

# Noise Environment: Jüri Okas's *Reconstructions* and Its Public Reception\*

ANDRES KURG

This article looks at Jüri Okas's works on the environment, particularly his series *Reconstructions* (1974–1978) and the exhibition of that series in Tallinn Art Hall in 1976. Okas's position is considered first by comparison with Leonhard Lapin's work on the urban environment. Next, I consider discussions concerning the signification of the city and show that instead of a fixed relationship between places and their meanings, Okas presents the viewer with unstable relationships, deconstructing the urban signifieds. I argue that the reception of Okas's images during the 1980s was influenced by their having been read formally, and find that the references of the images were incompatible with the prevailing forms and symbols which were at that time involved in efforts to construct a coherent national identity. I then interpret Okas's perception of the environment via notions of entropy and noise – concepts applied in information theory, popular throughout the decade. In contrast to the idea of escape, which is often thought to characterise the works of so-called 'unofficial' or 'non-conformist' artists, Okas's interest in the entropic or noisy environment presents a paradigmatic shift in which ambiguity and indeterminacy become understood as characteristic of a maximal state of information.

## Introduction

In artist and architect Leonhard Lapin's archive there is a roll of black-and-white negative film, exposed in 1972, which documents Tallinn's surviving architectural heritage from the 1920s and 1930s. It contains images of Kadriorg district and central areas of the city: elegant inner-city villas, facades of middle-class apartment buildings, detailing on the wooden doors and window frames, and geometric art deco railings and ornamentation. These photographs were taken during Lapin's walks around districts of Tallinn which date back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Lapin's intention during those walks was to record the current state of the architecture

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and to rediscover the architectural value of the buildings. In this he was assisted by his friend Jüri Okas, an architecture student at the time, whose task was to photograph the houses and details according to Lapin's instructions (or, as Okas put it later: 'Lapin needed a follower'<sup>1</sup>). In some of the images we see Lapin himself pointing to a valuable detail or decaying architectural feature. Occasionally, the camera has recorded relatively banal courtyard views – sheds, an obscure concrete structure (a bunker perhaps?), a run-down garage. It is easy to attribute the interest in the latter type of structure to Okas, since similar photographs by Okas had by that time already been published (e.g. in the popular youth magazine *Noorus*).<sup>2</sup> Okas's images made evident his fascination with industrial and everyday motifs, utilising a technique of repetition that demonstrated the ways in which 'film, photography, television, radio, become independent, as if a separate structure' so that we may begin to 'see the world through these structures'<sup>3</sup> – the discourse of technological progress and its impact on everyday life and the arts already having become widely acknowledged. Lapin, on the other hand, had published several articles in the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* in the early 1970s on the topic of architectural preservation, drawing attention to sites that had so far been left out of the dominant architectural canon (including an orangery and a castle by a self-taught architect from the early 20th century, and examples of art nouveau, early modernism and art deco).<sup>4</sup> Thus, while one may say that both Okas and Lapin were interested in how modernity had unfolded in the urban environment – in early examples of modernist architecture,<sup>5</sup> in the utilitarian infrastructure that accompanied modernity, and in transformed structures of viewing –, there were significant differences between the ways in which these artists engaged with this topic. Put simply, for Lapin it was important to establish a meaningful relationship between the historical urban environment and the canon of architectural history. Okas's works, on the other hand, seem to have been intended to sidestep the canon and were engaged more with the ways in which viewers (including the artist) produced meanings from the urban environment. I will first look briefly at Lapin's interest in the architectural heritage of the 1920s and 1930s and its association with the period of Estonian national independence. For the purposes of this study, Lapin's work is employed as a background to Okas's works – thus, the complexity of other fields of Lapin's practice during this period has been left out from the current article. Given Lapin's activity as a writer, his critical views were well represented in the media of the time and have come retrospectively to represent also those of his companions. Therefore, by differentiating Okas's position from that of Lapin's one may develop a more nuanced understanding of the art of this period.

1 Jüri Okas's communication with the author 4 August 2005.

2 Jüri Okas. 3 fotot. – *Noorus* 1972, no. 4, pp. 48–51.

3 Jüri Okas. 3 fotot, p. 48. The accompanying text is anonymous, most probably written by one of the magazine's editors.

4 In an article from 1972, written together with Tõnis Vint, Lapin calls for Glehn park in Nõmme, Tallinn to be saved, especially its orangery from the turn of the 19th/20th century. The authors point out the unusual typology of the park, which they see as relating to contemporary interests in architecture (T. Vint, L. Lapin, *Erakordne kultuurimälestis hävib!* – *Sirp ja Vasar* 2 June 1972, pp. 8–9).

5 Lapin uses the term *functionalism* to signify the architecture of this period and modernism for 'a cultural phenomenon with a wider influence' of which functionalism is an architectural representation. See L. Lapin, *Avangard. Tartu Ülikooli filosoofiateaduskonna vabade kunstide professori Leonhard Lapini loengud 2001. aastal*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2003, p. 105.

Lapin's interest in early 20th century architecture, especially functionalism, had a political motive: it emphasised a connection to the culture of the inter-war period of Estonian independence. In this way, it stood not only against the hegemony of the Soviet state but also against growing consumerism and the associated displacement of memories and values of the period by so-called 'kitsch' and mass-culture. Later, I will turn to consider Okas's series of serigraphs, *Reconstructions*, focusing on the ways in which the environment was represented and rethought in these works. This series was exhibited in an extended form in Okas's first solo show in Tallinn Art Hall gallery in 1976, for which part of the exhibition space was designed as a kind of installation intended to manipulate the viewer's experience of the space and exhibits.<sup>6</sup> I intend to bring the series *Reconstructions* and these manipulations to bear on another way of viewing the environment – the environment as related to architectural monuments and national identity – and to show the difference between Okas's works and the latter discourse. Finally, I will turn to consider the discussions about the notion of entropy, and Okas's interpretation of that notion, in order to offer an alternative reading of the 'irrationalism' of Okas's images. Estonian art-critical discourse has tended to place Okas's idiosyncratic works in the context of the 1970s avant-garde and critical art, framing his work in terms of non-conformity and escape. Moreover, his work has often been described as elitist, inaccessible and non-communicative. However, rather than characterising it as escapist I intend to demonstrate that Okas's engagement with the environment and his manipulation of it in the printed image not only contained potential for dialogue with the viewers of its time but also offered an alternative to the rhetoric of escape.

### **Leonhard Lapin and Tallinn's visual milieu**

After graduating from the architecture department of the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR in 1971, Leonhard Lapin was until 1974 employed in the State Directorate for Restoration in Tallinn, which dealt with architectural monuments and their preservation. One of Lapin's major works at the Directorate involved an analysis of the built environment of central Tallinn: 'An Overview of the Visual Milieu of Tallinn and Its Importance in the Reconstruction of the Central City' (1974).<sup>7</sup> The project involved the production of photographic documentation – similar to a cataloguing project Lapin had worked on with Jüri Okas in Kadriorg two years earlier – and description of the architecture and built environment of districts surrounding the Old Town with the aim of extrapolating the different areas in relation to their various stylistic details and character. The work was also intended to provide a basis for determining the landmark value of the different areas, which was to be taken into account in future planning and architectural interventions. Thus Lapin identified which of the districts and ensembles would be worth saving for the future and which offered little or no architectural

<sup>6</sup> *Reconstructions* was first shown in 1974 at the Estonian State Art Institute in the independent student's exhibition and also in an independent exhibition in Harku in December 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Estonian State Archives (ERA), f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994.

value. Compared to the Directorate's typical work in the Tallinn Old Town this was a new and different kind of research. In its focus on non-traditional landmarks, peripheral areas, industrial zones and working-class suburbs with wooden tenement houses from the turn of the century, it represents a characteristic turn in the architectural profession of the period towards the 19th and early 20th century heritage of modernity. Furthermore, the beginning of the 20th century was found to have contained a potential that had been perverted in the post-war era through the 'soulless' industrialisation of building production and commercial interests.<sup>8</sup>

In the text accompanying the project Lapin revealed a desire for architects to take control and manage the environment. He lamented the verdure that had outgrown its intended space due to neglect, the courtyard structures that evolved independently without the participation of the architect and the chaotic planning of the harbour area: 'It lacks the systemic regulation of functions needed for an efficiently functioning harbour, nor is there an architecturally legible transfer from the sea to the city'.<sup>9</sup> Although this call to abolish the holes, disjunctions, irregularities and spontaneous additions appears similar to attempts to unify the city under a master plan – a general approach to urban planning typical of the dominant modernism of the period – Lapin's standpoint nonetheless differed from the Socialist-modernist subjection of the environment to a single regulating idea or principle. Lapin had demonstrated that the architectural face of the city consisted of many layers, periods and qualities, and he clearly celebrated the architectural plurality that had been neglected by official histories, seeing his work as a way of bringing this complex environment back into official representations and the public consciousness; a plurality which, however, is to be surveyed from the hierarchical professional perspective of an architect tasked with overseeing the changes and processes in the city.

On the basis of research done in the Directorate, Lapin published in autumn 1974 a series of articles on the 'architectural image' of Tallinn in Estonia's leading cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*. His classifications followed a traditional history of styles, labelling early 20th century buildings as historicist, neo-gothic, art nouveau etc. Underlying this apparently neutral de-politicising art-historical categorisation there occasionally stood arguments for the priority of local materials and detailing instead of the anonymous neoclassical architectural types imposed on Tallinn during the Russian empire period by St Petersburg and Moscow: 'One should emphasise the good building quality of the historicist architecture of Tallinn, its rich detailing and the relationship of the structures to the surrounding nature or verdure, compared to which the 19th century military neoclassicism looks dry and boring'.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the value of the built environment was to be determined in correlation with its locality and regional character rather than according to a preconceived typology. Such polarisation refers to the similar situation in Estonia during the period in which Lapin was writing, when the built environment was dominated by standardised system-built housing subject to centrally prescribed norms and regulations. The critique of mass housing,

8 See also L. Lapin, *Avangard*, p. 113.

9 ERA, f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994, l. 6–8.

10 L. Lapin, Tallinna ehituskunstilisest ilmeist. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 1 November 1974, p. 9.

its anonymity and homogeneity, which had been growing from late 1960s onwards, often went hand in hand with the emerging interest in national identity, leading to a turn toward the independence period of the 1920s and 1930s and especially to the interpretation of early modernist buildings as being representative of national character.<sup>11</sup> Retrospectively, Lapin has written on the role of functionalism as having been the first national movement in Estonian architecture to have developed a specific language and 'a unique connection to local building tradition' and conveying 'a heroic idea of independence, of being a new member of Europe – when one looked not to the East but to the West.'<sup>12</sup> Thus an argument which might be presented in terms of the history of style in a newspaper of the time has later been translated into an argument concerning political history and interpreting modernist architecture as symbolic of independence and freedom.<sup>13</sup>

A more tangible reason for the interest in national heritage was its gradual erasure from the urban environment: the early 1970s was a period when wooden dwellings in inner-city areas were demolished and replaced by industrialised housing. The popular home decoration magazine *Kunst ja Kodu* (*Art and Home*) consciously positioned itself against this practice, published during the mid-1970s a series of articles and photographic essays on the architecture of Tallinn, written by Lapin and with photographs by Okas.<sup>14</sup>

In later writings Lapin has related the emergence of interest in national identity as a countermovement to its disappearance from the material cultural environment. In an interview given in 1993 to the Estonian art magazine *Kunst*, Lapin considered the period from the late 1960s onwards to have been a time when the heritage of the Estonian Republic – or what had survived of it – was being destroyed: information arriving from the West, the scarce but still present consumer items and technical innovations, all contributed to shifting attention away from the fact of Soviet occupation and, moreover, to naturalising its strange hybridity.

