin's documentation of the lives of her subjects (as well as her own life) constitutes a shift away from traditional representations of the sexuality and gender of her subjects as pathological. She refutes such views in the spirit of the famous feminist slogan, "The personal is political". As Goldin writes in her preface to *The Other Side,* "Most people get scared when they can't categorize others – by race, by age, and, most of all, by gender" (1993, 6). She adds: "The pictures in this book are not of people suffering gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria. This book is about new possibilities and transcendence" (Goldin 1993, 8).

Anna-Stina tells me that drag queens seem to appear in photographic art much more frequently than women who dress up as men. While drag queens have become almost a cliché in many films, television programmes and advertisements, male impersonation is a much rarer sight. As Jennifer Blessing notes in her overview "Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography":

> Why is there such a dearth of popular images of female-to-male (FTM) gender-crossing? Is it somehow more problematic for a female-born subject to take on overt signs of masculinity than it is for a male-born subject to take on femininity? Could it be that femininity – the throwaway gender, that inscrutable extraneous otherness – is available for play, while masculinity, which symbolizes power, cannot be tampered with? (Blessing 1997, 107)

This issue is also extensively discussed by Judith Halberstam in her book *Female Masculinity*, where among other things she raises the question of why the history of public recognition of female masculinity is "most frequently characterized by stunning absences" (1998, 231). By performing a man who is performing a woman Anna-Stina thus also addresses this problematics with a twist.

Typically, photographic work that documents the lives of drag queens, cross-dressers and others who are regarded as sexual or gender deviants is characterized by its voyeurism, in which "the drag queen is presented

as a debased theatrical personality alongside ageing strippers and denizens of carnival sideshows" (Blessing 1997, 96). These photographs satisfy the voyeur's appetite for the other, for the unusual and the unimaginable. However, since the subjects of such photographs are often performers or at least aware that they are being photographed, this does not necessarily come off as predatory. Anna-Stina certainly plays along with the theatricality of her eccentric drag queening/drag kinging performance. What distinguishes Anna-Stina from the drag queens in Goldin's photographs, for instance, is that for Anna-Stina, this is fantasy play, a reference to and a way to connect with so-called queer lives elsewhere, in other times. She plays dress-up specifically for this image. It is not her everyday surroundings, her everyday routines, her everyday life. Through mixing and matching references to queer visual cultures elsewhere, she is constructing her own place within the visual economies of otherness to which she arrives almost alone in her home context and as a latecomer in the Western context. With this self-portrait, she challenges people's need to categorize others and feels liberated, if not to say euphoric, about playing with fantasy images, fantasy personas. She invites the viewer to contemplate the realm of photography that delights in the documentation of the unusual, allowing the viewer to stare, to ponder without shame: "Is it a man? Is it a woman? Does this person really exist?"

As Anna-Stina says, the electric blue wig that she is wearing in her *Drag* is a friendly nod to Nan Goldin's work, in particular to the photograph entitled *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC* (1991).[36] This photograph shows two drag queens, Misty and Jimmy Paulette, who are photographed close-up, sitting next to each other in a taxi. The camera's flash has illuminated and accentuated their heavy make-up and shiny clothes. Misty wears a light blue wig, big heart-shaped silver earrings and a PVC-textured sleeveless top stretched tight over large fake breasts. Jimmy Paulette is dressed in an equally synthetic blonde wig, a white fishnet top and a golden bra, the straps of which have fallen off his shoulders, with white padding showing and with two large holes in the front of the white giving a sense of a sleazy edge to this glamour. However, in contrast with Anna-Stina's almost triumphant and conceited look, their vacant gaze at the camera under heavy eyelids speaks of fatigue and emptiness rather than desire, ironic playfulness or a

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36 Nan Goldin's photograph *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC* (1991) can be viewed here: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/goldin-misty-and-jimmy-paulette-in-a-taxi-nyc-p78046 (accessed 8 September 2012).

celebration of open-ended gender and sexuality.

As someone who grew up in the Soviet Union, I am bound to make another connection with the blue wig and the particular make-up Anna-Stina is wearing in *Drag*. The colour of the wig and the two distinct round red dots drawn on her cheeks remind me of images of Malvina, a doll-like character with blue hair from a children's story entitled *The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino* (1936) by the Russian author Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy, which he based on the 1883 novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi*. This book, and the various films and theatre performances it inspired, was hugely popular among children in the Soviet Union. It continues to be popular nowadays as a new series with these famous characters is being produced and shown for young audiences in contemporary Estonia. In the local context, then, it is difficult not to link the blue wig Anna-Stina is wearing with a certain sense of nostalgia and the innocence of childhood when blue hair and other "oddities" were nothing out of the ordinary.

Another source of inspiration for Anna-Stina's *Drag* was the poster for the *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* exhibition that opened in 2009 at MUMOK in Vienna.[37] That poster features Russian artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe's self-portrait entitled *Monroe* (1996).[38] To date, *Gender Check* is the first comprehensive survey of Eastern European art dealing with gender roles. Showcasing more than 200 artists, who employ a variety of media, and covering a time-span of about half a century, *Gender Check* painted a diverse picture of a chapter in art history which until that point had remained largely unknown. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exhibition took on the enormous task of tracing changes in the representations of male and female gender roles in the state-socialist and post-state-socialist space. At the time *Gender Check* opened, Anna-Stina was an artist-in-residence in Vienna and I went to visit her for a few days. We attended the opening of the *Gender Check* exhibition together as well as the symposium *Reading Gender: Art, Power and Politics of Representation in Eastern Europe* that took place the next day. The glossy and

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37  The exhibition *Gender Check* took place at MUMOK in Vienna from 13 November 2009 until 14 February 2010. More information about the project can be found here: www.erstestiftung.org/gender-check/exhibition (accessed 8 September 2012).

38  The poster for the *Gender Check* exhibition featuring Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe's self-portrait entitled *Monroe* (1996) can be seen here: www.e-flux.com/announcements/gender-check/ (accessed 8 September 2012).

highly commercial-looking poster with Mamyshev-Monroe's *Monroe* was plastered all over the streets and metro stations of Vienna, luring people to visit the exhibition.

Embodying a character is an important theme in Anna-Stina's work, increasingly so in her work since *Drag*. So when she says that Mamyshev-Monroe's self-portrait *Monroe* (1996), which was turned into a ubiquitous poster, served as a kind of role model for her during her time spent in Vienna and partly inspired the idea for *Drag*, I believe it is mostly due to the promise of the process of bodily transformation, the possibilities that recreating another character offers. Performing another person is not about copying the other. What I can immediately see that Anna-Stina brought from her engagement with *Monroe* into *Drag* is the attitude, the slightly elevated chin that speaks volumes about the change in Anna-Stina towards embodying and recording self-confidence and taking charge. But while in *Monroe* Mamyshev-Monroe is flirting with the camera and with the viewer – with the carefully coiffed platinum blonde hair, diamond earrings and necklace, black velvet dress and the seductive placement of the hand on the chest, slightly parted red lips, accentuated by the bright pink backdrop – Anna-Stina's *Drag* remains aloof, perhaps even cold. She does not need to seduce. She *is*.

It could be said that Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe – and also Anna-Stina to some extent – walks in the footsteps of the likes of Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura, who have famously used their own bodies in their photographic artworks, morphing themselves into imaginary or real historical figures or inserting themselves in disguise as figures in famous paintings to various critical effects pertaining to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. Like Sherman and Morimura, Mamyshev-Monroe is a "man of a thousand faces" and he uses himself as his own model. With the help of make-up, he turns himself into a multitude of different personas. Although bearing a striking resemblance to the approaches of Cindy Sherman or Yasumasa Morimura, Mamyshev-Monroe's projects also differ significantly. He has become known as an "artist-character", a kind of artist figure that emerged in Russian unofficial art during the 1970s and 1980s. Such fictitious "artists" appeared in the artwork of many authors. During the 1990s, when an artist, rather than the work of art, took centre stage, the meaning of the term changed considerably. Artists turned into entertainers appearing in various roles and their artistic practice turns into a non-stop performance.

Mamyshev was one of the most prominent artist-characters of the 1990s and 2000s. Most famously, he took Marilyn Monroe for his pseudonym and appeared in public as Monroe, an icon not just for Hollywood, but also, thanks to Andy Warhol, for modern art.[39] His transformations thus are not supposed to efface the artist himself. Mamyshev-Monroe the artist is inseparable from Mamyshev-Monroe the socialite or Mamyshev-Monroe the TV star. His identity does not become dissolved in citations from art and history. On the contrary, he brings forth historical figures and makes them as accessible as the camera-loving celebrities of contemporary times.

It should also be noted that the choice of Mamyshev-Monroe's *Monroe* to serve as an emblem for the *Gender Check* exhibition in Vienna became somewhat of a controversy during the symposium at MUMOK. As one commentator put it, the poster came off as "a tacky Eastern copy of a highly priced Western original".[40] In addition, many symposium participants were asking why a male Russian artist dressed as Marilyn Monroe, a female Western sex icon, had been chosen to represent Eastern European feminist art. Was there no other way to attract the Western audiences to Vienna? From which position should we read this poster? Was it not about time already to overcome the East/West antagonisms? How would the reading of this poster change when the exhibition travelled to Poland?[41]

In the case of Anna-Stina in *Drag*, there is no clear referent, no person in particular that she is trying to morph herself into. It is not about copying or achieving a likeness to one singular character, it is more about playing with a mixture of references, a plethora of types and citations, from among the characters in Nan Goldin's drag queens from the 1970s to the 1990s in New York to Malvina, the Soviet children's favourite blue-haired puppet (which I remember from the early 1980s), to Mamyshev-Monroe's impersonation of Marilyn Monroe in the 2000s.

The citations that *Drag* peruses are all temporally charged. With regard to my interest in exploring temporality and the way in which Anna-Stina

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39  Marilyn Monroe, as well as Lyubov Orlova, the film star of the Stalinist era, became the favourite "role specializations" of Mamyshev-Monroe. He builds his strategy on a continuous change of roles, appearances of his characters and material forms of their embodiment (photography, video, performance, etc). *Life of Magnificent Monroes* is one of Mamyshev-Monroe's best-known photographic series, where he appears as characters from various historical periods, from Buddha and Christ to Lenin and Hitler, each time achieving a striking likeness.

40  My notes from the symposium at MUMOK on 14 November 2012.

41  The *Gender Check* exhibition then travelled to Zachęta gallery in Warsaw, Poland and it was there from 20 March 2010 until 13 June 2010.

conceives of the "lag" discourse associated with the former Eastern Europe, I am tempted to read all these intertextual layers in *Drag* as a specific mode of disidentification in the way that Jose Esteban Muñoz uses this term (1999). Following Muñoz then:

> to disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (1999, 12)

Anna-Stina is not simply following the path of a "good subject" towards a clear and linear identification with the Western discursive feminist and queer discourse. Neither is she a "bad subject" who entirely resists and rejects the images and identificatory sites that are available through the hegemonic Western discourse that dominates current global understandings of feminist and queer politics and artistic practices. Instead, through applying a mixture of intertextual references, she deals with the dominant Western discourses of feminist and queer activism through disidentification, neither willing to assimilate under the pressures of dominant ideology nor trying to break free of its inescapable sphere. It is clearly not possible to step outside the so-called Western sphere of influence. As Eastern Europeans have always already been part of Western culture, no utopian "outside" exists, nor is it desirable. Instead, Anna-Stina makes use of a strategy of "working on and against" (Muñoz 1999, 11).

## Taking agency

Although similarly playing with the concept of agency, *Queer* (2010) is rather different from *Drag*. It shows two young women, the artist Anna-Stina Treumund and a blonde contemplative-looking woman, presumably her close friend or possibly a lover. The artist is being carried piggyback, positioned lower laterally along the carrier's back with her legs extending forward around the carrier's waist to provide balance and supported by the

carrier's arms. The blonde woman is standing on a bed, or what really is just a mattress placed on the floor. The mattress is covered with a patchwork blanket. It feels like a homely corner in a girl's bedroom, as suggested by the jewellery, handbags and make-up products on a makeshift nightstand in the left-hand corner of the photo. In the right-hand corner there is a lighthouse-like doll-house. Behind the woman there is a double door with see-through windows in the upper half. The artist is holding the remote control again, thus suggesting that she is in fact the one taking the picture, and she appears to be whispering in the ear of the other woman. Both women, the artist in her dress and slightly boyish-looking short haircut, and the blonde friend, dressed in black trousers and a black shirt, with a feminine face, appear rather serious-looking, with almost expressionless faces. Neither of them looks straight at the camera: the artist's gaze is directed somewhere into the distance, as she is focused on the act of whispering, her friend carrying her is looking to the right.

*Eli* (2010) was taken in the same dilapidated old house as the other two photos, *Drag* and *Queer,* albeit in a different room. The photograph is centred around Eli, a young butch-looking punk woman who is sitting in an old armchair in a rather tough-looking pose with her legs wide apart, a position that is generally not allowed for women. She is wearing a black t-shirt with a large print on the front, checked trousers and trainers. Her head is shaved, with a small mohawk in the middle. The low angle of the camera shows Eli in a position of power in relation to the viewer, gazing directly at the camera. Behind her there is an old broken fireplace, a door with glass windows and a sign "VÄRVIDA" ("To paint"), suggesting that the room is about to undergo some renovations. Despite the messiness and temporary, makeshift appearance of the room, there is a homely feel to the photo: a pair of slippers under her armchair, a fireplace (although broken), a coffee cup on the floor, a blue rug.

Unconventionally for a portrait photograph, the lower part of the picture is taken up by the artist herself, specifically in that her legs are visible, one bent under the other in a kind of comfortable pose, accentuated by her fluffy slippers. Hence, this photo is, perhaps arguably, a self-portrait: the artist is indeed visibly present. She has placed herself in front of her subject, as if offering herself as a frame to Eli. As Anna-Stina tells me, this was her conscious strategy so as not to create a simplistic image that would come off as a documentary image, showcasing a "stereotypical" lesbian. She

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Queer* (2010)

elevates Eli's position through the camera angle, showing her as a strong, independent woman. Almost placing the camera between her legs enables the artist to focus on the relationality between herself and her subject. The pose also perhaps brings some sexual tension to the image, making lesbian desire visible in this home-like setting. While Eli is looking at the viewer (at the camera), she is also looking at the artist who is behind the camera.

As I came to see it, one of the themes that binds *Drag, Queer* and *Eli* together is the question of being in charge, the question of agency in relation to social transformation that all three seem to evoke. One way to address the question of agency in self-portrait photography is to show that the image is in fact a self-portrait. This can be done most effectively by leaving the remote shutter release of the camera visible in the image so that spectators can see that you are in fact the one who is recording the image. In *Drag* and *Queer,* the remote shutter release that Anna-Stina is squeezing in her hand suggests that she wants to make it very clear that she is orchestrating the recording of this photograph, that she is the author of this image. In *Eli,* the artist's legs visible in the lower part of the photograph add a sense of the artist being in charge of framing the image. The shutter release and the framing legs help to underline her intention to show herself as in charge of herself, of her image, of how she appears, of how her subjects appear. Of course, it is also possible to "fake" this position of being in charge: the photographer might give the cord to the model and only make it look as though it is the model who is recording the image, thus wanting to give agency to the model, to suggest that the image is a self-portrait. For instance, in Anna-Stina's second picture with her sister, *Sisters Gerda and Pussycat II,* she has given the remote shutter release to her sister, although she still regards the photograph itself as a self-portrait because she "constructed" the image.

The question of being in charge is closely related to the concept of agency, which has been a point of anxiety and tension within feminism for a long time. In fact, it even seems to be haunting feminist theory. Agency in such a discourse is often aligned unequivocally with radical politics and the struggle against dominant social norms and institutions, arguing forcefully for women to be recognized as agents capable of acting on and transforming the world. The problem seems to be, however, that the concept of agency remains steeped in liberal theories of the subject which often depart from a white, heterosexual and middle-class norm, assuming and reproducing the

liberal idea of an "autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject who first proceeds according to the logic of identification in regard to the subject of consciousness" (Alarcón 1990, 357) and thereby obscuring more complex understandings of subjectivity. Agency is also linked to a socially constructed self whose very formation is deeply embedded within the institutional practices and norms that feminists wish to challenge. Furthermore, while subjects can act, they are not able to guarantee or control the direction their actions might take. They cannot control the outcomes, the effects.

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Can self-referential, self-representational works of art help us to understand the concepts of subjectivity, agency, feminist imaginaries? What is the importance of claiming visibility, claiming a subject position? What are the limits of insisting on making identities, rendering subjectivities visible? How does an artist situate her subjectivity in her work? These were some of the initial questions I started out with. But, along the way, I realized that these particular self-referential artworks, the photographic self-portraits that Anna-Stina had gathered together in her first solo exhibition, *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know,* enabled me to think about more than that: they offered an opening into contemporary problems of Western hegemonic discourses and the so-called Eastern European "lag".

These photographs forced forced me to consider questions I did not want to find at first or did not really know how to take up. These questions about how it happens that feminist imaginaries emanating from the postsocialist Estonian context get caught up in metanarratives of originals and copies, advanced and backward cultures, hierarchically arranged positions. I came into contact with the force of their impact when exploring Anna-Stina's photographs. These photographs seemed to be a portal into a past that is there in the present, a gateway to a future that we would want to keep indefinitely multiple, becoming, unfixed, undetermined by the present. I came to argue for the importance of tracing subject formation before stabilizing it.

The artist's statement, in conjunction with my ongoing discussions with Anna-Stina, produced a frame for reading these photographs in a way that froze us, that locked us both into the East-West binary, and I was overtaken by a strong feeling of ambivalence. The East-West dichotomy is not, of

Anna-Stina Treumund "*Eli*", (2010)

course, the only available frame through which either the text or the photographs could be read, either separately or together. But as far as I could see then, through the lens of Western feminist theories that form my educational background, it was not only the issue of Anna-Stina being reduced to a "mere copy" that was at stake here. It was also the question of "belatedness" or "backwardness" that fuelled my ambivalence. Regarding something or someone as "backward" assumes a relation of domination and power between the one who considers themselves as "the advanced centre" and the one who is seen as "the backward rest", binaries that are both constructed in one sweeping, homogenizing move. Sticking to the discourse of originals and copies, advanced and backward cultures, effectively erases the possibility of dialogue between each of Anna-Stina's photographs and the photographs that might have come before hers. It wipes out the possibility of this work talking to earlier work, no matter where that work has been produced. It erases the chance that this work, Anna-Stina's work, could relate, it denies this work the capacity to produce relations, to speak, to show, to enact. It silences her work, objectifies it in fact by turning it into an object to be dismissed, to be discarded as soon as the box of progress is ticked off.

Part of the initial ambivalence that I started out with and wanted to hold on to for the sake of teasing out the mechanisms that were locking in the "lag" can be attributed to the fact that I was applying the so-called implicit methodology of visual culture studies (Rose 2012) when trying to make sense of her self-portraits. I was at first intensely invested in uncovering the meaning of the photographs, presuming it to reside within the images, rather than considering the practices of looking, and so were many of my interlocutors, colleagues from Western feminist academia who were part of my realization of the ease with which Eastern European artists, feminisms, queer movements are turned into belated copies of the West.

Scrutinizing these multiple levels of ambivalence that surround my relation towards Anna-Stina and her artwork, as well as towards Western feminist theories, allowed me to unravel the dilemmas of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider. I realized that the ambivalence I have felt throughout appears to be symptomatic of certain tendencies to fix Western understandings and approaches as norms to be followed by others. Claiming ambivalence thus enabled me to bring forth the tension that I felt was there between discourses of Eastern Europe and the West. I came

to argue that one of the consequences of focusing only on finding meaning from the viewpoint of a detached critic is locking Anna-Stina's art clearly in the position of a belated copy of the West. It became crucial for me to stop worrying about whether representations are true or false, positive or negative, subversive or conservative, and start thinking about the divisions they put in place and the myriad exciting connections they evoke.

What I was able to bring to this chapter in connection with Anna-Stina's exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* was thus attained through a series of specific interactions rather than from a series of cumulative revelations. The words, the stories, the experiences, the theoretical reflections gathered here are based on the process of trying to relate to the photographs, to focus on the relations and relationalities they produce, the dynamics of connectedness. Looking at practices and encounters, fleeting moments of dialogue and reveries, celebration and frustration, I explored what becomes visible through these works of art, in what ways, and to whom. I wondered if an event, a relational field, can be used to redraw territorial boundaries, hierarchical constructions, sweeping statements. I pondered upon the processes of becoming of the elements in relation, trying to do away with presuming any in advance, breaking with the idea that they exist prior to this relation.

Eventually, after making a shift from the unreflected position of a "Western" critic, I was also able to re-read the artist's statement with new eyes. I could see now, indeed, that it was more ambivalent than I had taken it to be. Anna-Stina was not trying to claim a position of a lesbian who wants to make her "authentic self" visible to herself and to the world. What she was, in fact, talking about is representations of lesbians in the mainstream society. She was pointing out the ways in which other people's discourses and visual regimes construct lesbians. Importantly, when she said "it's about time for lesbians to introduce themselves to the public and create an adequate image of themselves", she did not say "ourselves". She did not want to create a collective voice, speaking for everyone else who would define themselves as lesbians. But she was careful to leave "lesbian" as an open signifier, far from essentializing lesbianism or lesbian politics. In this respect, she was in fact disidentifying with Western feminist identity politics.

For me, then, after I was able to make a shift beyond ambivalence, *Drag*

came to represent a bold world-making performance that moved Anna-Stina from the context of a "belated copy" from Eastern Europe to a queer space that she herself carefully carved out and claimed for herself. Her tactic of using intertextual references to artworks from other times and other places comes across as a powerful disidentificatory practice that works both on and against mainstream culture and art practices. She does not presume pre-given meanings nor does she want to copy others. She wants to be in dialogue with Western feminist and queer discourses and at the same time, claim her own space, to whirl the world on her own terms.

# 5

## Queering Men: *Loser 2011*

*No more photos. Surely there are enough. No more shadows of myself thrown by light onto pieces of paper, onto squares of plastic. No more of my eyes, mouths, noses, moods, bad angles. No more yawns, teeth, wrinkles. I suffer from my own multiplicity. Two or three images would have been enough, or four, or five. That would have allowed for a firm idea: This is she. As it is, I'm watery, I ripple, from moment to moment I dissolve into my other selves. Turn the page: you, looking, are newly confused. You know me too well to know me. Or not too well: too much.*

- Margaret Atwood, *The Tent* (2006, 25)

View of the exhibition *Lost in Transition* (photograph by Denes Farkas)[42]

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42 Also available online on Anna-Stina Treumund's website: annstinatreumund.com/exhibitions/loos-
er-2011/ (accessed 1 March 2013).

**Opening: My mother's eyes**

On a warm lazy afternoon sometime in early August, I drag my two
friends, with whom I have been staying in Tallinn, out to see the exhibition
*Lost in Transition* at the Contemporary Art Centre. Initially, we have
difficulties finding the derelict old factory that has been converted into
exhibition space. It just stands there, close to the port, in the midst of other
grey buildings, other relics of the Soviet era, seemingly unsuspecting of
anything that might be called contemporary art.

This house might as well be haunted, as is the country, the place on the
map where it is located. Haunted by remnants of pasts still present in our
presents, memories of times, people, things that happened that we still
cannot quite make sense of. It is 2011 and it has been two decades since the
fall of the Soviet Union.

