

# Case Study on *A Woman Takes Little Space*: art project for the Estonian pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennial

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## Abstract

This case study opens up the process of making the project *A Woman Takes Little Space* for the Estonian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. In February 2012 the same installation was adapted for the new building of the Pärnu Museum in Estonia. The exhibition *A Woman Takes Little Space* consists of 6–7 conceptually connected room installations in an apartment-like environment. The exhibited photo-, video- and site-specific works explore social and political topics, ranging from femininity and social space to different representations of women in contemporary society, as well as ‘feminine’ jobs, prostitution and gender pay gap. I try to test space as a factor to define ‘woman’ and ‘femininity’. The paper also examines ‘translation’ of research findings into aesthetic vocabulary.

One part of the case study discusses the technical matters along with the response from the pictured women. A summary on media reception will show the difficulties in seeing this kind of project in an art context.

**KEYWORDS:** art and/or research, installation, gendered space

## Introduction

In my paper I am going to examine the making of photo-, video- and site-specific installation project *A Woman Takes Little Space* for the Estonian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. In February 2012 the same installation was adapted for the new building of the Pärnu Art Museum in Estonia. In Venice the exhibition space was squeezed into a former flat in a palazzo, in Pärnu the space was three times bigger which enabled broader scope and a new work.



**Figure 1– Invitation cards. Graphic design by Aadam Kaarma**

## Visual journey

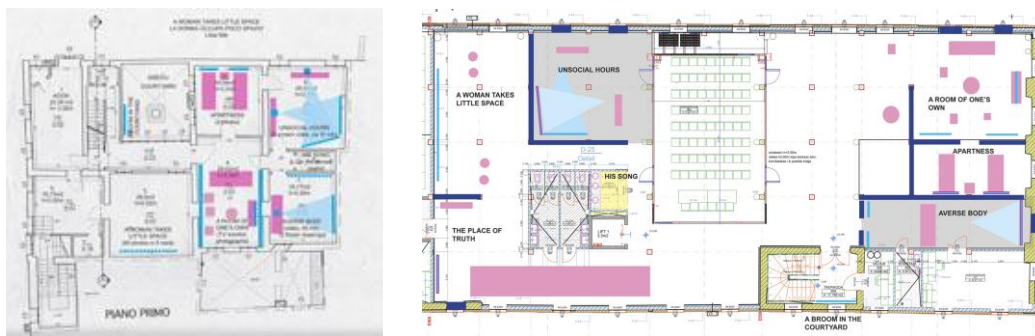
I examine the works mostly on the basis of Venice. The exhibition *A Woman Takes Little Space* was a visual journey connecting different social and emotional female characters shown through rooms in a Venetian 18th century apartment at Palazzo Malipiero. Casanova began his social life in the same palazzo and Alberto Moravia was a frequent visitor of the owner in the 20th c. The project defined the image of a woman through her space in an apartment-like, (un) homely environment. In six photo-, video- and site-specific room installations, I explored various topics, ranging from femininity and social space to different representations of women in contemporary society, as well as ‘feminine’ jobs and prostitution. The characters were contemporary Estonian women observed in their social environment and space around them, from the workplace to their private sphere until the primary space of a woman, her body. This research was supported by the props as furniture, textile and other domestic item to enhance the domesticity of the exhibition space. Some works were loaded with questions, some stood for support. The transparent archive of documentary images was planted into a set of spatial situations.

The trip started with the title piece of the project – *A Woman Takes Little Space*, which was a collection of 40 photographic images taken in the last 4 years from very different but ordinary women in their working atmosphere. The path to the left brought the visitor to the bedroom setting where two photographs from the bigger series *Apartness* represented a middle-aged woman in her apartment presenting her female fantasies. The path to the right led to the living room installation *A Room of One's Own*, which tried to find out how much space was left for a woman as a mother and a wife in a new suburban estate family house. Her domestic space mixed suddenly with a public event where images of dancing women brought different kinds of pleasure to the agenda.

