

ETHNOFUTURISM, POLITICS AT THE GRASS ROOTS LEVEL

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There has been a lot of discussion about multiculturalism, postcolonialism and the Other in Anglo-American art criticism of the 1990s. In the Estonian context this discourse has nothing to do with communities of people with different skin colour; the discussion has centered on coping with our own history and existence, as a small nation belonging to Finno-Ugric family of languages, "the Other", and the minority in whose collective psyche there is an ingrained fear of being assimilated and of losing our identity in our own homeland. Looking at the problem more widely, there are many small Finno-Ugric nations living in the territories of Russia, Sweden and Norway. Recently, strong warning signals have reached the international media from the Finno-Ugric community in the state of Mari-El, in Russia. In connection with the visit to Finland of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, the chairwoman of the Mari Union, Nina Maksimova, wrote an open letter to Tarja Halonen, President of Finland, on 2 August 2005, describing the President Markelov's dictatorship there in some detail and entreating her earnestly to inform Putin of the true situation.¹

I should also like to refer to the special report from Mari-El and Tallinn which was published in *The Economist* on 20 December 2005: "But the hard-pressed Finno-Ugric minorities in central Russian regions such as Mari-El, Komi and Udmurtia are more concerned. To them, Estonia, with its regained statehood, is a miracle, and Finland an enviable superpower. For the Finno-Ugric languages of the minorities in Russia are dying and are now spoken mainly by old people in the countryside and a handful of intellectuals. There are few books, newspapers, radio or TV programmes and there is little education in the mother tongues, It is Russian that signifies culture and civilisation; the local lingo, for many, is useless peasant gobbledegook. That would have been Estonia's fate too, had the Soviet Union not collapsed in 1991."²

Ethnofuturism is a grass-root-level politics of survival, created by Finno-Ugric artists and writers; it's also an academic discourse.³ By 2000 it had become a movement with its own philosophy, to quote Prof. Kari Sallamaa from the University of Oulu, in Finland⁴; also, papers have been written on the subject in Finnish and Udmurt universities. It has acquired a special meaning for the cultural awareness of the Finno-Ugric peoples living in Russia.

Estonian Kostabi Society

The concept of ethnofuturism was formulated in 1989 by the young Estonian poet, Karl Martin Sinijärv (b. 1971), the grandson of the futurist poet, Erni Hiir. It carried the spirit of liberation and optimism of the 'Singing Revolution' of 1988, which signalled/heralded [?] the collapse of the Soviet

¹ www.mari.ee; see also Eve Kask. Finding oneself "a spy" in the land of Mari El, Russia. – kunst.ee (Estonian quarterly of art and visual culture) 3, 2005, pp. 50-52. (In Estonian and English)

² The Finno-Ugrics. The dying fish swims in water. – The Economist, Dec. 20th 2005. Special report.

³ Independently from Ethnofuturist movement, the official institution Finno-Ugrian was refunded in 1991 in Tallinn to support the culture of small Finno-Ugric nations.

⁴ Kari Sallamaa. Ethnofuturism in filosofia suomalais-ugrilaisten kansojen säilymisen perustana. Paper read at the 3rd World Conference of Ethnofuturism, Tartu, 5 May 1999. See: www.suri/etnofutu/3/doc/salla-sm.html (In Finnish)

Kari Sallamaa. Ethnofuturism in ilosanoma. Heimokansojen kulttuuriohjelmasta tehtiin filosofia ja pelastusohjelma. – Kaleva, 12 May 1999. (In Finnish)

Union. Young Tartu writers, including Sinijärv, Kauksi Ülle, Sven Kivisildnik and Valeria Ränik felt they were standing on the threshold of a new age and were in search of a new literary slogan. Ethnofuturism was at first applied to poetry and fiction, and then extended to cover regional and international political aspirations and aesthetics, with an emphasis on ethnographic motifs, nature and old beliefs, mixed with the experience of contemporary high-tech society.