The exhibition press release reads:

> Do you remember the summer of 1991? Can you recall the
> weather? What did you do on August 19? How did you spend your
> evening? Where were you and with whom, when you heard about
> the coup d'état in the Kremlin, Moscow? What did you say to your
> parents, friends and neighbours? What was announced on public
> television? What was the atmosphere in general? (Artel 2011, n.
> pag.)

Through this series of catchy questions, I was taken right back in time
for a brief moment. I was 11 and anxious. Not because I really understood
the events on a political scale. But I did understand the army and tanks and
guns. My father was called up to join other men in Tallinn on August 20 to
protect the TV tower from the incoming Soviet tanks. My sister and I kept
waiting for the news on TV. He came back the next day. No one got hurt.
No shots had been fired. It was over. Our cassette player kept playing one
cassette in a loop. There was *Ärgake, Baltimaad!* (*Wake up, Baltic States!*), a

hymn of sorts in three Baltic languages, compiled specifically for the Baltic Way demonstration held two years earlier that brought together over 2 million people holding hands, stretching an uninterrupted human chain of 620 kilometres through the three countries.

I read about these numbers much later. At the time, I had just been curious about what it would feel like to join hands with so many for something that was celebrated as being so good – freedom and independence. I never found out firsthand. We did not have a car to drive to where the demonstration started. So yes, there was that song and other nationalist songs on this cassette, telling of freedom and fighting for it. Everything else is a blur. This cassette, not unlike a broken record, igniting new hope for dreams broken long ago.

Many people are still posing questions. What was found in that tumultuous turn twenty years ago? What got lost? Who is lost? In what now seems like a perpetual transition from socialism to capitalism, from poverty and deficit to economic success and abundance, from East to West, from past to future, who is not lost? Are we even still awake?

I wanted to come here to this place, to this exhibition, to see Anna-Stina's latest photographs, to feel the questions she is asking in this context. She had already sent them to me by email, but there is nothing like facing them blown up, printed in large format, framed and presented in a gallery. Exhibitions invite other kinds of seeing, other kinds of contexts, other kinds of intertextual links and relations.

My friends, they do not have any patience for this room, for Anna-Stina's images. One of them says she dislikes the photos and finds them arrogant, the critique too obvious, tired, well-rehearsed, seen too many times before. The other admits that he can see why Anna-Stina's critique might be necessary, but finds little else to comment on. When I step closer for a more detailed look, I am immediately nailed to the picture in the middle.[43] I freeze.

In the picture, Anna-Stina appears in drag, standing against the background of a huge cross, the infamous Estonian War of Independence Victory Column that towers over Freedom Square in Tallinn.[44] She is

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43 See Anna-Stina Treumund, *Loser 2011. Veiko* (2011).

44 The War of Independence Victory Column, located in Freedom Square in Tallinn, Estonia, was unveiled on 23 June 2009 as a memorial to those who fell during the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920). The pillar is 23.5 metres high and consists of 143 glass plates. The memorial incorporates the Cross of Liberty, Estonia's most distinguished award, established in 1919.

wearing jeans with braces and a sleeveless T-shirt, her short hair combed to the side. Her pose looks arrogant, even threatening perhaps. There is certainly something masculine about her. This image bears some vague resemblance to the skinheads who often gather in big groups around public parks and squares.

I study Anna-Stina's face in this photograph. In particular, I study her eyes. Intensely. I cannot shake off the feeling of strange familiarity. Yes, no doubt about it. With a tense, slightly sad look, although Anna-Stina had aimed for emotionless or even angry, in fact, these eyes unmistakeably conjure up my mother's eyes, reminding me of some picture or other of her from her old photo album. The intense look, the contours – no doubt about it. I cannot quite remember which picture exactly they remind me of, but the thought of her, my mother, in here, in a photograph of a lesbian artist in drag, shakes me up a bit.

What are you doing here? My mother's eyes seem to be asking questions. Sceptical, strained, almost afraid. Afraid that I am doing something she is not comfortable with. What are you looking at? What are you looking for? I am shocked. My mother, the primary school teacher, seems to have transformed into the kindergarten teacher from my childhood memory. The teacher who pulled me forward in front of the row of embarrassment and shame, punishing me for taking up leadership in a moment of play. It is as though my mother has caught me doing something prohibited.

As I move away from Anna-Stina's photographs to look at other artworks in the exhibition, I am still haunted by my mother's eyes. I try to will her away. How did she get here? What was she doing here? I do not want her here. I have been trying to keep my research separate from my family. They will not understand. Even when I have tried to explain, they have lost interest quickly. Do what you want, as long as you are happy. No need to bother us with the details. We are happy if you are happy.

I can never find the right words. I feel like the odd one out with them, most of the time anyway. The more I try not to think about her, my mother, the more she occupies my thoughts. What would she say if I told her about her unexpected appearance in this photograph? How would she feel? Would she agree about the resemblance? Would she even try to look for similarities? Would she just shrug off my insistence?

This is Anna-Stina confronting homophobia, confronting sexist, homophobic, nationalist, neoliberal, capitalist men in Estonia. She is

challenging certain toxic masculinities, parodying men who have eyes only for personal economic success, ridiculing their blatantly patriarchal discourses. Nothing to do with my mother. Or perhaps, everything to do with her?

What would my mother say? My mother who is always waiting for me to come home to Estonia, complaining that I do not spend enough time with her. My mother who every time I travel back to Estonia expresses in some way or another her longing for grandchildren, although she already has two from my sister. My mother who does not quite want to understand what I am doing in my research but who nevertheless does not really question it either, always wishing me to do my best in doing what I do. My mother who is constantly afraid that I am rejecting her, that she is not good enough for me, that I am too critical of her because of all my years of education abroad. My mother who travelled to visit me in Sweden, taking a plane for the first time in her life, arriving alone at the airport in a country where she did not have a language to speak with. My mother who could not stop being amazed at how wonderful it had been up there in the sky, with the clouds and the sun, the beauty of it all. Why had no one ever told her about this before? My mother who always has natural remedies for all kinds of problems: be it about swollen eyes, a sunburnt back or finding lucky charms to make your dreams come true. My mother who has not always had it easy, raising two children on her own. My mother who was the first in her family to leave the tiny village in the countryside of Southern Estonia where she was brought up to go to the city to get higher education and become a teacher, just as I will be the first in the family to get a PhD. My mother who is amazed, puzzled when I tell her I do research on visual culture and self-portrait photography: what do you know about photography when you studied English at university? My mother, to whom I constantly fail to get through.

I cannot help but wonder about the politics of it, the politic of making myself understood. Of practising what I preach. Of getting through to those closest to me. What is the use of my feminist politics if I cannot even explain it to my own mother? If my own language, my mother's tongue, fails me. If I fail my own language, my own words, because my knowledge and experience of feminism has been in a foreign language. There are always going to be things she will not understand. Things that she will regard with reservation, if not as outright abnormal. Does her appearance in Anna-Stina's caricature of publicly known homophobic figures make her conservative? What if it

does? How does that reflect on me? On our relationship? She would not say anything critical out loud, not directly. She would be quiet, scornful maybe, but discreet.

Could these photographs then be more than self-representations of the artist and her politics, her critique of homophobic men in Eastern Europe? Could they, in fact, actualize gender, sexuality and politics in the wider historical and contemporary social context of Eastern Europe?

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My mother's haunting eyes that appear in Anna-Stina Treumund's self-portrait Veiko from the *Loser 2011* series brought the exhibition Lost in Transition unexpectedly even closer to "home" than I had anticipated and forcefully provoked me to reflect on the politics of location: the geopolitical location, situatedness in discourse, embeddedness in multiple entangled relations. The international exhibition *Lost in Transition*,[45] curated by Rael Artel as part of the project series *Your Periphery is My Center*, took place in the summer of 2011, twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union. The exhibition aimed to bring together various critical perspectives on social realities within the culturally and ideologically loaded landmass defined as Eastern Europe or the former Eastern Europe. In this sense, it engaged directly with the theme of Eastern Europe and its rather negative image in the West as culturally less developed and marginalized compared to "Old Europe". Thus, the "lag" discourse that interests me in this thesis in relation to Western feminist theorizing stemmed from a broader geopolitical perspective through the diverse artworks exhibited.

Anna-Stina's impulse to create this work came from the curator of the exhibition, who invited her to do a re-make of Kai Kaljo's video *A Loser*, made for the Vilnius Contemporary Art Centre exhibition Funny versus Bizarre in 1997. Kaljo's video has been widely regarded as one of the most renowned and internationally displayed pieces of Estonian contemporary

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45 The exhibition brought together artists from seven Eastern-European countries. The main aim of the exhibition was to pose questions about the losses of transition societies. In addition to mental chaos, some artists also interestingly addressed physical and material chaos. For example, Serbian artist Katarina Zdjelar brought together artefacts that she found left behind in her summerhouse after the Balkan wars. Other participating artists included: Arnis Balcus (Riga), Wojtek Doroszuk (Krakow/Rouen), Alexei Gordin (Tallinn), Ivan Jurica (Bratislava/Vienna), Flo Kasearu (Tallinn), Gergely Laszlo & Katarina Sevic (Budapest), Zampa di Leone (as the artist says, from "the arse of the Balkans"), Anna-Stina Treumund (Tallinn), Katarina Zdjelar (Belgrade/Rotterdam).

art. The success of this work is often attributed to its simple but striking structure and the way in which it opens up space for discussions about the position of women and artists in society, the precarious workforce, mass media strategies and Eastern European identity. Anna-Stina's response to Kaljo's *A Loser* 15 years later makes a queer intervention into understandings of contemporary "losers" that enables her to address the prevalence of xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of discrimination in Estonian society.

It seems to me that for some reason the three photographs – *Martin, Veiko* and *Lauri* – have received significantly less attention than the accompanying video *Peeter*. This might be because videos by nature feel more immediate than still photography: they capture and convey movement, sounds and emotions. Videos are accessible in ways that photographs are not. However, the stillness of photographs does not silence them, but often asks questions that ignite the spectator's sense of wonder, of puzzlement in a different way than videos in their immediacy can do. I want to guide the reader to consider the photographs first before focusing on an analysis of the video and the parallels that can be drawn with Kaljo's work, both of which I will also discuss in more detail. My main concern is that neglecting aspects of this series that are specific to photography as a genre contributes to a rather simplistic reading of the whole *Loser 2011* series – that Treumund is just ridiculing or even shaming contemporary "losers" in a banal way.

When considering Anna-Stina's exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know,* I was torn by the ambivalence caused by my initial "Western" feminist reading of her self-portraits, which I read as identity critical/political and as "lagging behind" in relation to Western feminist art, so it became my goal to deconstruct the mechanisms that had produced my ambivalence and locked her into a static, marginalized position. In this chapter, however, I would like to add another twist to these sets of concerns and, through a close reading of Anna-Stina's three self-portraits and a video from the series called *Loser 2011*, extend my discussion further to the wider "lagging behind" discourse that is so often evoked both within and in relation to Eastern Europe with alarming consequences, a theme addressed in Anna-Stina's work through evoking the prevalent discourse of "winners" and "losers". In short, like Anna-Stina, I want to focus on the harmful effects of the frantic "catching up" mode that Eastern Europe has put itself through since the fall of the Soviet Union, not entirely on its own initiative. My

aim is then to confirm, together with Anna-Stina, that it is of immense importance to take up an intersectional critique of the neoliberal models of success that fuel the "lagging behind" discourse in a broader context. Likewise, it is also important to challenge the "lag discourse" within Western feminist discourses that I have attempted to describe throughout this thesis so as not to inadvertently run the risk of cooptation with these colonizing and patronizing frameworks of thought.

### The discourse of "winners" and "losers"

Since making sense of Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* (1997) and Anna-Stina Treumund's remake series *Loser 2011* (2011) is highly dependent on understanding the discourse of "winners" and "losers" in contemporary Estonia, I will first take a small contextual detour before I discuss these artworks. While I do not pretend to be an expert on the Estonian context and neither should my description here be taken as necessarily definitive, I do think that sketching out some characteristic features of the changes Estonia has gone through since the 1990s will help to contextualize the specificities of the two works of art that pave the way towards my argument in this chapter.

I have often had mixed feelings about the way in which Estonia likes to present itself as the "little country that could", growing more and more critical of this discourse in recent years in particular. Like many Estonians, I have taken immense pride in my country being positioned as the most innovative, prosperous and successful country in terms of political and economic transition of all the former socialist states and former Soviet republics. Moreover, Estonia likes to see itself as a society of "winners" that came out of a disaster on top, the best, "praised by foreign analysts as 'a shining star from the Baltics'" (Norkus 2007, 21) throughout the 1990s. Understandably, taking pride in being Estonian was important during Soviet times and during the early 1990s because it was a form of resistance to the Soviet regime. It sustained a sense of self and alternative ways of belonging that had been denied to Estonians for more than 50 years. Since Soviet totalitarian rule sought to subjugate all other identities to an all-embracing political identity, ethnic and national identities were the main discursive means readily available to populations newly shifting away from

Screen shot of BBC News: Europe website (published 18 August 2011)[46]

the totalitarian system towards a democratic one. This perhaps also explains the prevalent focus of scholars of postsocialist transformations on identity changes and in particular on ethnic and national identities rather than personal identities at the beginning of the 1990s (Lagerspetz 2007).

Yet, an over-emphasis on the association with "winners" eventually becomes dangerous. When there are "winners", there are also "losers". This problematically maintains a stark division between the two groups and creates immense social inequalities within as well as between countries, not to mention feeding toxic forms of nationalism and xenophobia. Often, as the screenshot of the BBC news website I have included here shows, the postsocialist transition countries are divided into two groups: "successful" (with a consolidated liberal democracy and working market economy) and "unsuccessful" ones, pointing to a north-south gap which aligns the

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46  Link to the website: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14489883 (accessed 1 March 2013).

The 46th Estonian Government taking the oath of office
in Parliament on 6 April 2011
(Source: *Riigikantselei*, photographed by Kaupo Kikkas[47])

countries of Central Europe and the Baltic states with the first and the Balkan countries and most of the former Soviet republics with the second group. Estonia's economic success is often attributed to the fact that it is the "only one of the 15 [post-Soviet] countries that was consistently and unambiguously liberal from 1990 to 2000" (Darden 2010, 126), being from early on "programmatically oriented towards Westernization and liberal and quick economic reforms" (Bennich-Björkman and Likić-Brborić 2012, 58). However, the rapid shift was "from one extreme to another: from a state-operated Socialist planned economy to wild and heartless cowboy-capitalism" (Artel 2011, n. pag.).

Yet, after two decades and the successful inclusion of Estonia and the majority of Europe's postsocialist countries, now seen as modern capitalist countries, in the European Union, the mood of optimism and appraisal that fuelled most of the 1990s seems to be wearing off. Estonia looks much better from the outside than the inside. The press release for the exhibition Lost in Transition also underlines the potential problems behind the success story:

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47 Available online at: et.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrus_Ansipi_kolmas_valitsus (accessed 1 March 2013).

> According to the understanding promoted in the mainstream, we all became winners that very week in August 1991; "we" as a region of democratic and independent nation-states, as well as "we" as private individuals. It seems to me that the question of what we may have lost has not been asked. And, after such a radical change in the surrounding situation, are we still lost in the confusion introduced by these rapid reforms? (Artel 2011, n. pag.)

As Estonian social theorists Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm have pointed out, "beneath the surface of extraordinarily high economic growth, society is tormented by unsolved political, economic and social problems" (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2009, 1). The success story is overshadowed by the dark side of the changes:

> When measured against Europe, Estonian society seems contradictory. On the one hand, we have fast economic growth, excellent employment levels, and a thriving digitalisation process; on the other hand we are characterised by poor health, xenophobia, incompetence in battling HIV, and overcrowded prisons. In addition, there is increasingly prominent inequality/stratification within the society in terms of money, gender, health and attitudes. [...] Our human development has taken us towards freedom, but not enough responsibility and common values. The result is a fragmented and individualistic Estonia that finds it difficult to fit the conventional notions and way of life of Europe. (Heidmets 2007, 115)

No doubt these imbalances have emerged as a result of both "external pressures exercised by strong monetary institutions headed by the IMF and the EU" and internal factors, such as "the domination of right-wing parties on the political scene or the rapid shift from national development goals to individualistic values and consumerist orientations" (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2009, 2).

The discourse of "winners" and "losers", or "first" and "second" Estonia is indeed strongly prevalent within Estonian society (see for example Pajumets 2012). In the context of major economic reforms and fundamental changes in the relationship between the state and its citizens, owners of capital and workers, local and international capital, a newly introduced model of success, acceptable lifestyles, ways of working and spending free time was promoted. The "winners" in this context are those who "won" from the messy processes of privatization that accompanied the restoration of democracy

and capitalism. Hence the talk of a whole generation of "winners", which is often taken to mean mostly young/er self-made businessmen who made the "right" decisions in the 1990s and are now part of the newly rich "elite". The leading right-wing reformist party projects an image of itself as wealthy capitalists and innovators, who are presented as role models whom everyone should want to imitate. Their continued success in staying in power is arguably supported by populist slogans that promise to lead Estonia to a place among the five wealthiest states in Europe and paint an even more provocative and oppositional black-and-white picture of the troubled ethnic relations within the country in an attempt to fix the Estonian national(ist identity in a very problematic way.[48]

Alongside the generation of "winners" there is also a generation of "losers" – those who do not fit the image of success, who do not have expensive property, fancy cars, money in the bank, an obsession with shiny, glittering appearances. This group of people were not quick or clever enough to profit from the chaos of the transition era and they were left empty-handed, without proper skills to manage in the new socio-economic regime. The situation deteriorated considerably for many people who are dependent on fixed transfers from the state, such as pensioners, large families and disabled people, as well as people who work for the state and municipalities – teachers, medical staff and social workers, all positions that are predominantly held by women in Estonia. For example, the differences between men's and women's earnings and living standards have grown rapidly in recent years as the hourly gender pay gap reached 27.3% in 2011 (Eurostat 2013), the highest among EU member states. In addition to women, this group of "losers" often includes ethnic minorities, homeless people, gays and lesbians and other "others". The grave gap between "winners" and "losers"

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48 Most of the present-day Russian-speaking community in Estonia (approximately 25% of the population) are migrants from the Soviet era and their descendants. The relationship between Estonian and Russian-speaking communities has been fraught with tension and shaped by the legacy of the Soviet occupation and the post-Soviet Estonian legislation and official ideology. During the Soviet period, the majority of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia identified itself with the Soviet Union rather than with (Soviet) Estonia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the local Russian community had to cope with the difficulties of political and cultural re-orientation. Many of them were also strongly affected by the economic changes during the transition period. Their sense of un-belonging was exacerbated by the Estonian citizenship law, which did not automatically grant citizenship to Soviet-era migrants, resulting initially in a large number of (mostly Russian-speaking) stateless persons. The proportion of stateless persons has now declined significantly, but nevertheless many people among the Russian-speaking population continue to resist identification with the state of Estonia and its national culture. Likewise, there are many conservative-minded, overtly patriotic Estonians who resist including the Russian-speaking population under the category "Estonian" and use derogatory terms to refer to them.

is further accentuated by the persistence of the model of success, promoted by the majority media. This arguably guarantees the re-election of the same right-wing party again and again because the majority of people who would be considered "losers" buy into the rhetoric and promise of reaching the elite club of "the five wealthiest states", despite the fact that the policies of this party are not in the best interests of economically fragile groups and will not improve their situation.

In relation to the discourse of "winners" and "losers" and in light of the position of women in Estonian society, it is also important to look at the emergence of new types of postsocialist masculinities, a topic that Anna-Stina Treumund takes up in her series *Loser 2011*. Sociologist Marion Pajumets argues that the rapid changes during the 1990s contributed to the creation of "a heterogeneous spectre of masculinities" (2012, 36) in Estonia, of which the so-called "transnational business masculinity" (Connell 2002) gained hegemonic status. The newly adopted US American style of neoliberal ideology idealized strength, competitiveness, financial success, hedonism and individualism in men. Furthermore, as well as the men who live up to these ideals, there is a large group of other men who are complicit with these norms and while "[t]hey do not personally play as dirty, aggressive, and risky, […] they support anti-egalitarian, patriarchal, hegemonic ideals" (Pajumets 2012, 36). During Soviet times, men and women were depicted as equal in the mainstream rhetoric, most women worked, unlike their Western sisters, and in fact, carried a second shift at home without much help from men. However, most of the men were probably unsatisfied or even emasculated under the Soviet regime due to their inability to exercise real power in the socialist public domain, which was controlled by the state and the communist party (Watson 1993, 484–485). In other words, this brought about a situation where the emancipation of the nation and the emancipation of women could not occur simultaneously (Krull 1995). The photograph of the 46th Estonian Government taking the oath of office in Parliament is telling in this respect: it clearly legitimizes the model of thinking that leadership and decision-making belong to men and women are simply taken as decoration.

Interestingly, instead of kaotaja, the Estonian equivalent of "loser", the word luuser entered the Estonian vocabulary as a loan word from English and quickly became one of the keywords of the 1990s. I suppose the linguistic distance it creates links the whole concept of a "loser" in Estonian

imaginaries more closely with re-Westernization and somehow marks the creation of divisions between "winners" and "losers", including the specific meanings these terms have acquired, as a strictly post-Soviet phenomenon. The word "loser" seems to be most commonly associated with US American popular culture, where it denotes a person who has fallen off the social ladder, come down voluntarily or never actually tried to get to the top. Such "losers" are often ridiculed and humiliated because the predominant cult of success in the Western context prescribes an upwardly mobile and individualistic outlook on life. Rael Artel, the curator who commissioned the remake of Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* by Anna-Stina Treumund, has also suggested that it is possible to distinguish a second type of "loser" in Eastern Europe as well – the "loser" who has rejected the model of success that is oriented towards material values, keeping up appearances and social status. This type of "losers" are people who have decided to dedicate themselves to intellectual values and not care about how they look to others. While I will show that Kai Kaljo fits this description rather well, Anna-Stina leaves the question of who is a real "loser" and what that might mean a bit more ambiguous.

### "What's in a face?" Becoming *Martin*, *Veiko* and *Lauri*

Unlike Kai Kaljo's *A Loser*, Anna-Stina Treumund's *Loser 2011* includes a series of three self-portrait photographs in addition to the video. My initial encounter with Anna-Stina's series at the *Lost in Transition* exhibition leaves me pondering in particular the three photographs. What kind of connections do they form between themselves? How do they come together as a set? How is my reading of them influenced by the hollow canned laughter that echoes back from the video, playing in a perpetual loop at the exhibition?

In all of the photographs and the video, which is certainly central to making sense of this work, Anna-Stina appears in drag. She is dressed as a man, as a homophobic figure, a caricature – or rather four different ones. She builds upon her experience with homophobia, often part of the hegemonic masculinities in Estonia, in creating these figures. Her "losers" are fictional characters yet, knowing the local context, it is possible to guess who the prototypes were, despite the fictionalized names. There are elements in each character that reveal a reference to certain public figures who are often very vocally conservative and patriarchal and do not hide their homophobic views.