Independence-era furniture was thrown out in a massive scale, modernist furniture appeared in rooms. [---] All society rushed to the future with full speed – this was the period of Finnish saunas and Caucasian shashlyk, everyone bought

11 From today's viewpoint it is hard to understand the extraordinariness of Lapin's articles in the context of the discussions of the built environment in the 1970s, yet a discussion at the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*'s editorial board at the end of 1974 reveals the uneasiness that his writings produced. Considered for the newspaper's annual award for the same series of writing, his work was strongly objected by the then head of the Artists's Union Ilmar Torn and Architects's Union Mart Port. The latter argues that his thoughts are copied from foreign magazines and artificially applied to local conditions, 'not taking into account the standpoints of Soviet architectural theory.' In his opinion the piece does not give an objective account of the architecture of Tallinn (*Sirp and Vasar* Editorial Board meeting 20. December 1974. – ERA, f. R-1695, n. 2, s. 1780a).

12 L. Lapin, *Avangard*, p. 107.

13 L. Lapin, *Avangard*, p. 107. In another chapter in the book he writes that architects of the Tallinn School 'turned to functionalism as a style of building that symbolised independence, taking their examples from the white houses of the 1930s. Functionalist architecture was for us a symbol of the golden Estonian independence period and this desire was initially of emotional value, later joined by purely professional aspirations, like getting to know the architectural history of the whole world.' – L. Lapin, *Avangard*, p. 132.

14 In 'Meie tänav, alev, linn' ('Our street, village, city') Lapin celebrates the hybrid and the multiple in cities, 'historical layering and strange, often illogical or nonorganic relationships give cities their face and character'. L. Lapin, *Meie tänav, alev, linn. Romantism ja ratsionalism II*. – *Kunst ja Kodu* 1974, no. 1, p. 9.

new light-coloured furniture, new comfortable cars, refrigerators, washing-machines, TV-sets, radios, tape-recorders, jeans.<sup>15</sup>

For Lapin political history is thus clearly related to the everyday environment in the domestic sphere and his work was motivated by fear of surviving signs of the independence period being replaced by a Soviet version of consumer society – a society in which the signs of the Estonian era still existed but only in the form of simulacra – as kitsch – so that authenticity has been swallowed up by homogenising mass-production.

Lapin's own career as an artist later during the 1970s presented a radical response to those processes in society: he privileged art that actively intervened in everyday life and granted the artist an agency in designing the environment.<sup>16</sup> As Epp Lankots has recently pointed out, Lapin's interest in the history of the pre-war avant-garde and his particular way of history writing – what she calls 'living history' – projected contemporary issues onto the past and also served to sustain his practices as a contemporary artist.<sup>17</sup>

### **Jüri Okas: from montages to Reconstructions**

Jüri Okas graduated from the architecture department at the State Art Institute in 1974, and was employed in the Collective Farm Construction Office until 1989, working in the department of industrial constructions designing boiler houses, gas stations, car repair workshops for collective farms. At the same time he was active as an artist, working in the photography and printmaking, and participating in happenings with his friends. From 1974 to 1978 Okas worked on a series of prints he called *Reconstructions*. The series was based on photographs taken in the urban environment of Tallinn and its environs, which he had been documenting since the beginning of his studies at the architecture department in the early 1970s. He photographed everyday urban scenes and utilitarian (architectural) objects that otherwise tended to escape attention – urban wastelands and peripheries, neglected courtyards and unusual facades of houses. Often engaged in the same territories as Lapin's aforementioned work, he was, however, fascinated by

15 Pilgud kuldsete kuuekümnendate fassaadi taha. Leonhard Lapiniga vestleb Heie Treier. – Kunst 1993, no. 1, p. 36.  
16 See M. Laanemets, Kunst kunsti vastu. Kunstniku rolli ja positsiooni ümbermõtestamise katses eesti kunstis 1970. aastatel. – Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi 2011, vol. 20 (1/2), pp. 59–91. It is significant that Lapin also proposed in his work on the Tallinn milieu several interventions to improve the environment. One strategy included 'artistic colouring of the wooden dwellings' – an idea proposed by Vilen Künnapu and Juhan Viiding already in 1972. He also suggested that by combining architecture, art and synthetic design, the visual milieu should include up-to-date means of information. 'As the urban environment is in contemporary society a place for the concentration, multiplication and dissemination of information, its development should be seen in relation to art and aesthetics.' Finally, Lapin proposed to add so-called transformative structures to empty spots in the city, which would combine 'communicative functions', including 'information booths, commerce, service and cultural institutions.' (ERA, f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994, l. 23–24). These latter ideas recur in Lapin's partner Sirje Runge's diploma project a year later. See A. Kurg, Feedback Environment: Rethinking Art and Design Practices in Tallinn During the Early 1970s. – Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi 2011, vol. 20 (1/2), pp. 38–40.

17 E. Lankots, History Appropriating Contemporary Concerns: Leonhard Lapin's Architectural History and Mythical Thinking. – Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi 2010, vol. 19 (3/4), pp. 122–125. This led him also to embrace other examples, primarily the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, as his references for critical practice. See also H. Liivrand, Leonhard Lapin Kadriorus. – Kunst 1989, no. 1, p. 10.

the kind of things that Lapin would have considered superfluous, disturbing or excessive to the architectural order of the milieu and architectural-historical character of the neighbourhood.

In *Reconstructions*, Okas's black-and-white photographs were overlaid with structures of geometric lines, rectangles, and sometimes letters and signs that, depending on the underlying contrasting image, were either black or white, either seemingly modifying the photographic situation or overlapping with it. Often the lines converged at a certain point in the picture to form a single-point perspectival grid on the photo. Some works in the series combined montage images of various architectural objects (Stalinist buildings next to industrialised housing) with regularly-placed heaps of soil or gravel in front of them (*Reconstruction L1*, *Reconstruction KS*), the additional geometric figures adding to the overall complexity of the image. The geometric additions were first drawn onto the photograph with ink or pasted on using other materials (e.g. Letraset) as montage and then taken to print. In this way the author emphasised his distance from the dominant craft tradition in printmaking and, due their technical similarities, preferred to call them 'newspaper photographs'.<sup>18</sup> The final result thus merged the original image and the added signs into one continuous surface of montage marks, whereas the print technique left both with a strong raster, visible on closer inspection. In a text from 1984 Okas himself described *Reconstructions* as 'complicated designs of space, photomontages of spatial fragments, materials, details, placements, where the aim has been to produce a new, multi-layered, irrational (destructive) imaginary space.'<sup>19</sup> A few years later he made almost identical claims: 'I took photographs of the urban space, dispersed these documents into pieces and started to compose the elements. My aim was to create a new, multi-layered and irrational space.'<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the illusory and irrational aspect of his works was often emphasised by art criticism and commentaries. In one of the first articles on *Reconstructions*, fellow architect Vilen Künnapu described Okas's procedures as 'cutting up the space, moving its elements around, thus producing new illusory spaces, intertwining the space in every which way, and creating new perspectives and symbols using graphic elements.'<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1980, Lapin described *Reconstructions* as projects for irrational space.<sup>22</sup> Unlike much of the later art critical discourse from the 1980s that readily describes the series in terms of merely formal manipulations, earlier writers, especially Künnapu, also drew attention to the actual sites represented in *Reconstructions* (Künnapu mentions Pelgulinna hospital, Stroomi beach, dwelling houses by the first Estonian architect Karl Burman)<sup>23</sup> and to their significance: they do not belong with the often-reproduced images of the Old Town, but represent the city's 'nearest past and its

18 M.-T. Kivirinta, Jüri Okas on aristokraatti ja minimalisti. – *Helsinki Sanomat* 16 June 1987.

19 J. Lintinen, Jüri Okas – rakenteita, tapahtumia, visioita. – *Taide* 1984, no. 4, p. 49.

20 M.-T. Kivirinta, Jüri Okas on aristokraatti ja minimalisti.

21 V. Künnapu, Jüri Okase keskkonnakunst. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 26 March 1976, p. 9.

22 L. Lapin, *Kunstisalongis*. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 11 July 1980, p. 13.

23 The hospital and the beach are both located in the peripheral areas of Tallinn, they both also carry meaning in the personal geography of Okas who grew up and lived at the time of producing the works in the vicinity in Pelgulinn, a neighbourhood with turn of the century wooden working-class housing. Karl Burman's works, representing art nouveau and national romantic architecture from the first decades of the 20th century, were actively rediscovered in the 1970s and well-known in the architectural circles.

industrial (more precisely small-industrial) milieu.<sup>24</sup> Later commentaries have tended to abstract the sites from their original meaning and concentrated on the relationship between the photographic image and the added structures or grids.<sup>25</sup> Although Sirje Helme in her texts mentions Vääna beach and Pelgulinn as meaningful sites for Okas, and describes him as being strongly connected to his context;<sup>26</sup> she also emphasises that there is nothing 'narrative' about his works and prefers to reflect on the dualism between 'real and pictorial' space, where neither side is privileged and there appears a tension that remains unsolved.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in 1988, Tamara Luuk points to 'a constant and equal presence of mutually contradictory assemblages (*kooslus*) in Jüri Okas's art.'<sup>28</sup> This devotion to the formal tension in Okas's works leads the critics further to assume a complex and non-communicative relation to the public. Admitting that the graphic lines drawn on the surface of photographic images are not symbolic or utopian, Eha Komissarov sees the works as research into social reality with

a position taken against the credibility of that reality, in spite of the fact that the irrationality of the real makes its credibility nearly impossible to ... question. The contact with the viewer becomes ... possible based on the same social experience, and therefore a conceptual artwork virtually fails.<sup>29</sup>

In these texts the illusory and irrational character of the represented spaces becomes closely associated with a refusal or distancing from reality, a feature that later was emphasised in the discourse of non-conformist and unofficial art that preferred to see the alternative art of the late-Soviet period as that of 'stepping aside' and living in a space of one's own.<sup>30</sup> This also presupposed a distancing from the viewer, thus ruling out any possibility of a 'common social experience', as Komissarov put it.

