

History Appropriating Contemporary Concerns: Leonhard Lapin's Architectural History and Mythical Thinking*

EPP LANKOTS

This article examines the possibility of reading the textual practice of Leonhard Lapin, an energetic leader of the Estonian artistic avant-garde during the 1970s and 1980s, as an indication of the emergence of history as a critical category in the historiography of Estonian modern architecture. Architectural history is often narrowly interpreted in terms of the domination and ideological commitment of spatial theories, including perceptions of the 1970s avant-garde in relation to resistance to the Soviet regime. However, Lapin's concept of living history and his ideas about the mythical content of architecture, lead to the reframing of architectural history through a range of critical-analytic models that is more diverse. Lapin's attempt to re-work the history of early twentieth-century architecture in Estonia was part of his subjective strategy: he sustained his own avant-garde and critical practices in contemporary art by pursuing the (hi)story of the avant-garde. This multi-faceted engagement with issues concerning historical continuity (or discontinuity) with the early twentieth-century avant-garde also raises the possibility that Lapin's history writing is relevant to the debate concerning the position of the Western neo-avant-garde after World War II.

The title of this paper refers to two very distinct threads in modernist art-historical narrative: the repetition of various artistic practices and ideas, and the mythical structure of modern art and architecture. Although the canon of Western art and architectural history is an institution that has sustained various myths about modernity, it is not my aim here to follow the path of critical theory and explore such processes of mythmaking. Instead, I intend to look at these two threads interconnectedly, not as they appear in artistic or architectural practice, but in historiographical practice; and specifically in relation to texts written by Estonian artist and architect Leonhard Lapin (b. 1947) on the history of Estonian twentieth-century architecture during the 1970s and 1980s.

* This article was written as part of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research targeted financing project no. 0160047509.

By the late 1970s, the history of modern architecture in Estonia had developed the canonical form that is evident in architectural historian Leo Gens's (1922–2001) contributions to the collectively authored survey histories of Estonian art and architecture: *History of Estonian Architecture*¹ and the three volumes of *History of Estonian Art*². Gens dominated the field of modern architectural history in Estonia during the first decades following World War II. During the 1970s, Leonhard Lapin, a young architect and an energetic leader of the Estonian artistic avant-garde, also began to write on the history of Estonian architecture. Although small in quantity, and despite of having had a minor – if not unacknowledged – impact on the historiographical practices of a younger generation of historians during the 1980s and 1990s, Lapin's texts are inextricable from Estonian architectural historiography today. One of the reasons behind this lack of recognition is that Lapin's writing is not considered to have sufficient academic rigour: he has written an account of art history that is strongly influenced by his subjective interests, being explicitly infiltrated with his own life and beliefs as an artist. Sirje Helme has described Lapin's textual practice as mimicry disguised as history, in the service of the avant-garde.³ Thus, Lapin was opposed to the official architectural history written by Gens, and his efforts in re-working the history of early twentieth-century architecture in Estonia have been considered part of his subversive and subjective strategy: in pursuing the (hi)story of the pre-war avant-garde he sustained his critical practices in contemporary art.

Needless to say, such avant-garde activities that occurred during the Soviet era have in post-Soviet years become accepted and legitimised as part of a 'discourse of resistance' in accordance with today's dominant art-historical narrative structured around nationalist ideas. Generally, that discourse is based on two myths that have been considered central to understanding the Estonian avant-garde: repressed national and cultural identity, and the lack of individual freedom. The cornerstone of these myths was a utopian conception of the West and the idea of architecture as a kind of artistic practice. Accordingly, the assertion of historical continuity with pre-war art and architecture, which became an important part of architectural practice in 1970s, was thought to indicate a break from Soviet reality, and to re-insert Estonian practices into the Western cultural tradition.