The background rooms were dedicated to moving images and sound. On the left there was a two-screen video-projection *Unsocial Hours* delivering a crosscut of women making pastry in a bakery, selling it in a small kiosk and eating it in cramped conditions during the lunchtime break. It was accompanied by a male voice naming buns and rolls. On the right, in video installation *Averse Body* the artist under pseudonym Foxy Haze questioned prostitutes about liking or disliking their body, testing the hypothesis by Polish theatre director Jerzy

Grotowski that 'these women' had a sort of aversion towards their body. The room in the middle was an actual bathroom that had an audio piece *His Song* which suggested a man in a shower singing and making noises.

I did not start this project with the Venice biennale in my mind. The works developed in accordance with my growing interest in visual representations of social conditions and reflections of gendered spatial relationships in contemporary Estonian society. Submitting my project to the Estonian pavilion competition came later. The opportunity to present the project enabled a more focused approach, a team work and production support. I could concentrate on certain topics and interweave them with each other. To me it has been a way to communicate in society, to do my visual research on positions of femininity, to understand the limits and borders of female space. Art is just another language, a bridge between different parties. As a tool of making underexposed areas visible, it makes a difference, it can offer different points of views. Through visual montage on social issues we can also learn something else than by purely theoretical approach.



**Figures 2a and 2b – Plans for exhibition space at Palazzo Malipiero and Pärnu Museum**

## Observations

All exhibition works deal with the relations between woman and space, relying on Julia Kristeva's treatment of a woman's essential connections with space. As Rey Chow puts:

*Woman can never be defined. /.../ Instead, woman for Kristeva is a 'space' that is linked to 'repetition' and 'eternity'. Woman is thus negative to the time of history and cannot 'be'. (Chow, 2006).*

According to Toril Moi, Kristeva sees femininity as a position, pushed aside by the symbolic order. What is perceived as marginal at some point, depends on the place where someone is; women can be interpreted as a border of a symbolic order. Women who are seen as a border of a symbolic order, have in other words the disturbing features of all the border areas: they are neither inside nor outside, known or unknown. (Moi, 1991)

It seems that women and femininity are determined by space – think of the communal flats in the Soviet Union or the one-family suburban homes in America in the 1950s. (the Estonian equivalent – early 21st century houses in the fields near the town). The Soviet woman did not need much space at home, because she was mostly away at work. The American woman as mother and wife did not need separate space, as she was there to serve others. Women 'are shown their place by way of space', or as Kristeva said that femininity can be understood as a position in the border areas. At the same time the new influences enter culture namely through the borders.

Preparing this project I saw more clearly how unconscious and silent power lines determine the behavioural patterns of men and women and spatial positions. I have observed men in small rooms, and he somehow manages to stand apart in this space, whereas women seem to adapt, become part of the room.

Making a photographic or video work about someone can objectify the subject, it happens both with male and female subjects. Still, I tried to show my characters as dignified subjects with self-esteem and dreams, they are women standing on their own feet. In the video *Averse Body* one can only hear the voices of interviewed women. This project was carried out as an agreement between me and my 'actors'. All depicted women are just being or playing themselves, consciously. Sometimes they argued that there was nothing particular in them, that there was no point taking pictures of them. They did not consider an image of a working woman as anything worthwhile or beautiful. One woman refused to be photographed because she had a problem with possible feminist and gender equality content of the project.

Men were less present in the project, mostly by their voice (singing or speaking) and by their statements (Grotowski). Thus they did not occupy much space visually but their voices spread around as sound waves. This was certainly not the model of the world I would have liked to create. It was a way of showing things in the context of the project, to offer viewers the possibility to experience the conventionality of our natural order and the status quo of gendered space.

All types of feminist research tend to seek common patterns, make generalisations. If we take a closer look, statistics becomes unreliable, people are different, and it is nearly impossible to force them all under common denominators. Preparing the video about prostitution, *Averse Body*, reading materials, I realised that life often actually claims quite the opposite, and most statistics is subjective. The statistics about the gap in salaries could be equally subjective.

## Aesthetics

There was neither a curator nor a designer of the exhibition. It was difficult to articulate the project in terms of pure art. The display did not have to look like an art exhibition with objects on the wall or on the floor, set up in white cube aesthetics. Instead, I wanted to create an environment where the pictures were not on their own showing me as an artist behind them, but created clusters of their own stories folded in space as a visual research. The exhibition design was an integral part of the signifying process, so it would have been great to work with an interior architect, but at that moment no-one was available. Since I had produced exhibition design for some years for various art institutions, I took the risk of doing it myself in Venice too. Installation seemed to be the most optimal option to represent space.