Regarding the case of Okas's major exhibition at the State Art Museum of the Estonian SSR in Kadriorg palace in 1987, which included also works from the previous decade, all three of the abovementioned texts written in the late-1980s attempted to cope with the changes occurring in the art of the period – the postmodernist return to referentiality, its populist pastiche and the reinstatement of traditional art genres and techniques. Thus all three authors underlined Okas's disconnection from those tendencies, preferring instead to position him as the last of the *avant-garde*<sup>31</sup>

24 V. Künnapu, Jüri Okase keskkonnakunst, p. 9.

25 An exception is a Finnish critic Marketta Seppälä, who takes Okas's works as a metaphor for the 'localised Tallinn reality in which the artist has worked as an architect and artist since the mid-1970s.' She is also the only one to note the 'ironic playfulness' that characterises Okas's working process. See M. Seppälä, *Reconstructed Space*. – Okas: installaatio 9. Pori: Pori Art Museum, 1991, p. 10.

26 S. Helme, *Sanomia niille jotka tietävät*. Tallinnalaises Jüri Okasin taide lähikuvassa. – *Taide* 1988, no. 6, p. 13.

27 S. Helme, Jüri Okas. [Catalogue.] Tallinn: ENSV Riiklik Kunstimuseum, 1987, p. 6. Vääna beach near Tallinn, where Okas's closest friend at the time, architect Jaan Ollik, had a family summer-house, was a site for many of Okas's later land-art works from the end of 1970s, done with sand at the edge of the water. The works have been documented in photographs and were often constructed with a photographic image in mind.

28 T. Luuk, *Kadriorg*. Sügis 1987. – *Vikerkaar* 1988, no. 7, p. 46.

29 E. Komissarov, *Apoloogiline Jüri Okas*. – *Kunst* 1988, no. 2 (72), p. 22.

30 See: S. Helme, *Space. Conflict and Harmony*. Henn Roode's abstract works. – Henn Roode. *Modernist Despite Fate*. Newspaper accompanying Henn Roode's exhibition, Tallinn: Kumu Art Museum, 2007, p. 1.

31 As Luuk puts it: 'There are no other personalities in current Estonian art who in such an uncompromising way, so unidirectionally, would hold on to the modernist *avant-garde*.' – T. Luuk, *Kadriorg*. Sügis 1987, p. 44.



(an assumption based on stylistic rather than ideological features) and seeing him as being in opposition to populism and thus 'elitist' – a category widely used non-pejoratively at that time. This also suggested that Okas was hostile towards the public and its expectations, and that his artistic approach was deliberately made incomprehensible to a wider audience: Eha Komissarov has declared of the period that 'art was done ... in the name of art itself'<sup>32</sup>; Sirje Helme called her article on Okas's works 'Messages for those who know'<sup>33</sup>; and finally Luuk designated him, because of his impenetrability to the public, as a martyr who saw the hopelessness of his undertaking in the new post-modern context, yet still continued.<sup>34</sup>

However, I propose that *Reconstructions* should not only be viewed through a formal interpretation, as a straightforward projection of the artist's hermetic world, but they could also be read referentially, as containing several potential points of dialogue with the audience. Among these points of dialogue are the represented sites, as mentioned by Künnapu, which may be interpreted as dealing with recent history and the traces of industrialisation, and also the humour and irony relating to some of the signs and gestures in *Reconstructions*. The subject matter of each of the works in the series was indicated in the titles by the initials appended to the word 'reconstruction'. Thus SR refers to Stroomi beach (in Estonian: 'Stroomi rand'), R to railway ('raudtee') and B to bus ('buss'). There are exceptions: for what appear to be the first four works in the series Okas made a self-referential gesture using the letters of his own family name. Listing these works in an exhibition proposal in 1976 for Tallinn Art Hall gallery, he placed those four titles to the top of the list, one above the other, so that vertically the initials would spell 'OKAS'.<sup>35</sup> The represented sites often comprised the personal urban geography of the artist and his friends, a geography discovered in their group walks and recovered in artworks and writings as a counterpoint to the dominant portrayal of Tallinn.<sup>36</sup>

The name 'reconstruction' itself was rather unusual in the context of art of the period<sup>37</sup> and has prompted speculation about its meaning – e.g. that it refers to projects of potential installations in urban space, or to the reconstruction of the emotional qualities of spaces.<sup>38</sup> Like 'montage', the word strongly connotes processes of building or architectural construction and from that perspective it is significant that Okas's 1974

32 E. Komissarov, *Apoloogiline Jüri Okas*, p. 22.

33 S. Helme, *Sanomia niille jotka tietävät*, pp. 12–16.

34 T. Luuk, *Kadriorg. Sügis 1987*, p. 47.

35 ERA, f. R-1954, n. 2, s 339, l. 22–24.

36 See: M. Laanemets, *Pilk sotsialistliku linna tühermaadele ja tagahoovidesse: happening'id, mängud ja jalutuskäigud Tallinnas 1970. aastatel*. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2005, vol. 14 (4), pp. 164–165.

37 The word was widespread in the official context however, featuring in slogans calling to 'reconstruct the production' or 'reconstruct agriculture'. In this context it referred to upgrading industry or taking it to a more advanced level. Being similar to terms like 'mechanisation' and 'industrialisation' it was associated with progress, goal-oriented movement, and industrial expansion. See: *Nõukogude Eesti. Entsüklopeediline teatmeteos*. Ed. G. Naan. Tallinn: Valgus, 1975, pp. 104–108.

38 V. Künnapu, *Jüri Okase keskkonnakunst*, p. 9.

diploma work at the State Art Institute was indeed an architectural reconstruction, a conversion of a cellulose factory in Tallinn into a cultural centre.<sup>39</sup>

In *Reconstruction O* (1974), which is often reproduced and is presumably one of the first of the series to have been made, a generic Soviet truck (a ZiL carrying a land drill) is shown driving past the Stalinist neoclassical building of Tallinn Technical School of Building and Mechanics (1949). The scene has been overlaid with geometric additions: signs similar to that of a target have been added to the truck's wheels; a number 724 is pasted on the truck's door; the back end of the drilling mechanism features a black Letraset comma or apostrophe; on top of the classical portico of the symmetric school building a complex scaffolding-like structure has been drawn. On closer inspection one sees a real photographic image of scaffolding underneath the added image of scaffolding, thus we are dealing with a scene of a reconstruction of the building's facade. In several places the added scaffolding follows the configuration of the building; but at the building's right it becomes more independent, forming a separate structure above it (perhaps counterbalancing the neon advertisement – 'Keep money in the savings bank' – at the top-left corner of the building itself). At the lower-right corner of the image are two traffic signs: the lower, white one is covered with a black square, whereas the upper one is clearly visible and shows a 'No exit' sign. A 'T' shape similar to that on the signpost has been repeated independently in several places and at a larger scale: in inverted form it slides down from the corner post of the portico while it also lies upside down behind the car. Above the traffic signs a larger 'T' shape has been put together by combining two larger Letraset commas and an inverted L-shape.

Okas's manipulation of the urban situation may also be considered close to the work of Finnish-Swedish conceptual artist Jan-Olof Mallander, whose *Papersculptures in a File* (1972–1974) placed separate letters on selected sites on postcards of Helsinki.<sup>40</sup> In some cases the letters reference or react to their underlying site (a huge N and O in front of the Parliament building); however, in most cases the letters are abstracted or inverted and turned into absurd sculptures similar to surrealist tactics of appropriation and sign manipulation. A similar process seems to be taking place in Okas's works, in which the additions could function formally, as independent material pieces (with Letraset one used ready-made letters as physical objects<sup>41</sup>), signifiers detached from their meaning but they also function referentially, producing alliances and asso-

39 The project itself is lost and is known only partially from reproductions. See A. Kurg, M. Laanemets, Keskkonnad, projektid, kontseptsioonid. Tallinna kooli arhitektid 1972–1985. Tallinn: Eesti Arhitektuurimuuseum, 2008, p. 201. Echoing the rhetoric that often justified post-industrial urban processes Vilen Künnapu wrote in the abovementioned review that 'the project represents a humane idea – take badly smelling cellulose industry out from the city, change the existing communications (pipes, heating, sewage), use the noble limestone walls of the factory ... and add to them delightful glass and steel structures.' (V. Künnapu, Jüri Okase keskkonnakunst, p. 9.)

40 Okas claims not to have known Mallander's work, neither has their similarity been pointed out by critics. In 'Apoloogiline Jüri Okas' Eha Komissarov quotes Mallander on conceptual art, but does not draw parallels to the similarity of their pictorial language. See E. Komissarov, Apoloogiline Jüri Okas, p. 22.

41 The company and technique Letraset was devised by British designer John Charles Clifford Davies in 1961 and became a popular product among graphic designers in the second half of 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Graphic designer Ivar Sakk describes the technique like this: 'to a transparent plastic was printed in serigraphy letters with a layer of glue on top of them, so that by rubbing the plastic from the other side the letter stuck to paper or some other surface.' In the early 1970s the company Letraset held several international competitions for new typefaces, the winners of which were subsequently put into production (I. Sakk, Aa kuni Zz. Tüpoograafia ülevaatlük ajalugu. Tallinn: Sakk & Sakk, 2011, pp. 375–376).

ciations with the photographic image – altering and alienating them from their initial meaning. Although Okas withholds from presenting direct messages and puns, the effects of his additions can still be read as humorous. They must have appeared surprising to the contemporary viewer – disrupting the meaning of the places and motifs seen on the photographs and prints. In this way, one of the subjects encountered in Okas's *Reconstructions* is the relationship of urban sites to signification, a discourse which accompanied several fundamental changes in Western society from the 1960s onwards.