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Martin* (2011), from *Loser 2011* series

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Veiko* (2011), from *Loser 2011* series
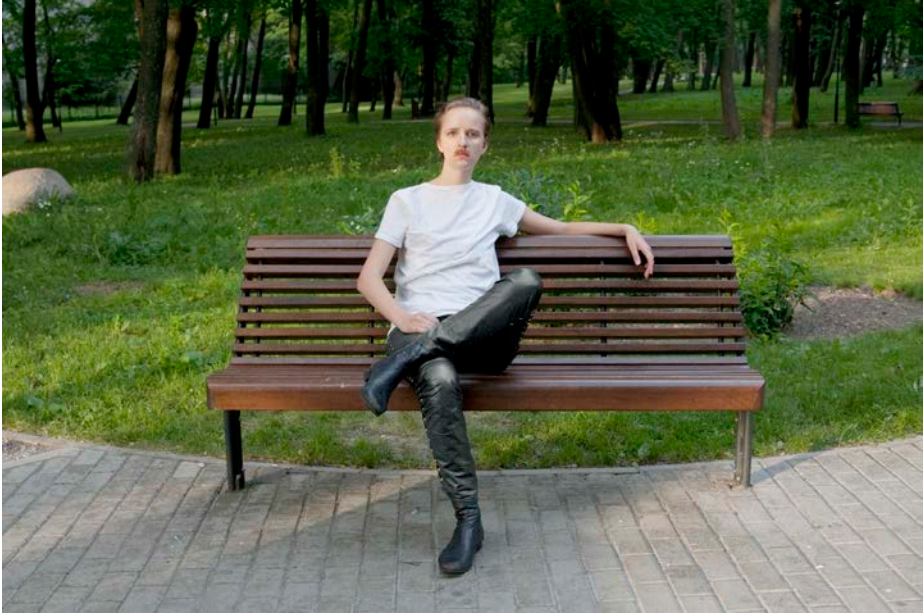
Anna-Stina Treumund. *Lauri* (2011), from *Loser 2011* series

All three photographs, as well as the video, are striking works; they create a narrative that speaks to, about and against Estonian nationalism, homophobia and hatred of "otherness". There is a certain clarity, a punch-line. In short, this series could be said to constitute a social critique, more specifically, a queer feminist critique of the rise of capitalist values in postsocialist Estonia. It presents a critique of a postsocialist society that is becoming neoliberal and capitalist with its blind focus on economic growth and strongly oppositional categories of "winners" and "losers", which are ultimately locked up in a lagging behind discourse. This series evokes an intricate web of wider social issues, going beyond Anna-Stina's focus on the question of lesbian visibility that consumed her while preparing her first solo exhibition. As a feminist who considers it crucial to challenge capitalist structures and the social inequalities that they create, agreeing with her critical viewpoint is easy. I understand, painfully at times, where she is coming from.

In contrast with Anna-Stina's earlier self-portrait photographs, which are often intimate, personal, focused on the body and private spaces, all of the photographs in the Loser 2011 series are taken in public spaces. The men she is depicting comfortably inhabit public spaces: Martin is leaning against a table in an office, Veiko is hanging out close to Freedom Square in Tallinn, Lauri is sitting on a bench in a public park. All of her characters evoke different types of masculinities, men whom she fears and would rather not cross paths with.

Anna-Stina tells me that Martin, the guy in the office, is someone who represents the so-called "regular guy" who can often be found in a position of power, with large social capital, a respectable status in society, an opinionated outlook on life. He could be said to be the epitome of "Estonian family values", despite the fact that he himself might not exactly embody all of those values, not an eccentric character in any way in the wider Estonian context. He looks commonsensical, which is why he comes across as threatening to Anna-Stina. He is dangerous in his everydayness that somewhat masks his overtly patriarchal views and that would most likely appeal to the "majority". Martin is leaning against a table, with his arms folded and his face looking rather blank. There is certain arrogance to his pose. The backdrop of the photograph does strike me as makeshift though. There is nothing fancy about this office, nothing to really count him among the "winners". The files and folders are placed in old fruit boxes and the

furniture looks tired as well. The scene gives the impression of temporary, slightly shabby times, in a way hinting at the constructed nature of the image and not really supporting the intended power position of the "man" pictured. The intention to show him in a power position is accentuated by the black and white photograph on the wall, picturing a man in a suit leaning over two women, looking busy and important. Yet this reference gives a comical tone to the image. Anna-Stina's character does not come across looking as shiny and empowered as he probably imagines himself to be. I see Anna-Stina's downplaying of his supposed "winner" status as a small queer twist that she added to this representation for fun.

Unlike Martin, Veiko, the "man" pictured close to Freedom Square, is more obviously threatening – or at least was meant to be, as Anna-Stina confessed, because her look as Veiko comes across as a bit too "hipster", her outfit too trendy. He is standing on the grass, with his blank face and hunched shoulders. Curiously, there seem to be no other people around, even though it is a very central location in Tallinn. Anna-Stina tells me this character represents a skinhead, someone who hates foreigners and homosexuals, someone who above all stands for Estonian independence, someone whose national identity is based on a sharp rejection of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia from his conception of who is a real Estonian. More broadly speaking, what counts as "real" Estonianness is constantly contested, a topic that is hardly ever off the table in Estonian society. The Estonian national study for the Fundamental Human Rights Agency (FRA) on homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation notes that representatives from the local LGBT organization SEKÜ[49] see the growing tension between Estonian and Russian communities as having a negative impact on LGBT people because it has driven right-wing nationalist groups to include anti-homosexual rhetoric in their agendas and messages (Haruoja et al. 2009, 5). In light of this, I am bound to read the cross in the background, the Estonian monument for victory in the war of independence, which dominates and frames Anna-Stina's photograph, as a hint at her critique of xenophobia and the homophobia that is entwined with it, both of which are intimately tied up with the discourse of "winners" and "losers". In recent years, this monument has come to epitomize these divisions. Ironically, after it was erected and officially unveiled, it almost at

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49 More information on NGO SEKÜ (NGO Sexual Minorities Protection Union) is available at: www.seky.ee (accessed 20 March 2013).

once started breaking down – there were cracks in some of the panels, some of the lights stopped working, the panels started changing colour. This spurred a lot of criticism, some of it related more broadly to the so-called wars of monuments, that is, the events from April 2007 when the removal of the Bronze Soldier, a controversial Soviet World War II memorial, caused massive street riots.[50] Anna-Stina, the photographer, places herself – or that is, Veiko, the model – intentionally lower down, under the cross, emphasizing its looming presence, caricaturing its problematic importance. The cross can be associated with everything the character Veiko and men like him believe in: heroic pride in being Estonian, which is perceived as in direct opposition to everyone different, everyone non-Estonian.

Lauri, the "man" pictured in the park, comes across as a bit more ambivalent. The prototype for Lauri is the very openly homophobic headmaster of a school in Tallinn. The irony is that his so-called trademark leather pants evoke associations with gay men. In a way, by placing this character in a park and into these leather pants, Anna-Stina is further highlighting, even exaggerating, the reference to gay culture that the real life prototype of this figure himself actively rejects and disparages. Anna-Stina also does so by evoking the work of the artist Jaanus Samma,[51] who has conducted interviews with gay men in Estonia about their experiences of meeting and having sex with other men during the Soviet era. He gathered the interviews into an audio collection entitled *Stories* (2011), first exhibited at the *Untold Stories* exhibition in Tallinn Art Hall in 2011. Samma's audio collection charts the sexual lives and social practices of gays in Soviet Estonia primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, when homosexuality was criminalized and the social life of gays converged mainly around closed

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50 In April 2007, the Estonian government relocated the Bronze Soldier and, after exhumation and identification, the remains of the Soviet soldiers that were buried at the site, to the Defence Forces Cemetery in Tallinn. Political differences over interpretation of the events of the war symbolized by the monument had already led to a controversy between Estonia's multi-ethnic Russian-speaking community and Estonians, as well as between the Russian Federation and Estonia. The disputes surrounding the relocation peaked with two nights of riots in Tallinn (known as the Bronze Night) and the besieging of the Estonian embassy in Moscow for a week. The events drew international attention and led to a multitude of political reactions. However, according to some historians and commentators, the Bronze Soldier controversy was more a product of the fears of national conservative groups among both the Russian and Estonian populations than an integration problem among Estonia's Russian-speaking minority (Ehala 2008).

51 Samma's work Stories was available before Treumund took her photographs in the *Loser 2011* series. The reference to this work was probably intentional. Jaanus Samma is a friend of Treumund and they share an interest in LGBTQI activism and art. They have also curated an exhibition together entitled *Family* in the framework of the OMA festival, Baltic Pride 2011.

gatherings among friends but also public parks and other "ordinary" places popular for cruising in gay culture.[52] In a sense, then, Anna-Stina has created a visual image to go together with the voices from Samma's audio collection. She is putting a face to these voices, a visual image to the recorded material. Linking Samma's stories with Lauri brings the dimension of temporality and belatedness into Anna-Stina's photograph. As Samma's project suggests, in the atmosphere of relative sexual tolerance at the beginning of the 1990s, cruising in public spaces was gradually replaced by searching for partners through newspaper ads and later through the Internet. Thus, Anna-Stina's portrayal of Lauri, with its uncanny references to gay cruising, comes across as slightly anachronistic, as if summoning a relic from the past.

Anna-Stina claims that she was inspired to create the characters in the photographs as a response to another video installation that was presented at the *Untold Stories* exhibition. In this installation, entitled Heard Story (2011), artists Liisi Eelmaa and Minna Hint presented interviews with Estonia's most (in)famous spokespersons against homosexuality, whose role in shaping public opinion cannot be underestimated.[53] The artists were interested in the arguments used to justify hostile attitudes towards homosexuality. The installation consisted of a huge bed with fluffy, rainbow-coloured pillows. It had four big bedposts and white curtains which created a sense of intimacy and privacy. It was a little haven of comfort. Sitting or lying on the bed, you could see video screens all around you, each showing a black-and-white image of the people the artists had interviewed. The cold, blank faces making homophobic comments in an intimidating tone right in your face created a stark contrast with the comfortable private space where they unexpectedly appeared, and this left a negative impression with many. The interviews kept circling back to the confrontation between public and private space that frames the widely held position that homosexuality is tolerable only as long it occurs in private space and does not demand

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52  For an overview of Jaanus Samma's *Stories*, see p. 10 of the *Untold Stories* exhibition catalogue, available at iwantapresident.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/ajaleht_sl_small.pdf (accessed 6 March 2013).

53  For instance, there are interviews with Martin Helme, the leader of the Estonian National Movement; Peeter Mardna, senior inspector of the Estonian Health Board's Supervision Department; Märt Sults, the director of the Tallinn Art Secondary School, Tõnu Lehtsaar, psychologist and Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Tartu, and Veiko Rämmel, who ran for Parliament as an independent candidate in 2011. All of them have vocally expressed their homophobic views in the media and on the Internet. For more information, see p. 8 of the *Untold Stories* exhibition catalogue, available at iwantapresident.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/ajaleht_sl_small.pdf (accessed 6 March 2013).

representation in the public sphere. The installation's environment indeed amplified this aspect, asking the exhibition's visitors to consider to what extent the politics of public and private spheres is also the politics of sexual spaces.

Anna-Stina was very critical of this installation because she thought it gave too much space and power to those who already have a lot of space and power. She felt they were presented too neutrally, in a matter-of-fact, to be taken seriously kind of way. Most significantly, they were granted a lot of airtime, they were given a voice that was dominating, that was threatening to anyone sitting there on those colourful pillows. One could say that it was too realistic a portrayal of the everyday situation which, rather than empowering you to rise up and resist, makes you feel vulnerable and hopeless. So Anna-Stina decided to transform some of the figures from these videos into caricatures with a twist, mixing up their features, exaggerating some and reinterpreting others. Most significantly, instead of showing them as they are, Anna-Stina tries to become them, putting them in a position where none of these people would feel comfortable: embodied by and placed in the skin of a lesbian woman. She parodies them, ridicules them, laughs at them. She tries to undermine their position as powerful "winners", instead showing them as "losers". Conceptually, Anna-Stina's work thus appears as a somewhat childish revenge, getting back at the people who have made her feel uncomfortable, using all the means in her possession to diminish their power and belittle their homophobic message.

The fact that Anna-Stina chooses to present several characters and uses the format of portraiture, most notably deadpan aesthetics, uncannily resonates with the history of photographic work, in particular with aspects that are embedded in imperialism and inequality. Visually, these images are rather similar to ethnographic photography of the most objectifying kind that was used to form typologies, pathologize, register criminals and so on. In effect, such a portrayal of characters comes off as objectifying, akin to photography of colonized peoples in controlled situations.[54] Part of Anna-Stina's strategy in invoking these historical relations between photography and power suggests that she wants the viewer to be aware of and in

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54 Among the most objectifying of this type of photographs are those of James H. Lamprey, who in 1869 devised a standard measuring grid against which subjects were photographed. Also, in 1869 Thomas Huxley proposed using standard views of subjects with a measuring rod. Such techniques were then later adopted by many other photographers. See James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (1998) for a more detailed discussion.

conversation with the distancing effect that deadpan aesthetics affords.

All three characters in the photographs of Anna-Stina's *Loser 2011* series have extremely blank faces and their gaze is turned directly at the camera, as is characteristic of deadpan photography. To clarify, deadpan is literally defined as a flat or emotionless face (the word "pan" is a slang term for face). Traditionally, deadpan has been used to describe a kind of dry humour popular in the 19th century in the USA and it has also been associated with "a mode of rhetorical delivery, used in speeches, public lecturing, and comedy" (Vinegar 2009, 854).[55] In photography, it suggests a straightforward, matter-of-fact, banal, ordinary, not to say non-artistic, style of photographic presentation that is devoid of subjective emotion or affect. This approach to presentation flattens out expression and conveys a certain kind of indifference and disinterest, or lack of depth. Deadpan photography often feels as though it aims to present evidence or rigorously and dispassionately recorded specimens, study types, structures, forms.[56]

Art historian Charlotte Cotton defines the deadpan aesthetic as detached and cool, moving art photography "outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective" (2009, 81). She argues that the main aim of this aesthetic, in its monumentality and visual clarity, is to produce a kind of emotional and individual perspective. The seeming neutrality of the photographer gives us no obvious guide to make sense of the images, so we have to rely on our own response. In other words, arguably, this aesthetic puts the power back in the hands of the images and the viewers:

> Polemic narratives are raised for the viewer, but it appears as if this information is being given impartially. Deadpan photography often acts in this fact-stating mode: the personal politics of the photographers come into play in their selection of subject matter and their anticipation of the viewer's analysis of it, not any explicit political statement through text or photographic style. (Cotton 2009, 88)

The deadpan aesthetic in photography thus often seems to be related to

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55 Silent film star Buster Keaton with his "stone face" is often seen as the epitome of deadpan humour. His movies, such as *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), *The General* (1927), *The Navigator* (1924), and *The Cameraman* (1928), all depict his "trademark deadpan visage and attitude to the world, that never flinches no matter what mishap befalls him" (Vinegar 2009, 867).

56 Indeed, the deadpan aesthetic is not limited to portraits. At various times, it has been used to describe some of the photographic practices of Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, Andreas Gursky, Hans Haacke, Thomas Barrow, and Sol Le Witt. For example, Gursky makes wall-size photos of interiors, landscapes, cityscapes and large groups of people.

no apparent point of view. It presents itself as anthropological and scientific rather than as a critical and artistic approach. In his article "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography", art historian and photographer Julian Stallabrass describes deadpan as an increasingly more prominent and distinct strand in contemporary art photography that depicts people "in uniform series, usually one per picture, and placed centrally in that picture, facing the camera head-on and gazing into the lens" (2007, 71). The mode of depiction of such photographs tends towards the establishment of the anonymous "type", reminiscent of the work of Francis Galton, a pioneer in the controversial field of anthropometry, which sought to classify human populations according to physical measurements and pin down "types" according to facial appearance (Aldersey-Williams 2010, 149). For example, contemporary artist Rineke Dijkstra, who is known for her deadpan style, takes a standard distance from the subject, alters the height of the lens a little, and otherwise does not compose. The subject conveys little emotion and photographer works matter-of-factly, not trying to manipulate the portrait with lighting, camera angles, background and so on. These pictures do not contain measuring devices, but otherwise approach an ethnographic practice in which the photographer appears to take the modest, largely technical role of recording variety and uniformity.

In line with Julian Stallabrass, I came to wonder about the motive for raising this old spectre of objectification and domination since it has been criticized by many theorists and artists for its power relations and the link to the use of photography for surveillance, classification and control. He proposes that this kind of photography "depicts subjects who are not, at least apparently, strongly differentiated from their likely viewers" (Stallabrass 2007, 72). He thus effectively connects the recent success of the deadpan aesthetic to the political view of the subject under neoliberalism (2007, 72). Such photographs stand in stark contrast to the "mannered portraiture of celebrated subjects in which extreme individuality of style and composition is congruent with the supposed uniqueness of the subject" (Stallabrass 2007, 73).

Although Anna-Stina's subjects are clearly not "real" models because she performs her characters herself, there is an obvious intention to present certain "types" from which she as a lesbian woman and artist wants to distance herself. The deadpan aesthetic allows just that: to create a cold distance between the photographer and her "subjects". In their formality

and standardized presentation, the "subjects" are also opposed to "the quasi-anthropological participant-observer model, in which photographers depict a social scene with which they are intimately connected" (Stallabrass 2007, 73). This is a clear signal that Anna-Stina does not want to be associated with the social scene of her subjects, the anonymous "types" of "losers".

At the same time as Anna-Stina is playing with the meaning of deadpan photography, her "becoming losers" project is also reminiscent of the snapshot aesthetic of Korean-American artist Nikki S. Lee's most noted work, *Projects* (1997–2001)[57]. This work includes snapshot photographs, in which Lee poses with various ethnic and social groups, including drag queens, punks, swing dancers, senior citizens, Latinos, hip-hop musicians and fans, skateboarders, lesbians, young urban professionals and Korean schoolgirls. Her work is about performing certain identities and infiltrating communities which allow her to present new versions of herself. In a way, her images capture non-moments that might trigger a time and place in the memory of those pictured, but for those outside the picture frame the image represents just any drag queens, punks, lesbians, Korean schoolgirls and other groups respectively. This form of vernacular photography adds an archival quality and thus we do not question the validity of the image – they appear as images we have seen many times before. There is such a quality in Anna-Stina's loser project as well. I can easily imagine the pictures as snapshots taken of the characters, if we were to take them as "real", in their usual surroundings. At least at first glance, there is a certain everyday quality to these images. Seeing a selection of Anna-Stina's portrayals of men she calls "losers" in everyday settings asks us to pay more attention to the categories and naming of different groups, suggesting that we examine the presumptions about gender, class, ethnicity and sexual politics that are prevalent in our everyday parlance and behaviour.

However, there is a special twist to the deadpans of Anna-Stina's so-called "conceptual documentary". These photographs are self-portraits, a genre that is associated with the expression of the artist's subjectivity. So I am definitely prompted to ask, where is Anna-Stina in all this? As a lesbian-feminist artist who is committed to her activist politics of representation and visibility and who has presented herself in drag many times, she must have other motives for taking these photographs than just creating a ridiculing

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57 A selection of photographs from Nikki S. Lee's Projects is available here: www.tonkonow.com/lee. html (accessed 20 March 2013).

portrayal of the men whose homophobia she finds threatening and whom she sees as "losers". As in her self-portrait, *Drag*, which I discussed in the previous chapter, and some later works that I have not included in this study, she is engaged in drag kinging. This suggests that she finds immense pleasure in dressing up as a man; there is identification with the arrogant distant look, with the masculinity she is portraying. So on the one hand, Anna-Stina is exposing that the types of men she is embodying are banal and without emotions, and she is critical of everything they embody for her. On the other hand, she enjoys the process of "becoming" a man, of displaying masculine features as a woman. She is very conscious of this ambivalence. She plays on the duality of performing characters whom she fears and hates at the same time as she finds the process of "becoming" these characters fun and funny, even sexy. She told me in one of our conversations about these pictures that she found the experience of wearing the little moustache and the leather pants in public an irresistibly erotic experience when photographing Lauri. The pleasure she takes in becoming these characters suggests that she is also appropriating them emotionally. As a lesbian woman, she herself often gets cast as a "loser", so on that level, I suggest that she even identifies with these "men" and thus adds a bit of ambiguity to the meaning of a "loser". Yet Anna-Stina the queer activist artist enjoys the arrogance, the matter-of-fact-ness, the showing of herself in a powerful position that she interprets these "men" as possessing, in contrast with her, albeit that she of course remains critical of the specific toxic power that her characters represent. Despite the negativity attached to the power position of these "men", it nevertheless elevates her as a lesbian woman who often finds herself in a marginalized position. Through performing these characters, adding her own queer twist to the way they appear and not, for instance, choosing to photograph and portray these people for real, she can take control of how she herself appears. She retains her voice and carves out her own space for whirling.

Since Anna-Stina's *Loser 2011* series is so strongly linked to Kai Kaljo's original video *A Loser*, it is high time I contextualized Kaljo's work before moving on to consider Anna-Stina's remake of the video.

Kai Kaljo, video still from *A Loser* (1997)

### The phenomenon of *A Loser* by Kai Kaljo

*The first bout of laughter is triggered by the opening claim "I am an Estonian artist," as if this status itself were something impossible or as if the artist is some kind of clown whose appearance before the audience triggers an involuntary burst of laughter.*

- Hanno Soans, *Laughter that Laughs at Itself* (2011, 19)

Anna-Stina Treumund's series *Loser 2011* was created thanks to curator Rael Artel's interest in Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* (1997).[58] Since Kaljo's *A Loser* constituted a multi-faceted story with a character behind whom was a woman, a freelance artist, more broadly a cultural worker and intellectual and even more broadly, an Eastern European of the 1990s (Artel 2012a, 30), and it has touched a nerve among many during its 15-year international career, Artel wondered what had changed since this video work was made and commissioned Anna-Stina to do a remake for the exhibition *Lost in Transition* (2011).

Kai Kaljo (born in 1959) is a well-known and multi-talented Estonian artist best known and recognized for her video work. She studied painting at Tallinn Art University and continued with her postgraduate education at the Swedish Royal Academy of Arts. She has been awarded an ArtsLink Fellowship Grant and an Independent Projects Grant for residencies in the USA and several other significant awards, international prizes and residencies. In her early years as an artist she mainly worked in stained glass and as a mural painter before making her first installation in 1994. It was her first video work, *A Loser*, that brought her international recognition. She has made many more short films since then and exhibits around the world at video festivals, group and solo exhibitions which incorporate painting, installation, text and video. Kaljo's work has been described as video poetry in which she pursues themes of ambivalence, love, communication, contrast and values.

Kaljo made A *Loser when t*he Vilnius Centre of Contemporary Arts was looking for works for an exhibition entitled *Funny versus Bizarre in 1997*.

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58 Kai Kaljo's video *A Loser* is available at: vimeo.com/14214871 (accessed 1March 2013).

Kestutis Kuizinas, curator of the exhibition and director of the centre, wanted to introduce Nordic and Baltic artists in order to test the sense of humour of countries that are not normally associated with a great sense of humour (quoted in Artel 2012a, 31). His aim was to gather works that looked funny or bizarre on the outside, not necessarily according to their noticeable or non-noticeable structure. It is also curious to note that, at the time, in the late 1990s, which were characterized by great transformations, for a curator to commission new work from artists specifically for a particular exhibition was rather uncommon in the Baltic States. As curator Rael Artel has pointed out, the old generation of artists in Estonia has been vocally against such a way of producing new artworks because they still view an artist as someone who, withdrawn into the depths of his or her quiet studio, creates self-expressive works in privacy, not taking anyone's direction. Curators thus tend to be seen as limiting artistic freedom (Artel 2012a, 31).

