

Quarter of a Century

In a sense it is not difficult to write to celebrate anniversaries. This is like a kind of progression where to what was before something that followed is added; at the same time something remains unchanged. What has remained unchanged since the turn of the millennium in the case of the Kursi School is their number. At the present moment there are still nine members in the School: Peeter Allik, Albert Gulk, Ilmar Kruusamäe, Priit Pangsepp, Marko Mäetamm, Reiu Tüür, Külli Suitso, Imat Suumann and Priit Pajos. Now they have become even so monolithic that no visiting members are used.

First a few words about the beginning. It was 1988. Art in Tartu had in the Perestroika-camouflage and thirst for freedom inconspicuously shifted from the phase of pregnancy into the phase of giving birth. In that summer Art Society Pallas was re-established and under its wing the Konrad Mägi Studio became active. In September the students of the Tartu department of the Estonian Institute of Art started their studies (the first students graduating in 1993). Now art students get their university education at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Tartu. In the early spring of the same year one of the Estonian art groups that has remained together the longest was founded in Tartu and that was the Kursi School. The formation of the School was the earliest of all those events listed above although it is not in fact important as the members of the Kursi School are not interested in rivalry and do not wish to win the first prize in the world of art.

If we now take a look into the rear-view mirror, the formation of the Kursi School in Tartu seems quite unavoidable. In a town where the almost underground group of Visarid had been born and where with intermittent success the legally registered but often also underground and contra-cultural notorious university art studio (Kaljo Põllu and Andrus Kasemaa) functioned the ground for the growth of a certain inverted activity was fertile.

The name of the School comes from a small village near the Tartu-Tallinn road with which the founding members of the group have all kinds of strong and weak affinities. At the same time the name reminds one of the word 'course'; and the School's aim was a change – a change of direction, a change of course. The intrigues of the world of art did not mean anything to this company of village mystics mad about art. They were not interested in the monstrous opposition between Tartu and Tallinn born of the sleep of reason. Their basis was at first a small village in Central Estonia but they mostly became active in Tartu. In fact they soon invaded the whole of Estonia. It might be said that they covered the whole territory of Estonia and that was not enough. They really come from several places in Estonia but by now life has driven them into the wide world. At the moment Külli Suitso lives in Denmark, Reiu Tüür in Lithuania and Priit Pajos in Finland. The recent history of the Kursi School bears the stamp of globality in the sense of the extending living room and exhibiting area of its members. But what really still connects them is according to their own opinion turning away from the cultural politics and dedication to art without reservation. The quarter of a century behind their back seems to support that idea. Although slightly

dreamingly, but still. We all know that none of the serious artists can get through fire unburnt. These artists have all cemented themselves as serious artists during those twenty five years.

The School has developed in quite a smooth line; there are no shattering high and low tides. It is a pleasant feature that the Kursi School does not use itself, differently from many other schools, as a unit in a war against all others. I have never noticed any handicapped hyping of the members of the School. None of the members of the School is a competitor of others but only of himself or herself. The Kursi School is not a party. Every member has a personal value and freedom of art defending him or her from becoming a party member. A freedom to choose any country for living, an opportunity to participate in the joint events of the School but his or her creative path is marked only by the artist. The member of the Kursi School participates in joint events but in choosing his or her path in art they are all independent. During that quarter of a century the personal artistic biography of every member of the Kursi School has started to form. Thus we can speak of different creative stages of the artists. Each head of the nine-headed Kursi monster sits on its own shoulders and as the School does not intend to disperse, the writing of the history of the School must now stop on half-way. Let us only take a look at the formation of it.

