

Art Against Art. Rethinking the Role and Position of the Artist in Estonian Art in the 1970s

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This article observes how the new understanding of art which was introduced at the end of the 1960s by pop art influenced groups was pursued and perhaps even radicalised in the second half of the 1970s, in a period generally referred to as the weakening of the avant-garde. The starting point for the analysis is the speech Leonhard Lapin gave at the last unofficial art exhibition, *Event Harku '75. Objects, Concepts*, which promoted art as a means of creating a new living environment. Taking Lapin's text as a framework, the author analyses the intervention in the official exhibition of monumental art in the following year. The pronounced interdisciplinarity is seen not as a compromise, but as a critical experiment to transform official art and its hierarchy, which leads to the suggestion of postponing the 'death of the avant-garde'.

This article will look at the changes taking place in artistic practice during the 1970s in Soviet Estonia. After the Khrushchev reforms in the late 1950s, adapting to the trends of Western contemporary art became a touchstone for unofficial art, in opposition to official cultural policies and the doctrine of socialist realism, and showed signs of being avant-garde.¹ The decade of the 1970s, following the disillusionment after the suppression of mass demonstrations in Prague in spring 1968, has been described as reactionary. Indeed, direct Western influences were displaced by seemingly mythical and existential themes in the work of many artists, or by invoking avant-garde trends from the beginning of the 20th century, in particular constructivism and suprematism. In general accounts, this change has been interpreted as the abandonment of avant-garde ideas and as a retreat to cosmic and metaphysical dimensions.²

The article will endeavour to rethink this 'break'. The starting point for the re-reading will be Leonhard Lapin's speech given at a seminar held on the occasion of the exhibition *Event Harku '75. Objects, Concepts* in 1975, where Lapin demanded from his colleagues that they engage with the new industrial environment and social reality.

One of the problems that haunts recent accounts of the history of Soviet period art is the neutralisation of the complexity

1 S. Helme, *Why do We Call it Avant-Garde? Abstract Art and Pop Art in Estonia in the Late 1950s and in the 1960s. – Different Modernisms, Different Avant-Gardes: Problems in Central and Eastern European Art after World War II*. Ed. S. Helme. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstmuuseum, 2009, pp. 138–152.

2 S. Helme, J. Kangilaski, *Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu*. Tallinn: Kunst, 1999, p. 192. Cf. J. Kangilaski, *Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine. – J. Kangilaski, Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist*. Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2000, pp. 228–235.

of artistic practices, reducing them to the confrontation of 'official' and 'unofficial'. This has led to a general blindness towards the specificity of critical concepts and of authors' positions, often reduced to political/ideological opposition and anti-Soviet dissidence. Neutrality and withdrawal are seen as legitimate strategies for protesting against official concepts of art and society. I argue that the ideas Lapin announced in his speech, in which he continued the ongoing discussions of the new role of art in the new industrial and cybernetic era, were pursued further in subsequent experiments, which departed from the field of unofficial art in favour of design and architecture, thus entering the official realm of art. Instead of seeing interdisciplinarity – the characteristic guise of this art – as a 'defect', I regard it as a specific feature of the new art practice.³ Finally, the article will show that the recovery of constructivism was more complex than just a reviving of a historical style: it advocated the transformation and redefinition of the art object, leading to a re-politicisation of art.

Objective art – new art practice

On 6 December 1975, the exhibition *Event Harku '75. Objects, Concepts* opened in the Institute for Experimental Biology in Harku, near Tallinn, and it was later considered to be the last unofficial show

3 The dominant approach to the history of Soviet period art designates these kinds of local developments of art which differ from the ongoing mainstream discourse on Western art as mutation and malformation. See e.g. S. Helme, *Personal Time. – Personal Time: Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1945–1996*. Estonia. Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1996, pp. 20–24. Recently, Andres Kurg pointed out the fertile influence the official design discourse had on alternative artistic practices: A. Kurg, *Feedback Environment: Rethinking Art and Design Practices in Tallinn During the Early 1970s*. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture* 2011, vol. 20 (1/2), pp. 26–50.