Kai Kaljo has pointed out in several interviews that at the time she was invited to participate in the *Funny vs Bizarre* exhibition, she could not imagine anything more funny or bizarre than her own life (Kaljo 2006, 5). She explains in her artist's statement to the curator: "My project is a simple video which is shown on a TV. It talks about me. I am standing in an empty room and saying some important things such as..." (This is followed by the text that the artist presents in the video)[59] (quoted in Artel 2012a, 31). Indeed, the video has an extremely simple structure. The artist, shot directly against the background of canvases turned against the wall in her studio, introduces herself in "accented" English, looking directly into the camera:

> Hello. My name is Kai Kaljo. I am an Estonian artist. [Laughter.] My weight is 92 kilograms. [Laughter.] I'm 37 years of age but still living with my mother. [Laughter.] I am not married. [Laughter.] I'm working at the Estonian Academy of Arts as a teacher for 90 dollars per month. [Laughter.] I think the most important thing in being an artist is freedom. [Laughter.] I am very happy. [Laughter.][60]

Each of these personal statements, real-life confessions, is accompanied

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59 My translation.

60 Transcription of *A Loser* (video, 1 min 24 sec, 1997).

by hysterical laughter from an unseen studio audience, the so-called canned laughter familiar from American sit-coms. The artist defines herself through two identities: her profession and her gender identity. Despite her professional position, she is still evaluated by her professional success, measured in income, as well as her embodiment of femininity, measured in age, kilograms and marital status. She appears to be a "loser" in her profession as well as in femininity because she does not earn enough money to move out of her mother's place and she does not exactly fit the social norms prescribed for women in terms of her weight and her marital status. The laughter in the background further underscores her position as a loser but it also triggers a sense of embarrassment in the collective subconscious of the audience.

Interestingly, Rael Artel reads the white background behind Kaljo as a significant commentary on the way in which the role of painters in Estonia came to be redefined in the 1990s. Kai Kaljo had originally planned to stand in front of the camera in an empty room. Instead, however, there are canvases turned backwards against the wall. Kaljo is a painter by training and, as already mentioned, *A Loser* was her first video work. According to Artel, the focus of curators at the time was to modernize the local art scene and "catch up" with the West. This often meant a commitment to promoting new media, video and installation art, against the background of which painting seemed particularly quaint, old-fashioned or even backward. Thus, the local perception of what was progressive in the rest of the world pushed the painter away into a loser position (Artel 2012a, 32).

The point of Kaljo's *A Loser* is indeed stunningly simple and grotesque. She comes across as a stand-up comedian whose act consists of stating facts about her life as a middle-aged, overweight, Eastern European female artist. The success of the video can probably be attributed to the way in which it managed to sum up the whole tragicomic reality of existence in postsocialist Eastern Europe. It is undoubtedly one of the most characteristic works among the huge body of artwork dealing with the post-Soviet experience. In multiple overview exhibitions that attempt to chart the huge body of artwork dealing with the postsocialist condition, Kaljo's repetitions of banal statements about herself followed by canned laughter "highlight the precarious economic situation faced by Estonian artists back in the days before EU membership" (Fowkes and Fowkes 2010, n. pag.). However, as art historian and critic Angela Dimitrakaki has suggested:

> It is not as easy to decide whether *Loser* and its statistics refer to Estonian artists or Estonian women artists' position. Nor is it easy to compare *Loser* with Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics* piece from the American 1970s; each piece illuminates some aspect of the geographical and historical transformation of the political in women's work. (2005, 276)[61]

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, women artists as well as their male colleagues have been under great pressure as a result of the ideological conflicts that have characterized Eastern and Central European culture. Dimitrakaki further notes that the West has mostly been interested in them because of the region's history and expectation that their art would be "explicitly political, when 'politics' in this case has primarily designated an engagement with the grave issue of transition, of reconfigured national identity and conflict" (Dimitrakaki 2005, 276). It is also fascinating to note how being set in a contemporary context, more than a decade since Kaljo made her video, brings about new aspects of this work. In the exhibition entitled ECONOMY that opened in Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art and Edinburgh's Stills in January 2013, Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* is presented amongst many others as artwork that addresses the question of how the economy impacts upon life. As Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd, the curators of this exhibition, reframe this work:

> By 2013 *Loser*'s storyline has become alarmingly familiar to art tutors, cultural workers and many graduates well beyond Estonian society. The reference to the precarious position of the arts professional that structures the work is certainly no longer limited to post-socialist states. Nor is it limited to arts professionals. The protagonist's failure as "a woman" and "an artist" is intertwined with the new (capitalist) system's failure to support independent citizens. This removal of independence from the life prospect of the working subject has emerged as a more general condition of the 21st century. (2013, n.pag.)[62]

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61 Martha Rosler's work *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977, 39:20 min) is a tape that examines the objectification of women and others in a technological and bureaucratic society. At its core is a long, continuous shot that reveals the measurement and evaluation of a woman's nude body by two male doctors and a chorus of three women assistants, while a voiceover comments on standards and body ideals. The video is available at: artfem.tv/id;11/action;showpage/page_type;video/page_id;vital_statistics_of_a_citizen_simply_obtained_by_martha_rosler_flv/_(accessed 20 March 2013).

62 The description of Kaljo's *A Loser* for this exhibition can be found at: economyexhibition.stills.org/artist/kai-kaljo (accessed 20 March 2013).

Put in this context, it does indeed look as though what was once considered a particularly post-Soviet condition of cheap labour and low salaries is becoming normalized across Europe, thus Kaljo's ironic commentary on her own life reaches well beyond her time and place. Indeed, as Dimitrakaki suggests, Kaljo's *A Loser* could be seen as the epitome of this situation: "*Loser* is an historic piece that we've included because the condition of precarity Kaljo identified in Estonia following the collapse of the Soviet Union is something that has been generalised" or in other words, "[i]t's a social condition that is no longer limited to the East" (quoted in Sharratt 2013, n. pag.). Drawing on Kaljo's example, the curators of ECONOMY admit that after the recent economic crisis "all of us – or at least most – are losers" (Sharratt 2013, n. pag.). While I would remain careful about claiming that all of Europe is similarly in crisis as steep inequalities remain between former Eastern-European countries and the so-called "Old Europe", it is certainly thought-provoking to consider Kaljo's work in this framework. Each context in which Kaljo's video has been and continues to be displayed adds novel ways of interpreting it. Such was her success in capturing a widely resonating sentiment through very simple means that the video has not lost any of its relevance today and continues to strike a chord with the rising (creative) "precariat"[63] everywhere.

What is significant about Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* and what is directly transferred to Anna-Stina's remake of this video is the role of laughter and irony. Art historian Katrin Kivimaa has deemed Kaljo's *A Loser* "one of the best examples of self-irony in the post-Soviet Estonian society" (2001, n. pag.). Western feminist artists have a long tradition of using (self-)irony, laughter, grotesque, vulgar folklore and so on as means to challenge existing dominant cultural stereotypes and modes of representation. Rosi Braidotti has called this strategy "the politics of parody, or the political practice of 'as if'" (2011, 28). However, according to Kivimaa, a similar strategy in Estonian women's art has a different source: "it is no doubt linked to the tendency to soften the absurdity of socialist everyday reality with a (self-) ironic look, widespread throughout Eastern and Central European culture" (Kivimaa 2001, n. pag.). In short, the use of laughter in Kaljo's case may indeed have a wider cultural meaning and there is no reason to suggest

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63 "Precariat" is a neologism that merges 'precarious' with 'proletariat'. In sociology and economics, 'precariat' refers to people suffering from precarity. Specifically, it is applied to the condition of lack of job security, in other words intermittent or underemployment and the resultant precarious existence. See e.g. Standing 2011.

that it is just simply echoing the favoured strategy of Western feminist art. This means that the so-called "revolutionary power of women's laughter" does not necessarily go "hand in hand with the subversive power of popular folklore as means to (subtly) criticise the power structures and not less significantly, as means to survive" (Kivimaa 2001, n. pag.).

Cultural critic Hanno Soans wonders who actually owns this anonymous laughter in Kaljo's *A Loser* - "the growling net commentator, a normal Estonian man, a Homer Simpson or Al Bundy from the wealthy suburb of Tiskre[64]?" (2011, 19). The idea to include the canned laughter familiar from US American sitcoms came to Kaljo because she vividly remembered the first time she saw a TV series that used it – an American phenomenon – thinking "how bizarre, do people not know anymore when to laugh now, so even that has to be done for them?" (quoted in Artel 2012a, 28)

As Kai Kaljo herself has explained in her artist's statement for the initial exhibition Funny vs Bizarre, "[t]he point is that I do not look like a loser, but the people laughing believe my words and my words are true" (quoted in Artel 2012a, 36).[65] Kaljo mentions that in the Estonian context, where A Loser has not been received as well as in the international arena, people at first understood that they should in fact laugh at her because she herself says that she is ugly, old and poor. To her surprise, then, she soon discovered that "the world was full of people who identified with the character I had created and they thought that I made her up and that this video reflects a society where the media threatens all of us, that if all of us do not consume the same things, we are 'losers'" (quoted in Artel 2012a, 28).[66]

Kaljo's last sentences in the video present a significant twist as the artist claims that, despite all the confessions that make her sound as though she is a "loser", freedom is more important than anything else and she is actually happy. Soans remarks on the comment about happiness that there is a:

> moment of silence, an extended pause between the artist's statement and the expected burst of laughter. With this confession, we have entered an area that is not as easily measured by status, and the situation is made even more ambivalent by the artist's own laughter, which undermines her loser position assumed in front of the camera. (2011, 19)

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64 A suburb in Tallinn.

65 My translation.

66 My translation.

The clever combination of self-portraiture and confessional autobiographical statements works well to evoke a number of layers that speak of the way in which the generic and the personal, the public and the private are intertwined. Through parodying herself, then, Kai Kaljo challenges the audience's own beliefs about the position of a woman, an artist and an Eastern European more broadly.

The questions that Anna-Stina takes up in her remake of *A Loser* 15 years later only partly address the issue of the position and status of the artist, though of course some of Kaljo's statements certainly resonate with her own position. In an interview with Rael Artel, Anna-Stina describes her first encounter with Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* and the affinities she feels with her position as an artist in contemporary Estonia:

> I remember when I first saw Kaljo's *A Loser* – I was in the 9th grade then and I had to choose in which high school I would continue my studies. Since I was interested in art, it made sense to choose an art school. Hearing the confessions of a practising artist and facts about the current situation in Estonia, I was shocked. At the same time I was fascinated by confession as a method. I was not one of those laughing – after all, I took the same route – I will be 30 in three days, I am again living in my parents' house and I am registered as unemployed. Partly, it has been my choice. After my Master's studies, I wanted to try freelance work: to find work in my field, to be involved in activism, to participate in exhibitions, send applications to different festivals, apply for scholarships and look for alternative funds. I enjoyed the freedom to organize festivals myself, carry out projects, connect with other queer artists in the world. Unlike my colleagues, I did not want to become an art teacher or give lectures at the art academy because I do not have enough patience for this. I lasted for two years before I went to the unemployment office. I exhausted all my energy in worrying about whether I had money for next month's rent. (quoted in Artel 2012b, 37–38)[67]

So, 15 years later, when Estonia has officially become part of Europe again and the salary of art teachers has increased from 90 dollars a month to a couple of hundred, not much has changed in the position of artists and others in uncertain economic situations, who still come across as "losers". In addition to preserving the laughter from Kaljo's video and the "autobiographical" format (in Anna-Stina's case, again, it is the autobiography of a character

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67 My translation.

she is performing), Anna-Stina retains the link with Kaljo's original work through the reference to her own precarious position as an artist. Other than that, she goes straight to the topic closest to her heart: addressing questions of gender and sexual identity. She describes the socio-critical queering tactic that helps her to deconstruct fixed structures and patterns in society in a rather subtle way:

> it does not have to be something grand necessarily. Even wearing clothes usually meant for the opposite sex might create questions for people and hesitations about existing norms. Why is it that boys cannot wear skirts while girls may walk around in boy's pants? At the same time, I believe that queering is not limited by the topic of gender and sexuality. (Quoted in Artel 2012b, 38)

In the next section, I will consider Anna-Stina's video Peeter from the *Loser 2011* series to add more nuance to the discussion of Anna-Stina's "losers" project that I began with in the analysis of the self-portrait photographs in the same series.

## "I'm a real man": *Peeter*

Like the "losers" in the photographs in the *Loser 2011* series, Anna-Stina's loser *Peeter* (video, 59 sec, 2011)[68] is a composite of real-life features of real-life figures. Anna-Stina explains her motivations for cross-dressing in her remake of Kaljo's *A Loser*, so instead of the audience laughing at a woman smiling insecurely in front of the camera, the canned laugher is now directed at a conceited man sitting in a car:

> So what has changed in 15 years? We are in the European Union, but I do not feel it: human rights have stayed behind the border. Still there are problems with difference, be it on the basis of skin colour, sexuality or body type – I mean everything related to the body, such as age, weight, able-bodiedness, etc. A person who is heavier than average is laughed at, disabled people are stared at, black people get stones thrown at them, homosexuals are called names. I made my own list of losers – and what would be sweeter than as a lesbian, to represent a homophobe and nationalist (Quoted in Artel 2012b, 38)[69]

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68 Anna-Stina Treumund's video *Loser 2011. Peeter* is available at: vimeo.com/27433625 (accessed 1 March 2013).

69  My translation.

Anna-Stina Treumund, video still *Peeter* (2011) from the
*Loser 2011* series

If we were to look for a concrete prototype for Peeter, the fictional name that Anna-Stina has given to the guy she portrays in the video, it would be a typical working-class Estonian man who holds nationalist and patriarchal values and who during the economic recession of recent years has been forced to seek employment outside Estonia. In the interview I conducted with Anna-Stina about this video, she talked about her own experience of working in Finland. Her story is familiar to many young Estonians who have earned (an extra) living working in Finland for longer or shorter periods of time, picking strawberries, babysitting, working in construction, cleaning, repairing and other menial jobs. She used to go home every weekend, and had to face certain kinds of men on the boat from Helsinki to Tallinn. Most of them were loud, arrogant, full of themselves, drunk, ordering one long drink after another for those ninety minutes that the boat ride lasts. She told me of her fear of the bodies of these men: fat, sweaty, with shaved heads, intimidating. Being there, in that space, would be extremely uncomfortable for most women. I know immediately what she is talking about.

Peeter thus represents an amalgamation of stereotypical Estonian macho men whom Anna-Stina would not want to cross paths with on the street, a caricature of everything she is critical of. The video mimics Kai Kaljo's video in the sense that the main character faces the camera and talks directly to the audience, his confessional statements punctuated by the familiar canned laughter:

> Hello. My name is Peeter. I'm a worker from Estonia. [Laughter.] Building houses in Finland. [Laughter.] I am married. I have three children. With different women. [Laughter.] I have an apartment with four bedrooms. The loan lasts until the summer of 2082. [Laughter.] My car has leather seats. [Laughter.] I got them really cheap from the Turks across the street. [Laughter.] I hate immigrants and fags. [Laughter.] I think being a real man is hating everything different. [Laughter.] I'm a real man. [Laughter.]

As in the photographs from the same series, *Peeter* depicts the main character in a public place, sitting in his car in a newly built housing area, thus accentuating the external signs of success that are so important to him. Although Peeter is seemingly successful according to the model of success prevalent in post-Soviet Estonia, that is, he has a new spacious apartment and a car with leather seats, he is nevertheless not entirely successful. He is tied to the bank as his loan lasts till 2082 and his leather seats are not

actually the real deal because he got them really cheap from the Turks. He comes across as someone who is in a sense stuck but he does not realize it because at least he has the material things that are so important to his understanding of success. What complicates the image of Peeter is thus the class differences, the clash between his desire to fit the model of success and his limited means. Despite his hatred for immigrants, he has no problem with getting leather seats from them because it is cheaper. Although he claims to hate fags, the importance of leather seats to his sense of well-being suggests homoeroticism. So in many ways, he is simply keeping up appearances. Thus, the accompanying canned laughter no longer has anything liberating in it, as was the case in Kaljo's video, but instead, it becomes rather haunting and daunting. As Hanno Soans aptly notes:

> On the one hand, the transitional society has produced a large social element, a whole mass consciousness where myths of emancipation produce anonymous regulating laughter at the people the mass has abandoned – that is, the statistical majority. On the other hand, it is a sign of a society that has acquired a Western pragmatism, but not its value system, which is why the xenophobic mechanisms of identity and defensive positions arising from stuffy self-centredness have grown stronger since the 1990s which were seemingly liberal. (2011, 25)

The role of Anna-Stina's hijacked laughter indeed becomes a bit ambiguous. Is it simply laughing at the "subject" in the video, a character who has blindly followed the successful models of this society? Is it laughing at these limited models of success? Or perhaps it is laughing at the laughter itself? Are there different moments in the laughter where the audience is laughing with the artist, at the artist, at the character, with the character? Is the laughter the same throughout? Who is behind the laughter?

For Anna-Stina, laughter is by no means unfamiliar – there are plenty of anonymous homophobic comments ridiculing her and her work that can be found online. She reads laugher in Kaljo's original work as normalizing and thus the most frightening part of the video: the people laughing represent for her the repressive mainstream norm that tends to marginalize her. She explains: "I turned the power of those laughing against themselves, changing the sex and social belonging of the 'loser', making those laughing into a laughing stock" (quoted in Artel 2012b, 39). Her personal politics comes into the picture precisely because she does not portray the "real" characters,

the "real" men, but instead chooses to pose as them herself. Through this doubling move, she wants the viewers to consider both the "real" men and herself as a queer subject who is challenging the viewer to accept personal responsibility for xenophobia, homophobia and discrimination.

Moreover, it would perhaps not be too impossible of a stretch to claim that by inserting herself, a queer subject, into the three photographs and the video, Anna-Stina is asking the viewers to consider the queerness in themselves. Often, queer critiques target the most obviously homophobic statements and discourses and thus set up a problematic binary – whereas there are many people who would not fit comfortably into this binary. As Sasha Roseneil has suggested, without downplaying the discursive power of heteronormativity, more focus should be directed at "investigating how hetero-relations might not be as dominant or universal in people's affective and sexual lives as dominant discourses, and indeed feminist social research, tend to represent" (Roseneil 2011, 130). The way in which Anna-Stina is queering her "losers", inserting little elements into their representations that do not quite fit the lives of the actual prototypes of these characters, suggests a desire to move in that direction.

### "Your periphery is my centre"

Similarly to Nikki S. Lee's projects that I mentioned earlier, Anna-Stina's "loser" project invites comparisons with Cindy Sherman and Adrian Piper: the former being well-known for turning the camera on herself in the guise of a B-movie actress in her meticulously constructed *Untitled Movie Stills* (1977-1980), while the latter is known for her re-incarnation as a young, aggressive, black man, whom she called the Mythic Being and performed from 1972 to 1976. In particular, I am prompted to take up one of Piper's 1975 posters, entitled "I embody everything you most hate and fear".[70] This title resonates with Anna-Stina's insistence that the audience confront head on their own fears and prejudices. The doubled nature of the characters – the "men" who appear as "losers" and Anna-Stina herself as a lesbian woman beneath the drag – allows us to address wider questions regarding intersecting identities. She simultaneously confronts herself as a lesbian

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70 A selection of photographs from Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being* series can be viewed here: www.o-matic.com/public_art/piper.html (accessed 20 March 2013).

woman, to whom these "losers" embody everything she hates and fears, as well as the "losers" to whom she as a lesbian woman appears as a target of hate and fear and whose toxic masculinity needs to be challenged. At the same time, she does take immense pleasure in "becoming" these "men". The process of self-transformation, of drag kinging, offers her moments of identification with the pose and demeanour of these "men", thus adding more ambiguity to the meaning of "losers".

While Anna-Stina only performed her characters for the duration of taking the photographs, Adrian Piper made her appearance in drag into a street performance, walking through the streets of New York, adopting stereotypical male gestures, afro wig and moustache in order to "pass" as male. She visited certain culture-related locales around the city, such as art gallery openings, concerts, films, plays, and took the subways and buses, walking in different neighbourhoods at night. She became the Mythic Being. Like Piper though, Anna-Stina's staging of herself as an object for inspection ultimately reveals less about the artist than about the viewer's attitudes towards gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. Piper in her role as the Mythic Being and Anna-Stina in her role as different "losers" similarly ask the audience to face their own personal responsibility for xenophobia and discrimination based on gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality. They challenge the audience to reconsider their own role in perpetuating the conditions that allow discrimination to persist and the assumptions about the social construction of intersectional identities.

My ambition in this chapter has been to situate Anna-Stina as an intersectional and queer-feminist critic of a postsocialist Estonian society that too often accepts the "catching up with the West" discourse and focuses on its desire to get out of the "lag", keeping up the neoliberal model of success centred on shiny external appearances and material values. The so-called "catching up" discourse is, thus, always already about catching up with certain forms of neoliberal discourses. It is my contention then that this is why Western feminists and feminists from the former Eastern Europe might run the risk of cooptation if they leave the "lagging behind" discourse and issues of "self-colonization" unchallenged.

As I investigate Treumund's animation of the "real" loser men, I want to expose the complex and contradictory ways in which the artist claims authority through and in relation to the persona. Captions referencing the names of the fictional characters address the audience in a laconic

documentary voice, not Anna-Stina's. She uses her own body to insert herself into the representation of the losers while establishing that she and "they" are not identical. Yet, in a way, by asserting difference from and authority over the "losers", Treumund risks reinscribing power structures such as intolerant/tolerant, heterosexual/homosexual, educated/ uneducated, knower/subject of knowledge. However, this allows her to reveal the complexities inherent in making, representing, and modelling identities other than one's own.

*Loser 2011* is Anna-Stina's creative response to social intolerance, inviting various reactions from the audience. I hope my account of this series delineates networks of contingent power relations between artist and persona, and among audience, persona and artist. In her multiple roles as men she calls "losers", Anna-Stina sheds her own physical appearance, gender, sexuality and class identity and becomes immersed in the homophobic and nationalist Estonian male persona. As the epitome of what she is trying to portray as otherness, in a reversal of her own otherness, Anna-Stina asks her audience to face their own prejudices while synthesizing within herself the three principal elements of the artistic experience: artist, object and viewer. Through appropriating elements and structure from Kai Kaljo's iconic *A Loser*, she strikes at the foundations of complacency and denial that characterize the lingering chauvinism, homophobia and xenophobia prevalent in Estonian society.

The challenge for me in viewing Anna-Stina's *Loser 2011* has been to recognize and confront my own possible, albeit unintentional, complicity in perpetuating homophobia. The unexpected appearance of my mother's eyes in the photograph entitled *Veiko* powerfully evoked this sense of embodied knowing that unless I actively seek to translate my academic language into my mother tongue, into my rather conservative mother's tongue, in some form or another, I will remain part of sustaining heteronormative frameworks. This politics at the most personal level also touches a nerve when considering the Western feminist frameworks I have grown into and where I am now multiply situated. My troubling inability to fit into these frameworks as a woman from postsocialist Estonia, living and working in feminist academia in Sweden, challenges me to keep making interventions which, if following Anna-Stina's *Loser 2011* project as an example of creative responses to otherness, might work best in the form of insertion. I need to constantly insert myself into these structures that perpetuate the

"lagging behind" discourse in relation to Eastern Europe in order to become self-conscious and pose critical questions about what it might mean to be a feminist subject from Eastern Europe, negotiating a continuous and complex relationship with Western feminism.

