MODERN TRANSLATION:
ESTONIAN ART FROM THE NATIONAL AWAKENING
TO THE BREZHNEV STAGNATION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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During the Estonian National Awakening, the nineteenth-century period of cultural self-awareness, artists in this eastern European country, subsequently a republic of the USSR, creatively adapted stylistic models originating elsewhere in Europe. After World War II, artists turned to the United States for inspiration. This interpretive modernism, which was suppressed under Stalinism, remained integral to Estonian national identity, and resurfaced in the late-1950s reformist period known as the “thaw.” In the ensuing cultural renaissance of the 1960s, artists recovered the pre-war modernist past while reopening lifelines to contemporary art abroad. Until cultural retrenchment in the 1970s, artists used unofficial exhibitions to provoke audiences comprising cultural officials, the scientific and creative intelligentsia, and the general public. This artistic activity must be analyzed in the context of its heritage: a national movement begun in the nineteenth century, and at whose height artists like Paul Raud and Nikolai Triik equated Estonian self-realization with cultural modernity sustained by adaptive processes. Nonetheless, histories of Estonian art appearing after independence in 1991 have scuttled this salient quality
in favor of Western modernist paradigms, a cornerstone of which is originality. This
dissertation examines pre-war Estonian art, the totalitarian forms that supplanted
those aesthetic modes, and the return of Estonian modernism at unofficial
exhibitions staged by Leonhard Lapin, Raul Meel, and other artists in the final
decades of Soviet rule. Concepts drawn from Jüri Lotman’s semiotic theory of
culture support the proposed, alternative history of Estonian art, as well as critical
reassessment of Cold-War modernist theory that has obscured that history.
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Introduction: Modern Translation and the Ideology of Modernism

Since the Estonian National Awakening, the nineteenth-century period of cultural self-awareness, artists in this eastern European country have assimilated models of creative practice and the discursive traditions that supported them once they gained traction elsewhere in Europe or the United States. Though suppressed by twentieth-century authoritarian regimes, this interpretive modernism remained integral to Estonian national identity, and resurfaced in the late-1950s reformist period known as the cultural “thaw.” In the ensuing cultural renaissance, artists recovered their modernist past, and reopened lifelines to tendencies in contemporary art abroad, especially the United States. Until cultural retrenchment in the 1970s, artists used unofficial exhibitions to provoke audiences that included cultural officials and the scientific and creative intelligentsia, as well as the general public.

This dissertation reconstructs varieties of modernism in pre-war Estonian art, the totalitarian forms that supplanted them, and the reassimilation of those models in the final decades of Soviet rule. Finding American modernist accounts committed to an ethos of originality, and thus ill-suited to the descriptive demands of this task, my dissertation proposes alternative concepts drawn from the semiotic theory of culture developed at Tartu University after the thaw, a tradition with which Estonian artists were intimately familiar. The following reconstruction historically situates practices of creative assimilation, from the national movement and the pre-war Estonian avant-garde, to official Soviet culture and underground cultural activity in the thaw, revealing continuity that scholars have ignored. The
tasks required for this reconstruction are multiple, and they require some explanation.

A primary task is to identify and explore points of continuity between late-Soviet Estonian underground art and the nineteenth-century National Awakening: a movement that equated Estonian self-realization with a unique cultural modernity sustained by adaptive practices. This undertaking has grown urgent with the appearance, after 1991, of revisionist histories that scuttle this salient quality of Estonian art in favor of Western modernist paradigms, honed during the Cold War, and of which a cornerstone is originality. For example, citing post-Stalin examples of Estonian art that appear to engage Western tendencies like painterly abstraction and Pop Art, Eda Sepp has used the art of the thaw to sustain the classic modernism-socialist realism opposition.1 Although Estonian painters indeed returned to abstraction during the thaw, the connections Sepp draws, for instance, between Valve Janov’s 1958 Ice Melting on Ema River and American Abstract Expressionism, are temporally and formally generous.2 (Fig. i.i) Fortified by the profoundly horrific

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2 In ibid., 46. An easel painting on plaster that appears to have been cut and then surfaced with deliberate precision, the Janov is barely eighteen inches in height. The resulting effect is one of unmistakable delicacy, deliberation, and skilled craftsmanship. According to Sepp, “In Janov’s mixed-media painting Ice Melting on Ema River, done in 1958, the composition and the flat handling of the picture plane is closer to American abstract expressionism than any other work in Estonian art at the time.” Sepp’s comparison of the Janov to American Abstract Expressionist paintings, while not specifically emphatic, omits the fact that the examples of the latter best known to Soviet citizens were both very large and created by painters who tended to deny deliberation or refined skill in their work. Cf. “Barnett Newman – Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler,” Art in America 50/2 (Summer 1962): 83; 86-7. “SECKLER: A general public image of your work conceives of it as excessively logical, hieratic, involved with structure and intellectual dialectic. NEWMAN: [...] The fact is, I am an
story of Stalin’s reign of terror in Estonia between 1944 and 1953, her framework places Estonian art of the thaw in immediate opposition to official Socialist Realism. The national trauma suffered by the Estonian people includes an understandable need to reconnect the fragments of their modern art through a narrative that transcends political violence. Putting aside the logic of this motivation for the moment, the following turn of phrase strategically abridges Estonian art history, thus appending unofficial art of the thaw to the classic modernism-socialist realism binary: “The year 1957 marks a new beginning for abstraction and surrealism in Estonian art, which was different from anything that had taken place before.”3 Such revision elides a fact that Estonia itself exemplifies: the experiences of modernity have been many, extremely complex, and hardly simultaneous.4 This presents a


3 Sepp, 45.

4 Reflections of this revisionist posture can be found in Mari Laanemets, “The Fitful Arrival of Hyperrealism,” Estonian Art 2 (2000): unpaginated. Laanemets distinguishes Estonian 1970s “hyperrealist” paintings from those of later (and inferior) “photo-realists.” Her distinction revolves around the claim that photographic verisimilitude in painting, when used as a foil, compellingly engaged the Estonian experience of Soviet occupation and isolation from the West. The hyperrealist Ando Keskküla, “deals with manipulations and analyses of the viewers’ sense of vision [...] turning the copy of reality into a reality construed by the artist himself,” and Jaan Elken’s canvases employ photographic exactitude to “resemble subjective emotional map projections, rather than haphazard snapshots, even if they may seem like those at first glance.” By contrast, she claims, the photo-realism that followed, “does not use photo-effects to create simulacrum, but rather uses photos to facilitate the painting of realistic pictures,” in which “the realities in setting are replaced by the social surroundings [...] This was refabricating the realism of small towns, urbanism and painting of a techno-civilisation to sentimentality and the salon-style.” Through astute visual analyses and incisive observations of the changing social context, she convincingly differentiates the earlier, hyperrealist works from paintings that merely attempt photographic verisimilitude, a distinction glossed in recent exhibitions. Laanemets’s argument would be far stronger without her exceedingly uncritical use of the adopted terms “avant-garde” and “kitsch,” or the infantilizing of Estonian culture implied in the statement, “During the 1970s it seemed that we had finally reached some synchronisation with the West.” These are striking lapses, given her poignant initial observation: “All attempts to describe
problem similar to that presently facing the cultural studies field, which Arjun Appadurai summarized as follows:

All major social forces have precursors, precedents, analogs, and sources in the past. It is these deep and multiple genealogies that have frustrated the aspirations of modernizers in very different societies to synchronize their historical watches.⁵

Appadurai’s remarks illuminate the frequent impulse of Western modernist art histories to relate complex and varied experiences of modernity to a singular lineage.⁶

Sepp shaped a local history to accommodate western modernist theory, supplying coordinates for mapping Estonian modern art according to foreign values of singularity, originality, and aesthetic autonomy. The capitalized term “Modernism” has emerged to designate the discursive consensus and ideological weight these values accrued in western art literature during the Cold War.⁷

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Estonian art inevitably encounter the same problem – the terminology adopted from Western art is based on Western criteria, which are not always applicable to the local context. Each term must therefore be redefined within the local context, taking into account those parts of Western culture that have not found assimilation here.”⁵


“Literature” seems the apt term for a tradition of scholarship that favored prescriptive theory over descriptive, art historical inquiry. That tradition is easily traced to Clement Greenberg’s ingenious elevation of medium specificity as the principal criterion to distinguish American post-war art from official Soviet art. The resulting program was ahistorical in nature and thus remarkably versatile. Serge Guilbaut and others have shown that the Greenbergian tradition proffered auspicious critical stances for an ideological contest with cultural and political fronts.8  

While Estonia and the United States shared a common political nemesis in Soviet power, one courts profound irony by abridging Estonia’s national cultural history to accommodate this particular theoretical model. It must be said at the outset that the art that emerged in the National Awakening should not be evaluated through western modernism’s discourse on originality. Some clarification will prevent the reader mistaking what this means and missing its fundamental importance. Estonia’s modern culture eschews originality as a guarantor of temporal and thus individual singularity and stability. What I refer to is not unlike, say, the stability arrogated by American businesses that frame and display their first dollar bill, taking it out of circulation. Rather, the art and culture in question relies on the continuous circulation of forms, creatively resituated in modes captured by

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the term “poetic misprision,” coined by the literary scholar Harold Bloom. Until the nineteenth century, ethnic Estonian culture consisted mainly of lively yet extremely vulnerable folk traditions: oral history, poetry, singing, pageantry, dance, cuisine, and a handcrafted material culture of which national costume and vernacular architecture are only the best documented idioms. As mechanization and other modern advances gradually transformed communication, commerce, and transport, Estonian self-realization called for the simultaneous advance of political, socio-economic, and cultural modernity. Understood as the desire to be both meaningful in a popular sense, and durable and thus commensurate with the changing conditions of life there, the projects of cultural modernity and national sovereignty became intermingled in Estonian identity. The national movement catalyzed the appearance of adaptive practices capable of translating the national culture into modern forms.

I hasten to emphasize that originality is a culturally constructed value. The original confers upon the viewing subject a sense of spatial and temporal stability by subtle deception, masking the arbitrary conventionality that sustains it. The same conventionality endorses the Western conception of history as overlapping yet finite linear durations, as evoked by terms like “the French Revolution” or “the Age of Enlightenment.” Creative adaptation instead appeals to recognizable precedent – by means of a token that Bloom termed a tessera – activating the specific memory of the spectator. The tessera enlists an inventory of cultural referents limited only by

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the scope of the spectator's memory. I will show how this limitation only decreases with each audience convened for the rehearsal of cultural literacy at unofficial exhibitions in the sixties and seventies. These referential modes suggest Benedict Anderson's notion of "empty time," transcending historical and geopolitical limits to form a perpetually elastic tradition that interlaces cultural adaptation and national essence.

In the post-war Soviet occupation, official artists in the Estonian SSR adroitly translated established socialist realist themes into pictorial norms galvanized in the national movement, irrevocably intertwining these previously distinct cultural trajectories. Unofficial artists seeking to recover the avant-garde past during the subsequent thaw inevitably negotiated this painful, yet certain truth. In effect, Soviet mass culture precluded any meaningful study of this creative work unaccompanied by serious consideration of socialist realism. It is thus another task of this dissertation to describe and assess socialist realist art and policy. Ensuing findings will support the claim that official art and the avant-garde – both Russian revolutionary and Estonian inter-war – carry traces of assimilation and thus continuity, complicating narratives to which artists and art historians too quickly consent.

This dissertation – the first of its kind – historically situates those traces in unofficial art after the thaw. To do so, I confront several important issues that have

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10 Benedict Anderson has described as “empty time” the effect of cultural forms that recognizably resituate or recycle from precedents. These forms point to the existence, he says, of an “inventory” of cultural forms whose reuse, I would add, testifies to an awareness of power residing in their legibility across time and space. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 2006).
inflected histories of modern art and its perceived intersection with totalitarian
culture. Leah Dickerman’s influential essay, *Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the
Shadow of Photography,*¹¹ distills many of these concerns. The author notably
confines socialist realism to examples of painting and sculpture – media that, for her
primarily Western audience, have achieved fine art status. Through monumental
examples by painters Isaak Brodskii and Aleksandr Gerasimov, Dickerman suggests
that Soviet mass culture consisted mainly of academic mediums, and that meaning
in socialist realism can and should be sought in its formal divergences from (or
latent congruity with) western Modernist art and theory. Her analysis depends on
maintaining a dual presumption: that the value of originality transcends cultural
boundaries and that, it follows, photographic reproduction is universally
experienced with skepticism for its diminution of that value. This is not to say that
Dickerman’s reference to Walter Benjamin is untimely, for it is not.¹² Rather, I want
to underscore that Benjamin’s “aura” construed these values as absolutes by
masking their variation between cultures, thus mystifying terms that otherwise
resonated strongly with that other ongoing discourse, colonialism. Applied to Soviet
cultural policy, the supposed universal antinomy of originals and mechanical
reproductions is a thin critical foil for upholding medium specificity, aesthetic
autonomy, and the reinforcement of the individual subject. In Soviet Estonia, one in

¹¹ Leah Dickerman, “Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography,” *October* 93
(Summer 2000): 139-53.
¹² In ibid., 150-1. Dickerman cites Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
fact witnessed the progressive flattening of different media into a single field. This might reflect local resistance to such western constructs as the superiority (or inferiority) of the original to the inferiority (or superiority) of photographic authenticity. My analysis of the far more prolific applied art of the propaganda poster seeks to disrupt the paradigms that Dickerman’s essay reinforces.

Attempts to define exactly what is modern or modernist about creative work appearing to the West only after political upheaval, whether in the former Soviet Union, China, or South Africa, must situate the belatedness of artists’ encounters with western modernist theory. After all, they may revert to the elastic and referential modes described above even when giving accounts of their own creative practices. Former unofficial artists usually insist on their apolitical subject position – an insistence upon autonomy typical of what Fredric Jameson called the ideology of modernism. He defined his term as follows:

[...] it is first and foremost that which posits the autonomy of the aesthetic, the supreme value without which, however committed the various critics and practitioners may be to art itself and its specificities and inassimilable experiences, such commitment cannot really be identified as the ideology of the modern.\textsuperscript{13}

As if in deference to precisely that “supreme value,” Russian artists Rimma and Valery Gerlovin insisted that

A distinction should always be drawn between political *samizdat*, which analyzes and criticizes the Soviet system, and literary and artistic *samizdat*, which first aims not at criticism but at reflecting creative problems and values.\textsuperscript{14,15}

Estonian artist Leonhard Lapin elaborated on this sentiment in one essay, concluding with similar resolve:

In their analysis of Russian underground art several theoreticians have called it a dissident phenomenon which should belong to politics rather than to art and have regarded the works of underground art as documents rather than objects of aesthetic value. As far as I remember from my Russian experience, aesthetic values still prevailed [...] We communicated first and foremost as artists and personalities. Mostly we discussed aesthetic problems and analysed aspects of man’s spiritual and intellectual life. Social problems and issues of nation and state came up only in connection with our primary problems. Creation and art were above politics because for us politics was (and still is) foul play and an unethical way of existence.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Primary sources in languages other than English, whenever possible, are cited in the original language. In cases where access to such sources has not been possible – due to geographic or other limitations – I may not have been able to cite the source in the original language. In those cases, I refer to more readily available reproductions, the publication of which frequently entailed an English translation.
\textsuperscript{16} Leonhard Lapin, “Koe er sabag[k]a! Eesti Avangardi Traditsioon ja Eesti-Vene Kunstisuhted,” in ed. Anu Liivak *Tallinn-Moskva, Moskva-Tallinn: 1956-1985* exh. cat. (Tallinn: Tallinn Art Hall, 1996): 228. While providing some nuance, Estonian art historian Sirje Helme affirmed Lapin’s basic claims. She insisted that the term “dissidence” inaccurately describes unofficial art after the thaw. By Helme’s account, artists themselves maintained a distinction between art and politics, working on official commissions during the day, returning to experimental projects in the private spaces of their homes or studios in the evening. In her words, “To call them dissident is to call them heroes. They were not in a fight against the Soviet state. The aim of unofficial culture was not to end the Soviet system, but to keep Estonian identity alive. To fight Moscow would be to immediately become a political enemy, thus no longer working in the *art* world.” Author’s interview, June 17, 2009. My emphasis.
Whether or not Lapin’s revival of the revolutionary avant-gardes of Constructivism and Suprematism divorced them of their original, decidedly political purposes, is irrelevant. By the mid-1970s, Lapin and his friends drew and creatively resituated so broadly from the cultural past as to reaffirm a patently Estonian artistic practice of critical assimilation. The complex historical background of that reaffirmation includes both the National Awakening and the indelible consequences of the Soviet foray into Estonia’s fledgling modernity and cultural transformation. While this acknowledgment doubtless reawakens one to the national trauma, it is a necessary step toward appreciating as modern a culture that is as radically critical, lively, and ultimately enchanting as it is anathema to the Modernist tradition.

The task of describing modernism in Estonian art is methodologically complex. The developing postwar “relationship between international art trends and local tendencies,” Sirje Helme observed, seems to follow no familiar logic. As she explained, historically specific conditions preclude the “opposition of metropolis and periphery/province,” because

   Our ideological and official metropolis was Moscow: as far as our identity was concerned, the metropolis was

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found in the first Republic of Estonia and the ultimate metropolis was within the artists themselves.\textsuperscript{19}

My description of objects thus appears, whenever possible, within a chronological engagement with the broader, visual-cultural contexts. This approach not only demands our acknowledgement that Estonia’s is essentially a colonial history, but actually offers the advantage of disrupting Cold-War narratives.

A suitable alternative theory of modernism might – by extension of Bloom’s concept of misprision – resuscitate and build upon that proposed in 1925 by László Moholy-Nagy.\textsuperscript{20} Under the heading “Easel Painting, Architecture and ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’,” the Bauhausler identified a watershed moment when artists were forced into “untenable positions” traceable to the distinction between work and leisure.\textsuperscript{21} Moholy-Nagy saw this distinction as a condition of modern experience, relegating the viewer to an “excessively subjective attitude.”\textsuperscript{22} Artists “gradually forgot how to produce the essential” and, their purpose having become instead “to ‘create works of art,’ they seized upon the trivial, the unimportant and often upon aesthetic formulae derived historically or subjectively from the great individual works.”\textsuperscript{23} By his characterization, the ultimate failure of Cubism and Constructivism to liberate art from that purpose resulted from their overly restrictive tactics. Those artists “tried to purify the expresional elements and

\textsuperscript{19} In ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} In ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{22} In ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
means themselves without intending to produce ‘art’ in the process,”\textsuperscript{24} thereby only further separating creative work into specialized fields.

The Weimar Bauhaus and the Dutch De Stijl attempted to unify these fields in the revival of Richard Wagner’s aesthetic ideal: \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}, or the “sum of all the arts.” Moholy explained the certain failure of those projects in terms whose lucid resolve warrants their full citation:

\begin{quote}
The concept of a total work of art was readily intelligible, yesterday, at the period when specialisation was at its height. With its ramifications and its fragmenting action in every field, specialisation had destroyed all belief in the possibility of embracing the totality of all fields, \textit{the wholeness of life}. Since, however, the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} is only an addition, albeit an organised one, we cannot be satisfied with it today. What we need is not the “\textit{Gesamtkunstwerk},” alongside and separated from which life flows by, but a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing \textit{Gesamtwerk} (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which \textit{all individual} accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a \textit{universal} necessity.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Moholy’s \textit{Gesamtwerk} responded to his perception of a modern subject alienated by an overspecialized world. Hinging on concepts of totality and synthesis – doubtless informed by the interdisciplinary Bauhaus model – his theory traces an alternative modernism sustained by the subject as different aspects of his life are integrated

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. Original emphasis.
into his being. It was this modernism that was at stake in Estonian art, from the birth of the national movement to cultural retrenchment under Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s.

The interwar origins of Moholy’s plea correspond to the high-water mark of the Estonian avant-garde. The spontaneous form he invoked also resonates with the theoretical tradition taking shape at Tartu University in the aftermath of Stalinism, and to which the reader might usefully refer in the subsequent chapters. Jüri Lotman traced his key theoretical concepts to a seminar at the 1966 summer retreat of Tartu semiotics faculty in Kääriku, Estonia. He initially objected to using the Saussurean tradition as a model for the study of culture, as his colleague Isaak Rezvin proposed. Lotman objected to the urge, in that tradition,

[...] to consider a single communicative act – an exchange of communication between addressee and addressor – as the prime element and model of any given semiotic act. As a result, the individual act of sign exchange has come to be regarded as a model of natural language, and models of natural languages as universal semiotic models....

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26 I am indebted to Professor Oliver Botar, without whose comments and suggestions I might not have arrived at this important theoretical distinction.
27 Jüri Mikhailovich Lotman (1922-1993) was born into a Jewish intellectual family in Petrograd. Following military service in WWII, he relocated to Estonia in 1950 in response to anti-Semitic admissions practices at Leningrad University, where he was forbidden to apply for doctoral studies. In 1954 he became a lecturer in the Department of Russian Language and Literature at Tartu University. He subsequently established the influential Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, whose members included his close collaborator Boris Uspensky, Vladimir Toporov, Mikhail Gasparov, Aleksandr Pyatigorsky, and Isaak Rezvin, among others. For further reading on the Tartu-Moscow School, see Maxim Waldstein, The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008).
28 Jüri Lotman, “O semiosfere,” Trudy po znakovym sistemam 17 (1984): 5-23. Lotman worked out the central concepts of this essay over the preceding two decades, publishing them as the foundational texts Analiz poeticheskogo teksta and Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta.
Consequently, Lotman argued, “semiotics itself has sought to be understood as the extension of linguistic methods to objects not included in traditional linguistics.”30 For Revzin, “The subject of semiotics is any object, which acts as a means of linguistic description.”31 Rather than submit the semiotic study of culture to the specialized discipline of linguistics, Lotman gradually conceived the study of culture as a total field – the semiosphere. As opposed to the structuralist notion that the sign is the first element of any semiotic system, Lotman argued, “The ensemble of semiotic formations functionally precedes the singular isolated language and becomes a condition of the existence of the latter.”32 His theory amounted to a radical reassessment of the positivist values upon which the structuralist canon relied.

Through Lotman’s lectures on cultural semiotics at Tartu University in the 1960s and 70s, the Estonian creative intelligentsia grew familiar with this stirring new field of thought. The resonance with the Estonian experience of modernity was so rich, nimble and so varied that a satisfactory description far exceeds the scope of the present discussion. Briefly, the pre-existence of the semiosphere meant that cultural work in the present drew meaning from contact at a boundary, as if between organisms, at a frontier separating a culture – the semiotic – from “non-

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 In ibid., 228. “Chasti vkhodyat v tseloe ne kak mekhanicheskie detali, a kak organi v organizm. Sushchestvennoi osobennosti struktturnogo postroeniya yadernikh mekhanizmov semiosferi yavlyaetsa to, shto kazhdaya ee chast’ sama predstavlyaet soboi tseloe, zamknotoe v svoei struktturnoi samostoyatel’nosti.”
semiotic” space beyond it. In Lotman’s words, “The semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual translatable ‘filters,’ passing through which the text is translated into another language.”