The photographs of the project can be taken as bricks in spatial montage with their own rhetoric of glossy *silisec dibond* to digital camera pictures as lambda-prints or nikon FM analogue photos pigment printed on Hahnemühle Fine Art Baryta paper. Frames become significant as margins.

Three female writers agreed to be in the dialogue with me in discussing the project and contribute longer texts for the project catalogue. They were Dr Anna Kortelainen (curator of *Onerva* show at Ateneum Museum in 2010, which I very much admired), Dr Agnė Narušytė (Lithuanian art and photography theorist) and Elo-Hanna Seljamaa (PhD student in folklore

at Columbus University in Ohio). They gave me valuable advice and perspectives how to present the project. The catalogue under the editor Andreas Trossek and graphic design by Aadam Kaarma became a source book for the project including some of my previous works and inspiring remarks, as well as images from the pre-exhibition space in palazzo Malipiero. In sound edit we had a good collaboration with Estonian-German composer Hans-Gunter Lock.

## Questions around each work

### *A Woman Takes Little Space* (2007–2011)

Does space define a woman?

*But why do women and men work in different fields and earn different salaries? Career choices are mostly made on the basis of stereotypical gender roles learnt in childhood. While Barbies and Bratzes dress up and go to parties, BMWs and Mercedes race around bumping into each other. Mühlberg claims that it is those gender roles we learn as children that are behind the different career choices that girls and boys make – girls prefer the humanities and social sciences, while boys like the natural and exact sciences.*

*However, as children we learn many other things besides the fact that dolls are for girls and cars are for boys. Among other things we find out that girls are obedient, helpful, cooperative and take up very little space (the older they get, the less room they need). Boys on the other hand are disobedient, demanding, eager to fight and take up a lot of space. (Lamesoo & Vallaste, 2007)*



**Figure 3 – *A Woman Takes Little Space* (2007–2011)**

I began the photographic series *A Woman Takes Little Space* in 2007 as a reaction to the debate in the press about gender-based discrimination. The phrase in one of the debates, ‘a woman takes little space’ stuck to my mind and started following my photographing like a kind of mantra in various spaces that surround women, in Estonia and abroad. In my personal life I have encountered the ‘little space’ theme for years. In 1997 I got a 10 m<sup>2</sup> studio from the Artists’ Association in the Tallinn Art Hall. It used to be a kitchen, as it was assumed that a woman artist involved in photography, does not in fact need anything else.

I clearly remember taking the first pictures. June 2007 – a sweet-seller in the tunnel of the Freedom Square. The tunnel is now different, the kiosk of the sweet seller is no longer there either, and I never met the seller again. The boom has been followed by recession, and one photograph is totally unable to show it all. I met nearly all the women shown in the pictures by chance in a public space, mostly complete strangers, and in a few cases remained so,



**Figures 4a–4d – *A Woman Takes Little Space* (2007–2011)**

although I always made a point of asking their permission and explain why I needed that picture: to show a working woman via space. As for situations, it was important that a point in the passing randomness has momentarily touched upon a point in myself, has made me identify with the type and situation.

I took these photographs in order to make certain situations visible. There are not many images of women in their workplaces in today's media, except when a business goes bust. At the same time I do not want to repeat the ideological construction where human beings in their daily situation are placed in the context of a hero or a victim. Estonian women occasionally seem too well adapted to the model of working women, prescribed by gender roles. Their professional identity is largely shaped by their employer, who arranges the workplace for a woman employee on the basis of what it is supposed to be. Due to submissiveness and lower self-esteem, the women do not complain about their working conditions. People in retirement age, temporary employment or fearing being made redundant are not going to take any risks. Many jobs with dismal conditions and low salary, are taken up by Russian-speaking women. If these women could speak the official language, would their lot be better? When I was taking the pictures, I naturally asked myself: "What can a woman do in a situation like this?". Not very much, it seems. Something, maybe, if the employee had role models or supporters, if there were some sort of nucleus that would stand up for the employees' rights and informed them of their rights. However, the result might easily be that the activist will not be holding her post next month. The majority of employers do not expect any suggestions from the employees about the workplace where people spend 8–12 a day, or how to improve conditions in the public space.