# 6

## Affective Histories: *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings*

*My memory of men is never lit up and illuminated like my memory of women.*

- Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (1997, 65)

Marju Mutsu in front of *Together* (courtesy of Jaan Klõsheiko) and
Anna-Stina Treumund in front of her remake of Mutsu's *Together*[71]
(courtesy of Lea Tui).

71 Anna-Stina Treumund made this collage available on her website: www.annastinatreumund.com/ex-
hibitions/woman-in-the-corner-on-mutsus-drawing (accessed 25 March 2013) to complement her
work *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings*, but it was not part of the *II Artishok Biennale* exhibi-
tion.

**Opening:  touching across time**

*"Can I borrow your camera for a second? I need to take a picture."*

It was the second time Anna-Stina and I were going round at the opening of the *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* exhibition in Vienna in November 2009. She was excited about having spotted a series of three ink drawings *One, Two* and *Together* (1972) by the well-known Estonian graphic artist Marju Mutsu (1941-1980) that she had not seen before and that she was intensely interested in. She wanted to document them to study them more closely later on and I happened to have my camera with me.

At the time, Anna-Stina was preparing for her first solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know*. She was deeply concerned about the question of visibility and carving out a space for herself as a lesbian and queer-identified feminist artist in the Estonian context. This feeling of being squeezed into a depressingly tight space that she constantly needed to fight for, the sense of being cornered, intensified her quest for others: other artists, other artworks that she could identify with, other moments in art history – most importantly, in the Estonian context – that she could feel speak to her own experience. I joined her in Vienna for the opening of the *Gender Check* exhibition and the accompanying conference, which focused on discussing questions of gender in the art and social history of Eastern Europe, an issue that is often neglected in the transnational discourses of gender issues in history, both in the context of art and in scholarly discourse. Anna-Stina and I both saw *Gender Check* as an inspiring place for filling in gaps, creating missing links and finding new perspectives in the context of transnational feminist discourses where we both often felt somewhat alienated as women from postsocialist Eastern Europe.

In contrast to Anna-Stina, I did not immediately notice Mutsu's drawings. I was taken aback by the sheer volume of artworks gathered in this space and found myself looking for pieces that I already knew about but had never actually seen. Among them were, for instance, Mare Tralla's iconic video installation *So We Gave Birth to Estonian Feminism* (1995) and Marina Abramović's well-known video installation *Art Must be Beautiful* (1975). Mutsu's drawings somehow felt too small-sized and traditional amongst the more well-known conceptual works. It was not until Anna-Stina pointed them out to me that I began to appreciate the lyrical lines and the poetic content of Mutsu's triptych.

Anna-Stina immediately read Marju Mutsu's drawings as strongly suggestive of openly lesbian desire, a topic that up until very recently was rarely, if ever, discussed in Estonian art history. Anna-Stina herself has indeed been among the few to initiate such discussions. So perhaps she even fell in love with Mutsu, as one of the critics suggests (Põldsam 2010, n.pag.). Mutsu seemed to be a goddess-sent saviour who offered her something she had been missing out on: historical roots and continuity, a groundedness that she did not feel she had but desperately needed. Finding Marju Mutsu's three drawings among the first comprehensive collection of Eastern European art addressing gender issues, she became instantly fascinated, forming a strong attachment to Mutsu, something like an affectionate fan or not-so-secret admirer. She began researching her and trying to unearth as much information about her life, art and the reception to her work as she could get her hands on. Mutsu's drawings became an inspiration for her remake.

One of Anna-Stina's main objectives in recent years has indeed been to look for references to other lesbian-identified artists or representations of lesbian desire in the Estonian context – something she had found to be missing from discussions in art history classes when studying at art school. This search resulted in her first remake series, entitled *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings*, which was exhibited at the *II Artishok Biennale* in Tartu, Estonia in September 2010.[72] This work consists of a series of three self-portraits which constitute a playful citation, an homage to the series of

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72 *Artishok Biennale* is an experimental exhibition format that explores the relationship between art and criticism. In 10 days 10 artists/artist groups present their work, produced specifically for this particular exhibition, and 10 invited critics respond to it. An overview of the II Artishok Biennale and the reviews written about the work of each of the participating artists are available at: www.artishokbiennale.org/2010/ (accessed 9 February 2013).

three ink drawings called *One*, *Two* and *Together* by Marju Mutsu, insofar as these drawings relate to discussions of the politics of visibility and, in Anna-Stina's readings of them, build queer connections with the past. In Anna-Stina's reading of Mutsu's drawings, there is a sensual and erotic desire between the two women depicted in the drawings, who come together in *Together* – an undeniable fact for Anna-Stina albeit rarely commented upon by art historians. With her remake, Anna-Stina points out that art historians have neglected to pay attention to the erotic desire between the two women depicted in Mutsu's drawings, which to her is so obvious and important.

The intertextual and cross-generational links that Anna-Stina builds on, with and through Mutsu's work, can be interpreted as an intimate encounter between the two artists across time, creating affective connections between two women separated in time by four decades. Anna-Stina's homage to Mutsu strikes me as a queer reverie of Anna-Stina's imagined meeting with Marju Mutsu, one that never happened and could not have done so, but which, in its very impossibility, illustrates the performative premises of all nostalgia.

On her website, Anna-Stina also exhibits a photograph taken of herself in front of her own *Together* in 2010, which clearly imitates a photograph of Marju Mutsu in front of her *Together* from 1972. The two women look similar in age, with short hair and wearing a turtle neck, both looking up, their gaze turned in the same direction, framed by their respective artworks in the background. When placed side by side in a kind of collage, the two photographs seem to form a line, a suggestion of a historical continuum that is being forged, invented, in an attempt to affirm the existence of a genealogy, a community to which the younger artist of the two is desperate to belong. She lives and breathes for a connection with otherness, with difference, with others located outside the mainstream. The two photographs seem to play with straight lines, geometric shapes, borders that demarcate what falls inside and outside. The lines that begin from today, that are created retrospectively, suggest a link between two stories of two different times. The past can easily be colonized, reinvented, re-articulated, but what seems to be the central aim of this collage, as well as the remake, is the need to build bridges between the past and the present.

As I have argued throughout, a way to move away from being judgemental, locked in the East-West binary that is bound to cast Eastern-

European queer feminist art as a copy of the West, is through a relational approach to Anna-Stina's artwork. In the previous chapter, I considered the convergences between Anna-Stina and myself as critics of the Estonian capitalist neoliberal "winners" discourse that remains caught in the sense of lagging behind that is attributed to Eastern Europe and the importance of continuing to challenge that as feminists. In this chapter, I want to take a closer look at the construction of temporal relations in Anna-Stina's artwork. I feel that a desire for relations, for connection – to herself, to the past, to others – was and is in fact one of the driving forces behind Anna-Stina's artistic work which, at least for herself, serves as a looking glass into the depths and surfaces of herself, into her relations to others, to ideas, to the world. Her photographs are her mirrors, tools to check herself out here and now, in the present but also to bring into this world those critical images that she missed when growing up. They enable her to register and *see* herself in a fleeting moment in a world of constant changes and transitions, to stage her critique of society, to put forward a plea for change, to create the sense of a community of selves, people like "me", to facilitate affective contact with others.

I want to consider the dimension of time in another way, from another angle, against the background of the recent turn to time and temporalities in queer studies (see e.g. Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Freccero 2006; Freccero 2007; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Freeman 2010). Through the lens of queer temporalities, I explore the temporal regimes of some of Anna-Stina's photographs that engage with the question of histories, generations and genealogies, focusing in particular on the relations to the past that this work embodies. As Elizabeth Freeman has pointed out, time is not only of the essence, it actually produces "essences": time makes bodies and subjects (Freeman 2007, 160), which also makes time part of larger histories of sexuality.

The discussion of the three self-portraits in the series *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* forms the core of this chapter. In addition, I will discuss Anna-Stina's self-portrait with her girlfriend, entitled *Together II,* a continuation of the remake series that was made and exhibited a year later, in May 2011, at the first queer art exhibition in Estonia, called *Untold stories*. I want to connect Anna-Stina's remake of these drawings with Carolyn Dinshaw's sentiment about a queer desire for history which for her is about searching for "the possibility of touching across time, collapsing

time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then," in order to "form communities across time" (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 178). In this artwork, Anna-Stina literally reaches out to touch the sentiments of the artist across time through inserting herself into this image, making the erotic connection between the two drawn women visible through placing her own lesbian-identified body at the scene of their encounter. Through re-creating Marju Mutsu's work and reworking it to make it her own, Anna-Stina is exploring her desire for history, a queer history, searching for connections with and through the past.

Looking at Marju Mutsu's drawings now, in light of Anna-Stina's homage, I cannot help but notice how my reading of Mutsu's work has changed. Now I would never walk past her drawings without interest at an exhibition again. In line with Mieke Bal's argument that "[q]uoting Caravaggio changes his work forever" (1999, 1), I am left to contend that Anna-Stina's quoting of Mutsu has changed her work forever. Her quotation has effectively and affectively specified my reading of Mutsu's drawings and thus lifted them into an entirely new temporal context.

## A woman in the corner

Anna-Stina Treumund's remade series of Marju Mutsu's three drawings, *One, Two* and *Together* (1972), is entitled *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2010). This suggests that in her recreation, her playful citation, she specifically wants to call our attention to the woman who is present in the bottom right-hand corner of each of the three drawings by Mutsu. The woman in the corner is the main citational element. It is this figure that she identifies with. In light of the attention she received after her first solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* (2010), Anna-Stina perceives herself as a cornered woman. She feels alone in her attempt to draw attention to issues of lesbian visibility and women's sexuality more broadly in the Estonian context and she also feels alone because she finds it difficult to be openly lesbian or to find a partner in this situation. So she becomes that woman in the corner of Mutsu's drawings. These are self-portraits that are personal and autobiographical, political and challenging. In this series, she comes closest to presenting herself as herself, and not just as Anna-Stina the lesbian/queer feminist-identified artist, but also as
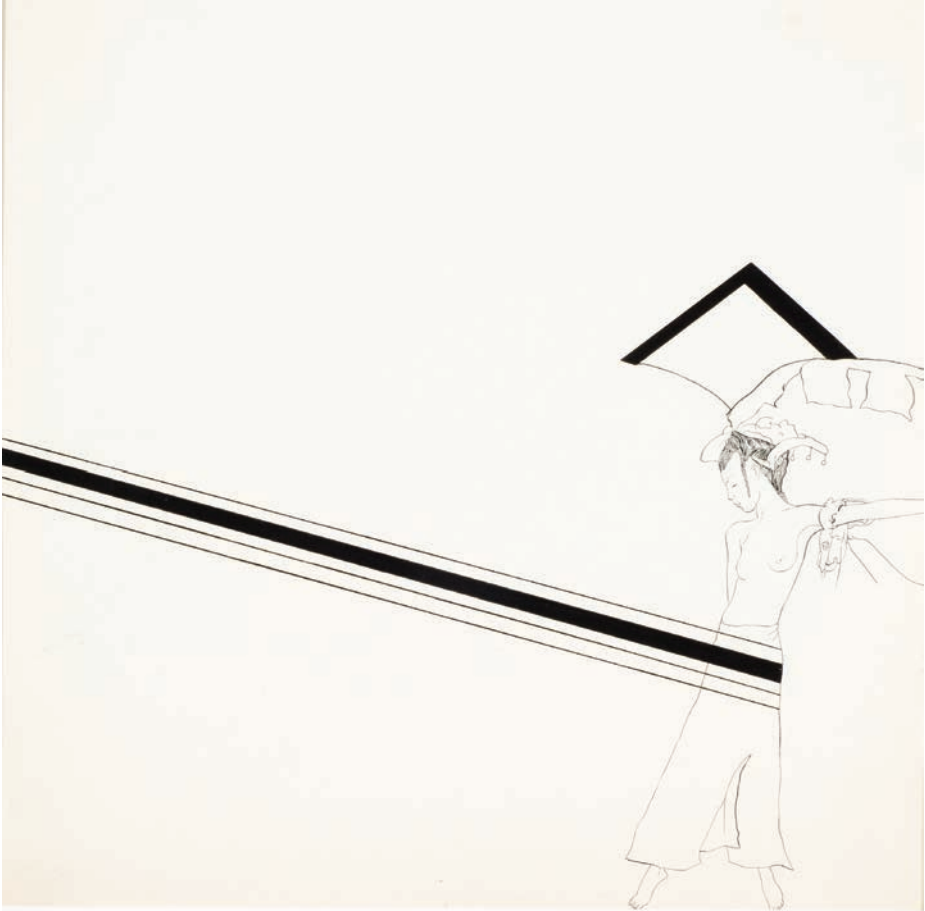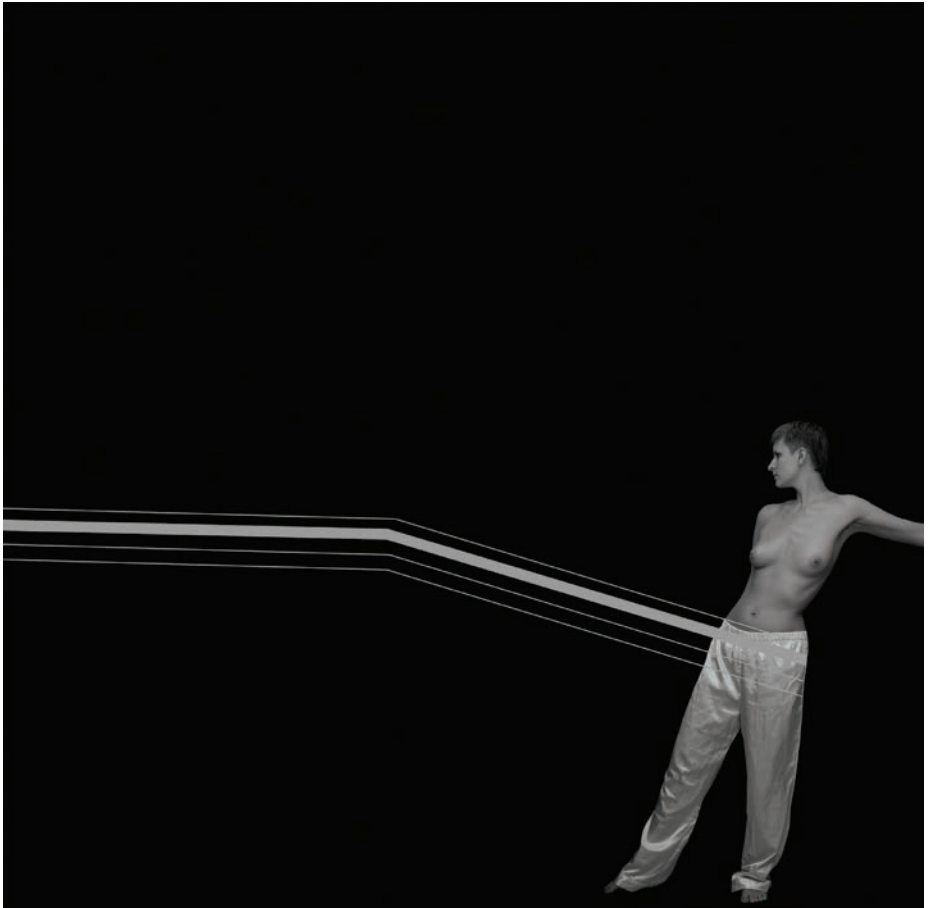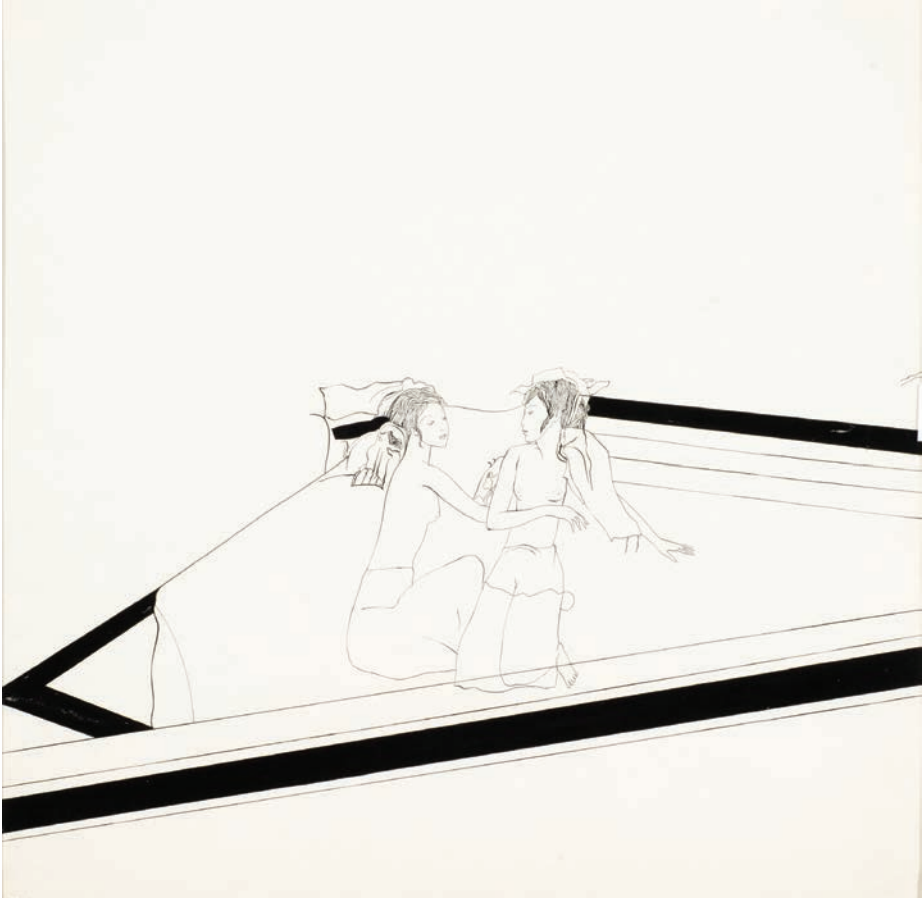
Marju Mutsu. *One* (1972)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *One* (2010)

Marju Mutsu. *Two* (1972)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Two* (2010)

Marju Mutsu. *Together* (1972)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Together* (2010)

a woman who is searching and yearning for love and closeness. In contrast with her tactic of performing a character, prevalent in the other works discussed in this thesis, such as *Drag* and the *Loser 2011* series, here she engages in self-presentation and is overall much more self-referential and self-sustaining.

Marju Mutsu's drawings from which Anna-Stina draws her inspiration are minimalist, light and airy, playing with empty space and geometric lines. As the titles suggest, One depicts a single woman. She is wearing nothing but wide, flowing and silky-looking trousers, perhaps pyjama bottoms, and she is placed in the bottom right-hand corner of the drawing. She is also present in Two, but here a second woman appears from the bottom left-hand corner and the two women are drawn towards each other by parallel lines which function as a kind of waistband. The woman on the left-hand side appears in a more active and seductive role, while the woman on the right-hand side remains somewhat more passive, anticipating. In turn, Together shows the same women brought together in the centre of the drawing in a suggestive embrace, the lines forming what looks like a bed where they are sitting dreamily. Their suave and somewhat shy glances at each other hint at desire and closeness, a possible story of seduction, of erotic playfulness, of love.

Mutsu's aesthetics, which I will contextualize and discuss further in the next section, is often described as Far Eastern, in dialogue with "Japanese minimalism" (Taidre 2009, 18) and the romantic-lyrical aesthetics of Estonian graphic art of the late 1960s and the 1970s (Kivimaa 2009a, 97). The figures of the two women depicted in the three drawings seem delicate, intimate and very fleshy. Their movement towards each other throughout the three works and their eventual placement very close to each other in Together accentuates the intimacy between them, which to a contemporary viewer looks strikingly erotic and undoubtedly lesbian. In each picture, the women are framed by the thick geometrical lines that seem to bind them together and create the narrative of two women yearning for each other.

Anna-Stina's photographs, a gentle homage to Mutsu, constitute a simple, sensitive and suggestive answer to the drawings from the 1970s with which she attempts to communicate and establish a connection. Partly, she achieves this through borrowing the narrative and compositional structure from Mutsu's work, thus closely tying the two works together. Her photographs derive their force and weight through reference back to Mutsu's drawings.

At first glance, the two series appear to be rather similar in their style and mood. Both are equally minimalist, relying on empty space and geometric parallel lines to create their compositional focal points. Yet, Anna-Stina's reference to Mutsu is not a direct quotation, but rather a commentary that only partly replicates Mutsu's drawings. The greatest difference between the two series is that Anna-Stina has decided to remove the second woman from the scene. Bare breasted and wearing just long silky pyjama trousers like Mutsu's women, Anna-Stina puts herself in the role of the more passive woman of the two, the woman in the bottom right-hand corner of the drawings, the one who is waiting for the other. Her toned body is slim and tall, her figure feminine, her short haircut perhaps adds a hint of androgyny. Replicating the poses of Mutsu's woman in the right-hand corner, Anna-Stina is looking down in One. We only see her in profile and she looks somewhat reserved, which matches the mood of the woman in the right-hand corner of Mutsu's work. Most notably, the hand of the woman in the corner in both images seems to be pulled away by some force outside the frame of the image. This appears to be more intentional in Anna-Stina's photographs than in Mutsu's drawings, where the figures of the women seem less central to the composition than the strong, straight lines.

In both versions of Two, the woman on the right-hand side has lifted her gaze a little bit. Again, she seems to be pulled by her left hand even further to the side of the frame. Her body seems to be being stretched by something or someone beyond the frame, outside our immediate field of vision and perception. Due to the absence of the second woman from Anna-Stina's Two, the placement of the hand creates a tension in the image. It is as though she is anticipating the appearance of the other woman, but she is held back, someone is trying to pull her away before there is a chance for the other woman to appear. The reference to Mutsu's work creates the expectation that she is waiting for the arrival of the other woman. She is yearning to be united with her.

This feeling of being forced to be alone becomes especially overwhelming in Anna-Stina's Together, which in Mutsu's version is a very sensual and sexual image, showing the two women together on a bed. In Mutsu's Together, the woman on the right appears yet again to be more passive and awaiting. She retains some of the reserve of her earlier position, with her right hand covering her stomach in a protective pose, although her upper body and the position of her left hand suggest an openness that was not

there before. She has also lifted her gaze a bit more and is now looking at the other woman. She is giving in to the other's desire. Anna-Stina copies her position almost exactly down to the line, except that her Together appears deeply ironic. She is in fact alone. The effort to fit into the role of the woman in the right-hand corner, who is opening up to the sensual gaze of the other woman, comes across as rigid and rehearsed. Upon a closer look, her pose looks far more strained than that of Mutsu's woman, who seems so light, almost flowing or floating in her sensual anticipation. This contrast further emphasizes Anna-Stina's feeling of being cornered and her wishful desire for the "happy end" of Mutsu's narrative of the two women coming together.

