

*I took the photograph from him. There was a rectangle of lawn, the driveway, carport, front steps, bay window, kitchen window. Why should I want a photograph of this tragedy?*

— Raymond Carver, *Viewfinder*, 1981

In hindsight, one could say that when Paul Kuimet arrived on the Estonian art scene a few years ago with his first solo exhibition at the Hobusepea Gallery, he was already a mature artist. In the photo series titled *In Vicinity* (2010) in his inaugural exhibition, which depicts the architectural environment and spatial policies of the recently developed Tallinn suburbia of Assaku, Peetri, Rae- and Järveküla, he already stood out due to his sharp social focus, medium specificity, clearly articulated themes, aesthetic cleanness and conceptual clarity. Subsequent developments have only confirmed the initial expectations. Kuimet seems to have an extraordinary persistence to wait, watch, weigh, and separate the well-measured part of reality, which speaks to him and his audience. To date, his “intended role” so to say has been exposing the internal social codes of architectural environments in dialogue with modes of photographic depiction that are perceived and conceptualized with special sensitivity. The keywords that apply to Kuimet’s art are systematization and pictorial perfection.

Regardless of the fact that Kuimet has studied film and has repeatedly used video as a means of expression along with photos, he is primarily a photographer, more so than any other young artist that has come out of the Academy of Arts photography department in recent years. In his art historical range of references, Kuimet himself has suggested Stephen Shore and Robert Adams, and in connection with the typology of his photo series, even such names as Berndt and Hilla Becher have come up.<sup>1</sup> Yet, based on a more recent range of references, and despite pictorial forms that are oriented toward great sale success, one should stress the importance of the work principles acquired from the Helsinki school of photography – to produce strictly separated and aesthetically clean series that are characterized by clear links to subsequent series and an intentional approach that springs from the fundamentals of conceptual art. After all, the artist has stated that being a resident student at the Taik University of Art and Design in Helsinki was

an important time in his development, a period when the *Kairo Street* (2011) photo installation was produced – a series photographed during one photo session. The barely discernible tension between one’s own, although dystopic, type of new settlement in Tallinn, and the foreign houses on Helsinki’s Kaironkatu, which are a considerably clearer manifestation of a bourgeois environment, help us to understand the richness of the nuances related to Kuimet’s utilization of the camera, his pictorial treatment and presentation format.

In fact, Kuimet’s social codes related to architectural environments were crossbred with the codes of the photographic idiom even earlier, in the series *Five Constructivist Views* (2009), which grew out of what was initially a student assignment, but became organically combined with his subsequent work. In that work, the relationship between these two codes is clearly antagonistic. The artist writes the following in his portfolio: “The work *Five Constructivist Views* depicts one of the largest and most central Tallinn shopping centers from a constructivist perspective. This particular shopping center can be considered to be an iconic symbol of neo-liberal Estonia. By employing political and art history-related re-conceptualization, I wanted to question the constructiveness of neo-liberal policies in Estonia at a time when the economic recession was at its worst.” The utopian subconscious of the shopping center building is expressed in the turbulent fireworks of the intersecting Rodchenko-like diagonals on five sparse square photos.

The ideological recoding of the Viru keskus’ visuals is all the more eloquent because Vilen Künnapu, the building’s architect, is famous for the classical Russian avant-garde pastiches of his successful commercial architecture, a clear ideological contradiction in that he seems to bridge with ideologically obscure New Age-like interpretations that in his bombastic references extend to the structure of universe, architectural mandalas and the formal solutions of ancient shrines. This hopeless inner contradiction between reality and the aspirations,

ideologies and spatial policies of developers, architects and builders, which is tenaciously but quietly depicted in the *In Vicinity* series, is here made manifestly apparent. The series was on display at the EKKM exhibition Inter Fenster Top 5.

