

# MATERIALITY of LANGUAGE: Mari Kurismaa's Early Experiments with Language\*

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The aim of the current article is to examine problems relating to the material aspect of language. The main aspect of this question, partly concerned with conceptual genealogy, is how to interpret the occurrence of verbal language in the structure of works of art. On the one hand, we can regard language as a physical, material object. On the other hand, language can be considered as a so-called transparent instrument, which has no relevance in comparison to the content. Knowledge of the history of art, considering the specific subject as well as the application of this phenomenon in particular works of art, is the prerequisite for dissecting these two essentially opposing views.

This article focuses on Mari Kurismaa's experiments with verbal language in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The artist herself has characterised the time interval from 1977 to 1984 as 'a period of experimentation with dispersive tendencies filled with intense mental work and debatable results' (Saar 2000: 58). Not intending to oppose creativity to the performative and visual, she has systematically dealt with the question of language as a material of works of art and played through different scenarios – surrealistic works, some of which are akin to process art, as well as conceptual interpretations of the use of verbal language. The present article aims to analyse Kurismaa's experiments from the point of view of becoming conscious of various ways of using language. The main attention falls on the happening *Words in Tallinn. Lyrical Cycle (Lüüriline tsükkel. Sõnad Tallinnas, 1980)*, which consisted of writing words in various places in Tallinn during three weeks in three different seasons. Usually the words were nouns, lacking connotations, imprinted on asphalt, walls, sand, snow, etc. A most variable selection of materials from chalk and sticks to snow, boiling water, kefir, and garbage was adapted for writing – anything that would leave a legible mark. This work is notable because of the temporality of the process, the by-play between the word and material, the

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conceptual structure and the emphasis on the everyday aspect of language.

Glimpses into the movement of the history of conceptual art, which did not regard verbal language as a theoretical construction but considered it more as a physical entity, serve as an indirect source of comparison and enable us to interpret Kurismaa's contradictory relations with conceptualism.

The verbal experiments of Mari Kurismaa (Nõges until 1981), a student at the State Art Institute of the ESSR (so called ERKI) at the time, occurred mainly in the period from the late 1970s to early 1980s – a period widely described as an intellectual vacuum in Estonia. The experiments varied from small-sized drawings to collages and happenings and have since remained locked in the artist's desk. They have not been published, displayed or analysed.

Eha Komissaarov, Mari Kurismaa's reviewer while she was defending her Master's degree in Arts in 1994 with the thesis *Creation and Open Reality. Connections Between Surrealism and Taoism (Looming ja avatud reaalsus. Seosed sürrealismi ja taoismiga)*, stated that, in the submitted exposition, consisting of three parts, the first two parts were completely unknown to the general public (Komissarov 1994).<sup>1</sup> Drawings influenced by conceptualism, dating from 1979–1981, and a series titled *The Cold House (Külm maja, 1980)*, composed of 100 slides investigating light in an architectural context and created in co-operation with Mari Kaljuste, proved to be a rediscovery. The interiors that were photographed belong to a set of examples of the most influential architecture from the first half of the 20th century, including the building of the Estonian Nobles Credit Union, the schoolhouse at Ristiku Street 69, and a clubhouse at Ujula Street 12. In the magnificent interiors designed with neglected, broken or improper furniture, the diverse layers of different periods create new visions and a sense of perception that extend outside purely aesthetic boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

While defending her Master's degree in Arts, an exhibition of the works appended to the thesis was open for one day in Vaal Gallery. In addition to the works mentioned above, two additional series of paintings, *Meander I–IV* and

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<sup>1</sup> Kurismaa defended her thesis in the Estonian Academy of Arts on May 30, 1994. Some important chapters include: 'About language', 'About Surrealism and Taoism – ways to naturalness' and 'About Taoism and Estonia – openness and silence'. In addition, Kurismaa has provided commentaries on the expositions.

<sup>2</sup> In the thesis, Kurismaa examines the series in the context of surrealism (Kurismaa 1994: 27). In 1980, when the series was finished, the artist submitted it to a competition organised by The Union of Architects and won. Young artists were awarded trips to the German Democratic Republic.

*The House I–IV (Maja I–IV)*, were included, dating from 1994. It was the first real chance for the general public to see Kurismaa's earlier works, as they had not been exhibited before. Unfortunately, the series of drawings was by that time incomplete because, since the early 1990s, most of her works had been kept in the collection of Baltic Art at the Zimmerl Art Museum at Rutgers University (collection of Norton and Nancy Dodge). Taking into consideration the fact that these works are not well known, the artist's involvement in interpreting her creation is one of the opportunities to re-initiate contact with her works. In Eha Komissarov's opinion, 'Kurismaa's thesis represents a unique precedent in regard to the history of Estonian art, because a creative artist turns to the instruments of the history of art and philosophy, reflects upon her creation and upon herself as a creator' (Komissarov 1994: 1)<sup>3</sup>. Her creative work over a period of 15 years, from 1979 to 1994, and issues related to it, are the foundation of Kurismaa's Master's thesis. Attention is given to problems connected with the more experimental parts of her works, dating from 1979–1981. Yet, while reading it, we have to take into consideration that there is a 14-year gap between the creation of the works and their interpretation by the artist, a period during which many of the artist's notions had time to settle and clarify.

Komissarov has pointed out the importance of the earlier experiments for the artist in her development as a metaphysical painter. Nevertheless, the aim of the current article is not to shed new light on the problems of metaphysical painting. It is also not accurate to see the early experiments merely as Kurismaa's preparatory period to her career as a painter. It is rather an independent stage, where the artist's important creative impulses were less refined and more transparent than at any later period. Several reasons mixed at the time when Kurismaa, possessing an artist-interior designer's diploma, was active in the field she had studied at the university, though she already had a predilection for painting. This period of explorations generated very interesting results.

