

## Student Fashion Shows at the ERKI (State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR) as a Carnavalesque Phenomenon in Soviet Estonia

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Summary

**Abstract:** The present paper analyses carnivalesque aspects (in the Mikhail Bakhtinian sense) of the popular student fashion shows in the ERKI (*Eesti NSV Riiklik Kunstiinstituut* – State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR), which took place from 1982 to 1985. The paper focuses particularly on ambivalent laughter, the grotesque and symbolic transgression.

The present article examines the first performances of the fashion show initiated by the fashion students of the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR in 1982–1985<sup>1</sup>, which became an essential mode of self-realisation for many aspiring fashion designers and offered them opportunities for experimental application of their ideas and creativity. The main sources for this study are semi-structured interviews carried out in 2007 and 2008 with the organisers of the ERKI fashion shows and other involved people, and the preserved photos that the former participants helped to interpret. Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory constitutes the theoretical framework for analysing the social and cultural meanings of the fashion show.

In Bakhtin's vision, the carnival is primarily a culture of laughter<sup>2</sup>, which is opposed to the everyday norms and seriousness of the official culture and, in a wider sense, to everything that is considered sacred and serious in a given culture. The pervading and inter-

related characteristics of the carnival are laughter, the grotesque, corporeality, social solidarity, inversion and symbolic transgression. Carnavalesque laughter is ambivalent (both jolly and exultant, mocking and deriding), universal (the whole world seems to be funny; everything and everyone, even the one who laughs, is laughed at) and collective (creating social solidarity). A carnivalesque situation is characterised by inversion, expressed by the transformation of individual and social identities, as well as of social order. The identity of participants is changed by their changing of clothes and re-embodiment in different characters – in a carnivalesque situation, a person is not himself or herself any more, but somebody else. The carnival, as a practice of generating a feeling of liberation and new symbolic meanings, offers its participants an experience similar to ritual and, through inversion, temporarily questions the reigning social and cultural norms, as well as sometimes indicating the need to change these norms. Participants in the carnival play with conventional models of language and thought by reversing and questioning them, thus undermining the dominant social order, in the symbolic rather than in the direct sense.

The central image of the carnival is the body, through which the grotesque is revealed and a change of identity is carried out. In carnivalesque situations, the body and its additions (costumes and accessories) become grotesque – strange, fantastic, eccentric and absurd – as elements that are unsuitable together in everyday life are combined. The

1 The period under observation is limited to the study years of the first organisers of the ERKI fashion show – the first group of initiators of the fashion show graduated from the Institute in 1985.

2 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1968].

carnavalesque grotesque degrades everything that is officially and habitually taken as the norm by adding hyperbolic exaggerations but, in general, it involves the emphasising of ambivalence, not destruction. The grotesque body makes congruent bodies that cannot be made congruent in normal life – the bodies of men and women, young and old bodies, and bodies that are being born and dying. Woman has an especially important role in the carnivalesque situation: it is the woman who can devalue life, bring things down-to-earth and, at the same time, create new life.

The ERKI fashion show was born at the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR, which was at that time associated with creativity and free thinking. The fashion show was one of the performative forms of art that, through laughter, grotesque and symbolic transgression, helped people to cope with the social oppression of the 1980s. The early 1980s were the peak of stagnation in the Soviet Union – an economic and political standstill that carried with it rigid politics, economic inefficiency, a Russification campaign and continuous control over cultural life. Under these conditions, several different cultural phenomena emerged that helped people to free themselves of a gradually growing depression, to cope with the growing differences between the official ideology and everyday life, and with the deepening of cynicism and double thinking of the time. In the art life of the period, there were several performative forms of expression (e.g. *performances* and *happenings* in urban space) that were hard to censure and which enabled artists to create their own alternative worlds within the Soviet reality. The ERKI fashion show was preceded by a tradition of popular parties at the ERKI in the 1960s, where the students staged thrilling entertainment pro-

grammes, organised performances, showed self-made experimental films, and had style parties and carnivals.

In 1982, the students of the fashion department of the ERKI came up with the idea of organising fashion shows. They could not compare their ideas with other similar fashion shows in the Soviet Union, let alone in Western countries. The only possible model for their show was the local fashion institution – the Tallinn House of Fashion, whose conservative fashion shows were just the opposite of the students' shows. (The ERKI fashion show can be seen as an example of 'citizen action' fashion of the time). It is possible that, precisely because of the lack of examples, the ERKI fashion show developed into a unique event where an increasingly more important role fell to a number of performative elements (e.g. performative conception, arranged dance movements and interludes), besides the usual introduction of fashion. The organisers of the ERKI fashion show enjoyed laughing at fashion as well as at themselves, creating grotesque images, emphasising corporeality, and playing with social norms. Each spring, this student event created a unique alternative world governed by bravery, creativity, play and pleasure. The art students of the time did not always realise how their jokes balanced on the edge (open mocking of Soviet offices and values was not permitted and it could have resulted in being expelled from the school or even in more serious repressive measures); at the same time, the mocking in the fashion show was never overtly politicised and cynical; rather, it was playfully liberal.

Characterising the ERKI fashion shows in retrospect, the organising students of the time recalled it using words similar to those of Bakhtin, admitting that, in addition to 'self-realisation', for them this was also 'fooling

around', 'show', 'playing at the fashion world', 'an outlet where people could afford to make silly jokes', 'clownery, pantomime or circus', and 'a positively charged laughing programme'.