The present study finds ample discursive space within that notion of translation in which to begin an account of Estonia art as a significant field of both national and modernist culture, even if this account faces coming to terms with the impact of the Soviet occupation. The Modernist tradition is as ill-equipped to describe the lived experience of twentieth-century modernity as it is to historically explain avant-garde, post-war, or post-Soviet art in Eastern Europe with any credibility. By adapting its forms as early as the late 1950s, Estonian unofficial art began its recovery of the avant-garde. Yet the “unofficial” designation binds this art in a rhetorical hermeneutics: questions about its resistant logic plague claims, advanced primarily by artists, to its autonomy. Perpetuated by their own testimony, the conundrums surrounding intentionality hinder one in the historical duty to find meaning in these artists’ creative output whilst situating it in its multiple contexts. These were not limited to the locally constructed discourses of cultural continuity and self-realization. Indeed, as contexts for creative work, those discourses were inevitably inflected by cultural politics in a milieu of forced industrialization and institutionalization of knowledge by Soviet directives.

33 In ibid., 205.
34 Ibid.
35 In seeking to articulate multiple dimensions of Estonian modern art under Soviet rule, my account may at times seem to take a conciliatory attitude toward Soviet power. This was never my intention. I cannot know the loss suffered by the Estonian people, but I have endeavored to faithfully convey the known costs, human and otherwise, of the Soviet occupation.
Estonian identity remains complicated by the legacy of its inter-war sovereignty, cut short by a convulsive sequence of invasions during WWII that led to the Soviet occupation from 1944 to 1991. The initial three chapters consider the cultural outcomes of the Estonian national movement, the Soviet occupation and ensuing cooption and suppression of that heritage, followed by coerced modernization. Two final chapters explore the ways Estonian artists recovered the avant-garde in the wake of Stalinism. By creatively recuperating their modernist past in its infancy, Estonian artists resuscitated and explored options for the creative intellect after political and cultural invasion by the USSR. Chief among these was the practice of crafting identity in the present by shaping indigenous traditions and the European past as coextensive.\(^{36}\) Chapter 1 in particular summarizes these aspects of the national past, providing readers with new historical background to the story of Estonia’s modern art.

The Conclusion considers strategies emerging in Eastern European art, gauging the force of my findings beyond the Soviet period and suggesting avenues for investigating contemporary art. In recent examples of performance, artists reconstruct or appropriate from historical forms of mass communication from direct audience address to telecommunication and Wikipedia. I have chosen examples that creatively explore the conceits of new internet technology in its

\(^{36}\) See Jane A. Sharp, “After Malevich – Variations on the Return to the Black Square,” in eds. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger *Picturing Russia* (New Haven: Yale University, 2008): 233-4. The author described a related tactic in the oeuvres of Russian painters Lidia Masterkova and Igor Makarevich, whose “recognition of his or her place in the present is embodied in a dialogue with the past – one that makes such art especially poignant to contemporary viewers. In reconstructing this dialogue and its reception we may come to better understand how art constitutes history instead of merely illustrating it.”
dissemination of information across cultural and linguistic boundaries, productively intervene in the singularizing conceits of the “global” as a context for cultural work.
Chapter 1: The Russian Avant-Garde and Historicism in Socialist Realism

1.1 Introduction

Official Soviet art assumed local variants in response to the needs of local cultures. In occupied Estonia, a combination of ethnic Estonians, Russified Estonians, and Russians relocated to the Baltic Sea region, filled the ranks of official artists. One may speculate that this mixture of backgrounds was strategic, better equipping the state for the primary task of fusing, into a single field, different mediums of meaning-creation, from the handmade to the photographic. What emerges is a locally specific program of continuity and adaptation of Estonian culture in official applied art: the Soviet propaganda poster. Consequently, the notion of an Estonian unofficial art devoid of political motives or outcomes appears far more complex than artists are willing to acknowledge.

To begin, it is widely asserted that a culture of the distributed copy, and not the treasured original artifact, defined official art in the Soviet Union. Histories of Soviet art marvel that serial repetition of objects ousted the cult of the original, thus characterizing Soviet socialist realism as an undifferentiated and consistent mass.37

37 See Ekaterina Degot, “The Collectivization of Modernism,” in ed. Boris Groys and Max Hollein, Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era, exh. cat. (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2003): 93. “From the very beginning, Soviet art was formed as the art of mass distribution, indifferent to the original.” See also Sarah James, “Back in the USSR,” Art Monthly, 12/2006. Discourses of individual style and originality among official painters in the thaw have complicated the study of Soviet art. See Susan E. Reid, “Destalinization and the Remodernization of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1963” (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1996). Meanwhile exhibitions and anthologies on Socialist Realist art tend to bifurcate Soviet culture into complementary halves, ordering artistic phenomena to reinforce a temporal narrative of empire and decline: the first half is framed in terms of utopias left unrealized after revolutionary avant-gardes disbanded under Stalinist campaigns against “formalism”; the latter half is understood as post-Stalinist and fallaciously prescient of international détente, nuclear disarmament, parliamentary democracy ascendant under Mikhail Gorbachev, and the eventual collapse of Soviet communism. In its basic forms this bifurcation seems sensible, given the
That this culture determined, and was determined by norms for the depiction and
delivery of state messages remains a tacit assumption. This assumption cursorily
vindicates the Westernizing judgment of totalitarian culture as chauvinist, its
aesthetic forms the insipid products of philistines – “kitsch,” as Clement Greenberg
termed it.\textsuperscript{38} Histories of socialist realism tend to confine their analyses to literature,
painting and sculpture and how, in these forms, innovative self-expression suffered
under dictatorship. Though it is never a stated agenda, this approach insulates itself
from the most prolific form of Soviet propaganda: the serial poster. This is
frustrating because the same historians announcing as their task the elucidation of
authoritarian suppression use this approach, but simultaneously argue that official,
mass culture and its forms supplied the raw material for later dissidence.\textsuperscript{39} Rather,
academic forms and their aesthetic judgment are made to represent official Soviet
culture, leading to its evaluation in terms originating from beaux-arts traditions.\textsuperscript{40}

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reprimand implied by policies Khrushchev introduced after Stalin’s death. These included the
November, 1954 decree “On the Elimination of Excesses in Projects and Construction,” which largely
abolished the irrational embellishment that characterized Stalinist architecture. See Miranda Banks,
ed., The Aesthetic Arsenal, exh. cat. (New York: The Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum,
November 21, 1993 to February 27, 1994). The anthology focuses almost exclusively on the visual
culture of Stalinism in Russia, excluding its development in the republics and the Eastern bloc. See
Following this tendency, both sources imply censure of official Soviet culture on moral grounds,
laying the groundwork for pairing the art of the thaw with western modernist art.
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\textsuperscript{39}Again, scholarship by former Soviet historians as well as Westerners takes this stance. See Degot,
98. “Official power in the USSR, contrary to widespread opinion, never repressed the production of
art in private studios, but it controlled its distribution through exhibitions and reproductions [....] It
was this situation that brought forth the unofficial art of the 1960s, the status of which resembled
that of experimental science – not being put into production.”
\textsuperscript{40}See Leah Dickerman, “Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography” \textit{October}
93 (Summer 2000): 138-153; David King, \textit{The Commissar Vanishes} (New York: Henry Holt and
photographs in socialist realist paintings and sculptures. Isaak Brodskii’s 1930 classic, \textit{Lenin in
Smolny}, “borrows the reality-effect of the photograph in order to naturalize the mythology of the
artwork, tapping its evidential authority even as it obscures its mechanical origins.” She disparages
the realism of such paintings on grounds that it is unapologetically disingenuous, a quality uniquely

At their worst, these evaluations require Soviet mass culture as supporting evidence for positions in utterly foreign discourses. An especially noteworthy example is “Modernism (capital M)” because it grew out of a patently Western deployment in the ideological battle against totalitarianism. Of course we are speaking of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg’s seminal effort to distinguish our modernism from that other, totalitarian modernism.

Unsurprisingly, formative connections between state-mandated visual culture and the preceding avant-gardes have only been considered in the broadest terms, usually as suggested by artists working after the thaw. This has impeded a nuanced understanding of the strategic forms these avant-gardes variously took when rehabilitated by artists throughout the Soviet Union. Particular obstacles, then, fog the meaning of alternative art from Estonia, where artists simultaneously assimilated Western Pop and minimalism in the final decades of Soviet communism. The fact that Soviet mass culture mainly consisted of graphic design is ignored, and we never really arrive at the grist of Soviet modernity and its cultural iterations.

apparent in its troubled relationship with photographic evidence. That troubled relationship marks, for Dickerman, the distance between socialist realism and “a traditional realist idiom.” The reader must assume she is referring to Russia’s academic traditions, mainly nineteenth-century realist painting.

41 For Dickerman, canonical Soviet paintings and sculptures define “a form of ‘camera-vision’ in anti-modernist guise.” She connects her arguments with Siegfried Kracauer’s lament of photographic “excess,” summarizing as follows: “For Kracauer, photography’s excess – the plethora of images, which disallows sustained concentration – erodes memory by severing the connection between what is represented and what is known through experience to be true.” Agreeably in specific instances, the author asserts that socialist realist painting and sculpture both relies on, and yet resists the photographic, a measure of its “conflictedness.” The author problematically situates the likes of Brodski at the crux of another conflict – that between pre-WWI high modernism and “antimodernism,” a paradigm invented at the height of the Cold War by American art historians committed to the notion of art’s autonomous development. Ibid.; Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in ed. and trans. Thomas Levin The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998): 51.

The outcome is a loose grasp of how centralized power, local traditions, and even currents of dissent intermingled to form the fabric of Soviet culture. As the following analyses demonstrate, Soviet culture in both its official and unofficial forms relied on strategic modes of assimilation. The precise modernism of these modes is beyond the grasp of prevailing Cold War narratives, which encumber even scholarship concerned with art made after the Soviet collapse.

Notions of cultural progression underpinning socialist realism were far more straightforward than implied by the diversity of its forms and the tasks to which they were put. Official priorities shifted over the decades, especially after Stalin’s death in March, 1953. Considered apart from official policy – with which it is frequently confused – official art only selectively contradicted the forms that preceded it. Moreover, tendencies specific to locale and period differentiated official art produced in the republics that made up the Soviet Union. The implied unity and stability of even Stalin’s formula for art “national in form, socialist in content” is deceptive: after its inception in the mid-1920s, the motto was invoked to mobilize, then to suppress nationalist sentiments in art of the new republics.43 To be clear,

43 This phrase was coined after the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, when Stalin asked, “What is culture during the dictatorship of the proletariat? It is a culture socialist in its content and national in form.” Bown described this formula as “the bedrock of cultural policy towards the non-Russian nationalities throughout the existence of the Soviet Union – although at different times it was to be interpreted by the Party in different ways.” The author noted Stalin’s nomination as Commissar for Nationalities by Lenin in 1917, and that Stalin described proletarian culture as “socialist in content” already in his May 1925 speech, “On the Political Tasks of the University of the Peoples of the East.” At that time, Stalin conceded that proletarian culture may adopt “various forms and means of expression with different peoples.” Between 1924 and 1936 the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were formed from territory originally included in the Russian republic. Stalin’s accommodating tone suggests that the Party sought to foster stability through a policy conceding cultural self-determination. The concern all along was to balance a permissive cultural stance with allegiance to Moscow, and the phrase was invoked in
socialist realism was a complex discourse, beginning perhaps with the 1922 Declaration of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), but only superficially culminating in the 1932 Central Committee Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations. The drafters of the 1922 AKhRR declaration condemned the “abstract concoctions” of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde in favor of “heroic realism,” with emphasis on documentation and observation. Ten years later, following Pavel Filonov’s treatise on the metaphysical obligations of the “artist-proletarian,” Andrei Zhdanov called for the Socialist metamorphosis of the realist tactic: a cross-breed of “truth and historical concreteness” with “the task of the ideological transformation and education of the working people in the spirit of Socialism.”

In policy rhetoric socialist realism, which Zhdanov termed a method, called for a confining version of history henceforth referred to as “reality in its revolutionary development.” The official policy came to demand a certain vagueness of historical attitude rather than a specific product. As Jane Sharp recently observed, “Realism, which, stemming from its official status as the style of Soviet art, mystified the connection between painted representation and the object or idea being represented – was abstraction’s obverse.”44 The following section suggests that the mystified epistemology of socialist realism was a means to officially dictate historical memory. Though it may surprise, it was abstract painters

of the Russian avant-garde who initially expanded this practice, establishing tactics for subordinating historical facts to the requirements of idealistic narratives. This connection bears further examination, as it opens new avenues for considering why, as Sharp points out, “abstraction became the ever-present, but repressed Other in all visual forms.”

45 Ibid. Original emphasis.
1.2 Metaphysical Avant-Garde and Reality's Others

In order to better understand their relationship to canonical socialist realism, it is prudent to trace stances toward cultural heritage taken in both abstract and representational painting surrounding the Russian revolution. In the years preceding October 1917, figures associated with the Union of Youth and later identified with the movements Organica\(^{46}\) and Suprematism, began grounding their practices in theoretical quests. Among the various projects of the revolutionary avant-garde, those of Pavel Filonov and Kazimir Malevich were unrivaled in their metaphysical scope. Each sought forms whose authority might rest on absolute principles, thereby transcending art’s conventions (which they saw as historically arbitrary), limits imposed by the human condition, even nature itself.

In a 1914 declaration entitled “Made Paintings,” Filonov and his circle\(^{47}\) expressed the need to rectify what they deemed historically erroneous developments in art. Relegated to a preparatory role, and gradually perceived as merely instrumental and thus of secondary symbolic value to painting,

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\(^{46}\) Used by art historian Anna Povelikhina, the moniker refers to the circle of artists associated with Mikhail Matyushin, whom Malevich appointed in August 1923 to head the Department of Organic Culture at Petrograd’s Museum of Artistic Culture. Other figures included Pavel Mansurov, Pyotr Miturich, Boris, Maria, Xenia and Georgy Ender, Nikolai Grinberg, and the artist and poet Elena Guro. See “The Theory of World Unity and the Organic Direction in the 20th-Century Russian Avant-Garde,” in ed. Povelikhina Organica, exh. cat. (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1999-2000): 11-7. Further reading on the related subject of biocentrism, though I have not yet been able to consult it, should include Oliver Botar and Isabel Wünsche, eds. Biocentrism and Modernism (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2011).

\(^{47}\) “Made Paintings,” in eds. John Bowlt and Nicoletta Misler A Hero and His Fate (Austin, TX: Silvergirl Press, 1984): 135-8; note 1. Originally published by the Intimate Studio of Painters and Draftsmen as the leaflet Sdelannye kartiny. It was cosigned by Filonov, David Kakabadze, A. M. Kirillova and E. A. Lasson-Spirova. All were members of the Intimate Studio, which Filonov founded after the Union of Youth disbanded in January, 1914.
The enormous significance of the drawing, one equal to that of the painting, has long been lost. It has been dissipated through graphics and studies for paintings. And yet the drawing as such should be a Colossus. It is neither the servant of painting, nor the servant of graphics. We are restoring the rights of the drawing.  

The group’s choice of the drawing technique for their example was surely deliberate. While the vignette evokes the image of great potential lying dormant under the policy traditions of the Academy, it easily slips into the opposition of servitude, on one hand, and rightful symbolic. The moral-historical pathos barely conceals an innuendo of the overthrown tsar.

Filonov and his friends reconceived artistic labor in the form of painting saturated with the artist’s consciousness. His early statements provide only vague descriptions of “long, persistent work” through which human will, exclusively brought to bear on the creative act, would result in an art of absolute “madness” (sdelannost’), the unadulterated expression of purified, conscious agency. Like the ancient stone churches of Russia, the made painting embodied “superhuman tension of will,” revealing an immortal force within man. For the signatories of the declaration that force lay encumbered by the fortuitous impulses of artistic “tradition,” a term Filonov used as a pejorative.  

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48 Ibid., 135.
49 See “The Basics Tenets of Analytical Art” (1923) in Bowlt and Misler, 145-6. “The role or significance of my art, i.e. its active force, can be reduced to its effect on the evolution or revolution of the viewer’s intellect, to the emancipation of the artist’s or student’s creative individuality from the domination of every kind of pseudo-authority, tradition, prejudice and school.” Though it is beyond the ambitions of this dissertation to explore their likely motivation here, it should be stated that
exploitation of the past by “parasites” had refracted art’s otherwise focused
progression toward a sublime modernism. In the passage above, Filonov singled out
the division of creative work into technical specialties of descending authority as an
exemplary and dire consequence of that process. The alternative path he envisioned
was to a modernism that both unified technique, and fused the subject-object dyad –
fundamental to conscious perception – into a single whole. Art’s lost trajectory, if
reclaimed, might lead to just such a transcendent unity of form, act, and
consciousness – what Filonov called “Universal Flowering.”

Filonov explained his philosophy of the creative act more broadly in later
writings. In 1923, he elaborated on his concept of “madeness” – the term with
which he replaced “creativity” – as “organized and systematic work on material.”
The mere organization of artistic objects did not constitute madeness. Rather, it
was a condition of mutual determination – labor upon materials in harmony with
the organization of the self. Filonov believed that real creation disavowed academic
procedures and hierarchy of form over color, establishing instead a direct link
between the painting and the intellect. In an essay entitled “The Basic Tenets of
Analytical Art,” Filonov asserted,

Filonov’s equation of direct and prolonged work, creation, and self-realization closely resembles
ideas previously developed by John Ruskin and William Morris.
50 For a more focused discussion of Filonov’s theory of perception and creative agency, see Jeremy
Canwell, “Pavel Filonov’s Dictatorship of One Painter,” MA thesis (New Brunswick: Department of Art
History, Rutgers University, 2007).
51 Bowlt and Misler, 135. For Filonov, by unleashing eternal forces, madness granted access to a
sublime which he initially described through comparisons to institutionalized religion: “For us the
words the ‘made painting’ or the ‘made drawing’ are just as meaningful as the words ‘the Church of
St. Vasilii the Blessed’ or ‘Lyons Cathedral.’” He quickly abandoned this strategy. In his later writing,
especially polemics concerning AKhRR, he increasingly packaged his descriptions of the absolute in
the concepts of Russian genius loci and, eventually, the “proletarianization” of art.
You should operate with color while operating with form simultaneously, so that the effect of color never ceases to be the effect of form. [...] do just as you please and begin to paint just at the point where you think it would be most effective to begin.53

Unsurprisingly, the term “intuition” begins to appear in Filonov’s written statements at the time of this essay. Recruiting the intuition was a prerequisite to reorganizing the creative act into “a subconscious, analytical comprehension.”54 To speak of the madness of a painting central to this experience was to suppose a new reality – one conditioned by aspects of the self unrealized or marginalized in the past. Filonov was at pains to explain this:

The higher will of creation (higher in intensity and active force) derives from the artist’s specific idea of his organizational, expedient work on himself, of the goal he is trying to reach by operating with his intellect on his own development in art, and of the response that he wishes to elicit in the intellects of others.55

His vision for modern painting was difficult to specify because its mystical quality was, at its core, the defiance of naming – a trajectory directly opposed to contemporary Western modernism, in which polemics surrounding nominalism persisted long after Duchamp’s initial concerns. Rather, attempting to reduce his principle to its essence, Filonov approached a shamanist dialectics:

53 In ibid., 146; note 1. The editors’ translation is of a text entitled Osnovnye polozheniya analiticheskogo iskusstva, a manuscript dated 1923 and located in TsGALI, f. 2348, op. 1, ed. khr. 10. 54 “The Basic Tenets of Analytical Art,” 145. 55 Ibid.
Creativity, i.e. madness, whatever is depicted in the painting, is, above all, the reflection and record (via material) of a struggle – a struggle for the development of a higher intellectual plane in man, for the existence and effect of this higher psychological art on the viewer, i.e. it makes the viewer higher, summons him to be so.\textsuperscript{56}

Where Filonov prescribed an art of synthesis for the spiritual elevation of society, Zhdanov politicized this vision, substituting it with “reality in its revolutionary development.” Made paintings represented the spiritual and intellectual passage of art, artist and viewer into a reality that transcended limits observed, and thus reinforced, by historical tradition – tradition being understood literally as the temporal persistence of artifacts or their qualities, conditioned by exchanges particular to the mode of their transmission. It is poignant that Filonov never expressed allegiance with mimetic representation, abstraction, or any other tendency. In debates over pedagogy in the Leningrad Academy of Arts, he consistently campaigned against partisan alliances to style, from Cubo-Futurism to Academic Realism.\textsuperscript{57} Instead he advocated art that was both a record of, and a means to a creative state in which the intellect is devoid of “preconceived, synthetic resolution.”\textsuperscript{58} In this sense, Filonov’s artistic philosophy concerned a singular

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Of particular relevance here is Filonov’s statement, “Who Needs It?” (Pedagogy in the Department of Painting, Academy of Arts, Leningrad, 1927), in eds. Bowlt and Misler, 217-23; notes 1, 2. The editors tentatively date the statement to 1927 because the text refers to the threatened secession of twenty-three students from the Department in 1927 unless the rector, Eduard Essen, was dismissed.
\textsuperscript{58} See “The Concept of the Inner Significance of Art as an Active Force” (1923), in eds. Bowlt and Misler, 155-65. Filonov repeated the term “extra-tendentious” to describe intellectual independence from planned outcomes and historical traditions.
struggle toward reality’s persistent other, what he once described as “double naturalism.”

