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Queering Victimhood : Soviet Legacies and Queer Pasts in and þÿ a r o u n d   J a a n u s   S a m m a s   N S F W .   A   C h a i r m a n s   T

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Amsterdam University Press
2022-12-23

Taavetti , R 2022 , Queering Victimhood : Soviet Legacies and Queer Pasts in and around þÿ J a a n u s   S a m m a s   N S F W .   A   C h a i r m a n s   T a l e   .   i n   K   S a l m i - N i k l a n d e r   ,   S
Salmesvuori , U Savolainen & R Taavetti (eds) , Friction, Fragmentation, and Diversity : Localized Politics of European Memories . , 3 , Heritage and Memory Studies , Amsterdam University Press , Amsterdam , pp. 79-98 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/342250

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Queering Victimhood: Soviet Legacies and Queer Pasts in and around Jaanus Samma's "NSFW. A Chairman's Tale"

Riikka Taavetti

Abstract

Riikka Taavetti's contribution addresses intertwined queer pasts and Soviet legacies in Estonian public discussion. She examines an art exhibition by the Estonian contemporary artist Jaanus Samma, titled "Not Suitable for Work. A Chairman's Tale." Originally produced for the Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, the exhibition caused controversy in the media when presented at the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn in 2016. According to Taavetti's analysis, both of these contexts framed the exhibition with questions of victimhood. In the framework of an international art event, questions of human rights violations were highlighted, while the environment of the Museum of Occupations emphasized questions of the suitability of a homosexual man as a victim of Soviet repression.

Keywords: victimhood, queer, politics of memory, post-socialism, museums, Jaanus Samma

Introduction

In April 2016, the opening of an exhibition at the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn aroused exceptional reactions. Mart Soidro described the coming exhibition in Saaremaa island's regional paper, *Meie Maa*:

> In the popular speech it is even called a gay exhibition. Those on the more conservative side stamp their feet and old freedom fighters have helplessly lowered their hands — what will their eyes see before death!? The unacknowledged fact is that this exhibition was not planned to irritate "the extreme right and Putinists," but it represented Estonia last year in the 56th Venice Biennale.[1] (Soidro 2016).

[1] All translations are made by the author from the original Estonian.

The art exhibit described in such an intentionally controversial way was “Not Suitable for Work (NSFW). A Chairman’s Tale” by the contemporary Estonian artist Jaanus Samma. The work was a combination of photographs, short films and installations, all based on sources—legends, oral history interviews and archival material—left by the life of a Soviet Estonian man known by the nickname “Chairman.” The core of the archival material was comprised of files of a court case involving a man Samma had given the pseudonym Juhan Ojaste, who in the mid-1960s was accused and convicted of pederasty, namely, consensual penetrative sex with another man. The controversy around the Chairman was emphasized by the timing of the exhibition, as it was interpreted as the first step in the museum’s rebranding as the Museum of Freedom, and finally named as Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom (see Kirsti Jõesalu & Ene Kõresaar’s chapter in this volume). Partly due to the timing, the work was perceived as a scandal, the framing of which was used to foment the discussion. Afterwards, the concept of scandal was attached to the public figure of Jaanus Samma, even though he also gained recognition and praise.

This chapter analyzes how an exhibition on the life of a queer Soviet citizen situated in a nationally important museum raised a discussion on the controversies of understanding the past in the present. Moreover, I analyze the cultural value of victimhood in the discussion on queer pasts and in the Estonian narrative of recent history. Diverse elements of victimhood gained ground over the representation of queer past, as the exhibition was created for the Venice Biennale and discussed in the context of human rights violations and, subsequently, the exhibition was presented at the Museum of Occupations. The discussion around the exhibition reconfigured the “political construction” of victimhood (Ronsbo & Jensen 2014), and it was debated if the Chairman could be interpreted as a victim of Soviet repression.

The exhibition was part of Samma’s longstanding interest in Estonian queer pasts. He first deployed the story of the Chairman in an exhibition that won the Köler Prize, an Estonian distinguished award for contemporary art, in 2013. A year later, this exhibition, based on the same story, then titled “NSFW. Ajaloo sügavikust” [“NSFW. From the Abysses of History”], was chosen to represent Estonia in the Venice Biennale. Samma’s work in the Biennale attracted attention in the Estonian media. The content and the artistic expression were discussed, as was the exhibition’s international reception. However, none of the commentators in the media saw any problem with this exhibition representing Estonia in an important international art event. As vividly described in Soidro’s text above, the reception changed when the Chairman came to Tallinn; in particular, it was the placement of the exhibition in the Museum of Occupations that aroused opposition.