The very first acts in 1983 – 'Black and white angel' (authors: fashion students Kaire Tali and Ilja Tüür) and 'Claws and fangs' (author: fashion student Anu Hint) – contained elements of a theatrical show and carnivalesque re-embodiment, using fashion to point out the meaningful relativity of the inner-outer dissonances and binary oppositions in social and cultural reality. The fashion shows that followed also showed the ambivalence of opposites and questioned customary norms. One of the collections, directly mocking the academic reserve of the Tallinn House of Fashion, 'White dresses' (author: fashion student Kaire Tali, 1983), introduced models with blasé faces, all wearing similar white housecoats, moving as one entity against the background sounds of squawking crows. In this show and in several shows that followed, the students introduced a *readymade*-type of clothes that seemingly did not suit the fashion stage (e.g. militia uniforms, wadded coats and housecoats; the designs of other students included in somebody's collection etc.).

In the constant state of scarcity of goods in Soviet Estonia, the collection 'Poor emigrant' had an especially comic and grotesque appearance (exceptionally, this time, the teachers of the Chair of Fashion were the authors of the idea), where the life of emigrants who had fled from the Soviet Union was shown as exaggeratedly hard and poor, pointing out the stupidity of Soviet propaganda. (According to the official message of Soviet authorities and the media, emigrants to the capitalist West lived in extreme poverty, but in reality, emigrants sent aid parcels to their rela-

tives in the homeland.) In addition, several acts of the fashion show mocked uniforms. Two acts presented together everyday clothing items, the 'uniform' of poor Soviet people – a wadded coat and militia uniforms – and fishnet stockings or bare feet. By showing the official and unofficial together in such a funny and grotesque key, the participants degraded the authorities.

In 1984, the improvisational dance number *Breik* ('Break') was presented (authors: fashion students Jelena Ljutjuk and Maire Valdma), the idea of which was born when one of the authors saw her great-aunt's baptiste underwear and decided to use it in a fashion show. This striptease-like act (at the end of the act, the performers wore only underwear) brought together a pseudo-sensual parody of striptease and the powerful angular movements of break dance. *Breik* was a kind of symbolic transgression, a balancing on the borders of bodily (officially, strip-tease did not exist in the Soviet Union) as well as cultural taboos (break dance as an American youth subculture).

From the initial years of the ERKI fashion shows, we can mention two other types of shows, which did not directly present fashion collections. First, there were interludes, which were spontaneous and improvisational acts, presented by the hosts playing the fool. These improvised acts were characterised by spontaneous playfulness; they were born on the spot and aimed only at joking. Clothes were presented in an unusual way for a fashion show – they were exhibited, not worn, in an effort to question the meaning of clothes and the idea of fashion. On the one hand, they mocked the seriousness of the fashion show format while, on the other hand, the clothes shown in these acts (e.g. mass-production underwear and women's housecoats) can be interpreted as a general mockery of

the status of clothes and the uniformity of fashion in Soviet society. To express the carnivalesque, these interludes also used travesty and the opposition of large–small bodies (in a grotesque key). There was *happening*-like performance in the Tallinn city space 'Women from the slum storming *Laste Maailm*' [the shop 'Children's World'] (author: Anu Hint, 1984). Photos taken at this event were later presented as a slide show to accompany the collection 'Black and White' at the ERKI fashion show. The action 'Women from the slum...' resembled the *happenings* that had been carried out in Estonia in the 1960s and 1970s. Four women students, clad in black, wearing men's hats, leather and suit pants and sunglasses, marched arrogantly through the city to the shop *Laste Maailm*, where mothers bought clothes and toys for their children. In the Soviet Estonia of the time, it was normal that people had to queue up for a long time to be able to buy anything worthwhile. The students behaved provocatively, trying to jump the queue, and playfully imitated the grabbing of some goods. With such a breach of order (again, symbolic), the students emphasised one of the absurd features of Soviet life: in order to acquire elementary necessities under the conditions of constant deficiencies, women had to become masculinely brutal.

The ERKI fashion shows of the initial years were full of playfulness (as opposed to the competition that can be seen at serious fashion shows) and improvisation. The carnivalesque was expressed in many different ways, the most important of which was all-embracing, collective and ambivalent laughter. The laughter was aimed at socially accepted norms and values, institutionalised official fashion (the Tallinn House of Fashion), the fashion show as a genre and, finally, at the participants themselves (at their being

fashion artists). The ERKI fashion show offered the fashion students of the time liberating laughter, which helped them to cope with social and political conditions and the stress of their studies. The laughter was not condemning but, rather, joyfully relative and optimistic. The relativity of several social and cultural oppositions and hierarchies (e.g. man–woman, good–bad etc.) was demonstrated to the audience; the performers degraded the traditional style of official fashion shows by bringing 'anti-fashion', ready-made fashion and sometimes non-aesthetically bared bodies to the stage. One of the permeating themes of different collections and *happening*-like performances was the grotesque in its different forms of appearance – grotesque bodies, strange sets of clothes and accessories, hyperbolic images and comical movements. Many collections displayed the theme of brave, strong and 'creatively mad' women, which interrelated with the importance of women in carnivalesque situations described in the Bakhtinian approach, and their ability at the same time to vulgarise, destroy and create. Symbolic transgressions questioned the general validity of social norms, offering playful alternatives in the form of these performances. The mutually inspiring rehearsals and performances brought together fashion students who generally preferred to work independently, creating the unique community of the ERKI fashion shows.

*Translated by Marika Liivamägi  
proof-read by Richard Adang*