



The Family Album: From Personal Stories to Memory Wars in Estonian Art

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses some of the aspects of the relationship between memory and art in post-Soviet Estonia. Focusing on artworks from the 1990s that use photographs from family albums as a medium for different kinds of memory, this paper aims to highlight the intricate relationship between memory and photographs, especially in the process of the construction of (a new) identity, which inevitably includes forgetting and collective amnesia. In this paper, subjects such as personal memories and death are seen as a form of protest in Estonian art. In addition, while analysing artworks from the 1990s and their recent re-presentation, this paper finds that there has been a shift in the perception of the Soviet past in recent years. While during the 1990s, the process of memory making excluded all the connections to Soviet past, in recent years, the Soviet past and the Soviet aesthetics have become something exotic for a new generation of young artists.

KEYWORDS: photography, family album, identity, post-Soviet memory, present pasts

Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully “ours”, nor are the pictures ever unmediated pictures of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other version’s of a “real” one (Spence, Holland, 1991: 13–14).



All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt (Sontag, 2008: 15).

Memories are among the most fleeting and most unreliable phenomena of all (Assmann, 2011: 238).

Family Photographs and Memory

Photography has been considered, and still is, enigmatic. It has been constantly developing, finding its way into our daily lives, but after all, it is still just a flat surface that has the ability to ignite our senses and memories, take us to another space and time, make us mourn or manipulate with our minds. While family photographs in an album construct the identities of individuals, photography also functions as a medium for constructing collective memory, thus being an important tool for totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet occupation in Estonia. During the occupation, photography mainly served the hegemonic powers; however, since Estonia's re-independence in 1991, photography has played an important role in the arts and has now been considered almost the most prominent art form for a bit less than the last 30 years. Many works of art, since 1991, have taken advantage of photography's innate connection to memory, in order to create alternative or counter-memories, or simply, to question photography's ability to keep memories alive.

This article aims to analyse some of the aspects connected to the uses of photographs from family albums in Estonian art in the 1990s. The development between photographic art and (collective) memory is followed here through four works of art from the 1990s, although one of them is actually an exhibition. The common theme in these works is the notions of death and collective amnesia. These works have all been created in the turbulent years of the 1990s; however, almost all of them (except for the exhibition by Ly Lestberg) have been displayed again at exhibitions in recent years, giving them new meaning and new importance.¹ All of them construct a personal narrative, which at the same time has a collective and public importance, in this deeply personal content lies a protest

against the official constructed collective memory². The main question here is how can art relate to memory and challenge its mediums? And what is the role of photographs from family albums in the construction and deconstruction of different memory narratives in art?

Family photographs play an important role in the construction and the persistence of different memory narratives. Marianne Hirsch has noted that after its invention

photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told (Hirsch, 2012:7)

If all else is gone, there will be only oral stories and other material mediums of memory, such as photographs from family albums. Family photographs have the same function as the painted portraits had before the invention of photography in the beginning of the 19th century. They are meant to be a material and ever-lasting proof of someone's existence; to give immortality to the mortals. Photographs are considered to be the indexical record of reality and even when digital photography has reduced this belief, family photographs are still a very big part of a person's life. A person is being photographed from the first days of their lives until the day the mortal body is laid down to rest.

The profound connection between photography and death reveals itself very distinctly in the post-mortem photography. Post-mortem photographs are those of the deceased. They are reminders of one's mortality, at the same time objects of grief and mourning. The practice of photographing the deceased was once quite common, but has become rather unusual nowadays.³ It was a way to keep them in the world of the living, as an artefact, as a material memory. Whether they were representations of death or grief, they were always meant for personal use, even when the photographs themselves were placed in public places. The turn in the mentality and the perception of death came in the middle of 20th century. Death became a taboo and the tradition of making post-mortem photography stopped (Linkman, 2011), nowadays a glimpse of these post-mortem images can have a rather uncanny effect.

