

Raul Meel's combinatorics, notation and self-tales¹

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Raul Meel's significant work "Under the Sky" seems to include all the main themes that exist in his production. By way of introduction, I would like to underline the creative approaches that characterise "Under the Sky", i.e. combinatorics, noting the creative process and elements. Procedural approach is evident in "The White Fields", where we see temporal dimension in written form. I have tackled these before,² but here it would be necessary to partly rephrase and supplement the earlier text.

Another theme is Meel's latest book "Observing the Wandering Clouds" (2011–2013), which is simultaneously a work of art and an autobiographical address, where biographical facts blend with specific artefacts of poetry.

"Under the Sky" seems to be the work that has attracted most attention in Raul Meel's creative output. This seemingly endless project contains thousands of prints and hundreds of exhibition versions. The current, latest draft, is supposed to have 97 graphic elements.

In 2007, Raul Meel explained "Under the Sky" as follows:

With a fairly long preparation I had completed a selection of pictures by the end of 1973 /.../: 200 different pictures (each could be in four positions plus-minus 0°, 90°, 180°, 270°), also variations from shifting the matrix up or down in relation to the foundation, and decreasing or increasing the angle compared with the standard selection. I thus had altogether about one thousand different two-coloured serigraphs, all of them could be presented in four positions; in addition there were single-colour pictures of six basic images on white paper, two-colour pictures of the basic images, plus dozens of three- and four-colour pictures with intuitively chosen prints...³

The series was originally titled "Under the Estonian Sky", since 1974 when Frechen Print Triennial took place it has been known as simply "Under the Sky".⁴ On 101

¹ Published in *Raul Meel. Dialogues with Infinity*. Eds. by Eha Komissarov, Ragne Nukk, Raivo Kelomees. Published by the Art Museum of Estonia — Kumu Art Museum 2014. The book accompanies the exhibition *Raul Meel. Dialogues with Infinity* in the Kumu Art Museum 9 May — 12 October 2014

² R. Kelomees, *Postmateriaalsus kunstis: indeterministlik kunstipraktika ja mitterateriaalne kunst*. (Postmateriality in Art: indeterminist art practice and immaterial art.) PhD thesis. Estonian Academy of Arts, 2009, pp. 150–160.

³ Raul Meel's letter to the author, March 2007.

⁴ R. Meel, *Minevikukonspekt*. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2002, p. 101.

pages of "Conspectus of the Past" Meel discusses the reasons and meaning of the colour choice in the series. The initial blue had been almost pure ultramarine.

"However, I recalled the big blue blooms of the ordinary bellflower of my childhood, unbleached cornflowers, the blue of Estonian flag – and the blue in the new pictures of "Under the Sky" became lighter: the blue of my pictures matched the Estonian flag blue".⁵

From there onwards, he affords the blue, black and white a more total meaning:

"Using blue, black and white in creating a perception of cosmic universe is regarded as something quite normal /.../".⁶

Disregarding personal associations that the abstract images⁷ and colours in the picture might evoke in the viewer, I would like to emphasise the combinatorics realised by the artist. Everything is based on his "engineering background", ability to think technologically, instincts of an inventor and constructor. As he lacked any earlier art-making experience, he rested his approach on the familiar, using mathematical constructions and control mechanisms. Mathematics, according to Meel, is good and impersonal. Relying on that, the formal method made it possible to regard art-creation as a rational process of realisation.⁸

On the basis of a certain standard understanding, we consider art creation as self-expression. It is a clash between the artist and a work of art, producing an artefact as a result. An artist's emotional and subjective creative outburst materialises in the matter of the artwork. In that sense, creative work is described as an emotional explosion, resulting in an artwork. According to the normal understanding, the emotion instilled in an artist's work should carry over to the viewer.

Following Meel's methods, we only seldom feel that a work was born out of momentary emotions; a work of art is the outcome of deliberation and formal construction. This, however, does not indicate any lack in expressiveness. Certain formalism and avoiding direct emotional and singular creative explosion has enabled the artist to develop massive series. "Under the Sky" is an excellent example here.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The silkscreen prints were based on graphs from the book *Masinaehitaja käsiraamat I* (Manual of Mechanical Engineering, publishing house Valgus, Tallinn, 1968) and a Russian-language Handbook for Protective Relaying (Справочник по релейной защите, Москва, Ленинград: Государственное Энергетическое Издательство, 1963), which had been cleared of numerical information.

⁸ Conversation with Raul Meel 26 March 2007. Recording owned by the author.

Another aspect is the serial approach. A work of art is understood as a set of works, not as individual works. The authorship has been transferred to the component elements of the series, but they cannot be understood as artworks. The work is a set, series, ensemble. The artist has indeed called them thus – a field ensemble.

