

17.9°

THE THREE LIVES OF A SITE-SPECIFIC ARTWORK

2012

It is not so common, upon entering a gallery space, to be met by the back of the work you came to see.



Anu Vahtra, 17.9°, 2012. Site-specific installation at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM). View from the entrance during the III Artishok Biennale, curated by Liisa Kaljula. Photo by Paul Kuimet.

But this was just the case with Anu Vahtra's 17.9°, a site-specific installation triggered by a photograph hung facing away from us in a very brightly lit space. To be sure, it was not your regular gallery space either. It was the inside of a loading ramp,



EKKM, view of the loading ramp from outside. Photo by Anu Vahtra.

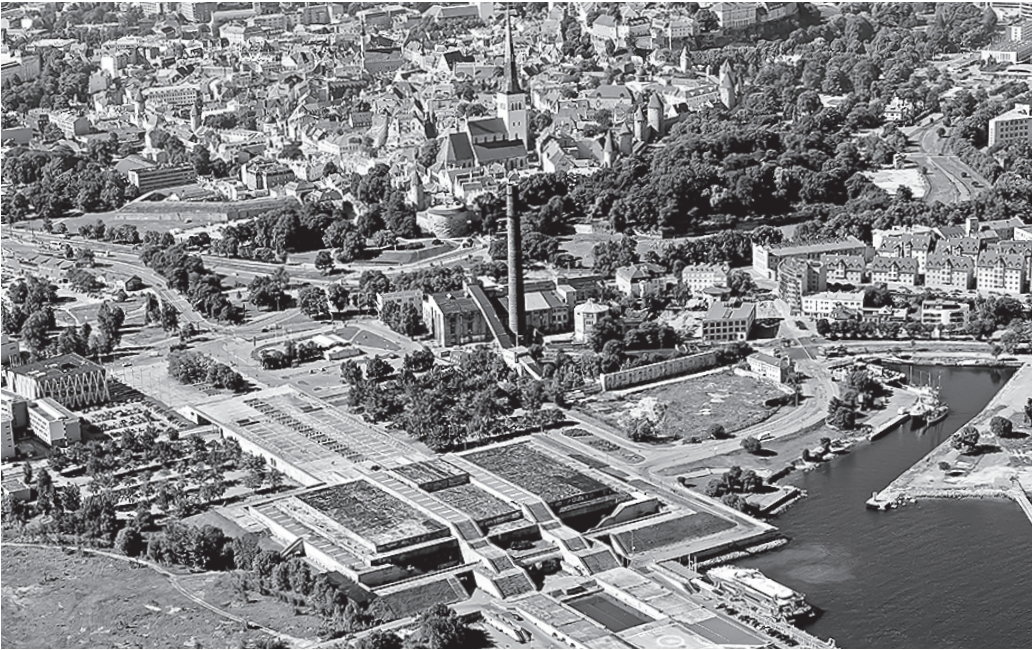
an oblong space with a floor inclined at 17.9 degrees – one of the

exhibition spaces at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM). Notwithstanding its ambitious institutional name, EKKM is in fact a self-initiated art space that has operated in a derelict annex

EKKM around 2008. Photo by Marco Laimre.