The School was formed of a closely related circle of friends. From the four founding members Priit Pangsepp knew Peeter Allik and Albert Gulk from their common schooldays at the Tartu Art School. Ilmar Kruusamäe and Priit Pangsepp had seen each other even earlier than March 1988, but it was at that time that something in the cultural experience of those boys reached a critical mass and it was the starting chain reaction that gave birth to the Kursi School. I have always had a wish to compare the birth of the Kursi School with the birth of The Rolling Stones, with the meeting of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on the railway platform of a London suburb. The founding members of the Kursi School were all of a socializing type even outside art. They were interested in what happens in life and in art, their sense of humour was developed more than the average and at first it was a common absurd-like and grotesque perception of reality that became their way of expression. They were also notable for their use of words which created a basis for powerful performances in writing, publishing and audio-visual media. The Kursi members tried to use the media maximally although no extensive advertising campaigns were organized. The later newcomers joined the group as friends or acquaintances. Ilmar Kruusamäe knew Reiu Tüür and Peeter Allik Marko Mäetamm well and as both were similar in their creative aspirations they became the members of the group. Imat Suumann, Külli Suitso and Priit Pajos also became members as friends. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Kursi School I wrote that the possible number of the members could be 'somewhere between four and infinity'. Now I must say that the die is cast. Nine members seems to remain the final number although never say never. One thing might still be said – this School does not teach but those twenty five years have now started to bend them. In what direction, remains to be seen.

Belonging to the Kursi School has not brought any financial success to its members. The figurehead of the School Ilmar Kruusamäe who is educated in economy states that economic analysis is like analysis in art. Taking this into consideration one may remain certain that belonging to the School one will not enjoy the life of a great star and cannot buy a jeep or build a house. The Kursi School's aim is not successful selling although every member can do with his or her art whatever he or she wants for life wants living and the family fed.

A quarter of a century gives reason for snapshots of the Kursi members.

Peeter Allik – seems to have a more and more deepening social content during the last decade. Interferes with Estonian problems at an international level. During his being a member of the Kursi School he has changed both technically and in the sense of purpose. The world in his works tends to drive straight into us. Allik places the global village in the midst of us in his work. In his paintings the spiritual tension is expressed through the anatomical output of violence. In a sense he is the disciple of Brueghel and Bosch. Some time ago an Estonian version of the Newsweek magazine called Luup (A Magnifying Glass) was published here. There is some kind of inverted relation to that magazine in Allik's works. In his graphic work he likes to depict rear-view-mirrored reality; in painting he is more related to his time but by his technique what it may, Allik feels very precisely the unity of form and content. He expresses in painting what he cannot express in graphic works and vice versa. Allik belongs to that Holy Trinity where also Tüür and Pajos belong – their sharp politically grotesque perception of dislocated reality has been taken to an absurd-like sharpness.

Albert Gulk – uses in fact the surrounding reality in his fantasmal madness, even his closest companions. He really deforms the reality into some kind of mad fantasy. The sleep of reason produces monsters, maybe even Freudist monsters. Although I am not so sure whether Freud did analyse nightmares. Gulk's Barbies are at the same time Barbies and anatomically gruesome lie. Deformation gives them a dream-like reality in its dislocated way. It seems that Gulk has managed to pass through Wiiralt's Hell staying alive and not having become a tee-totaller either; if he would present his pictures to a parson, they would be hung in the dressing-room of a sauna.

Ilmar Kruusamäe – the figurehead of the Kursi School has been lately busy with documenting his world and his friends. He painted his first big portrait, a portrait of Albert Gulk (Vend Albert/Brother Albert) in 1999 and his last big portrait, that of Reiu Tüür in 2013. Alongside with portraying the Kursi members he has also depicted his other acquaintances in big format. But Kruusamäe's creative path is so long already that it could be marked with milestones. I would find almost ten periods of different direction in his work but in fact this is not even the most important thing here. The most important thing is that Kruusamäe has managed to manage that art castle called the Kursi School and make it, by slight lashing, to go over from a trot to gallop. It is one thing to be an artist in a School; it is another thing to be an artist holding a School together. There are only a few who can bear the burden of two so different roles. Ilmar can.