In a well-known text from 1967, 'Semiology and the Urban' (published in Russian in a widely-read architectural journal *Современная архитектура* in 1970), Roland Barthes examined the ways in which one may go beyond the metaphorical notion of the language of the city to look at how symbols operate in the city from a semiological point of view. For Barthes semiology was not about finding correspondences or devising a catalogue of relations between signifiers and signifieds (as in traditional art history), rather 'we are faced with infinite chains of metaphors whose signified is always retreating or becomes itself a signifier.'<sup>42</sup> Thus on the urban level signifiers and signifieds (places and their meanings) would be impossible to fix, they would be in a state of continual movement. It is the reader/user that becomes the constructor of meanings and producer of multiple personal interpretations. This play of signifieds – an 'infinitely metaphorical nature of the urban discourse' – opened up for Barthes a dimension of the city which he called 'erotic':

The eroticism of the city is the lesson we can draw from the infinitely metaphorical nature of urban discourse. I use the word eroticism in its widest meaning ... It is a functional concept and not a semantic concept; I use eroticism or *soci-ality* interchangeably. The city, essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*....<sup>43</sup>

Barthes associated this erotic or *other* dimension of the city with play, subversion and rupture, as opposed to 'everything which is not otherness: family, residence, identity.'<sup>44</sup> Abstaining from definite methodological recipes and calling for multiple readings of the city, he prioritises the volatility of the sign: 'we must never seek to fix and rigidify the signified of the units discovered, because, historically, these signifieds are always extremely vague, dubious and unmanageable.'<sup>45</sup>

It is possible to read *Reconstructions* in a similar way, as undoing the fixity of urban signifieds and demonstrating this through the arbitrariness of the sign (by making it literal, similar to several neo-avant-garde artists).<sup>46</sup> Likewise, *Reconstructions* also engages with the otherness of the urban, the anti-hierarchical and subversive, and refuses to rely on recognisable symbols (like the Old Town). At the same time, the places

42 R. Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban. – Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Ed. N. Leach. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 170.

43 R. Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban*, pp. 170–171.

44 R. Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban*, p. 171.

45 R. Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban*, pp. 171–172.

46 H. Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. (An October Book.) Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, p. 77.

must remain sufficiently recognisable for this process of undoing or rupture to be successful, and for this otherness and the occasional irony to be effective.

Okas's conceptual album of photographs from 1972, 'The Age of Sex', is of particular interest here. Barthes warned against taking the category of 'l'erotique' too literally, but in this work the 'semantic and functional' come very close to a complete overlapping. The album was compiled from photographs of a generic toilet structure near Stroomi beach in Tallinn. Anonymous users had drawn pornographic graffiti on the outer walls and rectangular columns in front of the entrance – giant phalluses, nude women, and vulgarities written in cyrillic. In one of the few commentaries on the work, Leonhard Lapin, to whom the album was given as gift, later wrote that the album documented the 'popular' erotic drawings that covered the walls of a neoclassical beach toilet.<sup>47</sup> By writing 'popular' in quotation marks, Lapin seems to suggest his own unease regarding the supposed Russian origin of the scribblings, thus denoting a disturbance in the project of constructing a nationally-coherent city through his walks and architectural historical work, and highlighting the need to differentiate one's individual and national otherness from the 'disorderly' Soviet culture.<sup>48</sup> In the early 1970s, this graffiti also reverberated with the new generation's engagement in sexual liberation (as suggested by the title 'The Age of Sex'), especially since the subject remained a taboo in the Soviet public sphere.<sup>49</sup> Although the message emerged here in public in a perverted form – as smutty graffiti on a public lavatory – the phenomenon of urban graffiti was nonetheless taken seriously by artists during the 1970s, for whom it had positive implications.<sup>50</sup>

Urban graffiti had been a beloved topic among surrealists, who saw in it an eruption of the collective unconscious, explored during their flâneur-wanderings in places undocumented or left out from the monumental history of the cityscape.<sup>51</sup> As with the interest in graffiti characteristic of photographers such as Brassai, there is something unpleasantly dark about the excessive eroticism of the graffiti in Okas's album – the scene demonstrates to us a return of the repressed, of unruly disorder existing just

47 L. Lapin, *Avangard*, p. 209.

48 For a recent critical account about the continuing discourse of the contamination of the people and land by Soviet occupation see: L. Kaljundi, „Puhastus” ja rahvusliku ajalookirjutuse comeback. – *Vikerkaar* 2010, no. 12, p. 48.

49 Pornography occupied an important place in Lapin's production: he mentions a collection of poetry from 1973, 'Aesthetics of Cock', that he had put together on the basis of 'Russian language acquired in the Soviet army in 1971–1972 and the 'Soviet' state of mind'. He however had to destroy it in the second half of 1970s, allegedly under a threat of KGB raid. Equally he had to destroy first images from the series of *Red Porno*, combining soviet signs with pornographic scenes (L. Lapin, 20 aastat hiljem. – L. Lapin, *Kaks kunsti. Valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist 1971–1995*. Tallinn: Kunst, 1997, p. 50).

50 In a proposal for urban decoration, written in 1972 for the cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*, Vilen Künnapu and poet Juhan Viiding drew attention to graffiti as an organic feature of the city: 'There is no point in forbidding your kids from writing on the pavement and the walls of the houses. The network of lines by a child's hand is a property of the street and the house.' (These two sentences were however censored from the printed version.) See V. Künnapu, J. Viiding, *Ettepanek*. – V. Künnapu, *Üle punase jõe*. Valitud tekste 1972–2001. Tallinn: Tallinna Tehnikakõrgkool, 2001, p.12.

51 I. Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 157. Mari Laanemets has written about the young generation of artists in Tallinn in the 1970s, including Okas, to be carrying out a flânerie in the urbanised environment to find meaning in the changing cultural and social conditions and register the ruins of modernity. She sees the flânerie of the bohemians as carried by nostalgia, in search of lost times. See M. Laanemets, *Pilk sotsialistliku linna tühermaadele ja tagahoovidesse: happening'id, mängud ja jalutuskäigud Tallinnas 1970. aastatel*. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2005, vol. 14 (4), pp. 164–165.

a stone's throw away from the well-groomed streets of the city (and sometimes even within that city, as demonstrated in the 1972 montage, *Egg*, one of Okas's most open references to surrealist imagery – a giant white egg placed before the monumental Estonia theatre in the centre of Tallinn).

For Okas the solution to the problem of dealing with this uncanny urban situation was to distance the subject through representation: on the cover of the small album a single detail image of the toilet entrance is repeated several times without any suggestion of obscene content; in a way reminiscent of Okas's other neutral urban photographs. On the inside of the album, the image takes up just a small area of the page and provides only a partial view of the graffiti, thus restricting the viewer rather than offering revelation.

Those same images of the walls of a public toilet reappear in 1973 in a montage by Okas. On this occasion black quadrangles obscure some of the images as if censoring obscenities (as was also done with the traffic sign in *Reconstruction O*). That same toilet building appears yet again a year later in a series of images titled *Performance* in which, in a three-part inverted narrative, the artist is seen standing before a building and then appears perhaps to draw something on it before approaching the entrance. As Mari Laanemets has pointed out, this series demonstrates a certain ambivalence since it is unclear whether the artist is making the images or recording them. Laanemets also points to the unusual distance of the camera from the scene of the performance which 'allows one to think through a distant surveying gaze, rather than as a participant in the action.'<sup>52</sup> As with *Reconstruction*, the photographs in *Performance* are overlaid with a geometric structure, which in this case highlights the artist's actions: in the two upper images the figure of the artist is placed inside a circle; in the final image the artist approaching the building is placed between perspective lines converging at the threshold of the toilet's entrance. Instead of being drawn onto the surface of the image, the structure has been scratched directly onto the negative with a pin and then further developed as an image. The resulting photographic enlargement has lines of uneven sharpness and edges that index the scarring of the negative while also giving it a stronger presence in the final image. Thus, in these works we see a movement from documentary photography to montage and an early version of *Reconstructions*, with each position contributing a different relationship with the viewer. Whereas in the photographs the framing worked to draw attention away from the content, in *Reconstructions* the original (obscene graffiti) becomes increasingly abstracted and removed from the viewer until we are left with just a scene of the artist intervening (restoring, drawing or erasing) in the images. The latter is indeed a reconstruction, but without showing what is being reconstructed.

American art-historian Hal Foster has proposed that the difference between the obscene and the pornographic depends on the distance of the viewer. In the case of the obscene, 'the object, without a scene, comes too close to the viewer', whereas in the pornographic, 'the object is staged for the viewer who is thus distanced enough to be its voyeur.'<sup>53</sup> Foster's comments occur in a different context from Okas's works –

52 M. Laanemets, *Pilk sotsialistliku linna tühermaadele ja tagahoovidesse*, p. 142.

53 H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 153.



1. Jüri Okas. Fotod Tallinna arhitektuuri dokumenteerimise seeriast (1972).  
Leonhard Lapini kogu.  
Jüri Okas. Photographs from the series documenting the architectural heritage of Tallinn (1972).  
Courtesy of Leonhard Lapin.



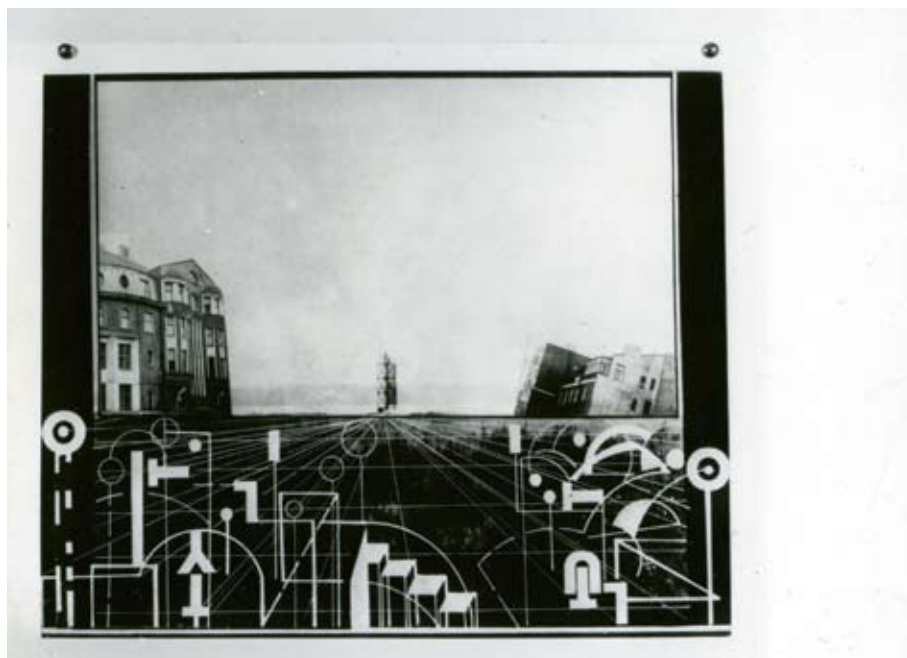






2.