to a Soviet-era heating plant near the Tallinn seaside



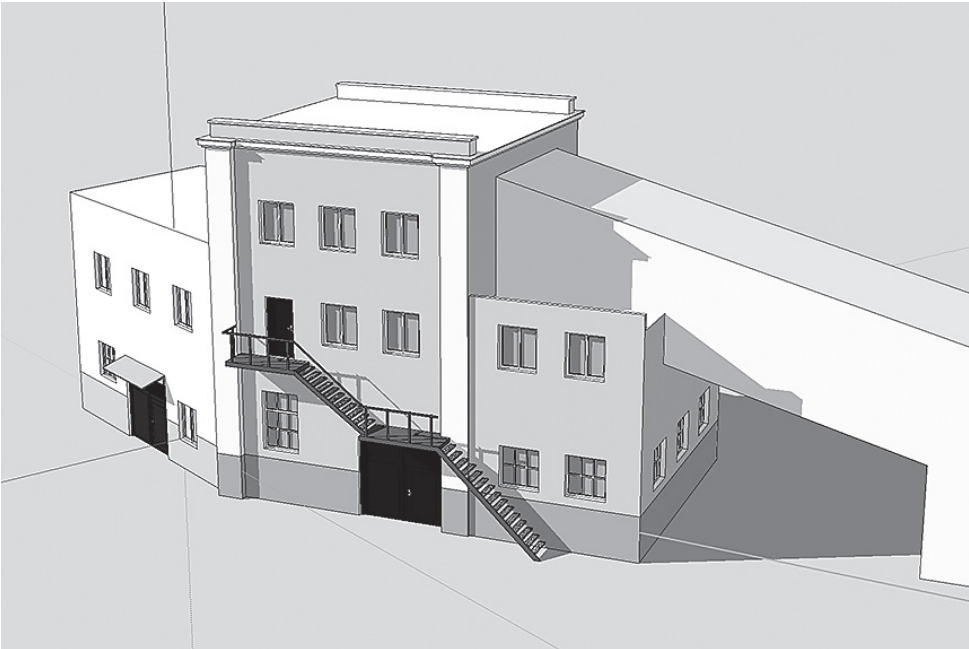
Aerial view of Tallinn in 2011. EKKM and the former heating plant with the old town in the background, on the foreground Linnahall, a Soviet concert and sports venue by Raine Karp. Photo by Arne Maasik.

since 2007.

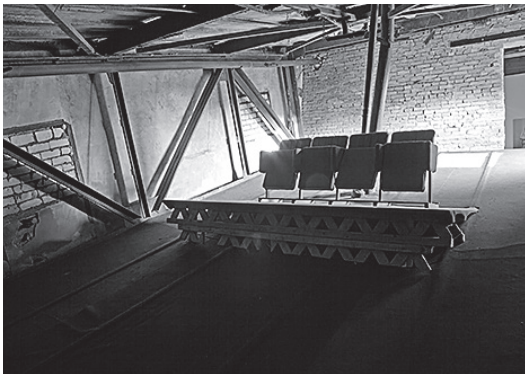
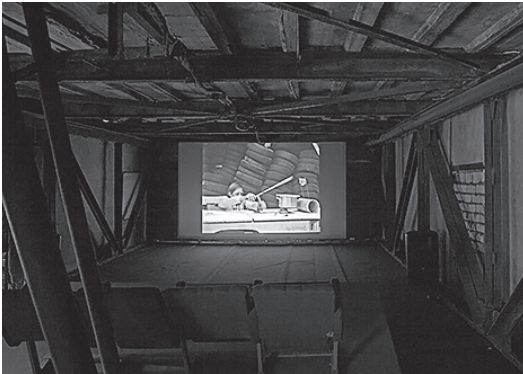
By 2012, when Anu Vahtra's piece was exhibited there in the context of the Artishok Biennial – an event bringing together young artists and critics mockingly using the biennial format – the one-time “art squat” had already gained some official recognition and achieved a legal contract of use with the city. Although due to lack of heating, it only operated seasonally, EKKM was in the process of convincingly establishing itself as the venue for some of the most interesting contemporary art exhibitions on the

Tallinn art scene. The spaces in the modest three-storey industrial plant

SketchUp drawing of EKKM, view of the facade.



were taken into use and adjusted according to the needs of each successive exhibition, leading to extending its activities into the former coal loading ramp in 2010, and making regular use of the ramp as a space for video screenings



Installation views showing the screening room during various exhibitions at EKKM. Photos by Johannes Säe, Mikko Heinsoo, and Anu Vahtra.

ever since.