My research is based on analysis of the exhibition itself, which I visited in April, August and September of 2016, as well as an examination of the material associated with the exhibition: the catalogue (Samma & Viola 2015),[2] leaflets, and press releases. To cover the Estonian media discussion, I searched the DIGAR (Estonian National Library digitized archive) database for newspaper and journal articles and searched online for pieces in newspapers, magazines, and edited websites, as well as television and radio clips discussing the exhibition. Altogether I analyzed seventy-four articles and media clips, omitting only those that briefly mention the exhibition or summarize other articles on it. Four articles in 2013 discuss Samma's previous work on the same topic, thirty-two articles discuss the exhibition in Venice, and thirty cover the exhibition as it was on view in Tallinn. Furthermore, eight articles published in 2017 address Samma's exhibition when he received an award by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, or discuss the exhibition and the debate around it in retrospect. My material is derived from the main Estonian daily newspapers, local media, cultural magazines, tabloids, and articles by the Estonian Public Broadcasting ERR, as well as from the political websites, feminist *Feministeerium,* and Christian conservative *Objektiiv*.

My methodological approach on the material—both the exhibition itself and its reception—is that of a historian researching the uses of pasts. I have searched for descriptions of the past and analyzed how they are interpreted in light of the present. I interpret the story of the Chairman as a queer history, telling of sexual conduct forbidden at the time and placed in a particular context of the Museum of Occupations. I analyze how the exhibition was framed with concrete references to the Soviet era and how the past was contrasted with the present. I focus mainly on the discussion of the exhibition at the Museum of Occupations, but the earlier discussion offers a point of reference for understanding what changed when the exhibition came to Tallinn.

Telling the Chairman's Tale at the Museum of Occupations

The Museum of Occupations (now called Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom) is positioned in a symbolically important place at the foot of Toompea Hill, the administrative heart of Estonia. Established in 2003 with private funding from an Estonian emigrant, it has since presented a permanent collection and temporary exhibitions focusing on the Estonian occupations in

[2] When the exhibition was being prepared for the Venice Biennale, I was contacted by then-project manager and curator of the Estonian Center for Contemporary Art, Rebeka Põldsam, and asked to contribute a text on Soviet queer history to the catalogue. As I did not feel capable of such a piece, Põldsam and I discussed the topic and the edited court case material which Samma utilized in the exhibition. Põldsam and Martin Rünk edited the discussion and it is printed in the catalogue (Põldsam & Taavetti 2015). At that point I had not seen the exhibition, nor did I in any way participate in its construction.

1940−1991. (For more detail on the museum, see Kirsti Jõesalu & Ene Kõresaar's chapter in this volume.) Due to the symbolic importance of the museum and the framing of Samma's work as gay art, the exhibition easily came to be a site of controversy. Even a demonstration of "patriots" was called for the opening, which caused the museum to hire extra security. But it was not only conservative activists who were critical. Most notably perhaps, the former director of the Estonian National Museum and a later member of the Estonian parliament, Krista Aru, commented just before the opening: "There is a place and space for every exhibition. The environment, too, creates the exhibition." She continued: "I think that those mentioned [the exhibition and the museum] do not jibe." (Randla 2016).

As stated by Aru, the environment of this particular museum did shape how the exhibition was viewed by visitors. Samma's work was located in the basement of the museum in a new exhibition space. As visitors entered the exhibition, they passed the museum toilets and two large vandalized Soviet-era statues. This location in itself emphasized the connection of the exhibition to Soviet-era repression. On the concrete walls surrounding the entrance to the exhibition space was hung the photo installation "Men on Collective Farms" (2016), consisting of photos from the Estonian Film Archives portraying idealized scenes of life on Soviet Estonian collective farms. Taken out of their original context and viewed in an exhibition discussing homosexuality, the scenes not only seemed to depict socialist-style farm work but also intimacy between men. This installation was not exhibited in Venice, but it was used in Tallinn to better adapt Samma's art to its surroundings (Herodes 2016a). This integration was strengthened by the visual similarity of the archival images and the theatrical photos of "The Chairman's Tale" (2015) on view in the main exhibition space (some are visible in the background of Image 2), both being black-and-white prints with a somewhat unreal and staged feeling. These photos featured the same characters that were depicted in four short films in a side room, which played in a loop on two walls with space for viewers in between.