Meel has written about serialism:

It seems to me that in my methods, especially in concrete poems and typewritten drawings, the practice of serial realisation was natural and inevitable. As if I had had it from birth. I did not learn it from any Master's words or works.⁹

I would like to counterbalance this line of thought with Leonhard Lapin's idea, which he expressed in his conversation with the current undersigned in 2007 that working in series comes from Sooster. Estonian artists were in touch with him at the end of the 1960s, including Tõnis Vint, who in turn influenced other artists.¹⁰

A similar opinion can be found in Lapin's book „The Avant-garde”:

„The idea of working with series comes from Sooster, Tõnis Vint learned it from him and through him it passed on to my work as well. A picture series is the best opportunity to clearly and powerfully point out the diverse ideas that matter to you, and creatively differentiate a big message from small ones, fragments of ideas that constantly come to mind... Sooster was the one who initiated the cult of large-scale series, running through years, and we could claim that in Estonian art, too, those who have managed to break into the international arena are mostly working in big series.”¹¹

We do not have to reach for a communication theory textbook in order to describe the spread of ideas and their movement as memes in three models: linear, radial and in a network. The linear model means that there is one source of information; knowledge/influence passes from source A to receiver B. The radial version also has one information source, but numerous receivers, and the network model means that it is not possible to establish the source of information, everybody produces and receives information. Today's internet is a typical network information channel, which does not mean that it eliminates the spread from one to one or from one to many.

⁹ Raul Meel's email to the author, April 2007.

¹⁰ Information in conversation with Leonhard Lapin 10 January 2007.

¹¹ L. Lapin, *Avangard*. Tartu Ülikooli filosoofiateaduskonna vabade kunstide professori Leonhard Lapini loengud 2001. aastal. Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus 2003, pp. 162-163.

In the case of the Soviet Union as a state with rigid and restricted information channels we might presume the model of linear information infection and distribution, but it is quite likely that the network model operated as well. The same "serial" method developed into an international creative method and it was involved in scientific methods too: various possibilities are tested with the same initial data, until the desired result is achieved. I would in fact question the "authorship" of serial method, attributing it to a specific artist. True, in propagating certain ideas, respected persons, outstanding artists act as augmenters of attention, just as on this occasion Ülo Sooster and Tõnis Vint can be regarded as role models.

It is fascinating from the point of view of the undersigned that Raul Meel's series "Under the Sky" was preceded and accompanied by "theoretical" and "dry" manipulations with formulas, which described the placement of two serigraph nets in relation to each other. Meel wrote the picture formulas down in three versions (minus, standard and plus) in three adjacent columns (see Figure 1), getting a total of 5328 formulas. Standard means 1776 combinations, multiplied by three it will be 5328. These columns fitted on 20 pages, which the artist himself considers avant-garde drawings.

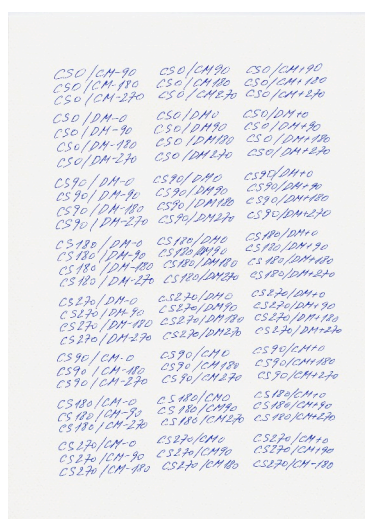


Figure 1.

The visual basis for these serigraphs was the schemes from the already mentioned „Manual of Mechanical Engineering I” (one of them in Figure 2).