However, rather than narrowly interpreting the issues in terms of national identity and cultural continuity with the pre-war independent Estonian Republic, the practices of Lapin and the avant-garde should be viewed in the broader cultural context. The idea of historical return has been at the core of numerous theoretical and historical accounts on modern architecture, and it has, to some extent, already been considered in relation to Leonhard Lapin and the Estonian avant-garde during the 1970s and early

1 Eesti arhitektuuri ajalugu [History of Estonian architecture]. Gen. ed. H. Arman. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1965.

2 Eesti kunsti ajalugu [History of Estonian art]. Gen. ed. I. Solomõkova. Vol. 2, 1940–1965. Tallinn: Kunst, 1970; Vol. 1:1, Kõige varasemast ajast kuni 19. saj. keskpaigani [From the earliest times to mid-19th cen.]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1975; Vol. 1:2, 19. sajandi keskpaigast kuni 1940. aastani [From the mid-19th century to the year 1940]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1977.

3 S. Helme, In the Beginning There Was No Word! – L. Lapin, Kaks kunsti. Valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist 1971–1995 [Two kinds of art: a selection of articles and talks on art and architecture, 1971–1995]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1997, p. 194.

1980s.⁴ In contrast, my main interest here is Lapin's textual practice and his idea that 'living history' should be based on 'mythical thinking'. I am interested in the relation of that practice not to the prevailing historiography stressing causal relationships and objectivity, but mainly to the field that takes history writing to be a kind of critical practice and is opposed to the understanding of history as totalising, ideologically conditioned and uncritical (as sometimes appears from the perspective of rigorous critical theory).

Lapin's texts may easily be characterised as following the canonical story of the Modern Movement and, based on the issue of style, adapting it to the Estonian art-historical tradition, but their significance as evidence for the emergence of history as a critical category has not been considered. One way of doing this is to take advantage of Manfredo Tafuri's idea of history as a subversive tool for revealing the ideological commitment of modern architecture. At this point, I should make it very clear that by making this comparison I will not be drawing radical connections between Tafuri's explicitly Marxist critique of modern architecture and Lapin's critical practice which, although directed in subversion of Soviet conditions, has nothing to do with political critique or ideological content in Tafuri's sense. The common ground is, instead, limited to Tafuri's theory of operative criticism (i.e. the genealogical histories practiced by Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner etc. that were concerned with the roots of modern architecture in order to legitimise the architecture of the present). And it is, moreover, limited to the actual conditions that gave birth to Tafuri's historical critique: the tendencies that were evident not only in the post-war Italian art world, but also in the Western cultural scene generally – that is, the intricate relationship between the historical or authentic avant-garde and neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, which also resonated with theoretical discussions from the 1970s and onwards dealing with the problems of the specific historical function of both.⁵

So, although I will take a close look at Lapin's textual practice, I cannot detach it completely from his artistic practice and its context. Instead, I will try to show their interrelation on a different level from that of subverting the system. The relevance of the neo-avant-garde is presently also suggested by Mari Laanemets's and Andres Kurg's account of the architects of the Tallinn School, of which Lapin was a member. Their study shows the connection between the ideas of Tallinn School and those of late modernism in the Western architecture of that time. For example, Laanemets has compared Lapin's concept of 'Invisible Architecture' with the practices of Fluxus.⁶ Still, in the history of Estonian art, an awareness of history evident among the forces presiding over the birth of the neo-avant-garde in Europe and North America, was an unprecedented event.

4 K. Kodres, *Müüdiloojad ja teised* [The creators of myths and others]. – *Ehituskunst / Estonian Architectural Review* 1991, no. 5, pp. 3–14.

5 T. Llorens, Manfredo Tafuri: Neo-Avant-Garde and History. – *On the Methodology of Architectural History*. Ed. D. Porphyrios. *Architectural Design Profile*. *Architectural Design* 1981, vol. 51 (6/7), p. 84.

6 M. Laanemets, *Before the Spaces are Constructed: Concerning the Relationship between Architecture and Art in the Practice of the Tallinn School Architects*. – *Keskkonnad, projektid, kontseptsioonid. Tallinna kooli arhitektid 1972–1985 / Environment, Projects, Concepts: Architects of the Tallinn School, 1972–1985*. Ex. cat. Eds. A. Kurg, M. Laanemets. Tallinn: Museum of Estonian Architecture, 2008, p. 90.