In his extensive writings, Malevich made similar appeals to notions of alternative reality. Artistic tradition for the Suprematist evoked not only tsarist hegemony over art through the Imperial Academy. It perpetuated the constraint of otherwise infinite human potential, sequestering cognition to a hermeneutics of self-fulfilling perceptions and representations. He seethed at the irony: “To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons.” It is important to parse from Malevich’s characteristic bombast the important point: the tradition of naturalism exemplified a host of what he called “habits of mind.” Their reinforcement in the manmade environment guaranteed

61 This phrase is from the opening passage of “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism, The New Realism in Painting” (1916), in ed. Andersen, trans. Glowacki-Prus and McMillin, 19. “Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art.” Original emphasis. Habitual behavior and cognition, for Malevich, historically drove man to design his environment with built-in stimuli, thus reinforcing man’s existing tendencies, his a priori projections. Nothing really new was possible in this paradigm. He illustrated this idea in various ways. See “On New Systems in Art” (1919), in ed. Andersen, trans. Glowacki-Prus and McMillin, 85. “All creation, whether of nature or of the artist, or of creative man in general, is a question of constructing a device to overcome our endless progress. It is only by forming signs of our creation that we advance and move away from the past, and therefore we cannot establish eternal beauty with our new inventions.” See also “Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism” (1919) in ibid., 121. “All the colourings of utilitarian intention are insignificant and narrow, having the already completed purely applied significance of what was found by cognizance and the result of philosophic thought, on the horizon of our vision of little corners either serving a philistine taste or else creating a new one.” In a 1922 letter to Dutch artists, Malevich sharpened his critique to attack the revival of aestheticism, specifically the resurrection of the World of Art. Ibid., 183-5. “They have all forgotten that painting or art as a whole has its own idea of manifestation. They did not know that they all, as objectivists, stand eternally as the exponents and ideologists of an alien idea – this alien idea is contained in States’ religion and economic bread bins; they have always served objectivity and thus been a super-structure of what society calls life. What does this life consist of? Of Religion and fleshpot well-being.”
history’s development through conflicts that would always arise from the tendency
toward conventional and thus static, unworthy and, significantly, safe pretenses:

I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped
from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring which
confines the artist and the forms of nature. This
accursed ring, which opens up newer and newer
prospects, leads the artist away from the target of
destruction. And only a cowardly consciousness and
meager creative powers in an artist are deceived by this
fraud and base their art on the forms of nature, afraid of
losing the foundation on which the savage and the
academy have based their art.62

At first, destruction of the cultural past cohered with the political goals of the
revolution. Just months after the October 1917 revolution, Malevich publicly
declared, “The social revolution which smashed the chains of capitalist slavery, has
not yet smashed the old tables [sic] of aesthetic values.”63 After such triumphalism,
it is tempting to see the death rattle of the avant-garde in Malevich’s decoration of
teacups with Suprematist motifs in 1923. (Fig. 1.1) Filonov’s groping efforts to
translate his pedagogy64 into revolutionary language – “to speak Bolshevik” – arouse

Andersen, trans. Glowacki-Prus and McMillin, 19. See editor’s note (240), which states that sheets
containing the initial passages, of which this is one, were handed out at the opening of the exhibition
“0.10” in Petersburg in December, 1915. Original emphasis.
63 From “The Problems of Art and the Role of Its Suppressors,” an open letter signed by Aleksei Gan,
Aleksei Morgunov, and Kazimir Malevich, published in the newspaper Anarkhiya, no. 25 (March 23,
1918); as reproduced in ed. Andersen, trans. Glowacki-Prus and McMillin, 49-50.
64 Pavel Filonov, “The Concept of the Inner Significance of Art as an Active Force” (1923), in eds.
Bowlt and Misler, 155-65. See especially “The Dialectics and Evolution of the Method and the
System,” 160-2. Amid vague references to “ideology,” the author compares masters and pupils to a
collective of shock workers (item 74), announces plans to organize traveling exhibitions and lectures
on art in the provinces (item 78, presumably after the model of the Itinerants), and implies a plan to
accommodate his program – “according to the principle of the proletarianization of creativity” – to
similar pathos. Malevich had totally identified his brand of abstraction with a purpose the revolution would reject in the course of the coming decade. For him, revolutionary art must be pure, bearing no recognizable trace of the past. Filonov’s theory of madness took a similar posture against historical memory. The made painting categorically sought to recuperate a reality other than that for which history had opted. For Filonov, history was a record of “artificial stabilization,” the perpetual manifestation of forms that expressed foremost historically contingent, and therefore haphazard relationships. His aesthetic theory was utterly incapable of the historical scope and causal narratives increasingly espoused in public debates over the past’s productive role in Soviet culture. The polemical painter receded from public view as the state assumed control of cultural resources during Stalin’s ascent. Scholars use his disappearance (and eventual death) to construct a hero myth in which his later obscurity confirms the success of his quest toward the metaphysical unknown. Claiming the “flexibility” of Filonov’s artistic system, for instance, Gleb Yershov seemingly contradicts himself with the subsequent observation, that official art

that of the cultural bureaucracy created after the revolution (item 80). He specifically mentions the Academy of Material Culture, the Institute for Art Research (likely referring to GlNKhK, an acronym from Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul’turi, or State Institute of Artistic Culture), the Decorative Institute, the State Porcelain Factory, the State Publishing House, and the State Photographic and Cinematographic Enterprise.


Filonov died in 1941 during the siege of Leningrad.

Evidence lacks to suggest that Filonov’s 1936 portrait of Stalin\textsuperscript{69} is more than a stylistic retrogression of the kind high Modernist theorists – seeking to demonstrate universal scope – attribute to the later Malevich.\textsuperscript{70} (Figs. 1.2-4) I will return to this point in the following section, which considers the historically contingent attitude of socialist realism at length.

\textsuperscript{69} Yershov, 177. “[...] several works by Filonov can be regarded as an original reply to the official method proclaimed by the Communist Party, demonstrating the flexibility and universality (or at least the polemical nature) of these two masters’ [Malevich and Filonov’s - JC] artistic systems and creative methods.” By this reference I must assume the author has in mind, among other works, the 1936 portrait.

\textsuperscript{70} See Benjamin Buchloh’s influential essay, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” \textit{October} 16 (Spring 1981): 39-68.
1.3 Painted Realism and the Salvage of the Past

Ironically, these avant-garde artists performed a task vital to the later official canon by articulating, even if from the perspective of abstract painting, positions radically opposed to historical memory. Their iconoclasm supported a rebirth of the subject in an experiential dimension devoid of tradition and therefore the infectious determinacy of the past. Inadvertently, in formulating their projects against the constrictive effects of historical convention, Malevich and Filonov popularized the very language and concepts to which the party leadership developed its contradictory posture. Ensuing debates centered on precisely the question of how historical memory might serve a positive function in conditioning Soviet culture. In an early effort to define the revolutionary role of art in keeping with Marx, Leon Trotsky countered the avant-garde posture against history, writing in 1922:

If there were no [...] utilization of the 'secondhand' wardrobe of the ages, historic processes would have no progress at all. [...] But this continuity is dialectic, that is, it finds itself by means of internal repulsions and breaks. [...] Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art.71

Founded on the dialectical link between the past and the future, Trotsky's formula remained essentially intact in Stalin-era cultural policy. By 1934, Zhdanov termed the figurative depiction of this link “revolutionary development,” which, he carefully

explained, was not merely “objective reality,” but an artistic combination of historical “concreteness” and “ideological transformation” of the worker “in the spirit of Socialism.”\textsuperscript{72} The factual truth of history as narrated by official Soviet art is of course never beyond question. This quality of dubiousness is actually integral to the epistemological turn that Stalinist culture made. For now, it suffices to establish that the leadership remained decidedly against excising public memory of the past, tsarist or otherwise. Rather, history became the perpetual handmaiden of Stalinist epistemology. As late as 1950, Stalin reaffirmed historical dialectics as the protracted accretion of the new together with the old upon, in this example, the armature of language:

Marxism holds that the transition of a language from an old quality to a new quality does not take place by way of an explosion, by the destruction of an existing language and the creation of a new one, but by the gradual accumulation of the elements of the new quality, and, hence, by the gradual dying away of the elements of the old quality.\textsuperscript{73}

At the 19\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress in 1952, Stalin emphasized that the eventual survival or obliteraton of a form may deceive expectations based, in turn, on perceived “stability”:

What is most important to the dialectical method is not that which is stable at present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable, since for the dialectical method only that which is emerging and developing cannot be overcome.74

It can be fairly said that the task facing officials was the creation of a command culture akin to the command economy. Historical memory based on individual experience must acquiesce to official history, which develops according to operative concepts of emergence, relative stability, and decline derived from Marxist dialectics.75

75 See “The Russian Avant-Garde: The Leap Over Progress,” in Groys, 23; Evgeny Dobrenko, “The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste,” in eds. Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen Socialist Realism without Shores (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997): 135-64. Groys constructs a paradigm in which he opposes “traditionalism” to the classical avant-garde over “the demand that art move from representing to transforming the world.” He situates this opposition within Russia’s “invasion” by technological modernization, or the “most momentous event of modern European history.” He constructs this paradigm only to break it apart, arguing that the Bolsheviks “appreciated the support of the avant-garde, but they were troubled by its dictatorial ambitions, which repulsed the representatives of other currents that were closer to them aesthetically although usually opposed to them politically. The avant-gardists took this ambivalence on the part of the party as a de facto admission that it was unable to cope with the construction of the new world.” Only rarely citing examples in art, Groys relies on generalities such as “dictatorial ambitions,” in turn simplifying methods by which realism and abstraction aspired to transform themselves in the achievement of a common goal. Groys’ conclusions somewhat limit our understanding of official Soviet culture, as they deny the Soviet subject a determining role in the formation and subsequent development of official culture. Evidence suggests that the party just as likely realized its ability to construct the new world through the synthesis of mimetic representation and principles of abstraction, within – importantly – academic art forms. Groys’ method exemplifies that described in Dobrenko: “The traditional model for describing Soviet culture, one which was current in both the West and the USSR in the 1960s, was based on the premise that the negation of past art began either with the avant-garde or with the Proletkult and (later) the RAPP – in other words, with the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ within the culture. But what was never taken into account was the fact that the negation of the cultural tradition, founded on the corresponding aesthetic threshold of the masses’ perception of art, proceeded from the broad masses, both urban and rural, who were actively drawn by their new power into ‘cultural construction.’” Original emphasis.
The official call for a unified policy on art was preceded by debates concerned as much with medium as with subject matter. In 1922, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR\textsuperscript{76}) published the following statement in the prominent arts journal Tvorchestvo: “While remaining faithful to realistic painting, we want to seek the devices that are closest to the mass of the people, in order to help the masses, in finished works of painting, to become aware of and remember the historic process taking place.”\textsuperscript{77} AKhRR itself was organized in January, 1922 after the 47\textsuperscript{th} Itinerants painting exhibition. At a meeting concerning the upcoming exhibition, David Shterenberg, head of IZO Narkompros from 1918 to 1921 and later a founding member of The Society of Easel Painters (OSt\textsuperscript{78}), pronounced realism an “ichthyosaur.”\textsuperscript{79} The centrality of easel painting to avant-garde abstraction, too, persisted in the memory of artists concerned not merely to reclaim the medium for the revolution, but to dictate the terms of that reclamation. Opposing its “abstract concoctions,” AKhRR dismissed the avant-garde not on grounds of ideological error, but in terms of a purpose fulfilled at the moment of the Bolshevik takeover: “The old art groups existing before the Revolution have lost their meaning, the boundaries between them have been erased in regard to both ideology and form....”\textsuperscript{80} The 1922 declaration concluded that the group would create a heroic, “documentary” style for the new society “By acknowledging \textit{continuity in art} and by basing ourselves on the

\textsuperscript{76} Assotsiatsia khudozhnikov revolyutsionnoi Rossii.
\textsuperscript{77} Tvorchestvo 1-4 (1922): 71.
\textsuperscript{78} Obshchestvo khudozhnikov-stankovistov.
\textsuperscript{79} David Shterenberg, as quoted in Bown, 71.
\textsuperscript{80} “Declaration of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia” (1922), reproduced in ed. John Bowlt, 265-7.
contemporary world view.”81 Announcing their goals in May 1924, the AKhRR leadership embraced the “general treasury of world art” and appointed all artists to “the careful, serious study and assimilation of the painterly and formal achievements of modern art....”82 Quoting from Lenin, their 1928 declaration placed less specific emphasis on painting, stressing instead the continuity of Soviet culture with history:

Proletarian culture is not something that has come out of the blue; [it] should be the legitimate development of the reserves of knowledge that mankind produced under the yoke of capitalist society, landowner society, and bureaucratic society.”83

It is worth noting that artists in leadership and teaching positions and aligned with the revolutionary avant-garde took a similar ideological foothold.

Charlotte Douglas relays that Shterenberg referred to the “great cultural value” of the medium at a general conference called in 1928 to assess the validity of easel painting as revolutionary art.84 The 1929 OSt platform, condensed from Shterenberg’s ideas, circumscribes the concept of mastery within an overall

81Ibid. My emphasis.
82“The Immediate Tasks of AKhRR: A Circular to All Branches of AKhRR – An Appeal to All the Artists of the U.S.S.R.” (1924), reproduced in ed. Bowlt, 268-71.
83V.I. Lenin, as quoted in “Declaration of the Association of Artists of the Revolution” (1928), reproduced in ed. Bowlt, 271-2. In 1928 the group shortened its name to Association of Artists of the Revolution or AKhRR (Assotsiatsiya khudozhnikov revolyutsii), thus including in its purview the non-Russian republics.
assimilation of “thematic” content, academic techniques, and, most importantly, their proper fit within a historically determined progression, “as the formal attainments of the last few years are developed further.” Expressly opposed to abstraction, the OSt painters resisted with equal ardor the feared revival by AKhR realists of 19th-century academicism. Appeals by every party to these debates clearly reflect that easel painting, whether by virtue of its demonstrated versatility – abstraction included – or the breadth and continuity of its historic legacy, remained a powerful site for cultural work in the early Soviet imagination. Moreover, both camps consistently demanded that Soviet art be a product of historical determinism, that it somehow account, at once, for abstraction and mimesis, each of which was a part of the record of Russian culture.

Boris Ioganson, a founding member of AKhRR, later expressed painting’s ideological potential not as a contest between abstraction and mimetic representation, but between realism and naturalism:

[…] the peculiarity of the artistic image as a subjective reflection of the objective world consists in the fact that the image combines the immediacy and power of active contemplation with the universality of abstract thought. […] Herein lies the great cognitive significance of realism, the distinction between realism and naturalism

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85 “OSt Platform” (1929), as reproduced in ed. Bowlt, 279-81. Bowlt notes that the text “was based probably on Shverenberg’s lecture at the Communist Academy in Moscow in May 1928, entitled ‘Teoreticheskaya platforma i khudozhestvennaya praktika OSta’ [The Theoretical Platform and Artistic Practice of OSt].”
in art. Absolutization of the isolated detail leads to naturalism, to a decrease in the cognitive value of art.\textsuperscript{86}

For loganson realism, as distinct from naturalism, represented fact under a veil of the ideal. Through the ideal – a product of human cognition – realism translates the world into terms and concepts motivated not by the laws of nature, but by mankind’s unique existential conditions. From this perspective socialist realism acknowledges nature’s ultimate indifference to the limitations of human experience, biological, perceptual, historical, ideological, etc. Reminiscent of the theoretical plane on which Malevich struggled, loganson invokes a “universality” based on collective perception of material reality directly, if not consciously opposed to the trans-rational, non-material reality theorized by the Suprematist in the late 1910s.

To be precise, socialist realism taps the conventions of optical reference. Its imagery is not verifiable by a real referent, but rather corresponds to an abstract ideal produced by cognitive reduction of experience to a socially transmissible code, an archetype. In loganson’s concept of realism, that reduction can only be performed by the rehearsal of memory. In lieu of facts, which are limited in dimension by explicit causality, the archetype enjoys relative freedom to traverse epistemological barriers that normally distinguish objective fact, individual experience, memory, fantasy and ultimately desire. Susan Stewart comes very close to describing the socialist realist archetype in her treatment of literary nostalgia.

While she is concerned with narrative authorship in books, her analysis is equally revealing of socialist realism:

It is the voice of abstraction, a voice which proclaims its absence with each word. In this outline of experience we can see a simultaneous and contradictory set of assumptions. First, the assumption that immediate experience is more ‘real,’ bearing within itself an authenticity which cannot be transferred to mediated experience; yet second, the assumption that the mediated experience [...] can offer pattern and insight by virtue of its capacity for transcendence.\(^7\)

The ideal, “mediated” forms of socialist realism, too, are perhaps better understood as non-mimetic representations. Lacking both a specific subject position and the authenticating power of popular consensus, their mode of address is abstract, permitting temporal slippages to which realistic, ideal, or otherwise conventional forms provide unique access. Mining the concept of nostalgia in literary narrative, Stewart identifies an author of boundless temporal discretion – precisely the authorship assumed by the Soviet state:

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative [...] Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality.\(^8\)


\(^8\) Ibid., 23.
Referencing collective memory through archetypes, socialist realism achieves similar temporal displacements, provoking desire for wholeness and temporal fixity akin to Stewart’s nostalgia. Though appearing as a fixed image, the archetype furnishes a screen of convention by which private experience is authenticated. Portions of one’s memory align with the features of the archetype, validating them on condition that they correspond to terms of collective discourse. Personal foibles, indiscretions of the imagination and, importantly, errors become esoteric remainders not easily parsed by a collective audience conceptualized as a party to Marxist historical forces.

Evgeny Dobrenko has argued that the “real source of socialist realist aesthetics” lies neither in “complete massism,” nor in “mutations” within the institutions of the avant-garde, nor even “between those two positions, but in their synthesis.” It has been my aim to nuance this claim by considering mimesis and abstraction in relation to aesthetic, personal and collective concepts of the past in socialist realism, an aesthetic mode that makes distinct appeal to historical memory. Interviews from the mid-1920s support his claim of a populace in dire need of cultural forms imbued with “fullness” and “completeness.” For Dobrenko’s subjects, descriptive forms alone were inadequate because, merely repackaging

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90 In ibid., 157.
reality to “create red Tolstoys,” they re-cemented terms that had historically conditioned people’s existence. Naturalistic depiction encouraged stasis rather than the revolution of reality – that is, reality completely unidentifiable with that overthrown along with the Romanovs. Audiences demanded that art furnish dimensions to capture history undergoing dialectical, transformative duress, as Dobrenko abundantly documented. The synthesis claim satisfies that requirement without positing that one radicalism eclipsed another in a total confluence, an arrangement that he demonstrated has rhetorical but not factual force.

Yet Dobrenko further argued that once the revolution’s political ambitions were realized, the avant-garde faced a crisis of purpose if it was to play a role in the ongoing cultural revolution. He described the prospects of cultural transformation as follows:

Accomplishing this task “fundamentally” would require giving up some of the radical goals and methods of which revolutionary culture was organically incapable. This “historical mission” was taken on by socialist realism. Having completed its avant-garde project, Soviet culture shifted “toward the masses” more thoroughly than its revolutionary predecessors had done [...].

In his effort to rectify traditional histories of Soviet culture by reasserting the role of audiences, Dobrenko suggested that the radical avant-garde of the revolution

\footnote{91 In ibid., 143.}
\footnote{92 Ibid.}
\footnote{93 Ibid. The quotations refer to interviews cited in the text.}
abandoned its metaphysical leanings without a fight. This may arguably have transpired in the area of literature, but it was not the case in all areas of radical culture. Having limited his examination to the responses of post-revolutionary audiences to developments in literature and the theater, Dobrenko overstates his case. As I have shown, Pavel Filonov’s program so completely divorced itself from the past that it could not adapt to tasks of reconciliation demanded later on by consensus in the press.94

However, Kazimir Malevich, perhaps the greatest protagonist of the avant-garde movement, saw a viable option for the transcendent logic of Suprematism in his late metaphysical paintings, such as Girls in a Field of 1929. (Fig. 1.5) Comparing

94 Comparative examination of language Filonov used to promote his theory as a pedagogic model indicates that he took cues from Malevich, who was far more successful in adapting his rhetoric and practice to the increasingly economic and scientific standards the Party used to decide which artistic principles would benefit from state patronymy and which would not. Specifically, Filonov proposed applying his principles of madness through “analysis” methods to be taught in the painting faculty at the Leningrad Academy of Arts. His appeals are littered with technical terms and references to “material culture” that he doubtless believed would appeal to the leadership. Invoking “collectives” or a “strike force of masters,” he clearly sought favorable comparison with brigades of soldiers or workers. He concluded by proposing to organize “Lectures and exhibitions in the provinces, in factories and plants.” Using “popular art” as a point of departure for developing official art, he proposed a system of coordinated institutions, including schools “founded on the principle of school-studios for made paintings” and museums “based on secondary works of art, on copies and reproductions” for disseminating his technique. See especially “The Concept of the Inner Significance of Art as an Active Force,” in eds. Bowlt and Misler, 161-2. Filonov may have been responding, as Malevich did, to the May 1923 transfer of the Museum of Artistic Culture to the jurisdiction of Glavmuzei, the Main Museum Administration, “as part of an effort ‘to connect every museum with the general economy.’” See Kachurin in eds. Douglas and Lodder, 127, who cites N. Trotskaia, “Osovie zadachi muzienogo stroitel'stvo,” Sovietskaia kul'tura (Moscow, 1924): 238-9. Kachurin attributes Malevich’s success in preserving the experimental atmosphere of GlNKhUK to his shrewd managerial sense in an environment increasingly hostile to the perceived frivolity of abstract experimentation. Kachurin underscores his use of adapted language, couching his appeals as strides toward official goals. His “Formal-Theoretical Department” planned to develop an “analytical approach to painting” out of which would develop a new objective approach to teaching art.” She states that “Malevich and his staff also planned a number of publications and lectures for the public, thus realizing Glavnauka’s goal of closer connections between research activities and the working masses.” The similarity of Filonov’s posturing is striking.
these works – the artist labeled *Girls in a Field* “Supranaturalism”\(^{95}\) – to the oeuvre of Giorgio De Chirico, Douglas argued that Malevich “continued painting without retracting his farewell to easel art or acceding to the requirements of proletarian realism.”\(^{96}\) She makes a convincing case that borrowing from the Italian painter was part of a strategy – albeit a frequently deceptive one\(^{97}\) – to “establish precedence over the Western [Surrealist] trend.”\(^{98}\) What is important here is that Malevich was concerned to demonstrate a historically causal link: between early Suprematist iconoclasm and its retooling into an aesthetic “translation of the past as the basis of a new idiom.”\(^{99}\) He made no small effort to stylistically adapt his radical philosophy to the official requirement that Soviet art engage the traditions that preceded it. Malevich’s laconic 1932 *Complicated Premonition* (*Torso in a Yellow Shirt*) indeed appears to merge the “emptiness”\(^{100}\) of De Chirico’s canvases with the reduced palette and geometric purity that signified Suprematist monism. (Fig. 1.6) Malevich explained his reversion to modes of symbolic reference in a letter to which Douglas refers, stating “The world of art is an objectless world [...] but Soviet art, that is a

\(^{96}\) Ibid.
\(^{98}\) Ibid.
\(^{99}\) In ibid., 290.
\(^{100}\) Douglas reports that Malevich inscribed the reverse of *Complicated Premonition* with the statement “The elements of this composition are the sensation of emptiness, solitude, and the exitlessness of life.” See eds. Douglas and Lodder, 287.
symbolic art, and neither naturalistic nor realistic.”

As of 1930, however, the artist had reoriented his aesthetic philosophy toward human sensory experience: “The world perceived through sensation is a constant world. The world which consciousness perceives as a form is not constant. Forms disappear and alter, whereas sensation never disappears or alters.”

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Sportsmen of 1930-32 link them to the icon tradition. By Malevich’s previous account, Suprematist non-objectivity eschewed existential limits that representational art maintained, particularly through established practices of figuring the human body. He clearly had in mind the Christian tradition of a supreme, eternal being assuming physical form in man’s person, and the transcendent state – both earthly and spiritual – to which Orthodox icons give provisional form. He used the icon metaphorically in his 1920 essay, “The Question of Imitative Art,” stipulating that representational art perpetuated a disconnect between man and any meaningful metaphysical experience in the aftermath of the revolution:

The icon can no longer be the same meaning, goal and means that it was formerly: it has already passed on into the museum where it can be preserved under the new meaning, not of a religious conception but of art. But as we go deeper into new creative meaning it loses even that significance and nothing can be invested in it, for it will be the soulless mannequin of a past spiritual and utilitarian life.

These passages, together with Malevich’s later theoretical tracts, strongly suggest a continuous path from geometric abstraction to the strategic reassessment of precisely those forms against whose spiritual bankruptcy he justified the initial rupture. The late paintings of undifferentiated human modules recover both the

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body and the icon for new purposes, while formally acknowledging art historical precedent as well as Malevich’s written record. Symbolic language just sufficient to establish anatomy suggests the provisional quality of display mannequins. The new men stand disconnected from a physical environment lacking coherent scale or other hierarchy. Adequate representational systems have yet to be conceived, a condition Malevich described in a text preceding the painting by over a decade: “We will no longer build in our own likeness, but according to the perfection marking off our likeness. The new man and our new world are dispersed and our consciousness cannot yet see them as a whole in the way that the old world sees me as a result of all its efforts.”  