Jüri Okas. Foto Tallinna arhitektuuri dokumenteerimise seeriast (1972).  
Leonhard Lapini kogu.  
Jüri Okas. Photograph from the series documenting the architectural heritage of Tallinn (1972).  
Courtesy of Leonhard Lapin.



3.

Jüri Okas. Rekonstruktsioon SR (1975). Sügavtrükk.  
Jüri Okas. Reconstruction SR (1975). Intaglio.



4. Jüri Okas. Rekonstruktsioon O (1975). Sügavtrükk.  
Jüri Okas. Reconstruction O (1975). Intaglio.



5. Jüri Okas. The Age of Sex (1972). Fotoalbumi kaas.  
Leonhard Lapini kogu.  
Jüri Okas. The Age of Sex (1972). Cover of photographic album.  
Courtesy of Leonhard Lapin.



6.

Jüri Okas. *The Age of Sex* (1972). Foto albumist.  
Leonhard Lapini kogu.  
Jüri Okas. *The Age of Sex* (1972). Photograph from album.  
Courtesy of Leonhard Lapin.



7.

Jüri Okas. *The Age of Sex* (1972). Foto albumist.  
Leonhard Lapini kogu.  
Jüri Okas. *The Age of Sex* (1972). Photograph from album.  
Courtesy of Leonhard Lapin.

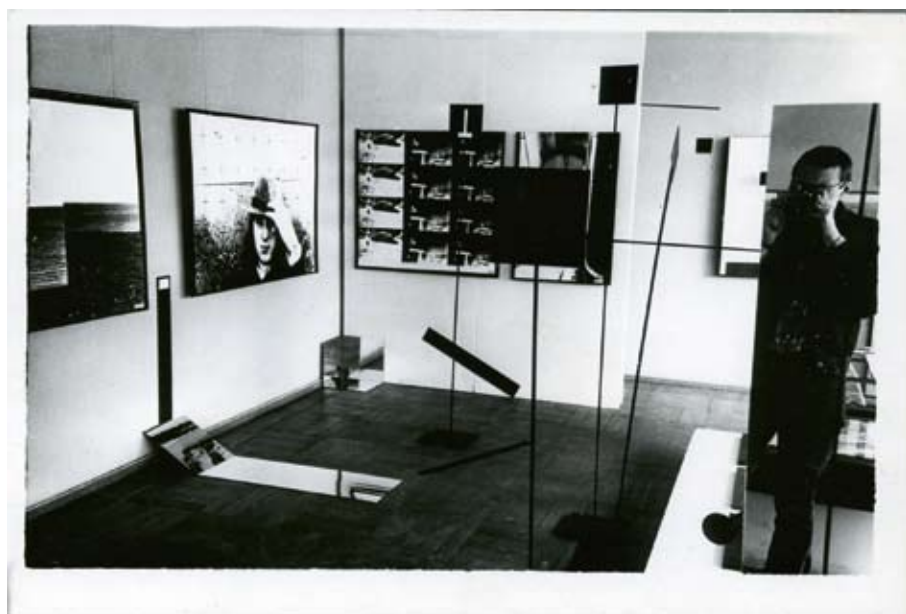


8.

Jüri Okas. Montaaž (1973).  
Jüri Okas. Montage (1973).



9. Jüri Okas. Rekonstruktsioon. Idee. Projekt. Objekt. Näitus Tallinna Kunstihoone III korruse galeriis (1976).  
Jüri Okas. Reconstruction. Idea. Project. Object. Exhibition at Tallinn Art Hall Gallery (III floor, 1976).



10. Jüri Okas. Rekonstruktsioon. Idee. Projekt. Objekt. Näitus Tallinna Kunstihoone III korruse galeriis (1976).  
Jüri Okas. Reconstruction. Idea. Project. Object. Exhibition at Tallinn Art Hall Gallery (III floor, 1976).

he is writing about abject art in 1980s North America and in a different interpretative framework.<sup>54</sup> However, what I find useful here is the idea of distancing and of the viewer relationship being dependent on proximity or detachment from the scene. If in 'The Age of Sex' distancing worked to bring obscene graffiti to fit photographic conventions and presentations (through framing and the format of an album), thus setting a scene for it, and if in montage the censoring worked further to denote this material as pornographic, then in *Reconstructions* we have different kind of distancing, something we could then, after Barthes, call the *erotic* dimension in its abstract, non-semantic sense, where appearance and disappearance, showing and hiding, are put into a dialectical play.<sup>55</sup> In the montage with the toilet graffiti, as well as in *Hommage to D. Judd* (1974) from the *Reconstruction* series or the above mentioned *Reconstruction O*, the black rectangles may be read as concealing certain scenes or signs from the viewer. In other cases, with lines, letters and scaffoldings, the additions work to draw the viewer's attention to particular sites and spatial relationships, as well as posing questions about the photographic illusion involved in viewing the image.<sup>56</sup> By overlaying specific details (traffic signs, graffiti) of the image and concealing the initial impulse that drove the artist to choose one or another site (e.g. the anonymous beach toilet), the scene is also opened up to ambiguity and uncertainty, which is in turn presented as a feature of the urban milieu itself, a terrain of possibilities and meeting with the 'other', of the unexpected (as in the concrete bunker one came across in the walks), as well as the potentially subversive and unruly (that has been disclosed from the environment as waste). Instead of 'messages for those who know', we find a multiplicity of potential readings emerging from these scenes, but at the cost of abstracting the specificity of the scene and de-politicising its potential (as in graffiti).<sup>57</sup>

The technique of montage has been hailed in the art-historical tradition as enabling the demystification and exposure of ideology and power through bringing together elements or surfaces that appear unrelated or incomparable. The technique emphasises the perceived differences between the combined elements, thus communicating the fragmentary and disconnected nature of modern urban society. On the other hand, critical theorists have pointed to the revival and appropriation of the montage technique by hegemonic practices of mass culture.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, Okas's *Reconstructions*

54 Foster employs Jacques Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis, investigating the (im)possibility of representing the real directly, 'without a scene', as representations are always culturally coded and appear in a particular framework. For Lacan the psychic register of the real is manifested through trauma, what he calls a missed encounter with the real, which one can repeat but not reproduce. This repetition acts as a defensive mechanism between the subject and the real, but it also points to the real (manifested in the obscene among other things). The medium for staging the obscene is an 'image-screen', or a 'cultural reserve' of images according to Foster, that 'mediates the object-gaze for the subject, but it also protects the subject from this object-gaze. [...] [F]or to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.' (H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 140.)

55 In a different context Barthes writes that 'in perversion, there are no erogenous zones ... It is intermittance which is erotic... the staging of appearance as disappearance.' – R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1975, p. 10.

56 See A. Kurg, Jüri Okase „spetsiifilised objektid“. – 1970ndate kultuuriruumi idealism: lisandusi eesti kunstiloole. Ed. S. Helme. Tallinn: Kaasaegse Kunsti Eesti Keskus, 2002, pp. 24–28.

57 It remains up to dispute how much this was directly conditioned by the societal circumstances where this art emerged from (Soviet censorship as well as self-censorship) and how much it was mediated by the concept of art dominant among the group.

58 B. H. D. Buchloh, *From Faktura to Factography*. – October 1984, vol. 30 (Autumn), pp. 82–119. Although in a different ideological framework, montage was appropriated also in the dominant Soviet post-war mass culture.

present a synthesis of photographic and added (ready-made) elements, a technique that integrates (and even cuts into, in early works) the montage marks, in many cases obliging us to see the montage as part of the illusory image space. If montage already exists as part of the underlying urban scene, then its juxtapositions do not so much present a shock as a unified (well composed) landscape. Still, it may be that the demystificatory aspect is present in the selection of the scenes: discarded buses, airfields, empty beaches, fragments of (often obsolete) infrastructure. However, it is not explicitly clear what kind of politics is being suggested by these scenes or what is being demystified. These sites may not lie not only outside of the official geography of the Soviet city, but also outside the geography of the pre-war Estonian city rediscovered in Lapin's work and in *Kunst ja Kodu*. Where one finds humour and irony in these images it appears only implicit or concealed, as manifested in images such as *Reconstruction SR*, in which a turn-of-the-century building is sinking into the water, or *Hommage to D. Judd* (1974), in which garbage containers have been lined up in a single row reminiscent of Donald Judd's minimal sculptures. Before analysing the urban environment in Okas's works, I will first examine the encounter between his works and the viewer in the art gallery.

### **Reconstructions and the viewer**

*An experience is a personal thing, but I think my endeavour is to influence exactly this.*

– Jüri Okas<sup>59</sup>

The series *Reconstructions* was exhibited together with photographs and an installation in Okas's first solo show *Reconstruction. Idea. Project. Object* from 18–29 March 1976, in the third-floor gallery of Tallinn Art Hall. The installation was a construction of mirrors, black cardboard quadrangles glued onto the wall and floors, (reminiscent of suprematist compositions) and black cardboard circles, squares and rectangles (like those in the *Reconstructions* images) supported on wooden rods.<sup>60</sup> Vilen Künnapu, in the only contemporary review of the show, described these enlarged 'spatial elements'<sup>61</sup> as being reminiscent of 'a railway world': 'We move inside an enigmatic world of turnpikes, semaphors, crooks and mirrors'. Later, the installation is generally interpreted as an attempt at realising the 'reconstructions' in three dimensions, as an execution of ideas previously worked out on paper.<sup>62</sup> If several of the spatial additions are reminiscent of

59 K. Laine, Jüri Okas etsii kauneutta rumuudesta. – Satakunnan Kansa 20 July 1991.

60 The exhibition included 21 serigraph prints, five enlarged photographs, an installation of wood, cardboard and mirror, titled 'Object', and 26 photographs (30x40 cm) placed on a lower table in the centre of the room, showing 'ideas, projects' from 1972–1975 (ERA, f. R-1954, n. 2, s. 339, l. 24).