Mutsu presents the women in an erotic, lyrical way. There is lightness, a dance-like quality to the drawings. In particular in Two, both of the women, in the nude from the waist up, wearing just wide airy trousers, appear with their bodies stretched out, standing tall, on their tiptoes. They seem to be dancing, whirling. It is as though the woman in the left-hand corner is pulling the band around the other woman's waist so as to launch her into whirling while she is being pulled back by her left arm in the other direction. These lines are at once strong and binding, yet also somewhat discontinuous and suggestive. I feel that some of that dance-like, airy quality of the women in Mutsu's drawings does not get transferred into Anna-Stina's photographs. Instead, her figure is much more in your face, so to speak. Her photographs thus seem rougher, perhaps slightly unfinished, still looking for balance. Perhaps some of this abruptness also comes about due to the change of media in the process of appropriation – drawings by their very nature tend to be more delicate, soft and gentle while photographs often carry with them a kind of sharpness and a sense of realism. With their photo-negative-like features and high contrast, these photographs present themselves as particularly stark and heavy. Thereby, the inversion of media is also significant. What is suggestive in Mutsu's delicate ink lines becomes declarative in Anna-Stina's work.

The play with the photographic positive and negative binary highlights the conceptual difference between the two series. Most noticeably, Mutsu's drawings have a white and light background, the women are rendered through contours made with thin lines in black ink and the geometrical lines are black as well. In contrast, Anna-Stina's photographs have a bleak black background and the geometrical lines added later on the computer

are white, which creates a much darker overall mood. She herself appears as a white figure, a negative image, which is a total inversion of the positive image in the drawings, making the lightest areas of the drawings appear darkest while the darkest become lightest.

The positive and negative binary is further accentuated through Anna-Stina's deliberate reading of the narrative structure of Mutsu's drawings – which we could tentatively see as photo positives – as positive and affirmative, as opposed to her own story which she perceives as rather negative and depressing. The conceptual reversal of the positive and negative evokes an imaginary link between what happened first and what happened later – the so-called photo positives seem to precede the photo negatives in time. The negative only surfaces retrospectively, as if wanting and wishing for the "happily ever after" story of Mutsu's drawings, constituting a prelude to this story at the same time as it is an afterword, an epilogue. The two stories are once again brought together in Anna-Stina's queer imaginary move to break away from normative continuities and chronological timelines – each artwork can function as a prelude to the other. Mutsu's drawings precede Anna-Stina's photographs by almost four decades yet at the same time the story they tell is, as it were, the desired solution to the loneliness and longing – a connection with another woman – that Anna-Stina as an openly lesbian woman is yearning for and wishes to demonstrate in her self-presentation in 2010. In that sense, Anna-Stina's story comes across as a prelude to the story of the couple that is pulled together in Mutsu's drawings. Yet Anna-Stina's story also firmly remains an afterthought, a contemporary intervention in art historical writing in that it attempts to underline the way in which the meanings of images can and should change over time.

Anna-Stina wants to read Mutsu's drawings as a happy story, as proof of the existence of lesbian desire in visual representations long before her own contemporary times. She is looking for historical continuity and has found Mutsu, whom she can call a foremother of sorts. Although she refrains from suggesting that Mutsu was a lesbian, she is highly attentive to the way in which Mutsu depicted the possibility of lesbian desire and erotics in a context where this was highly uncommon and unlikely. The wish to establish Mutsu as a foremother is also supported by the way in which Anna-Stina aligns a portrait of Mutsu in front of Together and a portrait of herself in front of her own Together – the lines behind the artists suggest a line that she

is effectively combining so as to create an imaginary connection between them. Interestingly, then, Anna-Stina becomes at once a descendant and a predecessor of Mutsu. She needs this retrospective construction of a genealogical link to define and contest her current situation, where she feels alone and lonely, and she is less lonely through her queer reading of Mutsu's drawings. She needs roots, a historical continuity, creating her own lesbian herstory through which at the same time she can throw new light on the reception of the art of Marju Mutsu. The temporal relations between these two works of art become hopelessly entangled.

In the next section, I will briefly introduce Marju Mutsu's graphic art and sketch out its role in Estonian art history in order to further contextualize the way in which Anna-Stina's remake of the three ink drawings constitutes a queer feminist construction of a genealogy that needs to be read differently from Western feminist genealogies and temporal trajectories.

## The legacy of Marju Mutsu

A recent monograph on Marju Mutsu (1941-1980) firmly establishes her as "a legend" and "a versatile artist and dynamic personality" (Taidre 2009, 46). Her graphic art – made up of nearly 150 prints, mostly etchings, and ink drawings that are very close to the etchings[73] – left a strong imprint on the works of her peers and has continued to influence the work of succeeding generations of artists in Estonia. Art criticism of Mutsu's work has been shaped by the fact that she died quite young and at the peak of her career. She received important awards posthumously and after several retrospective solo exhibitions, critics went on to re-evaluate her work from a historical perspective, often driven by guilt and grief that the "unforgettable artist" had not received enough attention and acknowledgement when she was still alive. While some critics had already drawn parallels with famous Western artists and art tendencies during her lifetime, for instance, Tachisme and Art Informel, after 1980 they even suggested similarities with Pablo Picasso, who is famous for reviving the method of etching. A promising beginning and the intense, albeit short progress of her career as an artist as well as her

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73 Some examples of Marju Mutsu's work can be seen in the Digital Collection of the Art Museum of Estonia at: digikogu.ekm.ee/search?searchtype=complex&author_ids=733 (accessed 9 February, 2013).

tragic early death contributed to the creation of a somewhat romantic aura around her persona.

Estonian graphic art has often been seen as central to the avant-garde art of the late 1960s and 1970s, giving Estonian art an important non-conformist role among the arts in the Soviet Union of the time. Marju Mutsu graduated from art school at the end of the 1960s, which has been called "the golden decade of Estonian print art" (Taidre 2009, 48). Mutsu was one of the founding members of the avant-garde group ANK'64 at the Art Institute. The ANK group organized exhibitions and lectures and was involved in researching and popularizing both earlier and 20th century art. One of the spiritual leaders of this group was a well-known artist and cult figure, Tõnis Vint, who influenced others with his philosophical and aesthetic views on art. The members of the group were driven by a desire to create a subjective aesthetic world; they were influenced by surrealism and naïveté as well as Eastern aesthetics and art nouveau (Hein 1981, 43–45). On the surface, the ANK group members could be classified as representatives of the so-called "beautiful art". However, for them, beauty was an ideological stance and not an aim in itself. Such creative escapism constituted passive resistance to the Soviet regime, an "ethics of non-participation". It was characteristic of ANK members to refrain from depicting political and historical events and instead to focus on the universal, the eternal and the aesthetic.

During the period when mixed methods, coloured graphic art and other complex techniques invented by the artists were flourishing in Estonian graphic art, Marju Mutsu turned towards etching as the best and most expressive technique for her art. Her work has often been described as simple, lyrical and intimate, generally characterized by open composition, free lines and a skilful use of empty space. Her art shows evidence of "an original surrealist fragmentation and a sensitive, seemingly spontaneous use of line" (Sepp 2002, 101), a style that influenced many artists, both painters and printmakers, during the 1970s. It oozes charming, youthful sensitivity and spontaneous self-expression, fragile and changing moods. She developed her own specific style of printmaking based on a medium-centred approach, recurring motifs and figures to compose a symbol-laden allegory. What sets her technique apart from other graphic artists of the time is that she actively used elements such as surface textures, lines, stripes, dots, scratches and blotches on the plate, which all create a sense of spontaneity, movement and chance. Mutsu sometimes used her fingers to

create the textures and she would make corrections both on the plate and on the prints. She boldly energized large white surfaces, scattering seemingly random hatching and fragments of undefinable, unfinished elements. The space that she left unfilled was in fact an active empty space. It was always meaningful. As a result, the intensity with which the small details and the main composition interact is enjoyable both visually and sensually. Her prints are very tactile, inviting you to touch them.

One of the main themes of Mutsu's work is young people and their world: love, friendship, dreams, purity, sincerity, openness to the world. The topic of youth is often mixed with motifs from nature. Other recurring motifs include family, the bond between mother and child, the complexity and simplicity of a woman's inner world. Critical writers on Mutsu's work focus mainly on the question of femininity in her art (Taidre 2009, 47). But while the theme of different aspects of womanhood is indeed central to her work, her approach is by no means naïve. The seeming simplicity of her work is more than just symbols of femininity or scenes of everyday life. It is visionary and deeply philosophical.

In Mutsu's view, young people, especially young girls, were something of an ideal. She often wove them into her romantic-flavoured etchings, for example, in "Young Girl" (1972). The fairy-tale-like scene, foregrounding a beautiful and delicate girl, evokes "an atmosphere of anticipation, an expectation for something miraculous to happen" (Taidre 2009, 49). Mutsu's interest in depicting young bodies derives from her interest in the erotic aspect of human bodies that she writes about in her diaries. Ants Hein cites Mutsu's diary: "For an artist, each youngster – a girl or a boy – is an object that creates erotic interest. After all, youth is full of sensuality that irresistibly beams out of them" (1981, 44).74

Feminist art historian Katrin Kivimaa claims that, despite remaining within the existing tradition of depicting female bodies, the female figures of Mutsu differ slightly from masculinist fantasies and masculinist visions of women's characteristics as enigmatic, overly feminine and often erotic (2009b, 144–145). Using iconographies of femme fragile, femme inspiratrice, Mutsu's women evoke a specifically female gaze characterized by an intimacy between female bodies that could not be seen in the eroticized works of male contemporaries. They take us away from

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74 My translation. The quote in Ants Hein's article is from a manuscript by Marju Mutsu, Notes 1971-73, which as he notes is in her husband Herald Eelma's possession.

heteronormative models of interpretation and reassert "the existence of female desire outside the socially prescribed rules" (Kivimaa 2009a, 97). Among the female artists of the time, this kind of openly sexualized gaze is exceptional and rather radical as this was not supported by the traditions of modern art of the time and least of all by Soviet society, which generally had a patriarchal and purist attitude towards sexuality, especially female sexuality (Kivimaa 2009b, 145). Female sexuality was taboo and women often felt stripped of their gender identity. These female figures in Mutsu's art are a synthesis of her personal encounters, her ideas and attitudes as well as her interest in art historical role models and aesthetic traditions.

Marju Mutsu's representations differed from Soviet-style visualizations of gender equality, offering a chance to visualize aspects of women's identities that were not favoured by the so-called official visual culture. Furthermore:

> Since imagery of private and enigmatic femininity contradicted the public ideals of Soviet and Soviet Estonian femininity, which promoted women's participation in society and labour, it tended to be associated with the anti-Soviet attitudes and the glorification of the private sphere which were central to non-conformist art circles. (Kivimaa 2009b, 193)

Furthermore, as Kivimaa has suggested, Marju Mutsu was not alone in experimenting with such representations of female figures, which challenged the image of the female working-class hero prevalent in the Soviet visual culture of the time (2009b, 145). Several women artists, such as Silvi Liiva and Naima Neidre among others, used such new imagery of the feminine, conceived as a very personal expression, influenced by symbolist and surrealist art as well as Eastern aesthetics, creating often romantic and aestheticized, painfully melancholic worlds that touched upon something that did not fit the official public sphere of the time (Varblane 2003). Although Kivimaa is a bit sceptical about whether Mutsu and her peers tried to reconceptualize themselves and their art outside the confines of patriarchal traditions more broadly, she does note that signs of a desire to do so are certainly visible in a number of artworks that fit well into the discursive framework of the Estonian avant-garde art tradition of the time, which was inclined towards individualistic and private approaches in the unofficial art context (2009b, 146). Mutsu's female figures in ink drawings

of 1972, *One, Two* and *Together*, in their sensual albeit reserved eroticism, are among the few such examples in this context.

Art critic Elnara Taidre has pointed out that Marju Mutsu's drawings *One, Two* and *Together* come across as an early homage to Tõnis Vint, the leader of the ANK group (2009, 48). The main features that point to this suggestion are the ultimate aestheticism of Mutsu's quest, the handsome androgynous characters of these drawings, their geometric shapes as well as the overall pervading sensuality and hedonism. Vint's work is also characterized by lots of empty space, "Japanese minimalism" in forms, clear geometric elements in the background. At the same time, art historian Eda Sepp has argued the opposite in her extensive account of Estonian non-conformist art of the Soviet period. She claims that Marju Mutsu's compositions from 1972 have in fact influenced Tõnis Vint, in whose work the fragile and erotic type of female figures with bare breasts placed on a strictly geometric background only appear in 1973, a year after Mutsu made her series (2002, 101). However, Taidre disagrees with this reading and finds that the members of the ANK group were brought together through a similarity of views rather than concrete artistic application of ideas: each artist valued first and foremost their own individuality. ANK did not turn into an artistic movement in the direct sense of the word, with members of the group producing art that is similar in style. Art for them was a way to express their personal experiences and idiosyncratic styles. So, in Taidre's view, these three drawings by Mutsu are rather exceptional and experimental and not really as consistent or indicative of a larger influential trend to the same extent as the later work of Vint (2009, 19). Taidre further suggests that, for instance, Mutsu's etchings "Summer night" and "Outing" (both 1972) depict characters similar to the ones in the series *One, Two* and *Together*, but already in a much more lavish environment and more detailed clothing, both minimalism and geometry having faded, suggesting that the series was just a one-time experiment.

In my reading of Marju Mutsu's artworks through Anna-Stina's remake, I side more with Katrin Kivimaa's interpretation, since Mutsu definitely comes across as more than a follower of the charismatic male leader of the group she belonged to. She manages to create an intimate women's space in her art, a room of her own which does not simply rely on autobiographical motifs but creates "a vision of private, alternative spaces inhabited entirely by women" (Kivimaa 2009a, 97). This brings her very close to my imaginary

figure of a whirling woman whom I evoke as central throughout this thesis. Like Anna-Stina, I want to claim Marju Mutsu as a woman who seems to draw a circle around herself with her art, demanding a territory of her own that at once both protects her and attracts a connection with others.

Before getting into the specific conceptual and theoretical discussions that I argue Anna-Stina's remake of Marju Mutsu's three ink drawings evokes, I will consider some aspects of homage – central to Anna-Stina's impulse to create her artwork *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* – in relation to the work of the two artists and my discussion of the emergence of postsocialist feminist imaginaries. I will furthermore introduce the concept of "fans of feminism" to explore and add to the complexity of Anna-Stina's affectionate and at the same time fierce desire to embrace queer theory and feminism through acts of appropriation and (re-)enactment of the appearance of imaginary pasts in, through and for the present.

## The art of homage

An homage usually indicates a remake, an appropriation, a citation. Appropriation in art denotes the practice of creating new work by taking a pre-existing image from another source and transforming or combining it with new ones. Some common sources of appropriated images or borrowed elements are works of art from the distant or recent past, historical documents, media such as film and television or consumer culture such as advertisements or products. Sometimes the source is known, sometimes not, but it often has personal associations for the artist. The source of an appropriated image or object can be politically charged, symbolic, ambiguous or it may also push the limits of imagery deemed acceptable for art. Appropriation clearly manifests itself as a layered amalgamation of entangled texts or images: behind, beside or inside a picture, there is another picture.

In art that clearly uses appropriation, two questions immediately arise: what is the source of the image or object that has been appropriated and why has the artist chosen this particular source? Whatever the borrowed element or concept, the citation is usually meant to be recognizable and meaningful, and the new work aims to recontextualize it. This is the case in Anna-Stina's remake of Marju Mutsu's drawings: there is no second

guessing about the source of the remake of *One, Two* and *Together*. Even if one is not familiar with Marju Mutsu or the particular work of art cited, there is the unmistakable reference to the act of homage in the title of Anna-Stina's series, which then may – as it did in my case – or may not prompt the spectator to look up the reference and meticulously compare the two artworks in order to derive meaning.

In a sense, appropriation art does not necessarily expect or need us to have detailed knowledge of art history but it does force us to explore the structure of art as a process of communication. Often, when analyzing a work of art that is clearly a citation, the spectator will ask: who illustrates or helps to understand whom exactly? Should art that precedes the remake or the citation be seen as something that influences all that follows? In particular, since various cultural processes can be rather intense and diffuse, it might happen that we cannot really distinguish between what comes first and what comes later, what is primary and what is secondary. Sometimes this distinction does not even matter because the reading of metatexts might occur prior to the reading of the text itself (Torop 2011, 40). Citation "specifies what and how our gaze sees" (Bal 1999, 1), so the question is: how does the spectator relate to his or her gaze? If, following "The Death of the Author" (Barthes 1978), the meaning is located in the spectator, there are three options: first, the spectator understands that citation is used, notices the differences between the two works of art and derives an interpretation from that; second, the spectator understands that citation is used because there is a paratextual reference to it, but without knowing the original work, cannot perceive all the possible differences between the two works and interprets the work in the context in which he or she is located at that moment; and third, the spectator does not understand that citation is used because he or she is not familiar with the work and there is no textual reference to the original source, so the interpretation does not differ much from the interpretation of any non-citational work of art. Most intriguing of the three cases is perhaps the second one, as then the spectator realizes that there is information that he or she has no access to and tries at least to some extent to fill the gaps, attempting to imagine what the reference could be about.

Appropriations and remakes often encourage us to interrogate the power of images: what makes a particular work of art so authoritative, compelling or intriguing that the artist feels the need to recreate it? Is it the pose or

the lighting, the theme or the subject matter, the context of its making or its reception? Where does the power come from? Thus, in order to read a citational or recontexualized work of art, we need to consider the various aspects involved: what is the role and function of the author, the cited work of art, the cited artist, the spectator, the context of citation, the context of making as well as reading the remake? So, when looking at Anna-Stina's homage to Mutsu, one of the first questions might be how and why do these particular women come together through this artwork? And to what effect? What do those who have not seen Mutsu's original drawings and have nothing to compare it to make of the remake?

In a way, for the artist, remaking a work of art is an experiment in understanding it – while a critic or art historian might try to "get inside" a great painting by describing it in detail, a more direct way is to try to enter its imaginative world by re-staging it or creating it anew. This can be viewed as a very intimate way to connect with a work of art. Before contemporary artists and filmmakers, the practice of copying another artist's work was common among painters, often identified with the formative years of an artist and seen as part of the training to become a fine artist. Unless copying constituted forgery and was made for the purpose of presenting it as the original work of art, this kind of practice of copying or remaking was about paying homage to important people and ideas. A frequent plot in homage is the struggle of a young writer or artist who is wrestling with various powerful influences in the quest to find his or her true "voice" or style. However, an homage can also take a whole series of permutations: it can be a playful or ambiguous strategy, it can be a game, a eulogy, a joke, a seduction, a declaration of love and respect.

Anna-Stina seems to be using the term homage to describe her *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* as an earnest tribute. Her three photographs are centred around a sustained allusion to Mutsu's three drawings, the citational aspects of which derive meaning from and play around homage's aura of affection and reverence. Moreover, as I have already suggested, at the same time as Anna-Stina's work pays homage to Mutsu, she also poses critical questions through changing elements in the structural and narrative form of her remake. Her sensitive reinterpretation moves beyond tribute and turns into a conceptual tool. It becomes more than just a citation of Mutsu's drawings, as it also thrives and depends on tools prevalent in feminist and queer art, among the most obvious examples of

which is the tactic of rewriting or queering the "canon" of art history. In this sense, Anna-Stina's series makes a conceptual shift and diverts attention away from practices of creating art to practices of looking and seeing, to the political potential of images and pushing her own authorial position beyond a strictly personal or self-expressive discourse.

Insofar as homage primarily evokes a sense of paying tribute to or celebrating someone's work, I want to pick up another angle here and consider the artist engaged in remaking a work of art from a fan's position, which will hopefully add some thought-provoking nuances to my discussion of a lag attributed to postsocialist feminist imaginaries.

### "Fans of feminism" as excessive readers

*Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.*

- Adrienne Rich, "'When We Dead Awaken': Writing as Re-Vision" (2013 [1971/72], 11)

In a way, then, I want to suggest that Anna-Stina comes across as a fan of Marju Mutsu, or at least as a fan of these particular three drawings that she chose to re-enact. There is a certain tenderness and intimate care in her approach towards these artworks. Introducing the figure of a fan into the discussion evokes the role of fandom in queer culture. In particular, Tiina Rosenberg's passionate discussions of Zarah Leander, a Swedish actress and singer who, due to her sexual ambiguity, has become a gay icon, come to mind (see Rosenberg 2009).

Fandom, usually discussed as a common feature of popular culture in industrialized societies,[75] is often associated with overtly passionate

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75 The term fan was coined in the late 19th century to refer to spectators of professional sports. A shortened version of "fanatic", it is often associated with obsession – from the psychopathic stalker to the ridiculed "Trekkie" (a fan of the Star Trek franchise). By the late 1920s, fandom was mostly

engagement with the object or subject of interest; sometimes, due to the element of excess, it is even characterized as deviant, bordering on deranged behaviour and loss of perspective, as a kind of "pathology" (Jenson 1992). To counter the image of obsessive loners, fan studies has instead redefined fandom as "a creative, productive space of engagement with popular culture" (Grant 2011, 269). For example, Henry Jenkins describes media fans who write zines as "rogue readers" who re-write the text that inspired their desire in a way that radically transforms the fan "object". They are active producers of meaning and, rather than accepting what is given and remaining separate from the TV show they are passionate about, they construct their own version of it and thereby incorporate themselves into it (1992, 18). Thus, fandom can have a subversive potential as it involves generating new texts through an intense mode of "excessive" reading (Fiske 1992, 46).

When discussing how feminism has re-emerged as a historical moment (in particular, focused on second-wave feminist art and activism) in the work of several contemporary artists in the last decade[76], art historian Catherine Grant contemplates the figure of a "fan of feminism" in order to address "tensions between different generations of feminist artists and historians" and relate to a feminist history "in a way that moves beyond rejection or straightforward celebration" (2011, 271). By using the figure of the fan to explore the contemporary interest in second-wave feminism, Grant explores a re-animation of feminist politics, fuelled by both nostalgia for the political past of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and an engagement with what politics in art might mean in contemporary contexts. One of the examples that Grant examines is Sharon Hayes' series of performances entitled In the Near Future, in which Hayes stands in various cities holding placards drawing from various protest cultures. In the series of nine actions in New York, in 2005, Hayes held placards proclaiming "I AM A MAN", "WE ARE INNOCENT", and "Ratify E.R.A. NOW!"[77] The project is described as a set of "anachronistic and speculative actions in an ongoing investigation into the figure of the protester"[78]. When browsing through the project documentation, we get an overwhelming sense of the melancholy and

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associated with teenage girls and young women who went to the cinema to see the male film stars they adored to the point of adulation (Grant 2011).

76 Unsurprisingly, Grant only discusses artists from the USA and the UK in this project.

77 For documentation of Sharon Hayes's performance In the Near Future see the Tanya Leighton Gallery website: www.tanyaleighton.com/index.php?pageID=144&l=en (accessed 25 February 2013).

78 Project description from the Tanya Leighton Gallery website.

absurdity of a one-woman protest in the middle of busy streets, ignored by passersby. Grant suggests that considering such a performance as the act of a fan helps to articulate the relationship between different moments in history in ways that "do not collapse into a golden political past and an apathetic present" (2011, 269). The figure of the fan highlights attachment and desire, yet it also retains the difference between historical moments and focuses on what might be at stake in replaying historical modes of feminist activity and art.

Although building on the figure of the fan as it is reconceptualized in fan studies, Grant also criticizes Jenkins' model of fandom for privileging an active and resistant engagement with the object of interest while neglecting the negative connotations of the term. She urges us not to forget the negative as the contemporary appropriations of feminist histories that she discusses in her article do not constitute a straightforward re-enactment, or scholarly research into a historical moment. Rather, through taking on the figure of the fan and all of its dimensions, we can keep "the irrational, passionate, and violent aspects of the desire to embrace feminism" so as to allow for a model that brings attention to "what is done to the concept of second-wave feminism by this contemporary appropriation" (Grant 2011, 272). The figure of a "fan of feminism" thus potentially opens up new meanings of contemporary art's use of and intervention in previous political moments.