Investigating found spatial situations is one of the core working methods of Anu Vahtra, a photographer tackling the issues of space both in two-dimensional photographic images as well as large-scale spatial installations. To be more specific, she mostly directs her attention towards

the relationship between the two – the question of how reproduction, duplication or interpretation via photographic space affects our perception and conceptions of the physical space, and vice versa. In this sense, 17.9° was one of the most significant works in her career. The centre-piece of the installation, once you had descended the heavily inclined plane to see it, was an abstract geometric composition



Anu Vahtra. 17.9°, digital print, 70 x 105 cm.
Part of the site-specific installation at EKKM in 2012 and 2014.

of surfaces and lines interpreting the composition of materials and construction details of the loading ramp itself. Composed as a simple constellation of items on a desk, the image struck an eerie balance, confusing the eye – the first, careless glimpse suggesting it could possibly be a photograph of the same interior, you only had to detect the actual framing; a closer examination revealed the essential incongruence of the image and the space. Exhibiting large-scale photographs of the same space they're hanging

in, multiplying it and distorting the perception only so slightly has been a tactic Anu Vahtra has used repeatedly before and since, especially in the series No Title (2007–2010)



Anu Vahtra, No Title #1, 2007. Spatial intervention at P///AKT, Amsterdam.



Anu Vahtra, No Title #3, 2007. Spatial intervention at Hobusepea Gallery, Tallinn.



Anu Vahtra, No Title #5, 2010. Spatial intervention at Novydon, Antwerp.

but also in her most recent work The walls stand, speechless and cold (2015).

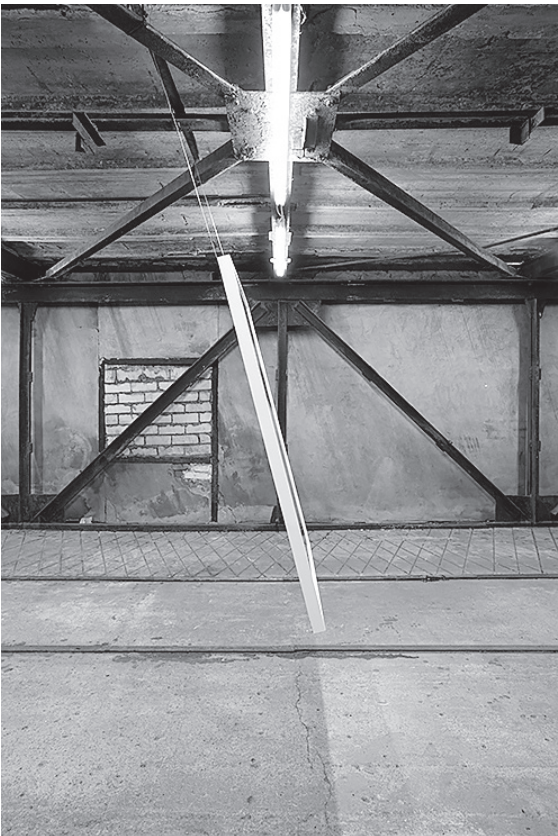


Anu Vabtra. The walls stand, speechless and cold, 2015. Site-specific installation at EKKM, realised for the "Koler Prize 2015. Exhibition of Nominees".

Surely this highlights the illusory quality of the spaces as well as the materiality of the photograph. In the case of 17.9°, the latter is reinforced

by the effect of gravity – the photograph hanging from the ceiling is at odds with the walls,

Anu Vahtra. 17.9°, 2014. Installation view from the side, camera aligned with the hanging frame.



Anu Vahtra. 17.9°, 2014. Installation view from the side, camera aligned with the space.

instantly stressing its mass as a material entity affected by gravity. The blindingly bright and bleak lighting enforces a confrontation with brutal materiality. But the composition on the picture plane does something more specific than simply accentuate the differences between physical and representational spaces.