In the main exhibition space, a red timeline illustrated the basics of the Chairman's life story ("The Rise and Fall of the Chairman," 2015; see Image 1). According to the artwork, Juhan Ojaste was born in small village in the early 1920s. In adolescence, he received a basic education and worked as a farmhand. As he had barely become an adult before the outbreak of the Second World War, his story can be classified among what has been called the "lost" Estonian generation (Wulf 2016, 78). Those who grew up in the nationalist atmosphere of the young Estonian nation and were just about to enter adulthood saw their future radically altered by the war (see Kõresaar 2004). The war meant

consecutive occupations of Estonia, first by the Soviets in 1940, then by the Nazis in 1941 and then again by the Soviets in 1944. Estonian men joined and were drafted into both the Nazi German Army and the Red Army. (See, e.g., Tannberg et al. 2000, 268−276).

The timeline shows that Juhan Ojaste joined or was drafted into the Soviet forces, which placed him among the winners of the war. The red line shoots sharply up at the point when he joined the army during the war, and it continues upwards after the war. For Ojaste, the continued Soviet occupation opened possibilities after the war. As the system of collective farms was established in the Baltic countries after the massive forced deportations of March 1949, Ojaste was appointed chairman of a collective farm — hence his nickname.[3] In the late 1950s, Ojaste further established his position as a respectable Soviet citizen by getting married and joining the Communist Party.

[IMAGE 1.]

Image 1. Jaanus Samma: "The Rise and Fall of the Chairman," 2015. Photo by Anna-Stina Treumund.

The peak in the timeline is in 1962, and a significant downward turn takes place the following year, when Ojaste was brought before the court in relation to pederasty. As a result, he was expelled from the party and lost his position as a chairman. Three years later, he was accused of the same thing, and this time the penalty was one and a half years of hard labor. The timeline shows that after being freed, Ojaste moved to Tartu and could only get low-status jobs. A slight upward curve takes place in the 1980s. During this period, it is told that he hosted movie nights, showing porn with his videocassette recorder player. Finally, the timeline takes a downturn before 1990, when Ojaste's life met a tragic end and he was found murdered in his home.

Even though the key life events of Ojaste are well documented and not controversial as such, the "rise and fall" in the life story follows the artist's interpretation. In her review of Samma's exhibition in Venice, Lithuanian art critic Julija Fomina (2015) states that the artist and the curator, Eugenio Viola, produced the Chairman's tale as a victim story. According to Fomina, it could also be possible to see the Chairman's life after the "forced 'coming-out of the closet'" as a rebirth into a freer life. Certainly, some elements in the exhibition reinforce the interpretation of the tale as a

[3] Collective farms, or *kolkhoz*es, formed the core of the Soviet agricultural system. There farmers were organized as a cooperative that collectively worked the land. The head of a *kolkhoz* was a chairman, officially elected by the members of the cooperative. While some chairmen were influential and part of the Soviet elite, this was not the case with heads of smaller Estonian farms. Furthermore, "Ojaste" also became a chairman before chairmen were listed in *nomenklatura*, the Soviet system of positions approved by the Communist Party. (On *nomenklatura* in Estonia, see Hämäläinen 2015).

victim story, even though it may be stretching the metaphor to refer to a sentence of hard labor as an act of outing. As described above, the high point in the timeline appears just before the first court case, and in later years the line never rises even nearly as high. Moreover, in one of the films in the exhibition, “The Trial” (2015), the murder of the Chairman is portrayed right after the declaration of the sentence, implying that the murder was connected to the court case.

The story of the Chairman is an opera-like melodrama, as Samma himself described it in an interview (Esko 2013). This aspect of the story is reflected in the artistic interpretation, as Samma uses an aria and the darkened loge of an opera auditorium where it could be listened to (“Loge,” 2013/2015). The aria, composed by Johanna Kivimägi with text written by Maarja Kangro, is a dramatic depiction of falling into darkness. The baroque-style presentation, featuring rich colors and drama, was compared by one reviewer to the aesthetics of gay art (Trossek 2016), as both opera and the excessive baroque style are often associated with gay male culture (see Halperin 2012, 34−66). In its presentation, the luxurious loge is distanced from the Soviet Estonian imagery otherwise deployed in the exhibition. That said, the representation carries connections to Soviet-era gay culture, as all the major Soviet cities had opera houses and their surroundings were frequent cruising places for gay men (e.g., Moss 2015, 52).

