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Meel's galaxies

The importance of Raul Meel in Estonian visual arts is considerable. Meel, for whom creative freedom means an ability to unite poetry in all its forms of expression, has come through a long way from graphic generalization to analysing details, the peculiarity of transcriptions of birdsongs and the essence of letters. His ability to get enthusiastic about the tiniest detail, idea or image, without losing sight of the bigger idea or vision, has resulted in constant international recognition over the past 45 years. From series of serigraphs relying on technical graphic drawings (“Revolution of Science and Technology”, 1971; “Under the Sky”, 1973) to collections of artist’s books, Meel’s work has always explored visual signs, created and tested sign systems and, felt the boundaries of poetry. Let us call these sign systems *galaxies*, inspired by one of his most significant serigraphy series: 4 graphic basic images form 196 different pictorial schemes with the title “Under the Sky”, symbols of Meel’s own world, abstract, minimalist, poetic.

Semiotically fascinating are Meel’s visual sign systems as well as the ideas and truths that form the basis of the artist’s work. The ideas in the article mainly originate in conversation with Raul Meel on 17 April 2016.

The Avant-garde

Hierarchies have been coded into us, says Meel. Nature is a hierarchical system. Laws of nature apply to all of us. Democracy in art does not work, creating does not follow normal rules and laws. You may decide to abandon verticals and agree to replace them with horizontals, but already by making such a suggestion the person sets himself above the auditorium. Art, like nature, is essentially hierarchic – there are the best of the best, their followers and the followers of followers. The aim of toppling hierarchy is to establish a new, a more useful hierarchy.

*There is no uniform avant-garde. The avant-garde is an inseparable part of art, living its daily life. Art that has influence in society, finds response, is art that society has reached.*¹

The after-effects of Russian avant-garde are more powerful than the post-avant-garde of the 1920s-40s of Tšebotarev, Verigo or Vassili Krotkov; direct influences of Russian avant-garde can be also seen in the work of older-generation Estonian graphic artists (Lapin, Keerend). Meel's avant-garde is both semantic and formal: the first, joining and blending different sign systems; the second, finding different means of expression, starting with 1967/1968 typewriter drawings, seeking possibilities to link various individual pictures, to installations and fire-performances.

Poetry

„Poetry divides into three larger parts: linguistic, voiced and pictorial. I am in the common area of these three fields,” says Meel. He composes in picture, sound and word. In the Tartu-Moscow school's culture semiotics, cultural languages and sign systems are synonymous. Every sign system can be seen, writes Kristeva, as a special language – it requires differentiating its basic elements and determine the rules of their relationship². As there are no universal basic elements in visual arts, Meel solves the theoretical problem in a practical manner: he takes elements from where they exist, i.e. from ordinary language, schemes, technical drawings, and uses them as artistic images.

Meel chooses a language picture and allows the viewer to react to the mutual effect of word and image. “I present portraits from words,” writes Meel: „Although I select words, I could basically take any, as all words are connected with visual imageries³,” writes Meel, who uses the term *evident poetry* for his work (Latin *evidens*: obvious, visible)⁴. Verbal abstraction is poor compared with assemblage deriving from “*everything else. Verbal abstraction evokes images, it does not replace them*”⁵. You can talk about language in a language, but in order to

1 Interview with Raul Meel 17.04.2016

2 Kristeva, J. 1967. *Semiootika ekspansioon*. lepo.it.da.ut.ee/~avramets/Semiootika%20ekspansioon1.doc 11.06.2016

3 Meel, R. 2001-2016. *Minevikukonspekt 1941-2001*. CV 2016, p 40

4 *Ibid.*, p 41

5 Interview with Raul Meel 17.04.2016

describe a visual image, you must choose another, a totally different medium and make do with possibilities offered by that medium⁶ (Ireneo's amazement in Borges's "Funes the Memorious": why a dog seen in profile should be indicated by the same noun as the dog seen frontally?⁷ How can one noun be valid for such different dogs?).

Meel equalises and unites word, sound and picture, placing poetry above them. The linguist Roman Jakobson's concept of poetic function also refers to the primality of artwork as a message, to poetry as the continuity and quality of the state of consciousness, and to poetics as something produced in a certain way.

Typographical games

"Writing is not related to the inner-system of language," claims Derrida (Derrida 1997: 33)⁸. Writing is in any case related to culture and to system. A letter is an ideogram containing references to geography, culture and history, a cultural fossil evoking a special awe. Meel's pictures-texts in a sense return to the initial times of typography. Meel analyses the layers of writing: a letter as a visual and a sound object, word as an object, text as a whole and text as part of national culture. A letter is pretty enough as an artefact, polished to superb form from extensive usage. The fonts have a tale of their own: Helvetica has traditions from Ancient Rome, *Žurnalnaja Rublennaja* is associated with Soviet-era official bulletins. Usage of colour pigments is linked with certain cultural traditions (e.g. the French origin of "Russian blue"). In using colour, Meel is minimalist and precise.