I present the images of working women in showcase boxes, as an ordered grid on the wall, to emphasise the transparent archive-type photographs. These are not portraits, but instead show different spatial situations, which are linked with visual conventions and pictorial construction. The situations are not staged, these are people displaying their true lives. Lives that include redundancies, salary gaps, long working hours and several jobs on the go, conditions where aesthetics does not count, only survival.

*A Woman Takes Little Space* gave the title to the whole Venice project.



## *A Room Of One's Own* (2011)

What space is available for woman in new suburban houses?

*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. (Woolf, 1993)*



**Figure 5 – Adolf Loos. Villa Müller (1930)**



**Figure 6 – *A Room Of One's Own* in Malipiero, 2011**

For the video and photo installation about women in new residential settlements, *A Room of One's Own*, I read a lot about women's expectations, the syndrome of one's own home, the baby boom, feminine mysticism. Estonian women want to live in an American dream, but to achieve that she works in town, children go to kindergarten in town, as there are no such establishments near home, the nearest shop and even the bus stop are miles away. It was very kind of these women to allow me, a stranger, into their private space.

I was interested to see what the women's space was in these large one-family buildings. I found that the masters of the house are the children. Incidentally, quite a few of these women, with a varying shade of red hair, were reading the book *Eat. Pray. Love*. This was not a stage performance, but life itself. As a spatial installation, *A Room of One's Own* had to be the nodal point of the active and the passive with the woman displayed in other rooms, a kind of terminal, furnished typically of a cramped sitting room in a new residential area, where the viewer sees the pictures of the mother in photographs and TV-monitors alternating with women dancing in a winter landscape.

I named this room after an essay of Virginia Woolf, which has had a strong impact on me. One's own room in the title does not tell us whose room it is, if it belongs to a man or a woman. In the text, Woolf tells about a place where a woman can be on her own, which disrupts her daily chores and makes room for reflection. Like an artist's studio, a room of her own for a woman who wants to write, is essential.

This room should thus mean a disruption of the mundane, and although it is furnished modestly and as a sitting-room, it is a place that reflects the joy of life, because, according to Woolf, a writer struggling in the shackles of hatred and worry cannot create anything permanent.

The 'main link' of the inhabitants in the new residential settlements with the outside world, except the office and kindergarten in town, is television, the larger the better. So big that neighbours across the road have no need to switch theirs on. THEY ARE HAPPY, most of them have a job and a peaceful, safe home, even if storms cause occasional power cuts. These women have their own houses – a lot more space. However, it is furnished much the



**Figures 7a and 7b – *A Room Of One's Own* (2011)**

same way. The houses bought on young family loan have an open kitchen, so that mother could see what the children are doing. These women are constantly available to their families, their own space is practically non-existent.

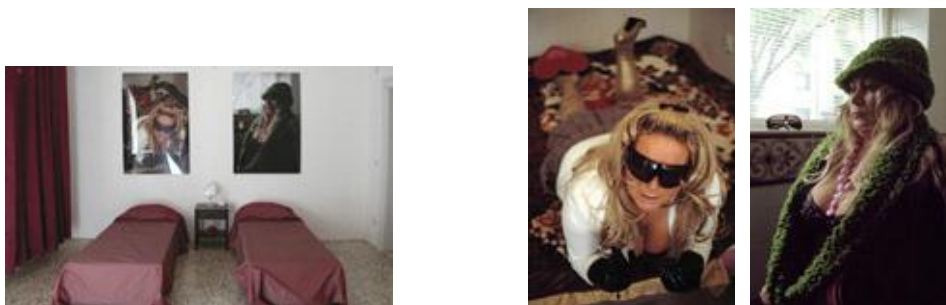
To construct the space, I use Adolf Loos-like theatricality, after Villa Müller. Two walls are put up, and painted light greyish green. A sofa and TV stand are made of plywood.

