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In 1994 I discovered Estonian art. On a cold, dark afternoon in Tallinn I found myself in the Knighthood House (*Rüütelkonna Hoone*) on Kiriku plats. This was the temporary home of the Art Museum of Estonia. I have a vivid memory of being unexpectedly invited by the curator, Eha Komissarov to see some of the wonderful drawings by Kristjan Raud that, for want of space, were kept in scarcely adequate storage. Mesmerized by the weird and wonderful scenes from *Kalevipoeg* I remember thinking what a great pity it was that these masterpieces were not on show to the public.

It is now twelve years later and I return to a museum – and city – transformed. One will find no better encapsulation of the dramatic changes that have taken place in Tallinn than in the grounds of Kadrioru park. Walking past the resplendently restored Kadrioru Palace I came across a building that seemed to grow out of the ground. This is Kumu, the long-awaited permanent home of the Art Museum of Estonia. Once inside I found myself reunited with Kristjan Raud. Standing before his *Death of Kalevipoeg* (1935, charcoal, 69.8 x 15.8 cm) it struck me how Kumu fulfils the prophecy of the epic by resurrecting not only Raud's stricken hero, but many other artworks by a multitude of other Estonian artists working in markedly different styles and circumstances.

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Kumu has been a very long time in the making. The Art Museum of Estonia traces its origins to 1919. It occupied Kadrioru Palace in the 1920s and again from 1946 until 1993, when the parlous state of this building necessitated its removal to the aforementioned Knighthood House. And, just as the founding of the museum coincided with Estonian independence, so too did plans to build Kumu correspond to the resumption of sovereignty.

However, although it was first agreed at the end of 1991, Kumu was not inaugurated until February 17, 2006. The competition held long ago in 1993-4 had been won by the Finnish architect Pekka Vapaavuori with his entry 'Circulos'. The name is suggestive of the way that the concrete building arcs in a semi-circle. The circle is completed by a curving forecourt made up of a prodigious arrangement of steps and ramps. The entire structure is enormous – it occupies a plot some 36 206 m². And yet, from the park, the building itself does not appear excessively vast. There are five stories, plus an extra two underground, set within the limestone escarpment separating the park from the district of Lasnamäe. The floor space of the building is 20,970 m², of which the exhibition halls account for 'just' 5,000 m². There is a 246 seat auditorium for an extensive programme of film, music, dance, theatre, performances, conferences and lectures. In addition to the exhibition galleries there is an education centre, library, archive, storage space, and restoration workshop, not to mention the ubiquitous café, restaurant and (of course) a museum shop.

Kumu was paid for by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, established in 1994 to 'support projects which promote, introduce and popularise the arts and sport' (see <http://veeb.kulka.ee>). Its resources come from an excise on alcohol and tax on gambling. As well as paying for the building, the fund also provides money for new acquisitions. In terms of capital spend, Kumu has cost 656 m EEK. This is an incredibly bold venture for a country of the size and nature of Estonia. This prompts two related questions: does it succeed and is it viable?

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There are two ways in to the museum: the main entrance down the immense flight of steps; or a side entrance from the park. Entering through the latter one is confronted by a daunting spectacle. Should you have visited the Finnish museum of contemporary art, *Kiasma* in Helsinki it will look strangely familiar. A curving ramp leads upwards to some unseen destination. This is an intimidating space, not helped by the fact that signage is minimal and staff non-existent. It is clear that as little as possible is allowed to impinge on the architecture. This includes art. One has to travel a considerable distance before ever encountering a painting.

Assuming one has successfully negotiated the building and found the way to the first galleries, the story of Estonian art begins. The two floors above the entrance level contain long-term displays of Estonian art from the 18th century until the present day. The first consists of work up until the Second World War. It is here in the aptly named 'Treasury' where one encounters some of the most familiar and admired examples from Estonian art history. Of the many artists featured I would like to mention just one, Nikolai Triik (1884-1940). This is primarily because he painted one of the icons of Estonian art (and one that seems especially relevant to this journal). It is entitled *Lennuk, the Ship of Kalevipoeg* (1910, tempera and chalk). Resembling a design for a fresco or other wall painting it betrays a similar national romanticist character as contemporaneous paintings in Norway and Finland (not least Akseli Gallen-Kallela's depictions of *Kalevala*). Triik is also of interest because he marks the transition from national romanticism to other international styles that brought an influence to bear on Estonian art. He travelled to Norway in 1905 and Berlin in 1910 and executed a series of stunning portraits in a variety of styles including Impressionism, Fauvism and Expressionism.

These are all beautifully displayed. The building is pierced by a variety of windows to allow as much natural light in as possible. This is complemented by artificial lighting hidden in the coves. Each work is accompanied by a label giving the names of the work and the artist. Some pieces have additional explanations and each space contains holders with laminated sheets explaining the theme of the room. Next year an audio guide will be made available.