The central series of Kuimet's work to date, which was photographed in Tallinn's suburbs, has inspired several interpretations, of which the most voluminous and theoretical is Mari Laanemets's approach in her article *Homes for Estonia*, which appeared in the artist's book titled *In Vicinity* and the title of which refers to an earlier photo series by Dan Graham. In Laanemets's article, the development of suburbia is "connected to the reinterpretation of ways of living and lifestyles that occurred after World War II in the United States and Western Europe, which were adopted by re-independent Estonia in the 1990s"<sup>2</sup>, whereas this was initially related to an idea of a new communality, and only after the economic crisis of the 1970s and the turn toward conservative politics did it become increasingly associated with neo-liberalism. This was marketed as the desire for one's very own piece of land, which was ratcheted up by the rhetoric of the "lone cowboy," although in the reality, this was reduced to a pattern of densely adjoined plots of land and quite restricted lifestyle choices. Referring to the sociologist Siegfried Kracauer, who said that "social relationships create their own specific space,"<sup>3</sup> Laanemets points to the new suburban settlements as one of the typical environments of 21st-century Estonia. And Kuimet is the first Estonian artist to start examining the visual aspects of this social and cultural context. The opening shot of the series, which was photographed somewhere on Vana-Järveküla Rd. near the village of Kodala, is a wasteland between the significant environments between home and work, as discerned through a car windshield. The settlement, stretching across the horizon beyond, in the melancholy nocturnal glow of the sun, speaks to us in its isolation, and for the artist, in its opaque lifestyle visible behind the

glass. The next two photos in Kuimet's series (*Untitled #2* and *Untitled #3*) show that the environments of these ideal lifestyle models, which seem complete from a distance and in real estate catalogues, are clearly incomplete and already dysfunctional when seen up close – environments where the economic crises is starting to force out those who lag behind, who can no longer complete their dream houses or have to sell them as soon as they are completed, and where empty gaps are left in the perfect rows of houses. On the windy clearing, bluish plastic tarps fluttering in the window openings and a FOR SALE sign on a brand new yellow house, which, due to the unfinished utility lines is partially hidden by a pile of gravel in the yard, leave traces of the recent economic crisis on the catalogue dreams. In the next photos of the series, we see some examples of catalogue houses with neatly trimmed lawns and single little trees, with the mandatory car on every driveway. Even the framing has been chosen as if to confirm the essential isolation of the houses. Only in the repetitive pattern of the photo sequences do we perceive the model's endless continuity in landscape, and the fact that the artist has depicted a pattern. Only the light of the setting sun, which provides some consolation, disturbs the catalogue rhetoric and the total lack of any human error in the case of these last houses cuts the viewer off from the experiential sphere. However, people are not totally missing from this angle, which knowingly avoids moving too close to the subject. The glow seen through the open blinds in a second-story window seems to indicate a presence, as does a TV screen glowing in the distance. In the last close-up of the series *Untitled #15 (Cigarette)*, we see the only person in the settlement – alone, cut off from life, smoking – against the background of a house silhouette on the dark, nocturnal sky.

In these photos there is something more personal than the artist's strict framing and the viewer's accidental sideward glance would lead us to believe. Liina Siib has this to say about the Hobusepea Gallery exhibition:

"These are his childhood haunts on the border of Tallinn, which the colonizing architecture of development has totally rewritten in both substance and form. Through the subjectively and ironically painful light, sky and clouds, we perceive loss, the temporal nature of things".<sup>4</sup>

In fact, some rearrangements in the photo series have taken place in connection with the publication of the artist's book. Except for one, slightly different shot, with a staged element, that soon started living an independent life as photographic wallpaper in the installation titled *Not Necessarily So* (2010) created together with Laura Toots. Three shots are added, including a long shot across a field with hay balls on an autumn morning, the last view of the settlement, which is duplicated in another lighting regime and reflects the opening shot. The series is complete; the series is fixed. It will be shifted in the next work, the potential of its subconscious expanded.