In 1974, Kurismaa went to the State Art Institute to study interior design, yet she did not limit herself to subjects strictly connected to her speciality, but 'channelled her talent into paintings, conceptual graphic art and undertakings .... She once painted the poetic word BELIEVES in large block letters in the technical specifications column of professional drawings.' (Quoted in Saar 2000: 58; Fig. 1.) On another occasion, the strikingly long affirmation YES rose across the lined

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<sup>3</sup> All translations from the original material in Estonian by the author of the article.

tables. A stencil had been used instead of writing by hand, aiming at a more objective output. Technical lines of tables and cell specifications work here as a determining background system that strictly define the place and size of the text to be written in columns. A poetic word moving beyond the defined space and, in a way, ignoring rules, creates a strange conflict. We can also find a poetic fragment on a 'word picture' called *Lalii* (1981), which was created using ordinary finishing materials for apartments (Fig. 2). Strips of tapestry and brown cardboard paper were glued to a sheet of plywood partly covered with white paint. Diagonally over plywood spreads the word LALII, drawn by using a stencil and highlighted with black borderlines. It might be a self-complacent poetic jest, or a part of a longer word such as SALALIIV ('secret sands') the beginning and ending of which had been erased or 'got lost'. Kurismaa made such collages using industrial materials, while working as an interior designer.<sup>4</sup> In the short text 'The commentaries', written in the early 1980s, she explains: 'I have used the same materials which people use for finishing off their apartments – wood, veneer, enamel and tapestry. The pictures change because of the effect of ageing and bleaching and I would not like to interfere with that process.'<sup>5</sup> (Quoted in Pukk 1986: 75.) As columns of technical drawings were covered with poetic words, the instruments chosen from a 'toolbox' become here the basic materials for visual experiments. We can find words such as 'dark places', 'shores', 'waterfall' and 'snow' in a pencil drawing without a date, made in the late 1970s. Visually, it resembles a map (Fig. 3). Little, clumsily written block letters are repeated on both sides of the surface of the drawing as a sort of reflection. Rectangular areas that have been crossed out vary, with lines marking shapes and words such as 'shores', and 'big road'. The space on the picture resembling a child's drawing is two-dimensional. The word 'waterfall' pierces the area called 'bird's eyes'. With the help of words, a puzzling, poetic space has been created where the text written by hand emphasises emotional associations. Nouns alone do not have a surrealistic effect, but they do have it in combination with images. Language as an articulated system, organised syn-

<sup>4</sup> While working in the industrial textile factory *Mistra* (1976–1981) and fishing kolkhoz *Majak* (1981–1984), Kurismaa also designed interiors for Vilen Künnapu's projects. By 1985, they had completed five projects together, including a florist's in Tallinn, Pärnu Street 1 (see Pukk 1986: 74–75).

<sup>5</sup> The commentaries apply to the works *Landscapes of Night and Day I–IV* (*Öö- ja päevamaastikud I–IV*), *Lalii*, *Post and Bridge I–III* (*Post ja sild I–III*) and *On both sides of the River I, II* (*Kabel pool jõge I, II*).

tactically, was secondary for surrealist artists, who did not value the differences between disciplines and regarded creation as syncretic; images always had a more important role in their works.<sup>6</sup> It may be an imaginary place or a psychological space which tries to 'map' a dream landscape in Kurismaa's drawings.

The artist's interest in the word as a material object is also evident in a motif appearing in the same drawing in pencil, where the word 'waters' reflects itself as an object. The same motif recurs in the stencil print sheets *Cloud I* and *Cloud II* (*Pilv I* and *Pilv II*, 1978–1979; Fig. 4). Kurismaa has explained herself as follows:

My quest for visual language during those years was directly connected with Estonian words and the space around them. [---] On the one hand, I was interested in the role of words in expressing the world around us and on the other hand, in their mediating role as an obstacle gaining immediate contact with the world behind words. Words as parts of reality, the meaningful space around them and words as *objects made of letters* (my italics – *K. L.*) in this space. Words, as the representatives of a term, which, at the same time, act as objects made of letters reflecting and casting shadows. We can look at the sky through a stencil which has the word 'sky' cut out of it and thanks to exactly these holes we can see the sky through it. In a work that is paired with this one, the letters of the same word conceal most of the sky from us, and the word here prevents us from seeing the thing itself ... Letters and words act in abstract as well as specific urban spaces, once as an object, then again as terms providing associations. They float freely in the air, a gush of wind moves them, alters the tilts the letters have towards each other. Ascending on the water, a reflection of the word is formed. In a storm, the words fly in gusts out from around the corner of the house. Hurling against the wall, they crumble into letters.... (Kurismaa 1994: 25–26.)

The stencil prints (as well as diatype and enamel) *The Mountain and the Snail* (*Mägi ja tigu*) and *Mushrooms and Berries Tilting Towards Sleep* (*Seened ja marjad une poole kaldu*), created between 1979 and 1981, bear the clear mark of a connecting point between the dream world and reality (Figs. 5, 6).<sup>7</sup> The snail rolling

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough overview of the surrealist word-image, see Welchman 1989. The interest of surrealists in expressing the actual flow of thought also generated interest in the convulsive manner of speaking of the mentally disturbed, where the flow of consciousness is not limited by syntactic rules. According to this logic, non-consciousness is the only correct basis for knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> These works were bought for the Norton and Nancy Dodge collection at Zimmerl Art Museum at Rutgers University with the help of Eda Sepp in the early 1990s. Also, the sheets *Cloud I*, *II* (stencil) and *You* (stencil, diatype), were acquired from Kurismaa then. Each sheet is 31x86 cm in size (Kurismaa 1994: 35). The reproductions of the works named are presented in Rosenfeld, Dodge 2002: 126.

out from behind the pyramid, as well as the text tilting in the maze of lines from upper left to lower right 'towards sleep', are surrealistically free, pictorial associations. The whorls of the snail's shell change gradually into the word 'snail'. This is an attempt to unite the plastic and graphic elements, so that the words with the letters spaced out would create contours for motifs.