61 Künnapu presents a somewhat surrealist reading of the installation when he adds in brackets that the enlarged graphic elements from Okas's works, which have now become spatial, are like 'heroes of pictures that at night descend from there into a child's dreams'. See V. Künnapu, Jüri Okase keskonnakunst, p. 9.

62 This unidirectional movement from prints to spaces (or project to constructed work) is more complex if we consider the Letraset marks and letters as inserted collage. The installation becomes then a kind of pop gesture, enlarging the readymade graphic device to an absurd dimension in an alien context. Also, Okas's use of the installation materials (cardboard, wood) is non-literal as opposed to Robert Smithson (for example); at the same time there is some similarity in their interest in mirrors and their spatial effects.

scenes from Russian avant-garde exhibition designs, then the row of mirrors in the centre of the room, at the corners and on the floor, are suggestive of the post-minimalist fascination with illusion and distraction. At the same time, the installation did not encompass the whole gallery space, but only the side where the photographs were displayed (on the left when entering the space) and the *Reconstructions* on the opposite side were displayed traditionally, framed and hanging on the walls with no distracting additions. It was as if the photographs were intended to be integrated into an overall system by the addition of forms that repeated those that appeared in *Reconstructions*.

While *Reconstructions* itself received much critical attention, less attention has been paid to the transformation of the traditional viewing situation of the gallery and to the way the viewer's experience was structured in the redefined circumstances of the space.<sup>63</sup> The dissolution of the art object and its expansion into space that occurred from the 1960s onwards has, in the context of Western art, been described as expanding the notion of viewing – a process that came to involve the audience 'spatially and kinaesthetically and intellectually, as well as visually.'<sup>64</sup> Several authors have highlighted the new kind of viewer engagement that arises with installation art, regarding it as active viewing rather than passive contemplation of an autonomous art object. Okas's installation with mirrors distracts from the traditional mode of viewing rather than enabling it: we can imagine people moving about the space, occasionally catching sight of fragments of themselves in the mirrors, provoking feelings of uneasiness, confusion and perhaps also a playful and spontaneous reaction to the appearance of the fragmented self among the artworks.<sup>65</sup> As with the album 'The Age of Sex' and its subsequent modifications, the physical structures inserted in the gallery distance the viewer from direct interaction with the works on the walls and emphasise the (bodily) experience of the exhibition itself. The viewer may approach the object but never quite arrives since there is always something to distract from the direct encounter, undermining any contemplative relationship with an image so that it cannot adequately be grasped.

That the artist may have desired to provide such an experience is evident from his black-and-white film *Environment*, which was shot during the period of the exhibition and combines views of the installation with scenes from urban areas of Tallinn, primarily Pelgulinn where Okas himself had lived. The film includes a rapid montage of jump-cuts, in which views from the gallery space alternate with views from outdoors, producing an overall impression of speed and anxiety and confusing the border between internal and external space. The soundtrack of the film, which Okas played while

63 See however: M. Laanemets, *Zwischen westlicher Moderne und sowjetischer Avantgarde: Inoffizielle Kunst in Estland 1969–1978*. (Humboldt-Schriften zur Kunst- und Bildgeschichte 14.) Berlin: Mann, 2011, pp. 210–211; also for a comparison with El Lissitzky's Proun room.

64 A. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 3.

65 In several photographs of the installation there are seen reflected on the mirrors members of the audience, the artist himself or his friends, who have taken their photographs there, perhaps considering it suitable for a new kind of representation. See Andres Tolts's portrait taken in the exhibition in: *kunst.ee* 2009, no. 3/4 (pages not numbered). And several of the photographs on the show itself represent the circle of Okas's friends, including Tolts and Künnapu.



demonstrating the film to his closer circle of friends, was taken from a live recording of American R&B band *Tower of Power* and gave the film a distinctive ambience.<sup>66</sup>

The English word *environment* became a keyword for Okas's exhibition in later art-critical and art-historical texts, thus relating it indirectly to Alan Kaprow's term for his immersive installations in which the viewer became an active participant in the completion of the artwork. At the time Kaprow was known in Estonian artistic circles through his book *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*<sup>67</sup> and the concept of the environment was most probably used with reference to it. However, Okas has denied any close association with Kaprow, nor does his work bear any close relation to Kaprow's, which was directly related to happenings and audience participation. What are similar, however, are their respective attitudes towards the gallery space. For Kaprow, the gallery was associated with commercial methods of presentation that underscore the distance between the viewer and the artwork, and which he wished to subvert through viewer participation.<sup>68</sup> For Okas, the context was the official exhibitions organised in genres and hierarchies, exhibitions which gave equal emphasis to the autonomy of the artwork and the contemplative attitude of the viewer. Against this, new models of participation were at the same time being sought from pop culture and especially rock music and live rock-concerts: the independent exhibition in Harku a year earlier had been described as an 'event' and opened with a performance of rock group *Mess*. Similarly, Okas made music a significant element in his films.<sup>69</sup> Significantly, it was popular music that the young audience of the time found most easy to relate to and which was the most popular cultural phenomenon in contemporary society.<sup>70</sup>

In art-historical literature the viewer's engagement in installations, her activation as opposed to contemplation, has also been associated with attempts to decentre the unified rational subject dominant in modern Western culture.<sup>71</sup> Whereas in 19th century and modernist art the work in the public gallery space functioned autonomously and was meant to reflect an equally autonomous and coherent subjectivity, with the shift towards an environment with which the viewer now had to associate herself this centrality was undone. Thus art critic Claire Bishop draws a parallel between the rise of

66 The music was from *Tower of Power* 1976 live album 'Live and in Living Colour'. Personal communication with the artist, 4.08.2005.

67 The book was brought to photographer Jaan Klõšeiko from Canada by Estonian émigré art historian Eda Sepp. In a photograph from 1975, Ando Keskküla, Eda Sepp, Andres Tolts and Jaak Kangilaski are sitting round a table, with Tolts looking at Kaprow's book. See the reproduction of the photograph in: J. Kross, *Kallid kaasteelised*. II. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2008, p. 546.

68 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005, p. 23.

69 Finnish critic Marketta Seppälä notes that 'Music was the most important medium of internationalism for Jüri Okas, the symbol of the age. For him it is the most communicative artform, because it is able, partly because of its nature, and partly using the machinery built around it, to express in the most simple manner 'what the weather is like today'. It has, in principle, the same rules of composition as the visual arts: the interaction of rhythm, sound and silence.' See M. Seppälä, *Reconstructed Space*, p. 11.

70 In 1972 sociologist Virve-Ines Laidmäe conducted in Estonia a first in-depth sociological survey of viewers of art exhibitions. Among other things, she posed a question about the popularity of visual arts in relation to other art genres. As one of the characteristic features of Estonian public was its youth (60% of gallery goers were under 30) their first choices among the arts were music (38%) and cinema (42%). Laidmäe concludes that the entertainment character of these genres should be put to work in the interest of figurative art and be used for artistic propaganda. See В.-И. Лайдмяэ, *Изобразительное искусство и его зритель: опыт социологического исследования*. Академия наук Эстонской ССР, Институт истории. Таллинн: Ээсти раамат, 1976.

71 Benjamin Buchloh relates the undoing of the contemplative position of the viewer already to El Lissitzky's exhibition design from the 1920s. See B. H. D. Buchloh, *From Faktura to Factography*, p. 92.

installation art and the emergence of theories of the subject as dislocated and divided: 'installation art's multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the Renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work.'<sup>72</sup>

Art historian Alex Potts has approached this dispersal of the artwork 'into an array of objects' from the point of sculptural history, and has related this to changes in the mode of viewing. Similarly, Potts has pointed to the emergence of a subjectivity not associated with a single motif or shape.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, he has attempted to go beyond an understanding of this new subjectivity as simply decentred:

At issue in this development is not so much some intangible decentring of subjectivity as such, but rather the tendency to a perpetual unfixing of images representing any ideal or collectively shared subjectivity within modern culture. [...] If a work gives rise to a vivid subjective awareness, this awareness cannot seem to be encapsulated in some potentially inert and fixed objective thing. It has to emerge from within the contingencies of the viewer's encounter with a work. Where three-dimensional art of the past few decades differs most noticeably from modernist sculpture is the way the staging focuses the viewer's attention on this contingency and unfixing.<sup>74</sup>

For Potts, the trajectory of modern sculpture is related to the history of the undoing of values in capitalist urban culture, aligning him with critics who emphasise the transformation of subjectivity through reification written into the structure of capital (Frederic Jameson's theory of postmodernism is the best known example). As mentioned earlier, in the Soviet Estonian context a loss of values was perceived in the early 1970s, resulting from shifts in modernisation and consumption habits, the influence of mass culture, industrialisation of housing supply and the subsequent transformation of the urban environment. And, as Lapin emphasised, this loss was often projected as a dissolution of the national subject seen in relation to the gradual disappearance of the environment that connoted it.

It is in relation to these transformations and the reactions to them that Okas's works of the period should be understood. Compared with Lapin's emphasis of recognisable symbols from the turn of the century and the independence period, Okas's photographs and *Reconstructions* presented the viewer with situations which, instead of offering a ground for the production of a coherent (national) subject, were ambiguous and confusing. Images of Karl Burman's building on a beach, alongside other turn-of-the-century apartment houses, slowly sinking, and of Stalinist buildings piled on top of each other, or of a generic Soviet truck travelling towards a drilling site, may perhaps have been recognised as ironic or allegorical, but they were far too vague to allow a common political 'we' to be constructed on their basis. Pointing to the undoing of the environment, the everyday and the banal, as well as to changes in perception,

72 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, p. 13.

73 A. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 18.

74 A. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 18.

and from a nationalist and simplistic-polarised viewpoint these images would have been difficult to put to work in the name of any unified identity – their meaning would be too ambiguous and slippery.

This ambiguity is taken further by extending the works into three dimensions in space to form an installation. Underlining multiple perspectives for the work's reception – the contingency and unfixing mentioned by Potts – the subject-position thus evoked by the work problematises the unity supposed in identity politics. Deriving its origin from the inter-war period of independence, the identity of nationalist ideology, although in a subordinate position, was already fixed and did not need to be challenged – it already knew well what it was. From the standpoint of nationalist rhetoric, the processes initiated in the art of the late-1960s, aligned with psychoanalytic and structuralist reconceptualisation of the individual, took the dissolution of subjectivity too far. Thus, even while the locations and images would have enabled a common and collective recognition to emerge at the level of the content, it was in any case disintegrated via form.