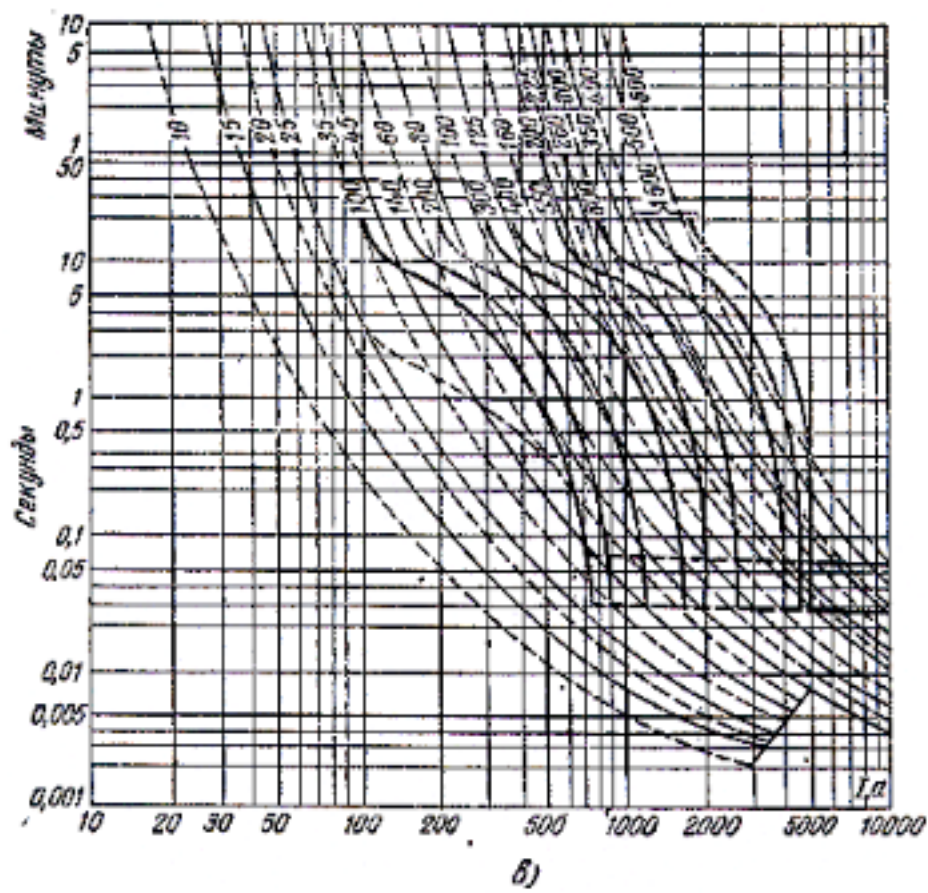


Figure 2.

The artist first determined marks (see Figure 3), and the corresponding original images C, D, F, G, H, I.¹²

¹² Image C is from the “Manual of Mechanical Engineering”, D is its reflection. Meel writes about other images: “The drawings of F and H are visualisations of temporal changes of the characteristics of two different electromagnets; G and I are mirror images derived from F and H.” Meel’s letter to the author, 25 Jan 2014.

TATVA ALL
 serigrafiaand, d 65x63 cm
 Aadressid:
 1) ... 4 värv / 3 värv / 2 värv / 1 värv pöördel
 2) C, D, F, G, H, I - algajundidel
 3) M - must värv
 4) S - sinine värv
 5) P - punane värv
 6) h - hele värv
 7) t - tume värv
 8) 0°, 90°, 180°, 270° - algajundide
 (pöördajundide) pöördumise pöördumise
 9) + ... märgid, et alama serigrafiaand
 on värvide suhtes pöördumise suhtes
 värvide 0°, 90°, 180°, 270°
 10) - ... märgid, et alama serigrafiaand
 on värvide suhtes pöördumise suhtes
 värvide 0°, 90°, 180°, 270°

Figure 3.

Every image had four versions, each with a turn of 90 degrees (see Figure 4).

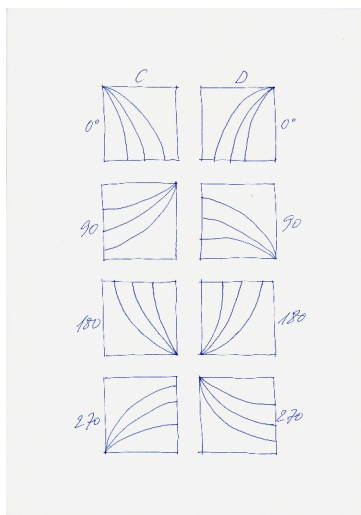


Figure 4.

The colours: M – black (Estonian *must*), S – blue (*sinine*), P – red (*punane*), h – light (*hele*), t – dark (*tume*). The clockwise rotation of the images were marked with degrees 0°, 90°, 180°, 270°. Additional signs „+” and „-“ were used, denoting that the lower image lies more/or less at 0°, 90°, 180°, 270° in relation to the upper image.

Some examples of reading the formulas.

Let us look at one of the field ensembles of "Under the Sky", which consists of ten serigraphs (Figure 5) and at the ensemble's schematic sheet with colour and location annotations (Figure 6). For instance serigraph VI with the formula DM90/CS-180.

The formula means that the uppermost is the black image D, turned clockwise at 90 degrees, and the lower blue image C, turned a bit less than 180 degrees.

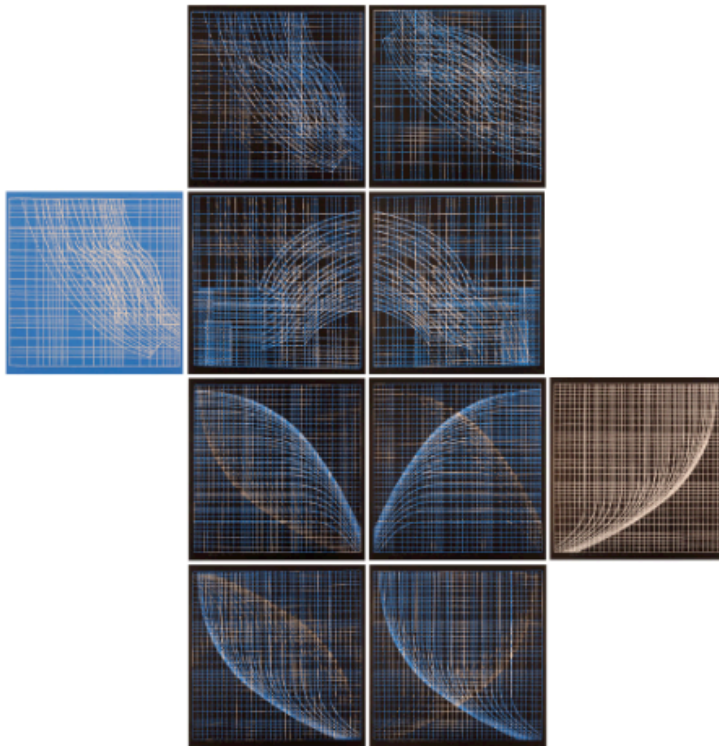


Figure 5.