These eerie post-mortem photographs usually find their way into the contemporary culture as curiosities, many of which have lost their primary referent, and are found from flea markets or other places. Susan Sontag has written in her essay “Melancholy Objects” that “a photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading” (Sontag, 2008: 71). She refers to the fact that photographs that have lost their owners are open to any kind of interpretation. In their nature photographs are very unstable and this ontological quality has been used by many artists that have taken advantage of the complex relationship between a photograph and the notions of time, memory and death. The works discussed in this article rely on this relationship as well; it is their core, it gives them their power.

While discussing the relationship between family pictures and memory, Hirsch has pointed out that artists and writers have used family photographs in their work as “modes of questioning, resistance and contestation” (Hirsch, 2012:7). They use the ontological qualities of a family photograph to go beyond their conventional use and disrupt their use as evidence and documentary materials. Photography and memory have been closely woven together by the ideas of Roland Barthes in his *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la photographie* (1980). In his view, photographs and memory are always connected to the past, a photograph is always a representation of a that-has-been, the *ça a été*, which has evoked the belief in the connection between a photograph and truth, a photograph and reality. Marianne Hirsch calls it the burden of Barthes’ *ça a été*, but simultaneously it is the very reason why and how contestation and resistance in art using (family) photographs becomes even possible.

Memory Politics and Art

However, it’s not only the complex connection between photography and memory that gives importance of these works. It actually lies in the way memory becomes a tool in the construction of nations and ideology. It is in the connection between private and collective memory and the hegemonic powers; and how art responds to these conditions. In Estonia, during the Soviet occupation, personal stories and memories were considered a threat because they didn’t conform to the official memory and narrative. The totalitarian regime tried to manipulate and erase in-

dividual memory and substitute it with an ideologically constructed one (Pääbo, 2011, Hinrikus, 2009). This occurred on the individual level, as well as on the collective level. There were complex processes that took place within the archives, for example, in which all the (visual) materials that somehow didn't correspond to the ideology were hidden in carefully guarded restricted collections. Photographs, as a medium of memory, had to present the official truth or they were discarded, locked up or destroyed. Until the 1990s, and during the Soviet occupation, photography and video mainly served the needs of hegemonic powers or were used to document everyday lives, and were not considered as artistic mediums. However, this attitude towards photography changed, and during the 1990s photography and video became very popular and powerful mediums of art.

The development of photographic art in Estonia resonates with the memory politics of the newly independent country, which was building a new identity. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, it faced the task of rethinking the past and creating a new identity. This was especially since the events of the WW II had been remembered on the terms of the Soviet ideology. There were many memory debates in the beginning of 1990s. It was called the "crisis of truth" and people were driven by slogans such as "to give the people back their history". This resulted in a very popular and systematic collection of people's life stories. The collection of these stories and personal memories was part of the attempt to fill in the blank space, or the rupture, as the Soviet occupation was perceived.⁴ While one part of the society was concerned with reclaiming the memories and filling in the blank space that had been occupied by the Soviet regime, the other part was concerned with the idea of the return – the return to normality, to historic roots and to Europe (Lagerspetz, 1999: 17–28). In this way, the Estonian society in the 1990s was simultaneously drawn in two different directions. One was the direction of progress, focusing on future and being part of Europe. The second was more concerned with reconstructing the past and claiming the memories. The memory work that was done during the decade involved art and public spaces, monuments and institutions, among others, and led to several memory conflicts.

The two directions – one being concerned with the past and the other looking to the future – can be very clearly seen in Estonian art in the 1990s. There were exhibitions that were concentrating on science, technology and future, such as the annual exhibitions of Soros Center for Contemporary Art, and on the other

hand, there were very influential events centered around memory, history and identity, such as the Saaremaa biennials organized by Peeter Linnap and Eve Kiiler.⁵ In Estonia, there is no tradition of classical photography being taught at the art academy before the 1990s, photography emerged into the arts at a very turbulent time, bringing in influences from the Western postmodernist art – such as working with archives and appropriation. When a laboratory of photography emerged at the Academy of Arts, a group of like-minded students gathered around it and were introduced to this new approach to the photographic image, as well as to structuralism, post-structuralism and the ideas of Michel Foucault, including his “archeology”, and other subjects on memory and identity. Thus, addressing the issues of past, memory or archive in the photographic art is usually associated with the Linnap’s School⁶ – named after Peeter Linnap who was an active lecturer and artist at that time.