Most small-scale experiments from that period speak of a conscious contradiction between art that wants to be serious and an interest in the more surrealist, playful side of the usage of verbal language. On the other hand, along surrealist lines, interest in the conceptual level of language is present from the beginning. It is characteristic of Kurismaa that she does not prefer one method to another throughout her works, but uses surrealist-associative, as well as conceptual, methods in the same work. This is reason enough to search for connecting points between aspects characteristic of surrealist and conceptual art, which at first glance may seem surprising. The genealogical connections between surrealism and conceptualism do exist but their influence on a line of conceptual art that could be called *kosuthian* has been limited until recent times. The study of the influences of surrealism on post-World War II avant-garde art was not taken up thoroughly until the 1990s. In his research, Hal Foster has emphasised the suppression of surrealism in Anglo-American accounts of modernism, where it was considered a deviant art movement – inconveniently visual and literary, not properly modernist at all. Even if it is referred to in some papers, it is seen as a morbid, intermediate stage before abstract expressionism, or as a decadent version of avant garde ambitions to unite art and life (Foster 1993: xii). While the model of formalist modernism placed its bets predominantly on the autonomy of art, based on visual experiences, its opposite, the neo-avant-garde approach to modernism, emphasised two movements, such as dada and constructivism, which appeared most opposed to this visualist autonomy. Surrealism seemed untrustworthy also to neo-avant-garde art, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, questioned a formalistic approach that was technically kitschy, subjectively philosophical and hypocritically elitist. Foster points to associations between surrealist and later developments in art, which, for all practical purposes, have not been studied in art historical analysis due to this suppression (Foster 1993: xii). The role of surrealism in the context of Estonian art is a bit similar, but for completely different reasons. Surrealism has not been considered a part of the history of Estonian art or literature (Komissarov 2001: 10), or it has been regarded as a movement of

art having very little influence (Hennoste 1994: 66; Krull 2000: 53<sup>8</sup>). The only exception here is the boom in surrealism in the late 1980s at the time of national awakening. The mixing of conceptual and surrealist impulses in Kurismaa's early works seems to be a rather unusual combination in Estonian arts.

## I

The *Words in Tallinn. Lyrical Cycle*, which was planned together with Mari Kaljuste, who also studied interior design at the Art Institute, was carried out in 1980. The work, which in a sense summarises previous experiments, can be considered as a series of language happenings. The reception of Kurismaa's work, to this day, has been confined to occasional references in shorter essays or in surveys of Estonian art in English.<sup>9</sup>

Several notes in manuscript and trial texts have survived regarding the process of drafting the happening, which help to examine the way the idea developed. The final solution was achieved by playing with various combinations of words and materials. The choice here was of no little importance, since many words were changed in order to find more intriguing relations. From initial notes we can read the following: 'Every day during one week, Mari Nõges and Mari Kaljuste will write a few words somewhere in Tallinn. On Monday, they will write the words BIRDS AND ANIMALS with snow on a wall of a wooden house. On Tuesday, they will write the word APPETITE in a yard using casual materials.'<sup>10</sup> Kurismaa had a studio in Tallinn at Hõbeda Street at the beginning of the 1980s and some happenings from the series *Words in Tallinn* took place in the neighbourhood. In initial sketches we can find hints on particular streets: 'On Wednesday, they will write the word GIRL with chalk on a house at Teras Street'. These precise

<sup>8</sup> Krull concludes that the understanding of surrealism has not changed much during these 30 years because the essay *Sürrealism ja Ilmar Laabani 'Roosi Selaviste'* by Aleksander Aspel (1959) was suitable for the special issue of *Vikerkaar* on surrealism, published in 1989 (Aspel 1989).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the series is mentioned by Eda Sepp, who erroneously called the works conceptual drawings (Sepp 2002: 127). Also Johannes Saar has very briefly mentioned the work (Saar 2000: 58).

<sup>10</sup> The central idea of the happenings was agreed on in common discussions, whereby, according to the division of labour, Kurismaa was the author of the textual part and Mari Kaljuste's role was to document the happenings (documentation stayed in the possession of Mari Kurismaa). They chose the places for the happenings together. The plural form used in initial notes was replaced by the singular form. The reason here could be Kurismaa's alienation from the process of work, as well as simply the desire to avoid repetition. In any case, in her MA thesis, Kurismaa marks herself as the only author of *Words in Tallinn*.

notes have disappeared from the final version, as if it was not intended to retain any hints on specific places because it would have made the work subjective. The title shows that the happenings had to take place in Tallinn, but all other visible hints about the fact that it took place in an urban space are usually missing from the photos. The places Kurismaa chose were anonymous or unspecified – the camera lens is pointed only at a word, the length of which determines the width of the shot. In photos, we can very rarely find casual information that could tell us something about the place they have chosen. The photo ‘Birds and animals’ is an exception. The words, written with snow on the side wall of a wooden house, were photographed from afar and the camera lens also captured a snowy yard with a trash bin and bare trees. We can tell from the descriptions that, during the whole series, the authors operated in two spaces – in a specific urban space and in a private, informal sphere. We can see indications of the latter in spaces defined by laconic objects such as a basement, a stairwell, a teakettle and a bathtub. It remains unclear where exactly the happenings took place.