Estonian ethnofuturistic poets and writers did not limit themselves to contacts in the east and in the north; they founded the Estonian Kostabi Society in 1989, named after Kalev Mark Kostabi (b. 1960), the controversial 29-year old artist, living in New York, who founded the painting factory *à la* Warhol, called Kostabi World, in 1987. His parents had immigrated to the USA in the 1940s after the war, when the Soviets had occupied Estonia. Kostabi was viewed as a mythical media figure, a contemporary shaman whose first name, Kalev (etymological meaning – "strong") was the same as that of the Estonian national hero (epic "Kalevipoeg"). Kalev Mark Kostabi's relationship to Estonia may also be perceived in his art – for example, he has taken some family photographs as the basis for a number of paintings and given a more general meaning to certain symbols or motifs, such as dancers, spheres and details of folk costumes, in a kind of metaphysical space *à la* de Chirico.⁵ In October 1991, after Estonia's *de facto* and *de jure* declaration of independence, the young poets in Tartu launched *Kostabi*, an anarchic cultural newspaper (editor-in-chief: Indrek Särg), which appeared only at irregular intervals, but originally had a print run of 10,000 copies. This paper was sponsored by the Open Estonia Foundation, the Ministry of Culture and a private sponsor [OR: 'private sponsors?'], and 45 issues had been published in the period up to 1993, when it closed down for financial reasons. This is an unusual chapter in Estonian media history.

In 1994 the first international conference of ethnofuturism was organised in Tartu (a university town in Estonia) by the Estonian Kostabi Society and other institutions, financed by the Open Estonia Foundation and George Soros, who was a follower of Karl Popper's concept of 'The Open Society'. Soon Piret Viires spread the message among international colleagues⁶ and Kauksi Ülle discovered that she was called "the mother of ethnofuturism" by her friends belonging to the small Finno-Ugric nations.⁷ Similar conferences and meetings have continued to be held, whether under the name of "ethnofuturism" or not - the last one, taking place in Mari-El, under the supervision of official Russian institutions, with the participation of a number of top politicians.

Theory and practice

Ethnofuturism is an interdisciplinary movement which looks at Finno-Ugric identity as a feasible and practicable reality, not as a "dead" archaeological / ethnographic / folkloristic / anthropological / linguistic topic for research, of interest only to a limited number of dedicated scholars. For this reason, it is openly at variance with the old modernist paradigm of the Soviet Union, with its emphasis on universality and globalism, when progress was regarded as one of the key elements of ideology, up to the end of the 1980s. The colonial attitude to national minorities and smaller nations had given rise to the notion that they should abandon their claims to independence, in the interests of "progress", which was regarded as an objective, scientifically proven, fact. To illustrate this, we should mention the Chukchi anecdotes, popular in the 1980s all over the Soviet Union, in which the Chukchis, as members of 'primitive' peoples, came to embody foolish thinking and conduct. The separate nations (including the Russian nation) were deprived of their past and their future and indocrinated, instead, with the concept of the "Soviet people", with a new past and a new future

⁵ On Kostabi's Estonian origin see the exhibition catalogue: Heie Treier. New York artist Kalev Mark Kostabi. Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn, 1998.

⁶ Piret Viires. The Phenomenon of Ethnofuturism in Contemporary Estonian Literature. – Congressus Octavus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum. Jyväskylä 10.-15. 8. 1995. Pars VII. Litteratura & Anthropologia. Moderatores, Jyväskylä, 1996, pp. 235-238. See: www.suri.ee/etnofutu/texts/viires.html

⁷ Kauksi Ülle. Ethnofuturism maailmatuurule. – Eesti Ekspress weekly, 20 May 1999. (In Estonian)

constructed and controlled by the communist régime.