Typography is an old and dignified art. Lead letters were manually set into rows, which meant that the composition of each page was handicraft, thought through and carefully composed.

6 Martin, T. L. 2004. *Poiesis and Possible Worlds*, University of Toronto Press: Toronto Buffalo London, p 29

7 *Ibid.*, p 12

8 Maiste, E.-M. 2013. *Differance'i avanemisest teises Jacques Derrida filosoofias*.

http://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/32176/maiste_eva_maria.pdf

Meel takes maximum from the tradition, using today's technological possibilities. "The written text has its own landscapes, water and air and effective powers," writes Meel⁹.

His "The King is Stuck in Your Curls" to Salomon's Song of Songs exists in twelve languages¹⁰. These languages, translated in cooperation with 40 translators, certainly expand Meel's poetic world. The initial version of "The King" has two layers, the pictorial image is formed from two texts printed opposite each other. „The King” from 2016 has three layers, quite common in graphic art. Colour impression, relief and surface printing are characterised by the "story-like" printing of layers, whereas the next layer does not fully cover or conceal the previous one. This is exactly what Meel does with images formed by letters, so that every page can be viewed as a print or a typographic painting where each designed part of text is contextually justified (horizontal as a grave and resurrection: „ОНИ НАШИ МОЛИТВЫ”).

In order to understand Meel's typographical witticisms, we should keep in mind that for him a letter is equally a visual image and sound, voice and a language element, a symbol ("A Horse Sighed into Wind", 2016). In a semiotic sense, Meel turns a symbol into an icon. Letters become graphic images, which do not only function in one, symbolic meaning.

ОНИ НАШИ МОЛИТВЫ

The Russian avant-garde is close to us both temporally and culturally. The Russian power is close to us. In 1987 when Solženitsõn was living his life as a hermit in exile in Vermont (autumns are colourful over there, just like in Puškino), manually reproduced copies of "The Gulag Archipelago" were passed on from one person to another and a few lucky ones had the printed copy in English. Meel's "ОНИ НАШИ МОЛИТВЫ" (1987, 2003, 2016) contains all place names in "The Gulag" (1973/74). Each page starts with a quotation from Goethe's "Faust", music of the spheres in Boris Pasternak's Russian translation *В пространстве, хором сфер объятom*¹¹ (according to Pythagoras's theory of spheres, the movement of every planet had a corresponding tonality, which put together produced harmony¹²), as a reference to Russian-language Lord's Prayer:

9 Meel, R. 2016 *Mõtlikult*. Speech at the opening of his exhibition 24.03.2016

10 The book of visual poetry and sound poetry, *Solomon's Song of Songs* (2010) belongs to the collection of rare manuscripts and original books at Herzog-August Bibliothek (Wolfenbüttel, Germany).

11 Estonian translation August Sang: *Koos vennassfääridega päike Veel võidu laulab taeva all*

12 Парнов, Е. И. 2008. Рок и ужас: авентирь и примечательные истории у последней черты, Тера: Москва, p 103

Отче наш, сущий на небесах!
хлеб наш насущный подавай нам на каждый день;
и прости нам грехи наши,
*ибо и мы прощаем всякому должнику наше...*¹³

and continues in an invoking rhythm: ... *Они наш Тобольск Они наш Томск ... Они наши я я*
...

Наши dictates the rhythm of the Lord's Prayer: *Хлеб наш насущный дай нам, И прости нам долги наши, как и мы прощаем должникам нашим...* The prayer, which Christ himself allegedly used when turning to God: *Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum...*, is an iconic text, referring to which emphasises the global dimension of a visual artwork and its connection with ritual. Ritual contains power, just like words, rhythm and repetition used in ritual have significance and a meaning. Meel is beyond daily politics. The last pages of "ОНИ НАШИ МОЛИТВЫ", Я Р О С С И Я do not mean topical Russia. Meel, for whom reflection is truth seen through the eyes of a viewer, adds another Я (*I*) – stressing that it is crucial to raise above suffering, either national or human, and the prayer is a way to reach this elevation. Text moves further, generalises – *Россия* – and returns to a bigger plan, to everyone's personal problem – *я*. *I, we* and *they* merely constitute a single and personal relationship compared with *the music of spheres*.