On the one hand, Kurismaa’s *Words in Tallinn* is based on the immediate experience of ‘writing’ (psychological or physical), but on the other hand, on the relationship with the act of describing this process. Throughout the whole cycle, none of the words or techniques of ‘writing’ is repeated – each combination of space, word and material occurs only once. The aim, according to the artist herself, ‘was, through the co-use of everyday materials and language, to move closer to experiencing phenomena that have been expressed through language and occur in life in general’ (Kurismaa 1994: 26). In the artist’s opinion, such unexpected comparisons of words and materials can be seen as a meeting point of Taoism and surrealism.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, they show the surrealistic method of poetic analogies created to experience the world’s strangeness and on the other hand, the technique of amazing juxtapositions originating from Taoism and created by Zen-Buddhists. The common goal is the immediate experience of the essence of a world that is irrational and cannot be expressed in words (Kurismaa 1994: 16, 26). The series was spread over a rather long period – from early spring to late autumn. Every three seasons, a cycle of weekly length when the happening took place was repeated. Every day, during all three weeks, one action that involved the writing of one word with almost monotonous persistency was performed. The

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<sup>11</sup> The sketching of connecting points between Surrealism and Taoism is one of most curious parallels in Kurismaa’s MA thesis (see also Kurismaa 1994: 16).



first weeklong happening took place in March, the second in July and the third in November – in this way a triangle was formed within the cycle of a year. According to Kurismaa, she was trying to give the cycle a steadier structure through a temporal-spatial construction, ‘a triangle is placed in a graphically drawn circle of a year and each tip points to week-long periods in early spring, midsummer and late autumn. The words were made of the materials somewhere in Tallinn.’ (Kurismaa 1994: 26.) There was no culmination during the happening; rather, it proceeded as a calendar. Using the rhythms and cycles of nature is characteristic of process art, which, aiming at immediate experience, values the whole process of making the object itself. The instability of the work was underlined by using materials such as ice, water, grass, wax and fat. Through the physical qualities of materials, especially through their changeability, we can observe the duration factor of the work. The work was visually present in the framework of spatial-temporal limits set by the material, existing as long as it was physically possible (until evaporating or melting occurred).<sup>12</sup> The role of an artist is to initiate the process and wait for the results.

Performances and happenings created by Jüri Okas serve as a comparison within the context of Estonian art. In the actions that took place in Vääna-Jõesuu in 1979, intervening in a realistic environment and manipulating materials such as sand and dirt were of central importance. The relationship with time, relativity of changes and invariability are important here as well but not as directly dependent on the materials. These actions have been regarded in the framework of conceptualism and land art, in the reception that Okas has received so far. At the same time, Sirje Helme has emphasised the lyrical nature of his actions. By pointing out one of the ethical problems of land art connected with human intervention in processes of nature, she states: ‘After all, the signs marking the ground have no meaning except their presence ... and that makes Okas’s objects lyrical rather than violent.’ (Helme 2000: 20–21.) In view of ‘softer’ and more poetic versions of land art, the differences from process art are not so dominant – they are interpretational rather than essential. Still, it is important to point out one of the main differences. Although both movements regarded art as an environment that has been experienced rather than as an autonomous object, the scale of the

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<sup>12</sup> Writing about *Words in Tallinn*, Piret Pukk has introduced the notion of a ‘space grown through’ that ‘aims at conquering and making visible the stability and changeability of things, the dialectics of transitoriness and permanence’ (Pukk 1986: 75).

work in process art depends on the physical presence and behaviour of a human. Instead of the grand scale of land art works, process artists arranged more sensitive interventions in the landscape outside the neutral gallery space. Kurismaa's happenings, which were made for the city space but remained unnoticeable there, rather have a common ground with process art.

The most characteristic element of process art in Kurismaa's happenings is the emphasis placed on associations between verbal language and materials. Here the process of 'writing' is not limited only by marking the letters – often the ending or duration depends on external matters. 'I put cardboard letters that form the word SHIP on the sand and set them on fire' (Friday, July 18), where the word is legible only for a short moment before burning to ashes.<sup>13</sup> 'I write SELDOM on the kitchen wall with a pen, and point the teakettle's jet of steam towards it' (Thursday, November 13), where the word will be steamed off the kitchen wall. Sometimes the end of the happening has been left dependent on weather conditions, for example, 'I write the word YOU on the ground and wait until the snow covers it' (Sunday, November 16). Simple gestures and movements that leave no visible or legible trace of the happening can also be interpreted in the context of process art: 'I poke a white sheet with a stick in a muddy yard without writing anything' (Monday, November 10). Also, 'I write THANK YOU in the air with my finger' (Sunday, March 16); 'I write TO CLOUD with a rod on the water' (Thursday, July 17); 'I say the word COLUMNS in the basement' (Friday, November 14).

We can find one possible parallel in late 1960s Italian process art. Specific instructions for writing words on a window have been recorded in an illustration of Paolo Icaro's happening *Pro Memoria for the Window at the SM* (1969). 'Between 22 March and 27 April write the words on the smoke-glass window. Use a ladder to reach the window. Leave it in the room. Write directly by hand, in capital letters, legibly and spontaneously. When the space for writing is filled up, leave the writing on the window for two days and take the ladder out of the room.'<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Icaro's redundant description, which fixates every movement, written like a recipe,

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<sup>13</sup> Staging a word with burning letters can be found on the cover (1982, 31x31 cm) of the long-playing record by Ruja, designed by Villu Järmut and Enn Kärmas. Here, the letters RUJA have been placed in the middle of a green pasture and set on fire.

<sup>14</sup> The description continues: 15 sentences that were meant for writing have been added. The first one is: 'It is not a question of being original or intense.' (Celant 1985: 105; Christov-Bakargiev 1999: 279.)

Kurismaa's instructions are much simpler – dated lists of exactly the same structure: a laconic description of writing the word, with the date, day and materials used. Here, only the fact of writing without any redundant, unimportant details has been mentioned, which makes the happening hermetic and less accessible.