This also explains the uneasiness reflected in criticism during the late-1980s, a period when nationalist identity politics was moving towards its peak and public expectations had already become very different from that of the 1970s. Thus, attempts at fitting Okas under the label of the avant-garde, emphasising his elitism and illegibility, should not be read only in the strict context of emerging postmodern discussions, but also in this political context. Replacing the referential reading – the ties to specific places and environment – with a formal one, becomes then a way of inserting these works into the discourse of withdrawal and resistance.

It is not that the artist was unwilling to address the public or that the public was unable to communicate with these images, it was rather that the public and critics of the 1980s considered these images irrelevant and unnerving. The potential audience for Okas's works had primarily been composed of the youth of the 1970s who, critical of social hierarchies, had been fascinated with rock music and adopted the values of the counterculture of the period.<sup>75</sup> But by the late-1980s the same generation (including soon Okas himself) had distanced themselves from radicalism and returned to more traditional forms of representation and subjectivity.<sup>76</sup>

75 Officially the exhibition in 1976 had 2182 visitors (ERA, f. R-1954, n. 2, s 339, l. 22–24).

76 See H. Krull, Jüri Üdi, Juhan Viiding ja eesti luule. – Jüri Üdi ja Juhan Viiding: kogutud luuletused. Ed. H. Krull. Tallinn: Tuum, 1998, pp. 597–599.

## Noise environment

As a result of its independent lines of development of thermodynamics and information theory, there are in science today two 'entropies'.

Jeffrey S. Wicken<sup>77</sup>

Finally I turn to interpret Okas's works of the 1970s via consideration of Norbert Wiener's book *Cybernetics and Society*, published in Estonian in 1969. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, Wiener based his theories on a fundamental shift in physics and the sciences in general, taking into account the contingency and probability of the world as it appeared under the scrutiny of these sciences. Wiener related this paradigmatic shift toward acceptance of the imperfection of measured conditions to Freud's views concerning the constitutive irrationality of the human subject. Wiener compared the founder of statistical thermodynamics, Josiah Williard Gibbs, with Freud on the grounds that 'in their recognition of a fundamental element of chance in the texture of the universe itself, these men are close to one another.'<sup>78</sup> From there on, rather than staying in the field of poetry and art, irrationality and contingency were thus written into the sciences, allowing discussions to gain more commensurate grounds while also dissolving the border between science and arts. This also meant that irrationality, rather than belonging to Romantic inexplicability, could now be theorised from the standpoint of the so-called 'hard' sciences. Secondly, and more importantly, Wiener theorised the notion of entropy (as a measure of probability), linking it to notions of chaos and order, terms which hold a central place in Okas's theorising of the environment.<sup>79</sup>

In one of the few texts written by Okas, printed first in 1982 in the architectural magazine *Ehituskunst* and reprinted later in the catalogue of his solo exhibition in 1987 as well as in the introduction to his photo series *Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture*, he presented his ideas on perception and the environment as a series of binaries: looking and seeing, recognising and grasping, knowing and acknowledging. Among other things he stated that 'it is possible ... to be aware of the laws of order and disorder'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, this binary has been one of the most widespread metaphors in the critical reception of Okas's work, characterising not only *Reconstructions* but also his land-art works and documentary photography series. Okas's short text accompanied a series of photographs of everyday and common structures that comprised an architectural vocabulary using compositional and stylistic features similar to those of so-called 'high' architecture, yet on a different scale or in divergent form. In this way Okas not only inverted the 'perceived notions of order and disorder' by showing the banal to

77 J. S. Wicken, *Evolution, Thermodynamics and Information: Extending the Darwinian Program*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 23; quoted in: N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 52.

78 N. Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. New York: Avon Books, 1969, p. 11.

79 Thirdly, interpretations of the notion of entropy reverberate also with the abovementioned discussion on national identity and its reconstruction. As Reinhold Martin, commenting on Robert Smithson noted, time in entropy is irreversible, there is no place for nostalgia nor going back in time in entropy. This means that a discourse of any kind of 'return' (to independence period, for example) becomes in this framework simply impossible. See R. Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 221.

80 J. Okas, *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture: Photographs 1974–1986*. Tallinn: Jüri Okas, 1995.

be constructed by similar principles to the monumental, but also questioned the architectural hierarchies of the profession. Writing on this series in 1994, photographer and critic Peeter Linnap regards Okas's interest as being about 'giving meaning to the complex relationship of the fundamental tension between nature and culture. In fact, Okas seems to be reflecting on an even more universal level – that of 'civilization and entropy'.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the emphasis in Okas's prints and photographs on the discarded, excessive and obsolete may easily be interpreted as entropic, drawing attention to the residues of industrial production and modernity that, when reaching a point of saturation, begin to dominate and lead the civilization away from order.

Norbert Wiener understood entropy in terms of the second law of thermodynamics, which postulated that in a closed system the tendency is always towards deterioration and what he interpreted as chaotic unwinding. He also associated entropy with the measure of probability: the more complex a system is, the greater its potential entropy. As entropy increases, so the system dissolves and begins to lose its specificity, moving from the less probable to the highly probable, from organisation and differentiation to chaos and similarity.<sup>82</sup> According to this schema, entropy is in counterpoint with information, the latter being used to generate negative feedback from outside the system and to challenge the tendency towards deterioration. Information is thus associated with order, organisation, and what Wiener called negetropy:

it is highly probable that the whole universe around us will die the heat death, in which the world shall be reduced to one vast temperature equilibrium in which nothing really new ever happens

and

...there are stages which, though they occupy an insignificant fraction of eternity, are of great significance for our purposes, for in them entropy does not increase and organization and its correlative, information, are being built up.<sup>83</sup>

Thus for Wiener, entropy, associated with a movement towards disorder, should be fought using information. Furthermore, as American literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles has pointed out, Wiener attributed this opposition a moral value whereby entropy is associated with oppression and rigidity.<sup>84</sup> A system that does not adjust itself to the incoming data must eventually fail as it is destined to mindless repetition of the same and thus allows noise to prevail.

According to the information theory pioneered by Claude Shannon and which gained prominence parallel to Wiener's cybernetics, entropy was introduced in an opposite meaning from that of thermodynamics: characterising a system's potential quantity of information there is an equivalence between entropy and information. For

81 P. Linnap, *Entroopia, ruum, pilt. Jüri Okase arheoloogiline rekonstruktsioon*. – *Kunst* 1994, no. 2, p. 25.

82 N. Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, p. 20.

83 N. Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, p. 45.

84 N. K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 103.

Shannon, information is not about the meaning of the message, but about the probability of its elements: the more improbable a message element is, or the more unexpected it is, the higher its informational content.<sup>85</sup> An increase in entropy also implied an increase in information and thus a noisy message gave more information than the one that is predictable. Whereas for Wiener noise meant de-differentiation and the increasing prevalence of uniformity, for Shannon noise was associated with difference and novelty.<sup>86</sup> This in turn led to seeing disorder and chaos, rather than order, as a source of newness.

However, the difference between these theories is not so much in the processes they describe, but between their different attitudes to the same forms, a plus or a minus sign that has been attached to it.<sup>87</sup> This is something that is crucial in the interpretation of Okas's case. From the perspective of Wiener's theories, his interest in the discarded and ruinous could be interpreted as a bleak pessimism regarding the excess and waste of modernist urban planning (and thus an implicit fight for unchanging order) and a prophecy of an entropic heat-death in the future. From the perspective of Shannon's use of the notion of entropy however, Okas is seen as giving priority to the 'noisy' environment as a source of potential information ('It is possible to look and not see', says the Okas's aforementioned manifesto-like short text.)

Shannon's theory imagined a medium or communication channel through which a message is sent and then deformed by the noise already present in the channel. To distinguish the contribution of noise to the initial message (noise was measured in the same units as information), Shannon coined the term 'equivocation'.<sup>88</sup> Warren Weaver, a commentator on Shannon's work, became the first to give this kind of equivocation a positive sign, seeing in it a desirable addition rather than an unwanted distraction. However, the problem arises that if a more improbable message has higher informational content than a more probable one, then, drawing its logical conclusion, a message that is totally unpredictable, a pure nonsense, would provide the greatest quantity of information. The solution to this problem is to be found in differentiating between desirable and useless information, inserting the recipient's knowledge into the schema of data transmission. Accordingly, the maximum point of information is reached when there is a combination of predictability and novelty, 'when the message is partly anticipated and partly surprising'.<sup>89</sup>

In a bold move, N. Katherine Hayles pairs equivocation with poststructuralist ambiguity or the 'reader's text' explicated by Barthes: the unintended surplus, the addi-

85 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, pp. 52–53. Hayles explains this with a computer programmer's viewpoint; that efficient coding gives the most probable elements the shortest codes and most improbable elements the longest codes (taking up most space in the information channel).

86 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, p. 51.

87 In both cases it is probability that is measured through entropy, but whereas in thermodynamics it is derived from the lack of specific information (like the position of heat molecules in a room) and needs to rely on statistical average, then in Shannon's case probability describes a choice rather than ignorance: how probable it is that one will choose an element over the other, e.g. in an alphabet (N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, pp. 53–54).

88 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, p. 56. Equivocation was actually proposed as a term for 'conditional entropy', which need not necessarily mean an addition but includes any kind of change the message undergoes in the channel.

I thank Virve Sarapik for this clarification.

89 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, p. 53.

tion, is what is pleasurable and what the reader consumes.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, this pleasure carries with itself ideological connotations, standing against fixation, hierarchies and centralising power structures.<sup>91</sup> Several of Okas's works engaged directly with the medium or 'channel of information': in *Perspective Corrections* (1979) he used the distortion of the photographic medium against itself (a trapezoid laid down on the snow appears in the camera viewfinder as a square, as if neutralising the photographic distortion), in *Snow* (1979) a heap of snow with a square black sign on top is repeated in negative as a black heap (named 'soil') with a white square on top, thus playing with the photographic medium's processes of reversal and problematising the original. However, these particular works appear to be concerned with the artist's exerting strict control over the material rather than with ambiguity – they present riddles to the viewer, but suggest a single definitive solution. It is in those works in which the artist reveals his own indecidability that Okas comes closer to the notion of equivocation and noise as used by Hayles. In an interview to a Finnish newspaper in 1991, discussing the environment as a subject of his work, Okas commented that 'in Estonia one comes across many structures about which it is impossible to tell whether they are being built or demolished'.<sup>92</sup> A couple of years later Okas restated this claim ('If you build a house ... there exists a certain moment when it is not possible to define whether the house is being demolished or built') and asserted that this condition of the ambiguity of the environment is a central concern of his work: 'The composition of all my pictures and installations convey that feeling of oscillating on the razor's edge.'<sup>93</sup> It is indeed this indecidability and instability which characterises his works from the 1970s: the viewer sees some kind of transformation, but cannot determine in which direction that movement is going. And this condition is then presented as being an urban condition. Paradoxically, from the perspective of information theory, this condition appears to be a point of maximum information.