In one of his rare ventures on the topic, “Of other spaces”, Michel Foucault has contrasted a traditional type of space as emplacement, where each object had its designated, hierarchical position, a modern type of space as an infinite extension, where each object was a point in movement, and the contemporary type of space, which is focused on sites as defined by relations of proximity between points or elements.¹ The distribution or rearrangement of elements may occur randomly or according to different classifications but they are in constant change and redefinition in relation to each other – so space, for us, cannot be anything more than a set of relations among sites. The photograph in 17.9°, interpreting the space around it, disassembles this space precisely into a constellation of such elements, demonstrating it as a set of relationships, as an essentially fractured entity. This operation also demonstrates its arbitrariness. What is site-specificity if the site itself is dismantled into arbitrary elements? The stability of a site is only temporary and apparent, prone to shift by moving any of the elements.

2014

In 17.9°, the precariousness of stability is of course not only an intellectual construct. It is an immediate bodily experience that we are reminded of by each step taken on the inclined floor. Entering the room, the setting with the off-faced photograph has enormous seductive quality, the desire to go and actually see the image matched with an equally strong sense of the threat rising from the gravitational pull towards the inside of the ramp, making your body instantly unstable and nauseous, a mere lump of bodily matter: “Your oesophagus, heart, stomach, kidneys, liver and intestines, now lightly indent pink flesh and yellow fat. ... The macerated peel of your stomach sac

begins to redden and throb.”² The experience prompted curator Rebeka Põldsam to use the work as a starting point for her exhibition “Feeling Queezy?!” , an attempt to apply queer theory to a broader, more essential experience of being in the world. The physical intensity of the work is in marked contrast with the restrained coolness of the photographic handwriting in this and most of all Anu Vahtra’s other works, underlined by her self-proclaimed abstaining from any metaphoric or narrative ‘meanings’ in her art. Yet the case of accommodating 17.9° in the context of a queer art exhibition testifies to a certain openness in the work and performs a most interesting shift in its perception. This prompts the question, where does an artwork actually start? Obviously earlier than on ‘arrival’ in front of the photograph – does it start with the process of descending the inclined plane? Or standing at the door, gathering the guts to do it? Or already by ascending the third floor stairs of the EKKM building, where the touch of a slightly tingling handrail against your palm – a work by Kristin Reiman,



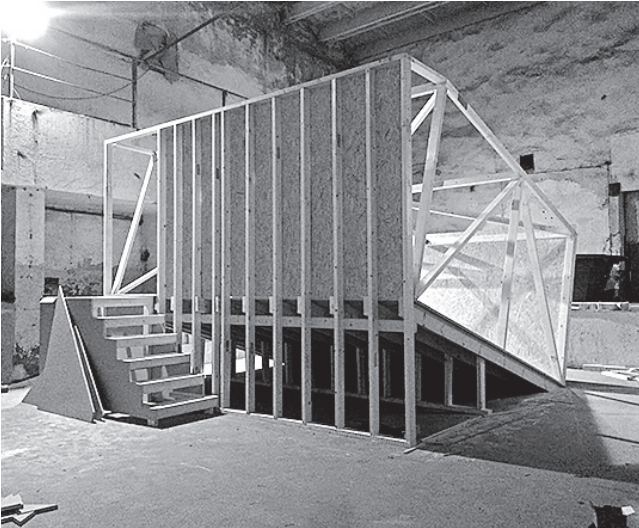
Kristin Reiman, Phantom, 2014. Site-specific installation at EKKM, realised for the exhibition “Feeling Queezy?!” , curated by Rebeka Põldsam. Photo by Kulla Laas.

delicately but unnervingly accentuating our bodily contact with the building – already prepares us for a heightened perception of the work? Was the work thus enriched or contaminated?

Site-specificity necessarily means destabilising the artist's limits of control – a constant challenge for an artist like Vahtra, trying to perform highly controlled, minimal gestures.