Kurismaa's series consists of three typewritten pages of dated descriptions and six photos. We might also ask if the textual part of *Words in Tallinn* is an instruction or documentation. That is, is it pointing to a possibility of recreating the happenings according to these instructions or is it just a description of an event that has already happened and occurs only once. The short instruction(s) have been considered as the earliest versions of conceptual art (Osborne 2003: 21). Here, the gap between the content of the work and the multiple textual possibilities of presenting it becomes important. Their interconnection is mostly determined by grammatical constructions and the differences between documentation and giving instructions are revealed through the tenses used. In instruction-based works, the future tense is used, they are directed to the future, and they are temporally and spatially open, not connected to any specific context. In view of the imperative, finishing the work is demanded from the audience (often only imagined). In the documentation, the past tense is dominant. As Kurismaa used the present tense to associate the happening to a certain year and date, it is a finite activity. At the same time, the first person singular form uses points solely connected to the artist, yet the reader can easily relate to it as well. The simplicity of the activity sets no obstacles to carrying it out for anyone.

Associations between the word and the material chosen for writing it try to show the interrelated, onomatopoeic connections. In the drafts, there was a version 'scratch the word HAIL', where the way the word was meant to be written tries to show certain physical attributes of the phenomenon. Sometimes the combinations of words and materials create odd, controversial emotions, as can be seen from a description of a happening on July 15: 'I write EYES on sand with honey'. The imaginary contact of eyes with sand and honey is probably unpleasant even if the idea is only being played with textually. In the series *Words in Tallinn*, Kurismaa dealt with the qualities of language, as well as materials and, in the case of each separate word, tried to amplify their mutual effect so that the material directly determined the form of the word. The series is based on simple knowledge of the 'behaviour' of materials and of how language limits the expression of this knowledge. Kurismaa based her work on three types of output of the

‘material’: the linguistic contents, the word that has been written, and the object it indicates. Without being trapped in tautology, she created a sort of mutual reflection between them on different levels, pointing to ways in which the syntactic and semantic aspects of language work separately.

An example of how we can be aware of a *thing* as a word and as a physical object can be found in a happening that took place on March 11: ‘I write the word APPETITE (*isu*) with casual materials in the yard.’ A piece of glass, a U-shaped, ragged piece of cloth, and a crooked lamp stand, which has been thrown out and resembles the letter S, have been found in the yard for marking down the word ‘appetite’. We cannot use the term ‘to write’ in this case; it would be more suitable to use expressions such as ‘making a written text’ as sculptors do, or ‘to brand with materials’. The word here acts as the material object and signifier at the same time.

## II

Using language as a possible tool in works of art added a new, important movement to the search of 1960s pictorial and plastic art. People were convinced that language was not meant solely for representing something, just a tool for speaking about things outside language, but can itself be an object for representation.

The idea of the materiality of language, which arises in the happening *Words in Tallinn*, offers possibilities for comparison with the movement of conceptual art, which did not regard verbal language as just a theoretical construction, but based its views on the physical existence of language (Wall 1999: 507).

Thus the American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner regarded language as a ‘sculptural material’ that ‘gains its sculptural qualities by being read’ (Osborne 2002: 31), by creating a perception of the form in the reader’s mind. Weiner regards concentrating on objects *in their state of language* as a choice based on certain decisions that let us deal with materials in the broadest sense. The choice does not intend the language to be seen as superior to other materials – this is rather a more general approach that allows greater freedom to the artist:

...the picture frame convention was a very real thing. The painting stopped at that edge. When you are dealing with language, there is no edge that the picture drops over or drops off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops. (Pelzer 1999: 84–85.)

He identifies the role of language in a work of art with the role of colours (Weiner 1998: 132). Such identifications can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp, who found that language added 'colour' to objects. It is, first of all, acquired by using non-visual forms that complicate the optical experience and, secondly, it has a semantic meaning that changes the audience's cognitive relationship with the visual form. The interconnections between the object, language and image that are centrally important in conceptualism originate here.

We can find several other ideas in conceptual art which are aimed at measuring the physical weight of linguistic material. The materiality of language is of central importance in the works of Robert Smithson who, above all, became known for his land art. In particular, the idea of the materiality of language distinguishes his works from conceptual art, which the artist characterises as an essentially evaluative, neo-idealistic approach, which tries to 'escape' from the physicality of the language: 'This whole conceptual thing ... treats language as a secondary thing, a kind of a thing that'll disappear when it doesn't disappear. Language is as primary as steel.' (Flam 1996: 214.)

As a counterpoise to Weiner and Smithson, who like to philosophise about the materiality of language, we can regard the mainstream conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth's approach to language, which emphasises the instrumentality and transparency of language. Regarding space and materiality as unimportant, he has explained his views as follows: 'One begins to realize that if one uses language, as a medium it becomes invisible, so that you don't focus on any specifics, which implies a sort of stance, a kind of philosophy.' (Alberro *et al.* 1998: 98.) Kosuth finds that language as an instrument is invisible: 'Composition and taste are specific but language is very neuter because it is used in so many ways.' (Alberro *et al.* 1998: 98.)<sup>15</sup> This means that if we value the idea over form, the verbal message does not depend on the technique that is employed to present it, the specific act of saying itself. Kosuth wished to create art of pure information and regarded it as separate from the visual or auditory method of presenting words. The following contradiction of central importance arises: can language that is a separate semiotic system exist as an individual matter in the creation of a work of art, and can the word be the object of a work of art?<sup>16</sup> This differs radically from

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<sup>15</sup> From among the artists who were at the symposium, the ideas of Weiner and Kosuth were the most contradictory. They remained of different opinions also about the term *conceptual*.

<sup>16</sup> This aim could bring some conceptual art closer to concrete poetry. In general, the word is re-

the main ambition of conceptual art, which can, in general, be characterised as abandoning the object and image and substituting them with words. Wishing to overcome the limits of traditional visuality, the auratic art object was regarded as opposed to analytical, critical language. The conceptual usage of language as an instrument for expressing art is certainly equal to 'abandoning visuality' and the dematerialisation of art (of the object of art).