Information was a buzzword during the 1970s and was often used to characterise the changing urban environment, suggesting a moment when sensuous information was retreating before sign-information. As poet and writer Jaan Kaplinski put it in *Kunst ja Kodu* in 1979, the artificial landscape was taking over from the natural, although '[a]rtificial environment can never be as complex-diverse as natural environment.'<sup>94</sup> This discourse regarded urbanisation and the corresponding withdrawal from nature as a loss for which urban planning, art and architecture should attempt to compensate. The task of these disciplines should be to help human beings to neutralise the noise, or cope with the noise, including the excesses of mass culture, unwanted sounds and signals and urban multiplicity. The proposed solution often involved increasing the

90 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, p. 188.

91 N. K. Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, p. 187. In another context Hayles politicises the role of pleasure even further, linking bodily and disciplinary transgressions: 'Like cybernetics, eroticism is intensely concerned with the problematics of body boundaries. It is not for nothing that sexual orgasm is called 'the little death' or that writers from Marquis de Sade to J. G. Ballard have obsessively associated eroticism with penetrating and opening the body. At stake in the erotically charged discourse in which Wiener considers the pleasures and dangers of coupling between parts that are not supposed to touch is how extensively the body of the subject may be penetrated or even dissolved by cybernetics as a body of knowledge.' (N. K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, pp. 107–108.)

92 A. Uimonen, *Järjestyksen ja epäjärjestyksen rajalla*. – *Helsingin Sanomat* 19 December 1991.

93 K. Hellerma, *Jüri Okast ei huvita inimene, vaid keskkond*. – *Hommikuleht* 29 May 1993, p. 11.

94 J. Kaplinski, *Inimene märgivoolus*. – *Kunst ja Kodu* 1979, no. 1, p. 6.

opportunities for withdrawal and escape: trees and bushes should be planted in ways that could protect the human being from the excessive flux of sign-information, tall fences would separate courtyards from the public space of the street, windows would be placed in ways that would reduce the communication between inside and outside.<sup>95</sup>

This position has an affinity with the view that changes in everyday life and the architectural environment were a threat to the national identity of the subject; indeed, these two discourses were often collapsed into one. While for Kaplinski the threat to individual autonomy was posed by the over-modernisation of the environment, the large-scale introduction of new technological means and the overflow of information, for many intellectuals in Estonia that threat was related to the cultural dominance of the Soviet-Russian other. In the context of late-Soviet society, cultural dissidence has usually been represented in terms of withdrawal into the supposedly autonomous sphere of the home, juxtaposing what was widely perceived as 'cultured space' with 'unsettling chaos'.<sup>96</sup> The integrity of the national subject, its homeostasis, was constructed through bounded territories and seclusion from the entropic other that was shut outside. In the following decade, interest among architects of the Tallinn School in restoring the perimetered structure of the urban space – the traditional spatial and architectural hierarchy of inside and outside – bears witness both to the post-modern turn and to local interest in expressing national difference through the built environment.<sup>97</sup>

Recent studies have attempted to show the interdisciplinary practices of the artists and architects working in Tallinn in the 1970s as having diverged from these later developments, thus demonstrating a plurality of voices in the postmodern turn.<sup>98</sup> This article has attempted to show that there existed an alternative to the idea of withdrawal. Okas's position among these artists and architects was an exemplary one. By privileging the discarded and unworthy, that threatens the closed system from outside, he provided an explicit challenge to the uniform meaning of the space of withdrawal. He also attempted to find a balance between signal and noise, understood as a moment of maximum information. However, he did not simply posit noise in order to oppose and disrupt order (Socialist or modernist) as was the case with the anti-establishment use of rock music; rather, his privileging of noise entailed a paradigm shift *vis-à-vis* the environment. Thus, noise figured not simply as interference, as it was understood by Kaplinski, but instead prompted recognition of a different kind of complexity that now included what had previously been cast out and excluded. This encompassed an interest in graffiti, in anonymous and seemingly self-emerging structures, and in the discarded and useless as part of the everyday (post-industrial) environment. The more radical effects of this shift were to be seen in the practice of architecture, which pushed against the borders between high and low by educating the viewer to see the

95 J. Kaplinski, *Inimene märgivoolus*, p. 7.

96 A. Kannike, *Kodukujundus kui kultuuriloomine: etnoloogiline Tartu-uurimus*. Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 2002, p. 60.

97 See A. Kurg, *Architects of the Tallinn School and the Critique of Soviet Modernism in Estonia*. – *The Journal of Architecture* 2009, vol. 14 (1), pp. 85–108.

98 See M. Laanemets, *Kunst kunsti vastu. Kunstniku rolli ja positsiooni ümbermõtestamise katsetest eesti kunstis 1970. aastatel*; A. Kurg, M. Laanemets, *Keskonnad, projektid, kontseptsioonid*. Tallinna kooli arhitektid 1972–1985.



non-monumental and the banal as part of the architectural discipline (e.g. *Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture*; or *Monument to L. Lapin in Rápina*, 1978, a huge rusty container placed in the countryside near Lapin's birth place) and problematised the relation between order and disorder by posing questions about the architect's work as something contributing to an environment's complexity.<sup>99</sup> In contrast to Lapin, who celebrated multiplicity through a form of 'high' architecture where the architect maintains control, Okas appears to have recognised the self-generating capacity of environments to evade the control of the architect. His installation exhibited alongside the series *Reconstructions* functioned as a noisy environment in which the stability of the relationship between viewer and object was undone by the lack of any single and correct point of contemplation and by encouraging constant movement in space, allowing no fixity of the subject.

## Conclusion

Shannon's rethinking of entropy and information signalled a broader shift away from the classical theory of thermodynamics and towards complexity theory and non-equilibrium thermodynamics. Rather than leading to heat death, entropy came to be seen as leading to self-organisation: 'chaos went from being associated with dissipation in the Victorian sense of dissolute living and reckless waste to being associated with dissipation in a newly positive sense of increasing complexity and new life.'<sup>100</sup> If thermodynamic principles could be seen as central to the organisation of industrial capitalism, 'to its technological machines and its organization of the social body',<sup>101</sup> then a shift in these principles could be seen as having wider societal repercussions, paralleling significant ruptures in the post-war societies. The industrial production and disciplinary order that had emerged during the modern era had been based on the principle that surplus energy should be excluded from the system as waste, which then posed a threat from the outside. The crisis of this order during the second half of the 20th century was, among other things, also a 'crisis of enclosure', not only of the dissolution of borders in science and prioritising self-organisation, but also a breakdown of the system of institutions (family, factory, prison, school) leading to the emergence of a post-disciplinary society of flows.<sup>102</sup> This was a society that also redefined the borders between the self and the other and instigated a displacement of the fixed notions of order and disorder.

99 One could argue that Okas attempted to redefine the practice of architecture from this viewpoint. In 1980 he described his own 1977 project for a roadside gas station in a laconic way as 'just one more object' added to the roadside piles of gravel, telephone posts, transformers etc, i.e. as an object increasing the entropy of the environment. However, at the same time the building attempts to mix different layers and elements, deriving from Robert Venturi's theory of complexity and contradiction, among other things to resemble a ruin or blend into this environment. The architectural features are then something deriving from 'disorder' rather than imposing its own pre-conceived order. See J. Okas, *Bensiinijaam Mäol. – Ehituskunst* 1981, no. 1, p. 34.

100 N. K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 103.

101 T. Terranova, L. Parisi, *Heat Death. Emergence and Control in Genetic Engineering and Artificial Life. – CTheory*, a084, 5.10.2000, [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=127](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=127) (accessed 10 February 2012).

102 T. Terranova, L. Parisi, *Heat Death. Emergence and Control in Genetic Engineering and Artificial Life*.

If we understand Soviet society to have operated similarly on the basis of disciplinary enclosures and institutions, albeit in a bureaucratic-socialist form, then the repercussions that accompany the rethinking of the notion of entropy and the positing of noise as complexity rather than interference offer a way of rethinking the tactics and place of oppositional art. Okas's reinterpretation of the environment from the standpoint of this transformed notion of entropy could prompt unease and confusion from two very different perspectives: both from the official Soviet perspective of the monumental cityscape and the dominant industrialised building production, and from oppositional positions promoting a return to the inter-war architecture of the Estonian independence period or a more traditional form of urbanism. Okas's reinterpretation threatened the autonomy and unity of each, and made visible the unsettling other which, being useless or disorderly, was shut out from their system's borders.<sup>103</sup> In the following decades Okas himself moved away from many of these investigations, drawing a clearer line between his art projects and architectural work and applying neo-traditional postmodern principles in urban planning projects. However, from today's perspective these early projects, which guide the public to 'look and see' the environment in a new way, occurred at the moment of inception of a redefined idea of the environment that incorporated previously excluded spaces into new productive territories of the city. By the end of the 20th century, urban otherness and former wastelands had become major vehicles in the regeneration of North-American and European cities, including those in the former Soviet and Socialist countries, recognising their potential for the post-industrial urban economy. Okas's noisy environment shows the prehistory of these transformations in Tallinn, and contains an alternative to the prevailing trajectory.

103 Okas was not the only architect in the Tallinn group interested in the effects of entropy on the environment. Tiit Kaljundi's project from 1976, *View of a New Visual Environment I* proposed, among other things, redeveloping slag heaps in mining areas as mountain-skiing centres. The surplus waste of mining oil-shale is fed back there into the system as recreational landscape and the threat (also through its prominent visual presence in the landscapes) is thus neutralised. Leonhard Lapin's *City of the Living*, *City of the Dead*, 1978, could equally be seen as an attempt to integrate death as a repressed other to everyday urban life and turn the threat into laughter and play. About the latter see: A. Kurg, *Architects of the Tallinn School and the Critique of Soviet Modernism in Estonia*.