Listening to the aria in darkness is an intimate experience, which clearly contrasts with the representation of the Chairman’s story in the main exhibition space. The difference is comparable to what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, esp. 3−4) has described as the division between *in situ* displays, which emphasize a visitor’s immersive experience, and *in-context* displays, which rely on the analytical “drama of the artifact.” Furthermore, whereas the timeline portraying the rise and fall of the Chairman promotes linear understandings of time and history, the loge, like other parts of the exhibition, offers more fragmented glimpses of the past.

The interpretation offered by the timeline—that of history as a factual representation of consecutive events of the past—is strengthened by a showcase in the same exhibition space. The two-sided case contains medical instruments that could have been used in a forensic examination to determine whether anal penetration has taken place. On the other side of the showcase (Image 2), there is a line of ordinary objects. These “fragments” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 18−23) of the story include a war medal, a wedding ring, a Communist Party membership card, a pair of leather gloves, a tube of Vaseline, three and half rubles in paper money, a shot glass and a green fedora hat. Portrayed like this, in a strongly lit showcase opposite from the medical instruments, these objects of everyday life resemble evidence (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 49). Indeed, as is told in the

labels attached to the objects, some of them—mainly the gloves and the rubles—did play a crucial role in the Chairman's court case.

[IMAGE 1.]

Image 2. Jaanus Samma: "Props," 2015. Photo by Anna-Stina Treumund.

This interpretation of the objects as evidence is strengthened by the context of the work in the Museum of Occupations. The permanent exhibition of the museum at the time when Samma's exhibition was presented contained showcases in which ordinary objects of Soviet life were shown. As Hanna Kuusi (2008) has argued, the objects that could very well inspire nostalgia were not placed in their actual context but shown with items associated with repression, partly in order to oppose the nostalgic reading. The exhibition did not take the visitor "into" the past but made the viewer a spectator from the outside, able to judge the past from the present. As the museum told a story of the crimes against the Estonian people, the occupations and the loss of national independence (Wulf 2016, 147−150), the objects could be interpreted as evidence of these crimes.

In this context, Samma's artwork invited similar interpretations. The objects used in the artwork became evidence of a crime—the crime of pederasty that the Chairman was accused of and the human rights violations committed against him. In the media discussion around the exhibition, this interpretation was strengthened by how the Soviet-era persecution of homosexuality was viewed in retrospect. The faith of a homosexual man was interpreted in the framework of repression and the rights of an individual, which is not how it was understood at the time. Furthermore, as persecution on the grounds of homosexuality was not widely perceived as a violation of human rights at that time anywhere, this reading of the exhibition emphasized the retrospective view to the past.

The Chairman as a queer figure of the past

According to Paragraph 118 of the criminal code of Soviet Estonia, consensual pederasty carried a maximum sentence of two years in prison. Although Soviet Estonian court files on pederasty have been preserved, to date others than those on the case of Chairman have not been utilized in research (for an early overview, however, see Veispak 1991; see Healey 2017 on Soviet Russia). As researchers and the public have become interested in the everyday life of queer Soviet citizens, other sources, such as oral histories, have been needed (see Ruduša 2014 for a Latvian collection of

oral histories on the Soviet era), and these are also utilized in Samma's art.[4] Samma's work can be interpreted as representing queer pasts with the sporadic, random and even hostile sources which are available and imagining the past even when the sources are insufficient (see, e.g., Cvetkovich 2002).

Samma's interest in gay life during the Soviet era developed first from a pseudohistorical work, which imagined gay life a century ago, and then continued in the form of interviews with gay men on life during the Soviet era (Esko 2013). As the Chairman's story was firmly based on history, Samma himself was asked in interviews about the changes in Estonian attitudes toward homosexuality since the Soviet years. In an interview at the time of the opening of the exhibition in Venice, Samma elaborated on his understanding of these changes. According to him, since the Soviet era, people have become more knowledgeable; however, he was not as certain if they have also become more tolerant: "In the Soviet period not even people themselves knew what they wanted. […] In the nineties it is complete confusion, as if everything is allowed. Nowadays the conservative side has got on their feet and tries to improve their position." (Karro 2015). In this statement, the period after the restoration of independence is not described as a gradual movement toward a more tolerant society, but as a controversial trajectory.