In the expressive poses and lighting of works such as Malevich’s 1933 Portrait of the Artist’s Wife, both Barr and Douglas detect strategies to figure contemporary realist painting as conscientious of its Renaissance and Baroque predecessors. (Fig. 1.8) As their essays cogently affirm, Malevich comingled the metaphysical tack of his earlier, radical abstraction with other patently distinct artistic languages, particularly the history of lighting as a sensory trope for spiritual embodiment. His apparent aim was to create “a whole that is both modern and ancient – in this sense, an art beyond time...” or, as Douglas put it, “an archetypal timelessness that lay behind the visible forms.” Malevich’s revival proposed an easel art that not only asserted its historical continuity, but outlined temporal displacement as an authorial mode. He thus found in sensation a viable avenue out

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106 Ibid., 171-2.
108 Barr, 216 and Douglas, 278 in ibid.
of the Suprematist impasse, as well as a means to assert a project both continuous with history and reconciled with its earlier defiance of that history. Conjoining mutually antagonistic conceptions of metaphysical transcendence from the history of art, the late metaphysical paintings perpetually challenge the authority of memory and sensation to generate the present. In this way Malevich successfully navigated the strait between academic dilettantism and the ideological void of naturalistic depiction. The result was, as Barr concluded, the “partial subversion of form.”

Already in 1920 Malevich had abandoned painting, and by 1924, in the essay cited above, his trajectory suggests he had embarked on the resolution of his oeuvre before the formalist purges began in earnest. In order to redeem the force of the past, he stabilized the easel painting by distilling that which was required to elevate the recognizable to the archetypal. He had found a convincing means to suffuse his own practice in a formal tradition, satisfying both official doctrine and the need for continuity with the acrimonious claims he had made in the past. There can be no doubting the artist’s awareness that his late work subtly negotiated the immanent flaw of a Soviet art based on monumental archetypes – a flaw Loganson barely concealed in the above euphemism, “the peculiarity of the artistic image.” Malevich forged a strategy that would arguably have safeguarded ancient Russian art and European modernism in the genesis of Soviet culture. But that strategy represented only one possible synthesis of realism and abstraction and. Attesting to the

109 Barr, 218 in ibid.
incongruity of that legacy and the massive output of state-sponsored art in the coming decades, the State Russian Museum sequestered its considerable Malevich collection to storage vaults in 1936, where they remained for some forty years.

In accordance with Party rhetoric, socialist realism originated not as a self-contradictory hybrid, nor a palimpsest of new in the place of old, but rather as an appeal to the dialectic: the synthesis of collective historical imagination with a manifold vision of the future. The painter Aleksandr Laktionov animated his scenes with a momentary quality by enveloping the viewer’s sensory faculties with stimuli. A single paper blown to the floor punctuates the reality effect of Laktionov’s monumental 1938 canvas, *Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Yudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank-Troops*. (Fig. 1.9) Objects distributed throughout the interior conform not so much to a narrative as to the task of elaborating the play of light in all its dimensions. Sunlight pours through the left window onto the reflecting sheet, illuminating faces in different states of composure. Depicted at calculated distances from sources of light and shadow, materials of varying opacity roundly demonstrate a balanced logic of mass and light.

The picture is realistic in the sense that it appeals to viewer desire for sensory cohesion akin to that confirmed by real experience. Several devices furnish the composition with the conspicuous sense of lack: crumples in the rug acknowledge a referent that traps real pockets of air and radiates warmth; open pots of paint would smell sour; if released, the crisp sheet might slide from the marble tabletop. Laktionov’s realism lies in the correspondences and oppositions
transpiring between the painting depicted on the rear wall and the figures arrayed around the table. Intentionally abortive cues to physical touch and olfaction pique the desire for sensory unity. That desire finds surrogate fulfillment in the rituals of connecting bodies across multiplied distances of space and time. Empathy between Yudin’s resplendent face and that of Stalin in the painting directly above him suggests their communion, prompting the viewer to seek further connections between realistic rendering and ritualized image. While advancing the narrative of a presentation to a distinguished visitor, the three principal figures appear to model the iconic postures of the figures in the painting depicted behind them. Given the recessed position of the fictive painting, the figures are of life-sized proportion. This subtle parity initiates a circuit of bodily correspondence that traverses the space, through the accentuated angularity of figures at rhythmic intervals, and concludes in the viewer himself, whose body seems to complete the group.

At its most successful, realistic painting only partially seduces the viewer, and does so at the sensory level. This is of course a condition of its being a visual representation. But that seduction is also a tactic on which canonical Soviet canvases frequently rely to disrupt the viewer’s sensory commitment to the present.

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110 Imagery of Stalin exchanging confidences while walking with a close ally in the surrounds of the Kremlin had become iconic by this time. Aleksandr Gerasimov’s painting I.V. Stalin and K.E. Voroshilov in the Kremlin after the Rain of the same year (Collection Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is the best-known example.

111 The figure to the right is clearly intended to be that of Stalin, as suggested by the thick moustache, trademark boots, and the scenery of the Kremlin wall. I suspect the depiction is of a painting that existed at one time, perhaps by Laktionov’s teacher, Isaak Brodskii. Despite having consulted numerous reputable sources, including my colleagues, I have not yet been able to confirm this suspicion, nor can I speculate on the identity of the other figure.
The viewer momentarily invests in the animation of the portrayed reality, suspending the fragmented subject between the haphazard real, on one hand, and planned utopia on the other. Zhdanov actually explained cultural policy as the creation of life selected from the past:

[...] we are critically assimilating the cultural heritage of all nations and all times in order to choose from it all that inspires the working people of Soviet society to great exploits in labor, science, and culture.\textsuperscript{112}

Neoclassical architecture and Russian handicrafts signal the central, cognitive proposition of socialist realism, literalized here by military victory commemoration: that communist utopia is the historical condition of understanding the past only through those forms which prevailed. By Zhdanov’s admission, what prevailed as history remained enshrined subject to the discretion of the Party.

Socialist realism addressed audiences by invoking collective memory, appealing explicitly to the perpetual desire for experiential wholeness. As explained above, spectral yet recognizable forms jammed the frequency of normal perception and mimetic representation. Icons denoting selected episodes assume a provisional identity in accordance with Marxist epistemology and in anticipation of historical synthesis. Socialist realism proffered a politically selected reality through imagery that might resemble memories in the imagination of its viewers. To the first Soviet

subjects, the past appeared in forms selected for those memories that the Party deemed historically soluble. Paradoxically, this seemed to be what Zhdanov intended in calling for an art of “historically concrete” forms. The Soviet cultural mode described in this section was fashioned out of the avant-garde’s ultimate reconciliation with culture’s historically contingent nature. Claims that eclipse this resolution do so in order to sustain a founding narrative of Western Modernist theory: the essence of the avant-garde was its unflagging hostility toward the past. The misplaced historical consensus that has long enjoyed the support of that narrative envisions socialist realism as the outcome of political leverage and the dialectic, as needed.
1.4 Conclusions

Benjamin Buchloh challenged the notion that the return to traditional modes of representation by European painters like Malevich was an “autonomous achievement of the masters,” arguing instead that they “were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability....”\textsuperscript{113} Buchloh frames the figurative turn within a broader discourse in which he represents one view – that modernism deviates from its path only when its historical autonomy is corrupted. Auxiliary interpretations of Malevich, Filonov and the rest of the avant-garde as “innocents caught up in the revolutionary turmoil, mistaking its motivations for their own,” as Paul Wood pointed out, have enjoyed “specious plausibility.”\textsuperscript{114} For example, Bown maintains that the political leadership, once distracted by civil war, brought its lacking competence and “‘conservative’ personal artistic tastes” in artistic matters to bear on the avant-garde as the political situation stabilized.\textsuperscript{115} Indeed Anatoly Lunacharski, Lenin’s appointed head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros\textsuperscript{116}) and an advocate of neutral state policy on the arts was marginalized and replaced as the proletarian-allied Central Arts Administration (Glaviskusstvo) eventually absorbed Narkompros in 1928.\textsuperscript{117} As Wood concludes, Buchloh’s position enjoys the support of this and other unfortunately viable histories of an avant-garde “badly

\textsuperscript{113} Buchloh, 39.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Narodnii komissariat prosveshcheniya}.
\textsuperscript{117} Sheila Fitzpatrick painstakingly documented this history in “The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo: Class War on the Cultural Front, Moscow 1928-29,” \textit{Europe-Asia Studies} 23/2 (October 1971): 236-53.
burned” as “the ‘real’ politicians managed to divert some of their will-to-power to the sphere of culture.”\textsuperscript{118} The implication is that, as distinctions between the Communist Party and Soviet state power vanished, the state became the de facto author of culture. The search is on, then, for remnants of a modernism “uncorrupted” by the consolidation of Europe’s totalitarian regimes.

Buchloh’s attitude reverberated twenty-five years later in the Guggenheim’s 2005 \textit{Russia!} exhibition. (Fig. 1.10) Tyshler, Labas, Luchishkin, Deineka, Pimenov and Redko – painters who, like Malevich, forged unique alloys of spatial abstraction and other painting traditions – were isolated in the annex galleries along with enormous Stalinist canvases by the likes of Isaak Brodski. Thus the white-cube additions to Frank Lloyd Wright’s spiral form euphemistically embody socialist realism as an undifferentiated aberration in an otherwise fluid progression of Russian art, from ancient orthodox icons and folk art to Moscow Conceptualism. The fact that this narrative grew out of Cold War anxiety over the historical verdict has not prevented it from inhabiting the spaces of a museum with now-global reach. Foisted on a public perhaps unsuspicious of the original motive, the curators of \textit{Russia!} swiftly recommend adopting their vague proposition: that Russia’s avant-garde forfeited metaphysical utopia to the pragmatic logic of mimesis, bad taste, terror, the privations of war,\textsuperscript{119} etc.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{119} Lodder claims that VKhuTeMaa was aborted, and Russian Constructivism with it, due to the “material scarcities” of post-civil-war life in Russia. Christina Lodder, \textit{Russian Constructivism} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983): 140.
As Barr’s work suggests, the Guggenheim show provides a myopic view, glossing a period that was extremely rich both philosophically and aesthetically. It is a cursory assessment that the resolutions and adaptations of the avant-garde in the wake of revolution were motivated by terror, as suggested by the fact that Malevich had already quit painting Suprematism in 1920, before the campaigns against “formalism” had really gathered force. The historical field outlined here suggests that, despite their once unique power to figure revolutionary hopes, abstract modes finally lost their share value under the undistracted attention of philistines. By this rationale, the Soviet state officially embraced realism and easel painting, despite its epithet of the bourgeois past. Rather, the struggle to adapt underlying principles of abstraction to the development of Soviet culture – of which Malevich’s salvage of easel painting was but one episode – suggests a synthesis of mystical vision with realpolitik in which academic techniques prevailed because of this epithet. Painterly realism harbored traces of the past as no other art could, preserving the past in an only partially vanquished state. This capacity for half-measure was crucial if art was to function dialectically: if it was to cohere with the continuity thesis of the revolution.

The leading proponents of Russian avant-garde painting, Kazimir Malevich and Pavel Filonov, expressed a mystical will to an as-yet undefined human order. Malevich’s Black Square inaugurated entry of the objective world and a new

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120 The establishment of realism as the official style appears to inaugurate precisely the retardataire traditionalism against which Filonov and Malevich oriented themselves in their writing. That they railed vociferously against academic realism as the terrain of opportunistic cowards and disingenuous charlatans has likely encouraged historians such as Buchloh to describe official painting as the fulfillment of whatever the most prolific avant-garde protagonists opposed.
paradigm of pure potential. (Fig. 1.11) He expressed the significance of that painting in terms of an end to what was, and the beginning of what was not yet. Filonov preached the union of human will with the absolute causes of nature in “universal flowering.” (Fig. 1.12) The end of chaos lay in the genesis of absolute, undifferentiated truth. Debate over whether or not the avant-garde freely gave its vision to both the political and cultural aims of the revolution will continue to reflect the prejudices of all parties involved.
Chapter 2: The National Awakening and Estonian Modernism

2.1 Early Estonian History

Upon its rare mention by Anglo-Americans, Estonia is typically included in the more general category of “Baltic States” or, by way of apology for the obscurity of the reference, carries the preface “the tiny nation of.” Perhaps ironically, the minority status of Estonians predates the discovery of the New World by several hundred years at least. Vastly outnumbered, medieval Estonians lacked centralized political-military power, and were thus easily marginalized as seven distinct ethnic groups\(^{121}\) fought for control of the northeast Baltic region. A landed, German ruling class emerged in the thirteenth century to dominate the area known then as Livonia.\(^{122}\) For centuries this German nobility wielded political power through guilds and amassed wealth via the feudal system, both of which excluded the native Estonian, Livonian, and Latvian peasantry – collectively designated the Undeutsche. The German elites were only further entrenched after the devastating sieges of the sixteenth-century Livonian Wars, and spared by evacuations to Russia during the first decade of the Great Northern War (1700-1721). Charles XII of Sweden


\(^{122}\) Medieval Livonia corresponded to the territory of present-day Estonia and Latvia. The Livonian Order was a branch of the Teutonic Knights consisting of German crusading troops and, at times, Estonian and Latvian conscripts. They controlled much of the contiguous land, while bishoprics established in the Western expansion of Christianity surrounded the cities of Tartu and Riga. For more on the rise of the German elite see ibid., 15-25.
eventually surrendered Estland and Livland\textsuperscript{123} to Peter the Great, under whose rule the nobility returned, their legal privileges fully restored as of 1721.\textsuperscript{124}

Russia aspired toward scientific and technological expertise on par with Europe. Peter and his successors therefore embraced existing social and political institutions in Livland and Estland. Founded by Germans and largely maintained under Swedish rule, the administrative organs of the old order embodied the “theory and practice of European government, warfare, technology, and economics,”\textsuperscript{125} all of which Peter wished to imitate. Until the old order came under attack in the late-1700s, under Tsarist Russia – as throughout the preceding five centuries – ethnic Estonians only achieved upward social mobility by adopting the language and cultural values of the German nobility.\textsuperscript{126} This situation only began to change with 19\textsuperscript{th}-century agrarian reforms, including abolition of serfdom in 1816\textsuperscript{127} and the gradual establishment of basic human rights for the peasantry.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{123} In ibid., 26-9; notes 3-4. Whereas the Livonian Wars concluded in the early 1580s with the territory's partition among Denmark, Sweden, and Poland, skirmishes between these interests continued for decades. A lasting armistice was achieved only in the 1629 Peace of Altmark, when former Livonia was again partitioned, this time between Sweden and Poland. Poland retained control of the southern territory inclusive of the Duchy of Kurland. The Swedish (later Russian) portion consisted of administrative divisions to which Raun refers, for clarity, as Livland and Estland. Livland designates the area north of the Daugav River, where estates and administrative units fell under Polish-Lithuanian administrative control immediately after the Livonian Wars. It included Riga, Pärnu, Viljandi, and Tartu. As of 1584, the Swedish Duchy proper, or Estland, consisted of the northern Baltic coast and included the districts of Virumaa, Harjumaa, Järvamaa, and Läänemaa.

\textsuperscript{124} In 1584 the Swedish state had recognized and extended the nobility’s autonomy in all four districts of Estland, which formed a single corporation or Ritterschaft. Including inheritance rights, they already enjoyed near-full control of their own estates and legislative and police power over the peasantry. They now acquired rights to exclusive representation in the duchy’s legislative assembly. For historical comparison of noble privileges in Estland and Livland following the Livonian Wars, see ibid., 26-9.


\textsuperscript{126} Raun, 37.

\textsuperscript{127} By Raun’s account, the Estland Diet accepted the principle of abolition in 1811. Delayed by war with Napoleon, Tsar Alexander I confirmed the statute of emancipation only in 1816. See Raun, 47;
Estonian national consciousness only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as Estonian-speaking intellectuals began asserting a distinct national culture known as the National Awakening.

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128 According to Raun, “The alleged freedom of the peasants was, in fact, severely circumscribed. They remained under the judicial and police control of the landowners, and indeed the norms for corporal punishment in the 1816-1819 laws were higher than had previously been the case. In addition, the lords (and the peasant tenants) could use corporal punishment to discipline anyone working on their lands. The peasant could not leave agriculture as an occupation, and great restrictions continued to exist on his freedom of movement. Before the reforms of the 1860s, only the tiniest fraction of the rural peasant population was able to move to the cities, not to speak of leaving the province.” See Raun, 48. For further information on abolition of serfdom and the rights of the peasantry, Raun refers to Juhan Kahk, *Die Krise der feudalen Landwirtschaft in Estland (Das Zweite Viertel des 19. Jahrhunderts)*, (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1969): 137-38. I have not yet consulted the latter.
2.2 The National Awakening and Estonian Modernism

A central feature of the 19th-century National Awakening was the emergence of an Estonian romantic folklore tradition.\(^\text{129}\) The most acknowledged example is Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald’s *Kalevipoeg* (Son of Kalev), first published in 1857 and prefaced by the author in 1862 as a reliquary of national origins:

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\text{[...]} \text{everything that happened in our country before the German merchants first found their way here in ships lies in a dense web of fog; therefore we must regard as highly fortunate whatever traces have been left in that darkness by our golden tales.}\(^\text{130}\)
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*Kalevipoeg* is considered the Estonian national epic for its perceived legitimization of national sentiment. Apparently modeled after Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, the legend’s Finnish counterpart, *Kalevipoeg* combined disparate instances of folklore into a coherent national epic to which Estonians could proudly point.\(^\text{131}\) Russians, Germans, and ethnic Estonians all vied for a defining hold on the prevailing cultural

\(^{129}\) See Toivo U. Raun, “National Awakening and Russification, 1860-1900,” in Raun, 57-62. Raun uses this term to refer to the period spanning the early 1860s to the mid-1880s. He states that a “reformist atmosphere” under the new Tsar Alexander II (1855-1881), including agrarian reforms and improvements in education, “contributed to the emergence of an Estonian national movement.” Rising social mobility and advances in technological and industrial modernization sparked an Estonian national culture and a sense of self-determination apart from Baltic German and Russian cultural influences. The decline of the Estonian national movement in the 1880s and 90s was accompanied by increased Russification as a policy in the central government of the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. National awakening gradually gave way to a mood alternating between despondency and hope, through the failed 1905 revolution, World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, Independence, the “First Republic” (1920-1939), and the Cold War.


forms, even at the level of villages, and the lack of an Estonian national epic would have been particularly evident. In that tradition, Kreutzwald’s own verse functioned to stitch together folktales to gradually embody the Estonian man and his natural surroundings within a single vitality. The Romantic notion of a land and its people bound by a unified, innate spirit is apparent throughout.

The *Kalevipoeg* circumscribes Estonian nationalism within a mystical and constant exchange between sublime nature and hubris. The latter arguably drives the final verses, in which the hero dies by his own sword. The subtle difference, if any, between hubris and self-determination in the natural world is the very matter of the story. Throughout the tale themes like valor and personal might in the face of deception are obviously intended to connote national values. What is unique is that the episodes bind nature, man, and the heavens in equilibrium to *prevent* Estonia’s deliverance from melancholy. This protracted parable contemplates man’s and nature’s prosaic existence *in lieu* of an ideal nation-state. Man’s soul is contained and thus limited by the physical land, whereas nature and the gods merge in a supernatural will. The ultimate lesson is that the natural world and the spiritual world are coextensive, man’s existence there and on earth provisional, tenable only by the humbleness of his actions.

Most importantly for the present description, Kreutzwald’s epic introduced the notion of regularity to the otherwise ephemeral and diffuse conditions of popular Estonian tradition. It was actually a Baltic-German scholar, Julius Schultz-Bertram, who at a meeting of the Learned Estonian Society in 1939 expressed the
inherently recessive character of Estonia’s folklore culture: “Is there anything that can indisputably demonstrate the historical importance of a nation but the existence of its épopée?”\textsuperscript{132} Schultz-Bertram thus appealed both to perceived Estonian inferiority to German and Russian literary patrimony, and the factual vulnerability of a heritage that was then by all definitions handmade. An amalgam,\textsuperscript{133} the production of \textit{Kalevipoeg} demonstrated that culture’s adaptability to modular form, thus instantiating its relevance to a modern Estonia. In 1869 Kreutzwald published an interpretative guide to the songs, and at least three separate editions – including the 1861-62 German translation – were printed in the author’s lifetime. Editions of the epic appeared throughout the twentieth century, providing a beacon of continuity between the National Awakening, the First Estonian Republic, and the insular Soviet period. Kristjan Raud illustrated the 1935 edition; a lavish casebound edition appeared in 1951 and included designs and illustrations commissioned from prominent artists Alo Hoidre, Ott Kangilaski, Rishard Sagrits and others. At least two subsequent editions followed in 1961 (with illustrations by Evald Okas) and 1975 (a reprint of the 1935 edition, including Raud’s illustrations.) (Fig. 2.1)

Technological and industrial modernization, on one hand, and national cohesion on the other, while contemporaneous, represent different if not opposing developments to the Estonian consciousness. Whereas the telegraph came to the major cities in the 1860s, soon followed by the railroad, Estonia’s nascent literary tradition produced perhaps the most powerful symbols of national coherence.


\textsuperscript{133} The stories were initially compiled by Kreutzwald’s predecessor, Friedrich Robert Faehlmann.
Members of the Estonian rural intelligentsia, including Kreutzwald, sought to raise the national consciousness of ethnic Estonians through mass cultural forms. Raun tentatively attributes the idea for the Society of Estonian Literati to Kreutzwald, who had earlier produced and circulated serials to educate the rural public during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55).\textsuperscript{134} The Society provided an organized context for the conduct and exchange of Estonian social thought, further developed the Estonian language, and continued the practice of collecting folklore that had resulted in the national epic. The organization of a regular all-Estonian Song Festival, begun in 1869 in Tartu, added performative dimensions to the cultural space in which the national epic resonated.

Estophilia, a fascination with Estonian culture among Baltic Germans, contributed to the inertia of cultural activity among the Estonian rural intelligentsia. The national movement gradually came into a fold with the traditions of academic painting. Customarily worn by women of the Estonian Seto group in Võrumaa and on Saaremaa during marriage, necklaces of silver coins and jewels acquired new symbolic currency in paintings of Estonian subjects by Germans. These bridal objects signify in connection with the vitality of the wearer: they acquire meaning upon their origin, made by the labor of the woman who wears them, and are considered to share her mortality. The specificity of such folk dress signifiers, and of Estonian folk culture generally, had exotic allure for painters of the German gentry. Schooled in the European academies, Baltic German artists craved stylistic

\textsuperscript{134} Raun, 55, 75. The author pointed out that new serial weeklies were forbidden by the Tsar.
Departures from their classical training and the Biedermeier safety in vogue at the time. Depictions of Estonians in national costume afforded artists opportunities to reinterpret tired conventions. As one scholar pointed out, Gustav Adolph Hippius’s 1852 *Estonian Bride* is more a still-life than a portrait. Undulating patterns in the sitter’s hair and elements of her headdress compete with rich colors and high luminescence to describe a broad range of coarseness, from a diaphanous ribbon to the heavy cord binding her felt veil. The minute details of a silver chain peek through amber spirals of hair that continue to the frame in the opposite direction. The viewer’s attention travels around the composition in sequences and trajectories suggested by formal connections, never really meeting the bride’s face, which lies in a secondary plane. To the principal space - of things organized in precise triangular relationships – her raised hand seems an afterthought.