This way, photography and memory became their main means of addressing the issues that were present and ardent on the level of the society. The photography laboratory at the Academy of Arts was called “Faculty of Taste” and its students became obsessed with photographic materials and personal stories, which was partly due to the fact that, as mentioned, during the Soviet occupation archives were carefully guarded and personal memories had no place in the dominant collective memory. By exploring these new mediums in art – photography and video – these young artists took advantage of the notion of truth, or the truth value, that has been given to photographs, and created semi-fictional narratives of their own lives, of their past, and the lives of their close ones. By touching some personal subjects in their works, such as memory, identity, sexuality and death, they spoke a universal language and revealed personal stories that for long had been denied in many aspects, and now had gained importance. With some of them embodying only very hidden and almost invisible hints of the condemnation of the regime, they still became a form of contestation and resistance for touching upon subjects from the private sphere.

Death as Resistance

As confirmed by the quotes by Susan Sontag and as it is known from the writings of Roland Barthes, death is considered to be an essential part of photography. A

photograph always depicts something that has been. Barthes considered death to be the very core or *eidos* of a photograph (Barthes, 1985: 15) – they are representations of a lost time. Or, testify to time’s relentless melt, as Susan Sontag has put it (Sontag, 2008: 15). This is what closely ties photography with memory and memory to photography. But death in this current context has a wider meaning, too: during the Soviet occupation death was a taboo, it belonged only to the last pages of the newspapers, unless it was a head of state or government (Kõivupuu, 2010: 111–112). The Soviet regime promoted atheist propaganda and atheist concept of death, while detaching from the church and religion, declaring that after death all that remains is a name and children, who will carry on their parents’ work (Järve, 2010: 6–8). So it isn’t a surprise that after the collapse of the regime, interest in such personal subjects, such as death, increased – especially in the arts. For example, in the work *My Father* (1996) by Piret Rääni, which uses photographs from family album and other kinds of documents to tell a personal story.

The core of this work is death, or to be more precise, suicide. Using photographic materials from her family archives, Piret Rääni constructs a visual representation of her father. The photographs depict her father’s everyday life – working at a theatre as an actor and being with family and friends. These personal and nostalgic common pictures are accompanied by short and harsh statements such as: “[h]e believed that the KGB was following him”, “[h]e didn’t know who to trust”, “[w]e don’t know if he imagined it or not”, “[i]t drove him mad” and “[h]e hung himself”. In this case, the artist is creating a sort of a post-mortem image of her father, something that would stop him from disappearing into the oblivion, but by constructing his presence, she is actually visualizing his absence instead – with every new exhibition the constructed presence becomes another proof of endless absence.

However; this is not a nostalgic altar for the artist’s father, but rather a search for a new visual language and an intriguing play with words and images. In his latest study on art and archives, Ernst van Alphen has pointed out that images, in their nature, are unstable (van Alphen, 2014: 27). Memories are unstable also. While exhibiting this work during the 1990s, Piret Rääni changed the text that was accompanying the photographic materials from the archives, thus giving the work, and the photographs, a new meaning each time. Using words like “KGB”, or talking about things like death and suicide, something that was unheard of and even dangerous during the Soviet occupation,⁷ was definitely new and exciting and can

be considered a form of protest against the ideology of the totalitarian regime.

Piret Rääni belonged to the same group of critically minded young students who were influenced by Peeter Linnap's love for postmodernism and photography. Piret Rääni herself has said that for them, these young students, at that time, it was all a game. They were playing with new mediums and new identities. Yet, her work *My Father* is more than just a test of new mediums. It is a work in which private and collective memories intertwine. From one side it tells a story about the influences of totalitarian terror on people, referring to the psychological traumas caused by the conditions of Soviet occupation. On the other side, it also characterizes the artistic practices of the 1990s, while addressing the issues and taboos that had been suppressed during the Soviet occupation. This work, while first exhibited in 1996, is still relevant, since in the last few years it has been exhibited again at several exhibitions, as part of a way of rethinking and conceptualizing the 1990s as a decade of paradigmatic changes.