### ***Apartness* (2008)**

#### **How to get the gaze returned?**

The photographs from the series *Apartness* or representations of femininity, are part of a larger series of the same name, where a middle-aged woman in a rented flat performs male fantasies about a woman as she understands them, until suddenly the glance of an imagined man has vanished, and the mirror shows nothing else but herself. Trying to be constantly feminine, as required, a question emerges of how much a woman can resist the image of herself as a potential consumer, forced upon her by the media and society – to buy goods and through that, an image of herself.

The installation shows two beds with red covers, with a nightstand in between. There are two large photographs from the series *Apartness* on the wall. One window has red curtains, the other window offers a view of a broomstick on the wall outside.



**Figures 8a–8c – *Apartness* (2008)**



### *A Broom In The Courtyard* (2011)

What does a broom signify?



**Figure 9 – *A Broom in the Courtyard* (2011)**

The broom was there, in the courtyard. What does a broom signify – a photograph of a broom by William Henry Fox Talbot, cleaning the courtyard, wiping streets, a witch, the new broom cleans the space...

Only later when things were installed and the broom was visible from the window of the *Apartness* – someone fluent in Italian told me that verb from *scopa* ('broom' in Italian) or *scopare* means also 'having sex' in slang. I like these kinds of unconscious coincidences.

### *Unsocial Hours* (2011)

Where do bread rolls come from?



**Figures 10a and 10b – *Unsocial Hours* (2011)**

Two channel video *Unsocial Hours* (10 min) shows the journey of bread rolls from a bakery to the shops and from there to a table in a café or in an office. Dough is kneaded and bread rolls are baked at night at the "Sunshine Baker", to be sold in daytime in cramped kiosks and eaten as cheap and quickly available snack. In the video, a male voice reads out the Estonian names of the bread rolls as if announcing departing trains: ...cheese roll, cheese pastry, cinnamon roll, cream roll, currant roll, danish pastry, fruit danish, cheese danish, puff pastry, cream puff, poppy roll, jelly roll, family size roll, french pastry, big cheese bun, elephant ears, dream roll, viennese bun, butter bun, alexander cake, cheesecake, chestnut cake, sofia cake, tatyana cake, caprice cake...

Lilia sells bread rolls. We buy them, hurrying to catch a train or other. Where do these rolls come from? What is the mechanism, who profits, who owns this production?

Two-screen videos are stuck together at the corners, the obtuse angle between the screens enables to see both screens together. There are two special benches in the room to enable the viewers to fully perceive the atmosphere.

### *His Song* (2011)

What kind of song?

In palazzo Malipiero there was a little bathroom between two video rooms, it seemed necessary to integrate this space also as a bridge from *Unsocial Hours* to *Averse Body* to *A Room of One's Own*. It was accomplished as a voice work (6 min 30 sec loop) – a man singing under shower – performed by singer and voice artist Roomet Jakapi, who has a PhD in philosophy.

The small lit bathroom is open, but the entrance is restricted by a red rope. The singing of a man in the shower can be heard from behind the shower curtain. Through the voice, he spreads everywhere in the room.



**Figure 11 – *His Song* (2011)**

### *Averse Body* (2007)

Do prostitutes have a sort of aversion towards their body?

*Prostitutes, for example, often have coarse voices. There are two reasons why their voices are not clear: alcohol and cigarettes on the one hand and, on the other, the enormous changes in temperature between walking the streets and being busy inside. This is not all. There is something that might not be scientific, but I believe it anyway. These women have a sort of aversion to their bodies. That aversion, that lack of trust (or misplaced trust), causes a split personality. (Grotowski, 2002)*

The video installation *Averse Body* consists of video interviews and drawings. In the video (45 min 54 sec), the artist under the name of Foxy Haze puts questions to women who offer sexual services. The questions concern their bodies, in order to test the opinion of the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski that prostitutes have an aversion to their bodies.



**Figure 12 – Averse Body, stills (2007)**

The replies of 11 women are vastly different, some are more satisfied with their bodies, and some are less so. The video shows a taxi drive in wintery Tallinn along the addresses of brothels and flats where the prostitutes operate. The walls display drawings of the favourite flowers of these women.