Having reached the conclusion that the work of art need not be created physically, still a question remains in equating a work of art with a linguistic act. Namely, does the message depend on the technique of presenting it? That is, can we regard art that uses text as its object separately from the visual presentation of words? The stressed underestimation of the physical aspect of art also means disregarding the materiality of language. Still, disregarding visuality does not necessarily mean giving up the 'material'.

This particular gap sets the attitude towards language in the centre of the problem and, thereby, these two points of view that are most contradictory have been enlightened: language as the 'transparent' non-material abstraction *versus* the realisation of language as a material phenomenon: word as a physical object. In view of the first point of view, language remains a tool. In the other case, it changes into the content of the work.

### III

In regard to Estonian art, the dematerialisation of an object could not have worked as opposition to the rules of the art market, because the proper social context was missing. It was applied more on a theoretical level. Experiments with words in pictorial space, based on the experience of conceptualism, are familiar to the audience of Estonian art from the early 1970s. Usually, the subject is written words on a painting. Painting occasional words charged with important meaning is similar to staging the word in a two-dimensional pictorial space. Another direction emerges from an earlier period: play on words similar to poetry, based on vowel associations and on the acoustic qualities of words, which makes us

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garded as an object. The wish to materialise the word completely is one of the main ambitions of concrete poetry. For example, while analysing the concrete poetry of Raul Meel, Eha Komissarov speaks of the 'physical body of the word' and about words, sounds and letters as 'completed production'. According to Komissarov, in the view of Meel, the only fosterer of concrete poetry in Estonia, it belongs to the context of pop art (Komissarov 1998: 131).

conscious of the different approaches to language as a natural part of visual art. Here, most of all, I am referring to the works of Raul Meel, which belong to the area of concrete poetry and date from the end of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, Kurismaa's experiments with verbal language work in a different way. According to Kurismaa, conceptualism was definitely the basis for her experiments with the problems of language, but more specific influences remain unclear.<sup>18</sup> In view of *Words in Tallinn*, later on Kurismaa was convinced that her point of view differed clearly from conceptualism: 'In contrast to orthodox conceptualism, the poetic aspect and the visuality of compositions were important here. The direct influence of materials on the form of words.' (Kurismaa 1994: 26.) Raul Meel has argued in almost the same way, while later analysing his works completed in the 1970s: 'I couldn't or didn't want to be like a purely western (cool orthodox) conceptual artist: pure conceptual ideas were always mixed with paradoxical situations and the fun of games, suggestive visual images and peculiar poetic language.' (Meel 2002: 64.) The artistic position was defined through negation, that is, through characteristics that were missing in orthodox conceptualism, according to artists. Also Eha Komissarov has defined Meel's relationship with conceptualism as unclear: 'Conceptualism narrowed its viewpoints, concerning itself with defining individual concepts and offering visual investigations of conflicts which arise between objects, notions and space. Meel's conceptualism works differently.' (Komissarov 1998: 135.)<sup>19</sup> But wasn't the at-

<sup>17</sup> *The Singing Tree (Laulev puu)*, *Longing (Igatsus)*, *The Key (Võti)*, *Balance (Tasakaal)*, *Progress–Regress (Progress–regress)*, *The Happy Sea (Õnnelik meri)* by Raul Meel, all dating from 1968, were printed in the January 1970 issue of the journal *Noorus*, as well as the article 'Between poetry and fine art' (*Poesia ja kujutava kunsti vahel*) dealing with concrete poetry and typewriter drawings (see Meel 2002: 48).

<sup>18</sup> At the time of Kurismaa's studies in ERKI in the late 1970s, Jaak Kangilaski was a lecturer in the history of the art of the second half of the 20th century. The lectures were based on Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* translated into Estonian. According to Kurismaa, the knowledge of conceptualism at that time wasn't noteworthy. We can find two articles about conceptual art in the late 1970s and early 1980s Estonian press. These are the ironic article 'Conceptualism. From Mona Lisa to telepathy' (*Kontseptualism. Mona Lisast telepaatiani*) by Jaak Olep and published in *Noorus* (Olep 1979), and the survey, 'From Conceptuality to Conception' (*Kontseptuaalsusest kontseptsioonini*) by Ilmar Malin in *Sirp ja Vasar* (Malin 1980). By providing several examples from modern Scandinavian conceptual art, Malin states: 'Most of this kind of art represents 'objective studies': a visual documentation is made of an everyday material. [...] It is usually made as a series.' What is significant for this article, is that conceptualism was introduced by surrealist artist Malin..

<sup>19</sup> She also points out one of the more general reasons: 'Soviet society certainly was not a place where space could be found for the exchange of information or where the exchange of informa-

tention to the 'physical body of the word' by Meel and the play with the physical qualities of language and material by Kurismaa rather this separation line from orthodox conceptual art?

It is interesting to note that, for the development of Kurismaa's and Meel's self-reception, the material for comparison was sooner seen in the linguistic conceptualism rather than in the idea of materiality of language partly based on conceptualism. Both artists' approaches might have had much more in common with the latter. On the other hand, the characteristics listed by Kurismaa and Meel to define their works, such as poetic aspects, paradoxical situations and suggestive visual images, have surrealism as their common denominator. By backing off from 'pure' conceptual art as they knew it, the artists decided to fill the space with Surrealism as a creative method. Combined in this way, surrealism and conceptual art formed a kind of 'space in-between'.<sup>20</sup> Adapting language to the context of visual art in her early experiments, Kurismaa was relying more on the surrealist than conceptual direction. Yet in *Words in Tallinn*, both influences can be observed. Its serial and highly schematic structure indicates conceptual art, while the associative connections between words and materials rely on the surrealist method of poetic analogies.<sup>21</sup> In Kurismaa's case, the connection of the materiality of language to the genealogy of conceptual art functions as a comparative parallel, not as a direct influence. Above all, in the series *Words in Tallinn*, the artist realises the surrealist aim of gaining direct contact with self and things, of achieving a synthesis between the human soul and spirit, of reconciling opposites and embracing the entirety of being (Aspel 1989: 56).