Lapin's history of architecture

Lapin's texts on art and architectural history focus on the essence of the main stylistic periods in pre-World War II architecture in Estonia. The majority were published in local art and architectural journals such as *Kunst* (Art), *Kunst ja Kodu* (Art and Home) and *Ehituskunst* (Building Art), as well as in the weekly cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* (Hammer and Sickle), from 1971 to the end of the 1980s. Some were written as conference papers, or remained unpublished until 1997 when his collected texts were issued. His articles and papers include 'Funktsionalismi kriis' (The crisis of functionalism; 1979), 'Eesti funktsionalism' (Estonian functionalism; 1981–1982), 'Poleemiline historitsism' (Polemical eclecticism; 1982), 'Eesti art nouveau loomus' (The nature of Estonian art nouveau; 1982), 'Art déco Eesti arhitektuuris' (Art déco in Estonian architecture; 1984), 'XX sajandi arhitektuuri terminoloogilisi probleeme' (Terminological problems in 20th century architecture; 1986), etc.⁷ Lapin's interest in Estonian architectural history originates from the early 1970s, when he, following his graduation, was employed by the State Restoration Office being a *persona non grata* for the state architectural offices.⁸

Lapin's ambition was not to write a completely comprehensive history of modern art in Estonia,⁹ and so his writing does not follow the chronological narrative but is, instead, fragmented, moving back and forth between periods. Generally, he examined the established route of the Modern Movement, as did Leo Gens in his own 'official' history writing:¹⁰ Lapin wrote about historicism, art nouveau (he insisted on using a French term instead of the locally-established German *Jugendstil* that is still the common term in Estonian art history), functionalism and art deco, and even about Stalinist architecture, although he did not use the term at the time, preferring to see it as a form of classical tradition in architecture that was partly influenced by socialist realism. Updating terminology and proposing different categories of stylistic periods were characteristic of Lapin's history writing. He believed that terminology in the history of art and architecture should emphasise the symbolic meanings, rather than the functionality of terms as art historians use them. In this he followed his broader understanding of architectural history as something to be interpreted through its close relations to contemporary architecture. In other words, the terminology of history and architecture should create a link between past and present architecture; and just as images are used in art to transform the mythical past into a mythical present, words should have a similar function in the writing of history. In 1986, Lapin wrote: 'It is possible to compose architectural history as an encyclopaedia, standing on the bookshelf,

7 All the listed articles are available in the collection of articles *Kaks kunsti*.

8 The image of *persona non grata* has clearly been among the conspicuous tools used after the collapse of the Soviet system by Lapin and his generation to mythologise their own activities.

9 This is not evident, at least, in his early articles written in the Soviet period. Lapin's later texts from 1990s onwards have often strived for comprehensive interpretations of the Estonian avant-garde. See, for instance, L. Lapin, *Pimeydestä valoon: Viron taiteen avantgarde neuvostomiehityksen aikana* [From darkness to light: Estonian avant-garde art during the Soviet occupation]. Helsinki: Otava, 1996.

10 Labelling Gens's architectural history as 'official' and Lapin's architectural history as 'unofficial' is not entirely unproblematic. Although Gens was the author of comprehensive histories, big books that participated in the construction of the canon of national art history, Lapin wrote for magazines whose audience was often considerably larger than the audience of some of Gens's texts. The magazine *Kunst ja Kodu*, in which Lapin published, was the most popular home decoration magazine in the entire Soviet Union, and was also published in a Russian-language translation.

filled with information, but also as a kind of history that is alive and in close connection with the developments in building art today ... We, architects, demand living history from the historians!¹¹

The idea of living history shapes Lapin's narrative of the Modern Movement in a way that provides a smooth – and many would say uncritical – transition throughout the various historical periods and ideas. The significance of art nouveau is one example: Lapin considered it to have been primarily a tradition having specific formal qualities and combining romantic and rational, female and male elements. He differentiates art nouveau and functionalism by claiming that the former is concerned with imitating forms of nature, whereas the latter is concerned with the structure and principles of nature ('form follows function'); then again, he finds art nouveau to be a general spiritual state common to all the stylistic periods, including Estonian functionalism. Lapin goes so far as to see even the standard pitched-roof private houses that were built *en masse* in Estonia during the 1950s as originating from the turn-of-the-century national romantic tradition associated with art nouveau.