2016

Presenting 17.9° as a remake in the context of Art Brussels



Reconstruction of 17.9° for Art Brussels 2016. A test set-up in Tallinn. Photos by Anu Vahtra.

involves a much greater challenge, not much unlike the case of presenting the legendary “When attitudes become form” as a remake at the Fondazione Prada, Venice – restaging the artistic situation entails restaging the initial physical space, at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of this. This highlights a third dimension of the work – its relationship to its institution, and the heritage of institutional critique. The latter has been present in Anu Vahtra’s work in a certain indirect, unvoiced manner. In 2010, in a partnership with Indrek Sirkel she initiated an independent publishing house called Lugemik



Lugemik Bookshop in the courtyard of EKKM, founded by Indrek Sirkel and Anu Vahtra in 2013, complementing their publishing activities. Photo by Anu Vahtra.

to invite projects

exploring the potential of the artist book. Surely this undertaking may be read as a critical art project in itself, a move beyond the institutions. However, she maintains this has not motivated her to abandon a more traditional art practice, which is used to investigate issues on a more abstract level. Dialogue with the tradition of institutional critique was seen in her project Illusion, distorted perspective, lack of balance, another dimension I–III

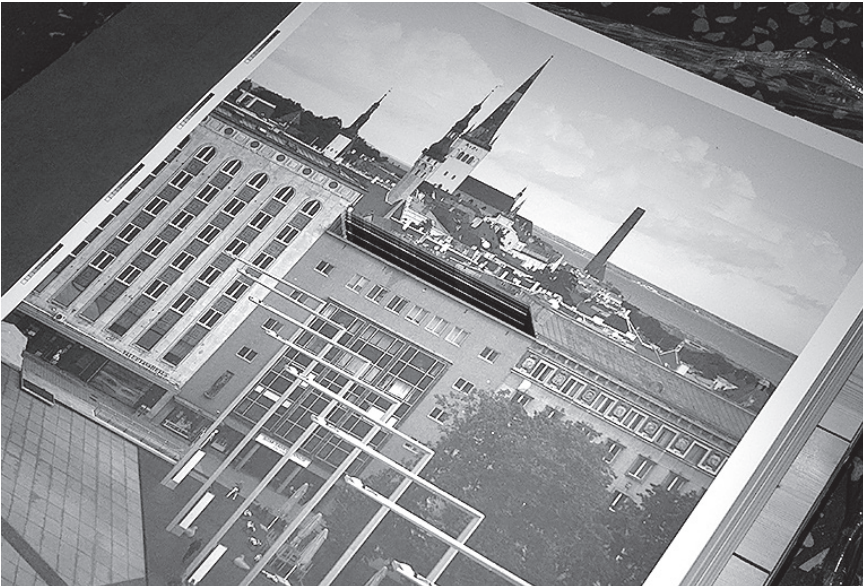


Anu Vahtra. Illusion, distorted perspective, lack of balance, another dimension I–III, 2014. Site-specific installation at Tartmus, realised for the exhibition "Archeological festival, a 2nd hand history and improbable obsessions", curated by Maria Arusoo.



