

Slash: In Between the Normative and the Fantasy

Participants: Tom of Finland, Aleesa Cohene, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Lucas Foletto Celinski, Atis Jākobsons, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, Armīns Ozoliņš, Edgars Ozoliņš, Karol Radziszewski, Wolfgang Tillmans, Vilnis Vējš.

Curated by Kaspars Vanags

Curator of display of Tom of Finland art works and ephemera: Gary Everett

June 19 – August 2, 2015

Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga

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There may be a kind of bent understanding of things. We can be bent on something, like crossing the lawn in a park on the diagonal. A drawing can be criss-crossed in red pencil, and calligraphy can be drilled into children by making them to do exercises in ruled notebooks with diagonal lines. A queer instance of the diagonal is the slash. In and of itself the slash is far from the norm. In street address numeration it both combines and separates adjacent buildings. Place it between terms; it's like a break in the lexicon and points to the indefinable, to what's in-between. The slash bears witness to the union of space and time, measured in km/h. And there are texts where it appears as a confusing alternative in the *and/or* format. The slash is the arbiter of the binary world and the lost dimension in three's-a-charm.

Side streets connect parallels with a slash, horizontal crossbeams hold up unsteady constructions, and much of the muscle tissue adjoined to the skeleton is crosshatched. In Latvian, the word *šķērss* – something that is opposite to straight, holds considerable potential as an equivalent to *queer*, which in the English-speaking world was introduced in the 1980s, when describing one's own personal take on the peculiarities of one's sexuality.

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The exhibition *Slash: Between the Norm and Fantasy* is the first time a public art institution in Latvia is turning towards *slashes* among contemporary art expression. More than 20 years had to pass since the decriminalization of homosexuality for such an exhibition, influenced by the digitalisation of personal life, to be possible - borrowing from the *open-source* mentality. The other, here, isn't juxtaposed to the norm as something locked in the solitude of an individual strangeness or an impossible taboo, but as an awareness of an essentially recognizable, reachable, and modifiable aspect of personal identity.

Stuck between the norm and fantasy, the slash questions the self-explanatory about sexual orientation. It questions the difference between identity and belonging, between belonging and decency. It does not concern only homosexuality, but a whole range of issues, which sometimes dart and zigzag through our minds. For the bent, the queer, first and foremost has to do with the right to be asexual and is unlikely to lead to pining for polyandry. The starting point here is to be found outside the context of partnership: it is the reflection of the queer on the self and an inner dialogue with the imagined possibilities aroused by the surrounding environment. Imagination is universal, therefore seductive art is meant even for the conservative. Straightness may lift one straight to heaven, but if we consider the infinite outside the Euclidian geometric framework, then the relationship between two parallel lines turns out to be less than straightforward, a little slanted, allowing for them to meet at some point.

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“I remember myself in the era of innocence -- before pornography on the Internet, before dating apps on mobile phones, before Afghan hashish or a vial of poppers... I am about thirteen, and I am jacking off, once again leafing through pages of an El Greco album. I study the wiry bodies of martyrs, conveniently tied to poles so that their arms fastened above their heads would reveal their shadowy armpits. I am fascinated with an evangelist's feet, as he kneels in prayer – the middle of his feet crumpled into soft, tiny folds in contrast with the coarse texture of his heels. There is also some snuffed-out saint, idly reposing on top of a purple shroud, like a present unwrapped a moment ago. I am about to finish, when I suddenly cannot decide, which would give me more pleasure -- the gaunt face of some nobleman or the perfect outline of John the Baptist's biceps.

The process drags out. Then I hear the front door slam as my brother has unexpectedly returned home for his lunch break at the School of Applied Arts, and I know that I will have to remain in this feverish arousal until evening. He has brought up today's post, and besides the magazine *Draugs* (Friend) and I have received the long awaited letter from Zenta Ērgle.