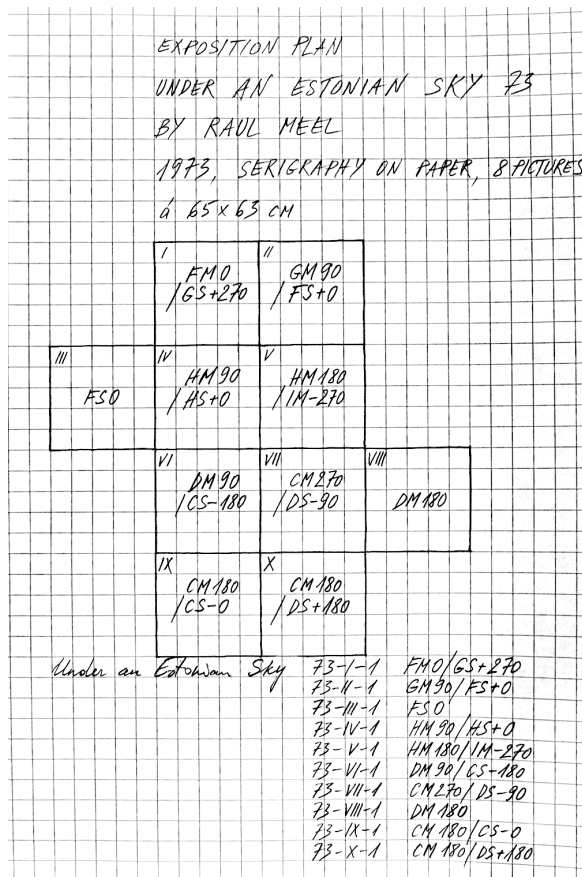
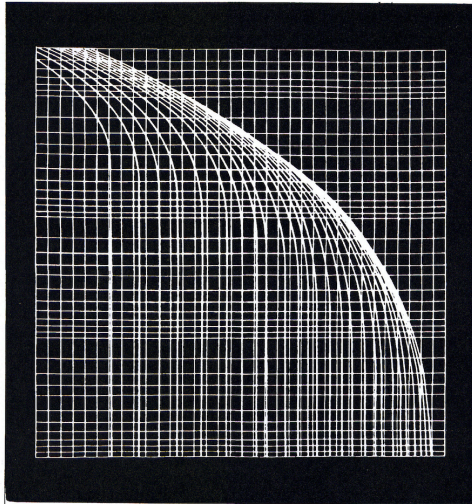


Figure 6.

The basic images C and D, which constitute the nets of the serigraph, look like elegant clusters of curving lines (Figure 7).

TAEVA ALL
serigrafate sans

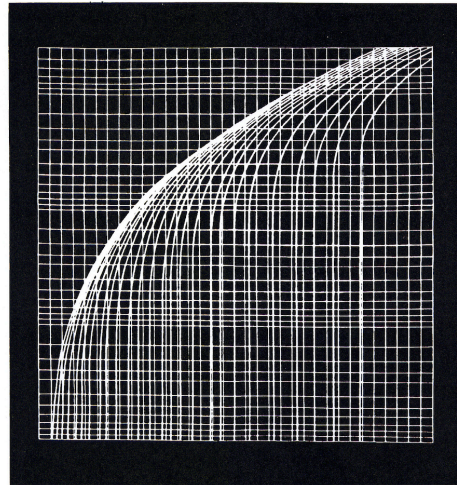
algebrafund C, position 0°



positiefilm 73x68 cm

TAEVA ALL
serigrafate sans

algebrafund D, position 0°



positiefilm 73x68 cm

Figure 7.

The first image be printed is blue C, turned inside out, then black image D on top of it, turned clockwise by 90 degrees. The result through the formula DM90/CS-180 resembles an egg or a diving fish (Figure 8). However, it would be naïve to suppose that the image was created to evoke mimetic associations. The viewer may see parallels in the picture with other artist depicting elliptical objects, but in the current context this picture is one of many compound images, and the viewer is at liberty to guess what it "recalls". Knowing that abstract art in the 1970s produced ideological side meanings, perhaps even directly anti-Soviet ideas, we can but guess the tense effort of imagination by the confirmed interpreters, who tried to "read" something into these serigraphs.