While providing Baltic Germans with novel subject matter and thus opportunities for technical experimentation, Estophile paintings were of momentous importance for Estonian national consciousness. For the first time, ephemeral folk rituals in humble, dimly lit peasant interiors appeared in illusions of dense pigment, at once introducing images of rustic Estonian folk life to an idiom with continental reach. In Ernst Hermann Schlichting’s (1812-1890) *Livonian*

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136 Baltic German artists including Ernst Hermann Schlichting and Eugen Dücker (1841-1916) studied (and taught, in Dücker’s case) painting at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, as did their most prominent Estonian successors, Paul Raud and Ants Laikmaa. The Düsseldorf Academy was thus the institutional center of techniques appearing in Estonian art in connection with the National Awakening. Using the term “Düsseldorf School” to describe resulting adaptive modes in Estonian art, Abel considers them variants of principally European tendencies. Broader European influences arrived through the creative production of other artists as well, a fact downplayed in Abel’s
Peasant Wedding of 1842, compositional and perceptual interstices converge upon the pipe-smoking figure at the far right. (Fig. 2.3) He leans against a column that serves no evident architectonic function, but rather serves to buffer the rupture between the contemporary viewer and the illusionistic space of the painting. The angle of the strut above him echoes a progression of gazes and gestures that concludes in the raised arm of the reveler across the room. The tabletop reveler – not coincidentally the only other smoker present – engages a young woman who, in turn, is attached to the central group. Each of these unifying devices, like the birch sprigs distributed throughout the space, dispatches the viewer’s eye to an adjacent target in a continuous, leisurely scan. At once the dark figure is positioned as having only just entered the scene and, as suggested, stands in a zone of compromised realistic logic. Though decidedly gendered, his ambivalent dress further appoints this figure as an optional surrogate for the viewer. To the socially aspiring Estonian or the German ethnographer, his vantage point and presence in the scene are equally available options for identity construction. He safely accommodates the spectator to the thrill of the exotic as well as the European aesthete whose gaze verifies the translation of an established genre into local types. Most significantly, Estonians enjoyed increasing social mobility in the lead-up to National Awakening, taking up subject positions from which they were previously excluded on class grounds. The ambiguous identity of Schlichting’s wedding guest is a foil by which to meditate on the spectator’s exteriority to the spectacle. Just as the painting treatment. Unclear from her text is the fact that the Russian-born Gustav Adolf Hippius was trained at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts.
conflates contemporary European art with archaic Estonian folkways, so was spectatorship increasingly a matter of judgment by a mass audience that now included a growing Estonian intelligentsia and a middling urban class, as well as old German nobles.

While paintings appearing in the mid-19th-century symbolically announced Estonian entry into European culture generally, that medium was undergoing critical reform as part of insurrections within French and German exhibition culture. Painters there thwarted the tastes of anciens-régimes that, until recently, held sway through forms dictated by the academies, mainly history painting. With growing support from officials in the reformed Académie des Beaux-Arts, the Barbizon painters gradually refused historical and literary references in landscapes produced en plein air. By mid-century, a German critic publicly decried vestiges of conservatism he detected in antiquarian motifs that persisted in paintings shown at national exhibitions:

If our history painters only possessed half the courage of our landscape painters, if they had the courage to look without prejudice and to forget about worn out aesthetic concepts, the artistic value of contemporary life would soon be looked upon differently.  


In Germany as well as France, painters and critics hostile to the erudite trappings of academic modes began choosing their subjects from everyday life, emulating seventeenth-century Dutch naturalists like Jan van Goyen, whose paintings were on view in local collections. The Düsseldorf Academy’s curriculum built upon the language of modest subjects and sensitivity to atmospheric conditions learned from Dutch examples like van Goyen’s 1632 Peasants and Horsemen at an Inn. (Fig. 2.4) Head of the Düsseldorf Academy’s painting department after 1872, the Estonian-born German Eugen Dücker introduced these approaches in images of the Estonian countryside. On frequent trips to Estonia, he grappled with spatial and atmospheric effects of the strangely diffuse northern light in scenes of peasants working in the natural environment outside Tallinn. His 1866 Seashore at Tiskre thus interprets views of life at the geographic margins of Estonia, yet in pictorial terms originating in the faraway struggles to modernize European culture through its beaux-arts institutions. (Fig. 2.5)

By all accounts, the National Awakening sputtered with the deaths of its central figures in the late-19th century.139 Yet artists persisted in the practice of translating Estonian subjects into creative modes previously developed in Europe. By selectively adopting European modernist styles, the national movement gathered inertia that influenced Estonian painting through the turn of the century. Rustic folk motifs interpreted in an impressionist vein suggest continuity with earlier nationalist forces for which social histories do not account. A graduate of the

139 Kreutzwald died in 1882. Perhaps the best-known poet of the national awakening, Lydia Koidula, died in 1886.
Düsseldorf Academy, the Estonian Paul Raud elaborated these practices while traveling through rural villages on the remote Estonian islands of Muhu and Pakri. His ethnographic compositions picture the handmade forms and textures of Estonian folk costume in the fluid language and loose handling of the French impressionists. Raud’s 1898 oil, *Old Man from the Island of Muhu*, poetically simulates the casual encounter that produced it – that of a cosmopolitan artist and an aged peasant. (Fig. 2.6) The latter’s worn habits evoke endurance and direct dependence upon, and even harmony with, the natural world. Single strokes announce the touch of the brush as much as they capture supple folds and tight lashings of the soft, worn hide in the islander’s footwear. Rapid passages of color barely suffice to describe stitched leggings or the woven pattern of a brilliant red belt knotted at the man’s middle. The slouch of his upper abdomen contradicts the attitude of resiliency, even vigor signaled by his staggered legs, bowed arms, and clenched fingers. These oppositions in his posture and anatomy run parallel to contrasts achieved through tighter handling of contour and pigment in the face, where psychological depth accrues in passages alternating between defiant will and signs of time’s cruel wear on the body. Wrinkled, mottled skin surrounds slight eyes peering into the facing sun through a tense squint. Beneath the tightly furrowed brow, these traces attest to the long adaptations of a body to the conditions of its natural surroundings. This sense of protracted time and accumulation is placed at odds, however, with the momentary dimensions of the speech act. The jaw juts forward in a syllable doubtless uttered with local inflection, confirming the instantaneity with which Raud strove to imbue the rest of the picture. Reminiscent
of Hippius’s bridal portrait, deftly constructed contours conduct the viewer’s eye through oblong and triangular courses uniting the composition. Yet here the artist poetically melded these technical solutions with the pathos of his subject. Spatial relationships cohere in the knot at the center of the composition, as does the disparity between long duration and impressionist haste. The knot simultaneously supports the sitter’s robe while euphemistically binding the overall image to the bare canvas just visible beneath.
2.3 The Estonian Avant-Garde

Some assessment of developments in architecture, literature, and two-dimensional art will bring together much needed documentation, as well as illustrate the fact that Estonian avant-garde art continued the ambitions of the national movement. It will hopefully become clear that modernist cultural activity largely constituted processes of critically adapting the national heritage to alien forms, and vice-versa. The 1918 constitution clearly established Estonian sovereignty, and thus political equivalence with other European nation-states. Far more important was the implicit (because obvious) assertion that self-determination was identical with the modernist cultural activity that generated Estonian national identity in the first place.

Before considering the activity of artists in the interwar avant-garde period, some explication is required to connect the ambitions of Estonian National Awakening with their fulfillment in social, literary, architectural, and visual art forms through the years of independence, or the First Republic (1918-1940). Folk dress and bridal jewelry were, as described above, among many handicraft forms embraced by artists in the context of the national movement. As part of their developing national consciousness, ethnic Estonians as well embraced the unique values of handmade objects. Traditional Estonian furniture and architecture display with clarity the processes of their making in ways denied by mechanical production. The ingenious yet plain structure of wooden and limestone fences and hand-operated machinery at farms in the Estonian countryside is a cherished example to
this day. The functional quality of a hand-driven wooden grain mill connects local materials and skills taught in the local woodworking tradition to the physical labor of an individual person, and in turn to the daily sustenance of a family or village.

The importance to Estonian folk culture of the physical relationship between an object’s use value and the uniqueness of its manufacture and locale cannot be overstated. The conspicuous presence of these artifacts at the Open-Air Museum near Tallinn, and at Koguva on the island of Muhu, testifies to the importance of unique material experience in the discovery of an Estonian national awareness. (Figs. 2.7-8) Furthermore, these artifacts are presented in a context that, although outdoor, carries the designation of a national museum. As open-air spaces, these museums sublimate ongoing changes in the natural environment itself, rendering that space legible as part of Estonian identity, which forms the basis of these institutions’ national ambitions. Over time, the real and varied experience of villages, forest, and coastline, and their modern transformation, becomes further embedded in the concept of the national. Unlike in a diorama, artifacts whose preservation includes their situation in real environments authenticates the modern subject’s quest to integrate lived experience, making it a part of his own imagination and being. Specific place, without emphasized parameters of duration or memory, affirms the equivalent, authenticating power of many pasts and presents. This uniquely Estonian cultural epistemology informs the critical approaches of these modern institutions, whose purpose in other cultures might be primarily additive - to extend the encyclopedic understanding of one’s own culture – concerned with documentation and preservation for inspection under the pretense of democratic
legitimacy. Ethnographic displays such as those in the Field Museum or the American Museum of Natural History undergo constant reorganization by curators tasked with satisfying Americans’ culturally informed and thus ever-evolving need for a balanced representation of the past, while attempting to respond to new biases that inevitably surface with social change.

To this day a particular point of Estonian pride is the rural house of the artist Ants Laikmaa (1866-1942) near Haapsalu in West Estonia. (Fig. 2.9) Like the national epic, the Laikmaa house physically embodies aspects of Estonian folk heritage. The structure consists entirely of handcrafted local materials, embracing the connection between its inhabitants and their natural surroundings. Within a single structure the house preserves early Estonian handicraft, the crystallization of national consciousness during Laikmaa’s youth, and rapprochement with European modernist movements at the close of the 19th century. An accomplished painter, Ants Laikmaa had promoted contact and exchange between Estonian artists and architects and their European counterparts, particularly in England, France, Germany and Italy. Cursory passages of color in the portrait of Laikmaa by Estonian painter Nikolai Trikk, made shortly after their first meeting in Berlin in 1913, clearly betray Trikk’s acculturation to German expressionism and the French Fauves, particularly Matisse, after his three year tenure there. (Fig. 2.10) Under Laikmaa, the assimilation of such European trends had a consolidating effect on Estonian painting. Artistic unity within a sphere of international influences became a suggestive notion for Estonian artists and intellectuals seeking creative relevance in a sphere transcending the cultural and political confines of the Russian empire.
Gustav Suits, founder of the utopian literary circle *Noor Eesti* (Young Estonia), formulated this concern in a 1905 rallying call which notably omitted Russian culture and history from the new cultural orientation: “Let us be Estonians, but also become Europeans!”

Technological and industrial modernization had been a driving force in the social mobility that prompted the national movement. But the resulting optimism foundered under increased disenchantment with tsarist control in the final decade of the 19th century. According to Estonian historian Toivo Raun, “rapid industrialization beginning in the 1890s [...] created a discontented working class in the cities.” The upheavals of revolution in 1905 led to instability in the tsarist regime overall, and both class and ethnic conflict were staples of social unrest in Estonia. Punitive measures by the tsar followed the 1905 revolution and the failed Estonian attempt to reorganize the country as an autonomous political entity. But the dismal prevailing mood was tempered by considerable social gains. In the period leading up to World War I, economic development seemed to pick up where it had left off at the end of the National Awakening in the 1880s. Although

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141 Raun, 83. See also Emanuel Nodel, *Estonia: Nation on the Anvil* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963): 135. Nodel offers additional description of the rural situation: “[...] the conditions of the peasants remained bad and often hopeless. More than seventy-five percent of them did not own their land; taxes were high and dependence upon the landlord was still great. The only contented Estonians were the well-to-do peasants [...].]"
improvements in the lives of the peasantry were appreciable, the main thrust of
development was in the establishment and growth of institutions such as
agricultural societies, consumer and industrial cooperatives, and credit
institutions. ¹⁴²

By the end of upheavals surrounding the 1905 revolution, the Estonian people
had managed to survive two centuries of challenges, from bans against pagan
folkways in the 18th century, to Russification and Germanization in the late-19th and
early-20th centuries. The contest to determine the ethnic, linguistic, and artistic
environment of modern Estonia remained open well into the period of the First
Republic (1918-1940). A few episodes in Estonia’s early modernist architecture
serve to elucidate these conditions in the sphere of urbanism. Eliel Saarinen’s
winning 1913 master plan for Tallinn was based on monumental public squares
with radiating boulevards, and considered mechanized transportation, high-density
housing, and expression of peasant heritage in National Romantic forms. ¹⁴³ (Fig.
2.11) A Finn, Saarinen’s design posited a Finno-Baltic regionalism encompassing
the National Romanticism seen in his 1909 final design for Helsinki’s central railway

¹⁴² Raun, 89. The author cites Arno Köörna, Suure Sotsialistliku Oktoobrirevolutsiooni
majanduslikud eeldused Eestis (Economic preconditions of the Great Socialist October Revolution in
Estonia), (Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1961): 35, 46-9; Eesti NSV ajalugu, 2: 461, 490; Hans Kruus,
Grundriss der Geschichte des estnischen Volkes (Tartu: Akadeemiline Kooperatiiv, 1932): 194-5. The
aim of this brief survey is to provide background on Estonian economic and cultural development
prior to the Soviet period. Thorough analysis of these sources is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
I have not consulted them, but offer these citations for the convenience of scholars wishing to do so.
For a more contemporary though brief account, see Albert Pullerits, ed., Estonia: Population, Cultural
and Economic Life (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1935): 150-1. Pullerits’ account supports Raun’s:
“Vigorous co-operative and educational movements sprang up, national consciousness being further
developed by the press and modern literature.” Pullerits adds only that “Farmers’ societies
performed the missing functions of the Local Government.”
¹⁴³ On his plan view, Saarinen used Tallinn’s German name, Reval.
station. (Fig. 2.12) The Tallinn master plan conceived of a grand city built around centers of culture and learning, and it pointedly suggested the city’s topical relevance to urbanism. Just as European cities were emerging from such aristocratic forms as Haussmann’s Paris, and leaning toward the democratizing function of utopian plans like Le Corbusier’s Ville Contemporain of 1922, Estonia became home to a frenzy of competing architectural visions. Mart Kalm’s history of 20th-century Estonian architecture – the only work of its kind – excavates the history of the modern, urban, built environment in Estonia and records with great detail the confluence of varied academies and national influences.\textsuperscript{144} With no home institution for architectural training, Estonians went abroad – often to Riga Polytechnic, St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts, Moscow School for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, or institutions in Western Europe, primarily Germany. Only in 1921 was a legitimate Estonian architectural practice instituted, three years after the Tallinn Technical School opened its architecture program. It is poignant that an order of business at the first meeting of the Association of Estonian Architects was the establishment of a standard Estonian nomenclature for discussing modern advances in architecture.

The historicism and romanticism of the early 20th century gradually saw the onset of perhaps the first urban modernist architectural style in Estonia.\textsuperscript{145} In the years surrounding the 1918 declaration of independence, Estonian cities were on

\textsuperscript{144} Mart Kalm, \textit{Eesti 20. sajandi arhitektuur (Estonian 20th century architecture)} (Tallinn: SILD, 2002).

\textsuperscript{145} At the same time, Estonia was becoming an increasingly urban country, and the majority population of cities tended to be Estonian. Raun partially attributes this effect to German emigration and an influx of peasants from the countryside in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Raun, 130.
the brink of revival in the language of modernist clarity. A mid-1920s aerial photograph of the city shows land still being used for farming within a hundred meters of the cultural and municipal center. (Fig. 2.13) As of the early years of independence, an eclectic, often retrospective mix of National Romanticism, Art Nouveau, and Biedermeier influences persisted in Tallinn’s major existing buildings. Nikolai Vassiliev and Aleksandr Bubyr’s Tallinn German Theater of 1910 is a prominent example. (Fig. 2.14) The implied correspondence between structural necessity, proportion, and repetition in the columns and balustrades is actually deceptive, expressing instead compromises made to accommodate a superficial, decorative program of spirals and other water motifs. Themes of stability, domestic comfort, and ultimately political disengagement flowing in Biedermeier aesthetics evoked the rise of Germany’s urban middle class in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. As artist and architect Leonhard Lapin stated,

The dream of the new twentieth century – the long awaited age of progress, democracy and peace – could not be formed in the extremely subjective plasticity of decadent art nouveau and in the highly refined culture affordable only for the elite.146

In what Lapin called the “new age of machines,” a relevant architecture must be equal to the task of distilling Estonian building traditions and national self-determination within the clear language of modernism. That architecture seemed to arrive as a generation of architects trained abroad came to the practical fore, heralding the rationality of the Functionalist aesthetic and a formative period in Estonia’s cultural modernity. A primary example is the house at 6 Toompuiestee in Tallinn, 1929, by the Hannover-trained Herbert Johanson. (Fig. 2.15) Generally, as Kalm has pointed out

Functionalism in Estonia did not meet such vociferous opposition as in older cultures, because there was no academic tradition, which could have resisted the new movement. There were no avant-gardists, either, who would have been committed to carrying out a social, aesthetic or technological reform, and thus Estonian Functionalism is no more than a local version of an international trend.

The Toompuiestee Villa only superficially interprets the International Style, and does so to the detriment of the rationalism underpinning that movement’s most

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147 Ibid.
148 The term Functionalism is generally used to refer to architecture characterized by reductive forms and an adherence to the Vitruvian concept of “utilitas.” The main distinction between Functionalist and Modernist architecture, both understood to have roots in the work of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, appears to be geographic; whereas “Functionalism” is typically used to refer to architecture of modern type in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, similar forms in Western Europe and the United States are termed “Modernist.” The question remains whether this nomenclature represents any architectural difference. Its use, meanwhile, continues to elide similarities and overlap between “Functionalist” and “Modernist” forms and their histories, perhaps reflecting a desire among architectural historians for a simplified discourse: a “modernist” architecture restricted to Western European and American buildings.
149 In ibid., 131.
successful buildings. The use of outer stone, load-bearing walls allows for only mimicry of strip windows, whereas reinforced concrete cantilevers might have permitted both more windows, clearer proportions, perhaps even the spatial advantages afforded by elevating the structure atop piloti.\footnote{Such paradoxes at the heart of Estonian Functionalism surface in our consideration of this building and others conceived in the same vein. At its core, Estonian Functionalism may have been a national phenomenon only to the extent that it is devoid of romantic or historic symbols, as underscored by the empty niches in the façade of Anton Soans and Edgar Kuusik’s 1934 Tallinn Art Hall. (Fig. 2.16) Never refined into an autonomous, national, and definitively modernist architectural style, Functionalism remained in its decorative phase. Examples surviving from this exploratory period in Estonian urbanism languish amid eclectic Stalinist buildings erected in the aftermath of the First Republic.}

National autonomy in the interwar period was of course a driving concern in creative forms other than architecture. A critical mass of socio-cultural institutions coalesced, signaling to visual artists that Estonian culture had reached a moment of simultaneity with European modernity more generally. Estonia became a member of the League of Nations in 1921, and regular Estonian language radio transmissions began in 1926. The first decade of independence also saw the standardization of written Estonian language, along with strides in literacy and standardized

\footnote{For more on reinforced concrete and the rationalist foundations of modernist architecture, see William J. R. Curtis, \textit{Modern Architecture Since 1900} (Oxford: Phaidon, 1987), particularly the discussion of Le Corbusier’s seminal Dom-in-o housing system in the section “Rationalism, the Engineering Tradition, and Reinforced Concrete,” 37-47.}
education. In 1922, the Estonian Writers’ Association formed and the literary journal *Looming* was launched. Along with Kristjan Raud’s illustrated edition of *Kalevipoeg* came the major works of Estonia’s foundational modern author, Anton Tammsaare. His five-volume magnum opus, *Truth and Justice* appeared between 1926 and 1933 among some 25,000 titles published in Estonian between 1918 and 1940.\(^{151}\)

The visual arts as well benefited from the regularity afforded by institutions founded shortly after declaration of the Republic of Estonia on February 24, 1918. The following year saw the establishment of the Estonian Museum in Tallinn and the Pallas Art School in Tartu. Art historian Andreas Trossek recently argued that Estonian national identity is “constructed mainly from mythical memories of the Twenties and Thirties, when Estonia gained its nationhood [...].”\(^{152}\) Adding to Trossek’s image of fantasy, Heie Treier considered Estonia’s modernist past as unfinished business: “Problems inherited from WWII are again open wounds in Estonian society in 2006, with numerous aspects still not properly discussed, to say nothing of the lack of consensus.”\(^{153}\) Contested on bases presumably too varied to cite, then, the legacy of the interwar period remains an important arena in the Estonian imagination. Some discussion of that legacy will provide a more nuanced sense of Estonian artists’ ongoing desire for a continuous tradition. A deeper understanding of this desire is indispensable to appreciating the importance of later,

\(^{151}\) Raun, 135.
unofficial artists’ rediscovery of the Estonian avant-garde. The sudden reemergence of this Estonian past gave artists options for positioning themselves, and for exploring questions of national culture across moments of profound ideological and formal rupture. It will become clear that these ruptures ultimately empowered later artists: to shape their own histories, even as they belatedly engaged modernist and post-modernist theory.

The pre-war Estonian avant-garde had its heyday in the 1910s and 1920s. A brief account here permits some preliminary conclusions about the legacy it bore upon its rediscovery in the thaw. Suggestive of the inter-war cultural climate were key oppositions among artists regarding the role and proper curriculum of the new national academy: the Pallas Art School, founded in 1919 in Tartu, historically Estonia’s cultural nucleus. United under the banner of the Estonian Artists Group in 1923,154 Arnold Akberg and Mart Laarman in Tallinn, and Ado Vabbe in Tartu, among other Pallas affiliates, variously synthesized forms and theories from contemporary European vanguards. While it would furnish the present claims with additional support, a more comprehensive survey of the group exceeds the scope of this dissertation. Specific works by Akberg, one of their most prolific members, suffice as exemplars of new aesthetic options generated from established modernist lexicons.

154 Eesti Kunstnikute Rühm (Estonian Artists Group) was formed in 1923. Though its activities declined in the 1930s, it was finally dissolved only in 1940 (along with all other autonomous cultural organizations) by Soviet authorities in the first occupation of Estonia.
The literary origin of concepts describing such creative repurposing, or “poetic misprision,”¹⁵⁵ should not disqualify their introduction here, but will likely prove rather advantageous. Bloom coined the term *tessera* to designate “completion and antithesis” of a precursor’s work.¹⁵⁶ A “token of recognition” alerts the observer to the presence of adaptive operations. In that it refers to its parent form “to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense,”¹⁵⁷ the *tessera* absorbs the observing subject, whose knowledge of its exterior nature is an aesthetic precondition for both the perception of the signal and the experience of its new sense.

Emblematic of this procedure is Akberg’s 1924 portrait, *View from Toompea*. The artist seemed to choose an academic form precisely for the static foundation it provided, and to then bombard it with recognizable elements isolated from Italian Futurism and its Russian variant, Cubo-Futurism. (Fig. 2.17) Spatial modeling, planarity, and serial repetition, all deployed to equally unresolved extent, suspend objects in a reality that remains only partial, in which reliable spatial-temporal properties fail to accrue. This effect is pronounced in a sequence of white quadrilaterals that alternately coincide with structural solids, elusive *passages*, and apparent voids, thus postponing the cohesion of the very space their elliptical arrangement signals. Spatial trajectories in the mid- and foreground serve the rather structural purpose of converging upon the *tessera of* a black square. Akberg introduced the suprematist icon as a finite term, ostensibly a decorative closure to

¹⁵⁶ In ibid., 14.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
the sitter’s neckline. But the viewer gradually enlists it to confirm both the space of the sitter’s body and, by its concurrence with the picture plane, his own reality. The square flickers between a nonobjective field and a curious polygon that, while describing the sitter’s throat, draws from the trajectories of an already distorted space. It seems to flag a remaindered zone of human existence, left unarticulated by the normalizing advance of culture as raw, uncodified experience inheres in conventions of representation.