In our brief correspondence many things went unsaid. That I liked Alyosha from her book *On the Kids from Our Courtyard, Indians, and the Black Cat*, but my mother didn't, because he was the son of a Russian officer. With my intuition, destructive to my self-worth, I suspected that between such boys and myself there was an incomprehensible, yet truly unbridgeable difference. Just by looking at the illustration in the book, of how he stood there, lazily reclining against the wall of the building, legs crossed and hands in his trouser pockets, I could tally our main differences: he knew how to play football, nibble on unpeeled sunflower seeds and fight.

Answering my first letter, Zenta Ērgle had agreed to exchange letters, saying that among her many correspondents it was not easy to pick pen pals, but that I was a rare exception among them: usually only girls wrote to her, she said. I felt I had done something weird. We could have discussed (but didn't) the controversial fact that I had named my puppy in honour of the protagonist of her book *Uno and the Three Musketeers*, who was actually a girl dressed as a boy. My experience with cross-dressing had not been good. I was seriously bullied at school after the time when I arrived wearing my mother's high-heeled shoes. Later, from accidentally overheard conversations between my parents, I learned that in a painting by Maija Tabaka, a West-Berlin Latvian émigré was pictured with red nail polish on his little pinkie, which, on a man, signified a queer lifestyle. When I interrupted with questions, they didn't want to go into detail, which made me intuit that, just as with the Russian officer's son Alyosha, therein was contained some explanation to my inferiority complex.

I left childhood as an uncomfortable place, finding the sex education book *In the Name of Love* by Jānis Zālītis among the sheets in a chest of drawers. In the illustrations of the various poses of sexual intercourse, I recognized the same artist's hand as the one who had drawn the characters of Zenta Ērgle's books, and the legendary story about copulation with a turkey calmed me, as I now knew that there were more outrageous cases than my own."

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With an emphasis on the distance in time between then and now, between the politically regulated sexual act and an institutionalized coming out of the closet, the exhibition is anchored in Edgars Ozoliņš's book art, whose hyper-sexual energy had a permanent impact on the minds and inclinations of Latvian adolescents in the Soviet era. In his drawings for Zenta Ērgle's books, her characters are stereotypical sex-bombs on the verge of explosion, ready to burst the seams of their skin-tight jeans any second. The constriction makes these bodies static, with their motions put on hold. A similar lack of liability is present in the illustrations of sexual poses in Jānis Zālītis' *In the Name of Love*; in the Soviet Union, it was the first book of this type supplemented by images. Edgars Ozoliņš's posthumous archives also contain sketches in which the lovers' position is just a fleeting intermediary state, a borderline situation, an experiment. Yet they are all crossed out by red pencil –with the word "fantasy" scribbled on the page.

The once crossed out fantasy world, the inverted norms and pleasure from borderline situations, are part of the living space, which in the 21st century feels like *future now*. In it, there's an opportunity to change one's gender at will, to discuss the fifty shades of grey with colleagues, and to expose oneself on freethinking dating sites, observing communication standards that are dictated by consumerism. A massive data flow from Internet porn sites streams even to computers whose IP addresses are registered to ISIS. Simultaneously silenced and openly exploited, it is a strange living space, which possesses the dimensions of a disentangled labyrinth and an unreachable horizon.

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The self-censorship of Edgars Ozoliņš's fantasy world had not affected some secret sketches and series of notes meant for his eyes alone. For years in his free time, he drew episodes in an imagined tale about an army of Baltic freedom fighters who, after the Second World War, ostensibly founded a base in Iceland, busying themselves with ethnic cleansing experiments and growing a healthy new nation in the hopes of freeing their native land from Soviet occupation. Likewise, in the world of queer fantasies, the longing for freedom can be found alongside the normative attraction and selection of power. The slash has squeezed here in between a pair of

powerful contrasts -- bewildering, fascinating, and frightening. Edgars Ozoliņš suffered from a serious physical defect, which would not have passed unnoticed in even the most cursory of selection processes. Behind his hunched back, it was gossiped that his eroticized drawings were made without any basis in personal experience.