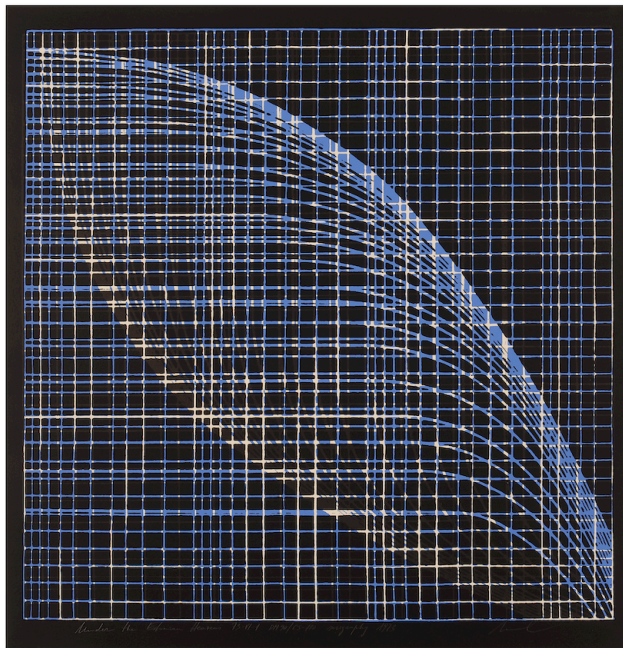


Figure 8. DM90/CS-180

We have thus described the recipe book of Raul Meel's art creation. It is likely that with this kind of instruction system anyone would manage the copying and the printing. Authorship of realisation could be easily transferred to someone else.

This is the series that Meel has copied most, creating ensembles with varying number of pictures. The latest draft contains 97 works.

"Under the Sky" is also interesting for its physically undetermined complexity. These ensembles have been shown by a few pictures at a time, but also by 45. This is an unlimited artwork, which at least in theory could be produced again every time. In reality it does not of course work like this, as the artist has fixed ideas about how one or another set of squares should be designed.

Meel approach in Estonian art is quite unprecedented, as combinatorics and formalisation of serialism have been taken to a level where graphic works could be described as formulas. We could call this an individual notation system. Seeing that

they consist of normal Latin letters and Arabic numerals, we cannot easily attribute singularity and originality to it, but it is nevertheless fascinating.

Solving technical tasks usually involves notation, marking with symbols, but it is much less common in artworks. We can quote as an example the approach of Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella and others, we can refer to systemic painting and the anti-form movement in the 1960s, when artists realised artworks as a result of cold calculation. Raul Meel's ensemble "Under the Sky" is anything but a cold approach, it is emotionally and historically arranged, plus a local meaning because of the blue-black-white, which makes the work contextually eloquent.

Self-tales

One of the attempts to understand the artist's work often means simplifying his output or reducing his world view to clear components, i.e. personal preferences or fears, biographical facts, temporal periods or spatial locations. This is a great help in talking about the artist and mediating him. He might not agree with everything. It can also happen that another glance is actually useful to the artist as it helps him to see himself more clearly. The artist creates himself, reconstructs on the basis of someone else's reflecting opinions.

Raul Meel generates enough information to find explanations and meanings for him. It seems to me that the information offered by the artist could sometimes be contradictory and confusing. The listener fails to put two and two together. Meel's self-tales bubble and multiply, leap into a distance and then return. His art, too, is a self-growing plant, expanding in every direction, relying on seeds that were set to germinate in the late 1960s.

Meel's self-tales achieve the status of a self-myth, they become self-narratives. They are repeated and are fixed and help the artist to frame different periods of his life. He has placed his life story and creative work between them. However, in his case these are biographical facts and not inventions. In that sense, I would like to mention Virve Sarapik's text *A Writing Artist*, which inspired the construction of the current

viewpoint.¹³ Through Meel's self-tales, I interpret his work, which contains these self-tales.

These self-tales are Raul Meel's five self-interpretations:

- **self-discoverer of concrete poetry,**
- **artist with technical school background,**
- **beekeeper,**
- **artist without the traditional art education,**
- **representative of Soviet-era non-conformist art.**

These self-tales constitute the foundation upon which the artist has built up his self-perception and -respect. More interestingly, though, is that the foundation also supports his works and series. In some cases the self-tales are in fact the content of his works.

I would like to examine Meel's biography via his most recent four-volume book **„Observing the Wandering Clouds I–IV“**, 2011–2013, which has over 3000 pages. The artist's more important biographical episodes are reflected there. Everything is on A4 format sheets, at the moment in files, although they are eventually supposed to be printed. In my vision they could be seen as a digital exposition object, which the viewers could easily browse on screen. With mostly 100-point Times New Roman the artist carries the reader from page to page, ignoring the customs of canonical transcription. An example is presented below, transferred into the normal font size. I would however like to point to a peculiar trouble that the artist causes to the reader, which then develops into pleasure and, according to my own experience, culminates in poetic experience.