Another example of the relationship between photography, death and personal stories in the Estonian art of the 1990s, is Ly Lestberg's 1998 Haapsalu City Gallery exhibition *Nothing*. This is another autobiographical self-definition narrative – the centre of it is the artist herself. The exhibition is a construction of memory and identity through photographic materials from the artist's family albums. The photographs depict the artist in her early years – as a happy and carefree young child – as well as as a grown-up woman. The centre of the exhibition is, rather eerily, a photograph of a seemingly sleeping, but actually of a dead child – the artist's aunt who had died at a young age.

The photo of the dead child functions as a rupture in the otherwise reassuring personal story of growing up, a visualization of the time's relentless melt, as the exhibition covered 30 years of the artist's life, bringing together the what-was, what-could-have-been and what-is. There is a subtle presence of a trauma, of melancholy and mourning, which is perhaps the trauma of the process of growing up and the life not being the way it was imagined in our childhood. The exhibition is a *memento mori* – a subtle reminder of one's mortality and life's fragility. The photographs from the family album testify to the time's relentless melt.

For Roland Barthes, as well as for Ly Lestberg, and for many others, there is a hope for finding some truth about the past in family pictures. In its essence, a photograph is destined to tell a family's story, they are the evidence of the past events,

the “that-has-been”, as Barthes has put it. In Ly Lestberg’s exhibition the photographs from her albums refer to the events in her life that have shaped her identity, or rather the memories of those events, making it a search for and analysis of the artist’s identity. As implied in the quote by Patricia Holland and Jo Spence (1991) – looking at family photographs is to construct a fantastic past and to work as a detective to find another “true” version. As we know, memory is a constant process, negotiation and re-negotiation from the perspective and needs of the present moment as pointed out by Aleida Assmann (2000), and which also explains how our memories of some events constantly change and evolve.

This exhibition is not a very typical exhibition for Ly Lestberg who is mainly known for staged photographic art and nudes, but who is still been constantly interested in the issues of the passing of time and identity, though mainly with sexual identity. In a way, both of these subjects, death and sexuality, are a form of protest; because that kind of search for one’s identity and construction of one’s memory is something that wasn’t possible during the Soviet occupation. Yet, even in 1998 this exhibition sparked some criticism. The audience felt too uncomfortable in this overly personal story, which still aimed to touch some general human subjects, such as childhood, dreams, growing up and the trauma of death. It was even considered to be arrogant – perhaps because the audience wasn’t used to this kind of sharp reflection on one’s past and present. This also implies to the fact that even though it is considered that private issues, such as death, were a taboo during the Soviet occupation and not so much after the independence, this wasn’t always the case.

A more critical approach to the relationship between death and photography can be found in the work *Grandfather* by Mari Laanemets. In this work, the indexical qualities – the photograph’s function as an indexical record of reality – has been put to the test. *Grandfather* is a collection of photographs from a family album, which aim to construct a story of a man who is claimed to be the artist’s grandfather. The photographs depict a man in all kinds of very common daily activities from sitting at a birthday table with other guests to holding the hand of a small child and riding a bicycle. But on each photograph the face of the man has been erased by scratching it off. The story that accompanies this work suggests that this act of erasure had been done by a little girl who’s grandfather is depicted on these photographs. The grandfather had died and the little girl, firmly believ-

ing in the connection between the photograph and reality, scratched out the face of her grandfather on each photograph in the family album. If he was no longer alive – how could he exist on photographs? Photographs are magic in the way they capture the reality; yet, the way they crystalize moments which become lost in the passage of time, creates confusion and also possibilities for different interpretations.

The scratched out face functions as a rupture between reality and image. It is believed that the flat surface of a photograph has a special connection to reality, that it is a proof of what is and what has been. It is believable that the power that has been given to photographs could confuse someone such as a little girl. It is not easy to damage a photograph – the act seems violent. When we look at a photograph, we don't see the flat surface, the paper of the screen – we see through it – we see people and spaces. It is that psychological connection between the photograph and reality, that makes every kind of act of physical intervention on the surface of a photograph particularly violent and powerful, uncanny and eerie, at the same time. Another example of this is ripping apart or burning former lover's photograph, as if that gesture would erase the past or hurt someone for real.