Samma's phrase of the people "not knowing what they wanted" may refer not only to the fact that homosexuality was not publicly discussed in the Soviet era, but also on how this lack of discussion affected how one could understand himself and his desires (e.g., Healey 2017). As a whole, this short commentary reveals Samma's view of history to be more nuanced than those views that interpret sexual freedom as gradually "freeing" homosexuality that has, in essence, always been similar across cultures. Moreover, it differs from those views that draw a clear line between the restrictive Soviet past and the permissive post-Soviet present. This clear difference between the past and the present is emphasized by a projection of the current understandings of queerness onto the past. When the Chairman's treatment is seen as an example of intolerance or as human rights violations, when his life is labelled as a double life (Soans 2013) or discussed in the frame of being in the closet and then coming out (Fomina 2015), or indeed when he is named a gay man, present conceptualizations of queerness are projected onto him. As Laura Doan (2017, 122) writes regarding Alan Turing, the British mathematician and war hero, this "renders the past intelligible

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[4] Samma's text on the legend of the Chairman based on these interviews is included in the exhibition catalogue along with the edited court case material (Samma & Viola 2015).

for groups today at the expense of understanding Turing's way of being in the world." It is as if queerness stayed the same even though society has undergone essential changes.

The Chairman's story corresponds to the recent international discussion on queer pasts, where history is brought to the present with the help of individual life stories. Through microhistory, a context of Samma's work described in the exhibition flier, the structures of society are illustrated by the fates of individuals. Compared to many other prominent cases of queer representation, the life of Juhan Ojaste has a significant difference, not being a story of an otherwise well-known person. Unlike Alan Turing, for example, whose story has been used to demonstrate the tragic destiny of a homosexual man in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s, the Chairman cannot be viewed as a hero wrongly treated because of his "different" private life. Juhan Ojaste became prominent only because of his queerness. Moreover, in the case of Turing, the interpretation of the past can be discussed in terms of the academic research available on his life and the homosexuality of the time (e.g., Doan 2017). The story of the Chairman, however, cannot be directly contextualized with academic research, as there is still hardly any on homosexuality in Soviet Estonia.

Because the Chairman was accused of homosexual acts, it is impossible to escape the topic of sexuality when discussing his repression. Indeed, the exhibition does not avoid discussing sexuality, as it is explicit to the point of being grotesque. When the exhibition was chosen for the Venice Biennale, the Chairman was framed in the press release in terms of "questions of authority, violence, persecution, and the powerlessness of an individual under a political regime harshly constraining human rights" (Kartau 2014.) Thus, the Chairman's story brought into the discussion the possibility of victimhood on the grounds of sexuality and queer victimhood in the Soviet era. In the cultural magazine *Sirp*, Katrin Kivimaa pondered if this story could be placed within the context of repression and occupation. According to her, the Chairman, as represented in the exhibition, is a very controversial figure. This does not mean, however, that he could not be a victim of repression:

> We do not scrutinize with similar logic the victims of the deportations or the Holocaust. We do not start digging into their private lives and claim that they could have caused their harsh destiny themselves with, for example, greed or a private life-style different from the social norms of the era. The control and punishment apparatus of a totalitarian nation runs over everyone with similar indifference to the reason why one is caught in the machine. (Kivimaa 2016).

For Kivimaa, it makes no difference for what reasons one was oppressed. Moreover, Kivimaa portrays the repression of the Chairman as something that was not caused by his private life, although it was precisely his sexuality that was the reason for his victimhood. That said, Kivimaa's emphasis of the Chairman's story as a victim story correlates with the interpretations often made when queer stories of the past are discussed in the present (on the emphasis of victimhood in the legend of Turing, see Caryl 2015). However, Kivimaa also stretches the limits of victimhood as she questions the need for innocence, a feature that is often an essential part of a victim identity (e.g., Schäuble 2014, 9−13).