Page 26 presents in 100-point Times New Roman font:

MÄLET
AN
ENNA
EMA
KÕHUST

¹³ V. Sarapik, "Kirjutav kunstnik," Paar sammukest. Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi aastaraamat XXV. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus, 2009, pp. 30—57.

Maintaining in this quote the transcription and design, we might experience that the text is elevated into a supernaturally meaningful fact. The artist has mixed his concrete poetry and the text-writer experience, thus creating hybrid writing, where graphic pictures and significant text have blended.

Writing about the development of his artistic world view, he starts through links with his first wife Aino Pori, through whom he communicated with art circles and described serious art: "... real art is true-to-life depiction." But soon he comes to the breakthrough, dated 1961, when he saw in a lecture of higher mathematics how the chalk lines on the blackboard lived, depicting the course of human life. The text spreads across several pages:

TALLINN
A
TEHNIK
AÜLIKO
OLI
KÕRGE
MA
MATEM
AATIKA
LOENGU
L, 1961,
NÄGIN,
ET
KRIIDIJ
OON
TAHVLI
L ELAS,
KUJUTA
DES
JUST
KUI
INIMES
E ELU
KULGE
MISL.¹⁵

¹⁴ I remember myself in my mother's belly. (Free translation from Estonian.)

¹⁵ At a lecture of higher mathematics in the Tallinn Technical University in 1961, I saw that the chalk line on the blackboard was alive, depicting the course of human life. (Free translation from Estonian.)

Meel discovered concrete poetry for himself. In 1968-69, the publication of his collection "Club" was banned. Meel commented: "The editors of the almanac "Hees" planned to duplicate my poetry booklet in 50 copies, under the aegis of the young author's society of the Soviet Estonian Writers' Union, but the vigilant representatives of the Soviet power banned it."¹⁶

The collection inspired later graphic art works, such as „Eternity” (1968/1971, serigraphy on paper, 65x63 cm), „Function” (1968/1970, serigraphy on paper, 65x63 cm), „Happy Sea” (1968/1970, serigraphy on paper, 65x63 cm), „Country of our own – with nation, without nation; positive” (1968/1970, serigraphy on paper, 65x63 cm) and others. Typewriter drawings, as the author calls them in their original version, became the basis for serigraphs. In that sense the graphic technique is the medium, a means of copying and distributing the original.

When he was working on "Club", Meel actively communicated with literary people, and these contacts became his "most active learning". His most famous and the most laconic summary of an era, „PROGRESS RE GRESS” was completed during the same period (1968) and appeared in the same collection. This had probably something to do with the failed publication of "Club". In 2013 Meel provided an additional interpretation to the initially five-line text. He wrote: "The shape (image) of a poem or an artwork unexpectedly emerges in the mind as a metaphor, rephrasing".

PROGRESS
PROGRESS
PROGRESS
PROGRESS
PROGRESS
RE! GRESS
RE! GRESS

Meel's poem-object "Dice" falls in the same period. He showed it at an exhibition during the student days in Tartu. The following texts were placed on the sides, as if marking the dice scores:

S E E	A I H	S U U	E E L	0 0 1	U D I
E S E	I H A	U S U	E L E	0 1 0	U I D
E E S	H A I	U U S	L E E	1 0 0	I D U

¹⁶ Notes to the selection of works for Kumu Art Museum exhibition, manuscript, 2013–2014.

He discovered concrete poetry himself and heard only later that it was cultivated in the West in the 1950s and 1960s. The reaction of literary people in Estonia was unambiguous:

NÕUKO
GUDE
KIRJAN
DUSÜLE
MAD
ÜTLESID
MULLE
ÜLEVAL
T ALLA:
„NII EI
TOHI
LUULET
ADA!
NII EI
TOHI
KIRJAN
DUST
TEHA!”¹⁷

At the first showing of the dice, the viewers were able to roll the dice. The ending of "Dice" was "pretty, entertaining, funny and sad".¹⁸ The dice was invitingly bright white and playful and seemed quite strong. The lads and girls of the Tartu University allegedly played with it by rolling it, until a girl wanted to sit on it or dance on it. The dice "collapsed under the girl's bottom".¹⁹

In the version installed in 1994 in Tammsaare Museum the dice contained bells. The dice project was certainly among the few, perhaps the only example of an "open" artwork at that time. Unfortunately it was later presented as non-movable, as we saw it at the exhibition "The Point of the Game. Archives in Translation" (2008) in KUMU Art Museum. This makes us wonder about the role of museums which archive/preserve, but occasionally distort works of art. We could claim that the ban on touching "Dice" in the museum display is a misinterpretation of an artwork. We see similar situations with kinetic works, which people are prohibited to touch or ignite on "restoration-technical reasons". And although in the context of problems about "preserving the unpreservable",

¹⁷ The Soviet literary chiefs, in a voice from above told me: "This is not the way to make literature!" (Free translation from Estonian.)

¹⁸ R. Meel, Meel. Minevikukonspekt, p. 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

people seek solutions how to present vanishing art or art that cannot be realised in matter, these solutions may bring about the danger of distorting artworks in the exhibition hall.