Priit Pangsepp – one of the longest members of the School. His path is characterized by a play of colours. He is tortured by problems between genders and love triangles. Thorns of love. For me there is something hermaphrodite in his flowing lines but also the multiple meanings of a naked body. He lives in his own world and as it seems is somewhat influenced by computer things as well as by his Viljandi-centred life. There is a certain striving technical aspiration in him balanced by thematic stability. Pangsepp's work is like the music of cither – a fine and intensive dance of changes taking place in a certain narrow range.

Marko Mäetamm – this teacher of the Estonian Art Academy paints lately big three-metre comics-like works. There is a cutting satirist hidden in him. As a citizen of the

world, he uses English in his texts. Mäetamm is an inverted trickster – and at the same time very serious. In his latest work he depicts family violence and horrible meat mincers looped through with toys. His comic strip is even becoming a film or in other words, his work reminds the drawings of a multiplication. Looking at the present day works of Mäetamm, it might easily be forgotten that at the times of joining the Kursi School he occasionally even painted still lives.

Reiu Tüür – there are periods in her work too. A blue period in the past and a red period at present. Her work might certainly be periodized in another way as for some time Reiu Tüür was interested in historical themes. She learnt to look at and understand mosaics in Italy. Taking old engravings as her example she found her own handwriting – a more modern and powerful one but simplified and in the key of modern graphic art. Her works are characterized by a strong line and contrasts. In recent times her thematic range has expanded reaching from Islam to Inuit. This is delighting. She becomes more and more absorbed in the basic material of world culture. She has got her own technical tricks, she rarely changes her colours but when she does she does it decisively.

Küllli Suitso – her sense of exhibition has grown with the years of Kursi membership. Having developed as an abstractionist, she has experimented with conceptualism as well as hyperrealism. By now she has reached a period of abstractly real boxes that have become a basic value. Those boxes remind one of still lives. She has also burning boxes, boxes pasted over, and boxes with a screen. Those works are like a still life in a supermarket – a doubly dead world where on the side forming a screen one tries desperately to impart life that is meant to die. At the same time, the TV-picture is in a sense killing death. Suitso has improved technically during years, her colours are more and more vivid and her feeling of colour fresh. There is a strange will to destroy, demolish in the loneliness of her boxes, also an opposition to the world becoming more and more Lego-like.

Imat Suumann – he could also be periodized as his thematic cycles are rather different. He has brought a different cycle to every exhibition which is always composed into a final whole. Like his Night pictures, Tartu houses, haycocks or landscapes of Lake Peipus and Ahja. Imat has in his constantly changing themes more and more been thinking of Tartu as of a town with a history. I happen to know that a book by Margus Laidre Dorpat 1558-1708. Linn väe ja vaenu vahel (Dorpat 1558–1709. A Town between Power and Enmity) left a deep impression on him. Imat reads books differently from me. I take them in like an ensiling machine but to Imat this one book at which he was busy for more than a year meant more than the hundred books I managed to read during the same period of time. And thus he is now in a palimpsest-like town period the background of which consists of the architectural-spiritual reality of the Tartu of the Livonian War in a certain symbiosis with the present town. The town has been lost in time and in his latest work it forms a kind of unreal doomed and waning whole which is at the same time resurrecting from the ruins.

Priit Pajos – for me, a kind of jeering phantasm breathes in his works. Through a narrative fairy tale world with some Bible motifs he often speaks of his own life and kin. I have always loved his colours, lighter in recent times. His illustrative worlds are partly narrative – despite of serious critics who usually do not like an artist who is at

the same time a preacher, even if he is a jeering preacher. The critics prefer to speak more of the colours and the narrative. Literariness is a sin in their words. But I like interpreting texts painted by Pajos for he creates at least an interpretational variety.

The Kursi School seems to be so compact after its quarter of a century that it can and even must branch off. The stem is strong enough so that the branches may get denser. But that invisible thing that according to Ilmar Kruusamäe united them and unites forever is their inverted humour, feeling for the grotesque and unpredictable trickiness.

Hannes Varblane

Translation Kersti Unt