If the queerness of the Chairman made him a disobedient figure and a victim of persecution, his public life as a Soviet citizen was respectable, and even described as successful in the exhibition. He was a decorated Red Army veteran, the chairman of a collective farm and a member of the Communist Party. Even though this kind of ordinarily successful Soviet life is currently also remembered with nostalgia (e.g. Jõesalu & Kõresaar 2013), it means that the Chairman's tale could not be interpreted within the framework of national victimhood. For those wishing to adhere to the perspective on national repression and resistance, the Chairman was not an appropriate figure. Eve Pärnaste, a Soviet-era freedom-fighter and a member of the Estonian Constitutional Assembly of 1991, was extremely upset about the exhibition being presented at the Museum of Occupations, although even she thought it was suitable for the Venice Biennale. She paraphrased the story of the Chairman in an interview of the leading Estonian daily, *Postimees*:

> It is about a communist who fought on the Russian side, and maybe was a member of a destruction battalion, who was put into the position of kolkhoz chairman, who harassed local boys, was finally caught and captured, and then was so unhappy when his wife left and he lost his job. And ultimately, some homo prostitute killed him in a toilet. (Pullerits 2016).

Pärnaste had rather detailed information about the Chairman's life events, as they are portrayed in the exhibition. In addition, she developed the story in a more scandalous direction. The idea of the Chairman as a molester of "local boys" is not extracted from the exhibition or the documentation associated with it, but presumably comes from the longstanding association of homosexuality with pedophilia.[5] The notion of "local boys" may have simply been meant to emphasize the innocence of

[5] Pärnaste may have derived the description from the conservative opinion site *Objektiiv*, where Priit Sibul (2016) had mentioned a similar idea a week earlier.

those the Chairman had relations with, but Pärnaste possibly sought to portray Chairman as non-Estonian, which carries an undercurrent of seeing homosexuality as foreign. Although this idea was not directly mentioned by those criticizing the exhibition, supporters noted that as so little is known about Estonian gay history, some might presume homosexuality to be something new (Varblane 2015).

Memories of the Soviet past

In the debate around the Chairman, the Soviet era was constructed by comparing it to Nazi Germany. This comparison is readily available in the Estonian discussion, for the understanding of the national past includes suffering under both of these regimes (e.g. Melchior 2016). As an illustration, in the Museum of Occupations both the Nazi and Soviet occupations were represented under the umbrella of totalitarian powers. Additionally, the Estonian state among other East European countries has worked internationally for recognition of Soviet crimes along with Nazi atrocities (Melchior 2016; Wulf 2016, 149). One comparison between the Soviet and Nazi times was made in a short commentary by Krister Paris titled “The lesson of the gay exhibition”:

> Many people living under the heavy fists of dictators do not consider their life as that bad. It was hard to live in a dictatorship such as Stalin’s time, when the strike could come regardless of party fidelity. But in the “normal” Soviet time, if you participated in certain rituals, so no one would touch you, there was nothing to rant about. The same goes for the Nazi worldview. If a Jewish background or otherwise suspicious figure did not classify one into a wrong category, life could be considered safe, even offering possibilities.
>
> These benefits, however, came with severe compromises, with sacrificing some fellow citizens. That should be a burden with which one cannot live. Go and see the exhibition which opened today at the Museum of Occupations about the strain on a Soviet-era homosexual, and you will get to put your empathy and humanity to the test. (Paris 2016).

Here the story of the Chairman is included among the tales of Soviet-era repression, but unlike the commentary by Kivimaa discussed above, it does not speak of just any repression but precisely a repression on the grounds of homosexuality. Furthermore, being a Jew under the Nazis is compared to the repression of a homosexual man under Soviet rule, which echoes the hegemonic status held by the Holocaust as an international metaphor of suffering (e.g., Melchior 2016; Kuntsman 2009). However, this hegemonic status is not axiomatic in Estonian views of history (Weiss-Wendt 2008),

and it may be noteworthy that this cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust is referred to precisely when discussing the internationally topical question of queer human rights and victimhood. Indeed, gay rights as human rights concerns have symbolic value as an indicator of "European" values. Estonia has taken pride in being among the fastest "transitioners" in post-Soviet Europe, both economically and in terms of adopting European Union institutions (Bennich-Björkman & Likić-Brborić 2012). This identity of a successful transitioner also includes advancement in human rights and minority policies, as well as the acknowledgement of the Holocaust as a common European history.