Similarly, we could then use the figure of the fan as a model for analyzing Anna-Stina's homage to Marju Mutsu. Through placing the figure of a "fan of feminism" at the heart of the analysis of Anna-Stina's remake of Mutsu's drawings, I want to add a twist to the discussion of the lag of feminist imaginaries in Eastern Europe. Viewing Anna-Stina as a fan of both Marju Mutsu and feminist and queer art and activism in Western contexts through this work of appropriation, we can examine the psychological dimension of her interest in the past. Not only does she re-enact, but she also mourns the fact that there has been no desired moment of feminist revolution in the Estonian context.

In contrast to Grant's examples of artists re-animating second-wave feminist politics, Anna-Stina's homage comes across as making reference to a rather obscure and unknown corner of Estonian art history of the 1970s, where we can hardly find any signs of feminist thinking at all. Anna-Stina's two remakes to date are rather different in character. Unlike Kai Kaljo's

*A Loser,* which has enjoyed considerable international fame and might be known to a wider audience beyond Estonia, Marju Mutsu's *One, Two* and *Together* do not seem to have stood out either in the Estonian context or more widely. These drawings only became more visible after being discovered and put into new perspective by Katrin Kivimaa when she was doing research for the Estonian contribution to the *Gender Check* exhibition, which in turn provided the impulse for Anna-Stina to try and make a queer reading of it. Anna-Stina has no diverse feminist or queer art history stemming from her local context to fall back on: instead she has to take a DIY approach. For her, both the present and the past in the local context often appear as politically apathetic and devoid of revolutionary initiatives. She yearns for and imagines a different past, a past she could identify with, and so she creates this past for herself. These emotions guide her in her rewriting of a historical "text" – a series of drawings – in order to tap into its hitherto unused potential to become an iconic representation of lesbian desire in Estonian art history.

In the context of fandom, the failure of the fan object to live up to the fan's expectations is often what prompts the construction of an alternative narrative. In Anna-Stina's case, the recreation of her fan object is related to her unfulfilled desires in the present. Mutsu's drawings, the object of her desire, represent a vision of the world she seeks. They speak of lesbian desire or, rather, the multiplicity of women's desires. They create an alternative vision of spaces inhabited by women. They construct a room of whirling women. It is the failure of Anna-Stina's present to fulfil her desires that prompts her to rewrite the object of her desire to make a difference in the present. There is no political past to reinstate, so she reworks her object of desire differently and passionately, lifting it out of its historical context and bringing it into the present one to have it do political work for her here and now.

Furthermore, when talking about the failure of Anna-Stina's present, I do not only mean her frustration about not having a local feminist and queer political past to rely on. I also want to evoke here the constant failure of Western feminist and queer political present(s) to include Anna-Stina's present in the stories we tell about feminism on her own terms and not just as measured against the yardstick of Western genealogies, forever bound by the "lagging behind" and "catching up" mode, pushed back to the belated secondary role to which Eastern Europe is often relegated. The conscious

choice to appropriate a work of art from the Estonian art historical context as an object of fandom and to make changes in its narrative structure point to Anna-Stina's desire for a feminism that goes beyond these tired and tiring familial terms. Her engagement with Marju Mutsu and other inspiring idols from among Western feminist and queer artists, with feminist pasts and presents, with local and transnational contexts, does not simply revere or reject one or the other but activates and combines each in an active dialogue. She insists on her desire to embrace feminism on her own terms. Her homage – her remake that transforms the object of her fandom into a work of art with her own message – is premised on a strong belief in feminism as something that is still in process, still a place of negotiation, thus expressing her particular relationship to histories of feminism.

### Together II

*Together II* is as a continuation of the *Woman in the Corner* series. In a way, this is an informal refinement of Anna-Stina's initial rendition of Marju Mutsu's drawing *Together*. While in her first remakes of *Two* and *Together* Anna-Stina had opted to appear alone in the images, thus deviating from the structure of Mutsu's drawings of the same name, she now goes back to this work and offers a new version, photographing herself with her girlfriend, Paula Maria Vahtra.

*Together II* was exhibited at the *Untold Stories* exhibition, the first international queer art exhibition in Estonia, curated by Rebeka Põldsam, Airi Triisberg and Anders Härm in spring 2011.[79] As part of both the European Capital of Culture Tallinn 2011 and the *Diversity Enriches* project, the exhibition focused on the problems of sexual minorities, primarily as they relate to social, political and historical issues. The exhibition primarily used a documentary format, telling stories about homophobia and representations of homosexuality in Estonia, the everyday problems of sexual minorities in the workplace or as parents, and the cultural history of

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79 Participating artists included: Malin Arnell & Kajsa Dahlberg & Johanna Gustavsson & Fia-Stina Sandlund in collaboration with Zoe Leonard, Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz, Sezgin Boynik & Kalle Hamm & Minna L. Henriksson & Dzamil Kamanger, Liisi Eelmaa & Minna Hint, Conny Karlsson, Dagmar Kase, Kiwa & Terje Toomistu, M.L., Marcus Lindeen, Karin Michalski & Sabina Baumann, Nallem, Flemming Rolighed, Emily Roysdon, Jaanus Samma, Mariá Takács, Mare Tralla and Anna-Stina Treumund. Architect: Karli Luik. Graphic designer: Jaanus Samma.

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Together II* (2011)

lesbians and gays during the socialist period in Eastern Europe. In addition, the exhibition addressed bi-, trans- and intersexuality as well as the movement and the public sphere at the political level of self-expression.[80] Interestingly, designer Jaanus Samma and architect Karli Luik tried to use graphics and architectural design to create an experimental "queer space" that would support the exhibition's conceptual point of departure.[81] The experience of having to bend down to get inside the hanging video boxes created an unusual contact between the body, the exhibition space and the material presented. As the other viewers were only able to see your feet when you were inside the box watching the documentary videos, notions of inside and outside became instantly blurred, provoking queer connections on several levels.

In the midst of the great diversity of documentary materials gathered at the *Untold Stories* exhibition, it was challenging for me, at first, to retain the connection between Anna-Stina's *Together II* and her previous remake of Marju Mutsu's three drawings. It felt as though the intertextual links between the two artists had gone missing without the presence of the earlier work. The title was perhaps the only cue to signal its connection to Mutsu's work, in particular because, aesthetically, Anna-Stina's *Together II* differs greatly from Mutsu's minimalism and the lyrical lines that she so faithfully copied in her first remake. First of all, it is a colour photograph that attempts to look old-fashioned with its traditional 19th-century-style family portrait format, indicated by the oval-shaped dark passe-partout and the rather rigid way in which the two women are posing for the camera. Gone are the minimalist geometrical lines that in Anna-Stina's interpretation of Mutsu's drawings so significantly bind the two drawn women together.

In a way, when looking at this photo, I am reminded of Anna-Stina's two photographs with her younger sister, entitled *Sisters Gerda and Pussycat I* and *Sisters Gerda and Pussycat II* (see Chapter 3) that were part of the *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* exhibition in 2010. Both *Together II* and the Sisters series are framed as family photos, in a sense appearing as documentary photos, keepsakes for family albums. All three photos were taken in Anna-Stina's home – her childhood home in the pictures with her

sister and her flat at the time in the picture with her girlfriend. Although there are elements in each to suggest differences from regular family snapshots – the shutter release placed in her sister's hand, the heavy frame around the photograph with Paula – there is still an overall feeling of an attempt to depict the closeness and familiarity between herself and her sister and, later, herself and her girlfriend.

*Together II* is thus not directly related to Mutsu's work in its language or form, but it does further develop the topic of lesbian love, while projecting the artist's personal hesitations and desires about starting a family against the background of a context that is not always favourable towards lesbian relations. It is a much happier picture than the photographs in the previous series, which were focused on loneliness and the feeling of being cornered. In contrast, I suggest that *Together II* speaks of closeness, desire, relationship and family. Anna-Stina is on the left and Paula on the right, both sitting on chairs placed next to each other. They are dressed in black from head to toe. While Paula is looking directly at the camera, Anna-Stina's own eyes appear closed.

To me, closed eyes suggest dreaming and fantasizing: closing your eyes to this world in order to go elsewhere in your mind. Although this was a coincidence, it turned out to be a meaningful one because it offers some additional nuances to the story this picture is telling. It links the photograph back to the days when the subject was required to sit still for a very long time to get the image recorded and thus it often happened that the eyes appeared closed. This further accentuates her desire for lesbian history that she has struggled to find evidence for in the Estonian context. It speaks of her desire towards artefacts, such as old family photos of lesbian couples, from the past that would provide proof for her longing: a longing for the self-validation that results from having a history to refer to. This longing is also expressed as an underlying theme of her latest exhibition *Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari* (2012)[82], in which she continues her quest for lesbian histories. Drawing on court documents, old newspapers and legends about witches and other outsiders, she recreated visual images of unconventional women who lived in Estonia and Livonia from the 16th until the 20th century. This longing for self-validation through history is about longing for a comforting sense of connection to others – both past

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82 See Anna-Stina's website for an overview of the photographs from this exhibition:
   www.annastinatreumund.com/exhibitions/lilli-reed-frieda-sabine/ (accessed 26 March 2013).

and present – whose experience mirrors one's own.

For me, the dreaminess on Anna-Stina's face in *Together II* also evokes associations with her earlier photo *Rehearsal for My Wedding* (see Chapter 3) where she similarly appears with her eyes closed. Anna-Stina told me that *Rehearsal for My Wedding* was actually taken at the wedding of her ex-girlfriend who got married to a man. In the black-and-white image, she appears alone, apart from the people who have gathered there for the wedding party. She looks fragile, cut off from everyone else, perhaps trying to close her eyes to a reality where gay marriage is still out of the question? She is perhaps imagining, with her eyes closed, what her own marriage to this woman could have looked like, as the title suggests. In *Together II*, she again imagines and expresses her desire for a family, as the use of the format of a framed family portrait underlines. My reading of this image in this way is also prompted by Anna-Stina's video, entitled *Mothers* (2011), which appeared next to *Together II* as part of the *Untold Stories* exhibition. This video is a documentary work and focuses on the legal and everyday problems of lesbian parents in Estonia. In recent years, several heated media debates have occurred in Estonia on the topic of sexual minorities, mostly centred around the draft of the same-sex partnership law. As the curators of the exhibition further contextualize Anna-Stina's video:

> The right of same-sex couples to family life became topical in 2009, when the Viimsi Rural Municipality Government changed the procedure for paying social benefits, in order to deprive the children of a lesbian couple of the travel and food benefits provided by the local government. The Viimsi Rural Municipality case was one of the few occasions when the practical aspects of the family lives of homosexual parents have gained public attention. This at a time when the discussions regarding the draft partnership law were primarily limited to posing questions about whether society should recognize other family types along with the heterosexual family model. In such fundamental disputes about the concept of the family, people often forget that families different from hetero-normative social conventions exist despite the pro and contra arguments that are presented in the media; that children often live in these families, who, along with their parents, are legally more vulnerable than traditional hetero families. (Triisberg 2011)

Anna-Stina Treumund's video thus works as a powerful reminder of these issues and attempts to delve deeper into topics which to date have

only been treated marginally in the Estonian context. Placed side by side with this video, *Together II* becomes part of these issues and discussions.

At the same time, I should note that reading this photograph should not be limited to linking it with lesbian parenting and the debate about same-sex partnership in Estonia. This image is also sexually charged. Indeed, compared to the role of the passive woman from Mutsu's series that Anna-Stina enacted in her first remake, she now takes the active role. Significantly, Anna-Stina's left hand is placed on Paula's thigh, while Paula's right hand is around her, leaning on her chair. As Anna-Stina herself says, the accent in this photograph is on the hand – a lesbian sex organ.

I must admit, however, that even though I understand that for Anna-Stina this photograph constitutes a positive image, one that speaks of togetherness and desire, I cannot help but feel she is not situating herself and Paula in an entirely free sexual space. They both appear fully dressed and, rather than facing each other, they face the camera, sitting in a pose that feels a bit awkward. It does not feel as though they are very comfortable posing. They are set up to be looked at, rather than looking at each other, as the two women do in Mutsu's *Together*, albeit a little bit shyly. Furthermore, the frame feels oppressive because of its blackness and the considerable space it takes up. Anna-Stina and Paula seem to be squeezed in the middle, and strangely the oval-shaped passe-partout also partly cuts their feet off from view. The lack of direct communication between them suggests, in a way, that as lesbian women, they still feel uncomfortable posing together freely. There is a profound void between personal desires and public opinion.

## A queer desire for history

Anna-Stina's homage to Marju Mutsu, both the initial remake and the later revision, uses the model of restaging or remaking in order to inspire us to contemplate the psychological and political pull of the past on the present. In her case, the past that is pulling her or luring her is non-existent in an openly public sense in her local context – she longs for a queer past that would provide emotional and political rescue for her in the here and now.

This desire resonates with the recent turn towards history in queer theory. As José Esteban Muñoz has suggested, "[t]he here and now is

simply not enough" (2009, 96) because our present is "impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (2009, 27). In a way, what Carolyn Dinshaw has called a "queer historical impulse [...] toward making connections across time" (1999, 1), speaks of the desire of sexual minorities to be part of a larger community, a longing for belonging to History with a capital "H", a hunger for collective historical roots. This search for so-called "foremothers" or "ancestors" to confirm and legitimate contemporary identities has been a much-debated topic within queer studies. Michel Foucault's argument about the discursive change in the understanding of same-sex practices in the late 19th century frequently comes up in these debates. The emerging science of sexology introduced a shift in the perspective on same-sex practice: sex acts came to be viewed not (only) as criminal acts, and hence a judicial problem, but (also) as a symptom of a sexual identity, of a homosexual "with a past, a case history, and a childhood," to be controlled by the medical institution (Foucault 1990, 43).

Yet, working together with kindred spirits across time, as Anna-Stina has done in recent years, in particular in her remake of Marju Mutsu's drawings, suggests a different understanding of history than one based on a "straight time" of chronological order and a clear-cut separation between past and present, a model of history that Elizabeth Freeman has called "chrononormative", that is an understanding of history invested in the notion of the "present" as more developed, more knowledgeable, more mature than the past (Freeman 2010). Resistance to the "chrononormative" model of history thus frees up space to create transtemporal relations in order to ask what we can learn about history by attending to the presence of the past in the present, motivated by the desire to create affective connections across time. The past thus becomes a "vibrant and heterogeneous source of self-fashioning as well as community building" (Dinshaw 1999, 142) in the present.

In light of my desire to reconfigure the fantasy of a lag discourse, the central aim of this thesis, it becomes important for Eastern-European feminists, artists and researchers alike, to begin this building of affective connections across time using local histories, subjectivities and experiences as a starting point. This is where my work resonates with the deconstructions of normative timelines outlined in recent queer theorizing.

Developing academic language that could be capable of grasping and analyzing postsocialist feminist imaginaries without always already casting them as "belated copies" of the West, as "lagging behind", requires that we challenge the lag discourse. My understanding and experience of relating to Anna-Stina and her art has shown that this can be done through creating transtemporal connections, through "touching across time", a method that can help to reconfigure the perceived temporal difference between Western and Eastern Europe within Western feminist discourses, which is predicated upon teleological progress narratives.

Writing against the "chronopolitics of development", which aligns with my attempt to highlight the importance of deconstructing the lag discourse pertaining to postsocialist feminist imaginaries, Elizabeth Freeman has coined the term "erotohistoriography", which she sees as the conscious use of the body as a channel for and means of understanding the past (Freeman 2005; Freeman 2010). I recognize this method in Anna-Stina's strategy of attempting to access a counterhistory to history through the insertion of her own body and desires into historical artwork. In doing so, I would argue, she is informed by "a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development" (Freeman 2005, 59). Importantly, Freeman notes that:

> Erotohistoriography is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. (2010, 95–96)

Viewed from this perspective, Anna-Stina's remake of Mutsu's drawings confirms the need to treat the present as hybrid. She encounters Mutsu and her drawings in the present, producing a kind of time consciousness that "can intervene upon the material damage done in the name of development" (Freeman 2005, 59). Likewise, the present of Eastern-European feminist thought and queer art and activism is not captured in the past of the West, displaced anachronistically into bygone times, as somehow always already one step behind the West, but it shares time with Western feminist

theorizing and queer art and activism.

Most importantly for my discussion, the figure of a "fan of feminism" has helped me to highlight how feminism continues to be relevant in the present in contexts other than what we understand as Western. In particular, "fan of feminism" is a useful term to use when trying to affirm the importance of taking into account the geopolitics of feminist knowledge production without getting stuck in teleological progress narratives, in the "chronopolitics of development". In my reading of Anna-Stina's remake of Mutsu's drawings, this very localized appropriation challenges the familial feminist genealogies and reinstates the importance of the politics of location, thus contesting the implicit association of Eastern Europe with a lag in feminist discourses. Moreover, fandom in this context shifts the discussion from reality to invention and suggests that the past, including the history of feminism, is not fixed but available for constant interpretation and reinterpretation.

Importantly for my thesis, then, I find that Anna-Stina's specific engagement with the local art historical context – in particular in her work *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawing* – launches her work into a more affirmative mode, beyond merely being critical of the lag discourse. Critique always names what it critiques, thereby leaving the thing critiqued in its place, unchanged. Thus my reading of this work becomes less dependent on the opposition between Eastern-European and Western feminist and queer discourses. This is also why I have placed my analysis of Anna-Stina's remake of Mutsu's drawings in the last analytical chapter of this thesis – to render the lag issue overall a much less important question than it is often made out to be with the help of Anna-Stina's intervention in this series of artworks, to reconfigure it as just one question among many other questions, many other co-presences and absences, connections and disconnections.

# 7

# Conclusion

*I cannot name myself. The alchemists worked with a magic mirror, using reflection to guide them. The hall of mirrors set around me has been angled to distort. Is that me in the shop-glass? Is that me in the family photo? Is that me in the office window? Is that me in the silvered pages of a magazine? Is that me in the broken bottles on the street? Everywhere I go, reflection. Everywhere a caught image of who I am. In all of that who am I?*

*My suspicions were aroused when I was quite young. I could not find myself in the looking glasses offered. I could not define myself in relation to the shifting poles of certainty that seemed so reliable. What was the true nature of the world? What was the true nature of myself in it?*

*I could not immunize myself against the germ warfare of object and dream. There seemed to be no bridge between mind and matter, between myself and the world, no point of reference that was not a handy deception.*

*I tried to copy my parents, as monkeys do, but they were trying to copy me, looking to the child for the energy and hope they had long since lost.*

*I tried to copy other children but lacked their tough skin. I was a glove turned inside-out, softness showing. I was the visceral place between mouth and bowel, the region of digestion and rumination. No doubt it is my spleen that refuses to locate the seat of reason in the head. No doubt it is my natural acidity that fears the milkiness of the heart.*

*This story is a journey through the thinking gut.*

- Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (1997, 12–13)

Anna-Stina Treumund. *Alfred* (2012)

## Whirling Subjects

This thesis emerged from probing time and again into the "thinking gut" and the "softness showing". I would like to think of the embodied knowledge, a mixture of both personal reflections and theoretical musings, gathered here as stories about (at least) two whirling subjects: Anna-Stina Treumund and myself, an artist and a researcher, both feminists from postsocialist Eastern Europe. These intensely personal narratives of her feeling of alienation as a queer subject in Estonia and my feeling of alienation within Western feminist studies as a feminist from postsocialist Estonia, multiply located in Western academia, became entangled in unpredictable and exciting ways, creating connections and affinities that neither of us could have known beforehand. Drawing on my readings of Anna-Stina's self-representational artwork and my various encounters with her at art events, exhibitions, seminars, conferences, coffee shops, my home(s) and hers, my hope has been to illuminate what it might be like to be a feminist and a queer subject in postsocialist Eastern Europe. Following and focusing on her process of coming to feminism and queer activism through her art practices challenged me to think about what it means to be still continuously cast as "lagging behind", a belated copy of the West within feminist theoretical frameworks. I was prompted to ponder upon how engagement with the visual arts could help to bridge the gap between how we live and how we represent this lived experience to ourselves.

In a context where it is a constant challenge to find words and images that can grasp the complexities of the postsocialist experience, which has undeniably received short shrift in Western feminist theorizing, we need figurations that are embodied and discursive at the same time. Inspired by Luce Irigaray (1989) and my own childhood memory that resurfaced as I was trying to think about the politics of visibility and invisibility together with Anna-Stina, I came to suggest *a whirling subject* as a feminist figuration. With the help of Irigaray, I have read whirling simultaneously as a reference

to the embodied and as a relational structure of knowledge-systems and world-making.

There is an immense pleasure in having the freedom to whirl, to spin 360 degrees around the axis of ourselves. This movement does not have to be fast and furious, not at all until our heads start spinning. It can be slow, observant, savouring each sensation and transformation that occurs in our bodies and in the world around us as we create a circle around ourselves with our bodies. Whirling is about creating a territory of our own in relation to others. It is about moving our bodies between the inside and the outside, towards and around others, but also around ourselves. This space that we create with our bodies is a space in movement, closed, autonomous and safe, while also being open, relational and inviting. Whirling expresses the sense of being embodied and embedded in both time and space. It is intensely relational, actional, social, emancipatory, empowering. Whirling is about creating a utopian elsewhere, for imagining otherwise. As a figuration, it is a provisional, yet powerful, connective trope that enables us to think through the mutually constitutive interactions between places and subjects in their material and conceptual formations. Whirling suggests an engagement with the structures of identity, location and difference in the movement across psycho-social and geopolitical borders. As such and in this instance, as I want to argue, whirling becomes an alternative subjectivity, articulated in a figurative form, for feminist subjects in a postsocialist context.

Jeanette Winterson's passage from *Gut Symmetries* reconnects me affectively to the question of "the looking glasses offered", the failure of current images and languages to represent our experience, that is, the politics of representation in the visual, affective, linguistic and political sense. I read this passage as a yearning for ways to identify with others, to recognize oneself in others. I read it as a longing for definition, for understanding oneself and one's relations to others. I read it as a manifestation of the desire to connect to someone like "me", to someone who would understand. It speaks of not fitting in, of being unrecognizable to oneself and others, the odd one out. It speaks of frustration with feeling invisible, displaced, disappearing in the patterns that form the fabric of the wider social, cultural, political life. It speaks of wanting to find the possibility of creating communities across time, despite normative timelines, to have a space of one's own.

For me, Jeanette Winterson's words conjure up Anna-Stina Treumund's

self-portrait photographs and my own struggles with writing as a feminist researcher. Anna-Stina's personal and political artwork evokes a similar sense of being faced with vulnerability, the feeling of being "turned inside-out" that Winterson talks about. Likewise, my own feeling of being oddly and multiply placed within the Western feminist academic context as a woman from the former Eastern Europe, from that ambivalent, in-between, "zeugmatic space" (Mudure 2007), a "semiperiphery" (Blagojevic 2009), the "void" (Tlostanova 2010), resonates with such fragility. These words, these images, all of the encounters and experiences I have discussed here, speak of an underlying desire for clarity and definition, a "point of reference" to one's constantly changing sense of self and place in the world at a time when it has become increasingly difficult to find any in the face of constantly "shifting poles of certainty".