Akberg extended Malevich’s monistic philosophy, which and his colleagues would have known, to specific local symbols distributed along the horizon. Compositionally, the pink smoke balances the linear severity and chromatic density of the Baltic Sea horizon. Billowing arabesques observe the upper limit of the canvas, compounding the affect with which the vast spire exceeds it (only half of the base appears, and in the barest recognizable manner). For contemporary Tallinners, the laconic medieval spire of St. Olaf’s Church (Oleviste kirik) – once the tallest building in Europe – and the smokestack were obvious ciphers for the spiritual sublime and the reifying forces of industrial modernity, respectively. Intelligible in the green band, then, is a manifold concept of wilderness, provided it is at once recognized as the unpopulated Lasnamäe bluffs.

Akberg continued to hold the Estonian experience of modernity in critical suspension by adapting its metaphors to the task of preserving signs of European avant-gardes as he became aware of them, beginning with Purism, then Russian constructivism and, only ultimately, cubism. This curious order resulted from the
fluidity with which the Estonians absorbed the former styles through the journals
*L’Esprit Nouveau*, edited by Le Corbusier and Ozeman from 1920-5, and *Veschi*,
found in 1922 by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg as an organ to publicize
constructivism in Europe. In contrast, the Estonian modernists received cubism
largely through the prisms of subsequent aesthetic philosophies, including
Malevich’s suprematism, for whom classical cubism played a generative role.\(^{158}\) In
Akberg’s later works, Komissarov identified the group’s De Stijl influence in his
“denotation of the possibilities of space brought about by the crossing of diagonals
... [his] vision of an endless room spreading out in all directions.”\(^{159}\) More precisely,
subsequent works, while far more spare, gradually amplify the function of the
tessera as a means to merge sublime and simulacral spaces it previously held in
mutual opposition. (Figs. 2.18-20) For a 1927 series of prints, he employed motifs
from contemporary Estonian Functionalist architecture as an armature through
which rectilinear passages fluctuate between pure, suprematist sensation, the
conventions of plan view, and immutable conditions of nature such as relationships
between light and mass. (Fig. 2.19)

Thus localized, Akberg’s works appear to mediate broader European
polemics concerning art’s capacity to transform the human environment in the

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Glowacki-Prus and McMillin, 19-41. This essay first appeared in Petersburg in December, 1915 as a
pamphlet published by Mikhail Matyushin’s Zhiravil and entitled *Ot kubizma i futurizma do
suprematizma. Novyi zhivopisny realism*. According to Andersen, Malevich also gave a public lecture of
the revised essay in Petersburg on January 12, 1916. Like other Estonians who fled to Russia in the
First World War, it is likely that Atto Vabbe, for one, learned of Malevich’s theories while he was
there.

\(^{159}\) Eha Komissarzov, “Art Historical Excursus,” in Personal Time: Art of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania
machine age. Estonians encountered these matters through the journals mentioned above, in the form of the ensuing debates. The rancor and utopianism of Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovskiy seemed lost on the Estonians, whose country had rebuffed the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Penned by Laarman, the group’s 1928 manifesto, *The Book of New Art* (Uue Kunsti Raamat) only superficially follows the tradition of the *Lef* theorists in Russia. (Fig. 2.21) Laarman’s widely quoted declaration is comparatively placid in tenor: “Neither the rose nor the machine are themes for poetry or art, they only teach the master structure and the method of creation.”

In an explicitly Purist formal vocabulary, Akberg perhaps sought a corresponding, painterly harmony between mechanical and bodily tropes in his *Composition* of 1925. (Fig. 2.22) Each incident of symmetry or hard edge balances judiciously against a languid orthogonal, an oblong mass, or a proximate density.

One historian recently implied that Laarman and Akberg’s group – Estonia’s sole avant-garde enterprise – was short lived because their culture lacked sufficiently stable traditions to which vanguard artists might oppose their own aesthetic development. Komissarov’s earlier observation provided more of the essential context: “Two revolutionary countries, Germany and Russia, set the tone for art in Estonia, [...] and so the new Estonian modern art was born on the dividing line between Expressionism and Russian Cubo-Futurism.”

Most recently, Indrek Grigor poignantly assessed the circle’s 1928 manifesto, whose “title seems to allude

160 Mart Laarman, as cited in ibid., 18.
to an opposition to the old, which, considering the brevity of Estonian art history, was almost a grotesque aim.” Citing the memoirs of founding member Eduard Ole, the author followed his claim with this notable proviso:

Although [Ole’s memoirs, JC], in which the role of the old belonged to expressionism, which was cultivated by the Pallas artists, contain some opposition, this was mainly caused by the need for an enemy figure, which everyone relying on modernist rhetoric had to have. The Book of New Art is therefore not a classical modernist opposition manifesto, but one of the basic texts of Estonian figurative art.163

The Group of Estonian Artists briefly practiced a modern, trenchant aesthetics, the critical value of which lay not in the autonomy or originality of its forms, but rather their continued solvency. The creative repurposing through which these artists mediated the realities of Estonian culture under technological transformation indeed dwindled, though not for a lack of history or traditions. As one critic even complained, “We have our history, but what have our artists done about it?”164 Rather, the gradual rise of an authoritarian government under the leadership of Konstantin Päts had dire pragmatic consequences for the Estonian avant-garde. As early as 1926, the national Cultural Endowment began offering commissions for paintings on historical themes, including Estonia’s victory in the 1918 war for independence from Russia. Conservative juries increasingly awarded

164 From “In Defence of A Serious Artist,” Kodumaa Hääl, May 1, 1926, as cited in Kristina Valdru, “Representation of the Estonian War of Independence in Paintings of the 1920s and 1930s,” Estonian Art 1 (2002): unpaginated. I have not yet been able to consult the original source.
commissions to artists working in a realistic manner, depicting military or history themes.

Päts’s Committee for National Salvation staged a coup in 1934, ousting the democratic order, and subsequently establishing professional chambers on the Italian model. Created soon after, the Department for Information and Propaganda no doubt mimicked its Russian precursor, which standing officials knew through their previous service as functionaries to the tsar. An academic canon equivalent to those of states on whose structures the regime modeled itself was not, however, readily available in Estonia. Pallas had only been a functioning school for fifteen years. The government’s efforts to legitimize itself through mythmaking campaigns effectively articulated this as an ideological problem. In early 1935, state funding in the form of prizes and direct commissions supported a competition to gather illustrations for a double-volume entitled The Estonian War of Independence. For Hanno Kompus, a leading critic, “The general impression is that it is a difficult subject well above the reach of the majority of competitors. Maybe even above the reach of the jury.”¹⁶⁵ Consequently, artists shortly emerged from the Pallas Art School with training in a style variously described as expressionist, realist, or late-impressionist, known locally as “School of Paris.”

The major pedagogical change was a shift in the 1930s toward monumental composition, and away from abstract experiment at the level of form as practiced in the 1920s by Akberg and his colleagues. In 1938, Aleksander Vardi reportedly

¹⁶⁵ Hanno Kompus, as quoted in Valdru. The author cites “Spring Art Exhibition. War Paintings,” Päevaleht, May 18, 1935. I have not yet been able to consult the original source.
produced the largest painting in Estonian art history – a triptych to hang in the great hall of the Estonian Students’ Society headquarters. Elmar Kits, then a student, had the formative experience of assisting Vardi in this foray into history painting, which does not survive intact. Importantly, the final panel reportedly depicted Society students, unmistakable by the attribute of the Estonian tricolor, which they flew on buildings they captures in the War of Independence.166 Through such pedagogical shifts at Pallas, the new government abruptly altered the previous course of Estonian culture, effectively co-opting historical memory, thus redefining for the practical support of its own myth the relationship of national identity to political sovereignty.

Previously a leading Tartu representative of the Group of Estonian Artists, Vabbe withdrew from his previous metaphysical inquiries in the course of the 1930s. He abandoned the vehicles of Futurist dynamism or the expressive subjectivity of Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter, with whom he had directly worked in Munich in 1913 and 1914 before fleeing to Moscow. (Fig. 2.23) It was between the instability of the late 1930s and the total reconfiguration under Stalin that Ado Vabbe, like Vardi a Pallas alumnus, joined the faculty of the school, provisionally renamed the Tartu State Art Institute after the Soviet annexation in 1944.

In the instability of the corresponding pedagogical milieu, Vabbe and Kits attracted a circle of Tartu students lead by Ülo Sooster, Olav Maran, and Henn Roode. Vabbe subjected these young artists to strict instruction in realistic

166 Valdru, unpaginated.
composition, which students were expected to achieve through concentration on nature. Vabbe’s methods reflected an obligatory policy, dictated through Tallinn from Moscow, aimed at destroying the concept of “the specificity of art and art instruction based on it.” Concurrent Tartu Art Museum staff accounts recall the students’ Sunday-morning visits to study officially banned works in the collection, which spanned Estonia’s engagement with modern art. Their nickname, the “genius gang,” perhaps reflected the transformation of aesthetic judgment underway in the wake of the Estonian avant-garde, specifically a resurgence of origin as a determinant of aesthetic value within a national tradition as purported by a nationalist state.

In 1948, totalitarian certainty abruptly replaced the ambiguities in which Estonia’s avant-garde gradually founndered. Through the Tartu Institute, Moscow began demanding Soviet themes. Students continued their spirited exchanges on unsanctioned topics and their dedicated study of foreign styles deemed harmful by official protocol, from the Fauves to Velázquez, until the November, 1949 arrests. Sooster and the men of his circle were charged with “hardened decadence and bourgeois nationalism.” The last vestiges of the Estonian avant-garde were exiled to Karaganda, Vorkuta, and other gulags. The foregoing is the legacy Sooster and his friends embodied upon their release and rehabilitation in 1956. What followed was,

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167 Ibid.
168 Virve Hinno, as cited in ibid.
170 Varblane, 7.
171 Ibid.
in Komissarov's apt words, "the first time in Estonian art that a new avant-garde movement found a predecessor in its own history."\textsuperscript{172}

Viewed as a moment of simultaneity, together with the characteristic spirit of revivalism in unofficial art after the thaw, cultural achievements of the interwar period amount to the establishment of an Estonian modernist tradition. With Stalin's death, communist ideology returned to its original, international scope, as did the suppressed avant-garde. Just as testimony to Estonia's substantial modern art heritage returned in many forms (a topic to which I return in Chapter 4), so did the spark that had initiated that very heritage. Previously redacted from official memory, Estonians would learn the fate of European modernism as a cultural model – paradoxically – through its rehabilitation by cultural officials in a ploy to reconcile Soviet culture with the comparatively radical forms of the international communist enterprise. Historically resituating, and thus creatively adapting from the models of Estonian avant-gardists discussed in this chapter, French Surrealism, the revolutionary Russian avant-garde, and even recent trends in the United States, Estonian unofficial artists found new creative options for critical engagement with global geopolitics, as well as breathing new life into their national identity. Western contemporary art reflected both the new Cold-War geopolitics and a windfall from the liquidation of institutions like the Bauhaus. These circumstances presented a rich trove of untranslated material through which Estonia's artists – many of whom had no memory of life before Stalin, could claim continuity with the Estonian avant-

\textsuperscript{172} Komissarov, 19.
garde, and thus the project of securing modernism to nationalism in the rebirth of Estonian identity. The monumental importance of these changes is better grasped if situated within a more exhaustive, sequential chronology than art historians have offered to date. The following chapter thus acknowledges and critically appraises the impacts of totalitarian modernism on art, lived experience, and memory in Estonia. As I will show, the resulting ruptures complicated the questions of national identity previously resolved in the practice of creatively reinterpreting European modern art.
Chapter 3: The Total Object of Official Culture in the Estonian SSR

3.1 Soviet Annexation

Scholarly efforts to rescue Estonia’s interwar cultural history have taken priority over the subsequent sovietization of Estonian culture, which has received scant attention.\textsuperscript{173} As explored in Chapter 1, socialist realism’s original claims to legitimacy relied on asserting continuity with specifically Russian history. That style refined cultural projects born together with the Bolshevik revolution, which Estonia had rejected and repelled militarily in 1918. Whereas Russian artists and audiences had witnessed the dialectical development of revolutionary culture over more than a decade, official Soviet culture was brought to Estonia as a metropolitan paradigm is imposed upon a colonized subject. This chapter presents an overview of that paradigm, establishing some of its operative concepts in order to consider its relation to unofficial art practices emerging in the post-Stalin era.

After massive emigrations,\textsuperscript{174} deportations\textsuperscript{175} eventually followed reestablishment of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic as German occupying


\textsuperscript{174} Raun, and Parming and Järvesoo, infer from census data that some 70,000 Estonians fled the country in summer, 1944, mainly to Sweden and Germany. Raun, 166; Parming and Järvesoo, eds., 24-6.

\textsuperscript{175} See Raun, 178. The author documents the slow pace of collectivization under Estonian Communist Party First Secretary, Nikolai Karotamm. The Moscow Politburo had crafted its policy of collectivization already in May, 1947. In response to Karotamm’s disappointing projections, Stalin took direct action by accelerating deportations of “kulak” families and eventually removing Karotamm. Raun relates the breakneck collectivization of Estonian farms in Spring, 1949, to “a stampede to join the kolkhozes” after approximately 10 percent of the rural population was deported under Stalin’s renewed focus. While no concrete figures are available, Parming and Järvesoo estimate that 80,000 rural Estonians were deported as “kulaks” in 1949. Parming and Järvesoo, eds., 27.
forces withdrew in Autumn, 1944. Institutional reforms and transformation of the education system followed thereafter, including the renaming of the Pallas Art School as the State Art Institute. Overall realignment from wartime uncertainty toward intense, forced collectivization compounded a climate of instability. The new Baltic acquisitions called for an influx of visual materials to propagate typical messages of the Soviet narrative mentioned above. But novel techniques were required for casting their meaning in personages and locales specific to Estonia. These techniques appear to negotiate Estonian national identity as it inhered in folk traditions: countering the “chaos” residing in the unique, the handmade, while still appealing to “the individual soul as the vessel of the conscious will.”177 The poignancy of that appeal was twofold: it addressed the mythical individuality of the Estonian subject, and conformed to the humanist ideals trumpeted in Stalinist propaganda. The following analysis identifies and historically situates official themes in mass culture, and explores changes to their formal application in the Estonian case – from their first incursions after Occupation to the post-Stalin thaw. The staple forms of socialist realism, the analysis speculates, initially indulged the cultural proclivities of Estonian audiences.

176 The Secret Additional Pact of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed August 23, 1939, stipulated that Estonia and Latvia were to fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. A Chamber of Deputies representing the USSR adopted the Soviet Estonian constitution on August 25, 1940, proclaiming Estonia “a socialist state of the workers and peasants.” All land, banks, and major industrial enterprises were nationalized as a result. The ensuing sovietization was interrupted by Nazi occupation of Estonia following invasion in June, 1941.
177 Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck, “The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany,” in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds. Beyond Totalitarianism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 317. In contrast with the mechanical overtures of early Soviet cultural figures Dziga Vertov and Aleksei Gastev, the authors observe, “The Stalinist ideological apparatus cultivated individual biographies, emphasizing the making of exceptional personalities rather than the exceptional deeds of inanimate machines.”
In particular, Estonians likely viewed photographic imagery with suspicion. If so, then this suspicion reverses the primary assumption upon which Leah Dickerman relied in her influential essay, *Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography*. Dickerman’s thesis is that socialist realism is a “post-photographic practice, fundamentally structured by its critical ambivalence toward the proliferation of mass media forms.” She argues that the “strength of photography’s power of authentication [...] grows out of the documentary demand of a photographic age.” The author’s stated aim is to consider how Soviet socialist realism actually “approaches” western modernism, and to presumably thereby disrupt their segregation within that tradition. With that aim, the “documentary demand of a photographic age,” itself a problematic description of 1930s Russian culture, suddenly arrogates to universal value.

Despite goals both implicit and explicit, Dickerman’s treatment actually reinforces the avant-garde-kitsch paradigm. Introduced as a joint critique of Soviet mass culture and western Modernism, her arguments resolve by subtly homogenizing the lived experience of modernity. More precisely, photographic

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178 Author’s undocumented interviews. Estonians who lived through this period suggest as much, though my claim admittedly lacks the support of documentary evidence.
179 See Leah Dickerman, “Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography,” *October* Vol. 93 (Summer 2000): 138-53. Dickerman’s analysis of socialist realism demonstrates official artists’, and thus the state’s, selective manipulation of the photographic archive in order to “disavow the mechanical origins of [the] work.” Her treatment of socialist realist painting, mainly Isaak Brodskii’s, construes the state’s oscillation between reliance on the handmade-ness of painting, and the authenticating power of photographs, as evidence of “conflictedness.” Her treatment confines socialist realism to examples of painting and sculpture – media that, for her primarily Western audience, have achieved fine art status. Given her examples, Dickerman suggests that Soviet mass culture consisted mainly of academic mediums, and that meaning in socialist realism can and should be sought in its formal divergence from (or latent congruity with) western modernist art and theory. Original emphasis.
180 In ibid., 143.
181 In ibid., 139.
literacy and skepticism of the handmade come across as conditions of life in undifferentiated modern civilization.

Despite its ephemeral nature, numerous instances of the graphic form survive to suggest the presence of such a program. In fact, because of their prosaic idiom, these graphics may correspond more readily than, say, paintings or the written novel, to the effective liquidation of Estonia’s resources. Ideally the goal was the transformation of the cultural, political and economic realms such that each became predictable because it was contingent upon the other. Simply said, the same apparatus that dictated breakneck industrial advances policed the creation of imagery to thematize life’s reconstruction in the pursuit of Communism. The images considered here demonstrate a proliferation of devices by which propagandists, i.e. the state, conceived of time and space themselves as aesthetic mediums uniquely adequate to the tasks of Soviet visual culture. Not least among these was the proposition that the Soviet version of history was a matter of objective fact. Tracing the cultivation of these devices furnishes our view of Soviet state art with richer nuance than that which existing histories offer. We can then consider the emergence and proliferation of unofficial art in Estonia against both this background and that of diffused Western forms such as Pop Art and minimalism.

At the onset of the Soviet occupation in 1944, the adjudicator of content in Stalinist art was politically subjective doctrine whose implied congruity with written or visual idioms was dubious to begin with. Contrary to treatments of the
rise of official art in the Estonian SSR, innovation was always a central concern, prompting questions of managing the production of the new, given the variety of cultural and social bodies that found themselves a part of the Soviet project. The central Soviet cultural apparatus showed much of its hand as the state produced new forms to address local concerns, negotiating the Estonian question: how to subjugate this valuable asset and its people while pretending to legitimacy.

Estonia’s post-war industrialization and urbanization was experienced as stasis, the effect of Soviet colonization rather than self-determination. At the conclusion of WWII, official Soviet art was redefined as “national in form, socialist in content.” Thus Estonian culture underwent its official transformation at a time when Soviet policy was struggling with the failure of the revolution’s initial aims, the ensuing successes of Nazi Germany’s defeat, and the underlying deals and betrayals by which the USSR acquired most of Eastern Europe. Artists’ efforts to adhere to

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182 Eda Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika,” in eds. Norton Dodge and Alla Rosenfeld, exh. cat. Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression Under the Soviets, 1945-1991 (New Brunswick, N.: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum Rutgers, December, 2001 – March, 2002): 44. Sepp summarily argues, “artists could get away with nonpolitical landscapes, still lifes, or portraits, but any modernist trend was considered ‘formalist’ and hence subversive. No innovative styles were possible between 1944 and 1953 during Stalin’s reign of terror, when punishment for dissident or unofficial art was extreme.” Sepp supports her assertion with evidence of student arrests at Tartu Art Institute in 1945. The orthodox distinction between “formalism” and “innovation,” on one hand, and “required Socialist Realist style” on the other, hinders study of official art as a set of strategies by which Stalin’s regime colonized cultures entering the Soviet fold after WWII.

183 See Sergei Tretyakov, “Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art (Aesthetic Production and Consumption)” trans. Devon Fore, October 118 (Fall 2006): 11-18. “Are the tasks of the revolution in the realm of art resolved by representation and reflection, or is art faced with organizational and constructive tasks that have not been fulfilled by the forms that have existed up to our time?” Thus in 1923 Tretyakov put forth, at an early moment in the formation of Soviet revolutionary aesthetics, the notion that art-making is actually a form of labor, among many others, that concerns itself with both organization and innovation within historical dialectics. The concept that art’s basic purpose is the creation of previously non-existent conditions for life and labor remained intact throughout the history of Soviet culture. Original emphasis.

184 Wood, 3.
government mandate meant invention of varying means by which to adapt indigenous traditions to official requirements. Bowing to the official tag line, Estonian artists introduced forms from their national heritage to the idiom of socialist realism. Kaarel Liimand and Andrus Johani (dates, background) are examples (see Treier article “Creative Twin Brothers...” in Estonian Art). Of far greater historic consequence for Estonia’s identity – as a modern nation – these artists accommodated their fledgling modernism to that of Soviet colonizing power. Tragically, that modernism thematized extraction of natural resources and industrial scarification of Estonia in efforts to redeem a revolution to which Estonia’s classical avant-garde – unlike its Russian counterpart – never offered its vision. Dissent or other strategies of resistance in Estonian visual art during the Cold War can only really be meaningful if accompanied by a descriptive survey of the official visual context. In this section, examination of official posters will serve to illuminate a rhetoric of temporal and spatial pliancy governing content in that idiom, which dominated official art.
3.2 Propaganda Culture

A 1951 poster declaring “Under the Leadership of the Great Stalin – Forward to Communism!” provides extremely rich imagery for considering Soviet visual culture in the aftermath of the avant-garde. (Fig. 3.1) The lower section unifies remote geographic sites in a continuous scene of factory smokestacks, forest, urban administrative buildings in various phases of completion, dam construction, grain elevators, and wheat fields. Each motif symbolizes a social or economic advantage afforded by the Volga-Don canal project. Completed from 1948 to 1952, this massive undertaking joined the two rivers at their closest point, creating a shipping route between the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov, and thus the world’s oceans. Spill from hydroelectric dams filled a 100-kilometer channel, feeding a network of irrigation canals and providing a waterway for exports of grain, steel, minerals, lumber and other construction materials, and oil. In addition to integrating the spaces represented, the foreground figure of Stalin encodes diverse modes of abstract representation. His central position and dominant scale establish terms of space and light by which the elements in the central zone are organized. Disparate scenes conform to the singular spatial logic of a visual field witnessed first-hand, yet their incongruity safeguards an aura of iconicity permeating Stalinist visual culture.

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185 This poster somewhat resembles a 1950 example by Mikhail Sovoliev (b. 1905) in which hand-tinted photographs of various ethnicities are reproduced in a continuous space with Stalin, superimposed on a cartographic representation of the Soviet Union. The text below is the Russian translation of that in the Estonian poster.
Facing utopia, his back to the supporting infrastructure of modern life, the figure of Stalin interprets the convergence of past and future in the dimensions of the frontal, human body. He poses as the closest in an advancing series of towers carrying high-tension power lines, animating a metaphor of electrification reminiscent of Gustav Klutsis’s 1920 constructivist montage, *Electrification of the Entire Country.* (Fig. 3.2) Milling around abstract architectons, Klutsis’s workers are dwarfed by the figure of Lenin, who carries a lattice connoting a transmission tower. In that work, radiating tangential arcs join lines diverging from the point corresponding to the very tip of Lenin’s striding foot. Their invisible trajectory radiates through the central architecton, suggesting a powerful charge emanating from the limit of the leader’s body and passing through the built environment into the viewer’s space. The Estonian poster in question substitutes the abstract constructivist vision with a parable relying on illusionistic representation. The leader’s body closes a circuit through which potential energy passes, reaching kinetic forms of illumination, heat, and industrial might.