The installation *Not Necessarily So*, which was initially exhibited in Austria, and the re-presentation of which we saw at the Temnikova & Kasela Gallery, is comprised of works by two artists that complement each other. Laura Toots's video *Howevermuch*, where she uses scraps cut out of her childhood home videos as flashing frames, is like a view behind the distanced façades of Kuimet's photos. However, it is primarily Kuimet's picture – a shot of the yard area in front of a private house's garage – that resonates strongly with the title of the work. From a distance, everything is not always the way it seems. At first glance, the shot that has been enlarged into the photographic wallpaper, and which is somewhat reminiscent of Miklos Gaál's long shots for its floating focus, depicts a picture that directly contradicts the advertised security of these residential districts – we see two ransacked SUVs with broken windows, which unavoidably makes us wonder what unexpected crime wave has struck this place. However, it's enough if your glance wanders a bit further on the picture for you to start suspecting that this is the type of picture that combines a staged photo of vandalized model car with

the image of a specific place in the Tallinn suburbs. Even Kuimet's most famous series has been written about as a violent scene in famous series has been written about as a violent scene in the shadow of oh-so-nice façades: "The bright nocturnal street lighting should be a sign of security, yet there is something disturbing, even threatening, as if the lighting itself were staging the site as a crime scene."<sup>5</sup> Here a new day is starting, in the sharp morning light, the wave of violence has already ended, the eye of the photographer seems to be recording the consequences of the event (if we forget for a moment that the photo was constructed), like the ruins left over from a real Lacan-like breakthrough. This picture, in which spaces with contradictory topologies collide – the apparent separation of the suburbs from social processes and the traces of the devastation left behind in the city center after the April 2007 riots in Tallinn – actually also the already repeated re-presentation of this as separate works, seem to be telling us something significant about Kuimet's artist's position. It seems that these pictorial series of houses, which, to date, have been considered to be primarily typologies, are really much more psychologized than they seem at first glance.

Kuimet's second solo exhibition in the Art Hall Gallery combined the photo installation called *Kairo Street* (2011) that is comprised of light boxes, the video *Viewfinder* (2011), and a 3D photo named *Kohatu 59°9' – 24°30'*, a place name which paradoxically means "placeless" in Estonian, enter into a dialogue with *In Vicinity*, "which all examine certain environments by alienating them in some sense or amplifying their internal contradictions and estrangement, by over-exaggerating the contradictions."<sup>6</sup> *Viewfinder*, which was filmed in a poetical pictorial idiom with an 8-mm camera in a model home settlement in Austria, is based on Raymond Carver's novel of the same name. A handless photographer appears at the door of a recently divorced man, offering to photograph his house. And the man agrees, hoping to entice him into telling him his

tragic story. There is an eloquent place in the narrative's inner monologue, which exposes the man's melancholy state of mind and his perception of his thoroughly designed environment as meaningless. The exhibition depicts various landscapes as detached from their inner meaning. "By imagining things that are impossible in some sense, Kuimet also probes the limits of photography as a medium, the hazy limits of the possibilities and impossibilities hidden in the center of the medium itself,"<sup>7</sup> the curator says revealing the core of Kuimet's art, the work with the portrayal modes of photography itself, which have mostly been eclipsed by his themes, and which explicitly become the subject of *Clouds and Waves*, his next to last solo exhibition in collaboration with Mikko Rikala at the Hobusepea Gallery.

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- 1 Porri, Anneli. "Foto ja vaataja kohalolek. Intervjuu Paul Kuimetiga," *Sirp*, 22.12. 2011
- 2 Laanemets, Mari. "Homes for Estonia," *In Vicinity* by Paul Kuimet, *Lugemik* 2011
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Siib, Liina "In Vicinity ehk mida me ostsimegi," *KUNST.EE* 2010, no. 1–2
- 5 Laanemets, Mari. *Op.cit.*
- 6 Härm, Andres. Exhibition press release, [cca.ee/webarchive/kuimet/est.html](http://cca.ee/webarchive/kuimet/est.html)
- 7 *Ibid.*