Hence, paraphrasing Tafuri's various understanding and use of the term 'history' (which Panayotis Tournikiotis calls a 'fog of histories'¹²), Lapin's architectural history is characterised by a fog of styles that accumulates around the mythical core of architecture, connecting different ages and periods. Style is an important issue for Lapin, and consequently his approach to architectural history may seem conservative. However, for Lapin, the concept of 'style' is the formal manifestation of the permanence of the human element – a kind of primal state of being that comes into contact with nature and technology. Lapin is not interested in style as a category defined by historical period or in the corresponding form, and rather than describing buildings in those terms, he looks for a unified integrity of 'style'. Rather than *Zeitgeist*, the mythical core of Lapin's history is wholeness and spirituality (human, nature and technology). Although, in so far as it places human being at the centre of history, Lapin's version of history is total; the interplay between fragmentation and the urge for integrity forms one of the elements that clearly distinguishes his history of the Modern Movement from teleological stories of modern architecture that see the course of architecture as an inevitable progression towards the present moment. Lapin's strategy is, of course, similar in the way it projects contemporary concerns onto the past, but it remains in conscious critical opposition to what was then the prevailing discourse in Estonia on modern architecture.

His particular agenda becomes evident, for instance, in his ascribing an avant-garde significance to the 1920s constructivism, whereas Gens had understood it primarily as a technology-driven development in architecture. This legitimisation of avant-garde artistic practices is the immediate context of Lapin's understanding of the history of modern architecture. Inventing or reinventing the tradition has been one obvious strategy for coping with Soviet policies concerning art. As Eha Komissarov wrote: 'A tradition was something to rest upon when disseminating the ideas of the

11 L. Lapin, XX sajandi arhitektuuri terminoloogilisi probleeme [Terminological problems in 20th century architecture]. – L. Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, p. 106.

12 P. Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1999, p. 201.

autonomism of art and ... the neutrality of aesthetic decisions. [...] The second catchword of tradition ... was the feeling of unity with Europe coded in it.¹³ Myths and symbols had provided a form of release from official doctrines even before Lapin's generation of artists adopted it; for example, in the case of Estonian abstract and surrealist art during the 1960s.

The other possible context for Lapin's history is to be found in general approaches in the Estonian cultural scene during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Postmodernism brought questions of contextuality and of architecture's relationship to history, which focused not so much on specific architectural problems as the general human aspect. This was one of the main features of the mythmaking of Lapin's generation of architects,¹⁴ and postmodernist attitudes in the practices of the Tallinn School during the early 1980s are a good example of the way in which contemporary architecture was being linked with the past and its mythic content. A colleague of Lapin, architect Vilen Künnapu, declared that 'the tradition of the synthesis of arts, as well as the symbolic dimension of architecture, is breaking free from the epidemic of scepticism that has become characteristic of our time'.¹⁵ His belief that architecture was being transformed into a sensitive and intellectual practice of deep inner culture reflected the new operative paradigm of 'architecture as an artistic practice'. Thus there was continued contact not only with the human aspects of architecture, but also with the idea of the avant-garde, which had remained outside the official Soviet discourse about art.¹⁶

For that generation, mythmaking also involved taking their own contemporary practices to be symbolically meaningful, and Lapin played an especially important role in the mythologising and historicising of his generation.¹⁷ His article on Estonian architecture of the 1970s reinforced the bridge between the early twentieth-century avant-garde – especially functionalism – and the neo-functionalism of the 1970s and the postmodernism of the 1980s.¹⁸ This bridge was built on the organic relationship between art and architecture, operating at a symbolic level. Hence, Lapin's concept of living history (i.e. architectural history with a symbolic dimension) was a product of its time, expressing an avant-garde mythology that combined the ideal with the real.