The actual happenings took place only during one week in March; they were also documented with photos by Mari Kaljuste, which have been preserved. The events in July and November were imaginary happenings, which existed only as descriptions. There may have been several reasons for discontinuing the series.

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tion could set about comparing the various methods of expression which conceptualist art dealt with.' (Komissarov 1998: 132.)

<sup>20</sup> The intersection of conceptual and surrealist codes isn't such a rare occurrence. We can find a surrealist motif in the urban space of Tallinn in the photomontage called *Egg (Muna)* by Jüri Okas, where a huge egg was placed on the green area in front of the Estonia opera theatre.

<sup>21</sup> In view of Surrealism, the writings of the Czech critic of architecture and art, Dalibor Vesely, are a strong theoretical influence. Vesely's article, 'Surrealism, myth and modernity', which was published in the journal *Architectural Design* (Vesely 1978) and the lecture *Architecture and the ambiguity of fragment* given at the Central European University in Prague were used in the MA thesis.



For example, Kurismaa may have exhausted the experimental side of the project and become convinced that the combination could also be played out only on paper. As the main reasons against continuing with the happenings, Kurismaa has mentioned the lack of audience and feedback, excessive seclusion on the conceptual level, and the sense of insecurity resulting from this.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the 1980s, these works found a very small audience, which consisted mainly of Kurismaa's close friends and group mates. The photo documentation of *Words in Tallinn* was submitted to the annual exhibition of young art in Tallinn Art Hall in 1980, but the jury did not find it appropriate for the show.<sup>23</sup> Further experimentation was cut short due to a lack of dialogue. As the realisation of the series and the process of preparing for it took up a rather long period of time, her close relatives intervened in the happening in their own way. The artist's brother commented in a friendly-ironic manner on his sister's work by passing on his birthday congratulations to her imitating the style of *Words in Tallinn*: 'I write on a dusty chest of drawers with a pickle HAPPY BIRTHDAY!' Another association, probably of a casual nature, emerges in connection with Jüri Okas. Curiously, two projects of art crossed paths, unawares, in the urban space of Tallinn. The word GIRL which was written with chalk by Kurismaa and Kaljuste on March 12, 1980 on a limestone house, was found by Jüri Okas while taking photos for his architectural motifs and was recorded as an occasional fragment in an urban space.<sup>24</sup>

Mari Kurismaa's early experiments with verbal language are a curious stage in the artist's creative work, as well as in the context of 1980s Estonian art in general. Concentrating mainly on the period of three to four years during her art studies and immediately following them, during this short time we can observe the various uses of language both in the two-dimensional pictorial space and in actual space. Kurismaa was equally interested in surrealist word-images, manipulations with words as objects, and finally, in juxtapositioning the physical properties of language and material, which formed a common ground between conceptual and process art.

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<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Mari Kurismaa, February 1, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Mari Kurismaa, October 15, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Mari Kaljuste, December 23, 2003.

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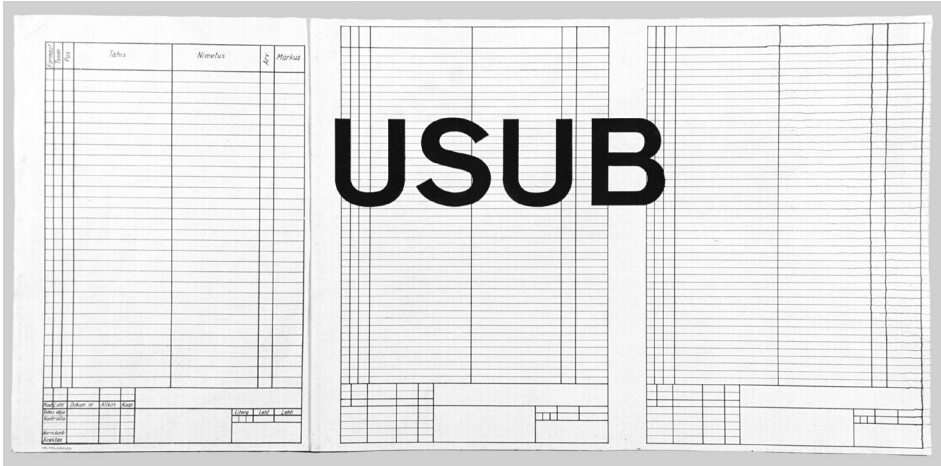


Figure 1] Believes, stencil print, 62 x 29.5 cm, end of 1970s. Photo by Anneli Kesa-Aavik. Private collection.

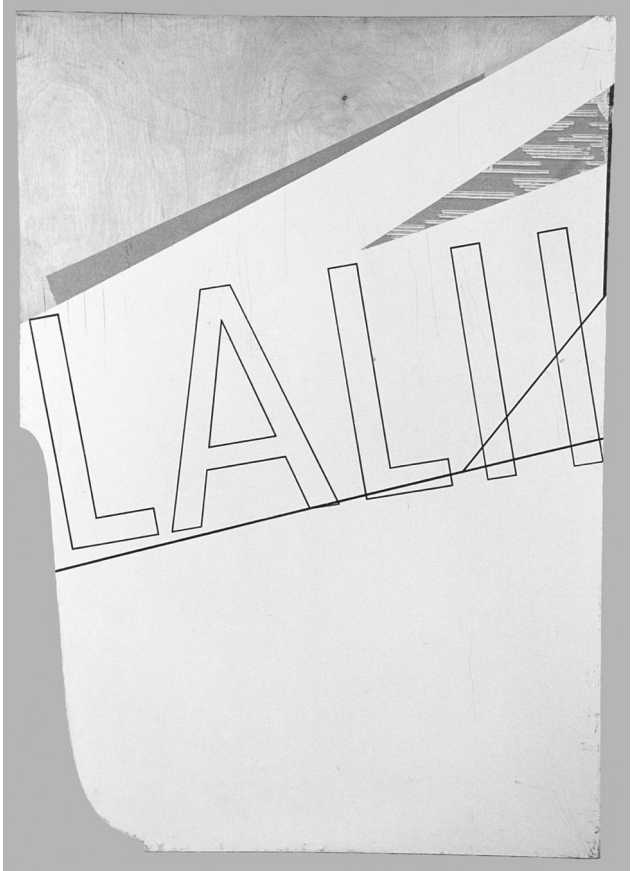


Figure 2] Lalii, collage and enamel on plywood, 60 x 85 cm, 1981. Photo by Anneli Kesa-Aavik. Private collection.