In the Klutsis, the tiny slogan hovers in the space of the composition, extending the representational logic of montage to incorporate sound. It appears as the final term in a sequence of signifiers depicted as bearing mass. In poetic accordance with the rest of the picture, Lenin’s supporting arms suffuse the lattice of the steel tower, modernist architectural motifs, and the miniature script with physical force, advancing it to a vocal exclamation. In the later poster, the slogan is isolated to a red field, supposing an ideologically saturated realm of speech. Indeed the phrase pivots on the grammatical shift from a spatial conception of governance –
being under the leadership (juhtimisel) of the Great Stalin – to directional movement through time – forward (edasi), to communism. Gazing simultaneously into space and ahead to the future, his sight aligns with rectilinear motifs emerging from a faint, surrounding halo. Nominally referring to vital water flow, these blue lines connect the ethereal space of the deified leader’s body and vision with sites of real transformation. Hierarchical typography and miniature skylines designate Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev and other landmarks as orbiting Stalingrad and the nearby Volgograd Hydroelectric Station – now the largest such installation in Europe. Stalin’s line of sight passes unmistakably through the city of Stalingrad, renamed from Volgograd in 1925, and invoked here as the earthly embodiment of both the demigod and his vision of industrial modernization.\footnote{The Volga-Don canal was one of several post-war “great construction projects of communism” (\textit{Velikie stroiki kommunizma}) undertaken in the 1950s and which included the construction of hydroelectric stations in Kuibishev and Kakhovka. The hydroelectric plant itself did not go online until the end of the decade.} The upper register combines optical cues, specifically aerial views of manmade structures and a tiny fishing boat, with a cartographic grid alluding to trees bordering farmland. Optical reference thus blends with an abstract standardization method normally enlisted to represent spaces beyond the scope of human sensation. Whereas the vignettes below are seamlessly stitched together to form a synthetic landscape, approximating a normal optical encounter, the upper zone blurs incommensurate modes for apprehending the Soviet landmass.\footnote{Molly Brunson has similarly argued that Stalinist visual culture depended on a profoundly compromised notion of geographic space. See Brunson, “Polet nad Moskvoi: Vid s vozduhka i reprezentatsiiia prostranstva v Mastere i Margarite Bulgakova,” \textit{Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie} 76 (2005): 173-95.} Representation of the entire Caucasus region in both its general and particular aspects challenges distinctions between sensory and
cognitive work. By contrast, sunlight bathes the entire picture in impartial luminosity, suggesting egalitarian judgment with vast reach. The theme of electricity extends the metaphor of light to the notion of the invisible constant: causality between the temporally disparate, and connectedness among the geographically remote in the construction of Soviet communism. This example of Stalinist graphics carefully assembles representational systems of varying abstraction – pictorial realism, typography, and cartography – in a decidedly post-avant-garde conception of official metaphor.

Through such conceits for depicting time and space, the image postulates a viewing subject who seeks highly specific modes of ideological representation. By the time of Stalin’s death in 1953, poster propagandists drew from a storehouse of such methods refined in the course of subjugating the Estonian people. Language and concepts emerging from this section will serve to trace conceptual tropes originating in official propaganda and reconfigured by Estonian artists after the cultural Thaw. A central concept is the collectivization of creative mediums into a total aesthetics. This aesthetics will be explained against a background of scholarship that maintains an academic distinction between painting and other techniques in the era of Stalinization.

A major determinant of official culture in the Estonian SSR was precisely that culture was only instituted after formal Soviet annexation of the Baltics in 1944. From 1920 to 1939, while Soviet Russia struggled through War Communism and the first Five-Year Plans, Estonia was an autonomous polity for the first time in its
history. With reconstruction efforts after the devastation of WWII, the Estonian SSR
was thrust into the most intense period of Stalinist collectivization and industrial
expansion. State presses churned out graphic posters in print runs often exceeding
five thousand. Messages of state-defined progress suggested a virtual reality to be
achieved by the populace through pursuing the utopian narratives of democracy,
duty, education, equality, peace and happiness, and scientific exploration.

Before considering further examples, it is important to understand the
contours of socialist realism as we have come to understand it, and the motivations
behind the history written so far. Classical modernism, in its preference for
instances of individual creative expression, has been an historic deterrent to this
kind of study. Soviet socialist realism in its monumental painted form delivers what
modernist inquiry has sought in its scapegoats. Paintings depicting large-scale
prototypes of ideal Soviet citizens violate the analytical, avant-garde disinterest so
prized by “Modernism” in its search for autonomy fueled disdain for Soviet mass
culture, which Clement Greenberg diametrically opposed to avant-garde art in his
1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”

His dismissal of utopian mass culture as the inadvertent output of “philistines” persisted within postwar accounts as they
passed down the tradition of defining avant-garde and totalitarian cultures as opposites.

By these accounts, official Soviet culture remains an undifferentiated

\footnote{In ibid., 47.}
\footnote{See for example Cyril G. E. Bunt, “Soviet Painting and Sculpture” in ed. Bunt \textit{A History of Russian Art} (New York: The Studio, 1946): 221-60. “(In the USSR) An entirely new outlook on the subject had
to be cultivated – an outlook which is as foreign as anything in the polity of the U.S.S.R. to our
preconceived ideas of what art is and what it seeks to do.” Original emphasis. See also Alexander}
monolith of monumental revolutionary painting, Stalinist terror and irrationalism, 
the disappointments of the Khrushchev Thaw, and economic stagnation under 
Brezhnev. So art historians readily identify heroic revolutionary paintings, such as 
Aleksandr Gerasimov’s 1929 Lenin on the Tribune, as paragons of Soviet visual 
culture. (Fig. 3.3)

Such thinking empties much of the significance from Stalin’s death, and thus 
the cultural thaw that came in its wake, and furthers the assumption that 
totalitarian ideology and its visual manifestations are a singular and static 
enterprise. The operative conceit here is that painted forms harbor or encrypt the 
historical circumstances of their creation, and present autonomous testimony about 
those circumstances. It is worth citing Greenberg’s identification of avant-garde 
culture with “historical criticism” lacking in utopian cultures:

[...] the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, 
an historical criticism – made [avant-garde culture JC] 
possible. This criticism has not confronted our present 
society with timeless utopias, but has soberly examined 
in the terms of history and of cause and effect the 
antecedents, justifications and functions of the forms 
that lie at the heart of every society. Thus our present 
bourgeois social order was shown to be, not an eternal, 
“natural” condition of life, but simply the latest term in a

Borovsky states “The history of contemporary Russian art begins with its opposition to Socialist 
Realism.” The most notable exception here is of course Boris Groys’ Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin (1988) 
later published as The Total Art of Stalinism (Princeton University Press, 1992). Sharp remarked on 
a similar paradigm in Russia, where “Painting as both medium and tradition polarized art discourse, 
one style legitimated by the negative values attributed to the other.” See Jane A. Sharp, “Abstract 
Expressionism as a Model of ‘Contemporary Art’ in the Soviet Union,” in ed. Joan Marter Abstract 
succession of social orders. [...] It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically, too – with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe.191

Greenberg argues that utopian cultural forms are static, implicitly unscientific, whereas bourgeois avant-garde forms are liberated, though not absolutely; they retain a causal relationship with their changing circumstances, yet this causal nature of cultural artifacts is unchanging and thus places them “at the heart of every society.”

He resolved the subtle conflicts within his definition of avant-garde only in later, more memorable essays on modernist painting. Greenberg concluded his 1958 essay “American Type’ Painting” by bemoaning the general impression he took from the 1954 Venice Biennale: that no one believed the United States was capable of producing an “art of high distinction.”192 By the time he wrote the canonical essay, “Modernist Painting,” in 1960 the more problematic, yet poignant questions in his thinking – concerning autonomy versus contingency – had yielded to his more resolute, Kantian concept of purity.193 Medium specificity - the pure expression of art’s materials – replaced historical contingency as the central criterion by which Greenberg and his followers would judge aesthetic quality. This

was a landmark shift in what seemed an effort to conclusively disqualify Soviet
culture as modern. For its part, official Soviet art was policed by bureaucrats.
However, within its parameters, this condition fostered investigation of artistic
practices, leading to aesthetic modes that bore critically on their historical moment.
It is precisely the point that these modes do not compare with abstract
expressionism. As subsequent analysis will hopefully demonstrate, there is much to
be said in connection with innovation and official propaganda. Regarding the
criterion of medium specificity: to judge Socialist realism by its success at
individuating aesthetic experience while distinguishing art forms from one another
– the measure by which Greenberg lauded American gestural abstraction, and by
which Michael Fried condemned minimalism – is to condemn its failure at a task
beyond its purview. On the contrary, as numerous examples from Estonia suggest,
expressive values of different artistic techniques seemed to merge in a unified,
continuous discursive space of official art.

Surviving evidence suggests a campaign to shape audience perception via
novel forms rather than simply to restrict the formal repertoire. In their recent
account of scientific objectivity, Daston and Galison termed cultivated expertise in
the perception of otherwise elusive images “trained judgment.”\textsuperscript{194} As Jaak Kangilaski
observed,

Discussing the advance of scientific objectivity from a paradigm of truth-to-nature and subsequent
mechanical objectivity to one of trained judgment, the authors assert the need for “cultivation of a
kind of \textit{physiognomic sight} – a capacity of both maker and user [...] to synthesize, highlight, and grasp
Together with the 1940 occupation, Soviet art theory invaded Estonia as well and became one of the means of [subjugating] local art life. By that time, the said theory and its central notion “realism” had gone through quite a diverse development.\(^{195}\)

As Kangilaski suggested, the propaganda campaign to condition Estonian audiences acknowledged, initially deferred to, and gradually modified the public visual field through epistemological concepts operating in local customs. Though it is beyond the stated timeframe of this dissertation, a brief foray into pre-Soviet history is necessary to establish some foundational aspects of Estonian visual and material culture. Against this background it will then be shown that handmade and photographic tropes combined in an official iconic style with pretenses of objectivity and authority.

The 1939 parable *The Misadventures of The New Satan* is a poignant commentary on indenture and self-realization, whereas its co-option by the Soviet state as an example of creative intellect in defiance of tyranny – bourgeois or otherwise – would have disgusted contemporary audiences. The irony in the foreword to the 1978 English translation by a Moscow publisher, lauding Tammsaare as “A Seeker of Justice,” is stunning: “[...] in the years of fascist reaction in bourgeois Estonia [...] everything that was progressive was ruthlessly suppressed. The writer often had to resort to allegory....” The text proceeds to

applaud the writer’s use of the theme of arson committed by the oppressed as allegorical “call to struggle against oppression.” But lingering in these passages is an appeal to a persistent theme in the Estonian national imagination, the human struggle against nature. Such appeals are frequent in Estonian Soviet official culture, and they played to both the state’s industrial and agricultural production goals, as well as to the socio-cultural proclivities of the subjects expected to fulfill them. The Estonians endured not merely the supplanting of their nascent modernist culture, but the ideological corruption of milestones in each of them.

The process of modernization was wrested from Estonian hands as Soviet administrative power gripped the country in the late 1940s. Until that time Estonian people had enjoyed brief periods of cultural self-determination interspersed with decline as the state’s goals periodically coincided with national ambitions. The national awakening of the late 19th century was only the most recognized of these renaissances. The return of foreign domination ushered in a long period of cultural and economic decline. This may explain the national reversion to folk traditions oriented around the struggle for Estonian autonomy. Estonians frequently report the existence of an anti-urbanist movement through which self-sufficiency, introspection, and communion with nature gained currency.  

197 Author’s undocumented interviews, June, 2009.
After Soviet annexation in 1944, industrial and agricultural modernization of their country seems to have ingrained a schizophrenic attitude toward modernity in Estonian intellectuals. The national narrative came to encompass regret over the lost promise of sovereign modernization, as well as vehement resentment of Soviet technocracy. Soviet repression of rural folk traditions, coupled with the transfer of authority over continuing modernization to the government in Moscow, effectively suspended the possibility of an Estonian subject that was simultaneously modern and dignified. The notion of a Soviet Estonian subject position was simply not viable. One anthropologist has documented the fallacious tendency toward binary models for understanding life as it was lived under late Soviet socialism in Russia.\textsuperscript{198} The oversimplification underlying such models is no less a threat toward histories of the Estonian case, and late-Soviet cultural life in Estonia might best be understood as anti-establishment sentiment attended by a persistent lack of fulfillment as authentic Soviet subjects.

The only constant since the establishment of a written Estonian language had been folk tradition, passed down mainly in a rural setting over the course of centuries. Partly, the effect was popular reversion to folk ways of life, reverence of national heroes, and resentment of the modernization the Estonians were now forced to conduct under foreign duress. Later chapters will explore the anti-urbanist responses to these processes. Architectural projects for individual buildings and the revision of large public spaces in the city center, such as Eliel

Saarinen’s plan for a square oriented on the National Opera House, envisioned Tallinn as a distinctly northern European capitol. As architectural historian Mart Kalm decried, Tallinn might have seen modernization on a par with Helsinki were it not for the Stalinist program that today obscures the Functionalist cityscape planned in the First Republic. Early aspirations toward a regional urbanism shared by Estonians and Finns were dashed along with gestures toward a self-determined and modern Estonian city that might enjoy a place in twentieth-century European modernist discourse.
3.3 *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Handmade

In his famous publication *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys put forth the novel idea that Soviet mass culture continued the aspirations and ideals of the revolutionary avant-garde. Groys so rarely applies his philosophy to specific works of art that his use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* – from Wagner’s concept of a total work of art – remains vague and general. Indeed as one reviewer recently put it, “[...] an acquaintance with [nonconformist] art remains the best preparation for understanding Groys’ work [...], despite the fact this it is not the subject of that book.”\(^{199}\) To wit, this dissertation establishes that Soviet socialist realism exhibited features specific to its locales, demonstrating the need to parse what Groys leaves an undifferentiated mass. It can then be shown that his theory leaves much to be desired when it comes to Estonian unofficial culture, which formulated metaphysical questions in the course of reclaiming national culture.

At the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, Stalin called for “creating the conditions [for the merging of distinct, national cultures] into one common culture with one common language.”\(^{200}\) Having initially conceded that proletarian culture may adopt “various forms and means of expression with different peoples,” Stalin’s developing concept of mass culture suggests that the closure of difference was the aim of proletarian culture. Yet it seems less likely or important that art and life were merged by Stalinist culture, as Groys claims. Rather, Soviet mass culture


collapsed precisely that aspect of modernism whereby a medium reifies otherwise formless values, doing so in a mode to which its unique materiality grants it privileged access. Though it arguably reversed strictures against which the avant-garde had struggled, it was not simply therefore the fulfillment of the avant-garde’s mystical vision “by other means.” From that perspective, the 1970s resuscitation of the classical avant-garde’s metaphysical ambitions would appear a mere protest, a critique of official culture through the terms and concepts it furnished. When the ideology of historical continuity invalidated the avant-garde’s fervor for vanquishing history, it also eclipsed the realities those artists postulated through mystical exploration.

Stalinist propaganda was, in actuality, an attempt to convey information to Soviet subjects. The ancestry of European and North American objectivity – from dependence on recognizable “working objects,” to mechanical objectivity, to the training of specialized viewer judgment – seems to be condensed and reduplicated in the ESSR in an intense campaign to reconfigure norms of representation. The formal repertoire progressively changed, suggesting this campaign’s longer view of forcing the public to interpret as fact creative representations of the history desired by the regime. To be effective at the local level, this program needed to negotiate the social context in which it was instituted through creative work in the visual arts. Such negotiation must be considered for this study to make any specific claims about Soviet Estonian art.

201 Daston and Galison, 19-22.
Texts on socialist realism usually deny this work any kind of focused description. This is mainly because terms and concepts originating in Cold War histories persist in disavowing the possibility that official art had modernist relevance. This is patently wrong. Boris Groys has claimed that the Soviet project unequivocally continued the aims of the revolutionary avant-garde. In fairness to his readers, his position comes across as coy, with a nearly facetious tone reminiscent of conceptual-art posturing. But Groys’ findings are difficult to refute because official culture so thoroughly fogged the distinctions between political and artistic endeavor. This is very important, because the Soviet state pragmatically expanded the notion of avant-garde, as I have argued. That it ultimately did so in opposition to national forms need not obscure an apparent agenda, at least initially, to engage local predispositions.

Historically, avant-garde was a term for cultural strategy practiced in opposition to prevalent cultural forms. The Soviet state used it to create the prevailing model. Consider this description of socialist realist art posted at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York:

What is it that is new in Soviet painting? [...] The answer ... lies in the very nature of Soviet art, which is impregnated with great humanitarian ideals. It lies in the simplicity and plastic clarity of the pictorial language of Soviet paintings, sculpture and graphic art.²⁰²

In its official rhetoric, the Soviet stance on art was awash in avant-garde ideals. The positivist pursuit of mimesis thorough material purity was only one such ideal. A secular, populist bent was flimsy camouflage for the continuing cult of the artist-hero, whose work

primarily addresses the people. His art is democratic. That is why hundreds of thousands of visitors attend our art exhibitions, that is why the Soviet people take the successes and failures of their favorite artists so much to heart, that is why such heated discussions arise about various paintings – discussions in which the collective farmer and the student, the worker and the university professor, the Muscovite and the visitor from remote borderlands take part.

The text gropes for new language to describe what is ostensibly new and anti-bourgeois art, uniting the rural and urban proletariat and the intelligentsia for its contemplation. Yet the only conventions the text can cite are realism and its ideological opposite, formalism. We are told that unnamed, failed artists restricted themselves “to a passive, naturalistic reproduction of vital impressions, and reality assumed very dull, monotonous and dismal colors in their paintings” and “Naturalism was and is still being just as vigorously opposed.” Citing “dismal colors” in unworthy art, the passage opposes the historical misery of the proletariat to a lustrous “laboratory of future art.”
Revolutionary art is dialectical by nature, carrying a disclaimer that requires the passage of an unspecified grace period before it can be fairly judged.\textsuperscript{203} Though its platform was less exclusively political and rather more spiritual, the trials and failures that took place at Unvis in Moscow twenty years earlier fundamentally resembled those of the Stalinist “laboratory.” Socialist realist dogma announced that the future must be simultaneously constructed \textit{and} represented in the present.\textsuperscript{204} A rhetoric of death and overcoming rendered the public notion of “the typical” in utopian progress a measure of the visceral:

What is most important to the dialectical method is not that which is stable at present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable, since for the dialectical method only that which is emerging and developing cannot be overcome.\textsuperscript{205}

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\textsuperscript{203} See Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism with Shores,” in ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen \textit{Socialist Realism without Shores} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997): 30. For Clark, the central literary form of this dialectic is the struggle to overcome spontaneity with “self-mastery,” in “a struggle which stands in for society’s own reaching out toward self-realization in a state of consciousness.”

\textsuperscript{204} See note 3. Zdanov’s wording carried the founding contradiction of socialist realist doctrine. The only “reality” commensurate with the goals of socialism had yet to be realized through revolutionary struggle. And yet artists’ subservience to Party mandate required they depict the “concreteness” of the world they saw around them. Apparently this discord, and not the visible world or its events, was to be the theme of art. Cf. Kazimir Malevich, “On New Systems in Art” (\textit{O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve}) (Vitebsk, 1919) in ed. Troels Andersen and trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus \textit{K.S. Malevich, Essays on Art, 1915-1933} (Copenhagen: Borgens-Forlag, 1971): 83. “\textit{No utilitarian} form is created without the help of aesthetic action, which sees everything except the utilitarian as pictorial. The aesthetic, the pictorial, takes part in the construction of the whole world.” Original emphasis.

If language and art are vitally bound, as is of course the human body, then only in the future moment of dialectical synthesis shall language adequate for discussing “typical” art precipitate from the work at hand. Thus the dialectical method places a fundamentally defective demand on the subject, such that he view what is unstable and therefore exceptional as though he were simultaneously comfortable with it and exuberant over its advent. Human biological vitality is at odds with a metaphysics that prizes controlled semiotic shifts over the sustenance of present consciousness. This is the paradox ultimately inherent in Kazimir Malevich’s project to deplete conventional signs of their meaning.\footnote{Kazimir Malevich, “The Question of Imitative Art” (K voprosu izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva)” (Smolensk, 1920) in ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus \textit{K.S. Malevich, Essays on Art 1915-1933} (Copenhagen: Borgens-Forlag, 1968): 169-70. “Today, when Revolutionary Perfection is bringing a new, youthful world of forms as the body of being, reactionary elements dig up and bring out into the street the remains of past perfection, showing them to the masses [...] They are striving to inculcate the new meaning of revolutionary movement into old art. Life threw the icon out of people’s houses, but now they are showing it dressed up in a new meaning.”} This overt connection between the classical Russian avant-garde and the gospel of socialist realism should be conspicuous to art historians today.

State sanction of visual art highly resembled, then, an avant-garde enterprise insofar as it both resisted its present moment and heralded an imminent, transcendent consciousness. And in the spirit of Unovis, it had profound and immediate penetration: into propaganda graphics churned out by the state-run printing houses, “Oktoober” and “Kommunist,” in the Estonian capital city, Tallinn. This section examines officially sanctioned art to better understand the ways it created not only new pictures, but norms for the perception of the new. We will
return to these norms later, as unofficial artists strove to reclaim the avant-garde patent.

Many constituent republics of the USSR were modernized under Soviet rule, each in its peculiar way according to its assets. Estonia’s coastal location, lush forests, rich soil and geological deposits offered opportunities for massive naval installations, a booming lumber industry, concentrated farming (particularly of corn which, if not rotated with other crops, renders land unarable) and mining. Oil-shale mining and refinement accounted for the most intense part of the Soviet push to maximize use of natural resources made available after reannexation in 1944.207 Estonians witnessed the reconfiguration – often catastrophic – of their borders and landscape with the Stalinist modernization of their tiny country.208 All of this serves to suggest highly specialized expectations by individual national audiences like Estonia.

Poster designs from the first years of Stalinization suggest that Soviet Estonian propaganda strove for the effects of the handmade. Contrary to classic histories of photography, these didactic posters illustrating proper methods of soil


208 Ibid. Following Soviet annexation of Estonia in 1944 the Estonian border was altered, reallocating everything East of the Narva River to Russia’s Leningrad oblast. Most of the Petseremaa district in the Southeast was likewise reallocated to the Russian Pskov oblast. This effectively cut off the Seto tribe in Southeast Estonia from their fellow people residing in new administrative units to the East. The Estonian Seto were meanwhile confined to village soviets (külalõukogu) near the Southeast town of Võru.
enrichment and pest identification apparently enjoy authority because they are *not* photographs. The advent of photography's power to *disemboby*, as well as embody is an underappreciated landmark of its modernity. It may be precisely the reduplication which photography permitted that discredited it for Estonians with the onset of official post-War culture. The Learned Estonian Society once acknowledged the inherently retreating nature of their handmade patrimony, and the perceived threat of oblivion at the hands of modern photographic reproduction would have persisted beyond the era of the first republic. The posters discussed here serve to illustrate a shift over time, consequently, from explicit and hand-drawn didactics toward a broader thematic approach. This program eventually reconstituted the authority of the photograph such that it fulfilled an objectivity specific to its viewership.