Meel's songs and Apocrypha

Poetic, political, ethical and tender, is Meel's characterisation of "Estonian Apocrypha". Indecent too, with the help of Peeter Sauter. Most of Meel's texts are sublime, whereas "Estonian Apocrypha" is a sharp and contradicting text – a reaction to political deception, abandoning ideals, lies. The theme of "Estonian Apocrypha" is compassion and worry. Obscene words have always been considered mighty words. In folk poetry, alliteration and assonance give might to what is being said.

Meel's work in progress, containing ninety books, is the opposite of "Apocrypha"; the used core texts or texts by the artist himself do not belong among the Apocrypha in Meel's work,

¹³ *'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

but rather to the holy side (Salomon's Song of Songs, Solženitsõn's "The Gulag Archipelago", "Kalev's Son", transcriptions of birdsongs). The iconic nature of the texts, naming, could matter more to Meel than the actual contents, "Once we" (2016), „Proper Names" (1969-71) – naming itself unleashes a specific and predictable reaction¹⁴.

Meel portrays repetition in the series "Folk Song/Singer-Like Ramblings On, I-VII" (1977/1989) "jo-joo-jook-jooks-jookse-jookseme-jooksete", murmur of ancestral voices, becoming a voice, a joik¹⁵, has been printed on typewriter sheets – Cage-like liberal attitude towards poetry meets Majakovski-type pathos. Repetition is also an essential part of Meel's paintings. Meel as a colourist is truly impressive in painting series *Võlu ja vaim* (1993-1995)/*Magic and Spirit* (1988-2001) and *Losing Sharp Angles* (1981).

Flatness itself is not a drawback of visual arts, it is a form of poetry. (*I can no longer produce sensitive typewriter drawings, because I am unable to track down coarse colour ribbon of cotton thread in our modern world [...], computer pictures lack the genuineness of texture, singularity, reliability, credibility of old typewriter pictures.*¹⁶) However, Meel's books are not merely a sum of flat images, pictures for looking at, these books are also meant for browsing, reading – singing, if necessary. By uniting language and visual images, he seeks new perceptive possibilities and means of expression; this is not a Dadaist contempt of ideas or experimenting with sounds and phonemes, but instead construing poetic worlds, engineer-like and interpreted.

Estonianness

Cosmos, says Meel, *is black-and-white*¹⁷. Meel's sky is blue-black-and white. The serigraphy series "Under the Sky" (1973-) has been printed during the years when the blue-black-and-white had a special meaning in the years of freedom fighting. The serigraph series "Under the Sky", "Windows and Landscapes" and "The Estonian Flag", Meel's best works in free graphics are devoted to Estonianness. Starting with "Our Own Country" (1969), "the anxious-acute and existential issue of the survival of the nation and its independence" has tormented

14 Жинкин, Н. И. 1993. О кодовых переходах во внутренней речи
<http://philologos.narod.ru/zhinkin/transcode.html>

15 Meel, R. 2001-2016. *Minevikukonspekt 1941-2001*. CV 2016, p 115

16 Meel, R. 2001-2016. *Minevikukonspekt 1941-2001*. CV 2016, p 342

17 Intervjuu R. Meelega 17.04.2016

Meel. The progress of events in art is not real, but possible, it “must depend on someone’s propositional attitudes, someone has to believe in this possibility, confirm it, dream about it¹⁸“. In visual arts, this belief is confirmed by *action*. An *action* is temporal. A work of visual arts is temporal through the fact of its creation and through the time of its creation. Meel’s image of Estonia oscillates between sacred (Heartland. Silver, 1981) and anti-sacred (*no symbol can be purer than people gathered behind it*¹⁹). An example of the latter is the (re)creation of the scandalous “Life of the Aborigines” (1997)²⁰. Interpretation of Kalev’s Son “The Horse Sighed into the Wind” (2016) is simultaneously serious and playful.

We can talk about the openness of artistic text, but when the system disappears which constitutes the text – the author’s work – we can no longer talk about the existence of text. To some extent, the text is always inspired by the rules of game of its author. Ignoring the artist’s work as a whole leads to overestimating the role of a single work, and various essential values are not properly perceived. Meel’s *galaxies* or “field ensembles” according to the author, make it virtually impossible to separate a single work from the whole.

Meel does not translate pictures into words or words into pictures or typographical constructions, voices and sounds. Meel plays with sign systems and creates poetry.

Noticing is Meel’s keyword. *Noticing means that it matters. Everyone is looking, but not everyone sees, few notice, few turn what they notice into part of their life. An artist lives the noticing into his own life*²¹. *Doing* is a process that could last for decades. It is the beauty of the game that starts off the artist. Meel’s rules of the game are the rules of creating the galaxy – knowing that what seems random and unfathomably huge contains its own rules, structure, and only human insufficiency prevents us from understanding this.

It was not only the metaphysicians who were seeking form and shape for eternity.

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