in Soviet Estonia. The exhibition itself, like unofficial shows in general, was miscellaneous, even eclectic, presenting such diverse trends as pop art – which had been the most significant tendency in Estonian alternative art since the late 1960s⁴ – kinetic objects, concrete poetry and geometric abstraction. The few photographs documenting the exhibition show a lively, slightly chaotic environment: oversized packets of Georgian tea hanging from the ceiling (Jaan Ollik and Villu Järmut), in the middle of the space the artwork *Altar* decorated with a colourful geometric pattern (Sirje Runge), next to it a 'chamber fountain' – a round side table with a cubic basin mounted on top of it (Kaarel Kurismaa) – prints showing a structural analysis of sites and drafts for their reconstruction (Jüri Okas) etc.

The main subject of the seminar, held on the occasion of the exhibition⁵, was conceptualism as the most relevant tendency in art; more generally, the issues of the role and function of art and the artist in society were raised and discussed. In his speech, Leonhard Lapin presented

4 Pop art was the first non-conformist tendency to engage with the Soviet reality and the surrounding environment, thus breaking the unwritten taboo of unofficial art. Union Pop, as it was called, was above all a funny and ironic mocking of Soviet everyday rituals and poor mass-produced goods. When Lapin later recalled the origins of Union Pop, he mentioned that methods had indeed been taken from American pop art, but the material they worked with was strictly local (L. Lapin, *Startinud kuuekümmendatel. Mälestusi ja mõtteid*. – *Kunst* 1986, no. 1 (68), p. 20).

5 The exhibition was initiated by the artists Sirje Runge, Leonhard Lapin, Raul Meel and the physicist Tõnu Karu. Scientific institutions often offered 'space' for alternative art exhibitions. However, beginning in the mid-1960s, artists became more interested in the nexus between art and science, in the development of new technologies and the possibilities they opened for art. On the level of student organisations, the meetings of young artists, authors, scientists etc. in 'summer camps' were widespread and popular, and during them several experimental exhibitions were developed. The discussions were later published in the youth magazine *Noorus*.

the notion of 'objective art' as the future art practice. Lapin called for a new art, for forms based on, and developed in accordance with, contemporary industrial reality and technological progress. It was indeed the new reality itself that called upon artists to re-consider their practice. For Lapin, the changes in the environment (industrialisation) and the development of technology, introducing completely new production environments and means of production as well as communication, had fundamentally changed the concept of art and the role of the artist.

The most important goal of this new objective art was the design of new urban surroundings, the creation of an integrated aesthetic environment. Therefore, it could not exist as an isolated artefact, but had to become, Lapin declared, an 'inherent part of the environment'. Art had to overcome the boundaries between the different disciplines of painting, sculpture and architecture, to encompass a variety of techniques, most notably multimedia and electronics. Thus objective art was not a new style or aesthetics, but the ideology of a new culture.⁶ Lapin ended his speech with the following vision: 'In the future, the new objective art will step down into the street. Museums will be information and production centres and monuments, designed for eternity, will go through many formal transformations.'⁷

From monumental art to an integral environment

What this new 'objective art' would look like was revealed by Lapin a year later, in the official retrospective on 20th

century Estonian monumental sculpture *Estonian Monumental Art 1902–1975* in the Tallinn Art Hall⁸, where he presented his project for a monument to Tallinn – a 345-metre-tall monument located in the new residential area of Mustamäe. On each storey of the monument, a period of the history of Tallinn would be displayed using audio-visual multimedia. The project was exhibited in the small survey of experimental work included in the main exhibition and organised by Lapin himself. It featured models and architectural projects, kinetic objects, abstract painting and prints, and was very different from the main exhibition, which consisted of decorative sculptures and Soviet memorial complexes, displayed in photographs and slides. A few constructivist compositions from the 1920s were exhibited as well. One of the aims of the small show was to present an experiment in transforming the official category of monumental art into a new kind of environmental design that encompassed the environment as an aesthetic whole.⁹

The issue of urban space and its organisation was developed by Sirje Runge in her diploma work *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn*, which she completed in 1975 at the Department of Industrial Art at the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR. Lapin mentioned it in his speech as the most significant example of objective art so far. Runge's work consisted of eight designs investigating the means for reconstructing different locations, mostly neglected courtyards

8 The exhibition, which opened in May 1976, was organised by the Exhibitions Department of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR. Lapin was involved as the exhibition designer.