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The group exhibition consists of works that hold a friction between imagination and reality, with unexpected flickers of synergy in the place of routine sparks. The different fusion samples are of a variety of structures. There are fragments of personal stories, micro-history notes without any pretence to the status of an artwork, as well as art installations of a conceptual nature without narrative features. There are poetic subversions of the hetero-normative dominant in mass media, presented in a video format, and nearby – charcoal drawings, where the plaster casts of Roman busts, ubiquitous in the academic art education system, have seemingly lost their “cast in stone” identities. The stories of intimate human relations and changes brought by the changing of time are addressed by various photo series, and daily artefacts unexpectedly surfaced from the past proclaim a certain message.

Knitting together the period before the decriminalization of homosexuality in Latvia with the queer interpretations of the turn of the 21st century in contemporary art is an exercise in the tightrope walking of communication. Thus an almost atrophied form of communication, which is nevertheless crucial in any attempt to revisit the past, the letter, pops up here and there among the works included in the exhibition. Letters are placed in glass cases as documentary evidence of history, or serve as epistolary forms of “social sculpture”. At a time when you can officially stick a stamp with a Tom of Finland’s homoerotic drawing on an envelope, you might think that shortly before becoming extinct even the most conservative type of communication has succeeded in integrating the outsiders. How such a letter might reach its addressee in Latvia is one of the footnote questions of the *Slash* exhibition.

The exhibition includes work from the archives of Tom of Finland and Edgars Ozoliņš, and by the following participants: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst (USA), Lucas Foletto-Celinski (Brazil, Germany), Atis Jākobsons (Latvia), Aleesa Cohene (Canada), Vladislav Nastavshev (Latvia), Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay (Canada, Germany), Armīns Ozoliņš (Latvia), Karol Radziszewski (Poland), Wolfgang Tillmans (Germany), Vilnis Vējš (Latvia).

Curators:

Kaspars Vanags is an art and culture theoretician. In the 90ties worked as a curator, together with like-minded thinkers in the fellowship *Open* organizing inter-disciplinary events, where he mixed visual art with trending rave music. Created projects in which art has a critical role of a social platform, turning against or creating an alternative to consumerism culture (*Slideplays* (2000); *Subversion in the city* (2001)). Later turned to studies of art history, obtained a degree in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Lives in Berlin, where has worked as a maker of exhibitions and art critic. Curator of the Latvian exhibition in the 56th International Venice Biennale.

Gary Everett is the founder and current artistic director of Homotopia Liverpool. He produces an annual festival in the UK and works extensively internationally with projects in Finland, Sweden and Turkey. Recently he curated *April Ashley, Portrait of a lady* at Museum of Liverpool & extended twice due to popularity attracting record audiences of 930,000. Curated the year-long *Tom of Finland Retrospective* as part of Turku’s European Capital of Culture 2011 which attracted 90,000, which then toured to Kulturhuset Stockholm in 2012. Currently curating a major new project on the life of Touko Laaksonen (Tom of Finland) which opens in Turku in 2017. In December 2014 he was judged 53rd in the 100 most influential LGBT people in Britain in the Independent on Sunday’s annual Pink List.

Collaboration partners: *Homotopia*, ISSP, *MooiMan*, *Tom of Finland Foundation*, 427, *Luis De Jesus Los Angeles*, Association of Memorial Museums.

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Program for the project *Slash*:

Princess PomPom in the Villa of Falling Flowers

Matthew Lutz-Kinoy

Organized by gallery 427 in collaboration with *kim?* Contemporary Art Centre

Venue: gallery 427

June 19 – August 2, 2015

Gallery 427

Elijas iela 20, Riga

Working hours:

Mon, Tue, Fri, Sat, Sun: closed

Wed, Thurs: 4pm – 7pm or by appointment

Writer's Room

Inga Meldere

Organized by *kim?* Contemporary Art Centre

Venue: Janis Rozentāls and Rūdolfs Blaumanis Museum

June 20 – August 2, 2015

Janis Rozentāls and Rūdolfs Blaumanis Museum

Alberta iela 12-9, Rīga

Working hours:

Thurs, Fri, Sat, Sun: 11 am – 6pm

Wed.: 11 am – 7pm

Mon, Tue.: closed