In the course of feedback I heard that any woman would have given the same replies to my questions. An interesting national nuance emerged as well: Estonian men are ashamed of buying sexual favours from Estonian women, if there are Russian women around to offer the same.

The video room has a soft red sofa for the viewers.

### *The Place Of Truth* (2012) in Pärnu Museum

**Do Estonian women realise that they are discriminated in salaries?**

*It turns out that the majority of the reasons for the salary differences between men and women are unknown – the differences could be due to personal traits or discrimination as well as a lack of detail in the statistics. (Jaagant, 2011)*



**Figures 13a and 13b – The Place of Truth (2012) in Pärnu Museum, Estonia**

According to the EU statistics, in Estonia the unadjusted gender pay gap was 30.9% in 2007 (% difference between average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees, as % of male gross earnings, unadjusted form). It is the biggest pay gap in the EU. In textile industry the salaries are the lowest. The other less paid spheres of work in Estonia are also mostly occupied by female employees: cleaning service, social welfare, sport, amusement and leisure activities, food and drink service, social and cultural institutions (archives, libraries, museums etc.), retail trade, catering establishments.

To better organise the big space of Pärnu Museum I decided to visualise the gender pay gap. In every factory or plant there seems to be a huge table where women are sitting around doing monotonous jobs that cannot be mechanised. We built a 10.4 m long table. At the end of the table there is a construction made of sticks that forms the pay gap scheme – the differences are marked by yellow glossy plastic cloth, the EU indicator is orange. To the right of the yellow scheme stands a metal industrial shelf with potted plants. This is the reconstruction of really existing spatial situations.

## Short summary on media reception

The show in Venice gathered 26 700 visitors in 6 months.

The guest book at Malipiero was mostly full of supporting and understanding comments, showing that the theme was universal. People who visited the show during the press days gave a good feedback and their thoughts were similar to my own ideas regarding the project.

Estonian media remained modest. There were not many articles written on this exhibition (except in *Estonian Art* magazine and *Kunst.ee* magazine who published articles by Anu Allas and Elo-Hanna Seljamaa on the project before the biennale), the media representation mostly consisted of interviews with me on the topic before and after the biennale.

In Estonian main cultural weekly *Sirp* there were two texts about Venice biennale in October 2012 and their authors only briefly mentioned the Estonian pavilion. A female Estonian researcher living in Italy put the show into the category *Alternative*. An Estonian male painter said that “the Estonian pavilion was prim and thoroughly decent” (Sirp, 2011).

One Estonian male culture critic wrote in the annual overview of culture in the daily *Postimees* that “the Estonian participation in one of the world’s most significant art events, the Venice biennale, was once again conjunctural and unoriginal. Liina Süb’s project *A Woman Takes Little Space* presents cliché ideas, no risks, preferring safe and harmless pseudo-sociality.” The critic regarded this as a trend to “consciously produce art meant for export, which takes into consideration international curators’ so-called taste”. And thus he had to attack against “howling with the wolves. Against unoriginality, imitations, wandering ideas, turning art into a product”. (Kaalep, 2011)

The Zurich-born artist Barbara Fässler wrote in the Latvian art magazine *Studija* that aesthetically the exhibition was weak and amateurish: “Notwithstanding the precise research of materials and the great idea of presenting private and intimate aspects of the feminine world through mutations of the exposition space in a (fake) apartment, there is no denying a superficial and demonstrative aspect to this approach. /.../ The works don’t manage to hide their formal weaknesses; the videos seem to have been filmed amateurishly; and the photographs are all frontal shots, making one think of a family photo album.” (Fässler, 2011).

The artist Sirje Ainso from Estonian diaspora in Argentina found that I had Soviet nostalgia and I was showing Estonia in regretful manner: “How does the described represent Estonia...? Does the artist’s topic with a ‘social message’ justify this display, which shows Estonia in worse light than any ‘fourth world’ country, where nobody wants to go? ... The artist has, unfortunately, despite her education and today’s possibilities, both feet still firmly planted in the Soviet era – is this inertia or nostalgia...? A pity about the wasted chance to present Estonia as a cultured country.” (Ainso, 2011)

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