I could end here with the parallels between the mood of Winterson's words, Anna-Stina's images and my own theoretical ambitions. But I could also stretch them a bit further and claim that a large part of my argument in this thesis arises out of my struggle with the overwhelming suggestion that Anna-Stina was trying "to copy other children" in her art, that she is in many ways emulating other feminist and queer artists from the West who have found a way of establishing their identity, defining themselves in their own terms through self-portraiture, through using their own bodies in their art, through being self-referential. In the context of discussing Anna-Stina's work with feminists from the West, I was time and again confronted with the dismissive attitude that was trying to fix her, an artist from Eastern Europe, as a mere copy, of lesser impact and interest than the original "other children" from the Euro-American queer artist scene. This resonated with my own experience in Western feminist academia where I myself am multiply positioned in the midst of certain residues of power hierarchies and I had to confront my own ambivalence about seeing her photos as just following in the footsteps of her Western colleagues. I had to refrain from being judgmental, from becoming a so-called Western critic, I had to try and get to that "softness", to the "thinking gut". I had to deconstruct this "lag" and "belated copy" discourse. I had to find my own space of whirling.

This thesis thus casts a critical eye over the politics of the kinds of stories we tell about the fields we inhabit. Also, my theoretical ambition has been to draw attention to Western academic feminism's embeddedness within geopolitical histories and to direct readers towards a new context in which

future stories might be anchored. I argue for the vital place of postsocialist feminist imaginaries within the debate on transnational feminisms in order to assess and reconfigure Western feminism's complicity in perpetuating teleological progress narratives that rely on "chrononormative" concepts of time (Freeman 2010) and, as a result, continuously render Eastern Europe as "lagging behind". Deconstructing this lag discourse will also function as a mechanism to avoid the binary division not only of East and West but also of North and South.

Throughout, I have argued that visual works of art can be productively used as "theoretical objects" (Bal 1999), as sites from which we can start paying attention to our own stories and, if needed, thinking and imagining otherwise: what are these stories about? Where did they come from? Who do they belong to? How do they generate meaning differently to others? What possible worlds, and ways of whirling in the world, do they assume and allow? What sorts of powers do they enable or disable?

The whirling stories that unfolded in this thesis thus open up the possibilities of conceiving and reconfiguring feminist imaginaries through the visual arts. They do so on a micro scale, zooming in on the deeply personal and political artwork of Anna-Stina Treumund, who mainly works with photographic self-portraiture, starting from her embodied and situated self. This partial and limited focus has enabled me to look into the intensity and open-endedness of individual experience. I have woven together the stories of the artist and my own stories to underline a relational approach to the visual arts and feminist theorizing that became indispensable for decolonizing my own thinking as a "Western" critic and deconstructing the impasse I had come to in Western feminist theorizing. The works of art I discuss in this thesis complicate the meanings of the lag discourse in productive ways and thereby provide a different narrative of European feminist genealogies that does not reproduce the contemporary mainstream framing of Western feminist histories, which lacks concepts and perspectives that would be more attuned to the geo-temporal realities of the former Eastern Europe. Ultimately, I have come to argue that there is no "lag".

## What I see now

Anna-Stina's self-portrait on the cover of this thesis, which she kindly made specifically for my book, is a remake of her photograph *What I Can't See* (2006), which served as an evocative point of entry for me for carving out the affinities between our experiences at the beginning of my research. However, there is a crucial difference between the two photographs. Her initial self-portrait spoke of moments of feeling like an outsider portrayed as a triple negative: she is facing the wall instead of the camera's gaze, her shirt is back-to-front and buttoned up in the wrong way. Her self-portrait now, in 2013, mimics the same pose, displaying a reluctance to face the viewer and wearing the same wrongly buttoned shirt back-to-front, yet I do not sense any of that earlier ambivalence about disclosing her sexuality or fear of what others might think or say about her behind her back. In contrast with the self-portrait from 2006, she is no longer looking at an empty wall but is gazing at her own self-portrait, entitled *Alfred* (2012), from her latest exhibition *Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari*. She still feels slightly off, as the wrongly buttoned shirt indicates, but the difference now is that she claims this position and she does not need to worry about those talking behind her back anymore. She has moved from a fragile and insecure position to creating her own space, enacting her own visual representations that challenge viewers to accept responsibility for their role in perpetuating conditions that allow discrimination and marginalization to exist. She has gained confidence through becoming a whirling subject.

As I describe in Chapter 3, at first, I read Anna-Stina's self-portrait photographs at her first solo exhibition *You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know* (2010), albeit unintentionally, from the perspective of a "Western" critic, which left me confused and frustrated. I thought that they were just "identity political", that she was somehow promoting an essentializing view of lesbian identities and, in this respect, she did seem to me to be lagging behind. I wondered, wasn't it the case that Western feminist theory had long ago "been there and done that" and that now we should all have moved forward? I wanted to save the artist from the lag discourse, which I thought basically just positioned her as a living anachronism, but I was at a loss for

words. I wanted and needed to come to her rescue, yet at the same time I felt strongly that I had no language to describe her work. I was stuck. As I began writing myself through that ambivalence, it dawned on me that there was a reason why I felt stuck. I, too, needed to be rescued. I needed to unlearn my usual frameworks of thought, to distance myself from the position of a "Western" critic. Indeed, I was unconsciously applying Western feminist frameworks to the postsocialist Estonian context in a way that did create the sense of a lag. The problem, all along, was my frame of reference. Exploring this ambivalence more closely through a reading of my experience of Anna-Stina's artwork from this exhibition triggered my main theoretical interest in tracing the ways in which postsocialist feminist imaginaries become cast as belated copies of Western feminist discourses.

Thus, my lengthy exploration of ambivalence functioned as a way to decolonize my own thinking. Eventually, I was able to reframe Anna-Stina's self-portraits as always embodied and embedded in the local context. I came to view them as "theoretical objects", which helped me to gain access to and theorize postsocialist feminist imaginaries, drawing on the decolonial approach (e.g. Tlostanova 2010, Tlostanova 2012), the links between postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives and recent work on queer time (in particular, Freeman 2010). In a sense, then, Anna-Stina's transformation, captured in the cover photo of this thesis, mirrors my own journey from being consumed by ambivalence about the way in which I was being positioned and was positioning myself as a feminist from postsocialist Eastern Europe towards attempting to reconfigure the lag discourse and articulate the need to pay closer attention to geopolitical locatedness within feminist theorizing. I, too, moved from a fragile and insecure place and a sense of non-belonging towards claiming my own space for theorizing.

Framing is, in a sense, unavoidable. It is how cultural life works – through framing. To some extent, then, it can be argued that reading images is not always dependent on the intention of the one who made them. Becoming friends with Anna-Stina and participating in discussions on Eastern European feminist art and activist practices throughout the research process reframed my reading of her artwork and created an opening into a whole new set of questions that I could not have reached otherwise. So it was not that I expected to gain access to the "real" meaning of the artwork by talking to the artist about her intentions and following her creative process over three years, but I did hope to gain an embodied sense of the

discourses to which her art was responding. What I unexpectedly gained was a new understanding of how the frames with which my education in Western feminist theory expected me to approach her art needed to be challenged. Furthermore, eventually reframing my take on Anna-Stina's art made me realize that, when viewing art, I always needed to make myself accountable for the choice of my frame. Reframing allows new possible meanings of the photographs to be brought out that I had not thought of before reframing them in this way. I am reminded here of what Mieke Bal has said of reframing:

> Analyzing the way images are, and have been, framed helps to give them a history that is not terminated at a single point in time, but continues; a history that is linked by invisible threads to other images, the institutions that made their production possible, and the historical position of the viewers they address. (Bal 2006: 301-302)

The ethnographic attitude that I adopted while doing my fieldwork thus helped me to reconfigure Anna-Stina's art and, ultimately, also to reframe feminist theorizing in a new way, from the vantage point of postsocialist Eastern Europe.

So, in Chapter 4, I attempted to link Anna-Stina's photograph *Drag* (2010) to other images through "invisible threads". I came to read these intertextual links to other artwork from the Western as well as the Eastern-European context as her own personal means through which to carve out a queer space in postsocialist Estonia. I came to view *Drag* as a bold, world-making performance that renders nonsensical the expectation of a lag or a displacement of this artwork into the past of feminist activism in the Western context. The photograph that pictures Anna-Stina engaging in a gender-troubling, drag-kinging performance – she is a woman performing a man performing a woman – chronicles the act of taking a photograph, as indicated by the shutter release cord she is holding in her hand. The act of photographing herself in this way, putting on a performance in front of the camera lens, demonstrates her refusal to be merely recorded or captured on film, shown as a two-dimensional print of a subject. She is making a strong statement with her bound breasts, long men's underwear, blue wig and the icy, proud-looking demeanour that is accentuated by her elevated positioning on top of a foot-stool. In my reframing of this photograph,

I came to the conclusion that the mixture of citational elements and intertextual layers that Anna-Stina utilizes in *Drag* point to her specific mode of disidentification with the hegemonic Western discourses and timeline of feminist and queer activism. She is at once "working on and against" (Muñoz 1999) Western influences because, while assimilation is not an option, it is also not possible to resist and just step outside the pressures of the dominant ideology either. So, in building on the intertextual references, Anna-Stina transforms them for her own cultural purposes in order to make a performative difference. Her *Drag* cannot possibly be a belated copy, displaced as backward and lagging behind, because it was created right here and now. It is relevant here and now in the context in which it appeared. Furthermore, her use of citational tactics creates an interactive link with the past and the opportunity to build on these intertextual dialogues with Western feminist and queer discourses and art practices, a chance to add one's own meanings. Such a dialogue does not presume any pre-given meanings in the elements from other artworks that she is quoting nor in the artwork being created. Moreover, quoting, for example, elements from Nan Goldin's *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC* (1991) or Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe's *Monroe* (1996) also ultimately changes how we look at these artworks from the past. This is what such an act of appropriation is for Anna-Stina: reading a multitude of hegemonic images, discovering their potential and connecting it to her own intention, in a way "putting her stamp on it" (Bal 2006, 293). In my reading, her mode of disidentification manifests itself through acts of appropriation in her later work as well.

As soon as I had deconstructed my own ambivalent position, which initially only presented me with a very restricted reading of Anna-Stina's first solo exhibition, the question of the lag discourse became particularly visible and I began finding more and more clues to the ways in which Anna-Stina was actually trying to conceive of and reconfigure normative timelines through her artwork. In Chapter 5, I came to read Anna-Stina's series *Loser 2011* (2011), a remake of Kai Kaljo's iconic video installation *A Loser* (1996), as critical of the way in which postsocialist Estonian society in fact accepts the "catching up with the West" rhetoric as it searches for a sense of belonging within Europe (again). Such rhetoric is fuelled by a neoliberal "winners" and "losers" discourse, prevalent in Estonia since the 1990s, that produces stark inequalities between different groups of people due to a blind focus on the importance of economic success and glittering

appearances.

Anna-Stina's queer twist to Kaljo's video, which focused on the position of women and artists in society as well as the precarious workforce and Eastern European identity more broadly, opens up space for critiques of the hegemony of toxic types of masculinities that the "winner" and "loser" discourse creates and perpetuates. Importantly, she presents a queer, intersectional commentary on the so-called "catching up" model that always already brings up harmful neoliberal models of success. Through a close reading of Anna-Stina's performance as men she calls "losers" in the three self-portraits and the video that make up the series, my aim has been to argue that, if Western feminists and feminists from the former Eastern Europe alike fail to actively challenge this "lagging behind" discourse and to question the issues of "self-colonization" that the lag discourse feeds, they might run the risk of being complicit in the persistent chauvinism, homophobia and xenophobia that are still rife in postsocialist Eastern Europe. It thus becomes important for feminist theorizing to deconstruct the broader "lag", associated with backwardness and inferiority, over and over again, to show that there really is no "lag", but rather that there are multiple co-presences and hierarchical models of thinking.

In the course of my close engagement with Anna-Stina's *Loser 2011* series, I also had to face my own complicity in unwittingly sustaining heteronormative frameworks. The sudden invocation of my mother's eyes in the photograph entitled *Veiko* made me realize that I have utterly failed to stand up for what I believe in when it comes to those closest to me. Leaving their latent homophobia unchallenged because I feel I have no words to express myself beyond my Western academic language suddenly seemed unforgivable and left me feeling powerless. This inability to convey my knowledge in my mother tongue and in non-theoretical terms continues to frustrate me.

What gives me hope though is Anna-Stina's decolonizing move towards looking for kindred spirits across time, always starting with her own body and, more recently and continuously, drawing on local history in her work to create new meanings through remakes. This is indeed in line with Madina Tlostanova's decolonial approach, which suggests that it is local histories, subjectivities and experiences that enable us to access "the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge" (2012, 132). For Anna-Stina, the body has been a powerful starting point in pursuing her queer feminist artistic

and activist goals in the postsocialist Estonian context. Likewise, I came to assert the importance of embodied knowledge in my engagement with the visual arts – with Anna-Stina's art – that launched me into exploring my own locatedness within feminist theory and ultimately led me to assert the ethical and political importance of taking geopolitical locatedness into account as an axis of difference that matters.

In Chapter 6, I zoomed in on Anna-Stina's first remake, *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* (2010), an homage to Marju Mutsu's three ink drawings called *One*, *Two* and *Together* (1972), and its connections with the recent turn towards history and reconceptualizing normative models of time in queer theory. Anna-Stina picked up on the affective pull of history when she encountered this work at the *Gender Check* exhibition in Vienna in 2009 that gathered together for the first time a huge collection of art from Eastern Europe that deals with questions of gender and feminism. Anna-Stina immediately found Mutsu's drawings seductive because of the way in which they depicted lesbian desire, a rare theme indeed in Estonian art history. She intervenes in this historical work from the 1970s by inserting herself, her own body, instead of the more passive woman in the right-hand corner and at the same time eliminating from the scene the more active and alluring woman on the left. This allows her to critique the omission of women's non-normative sexualities and ways of connecting from discussions in both Estonian art history and society more broadly. It also enables her to comment on the contemporary scene, where she feels alone and cornered in her quest for queer encounters and connections. Anna-Stina has no feminist or queer art history or theory growing out of her local context to rely on so, in a way, I read her intervention as taking a DIY approach. Against the relatively apathetic political past and present in the Estonian context, she creates an imaginary connection to a past that she can identify with. She reframes a historical "text", putting her own stamp on it, so to speak, thus creating a new work of art that speaks to her present-day concerns, yet is not divorced from the historical context.

Anna-Stina's impulse to start "making connections across time" (Dinshaw 1999, 1) reveals a resistance to "chrononormative" models of history (Freeman 2005; Freeman 2010) and confirms the need to view both the past and the present as always already hybrid, always already up for reinterpretation. Anna-Stina's strategy of creating a counterhistory to history through inserting her own body and longings into historical artwork

to highlight the elements that have not merited much attention reminds me of Elizabeth Freeman's "erotohistoriography" (Freeman 2005; Freeman 2010), a historical method that builds on the suggestion that our relations to history can sometimes be surprisingly erotic. Erotohistoriography uses the body as a tool to access and make sense of encounters with the past in ways that would problematize the logic of chrononormative development and teleological progress narratives. It is an affective historiography that is responsive to how history "arouses, kindles, whets, or itches" (Freeman 2010, 117). In the same way as Anna-Stina encounters the lure of Western feminist and queer art, theory and activism in her present, which she then uses creatively for her own purposes, she also feels seduced by traces of difference and non-normativity in the past of her local context.

Taking her queer engagement with Mutsu's drawings into the lag discourse that has been the focus of this thesis produces an intervention upon "the damage done in the name of development" (Freeman 2005, 59). It allows me to show that the present of feminist thought and queer art and activism in Eastern Europe cannot be viewed as though it is placed in the past of the West, as backward and out of sync, as somehow always already one step behind the West. Reconfiguring the discourse of a lag that is prevalent in Western feminist theorizing as a fantasy and a by-product of unidirectional teleological progress narratives, steeped in age-old colonialist discourses that have not been sufficiently challenged, enables me to assert that, in fact, Eastern Europe shares time with Western feminist theorizing and queer art and activism. In short, from the point of view of such reframing, there is no lag.

As I have learned from my study of Anna-Stina's art and activism, in particular from close reading a selection of her artwork, local histories can never quite fit into black-and-white schemes of West versus East, or North versus South, for that matter. Furthermore, what I identify as "local" in this context can never be entirely separated from "global", or "Western". Only through paying close attention to co-presences, interactions and interlocking understandings and practices can the lag discourse be rendered nonsensical and revealed as perpetuating hegemonic genealogies. It has been my hope in this thesis to underline the productive avenues that the visual arts open up for theorizing postsocialist experience and imaginaries, drawing on postcolonial theory and the decolonial option. Thus, paying close attention to the visual arts and the theoretical possibilities we can find

there, might eventually lead to the development of an academic language that would be capable of grasping and analyzing postsocialist feminist imaginaries in all of their complexities.

I want to underline that, in my reading, Anna-Stina's *Woman in the Corner of Mutsu's Drawings* comes very close to arriving at a more affirmative mode. In the end, important as deconstructing the lag discourse is, there is a need to move away from this dialectic and begin the difficult work of constructing and reconstructing something new, something that is not yet. Eventually, we should be able to let go of the lag question and render it much less important than the work of building new embedded and embodied knowledges that are more attuned to the local context, experiences and subjectivities, thus always beginning with the body and its geopolitical locatedness.

## What I still can't see

Writing about Anna-Stina's art without falling into the lag discourse and measuring her art against the yardstick of developments in Western feminist and queer art, required a shift in my frame of thought. Not only did this move towards decolonization illuminate how Anna-Stina's artwork specifically challenges the hegemony of unidirectional progress narratives that still haunt Western feminist theories, but it also opened up wider questions about how to break the epistemic privilege of Western theory within feminist theorizing.

Instead of looking more into the social realm, which undoubtedly offers important insights into the issues I have raised in this thesis, I have consistently privileged art and visual imaginaries here in the hope that art will allow me to find different ways of making sense of how we live historically and politically. As Mieke Bal has argued:

> To put it strongly, if provocatively: "reading" art is a subjective act, but it is not idiosyncratic. Instead, the image becomes a meeting ground where cultural processes can, precisely, become *inter*subjective. It is an act that requires the present tense to interact with the past tense. It is an act that declares the image and even its tiniest elements to be saturated with meaning, its semantic density constituting its social, cultural relevance. (Bal 2006, 309)

I have, thus, suggested that we view Anna-Stina's art as a meeting ground for various on-going and multiply entangled cultural processes. Art as a means "to slow down the world" (Grosz 2007, 248) allows us to take the time to pry open the multi-faceted realm of imaginaries, the fantasy terrain of stories and images through which feminism constructs and understands itself, to connect affectively to the ways in which the visual can illuminate the geopolitical aspects of the politics of location. Whirling becomes a strategy for thawing, for liberating, frozen and fixating discourses. It has turned into a world-making practice. Focusing on Anna-Stina's and my own positioning in relation to Western feminist imaginaries opened up space for new understandings of temporalities and spatialities through which we can "whirl the world" differently.

At the end of this thesis, I am left with an unshakable feeling that this is only the beginning. I have only touched upon the surface of much larger issues. However, I remain hopeful about the role of art in continuously enabling us to develop new imaginaries and new frames of thinking based on our own embodied experiences, importantly, embedded in local contexts.

As a final whirling story here, I want to briefly describe my experience of being a model for Anna-Stina's latest exhibition *Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari* (2012). For this exhibition, Anna-Stina continued to explore her longing for queer histories and her quest for affective queer connections across time. Drawing on court documents, old newspapers and legends about, for instance, witches and other outsiders, she recreated visual stories of unconventional women, both imaginary and real, who lived in Estonia from the 16th until the 20th century.[83]

While brainstorming for the characters she wanted to portray, Anna-Stina approached me with a difficult question: *If you could be any woman from Estonian history, who would you be?* She invited me to pick a character, perform as that character and thus become part of the exhibition. Hesitantly at first, I took up the challenge. Instead of me scrutinizing her, it was suddenly her scrutinizing me through the camera lens, albeit in "drag", embodying somebody else from some other time. Such a reversal of roles was a thought-provoking shift.

The task of picking a woman from history made me relatively uneasy about my knowledge of Estonian women's history. Why didn't I know more

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83 See Anna-Stina-s website for reference: www.annastinatreumund.com/exhibitions/lilli-reed-frieda-sabine/ (accessed 26 March 2013).

about Estonian women? Why had I been so invested in focusing on Western feminist movements? Anna-Stina had broadly defined her project as an exhibition about stories of exceptional women from history, either real historical figures or imaginary ones. Her main interest was in constructing stories of lesbian women in particular, although she told me that in the end sexuality was not as important as the fact that this woman should be somehow untraditional during her own time.

One of the first women I thought about when Anna-Stina approached me with her offer was Lilli Suburg (1841-1923). Having heard about her recently from Eve Annuk, one of my Estonian colleagues who has done research on her, I couldn't get her out of my mind. Suburg, a writer, founder of a girls' school and publisher of the first Estonian women's magazine, is sometimes referred to as the first Estonian feminist, from the end of the 19th century. Yet she is not known more widely. I had never seen a picture of her, I had never read any of the stories she had published. My image of her was at best fragmentary, but the glimpses I caught of her life and writing through my colleague's articles and stories were enough to sustain my interest. Apparently, she had been a single woman, well-educated by a lucky chance, incredibly devoted to women's rights and emancipation, in particular through educating women and using her own personal funds to contribute to her cause. Why wasn't there more information available about this exceptional woman? Or had I just not been interested?

Dressing up as Lilli Suburg, photographed by Anna-Stina (who set up the scene) as going from the kitchen to the living room to read, was an eye-opening experience. We were at the house museum of Eduard Vilde, a distinguished Estonian (male) author, the closest we could find to a house set historically in Suburg's time. The dress I was wearing, borrowed from the Estonian Drama Theatre for the occasion, was a size too small for me and could not be zipped up properly. The hair was coiffed somewhat haphazardly. I had no proper shoes to match the dress. In her re-creation of Suburg, Anna-Stina was not concerned about historical accuracy (which according to the two available photographs of Suburg, would have required wearing a scarf around the chin – she was self-conscious about scars on her face) but about creating the affect, the imaginary connection to the past. For a moment then, on that afternoon in August in 2012, I felt that I had been transported through an imaginary portal back in time. In fact, I got to experience it twice as we needed to reshoot the scene again in September

due to a technical problem with Anna-Stina's camera that let too much light in and overexposed the image.

There is a lot more to be said about this image and the other images in this exhibition, as well as the way in which making this image brought up new knowledge and affinities that are embodied and relational. Such a working together with kindred spirits across time evokes new understandings of histories, it problematizes time and space, subject and object relations. Most importantly, it speaks of the need to create new transtemporal relations with history that are not predicated on hegemonic Western models and chrononormative narratives but always begin with the body and geopolitical locatedness. My choice of character reflects as much a desire for affective and embodied connections with local feminist history as Anna-Stina's longing for lesbian stories and visibilities does in the artwork I have discussed throughout this thesis. My performance as Lilli Suburg in front of Anna-Stina's camera at once connects me as the researcher and Anna-Stina as the artist to Estonian feminist histories and contemporary audiences who can create their own frames of reference when encountering this image at an exhibition hall, online, in this thesis, or wherever it might travel next. There is certainly ample space for whirling in this world and exploring what kinds of new perspectives spinning around the axis of ourselves can open up.

Anna-Stina Treumund, *Lilli* (2012)

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