9 Uudislooming monumentaalkunsti näitusel. – Kunst 1978, no. 2 (52), p. 35. The review, published in the local arts magazine *Kunst* two years later, was written by Lapin.

6 L. Lapin, *Objektiivne kunst. – Harku 1975–1995*. Eds. L. Lapin, A. Liivak, R. Meel. Tallinn: Tallinna Kunstihoone, 1995, pp. 23–29.

7 L. Lapin, *Objektiivne kunst*, p. 29.

and abandoned industrial areas around the Tallinn city centre.¹⁰ Her aim, Runge wrote, was to convince people that the city was not 'a hostile territory stretching from work to home'.¹¹ The artist's aim was the reanimation of space through an active design process; these modern and flexible structures had to replace old monuments.¹² The work was not included in the monumental art exhibition in which Runge participated with geometric paintings. Dealing with the construction of space in a more abstract way, these paintings can be seen in the context of the architectural synthesis objective art was focusing on, and in the context of the debate on the renewal of monumental art, which had been going on since the 1960s.

The small experimental show was connected with discussions on monumental art, and particularly with its crises since the 1960s, resulting from the transformed urban context and expanding industrialisation. After Lenin's decree in 1918, monumental art became the foundation for the political connection between art and power, and one of the most important genres of Soviet art. There could not be anything more outdated for the young artist associated with the independent art scene than to engage in monumental art. Nevertheless, the aim of the artists led by Lapin was to appropriate the official genre and re-shape it into an extensive design of public space. It was not about replacing the old figurative monuments with more

abstract compositions of 'urban sculpture' – the official solution for solving crises in monumental art – but the creation of new city structures and, as a result, a different kind of public space.¹³

The legacy of constructivism. Interdisciplinarity as critique

'Objective art' was the art of the new industrial era, art that related to the industrial environment – artistically and morally. Lapin was convinced that art must intervene in and transform the everyday living space. This, in the context of 'real' socialism's highly suspicious (utopian) idea of a social mission of art, led to the constructivist aspect of the Soviet avant-garde and its appropriation by artists and architects in the 1970s. By then, the constructivist avant-garde had been rehabilitated as the predecessor of Soviet design. Yet the political – utopian – aspect that fascinated Estonian artists, and especially Lapin, was exceptional. In his speech given at the seminar in Harku, Lapin appealed to the power of art to change the surrounding environment and thereby to reform, if not society and the system, at least the way of life. When his programme for the synthesis of art and architecture under the guidance of the newest technologies for creating new spaces was influenced by the theories of design¹⁴, Lapin developed his constructive

10 It also included 80 slides, which depicted the actual sites in their original condition and mainly colourful abstract fragments of the boards.

11 S. Lapin [Runge], Tallinna kesklinna miljöö kujundamise võimalusi. Explanatory text for diploma work. State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR, Department of Industrial Art. Tallinn, 1975, p. 5.

12 S. Lapin, Tallinna kesklinna miljöö kujundamise võimalusi, p. 8.

13 The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre has noted that a monument organises a collective space. The search for new monumental forms also offers a potential for the reorganisation of social life (H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997, p. 200ff).

14 In his speech, Lapin was quoting, though not mentioning, Pierre Restany, from his book *Livre blanc – objet blanc* (1969), which had been translated into Finnish in 1970. I thank Andres Kurg for this information. Restany encouraged artists to include new technology in their practice and to extend the artistic field.

notion of art in dialogue with Russian avant-garde, in particular constructivism.