In addition to the comparisons made between the Estonian present and the Soviet past on one hand and Nazi and Soviet repression on the other, direct references to the Soviet past were also linked with the exhibition. When the exhibition was on view in Venice, the internet-era acronym in the title, "NSFW. Not Suitable for Work," was noted as being similar to ENSV, the acronym for Soviet Estonia in Estonian, or NSVL, that of the whole Soviet Union (Kartau 2015). Furthermore, when *Postimees* listed the art highlights of 2015, Samma and the success of his exhibition abroad were described, along with the work of another artist, as an "electrification of the whole country" ("15/2015"), referring to Lenin's idea that communism would be achieved with socialism and the electrification of the Soviet Union. However, the references to the Soviet past grew more serious as the exhibition was about to open in Tallinn and as the exhibition was linked to the coming reforms of the Museum of Occupations.

In February 2016, the museum had published its plans to change its name to the Museum of Freedom, which included reforming the permanent exhibition to not only feature the occupations, repression and resistance, but also the concept of freedom in its various forms. The plans ignited controversies, as erasing the word 'occupation' was interpreted as accepting the Soviet/Russian version of history, in which Estonia was not occupied but voluntarily joined the Soviet Union. In addition, some saw as very Orwellian the retitling of an institution focusing on occupation and repression as the Museum of Freedom. (On the renaming discussion, see Kirsti Jõesalu & Ene Kõresaar's chapter in this volume.) The debate over the name change framed Samma's exhibition in relation to the concept of freedom. For conservative commentators, such as Markus Järvi on the website *Objektiiv*, the link between the gay-themed exhibition and the changes in the museum confirmed that the "freedom" being called for was not something they would support (Järvi 2016).

Samma's exhibition was linked with the changes at the museum in the tabloid *Õhtuleht*. The paper had asked the then curator of the Center of Contemporary Art, Rebeka Põldsam, why the museum

had chosen as its first step in the reform a gay-themed exhibition. In her reply, Põldsam explained that the content of the exhibition does tell a story from the time of occupation, albeit a lesser-known one. At the very end, she added: "We hope that the deported and the freedom fighters, who know what it is like to be silenced, feel solidarity toward gays and others persecuted by the occupation powers, and are pleased that their stories are heard, too." ("Miks valis Okupatsioonide muuseum" 2016). Here Põldsam emphasized that the story of gay repression is one of the stories of the occupation era, in that sense being no different than other stories of repression and just as important to be heard. However, *Õhtuleht* lifted deportations to the title of their online article: "Art expert: We hope the deported are pleased about the gay exhibition."

By emphasizing the topic of deportations, the tabloid surely knew what kind of narrative they were employing. The story of the Chairman is connected to one of the cores of the Soviet system, the collective farm. The *kolkhoz*, in turn, is linked to one of the most painful memories of the Soviet era, the mass deportations of March 1949. In order to force reluctant Estonian farmers into collectivization, the Soviet regime deported over twenty thousand Estonians to Siberia. Often whole families were taken, and only after the death of Stalin were the survivors allowed to return to Estonia. (e.g. Kõll 2013, 25−28). Furthermore, the memories of deportations played an important political role in the Estonian process of the restoration of independence at the turn of the 1990s (e.g. Kõresaar & Jõesalu 2016, 48−49).

The question of the attitudes of the former deportees was also raised by the artist and writer Mats Õun in an interview on Tallinn TV and repeated on the news site of the local paper, *Pealinn*. Õun indicated that there was something essentially Soviet-like in pushing the exhibition into the Museum of Occupations. He commented that "in a way there is a socialist competition going on in the museum to achieve the red flag trophy of tolerance. Obviously those connected to the museum have found a good way of bringing together the principle of permissiveness and the past" ("EKSPERDID: Homonäitus 'NSFW. Esimehe lugu'" 2016). For Õun and others agreeing with him, "tolerance" had become the new standard to which everybody should conform, thus resembling the Soviet-era lack of freedom of opinion. According to this view, today, as in the Soviet era, one may obey the rules of the game, but independent-minded people should keep their resistance alive. The Estonian ability to nurture national identity during the Soviet era is part of the nationalist mythology as well as one reason for the post-Soviet Estonian success (Bennich-Björkman & Likić-Brborić 2012). Thus, these critiques suggest that in order to remain independent, one should not too eagerly accommodate present-day requirements either.