The work by Mari Laanemets is a reminder that even the materialized memories are fleeting and disappearing. It's also an intervention – an intervention to the constructed connection between a photograph and reality, between a photograph and the memory it carries. In the words of Marianne Hirsch this kind of interventions, “these forms of resistance not only contest but actually reveal the power of photography as a technology of personal and familial memory” (Hirsch, 2001:193). Mari Laanemets' work challenges the photograph as a medium of memory and for this it has been an emblematic artwork in the history of Estonian photographic art. Even though the work itself consists of a simple gesture, many younger photographic artists have been encouraged and influenced by this work, by its boldness and its affect – by the way it questions the values and power as a medium of memory that has been given to photography.

Notes on Forgetting

The works discussed previously have been mostly personal stories addressing the taboos and subjects that were silenced during the Soviet occupation, or works

that are challenging photography as a medium of memory, as in the case of Mari Laanemets. The last work included here has a bit of a different background – even though it still uses personal family photographs, its aim is to highlight collective forgetting or amnesia; Peeter Linnap's (1993) *Summer 1955*. Peeter Linnap is an artist and professor that has been already mentioned in this paper as the leader of a group of critically minded art students in the 1990s. *Summer 1955* is a work that connects personal archives, photographs from a family album, to the memory debates, and the collective amnesia resulting from them, that were part of the construction of a newly democratic country in the beginning of the 1990s. Rather than confirming the main narrative, it reveals other layers in the process of memory making.

Summer 1955 is collection of old family photos that the artist found on the attic of his father-in-law. These black-and-white grainy photographs, taken presumably in 1955, depict young Estonian men in Soviet army uniforms, on an empty green field, posing with revolvers. These are not official photographs, but made for personal use, for a personal album. The men on these photographs are very relaxed, their arms reached out with a gun in a very playful manner, like the protagonists of a Western. The series also consists of a view of the surroundings – a sunny countryside. Peeter Linnap took these found images, enlarged them one meter high and exhibited them as a work of art. Firstly, the way these were exhibited – family photographs as works of art – was definitely new and contemporary. But secondly, there was something even more powerful in this work than the mere way it was presented – it was the past that came back haunting.

When this work was exhibited, the Estonian society was systematically working on moving away from the Soviet past. The Soviet occupation was considered as a rupture, something not inherent to Estonia or Estonians, a disturbance in the existence of Estonian republic, and the Soviet era identity, or being connected to it in any ways, was something to be ashamed of (Kõresaar, 2005: 107). Having fun while being in the Soviet army was definitely something that otherwise would have been silenced; however, it is hard to disclaim or silence something that is one meter high and on an exhibition wall for everybody to see. In the ways in which this work made it uncomfortable for the society that was trying to forget certain aspects of its past, we can see an example of what Walter Benjamin (1969) called brushing the history against the grain – an example of an artist that is digging in the past and materializing the past that otherwise would have been eliminated or

erased from the dominant narrative which assured that Estonians were the victims and Russians were the perpetrators. Obviously, that was not always the case. Between black and white, there are also many shades of grey.

Memory consists of different processes, such as remembering and forgetting, which have been considered to be intimately intertwined even by early Greeks.⁸ It was Borges who had a character named Funes, who appeared in his short story *Funes el Memorioso* (Borges, 1979), and who was unable of forgetting, which drove him mad in the end. It is impossible to remember everything and forget nothing. In this sense, memory is a constant process of remembering and forgetting and in order to build an identity, it might be necessary to forget some things of the past. In the context of this artwork, the Soviet past had not completely been forgotten, but there was a certain way that had been established in which it had to be remembered. Anything else, a deviation, was not acceptable.