In the history of Soviet-era art, reconstructed after Estonia gained its independence in 1991, this aspect has been generally ignored, or rather re-framed. Abstract art, such as the geometric abstraction that emerged in Estonia in the mid-1970s, has been interpreted as the 'art of elegant refusal', which confronted the official demands on art, including propaganda and education, with a 'silent meaningful neutrality'.¹⁵ For the art discourse of the 1990s, this was of particular importance: it made it possible to show the autonomy of art and connect local art to the international (Western) discourse of art history. Lapin's turn to the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s was thus interpreted as a withdrawal from reality in search of 'universal truths' and cosmic values.¹⁶ I believe, rather, that Lapin's turn to constructivist avant-garde was motivated by the particular social situation of the 1970s, and by the demands it placed on artists.¹⁷

The 1970s have been described as a period of stagnation, with such distinctive characteristics as the deadlock of public life and the withdrawal of citizens into an apolitical privacy: owning a car or a summer cottage balanced collaboration with the system. The integration of the unofficial scene into official structures

had already begun in the late 1960s. The question for artists was how to engage in society without losing individuality. It was not about finding a safe, 'uncontrolled' space outside of the official art world, nor about 'inner emigration', but about disrupting the official art world through new ideas, in a meaningful and productive way. 'Instead of just cheering up life, art must become its organiser.'¹⁸ Lapin seemed to have given up on the idealistic notion that one could exist outside society, that there could be an independent unofficial realm parallel to the official one, as was believed by the first generation of unofficial artists. Rather, he was looking for a more influential position in the system. 'Inner emigration' and neutrality were opposed by an approach that had its origins in constructivism, in the belief that art could and must change society. To accomplish this goal, the field of artistic practice was to be extended to the whole environment, at the same time overcoming the boundaries of different disciplines. The exhibition of 'new monumental art' in 1976 was an example of architecture and design discourses being introduced to criticise and redefine (monumental) art and existing hierarchies. In the text 'Art against art' (written 1977), Lapin argued against the hierarchical differentiation of the arts and called upon his colleagues to 'protest against their profession'. He wrote: 'Artists must see visual culture as a whole, and search for means which will

15 S. Helme, *The Times of Artforum. – Idealism of the Cultural Space of the 1970s: Addenda to Estonian Art History*. Ed. S. Helme. Tallinn: Kaasaegse Kunsti Eesti Keskus, 2002, pp. 15–16.

16 S. Helme, J. Kangilaski, *Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, p. 210.

17 Indeed, at the time of the Harku exhibition, Lapin's former 'comrades-in-arms', the pop artists Ando Keskküla and Andres Tolts, had an official breakthrough as painters, adapting hyperrealist techniques, which Lapin saw as a compromise with the system (L. Lapin, *Pimeydestä valoon: Viron taiteen avantgarde neuvostomiehityksen aikana*. Helsinki: Otava, 1996, p. 102).

18 Lapin was quoting the Estonian constructivist Märt Laarman, who in turn was referring to El Lissitzky's and Ilya Ehrenburg's preface to the first volume of the trilingual journal *Beuub/Gegenstand/Objet* (1922), and called for a 'constructive art' that 'is not intended to alienate people from life, but to summon, to contribute to organizing it' (E. Lissitzky, I. Ehrenburg, *Die Blockade Rußlands geht ihrem Ende entgegen. – El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften*. Hrsg. v. S. Lissitzky-Küppers. Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1976, p. 341).

eliminate boundaries between single fields: creative artists must not limit themselves to one art, but aspire to all the techniques available.¹⁹ He criticised the lack of unity in the contemporary (modernist) art practice: its bureaucratic and hierarchic organisation as it was made manifest in the structure of sub-associations of the Artists' Union. And he opposed this with an extensive artistic practice which would integrate all fields of life. It was a strategy for leaving behind the normative, hierarchical institutional structure of art. 'Objective art' was the art of the new industrial reality and technological era. Following the experiments of pop art, its critique of the everyday and its interest in the new industrial and artificial environment, it provided art with a constructive goal: to engage with reality in the avant-garde sense of the word.

19 L. Lapin, *Kunstiga kunsti vastu*. – L. Lapin, *Valimik artikleid ja ettekandeid kunstist 1967–1977*. Manuscript in L. Lapin's archive. Tallinn, 1977, p. 81.