Interpretations of artists themselves are the fitting theme here. The serigraph works in Meel's "Club" collection can also be understood as a transfer into another medium, as "distortion". An additional aspect is the amplification which is part of taking the visual into another technology. Amplification as a result of multiplication and the changing size. Although we do not regard the artist's self-copying and further interpretation of his own art as a non-creative act, there is the danger of cheap self-repetition. In my view, self-interpretations, -repetitions and developments belong to the everyday world of the artist, and in Meel's art it is fascinating to follow how the initial concrete poems transform into a more "noble" technology, the accepted technique of graphic art. Regarding the context of the 1960s and 1970s it was inevitable, because the typewriter drawings-poems were considered more like drafts which we now accept as originals.

Failing to find acceptance in the literary circles, Meel moved towards art to "seek a chance of life":

NII SIIS
LÄKSIN
GI
KUNSTI
POOLEL
E
ELUVÕI
MALUST
OTSIMA.
KUNSTI
JAOLE
LISAKS
TULID
KAASA
KIRJAND
USE
JAGU
JA
HELIKU
NSTI
JAGU.²⁰

²⁰ I thus crossed over to the side of art to seek a "chance of life". Literature and music came along as well. (Free translation from Estonian.)

On 5 March 1969 Meel met Tõnis Vint. As an “engineering school student”, Meel then discovered and found (more securely after 1971) the modern serial technique of art-making, which Arvo Pärt was said to have used in music from the mid-1970s. According to Meel himself, his art-making method was more objective compared with the emotionally more subjective treatment that prevailed in Estonia at the time. Quite a few bystanders thought that "the lad had come to the wrong place, he had nothing to do with art".

The head of the culture department of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party thought in 1970 that Meel’s “formalism-flavoured experiments have no perspective whatsoever and the young man’s art-theoretical foundation was faulty, to put it mildly”. The same person also presumed that Meel’s art was supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency and that he records unhealthy tendencies.

In 1971 Meel met Ilya Kabakov after the opening of Ülo Sooster’s exhibition in Tartu Art Museum. Between 1971 and 1977 he took part in and received awards at art biennials in Ljubljana, Krakow, Frechen, Venice, Vienna, in Rijeka original drawings exhibition and elsewhere. Meel’s stubborn perseverance and friendly encouragement from Kabakov and a few other sympathisers kept him going. Looking back after decades, someone else’s bitterness and the insults he had to suffer might seem funny, but we must try to imagine the real society without any alternative thinking and working in contemptuous atmosphere. This hardens, but is also frustrating. Hooray to creators who are able to put up with psychological and social pressure and negative environment and still carry on working. The means of pressure differ in each era, but turning them into creative energy belongs to the basic preparation of a creator, which is not taught at any university.

If foreigners asked any Estonian artist about Meel’s status the reply was:

NOBOD
Y
IN
ESTONI
A

Pondering today about the culture of acknowledging or condemning one another, we would take it more calmly, because we can see artists working in different nests.

Being part of the art field does not necessarily mean sharing art-related principles. However, the art structure back then was more clear-cut, the art sphere more uniform and recognition or criticism radiated all across the art field. The artists were divided according to mediums - painting, graphic art, sculpture and applied art.

Meel's biography states that he is an autodidact in art and literature, an electrical engineer by education, and since the early 1980s a semi-professional beekeeper, which means that he could earn his living. However, his voluntary self-realisation in art through his enormous effort of self-determination should be the more appreciated. Official condemnation is part of the respectable title of a non-conformist artist. Ilmar Torn's bilious reaction to the invitation to Sao Paolo biennial, as well as his fellow artists' irony about the thousands of copies of "Under the Sky", who advised him to express himself with "fewer means" – all this frowning and ironic remarks belong in the biography of every creative person who is trying to do something different.

Art was supposed to fit into "one box", i.e. into one picture. When this canon was violated, the artist was severely criticised:

EESTI
KUNST
TOIMUS
KINDLA
TE
RAAMI
DE
SEES:
TERVIK
KUNSTI
TEOS
PIDI
ÄRA
MAHTU
MA
ÜHTE
KASTI.
MULLE
PANDI
PAHAK
S,
ET
ÜLETAS
IN
KANONI

SEERIT
UD
PIIRE.²¹

Meel could only summarise the situation by paraphrasing the classic.

IGAV(AV
ÕITU)
LIIV JA
(ÜSNAGI
)
TÜHI
VÄLI,
TAEVAS
(KAH)
PILVINE²²

Without any particular advertising, various ministers and even the secretary of the Central Committee of the ECP Kabin visited Meels' personal exhibition organised in the Estonian institute of design and technology in 1974. This was a typical Soviet-era phenomenon of the communist party apparatchiks publicly castigating Western culture, but whenever something resembled that, they paid bootlicking attention; but when it crossed the alternative news threshold, they began tightening the screws. The same category includes the party members watching Western ("anti-Soviet") films, which were never publicly screened.