In the postmodernist age of the 1990s ethnofuturism sought to return power, future and self-confidence to those who had been dominated, although it was aware of the theoretical impossibility of this aim. But if any identity is a construct, it can be consciously shaped, by a variety of means. For example, in 1994 the Udmurt artist Yuri Kutshyran (b. 1962) created the first ever national flag and coat of arms for the Udmurt people, based on the symbolism of birds. When the collective psyche needs strengthening, artists seem to create flags in other contexts as well – David Hammons created a US flag in African colours (red, green, black) at the end of 1990s, and Eddie Chambers created a British flag in African colours (yellow, red, green). Another method is to play an active role, rather than a passive one, by renaming people, places and things. Yuri Kutshyran's official family name in his passport is the Russian-sounding 'Lobanov', so when he renamed himself and his friends, he was taking a clear stand on the issue of personal identity. In Estonia there have been attempts to promote the written Võru language (spoken in Southern Estonia) alongside the national standard, based on the North Estonian dialects. In the late 1990s, a Võru-language ABC [?] was published, the Võru Institute was established, and so on. In 2000, the Axel Gallen-Kallela museum in Espoo near Helsinki, in Finland, mounted an "Ugriculture" exhibition of contemporary Finno-Ugric artists, whose thinking was derived from their ethnic identity.⁸

The art of contemporary Komi, Mari, Udmurt and Ersá artists draws on the experience of a village society which worships nature, performs sacrificial rituals and believes in myths. For example, the father of the Komi artist, Pavel Mikushev (b. 1962), was a respected bear hunter who enjoyed a high status in the village hierarchy. Paintings by Mikushev depict the bear as a cult animal. The Komi artist, Yuri Lisovski (b. 1964), draws intricate ornamental "Seals of the Universe" which resemble mandalas, exploring the iconography of folk patterns, as well as visual traditions including folk dress, rock paintings and the archaeological Permic animal style. The mythological cult animals are bees, reindeer, fish, bears and snakes, and these are repeated, for example, in the bear paintings of the Mari artists, Sergei Yevdokimov (b. 1961) and Aleksandr Ivanov (b. 1964). The Ersá artist, Yuri Dyrin (b. 1967), depicts fairy-tale and dream-like visions, in bright colours.

Some Finno-Ugric artists, such as Yuri Kutshyran, have taken up performance art, in a style reminiscent of ancient rituals. It resembles a form of shamanistic culture, with its fusion of Russian Orthodox elements, inherited archetypes and a feeling of harmony with village life and its closeness to nature. There are no career prospects in the villages, so the young people move to the cities, but the culture of the cities is the Russian culture. That is why the Finno-Ugric scholars led by Rein Taagepera, a professor in the USA, consider that the key issue in the survival of Finno-Ugric cultures is the creation of an urban language and culture. In their analysis of the ways in which the city is depicted in modern Udmurt literature, the critics Viktor Shibanov and Nadezhda Kondratyeva conclude that the city carries mostly negative connotations - it is depicted as a chaos, a 'no-world', indicative of alienation and emptiness, in contrast to the cosmic harmony of country life.⁹

While smaller, premodern village societies have to deal with the enormous problems of survival and identity and draw on their collective beliefs and rituals, larger, postmodernist nations in information societies have to tackle the problems of loneliness and soullessness, in a materialist environment. The suicide rate is alarmingly high in Finno-Ugric societies. Premodernist and postmodernist messages coalesce, and there is a surprising discovery, on a purely human level, that the divide is not so great, after all.

By 2005 world politics had drastically changed, in comparison to the 1990s. To quote the article of 20 December in *The Economist* once more: "After Mr Putin said recently that foreign-financed groups should be subject to strict scrutiny by the Russian security agencies, a website with close ties to officialdom, www.news12.ru, said that pro-Mari pressure groups would now be investigated further

⁸ Exhibition catalogue: Ugriculture 2000. Suomalais-ugrialaisten kansojen nykytaiteet. Contemporary Art of the Fenno-Ugrian Peoples. Gallen-Kallela Museo, 2000. (In Finnish and English)

⁹ V. Shibanov, N. Kondratyeva. Etnofuturizm i sovremennaja udmurtskaja literatura. – ART magazine, 4, 1999, pp. 141-142. (In Russian)

(the site also accused “Estonian nationalists” of stoking riots in Paris). Yet the Finno-Ugric axis in world politics seems more like a curiosity than a conspiracy.”¹⁰

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¹⁰ The Finno-Ugrics. The dying fish swims in water. – The Economist, Dec. 20th 2005. Special report.