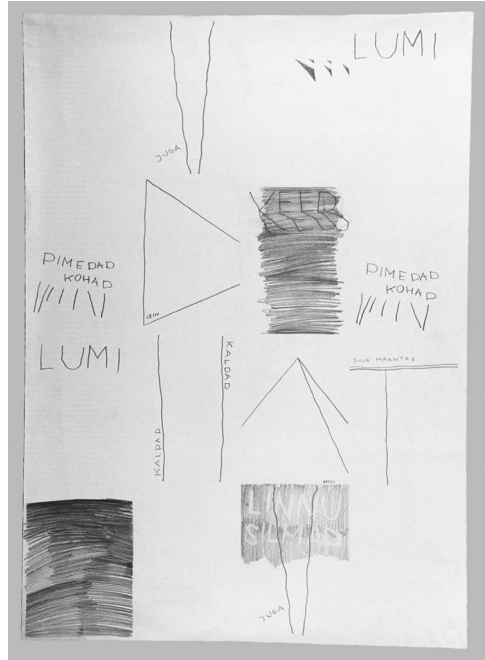
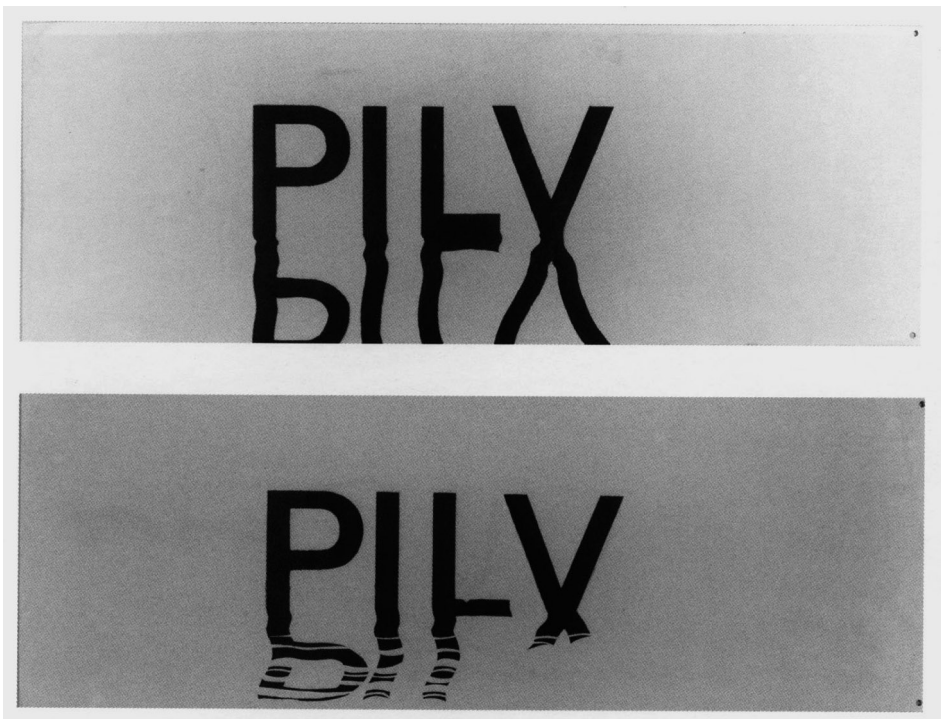


Figure 3] Drawing, graphite, 61 x 86 cm,  
end of 1970s. Photo by Anneli Kesa-Aavik.  
Private collection.

Figure 4] Cloud I and Cloud II, stencil print, 31 x 86 cm, 1978–79. Norton Dodge Collection.



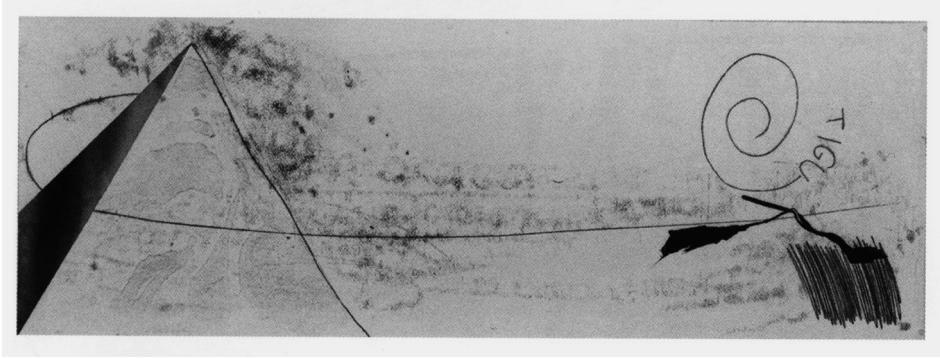


Figure 5] The Mountain and the Snail, stencil print, diatype, enamel, 31 x 86 cm, 1978–79. Norton Dodge collection.

Figure 6] Mushrooms and Berries Tilting Towards Sleep, diatype, enamel, 31 x 86 cm, 1978–79. Norton Dodge collection.





Figure 7] You, stencil print, diatype, 31 x 86 cm, 1978–79. Norton Dodge collection.

Figure 8] You, gouache, 85 x 30 cm, end of 1970s. Photo by Anneli Kesa-Aavik. Private collection.