13 E. Komissarov, *Thousand Kilometers of Abyss*. – Tallinn–Moskva 1956–1985 [Tallinn–Moscow, 1956–1985]. Ex. cat. Eds. L. Lapin, A. Liivak. Tallinn: Tallinn Art Hall, 1996, pp. 89–90.

14 K. Kodres, *Müüdiiloojad ja teised*, p. 5.

15 V. Künnapu, *Keerulise ja vastuolulise arhitektuuri probleeme* [Problems of a complicated and contradictory architecture]. – *Ehituskunst* 1, 1981. Tallinn: Kunst, 1983, p. 52.

16 K. Kodres, *Müüdiiloojad ja teised*, p. 10.

17 Lapin expresses the mythical content of the avant-garde somewhat rhetorically: 'The avant-garde does not emerge or disappear, it just changes its form.' (L. Lapin, *Avangardi taassünd* [Rebirth of the avant-garde]. – L. Lapin, *Avangard* [Avant-garde]. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2003, p. 155.)

18 With typical modernist rhetoric, Lapin described the 1970s (his own era) as something unique in history: 'The seventies were the most complex and pivotal years ... in our post-war architecture. There is no common denominator for the works created in this decade, as there had been previously; ... some approaches were established on radically different ethical and aesthetic ideas.' (L. Lapin, *Arenguajoni Eesti seitsmekümnendate aastate arhitektuuris* [Developments in the Estonian architecture of the 1970s]. – *Ehituskunst* 1, 1981. Tallinn: Kunst, 1983, p. 10.)

Why neo-avant-garde?

My proposal to read Lapin's texts within the framework of the neo-avant-garde and its historical connection with the authentic avant-garde is not aimed neither at finding a working comparison between Lapin's artistic and textual practice, nor a convenient position in the debates about Western neo-avant-garde. I am merely exploring the possibility of considering his account of history in the light of the critical history writing that was involved with issues concerning the historicity of the avant-garde in the West following World War II. Or, as Thomas Llorens put it in 1981: 'Among the forces which, over the last ten or fifteen years, have presided over the birth of the new avant-garde, none perhaps is more intriguing than the emergence of a new and problematic awareness of history.'¹⁹

The first reason to look for connections between the neo-avant-garde in the West and in Soviet Estonia follows from purely formal agreement in art-historical discourse that the artistic and architectural practice of Lapin and his colleagues during the 1970s is exclusively to be called avant-garde. Such an understanding is reinforced by Lapin himself, since he called his own writing a history of the Estonian avant-garde.²⁰ At the same time, there were obvious differences between the neo-avant-garde practices of the two different political systems – Western democracy and Soviet state socialism. In the post-war Soviet Union, avant-garde practices emerged as an underground or semi-underground activity; whereas modern art, especially in the form of abstract expressionism as it appeared in the United States, was a politically acceptable art form.²¹

A further reason is Lapin's 'mimicry'. This involved looking into history to find justifications and explanations for contemporary practices while working within a repressive political system. Hal Foster has described a similar phenomenon, inherent in the problematic of the neo-avant-garde, as a strategy of 'reconnect[ing] with a lost practice in order to disconnect from a present way of working felt to be outmoded, misguided, or otherwise oppressive'.²² Or, restated in a way that is more obviously related to the central issue of the neo-avant-garde: 'how does a reconnection with a past practice support a disconnection from a present practice and/or a development of a new one?'²³

Foster provides another key to understanding the comparison – Lapin's textual and artistic practices may be described in terms of his notion of 'parallax': that is, 'the displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer'. In this way, one can claim, paraphrasing Foster, that also Lapin's framings of the past depend on his position in the present and that these positions in turn are defined through such framings.²⁴ The central issue here is that the connection with the past should not necessarily be imitative or enforcing continuity as an essential quality. It could also be a

19 T. Llorens, Manfredo Tafuri, p. 83.

20 S. Helme, In the Beginning There Was No Word!, p. 194.

21 Clement Greenberg went so far as to call those artists who followed the inner regularities of art in their practice the most radical politically, cf. S. Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2000, p. 89.

