

Jaanus Samma | Artist Interview

Jaanus Samma (1982) is a visual artist based in Tallinn, Estonia, and represented by [Temnikova & Kasela Gallery](#). Over the years, Samma's interests and research have become focused on gender studies and the representation of male sexuality. Investigating how these issues can be discussed and portrayed in art, he combines fieldwork – interviews and archival research – with subjective artistic practice based on his findings. Samma represented Estonia at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015 and was awarded the Köler Prize by the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia. We talked to him about his art and the current situation regarding LGBTQ communities in the Baltics.



Jaanus Samma. Photo: Martin Rünk

A lot of your art focuses on hidden sexualities and identities in the Soviet Union – can you tell us about your work in your own words? How did this interest arise?

History is something that my art has always been about, but currently, I have shifted towards the questions of how history is constructed and what choices have been made, what has been undermined, what has been hidden.

” By now, there are a number of historians that research Estonian queer history, and some papers have already been published, but ten years ago, when I started working on the topic, very few resources were available.

Inspired by curiosity, I began interviewing older gay men to learn about their lives in the Soviet period when sex between men was punishable by law.

Still, a lot of secret exchanges took place – you addressed this subject in the installation *Riga Postcards* at the 2nd Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art.

Often, bigger cities are more attractive for cruising and sex dates, so when I did interviews here in Estonia, the men told me that sometimes they went to Leningrad – now St. Petersburg –, Moscow, and Riga, the latter being considered the capital of the Baltics. When gay men from neighboring countries traveled there for work or sightseeing, they often used the opportunity for casual sexual encounters. *Riga Postcards* is an installation that depicts a utopian 1970s–1980s travel fair that features Riga as a gay tourist destination during the Soviet period. When I was invited to research in Latvia and Riga in particular, I felt a bit uncomfortable, because I didn't want to do superficial research about an intimate topic and then just do my artwork and leave. So, I worked with Latvian experts on queer sexualities and decided to use this honest tourist approach of these places in my exhibition as well.



Installation view Jaanus Samma, Riga Postcards. Photo by Hedi Jaansoo

A recurring element in your work is the image of public toilets, another symbol of repressed and “hidden” sexualities.

The toilets were places where people that were pushed from society could meet each other and could be freer. What is interesting is to see how the center and periphery interlink here: Public toilets that were important for gay communities were mostly located in the center of the cities, often on the main squares. We can see them as a kind of non-spaces. When I continued my research about public toilets in numerous archives, I could hardly find any photos of these spaces, even though there is plenty of material on everything surrounding them.

Like they never existed?

Yes. Also in *Outhouse by the Church*, my first exhibition in Rome, I focused on the marginal subject of public toilets. In this case, a historic outhouse in a village in Estonia located next to an 18th-century church. The outhouse next to St. Michael's Church in Kodavere, Estonia, was a modest wood structure presumably built in 1916. Its interior walls were extensively covered with scrawls such as names and dates, verses from hymnals, all kinds of obscenities, and

doggerel about personal hygiene. These scribbles, mainly from the 1920s and 1930s, characterize a time when this lone church was an important community center, a place where most people in the area met and socialized. The outhouse next to the church, due to its contradictory nature of being both private as well as public space at the same time is a good place for such a thing. It seems as though the outhouse served as a venting place among the youth of Kodavere and its surrounding areas where they were able to release the energy restrained in the serious atmosphere of the place of worship. Showing it in Rome, where everything is so beautiful and antique, posed a nice contradiction and raised the important question of who decides what is beautiful and important.



Installation View Outhouse by the Church, courtesy of the artist

Why, in your opinion, is it important to re-address this history and make it visible in art?

Here in Estonia, certain right-wing, nationalistic forces see “queer” tendencies as a very Western trend, as a brand-new way of living. I think it’s always important to share that it’s nothing new at all. It is always interesting to research the different layers of a city or region. The deeper you get, the more you realize how diverse and rich the culture has been for a very long time.

How do you usually go about your work?

I like doing interviews, working in archives and libraries, but I have also understood that sometimes you can’t do everything by yourself. So for me, it’s interesting to work together with professional historians and researchers, because I think that artistic and academic approaches can complement each other and help to discover different things, or the same things from different angles.

Is bringing LGBTQ* histories to focus and highlighting nonbinary and queer experiences still challenging in Estonia?

I think overall, the tolerance of Estonian society is increasing. We are still witnessing ignorance and even hate, but I think things are getting better. When I showed my exhibition from the Venice Biennale Pavillion, which researches gay history in Estonia during the Soviet

era, here in Tallinn, people were a bit....confused. Overall, I have been lucky and had many positive surprises. For example, I had a series with sweaters that depict obscene patterns – penises and the like. These sweaters are produced by elderly women who know their craft well and I was a bit afraid of what they would say. But they were just interested in technical questions, like how to make this penis appear more real.



*Act 1. From series of knitwear with picture patterns, 2012–
Jaanus Samma*



*Hair Sucks! From series of knitwear with picture patterns, 2012–
Jaanus Samma*

How do you see the future of queer art in the region?

I don't consider my work as only "queer art" – I work with queer topics, but I always work with universal values to make it accessible and understandable for everyone.

"In general, I would be happy if art in general, may it be labeled queer or anything else, gets more attention and plays a bigger role in society.

Is contemporary art on the rise in Estonia?

I would say yes. Corona and maybe ecological awareness have pushed the trend that people are more interested in what is happening in their local region. This helps to create stronger communities in the art scene, which also leads to better outcomes.

Have you been to Vienna?

My gallery, Temnikova & Kasela Gallery, has participated in viennacontemporary and I think it was one of the first fairs they ever did.

I have been working with them for six years now, and they are always very supportive of what I do, not only on a professional level, but over the years it has developed into a friendship and deeper understanding.

What's up next for you?

Lately I have been interested in national museums and how museums and educational institutions have so much power in establishing the official version of history and identities. In museum displays, everyday objects and detached pieces of history become canonical documents. The objects and narratives are often framed by norms, customs, ideals, and their cultural context. At the moment, I am working on an exhibition which will be shown next year at the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, where I plan to display my works alongside their collection.

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