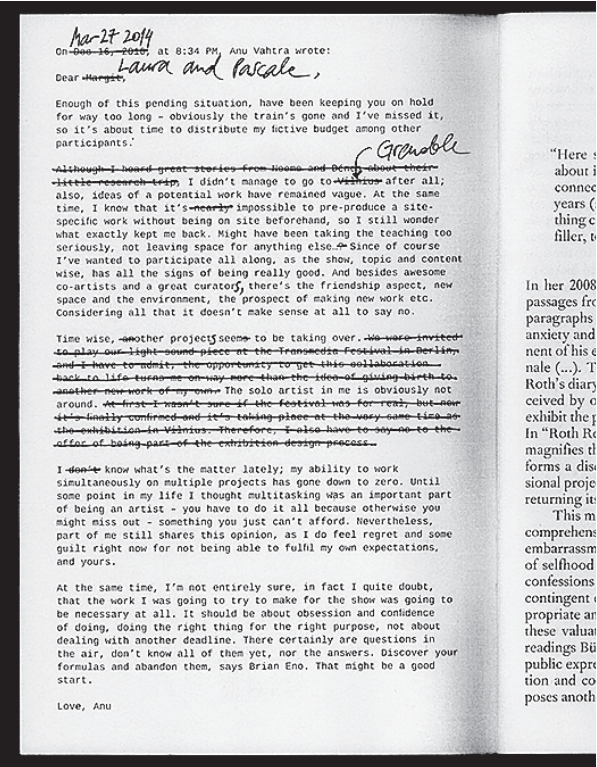
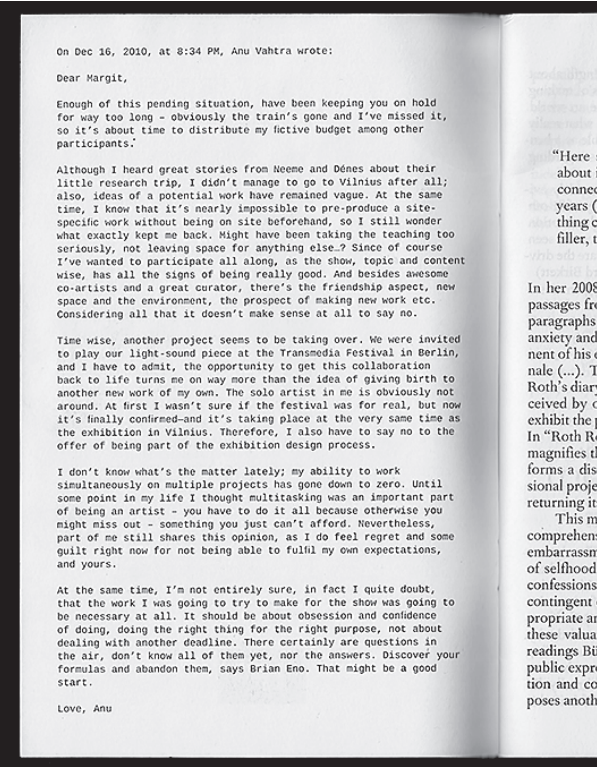
at Tartmus (2014), referencing the museum's history and current situation as well as certain

gestures by Gordon Matta-Clark; in Access by permission only (2010), commenting on the scope of artistic intervention;



Anu Vahtra. Access by permission only, 2010. A stack of 800 offset posters depicting Tallinn Art Hall with a die-cut hole replacing the roof. Realised for the exhibition "Above The City", curated by Kadri Klementi and Helis Heiter in Tallinn City Gallery.

or a series of works in the form of letters declining to participate (e.g. Dear Margit, 2010).



Anu Vahtra. Dear Margit, 2010; Dear Laura and Pascale, 2014. Letters to different curators explaining why the artist can't participate in the exhibition.

The aspect of institutional critique in 17.9° was not so obvious until the possibilities of the work were again tested in a remake, chosen to represent not only itself but also the institution that has become EKKM. The museum, soon to celebrate its tenth anniversary, has inevitably grown from the initial edgy squat, exhibiting student work and experimental formats, into a respected institution

with curatorial and artistic work winning top national awards in the field. The leaders of the museum have never denied that this has been precisely their goal, and they are aiming at filling an important gap in the Estonian scene; at the same time, it seems they would still like to retain something of the street credibility of its alternative roots as well – right now, the institution is in a most interesting state of development. These processes have been mirrored in its architecture as well – the spaces, initially simply cleaned of most of the dirt and clutter, gradually began to be painted white; boarded floor replaced a former less comfortable and secure terrain; the messy shebeen got civilized into a cosy hipster café. However, the space where 17.9° was originally installed, the loading ramp,