22 H. Foster, The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1996, p. 3.

23 H. Foster, The Return of the Real, p. x.

24 H. Foster, The Return of the Real, p. xii.

negative connection, calling for denial, or a break with historical practice, and thus building a ground for new forms, aesthetics, etc. However, such a negative connection is still historicist in terms of direction.

The aforementioned may also be understood in the light of Tafuri's critical history of modern architecture, which has its origins in the controversial situation of the avant-garde tradition in post-war European and American culture. This controversy involved two different approaches to defining the post-war avant-garde. The first approach interpreted the changes that had taken place in international architecture as signifying that the Modern Movement was alive and kicking – albeit showing signs of having aged. Thus, what history demanded was continuity with the classical avant-garde via changes that were merely a matter of degree. The second approach engaged in a process of reassessment that was attended by scepticism and heterodoxy regarding the underlying ideas of the Modern Movement.²⁵

Thus, both parties called upon history to legitimise the particular kind of modernity they each proposed. The first approach conceived of history as a sort of natural force that could be beneficial when not obstructed by a deliberate consciousness of the past. The second, denying the possibility of a smooth continuity with the Modern Movement, looked sometimes deliberately into the past for a renewed definition of the boundaries of architecture itself. Such a definition was the necessary prerequisite for validating any new creative move.²⁶ These two approaches are also evident in a famous discussion on the theory of the avant-garde that emerged during the 1970s when some critics, most notably Peter Bürger, viewed the post-war avant-garde as merely the recycling of forms and strategies used by the historical avant-garde of the first two decades of the twentieth century.²⁷ Others viewed it as a new articulation of the specific conditions of cultural production in the post-war period, and argued for a dialectical approach to the question of the historical discontinuity or continuity of the neo-avant-garde in relation to pre-war avant-garde movements (e.g. Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh).²⁸

Tafuri's connection with the second approach is obviously negative, but it is sincere nonetheless: he considered the anti-historicism of the avant-garde to be an objectively historicist act, while the later historicisation of modern architecture was truly anti-historical, and he declared that the genealogical approach was a means to create a chance for tradition.²⁹ Thus, Tafuri uses history to demystify the Modern Movement. He argues that historical criticism frees us from the burden of myth and that the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century were the only truly critical historians because they created a new ideology of form.³⁰

25 T. Llorens, *Manfredo Tafuri*, p. 84.

26 T. Llorens, *Manfredo Tafuri*, p. 84.

27 Bürger believes that the neo-avant-garde institutionalises the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-garde intentions. He considers neo-avant-garde art to be autonomous art in the full sense, which means that it negates the avant-garde intention of returning art to the praxis of life. 'And the efforts to sublimate art become artistic manifestations that, despite their producers' intentions, take on the character of works.' (P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1974], p. 58.)

28 See B. H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000; H. Foster, *Return of the Real*.

29 P. Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, pp. 202–204.

30 P. Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, pp. 212–214.

It is in relation to this moment of the debate that Lapin's texts seem to be joined with the second approach (though the neo-avant-garde should not be understood as a mould of fixed form, into which various Estonian avant-garde practices, including Lapin's texts, fit unconditionally). Contrary to Tafuri, Lapin's position in relation to the second approach is not so radical – he does not manifest a break with tradition, and yet at the same time he was clearly engaged in searching for a renewed definition of the boundaries of architecture. No doubt, a new aesthetic was an important mission for the generation of mythmakers, and this is evident in the graphic art of the 1960s and 1970s that took art nouveau as a source; or in neo-functionalism taking pre-war architecture as a source. Lapin wrote: 'Young architects took the path of neo-functionalism in order to look for ... the lost treasure of the movement. The attractive formal language of original functionalism and the play with geometric forms, geometric ornamentation and rich expression gave us hope within today's functionalism to restore the intimacy of historical functionalism, 'building art' [i.e. to restore architecture as a form of art].³¹ Even the reworking of the heritage of Kazimir Malevich and suprematism, which engaged Lapin during the 1970s, was carried out creatively and applied to other circumstances and to other periods.³² In contrast, the opposite path has been described by Susan Buck-Morss, for example, among her observations of the travels of the black square in the cultural landscapes of the post-war period: starting as a prototype for pure art it was eventually subjected to the degradation of becoming a hallmark of American elitist culture.³³ This example sustained Bürger's idea that the post-war neo-avant-garde was merely an empty recycler of the pre-war historical avant-garde.

Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to emphasise that rereading Lapin's architectural history has its rewards. Rather than reading his history merely as a deviant stage in Estonian architectural historiography, it may be read as having played a role in performing an unprecedented critical practice in Estonia – a role that was undertaken primarily as a way of appropriating avant-garde practices. There is also another aspect that is worth considering while probing the various readings of established discourse and trying to find new angles on Baltic, Estonian and (post-)Soviet art history. It is a kind of mirror effect: while reading Lapin's texts we are inevitably faced with our own reflection, i.e. our personal histories and biases – such self-reflective critical reading, in addition to re-crossing previously explored territories, may contribute to the reinvention of the history of Estonian art. As Ulrike Plath, a German historian working in Estonia, has written, this reinventing is characteristic of histories that try to go beyond national history. In the case of Lapin's textual and artistic practices, this also means going beyond the obvious meanings, such as the significance of resistance to the Soviet system.

31 L. Lapin, *Art déco Eesti arhitektuuris* [Art déco in Estonian architecture]. – L. Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, p. 136.

32 S. Helme, *In the Beginning There Was No Word!*, p. 196.

33 S. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, p. 89–95.

Such reinvented histories synthesise different observations of cultural transactions and expansions, and thus offer new perspectives on the object of study.

Plath calls this a kind of intellectual gymnastics which does not necessarily have to immediately lead to new research results but instead enables changes in attitudes towards national histories.³⁴ This is perhaps a possible location for a broader Baltic history of art: rather than looking for specifically Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian elements in art history, we might raise common research questions that converge across a broader horizon. Resistance to Soviet oppression is not the only common aspect to unite Baltic cultural discourse. Rather than sitting quietly in the back row of Western art history, we should show that local, marginal and somewhat anomalous practices could make an important contribution to the narrative of Western art history.

At the same time, it is not necessary to completely disregard the national context while examining local avant-garde practices (or, for example, Lapin's texts) because it has been deemed outmoded, too simplistic, or ideologically prejudiced. We should not ignore the fact that emphasis of national identity has been one of the main components of contemporary utopian ideas on modern society, and that the nation-space functions as one of its most important categories. Even if we try to move away from the fixed, pre-given modes of constructing an art-historical narrative – in addition to national culture the global economic structure and global identities assert their influence – these inevitably form the context of art history. In comparison, Benjamin Buchloh has pointed out the need to ask the question of whether post-war nation-states are relevant or marginal, or perhaps both, for appreciating the very diverse problematic of the neo-avant-garde.³⁵ Synchronic and critical art histories are as much constructions as are national histories. Thus, the only possible mistake is to avoid asking particular questions of art history simply because they might imply contradictions or because they may be uncomfortable.

34 U. Plath, Kadunud kuldne kese. Kuus pilti Eesti ajaloost rahvuslises kollaažis [Lost golden mean: six pictures on Estonian history in transnational collage]. – Vikerkaar 2009, no. 7/8, p. 93.

35 Perhaps it 'was the question of whether it was the *adherence to* or the *departure from* such concepts of regional and national culture that had made these works of the neo-avantgarde aesthetically legible and productive in the present. [...] Are these criteria of the national or regional specificity ... *marginal* or *central* to that particular work's interpretation?' (B. H. D. Buchloh, Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry, p. xix.)