This quite scandalous work by Peeter Linnap not only exemplifies the selectiveness of collective memory but also brings out the conflict between different memory narratives. It brings attention to the way how and on what conditions some events of the past are being remembered and how their meaning and interpretation is in constant change. It was Maurice Halbwachs (cited in Tamm and Petersoo, 2008) who pointed out that even if we remember things alone, the what and how we remember things is always influenced by the social environment we belong to. This is how collective memory is constructed. This work shows the other side of the coin – the act of remembering is always also an act of forgetting, or as Andreas Huyssen has noted: “every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence” (Huyssen, 2003: 4). Collective amnesia is a part of every kind of collective remembering.

The Exotic Past

The artworks that have been dealing with personal stories and with subjects that were taboos during the Soviet occupation, and the work that is offering an alternative memory to the officially constructed one, have a lot of similarities. First of all, all of these works refer to the unstable and dynamic nature of the memories, and show that even the material mediums of memory are unreliable in their nature. The first three works discussed here used personal subjects and taboos, such as death,

as a reaction to the psychological repressions of the Soviet occupation, which had silenced personal stories and subjects. However, the last one (by Peeter Linnap) was a reaction or an intervention (or perhaps a reminder) to an already established narrative of the re-independent country, where the Soviet past was erased and forgotten – and drawing attention to the collective amnesia of the Soviet period.

Similarly to other countries that had suffered suppressions by a totalitarian regime, memory became a form of protest in Estonia.⁹ The use of family photographs became a common artistic practice to address different memory issues – to create counter-memories or alternative memories, to challenge the mediums capability to carry and present certain memories, and to brush the history against the grain – to use the words of Walter Benjamin again – and shift the dominant narrative by revealing untold stories and deliberately forgotten memories. It is also important to point out that contrary to the general belief, working with memory is not something that characterizes solely the art of the 1990s, it's a tendency that by no means shows signs of disappearing. These works are just a small selection from the 1990s, but rethinking and working through the Soviet past continues through the different mediums of art. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, almost all of these discussed works have been exhibited again at different exhibit.

But in this shift lies the important question of finding the balance when dealing with a traumatic past – the question of the obligation or duty to remember, and the burden of the past that might keep us from moving forward. The question of holding on to something and letting go. All of the memory work that has been done during these years of re-independence is meaningful especially for the people who had suffered repressions and using the visual language of an era that has caused death and distress should be sensitive and respectful. But new generations always want to break free from the old customs, beliefs and traditions – and currently, that's what makes the Soviet past so exotic, different and appealing. Yet, no doubt, in order to let go, to get rid of the burden, first, the past has to be acknowledged.

Endnotes

¹ The work *My Father* by Piret Rääni was exhibited at two exhibitions in 2015: at *1995* curated by Anders Härm and Hanno Soans at the EKKM in Tallinn and at *From Explosion to Expanse. Estonian Contemporary Photography 1991–2015* in Tartu Art Museum. The latter exhibition also included the works by Mari Laanemets and Peeter Linnap, which have also been discussed in this article.

- ² Collective memory is used in this article as defined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the beginning of the 20th century in his *La mémoire collective*. In his theory memory depends on the social framework, which shapes the perception of the past. In his view memory is something that is constantly constructed, reconstructed and modified to conform to the prevailing way of thinking in a society (Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 38–40).
- ³ Although there are companies, especially in the US, that provide this service for example for families who have lost their children, as a proof that the child has been in the world and as an object of grief.
- ⁴ Both the Soviet occupation and the re-independence in 1991 have been interpreted as cultural traumas. See Aarelaid-Tart, (2006) and also Kõresaar (2005)
- ⁵ Saaremaa biennials were international art festivals that took place in 1995 and 1997, both of them presented mainly photography and installation art, and focused on the issues of history and identity.
- ⁶ This is an informal name of the students that were influenced by the teachings of Peeter Linnap at the Estonian Academy of Arts during that decade. Another phenomenon that is connected to this Linnap's School is the [mobil]gallery group consisting of students that worked mainly in photography, video and installation art and was the most active in the middle of the 90s.
- ⁷ Interview with Piret Räni, Tallinn, Estonia 27.03.2013
- ⁸ The mythical figures of Lemosyne and Mnemosyne marked forgetting and remembering as equal parts. (Whitehead, 2009: 13)
- ⁹ For memory as a form of protest see also Nora. (2011)

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