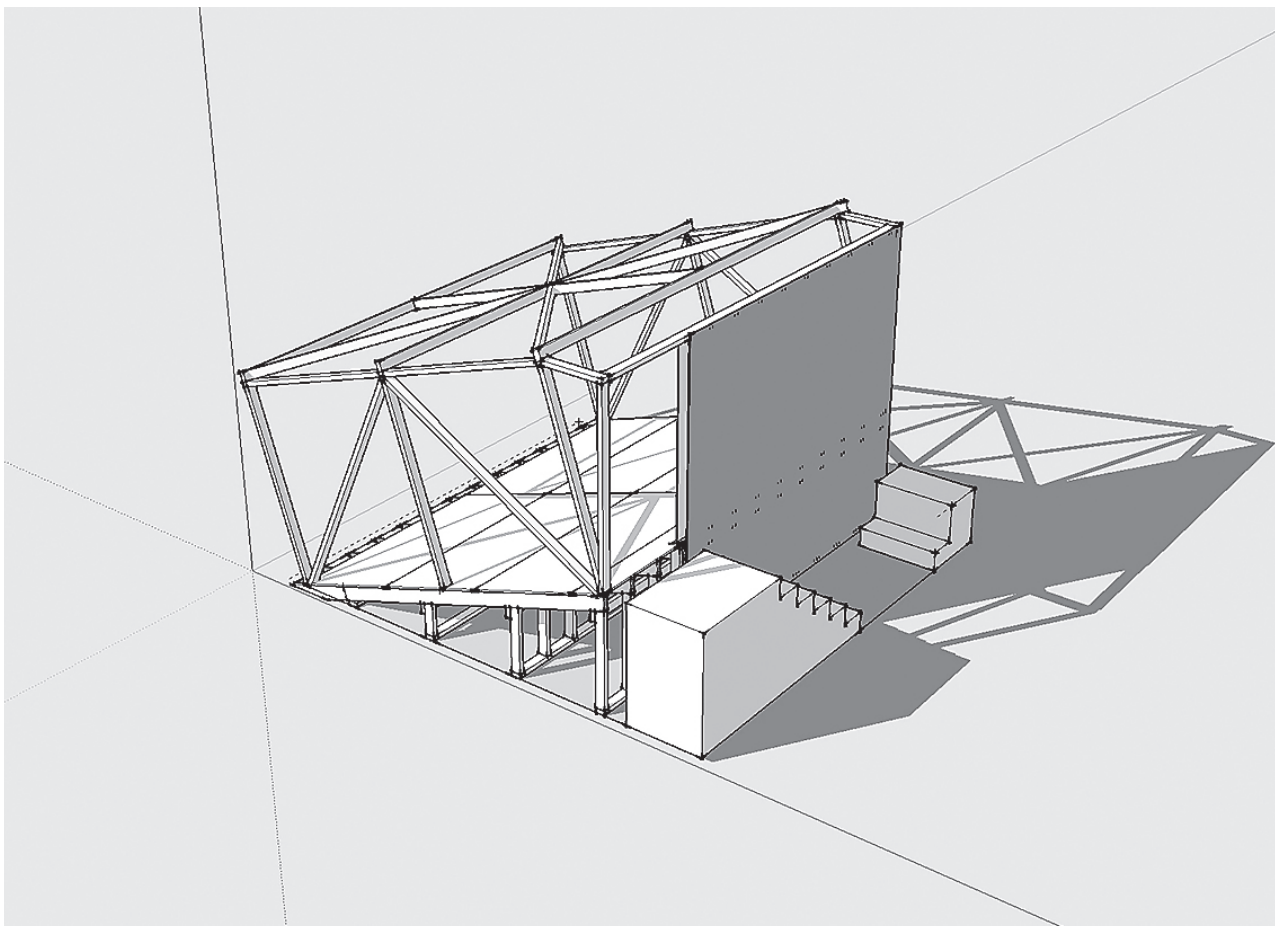


Anu Vahtra. 17.9°, 2014. Installation view during the exhibition "Feeling Queerzy?!", curated by Rebeka Põldsam.