Saku '73 exhibition was followed by Harku '75. The latter is still seen as a legendary "multimedia" undertaking. At the same time Meel was offered a chance to emigrate to the USA, both by the West and by the KGB.

KAS
SOOVID,
ET
AITAKSI
ME SUL
EMIGRE
ERUDA?²³

People in the know thought he had no future in the Soviet Union for the next 20 years,

²¹ Estonian art happened within certain frameworks: an artwork had to fit into a certain box. I was criticised for crossing the canonised borders. (Free translation from Estonian.)

²² (Rather) dull sand and (quite) an empty field; the sky is cloudy (too). (Free translation from Estonian.)

²³ Would you like us to help you emigrate? (Free translation from Estonian.)

plus there were those who would have helped him in America.

SIIS
KIRJUT
ASIN
„EI“
U.S.A.LE
JA
VEEL
KIRJUT
ASIN
„EI“
KAAGEE
BEELE.²⁴

The notorious “bulldozer exhibition” in Moscow also took place in 1974. This determined the whole background system, or the radical attitude of the authorities towards modernism-flavoured contemporary art. The situation was hopeless.

There is no doubt that Raul Meel managed to capture the international trend or demand that so many artists desire. The difference between his activities back then and the activities of artists today is that in the past the Soviet power, i.e. state organs (including KGB), sat between the artist and the demand. The authorities interfered in everything that had something to do with the ABROAD. It took a long time for those who tried to shake the iron curtain before air started moving again. It is therefore difficult to underestimate the mood of the artists back then – they were not able to expand, represent their art and travel with it.

Among Meel’s legends is MOMA’s wish in 1977 to purchase his art. They had chosen the 1973 "Under the Estonian Sky". As the law did not allow the foreign museums to buy Soviet art, the Leningrad Ermitage was offered an exchange: the art of Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella or James Rosenquist.

The reply of the Soviet official was curt:

²⁴ I then answered “no” to the USA and also “no” to KGB. (Free translation from Estonian.)

HE

COBE

TYÜ! ²⁵

The same series of disappointments and self-tales include the proposal by Flash Art to publish a 5-7 page article, but Meel could not find a single person in Estonia willing to write it. It is easy to imagine how frustrating this must have been.

Describing these tales and referring to them as significant self-tales, besides their traumatic content I also pay attention to their "creative" quality that in a sense constitutes the artist's self-myth. There is no need here for a fastidious art historian to find documentary proof to the artists claims, what matters is the feasibility and probability of these tales and the artist's biographical significance.

Trying to determine his own relations with his contemporaries, and seeking atonement, Meel refers to the Bible and the question posed by Peter: how many times should he forgive people who have sinned against him – up to seven times 7? Jesus replied: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven!"²⁶

PÄRAST
MIDA
LÕPUKS
TULEB
AEG /
AJATUS,
MILLAL
KÕIK
ANDEST
AMINE
ON
JÕUDNU
NUD
SAADA
PARATA
MATUK
S.²⁶

²⁵ Not recommended! (Free translation from Russian.)

Moving in this manner along the first volume of "Observing the Wandering Clouds", the reader learns about the painful experience, i.e. official ostracising and ruining the artist, demonstrated through various examples and episodes. Naturally from the artist's point of view. There are also positive experiences and compliments to Evi Pihlak and Tamara Luuk, whom Meel calls "cannons", which fire meaningful texts with a straight flight path.

In the second volume of "Observing the Wandering Clouds" the author arrives in the 1990s, when his status was much more secure. His views about the world and art are wise-moralistic and social-critical, some of them also evergreen. "Estonian poverty is the dominating mood! If the artists have no money, they cannot independently relate to society, make unconditionally honest creative choices."

EESTI
VAESUS
ON
VALITS
EV
MEELE
LAAD!²⁷

Of course nobody wants to exchange the current social order for anything else, many critics and analysts of social issues have reached similar conclusions: how free is an artist in a "free" society if his livelihood may depend on his opinions and criticism.

Meel's views are presented in the sixth volume:

"Keeping the independent, (socially) active artists in rein, it is most efficient for the rulers to shut them – and not only the artists – into the trap of poverty, which works better than frightening, censorship, repressions or even imprisonment."

Occasionally the words crumble and become pictorial forms, just like on page 355 of the third volume:

²⁶ After which comes the time/timelessness when all forgiving has become inevitable. (Free translation from Estonian.)

²⁷ Estonian poverty is the dominant turn of mind! (Free translation from Estonian.)

Or on page 302 of the fourth volume:

Meel's text moves between the biographical content, art-historical facts and poetic-sound improvisational text objects. It is difficult to spell all this, but as a whole it can be perceived as a many-layered work. It contains references and points to facts and

reality, although it is a rather ethereal text, which reveals to the reader an emotional artist who had poured his life, the charm and harm of the world into the text that remains somewhere between art, concrete poetry, song and meditation.

CV

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