The galleries on the opening level end in 1944 – a key year in Estonian history: it ushered in the commencement of Soviet power that lasted until 1991. The curators have therefore sensibly chosen this date as marking the juncture between the two floors devoted to the 'permanent' collection. The upper one of the two charts Estonian art of the second half of the 20th century. The artworks are for the most part displayed conventionally in a chronological fashion. But this masks something much more significant. By brilliantly taking advantage of the way the museum's lofty atrium splits the curving building in two, the curators have chosen to divide the collection in an ingenious manner. One side is devoted to 'mainstream art', whilst the other 'constitutes a laboratory of post-war art, presenting art experiments and innovative scenarios that often took place very privately.'¹ This is a testimony to the constrained situation that Estonian artists found themselves in under Soviet rule.

Kumu represents the first opportunity to tell the story of Estonian art history. When I interviewed Eha Komissarov – the curator I first met in the 1990s – she told me quite frankly that ‘conflict was in-built’ in all this. This is made explicit by the title ‘Difficult choices’ which is given to the galleries recounting the Sovietisation of Estonian art. Some people have unsurprisingly questioned the validity of including so much socialist realism (or ‘Stalinist realism’) in this ‘national’ museum. Shortly after the opening of Kumu, an article in the *Postimees* newspaper criticised the number of socialist realist works and called for more Estonian émigré artists to be represented. Komissarov counters this by arguing that, without an account of socialist realism, it is impossible to comprehend subsequent developments. Moreover, Kumu demonstrates the possibility of seeing the works produced in Soviet times as more than just propaganda. It is art of a particularly interesting kind. Estonia possesses an artistic heritage that promises to re-write conventional art history: the unique variant of Pop-art produced in the late 1960s and 1970s is one such example of this.

For Komissarov, Kumu equates to a *dialogue*: it deliberately ‘creates expectations and raises issues.’² This is very apposite given that the name Kumu (derived from KUnstiMUusem or ‘art museum’) also means ‘rumour’, ‘talk’ and ‘echo’ in Estonian. Indeed, ‘talk’ is inevitable given that the museum charts art up to 1991 and beyond. A number of artists from recent periods are still alive, and are likely to have strong opinions concerning the way in which they are written in (or written out) of Estonian / Soviet ‘art history’ as displayed at Kumu. Tensions inevitably only increase the closer we come to the present-day. Both the museum’s top floor and the so-called ‘great hall’ on the entrance level are devoted to temporary displays of contemporary art from Estonia and abroad. Kumu is therefore ‘a hybrid institution’.³ It is both a traditional museum of art history, and a venue for the display of contemporary art. Plans are afoot to mount a display focussing explicitly on Estonian art over the last fifteen turbulent years since the restoration of independence.

Kumu will be an excellent venue for Tallinn when it takes up the mantle of the European City of Culture in 2011. It very aptly provides wonderful vistas over a seemingly perennially expanding city. The building forms one element of an impressive collection of institutions that make up the Art Museum of Estonia. Kadriorg Palace contains the nation’s collection of foreign art. Also included are the Applied Art Museum, the Adamson-Eric Museum, Kristjan Raud House Museum and the Niguliste Museum, all of which were established in the 1980s.

Only time will tell if Kumu lives up to its ambitious expectations. It is charged with the task of earning 10m EEK per year. The 26,000 people who attended in the first three weeks represent a promising start. Yet one concern I have concerns the ‘public-ness’ of Kumu. There is a charge for all visitors: an adult ticket costs 75 EEK. Whilst I understand the economic necessity for this, it does threaten to turn Kumu into an elitist institution and the preserve of affluent tourists. Will Kumu be a place for *all* Estonians? Why is there so little information in Russian? Will Kumu produce exhibitions to tour the art museums of Narva and Tartu? Kumu has a fantastic collection and represents a wonderful opportunity. It is the first cultural venture of its kind in Estonia and it needs to cement itself in the hearts and minds of everyone with an interest in the future of Estonia.

The long-delayed opening of Kumu marks the beginning rather than the end of the Art Museum of Estonia. Kumu's slogan is 'Art lives in Kumu' (*kunst elab siin*). Despite its magnitude only around 10% of the approximately 50,000 works are currently displayed – many of the Rauds I saw in 1994 still languish in the store. There is therefore infinite scope for alternative displays and reinterpretation. The Kumu of 2006 represents but one version of the story. Many others must come because otherwise it will end up as a museum of a museum.

Visiting information

Kumu Art Museum, Weizenbergi 34 / Valge 1, 10127 Tallinn. Closed on Mondays and Tuesdays in the winter and Mondays in the summer, otherwise open every day 11 am – 6 pm. It is also closed on thirteen public holidays. Ticket prices from 30-75 EEK. The guidebook *Kumu – Kunst Elab Siin / Art Lives in Kumu* (ISBN 9985-9626-2-1) is available in the museum shop at 184 EEK. For more information visit: <http://www.ekm.ee>.

Notes

¹ Anon, *Kumu: Eesti Kunstimuseumi uus hoone* (exhibition leaflet), Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2005, p. 11.

² A. Allas et al (ed.) *Art Lives in Kumu*, Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2006, p.156.

³ *Ibid*, p.146.