is essentially

resisting such civilizing processes, and therefore, could be read as the hidden core of the museum, its conscience, if you wish. Its physical properties retain something of the resistant quality described as the function of the oblique by Paul Virilio in the 1960s. Together with architect Claude Parent they developed a concept for a non-orthogonal architectural geometry based on inclined planes that was

seen as the ultimate space of resistance, doing away with social hierarchies and reconfiguring the human habitat. An inclined space was seen as indispensable for urban revolution, promoting disequilibrium and instability; its physical effect as a reminder of the constant need to dynamically react and challenge the preconceived.³ If taken as an independent entity, the ramp space could even be read as the reincarnation of Virilio and Parent's un-built *Instabilisateur Pendulaire* of 1968, an inclined experimental house suspended 10 metres in the air. 17.9° enables one to perceive the oblique function in operation, working as a remainder not to lose the quality of productive disequilibrium – a quality that should come through even as a remake at the art fair.



SketchUp drawing of the reconstruction of 17.9° for Art Brussels 2016. Drawing by Johannes Säre and Marten Esko.

Text by Ingrid Ruudi

- 1 Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. – *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986).
- 2 Jennifer Boyd. *I Feel Queezy: Feelings, Guts, Revolutions*. – Rebeka Põldsam (ed). *Feeling Queezy*. Centre for Contemporary Art Estonia, 2014.
- 3 See for instance Enrique Limon. *Paul Virilio and the Oblique*. – John Armitage (ed). *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*. London: SAGE, 2001.

The Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) is a self-established non-profit initiative, that situates itself somewhere between official state-run institutions and artist-run-do-it-yourself venues. It is an unconventional concept of a contemporary art museum that works towards producing, exhibiting, collecting and popularizing local and international contemporary art while altering the prevailing working methods of established art institutions. It is a tool of self-establishment for younger generation artists, curators and art students.

EKKM operates from late 2006 as an ex-squat that has now legalized its premises in a previously abandoned office building of Tallinn's former heating plant. EKKM has been producing exhibitions and collecting art from 2007 and since 2010 has established its regular exhibition season that takes place from April until November. In 2011 EKKM initiated its own contemporary art prize, the Köler Prize, accompanied by an exhibition of the nominees. From then on, it has become a constantly evolving area of creative initiative where 2013 marks the opening of Lujemik Bookshop alongside the exhibition production company Valge Kuup. Subsequently the student gallery ISFAG and project-space-like EKKM's Café followed.

EKKM was founded by Anders Härm, Elin Kard, Neeme Külm, and Marco Laimre, since 2016 it is run by Marten Esko and Johannes Säre who joined the team in 2011.

ANU VAHTRA is an emerging young Estonian artist who is renowned for her artistic approach to site-specific space-oriented problematics and for the diligent methods of articulating them. Her installations, which often include the medium of photography, capture the surrounding space into itself, making the site become both the subject and the physical form of the artwork. Furthermore, she is one of the founders of Lujemik Publishing and Bookshop, and is also the winner of Köler Prize 2015 grand prix.

Anu Vahtra is represented by Chimera-Project Gallery (Budapest, Hungary).

www.anuvahtra.com
www.chimera-project.com

INGRID RUUDI is an architecture historian, critic and curator, currently working at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Institute of Art History. Her research interests include the relationship of architecture and spatially-informed art, issues of Soviet and post-Soviet built environment, and gender studies in architecture. She has curated the Estonian exhibition Gas Pipe at the 11th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008, an exhibition Unbuilt: Visions for a New Society 1986–1994 in 2015, also co-curated the Urban Installations Festival LIFT11 in 2011, and initiated and curated an open project space März in Tallinn in 2010–2011.

EKKM

Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Muuseum

Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia

Põhja pst 35
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Tue–Sun 12 pm – 7 pm

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Raivo Väliste, Raivo Plado, Kadri Villand

**Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia
(EKKM) presents:**

Anu Vahtra

17.9°

**Framed digital print,
70 × 105 cm,
fluorescent lights**

**Site-specific installation at
the Contemporary Art Museum
of Estonia in 2012 and 2014,
adapted for Art Brussels in 2016**