The exhibition was also defended by referring to the Soviet period. The managing director of the Museum of Occupations, Merelin Piipuu, was interviewed in July 2016 after the discussion surrounding the museum. She reflected on Samma's exhibition:

> It was a difficult decision to bring it into our house, but I understood that if we censor it, we act in exactly the same way as was done in the Soviet era! Have we become at all freer or more tolerant? It is a very heavy exhibition, but it is the task of our museum to work with complicated themes. (Herodes 2016b).

Thus, Samma's art was interpreted as something that could not have been shown in the Soviet era, and its acceptance was taken as a step toward a more open society. In this way, both those who were in favor of having the exhibition at the Museum of Occupations and those who opposed it justified their positions by referring to a shift away from Soviet society and to their own idea of freedom.

Queering victimhood, reforming memory?

The context of both the Venice Biennale and the Museum of Occupations shaped the interpretations of Samma's art. In 2013, when Samma was interviewed about the earlier version of the Chairman's story, he described the exhibition as discovering the gay history of Soviet-era Estonia (e.g. Esko 2013). By the time the Chairman's Tale was chosen for the Biennale, questions of repression and human rights violations were already highlighted. The placing of the work into the Museum of Occupations framed it with two new contexts. First, in a museum of history, questions of how the past is constructed became all the more relevant, highlighting contrasts and connections with the Soviet past. Second, the Chairman's story became contextualized with the narrative of Estonian national victimhood and suffering emphasized in the museum, or the "strategy of victimhood," as Meike Wulf (2016, 147−150) calls it.

The exhibition was interpreted as a scandal partly because of the context of the rebranding changes of the Museum of Occupations, but also because of the symbolic meaning attached to gay rights. In 2014, a law on the registration of same-sex couple cohabitation was passed in the Estonian parliament. However, the decision raised active opposition, and the ongoing debate was one of the contexts framing Samma's exhibition. Samma supported the stand that Estonian society—or any other society, for that matter—is never finished and needs to constantly decide whether to head in a more open or more closed direction (Herodes 2016a). This differentiation between an open and

closed society continues to be used in the Estonian context by those who call for less nationalist views and a more international approach (see Peiker 2016 for a slightly different phrasing of these conflicting and yet overlapping conceptualizations).

It has been complicated to see those convicted on the grounds of homosexuality as victims of state violence in the former Soviet Union. Queer repressions have only recently been addressed in other national contexts (on remembering lesbian and gay victims of the Nazis, see Evans 2014; on pardoning Turing posthumously, see Houlbrook 2013). I would suggest that in the Estonian discussion, an additional element is added to this difficulty, as the Soviet repression is interpreted first and foremost as national repression and Estonia has been constructed as a "victim nation" (Weiss-Wendt 2008, 480). The Chairman was obviously repressed, being accused, convicted and made to lose his position. The title of the exhibition, "Not Suitable for Work," carries many layers of meaning, as Juhan Ojaste was deemed to be an unsuitable Soviet citizen because of his sexuality, and thus he also became unsuitable for work as a chairman. But the reasons for his repression were not due to his national origin or nationalist ideology.

Even as the story of the Chairman is not a story of Estonian national oppression, it is not a story of general violations of human rights either. It is a specific Estonian history told in the current context in which gay rights are understood as human rights. Queer victimhood may offer transnational perspectives on victimhood, and together with national narratives, they can illustrate what is especially Soviet Estonian in the faith of this particular queer individual. The Chairman's tale is a story of tragic repression—and it is a story of the frail possibilities and harsh limitations of homosexual life in Soviet Estonia. Indeed, perhaps the Chairman offered the first step toward the new Museum of Freedom. Perhaps the reformed museum can also remember the fragile possibilities which were open in Soviet Estonia, as well as the repression and suffering based on other aspects than nationality.

Jaanus Samma's art and the debate around it managed to bend the Estonian construction of victimhood by raising possibilities of queer repression and questioning the innocence of the victims. It showed that a museum can be a place where no aspect of the past needs to remain a taboo and all emotions are allowed, as Merelin Piipuu has argued (Kõiv 2017). In this way, museums and art can open new possibilities for living together and promote empathy and understanding in difference. Even though in the debate the Chairman's tale was framed with current conceptualizations of gay lives and gay rights, as an artistic presentation Samma's exhibition offers glimpses onto pasts that do not conform to present categories. When sitting alone in the darkness of the installation "Loge,"

the visitor can feel and empathize with the queer past of the Chairman, which may radically differ from the present.

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