Positive results from encounters with propaganda graphics could not be expected if that idiom had no initial claims to historical veracity. Correspondence between images and their referents was therefore carefully orchestrated in an attempt to nurture believability.\(^{209}\) Declining collective farm yields resulted in a propaganda incursion to reinstate immediate postwar numbers. Several examples from this program trace a gradual tendency toward the photographic, with the ultimate aim of training viewers in an iconography then under rapid construction, as well as high suspicion by its Estonian viewers. Compared to the previous five years, 

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\(^{209}\) I am not suggesting that the intended efficacy of this tactic was ever realized. Indeed most contemporary eyewitnesses to official art in the USSR report both personal and widespread scorn for official propaganda in all its forms. See for example Groys, “Utopian Mass Culture,” in ed. Groys and Hollein, 24. “The most intriguing aspect of Socialist Realism is precisely that no one liked it when it was being produced. This art satisfied no existing tastes, fulfilled no existing social demands.”
from 1951-1955 kolkhoz output of grain and potatoes seriously declined, and state presses mounted a campaign to increase production by educating collective farm workers. An instructional poster dated 1949 furnishes workers with hand-drawn diagrams about collecting and testing soil samples, accompanied by lengthy explanations. (Fig. 3.4) Another example is a 1952 schematic with instructions for identifying the Colorado Potato Beetle in all its stages, lest sackfulls of a year’s crop be ruined. (Fig. 3.5) Crisp renderings of larvae, cocoons and adult insects teach the viewer the scale, varied color, typical location and signs of damage caused by the pest. As in the earlier poster, the illustrations are decidedly handmade. However the later example employs motifs that, while dependent on both the artist’s and the viewer’s knowledge of photographic verisimilitude, are at a demonstrated remove from actual photographic technology. Most peasants were probably unfamiliar with the technophilia attending the history of photography, and a photographic image of a beetle would arguably have been more conspicuously photographic – and thus foreign – than informative. Overtly manual handling is a device, then, and for its intended viewers it functioned as testimony to the poster’s accuracy, demonstrating familiar relationships of scale and proportion, while avoiding the shock of photographic verisimilitude. A magnified cocoon versus a life size (loomulik suurus) depiction, a landscape foregrounded by a close-up, and an oversize adult insect in flight are so familiar as to go unchallenged and, more importantly, verifiable.

Another poster, this one dating from 1949, displays some of the same devices, and would have been seen as part of a larger, contemporary syndication of images. (Fig. 3.6) The fact that this poster appeared in a print run of 5,000 suggests
that the hand-design of the plate is deliberate, as this is comparatively more
cumbersome than photographic methods. An important detail is the portrait of
Ivan Mitchurin in the picture. The image is not a photograph per se, but likely came
after a photograph, with the effects of photographs in mind. The scientist’s lapel is
rendered with realistic shading and lines that follow the contour out of the frame.
At the same time chiaroscuro in the details of the profile and the hat are
intentionally balanced against complementary tones in the abstract background.
Effects of the handmade are intentionally positioned against a realistic handling that
at the very least refers to photographic indexicality. The hybridity of this design,
deployed in the context of a scientist idolized for his pioneering research in
agricultural hybridization, could not have been lost on the designer. The subtitle
appoints Mitchurin “The Great Redesigner of Nature.” Adaptation through breeding
of separate desirable traits to a vital whole in the aim of producing a desired
outcome, in graphic form, is an aesthetic cognate of the project to indoctrinate a
subject in the reception of mass-produced ideology. The introduction of
photographic technique is still restricted to references to photographic exactitude,
such that handmade effects remain intact, whereas the overall verifiability of the
Colorado Beetle image has been only somewhat displaced by the ideological
narrative of heroism.

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210 The possibility remains that printing equipment and other materials required for photographic
reproduction were not available, either due to prohibitive cost or simply because printing houses had
yet to be so outfitted. However, my knowledge of Soviet Estonian propaganda graphics inclines me
to believe that the gradual introduction of photographic means was deliberate.
These posters adhere to a general didactic style that differs considerably from the more iconic imagery that the Mitchurin picture points toward. They were issued concurrently with other posters of a decidedly concocted bent that attempted to instruct the populace in matters of representational government and the overall structure of the state apparatus. (Figs. 3.7-8) Borrowing support from contemporary didactics like those discussed above, these more abstract pictures provide details of voting procedures and relationships among government organs and voting jurisdictions. The actual success of these bodies in conducting the business of the state was no doubt unverifiable, even to most government officials. What is more important is that despite the uselessness and likely inaccuracy of much of this information, its ostensible truth is delivered in a format reminiscent of scientific tables which other contemporary, more verifiable instances of this kind of public address emulated. This progression is reminiscent of a cognitive dynamic described by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky as “algebrizing.”\textsuperscript{211} In this process, repetitive experience is reduced over time to symbolic experience, such that “the greatest economy of perceptual effort takes place.”\textsuperscript{212} Restated for our purposes, a person’s experience is efficiently compressed into icons standing in for thought that normally demands longer duration. The dubious overall factuality of the scheme is somewhat compensated for by information typically given in the lower margin of these mass prints. The proportion of the Russian-language to the Estonian-language print run becomes a physical and present demonstration of an


\textsuperscript{212} In ibid., 5.
actuality that the average citizen could easily appreciate (3000:10000 was proportionate to the population of these two ethnic groups in Tallinn at the time).

Such numerical guarantors became superfluous as the didactic style gave way to a more monumental style, combining and compressing the rhetoric of scientific explication and photographs of partial human figures in icons of the “typical” that retained the pretenses of verifiability. A 1966 election poster by A. Säde reproduces a photograph showing a throng of human figures whose sheer number allows only a field of indistinguishable heads, filling an irregular, horizontal field.213 (Fig. 3.9) The outer edges of the crowd coincide with contours suggestive of waving flags. Not accidentally, the text imploring “Everyone Vote!” is in brilliant white, a color which advances this message as the initial consideration, such that increasing saturation carries the viewer through both color spectrum and increasing scale, toward the composition’s resolution. Individualized profiles with angular features partially overlie the dominant, red field, evoking transcendence into consciousness, from a disorganized and spontaneous horde to a composed citizenry, through the individual voting act.214 Devices of disconcerted scale in abstract spaces amplify a thematic message grounded in the dialectical progression: from straight photography’s ideological void to expert design for trained judgment of an aesthetically indoctrinated viewership.

213 The print run given on the design is 1500, published by Eesti Raamat.
Handmade elements most commonly accompanied the use of the photographic in state propaganda graphics. The juggernaut locomotive in a 1949 poster entreats citizens to purchase bonds is duplicated, in reverse, in the adjacent image of a bond doubtless impressed from an actual lithography plate for making real bonds. (Fig. 3.10) While photographic emulsion may not have been used to produce this particular element, the one-to-one relationship of the printed bond to its actual instance in commerce evokes photographic identity. The persistence of this medium hybridity, as hinted in the Mitchurin poster, into the monumental style of the 1960s is suggestive of a program that typified Estonian Soviet propaganda.

While the purchase of government bonds in 1949 was likely viewed as forfeiting one’s money to the state, it was also surely a rare belief that one’s choice actually affected change after voting at the polls. The sole political party was the Communist party, and the “voice” (Est. hää) solicited by another 1966 election poster, this one by Alfred Saldre, was given in vain.\(^{215}\) (Fig. 3.11) To my larger point, the upraised hands and emphatic slogan are more than rote citation of Gustav Klutsis’s photomontages. (Fig. 3.12) Importantly, that reference was most certainly intended as a part of the poster’s meaning. These Estonian elections posters craft their messages through closely related tropes to differentiate between mechanical and handmade representation and, in turn, maintain a far greater symbolic distinction that must be grasped here. The following comparison of two posters,

\(^{215}\) The print run given on the design is 2500, published by Oktoober.
created thirty-years apart, does not pretend to demonstrate difference between early Soviet Russian propaganda and its later Estonian variant. That difference would require description of a contextual field so vast and diverse as to be of dubious value here. Rather, the objective is to probe meanings given shape through referential and adaptive operations that count as translations across a temporal and cultural boundary. In the present examples, that boundary encompassed Stalin’s ascendence, the devastating effects of war – among them the Soviet annexation of Estonia – and the rehabilitation of Estonian national culture in the thaw.

In the Klutsis, the varying enlargement, hue, and exposure of several hands suggests a multitude whereas, upon closer inspection, a single negative provided the image in most cases, graphically reinforcing the unity emphasized in the text: “All Workers – Men and Women – To the Reelection of the Soviets.” The ideological value of the Klutsis issues from a coy betrayal of terms: the successful conveyance of the message is a question of the viewer’s initial belief in those terms’ stability. The result is a plane inhabited by workers individuated only biologically, and thus by a characteristic they did not choose. The flatness of that plane is only slightly inflected by the flicker of red textual elements in the typography at lower-left (less so by the typographic elements overlapping the mass of figures at lower-right.) The graphic isolation of “вы” and “ты” simulates vocal emphasis, completing a sensory ensemble spanning a gamut of textual- (written language relies on symbolic convention) and pictorial-symbolic (for photomontage intermingles indexical and symbolic signification), optical and, finally, aural cues. Furthermore, the described convergence of the red field with the text effectively advances language beyond its conventionally
singular symbolic meaning. The fragments in red at once form separate parts of a word, “перевыборы” (reelections), and thus participate in its constituted meaning, while, as individual words, the meaning they convey is determined by their use within a context, reaffirming their perception as aural and thus conditioned by properties surpassing the assumed fixity of the graphic idiom. While their semiotic function is complex and admittedly difficult to parse, these cues support with some success – owing to the described slippages between diverse modes of communication – the theme of non-exception in the reaffirmation of an ongoing whole.

In both the Säde and Saldre designs, the ostensible voters figure primarily as real people: Estonians whose lives are inseparable from their environment. They integrate into their being the conditions of that environment, reinforcing a unique culture forged in its very resistance to the transformations brought by modernity. With this recognition, the Saldre poster in particular offers points of continuity with the Klutsis and the historical context that produced it. Klutsis and his collaborator, Valentina Kulagina, developed versatile modes for suffusing the photographic with revolutionary purpose. As shown in the foregoing analysis, photomontage satisfied the cultural requirements of Soviet collectivization by assimilating those requirements to the mutual antagonism of photographic reproduction and static, singular or otherwise fixed forms. Frankly, the state-as-author fashioned a technical practice whereby typography, photography, and the graphic print, as needed,

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216 вы can be either the plural, second-person (Eng. you) or the pronoun for singular, formal address. я on the other hand is meaningless in isolation. The impossibility of its meaning, in exclusion, is a possible metaphor within the theme I proceed to describe above.
accommodated a fundamentally additive task: to design subjects required for the social transformation toward which it simultaneously coerced them.

That said, Saldre’s design seemed to require foremost a search for models whose hands were impossible to mistake for duplicates. There can be little doubt that the photomontage of three raised hands, composed in an upward, centralized rhythm originated in the Klutsis. But the original device of an undifferentiated Soviet throng beyond the frame, barely captured in a hurried snapshot but nonetheless present, seems to have been a significant factor in the oblique orientation of the composition. Saldre’s design dispenses with the need to account for its symbols by rephrasing from Klutsis. Klutsis used formal and semantic multiplicity to thematize collectivization in a ruse, using fictive devices to create a multitude of figures and voices whose actual origin is a single photograph. Where Klutsis fictionalized and deceived, Saldre foregrounded with clarity the solvent symbolic meanings and photographic origins of his composition. For instance the color red, signifying Bolshevik power on nearly every surface in the Soviet cultural sphere, played a central role in the antagonisms and coercions foisted on Klutsis’s viewer. Saldre’s design instead employs it in a symbolic logic of cooperative transformation of Soviet culture in Estonia – from opaque totalitarianism to civil arbitration and, finally, reconciliation and clarity. Other than overlapping and thus faintly suggesting their simultaneous appearance before the camera, he made no attempt to conceal the variation in lighting from one hand to the next. The resulting quality of artistic candor leads one to assume that the separate photographs were printed at the same enlargement, which is quite possible, and to speculate on the
physical proportions, ages, genders, occupations, even the memories of the sitters.

Our gaze advances upward, toward a white field into which the middle hand barely reaches, while the uppermost hand arrives precisely at the top of the sheet. Further suggesting historical duration, the reach spans the length of the sheet, emerging from partial obscurity upon a solid red ground, reinforcing the general upward thrust, and ultimately concealing the suggested underlying geometry. Upon the clarity of the white void, notably, the red background reemerges to articulate a stable, intelligible message. The silhouette of the longest reach defines the size and contours of the space in which the suggestive, yet cursory slogan appears: “Let’s Vote at the Polls!” As is common, the stem of the Estonian verb “to vote” is, literally, “voice” (hääl), which is not only left intact but organized according to the space immediately surrounding it: an allusion to popular culture as a spatial and temporal matter as opposed to merely textual. The metaphors for community, persistence, historical struggle, and of course equality, are obvious throughout. What is significant is the proposal, even by official graphic designers, that memory and historical reference provide potent tools for perpetually crafting identity, perhaps even a sense of personal or shared, collective peace.

A notable change in the overall body of graphic propaganda is apparent in the elections posters discussed above. Namely, with Stalin’s death the incidence of folksy portrayals of Estonians dwindled, particularly imagery of peasants or other figures dressed in folk costume. Decreasing reference to Estonian ethnic heritage seems to herald an influx of more strictly modern idioms for the distribution of
space, both realistic and abstract, and photography continued its central role.\textsuperscript{217} Public belief in officially mandated “truths” hinged on re-administering the means to image past and future. This became a real possibility with photography’s furtive ability to cultivate taste for experience. Some explanation is needed here, and a helpful example can be found in yet another technique – painting. Though the examples I consider here are not from the Stalin period, they serve nonetheless to elucidate my point. Consider a photorealistic painting by Estonian artist Ando Keskküla in comparison with the painted depiction of photographs in a work by Russian painter Erik Bulatov. (Figs. 3.13-4) Photorealism mimics the lens’s mediation, by means of direct projection onto canvas and the application of illusory effects. Keskküla’s virtuosity is what impresses us because the realism of the subject matter taps photographic testament, despite the fact that the picture is physically conveyed by other means. Bulatov’s painted depiction of photographs differs categorically from this: it bodies forth a complex tension that asks us to exist in more than the present: either the photograph or the painting can occupy the picture plane, but not both simultaneously. The tension resident in each takes place in lieu of our recognition that these works combine painterly and photographic means. It involves the collapse of the photo’s property that Roland Barthes pronounced its \textit{noeme}, its “That-Has-Been.” Illusionistic painting has always entailed the paradox in which the picture plane is simultaneously a physical receptacle for medium and

pigment and the locus of its own disintegration because it mimes something it is definitively not.

With the advent of photography, painting no longer had to, nor could it bear witness to occurrences of causality. In Barthes’ terms one might say That-Hasn’t-Been suddenly defined painting through and through. This is apparent with photography’s incursion into objectivity, when history painting became exactly not tantamount to documenting past events. The use of photography in these paintings is a process of fusing together, at the same place, the unique privilege assumed of each medium: painting is excused from taking any oath, whereas photography cannot escape the suspicion that its surface betrays something that, at one time, really was. This fusion does not merely prevent the visible advance of one medium in front of the other but, even further, permits the painter to blur the causal nature of the index with the whimsy of painting. A compelling contrast of this effect can be seen in an example of the opposite: photographs of non-photographic representations. In Daguerre’s still-life photograph of plaster casts, the faces of the cherubs were no doubt cast from a mold to which they bear the indexical relationship par excellence. At once, emulsion on the surface of the daguerreotype evidences both the moment that focused light was burned into it and the causal condition of surfaces reflecting that light. Thus two indices find themselves occupying the same place, dulling the temporal exactitude usually sensed in photographs, especially those as rich in texture as this. Of course photographs appearing in other photographs demonstrate the similar ability of the medium to reproduce itself without limits on size, saturation, contrast, focus, or scale, as in
Stieglitz’ Paula. (Fig. 3.15) However there are basically no other terms by which to compare photographs made from the same negative. This is not true of Daguerre’s photographs, nor does it apply to either of the paintings. The daguerreotype partakes of a telescopic and infinitely expansive mode that vouchsafes the index, even at a remove. The two paintings, on the other hand, collapse this mode. And they demonstrate the versatility that photographic indexicality enjoys when intersected with unique, handmade forms. This versatility further reflects the term photographic.

Postwar Soviet commemorative posters and images trumpeting the nobility of education offer rich material for exploring the conceptual liquidation and reconsolidation of knowledge, visibility and belief achieved in Stalinist propaganda by photographic means. In the graphics considered here, these changes are not rooted in either photography or in the handmade, but only in their union. As in the Bulatov and Keskküla paintings, the perceived difference between one mode of testimony and another opens conceptual space in which to re-imagine engagement and memory – again, fundamental bases in the production of the subject. It must be remembered that the subject observes, remembers and believes. But along with subjective belief comes the tendency to suspect. Belief flees from easel painting and toward the photographic. Once this is understood, a compromise becomes possible: between photographic belief, and suspicion of replicas made in the absence of photographic testimony.
The ability to re-render historical continuity to accommodate the Soviet narrative demanded that meaning remain mobile. The most effective way to preserve that mobility was to wither the viewer’s capacity to distinguish between two histories: the history of the represented, and that of the medium used to represent. Offset lithography, the preferred technique for propaganda posters, handily diffused the photographic onto painting and drawing, with the result of absorbing and fusing the effects of these freehand idioms. The distinction of the photographic from the handmade became increasingly meaningless in the context of graphic designs that intermingled photo reproductions with hand-drawn details, or provided hand-drawn compositions with subtle photographic enhancement. Cartoon-like imagery of wheat farmers consigning their “First Grain to the State!” and surpluses pouring forth as farms improved their methods, as in a 1957 gouache design by Siima Škop, find apologia in didactic posters like those discussed above. (Figs. 3.16-7) Less successful images, such as a brutally handled 1949 composition celebrating women’s labor, lack the heredity on which such auspicious works as Škop’s actively depended. (Fig. 3.18)

Building on early didactics and the contemporaneous effects I have described as passages, a third type of propaganda poster effectively destroyed the epistemological distinction between the photographed and the drawn, together with the proprietary effects of painting and the hand-pulled print. Leader cult images characterize the type in question, and provide the context in which the totalizing effects of Stalinist visual culture become most clear. Disseminated images of Josef Stalin in propaganda carried official approval, a seal that implied homogeneity. Yet
several image-types of Stalin carried radically different connotations in isolated incidents. They also conferred a degree of epistemological mutability between the media in which they appeared, blurring distinctions between painting, photography, drawing, and printmaking. Both dynamics emerge in the transference of an historic moment in history from photographic record onto easel painting. An unknown photographer basted intense flash over Stalin and Joachim von Ribbentrop during the August, 1939 signing of a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. The scale and depth of the resulting photograph are extremely similar to those in Fedor Reshetnikov’s 1950 portrait in oil, *Dear Stalin*, suggesting the presence of a model. (Figs. 3.19-20) We can consider the leader’s image as exactly that, a model, and it performs opposing functions in each appearance, and on many levels. The temporal fixity of the photograph contrasts sharply against the utter pliability of time and matter in oil painting. This contrast points up not only the fluidity of the model as it traversed eleven years after its first impress, but also the plasticity of testimony, and ultimately the reliability of a medium for representing truth, at the hands of political maneuver. Idealization of Stalin’s physical pose and form merely distract from this plasticity in photographic transit across mediums.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact became a screen for mutual contempt and eventually massive loss of life in World War II. But we lose our ability to impose this specific history on the document, not because it is a *subsequent* history, but because we see it dislodged by a progression toward aspecificity: from officiated, bipartisan accord between states to the pathetic bond of the cult of Stalin-the-father. Whereas documents binding both parties in peace ostensibly lay just beyond the edges of the
photograph, the painting is scattered with the effects of countless emotional contracts. The words “Dyedushkuyu Stalinu” lie flaccid over a crease in a letter on the table, accompanied by depicted drawings and even the child’s photograph. The painted picture repeatedly swears to the truth. This would be irrelevant in the photograph, even render it suspect. A photograph can disavow events subsequent to its creation, though here it need not bother. The painting, meanwhile, owns a license to re-administer circumstances around its model merely because it may choose to adhere to the official model. It is the alliance between the model’s varied uses that allows each medium the conditions of the other.

Though it is quite rich, the link between the photograph and painting just discussed is not unique. Their relationship would even be tendentious were it not for further, similar examples. An evolving morphology for idealizing Stalin’s physical form appears as his features are subtly altered in their displacement from historic photograph to painting. In the Ribbentrop photograph, the dictator’s ears are slightly lower and noticeably further forward than in the painting, his hairline advanced, the contour of his nose fashioned into an elegant aquiline. Further evidence of this formal mobility shows up even in a rapid sketch by Mikael Abdullaev, almost certainly after a photograph of Stalin lying in state. (Figs. 3.21-2) The ear is lowered, the head slightly lifted to make the brain case appear larger and higher, effectively raising the angle of view with respect to the composition.218

218 Bown, 306. Stating that “artists were summoned to paint [Stalin] lying in state,” Bown refers to the Abdullaev painting as an example. That this particular work was probably made after a photograph only suggests Bown was not familiar with the archival image. Regardless, Stalin’s head is at a lower angle in the photograph (and thus was likely lower in actuality) than in the painting.
These devices seem so automatic as to indicate a studied program of molding Stalin’s real proportions. The implication is that the ability to instantly recognize the man as depicted would displace traditional recognition of him as a man.

The state’s command of this program meant an unbounded freedom to cast actual objects in the mythical light of its choosing. Scholars generally recognize the regime’s conquest of classical tradition in art, particularly in architecture. By partaking of the timelessness of classical forms, Soviet propaganda evinces the need that Communist utopia posit an origin. The monumental statue overlooking Prague near Letná Park references classical funerary sculptures like those of the 4th-century BC mausoleum at Halikarnassos. (Fig. 3.23) The terms used by Stalin to describe historical dialectics – emergence and development versus stability and death – seem at odds with a program that links the future with a tradition that had already undergone multiple revivals and recessions. Yet the necessity remained to herald the continuity of Marxist-Leninism into the Stalin era, lest that government’s failures stand out in isolation from the ideals of the Revolution. The Alexandrian cameo tradition fulfilled this function, readily lending itself to graphic design, as in the Estonian Evald Okas’ 1950 poster celebrating the thirty-third anniversary of utopia’s forward march. (Fig. 3.24) The poster depicts a medallion flowering out of a column of leaves, as though the leaders were an inevitable yield of natural processes. The profiles of Lenin and Stalin are distinct and unmistakable, while the identical crook in the eyebrows and the angle of the jaws posits their interchangeability as visionary leaders. The viewer is saddled with several cognitive tasks – leaps linking the historical fact of revolution with the abstract glory
still to come. These leaps are increasingly unreasonable, demanding a degree of
temporal and spatial laxity on the viewer’s part. The years 1917 and 1950 are
paired, across an extremely fictive space, with the appropriate political personage to
the side opposite. The reversal repeats in the Bolshevik revolutionary, who stands
in the space opposite Lenin and in the foreground of flags notably lacking any
emblems. Progression from the armed struggle of the past to the present
construction of a future utopia is more than a matter of statehood, for no one
questioned this. Exclusive, one-way spatial and temporal paradigms are deployed
here in the company of their opposites. Indeed the beginning of the slogan, “Long
live” (elagu) is more than rhetorical here. Background-to-foreground symbolism for
the passage of time mimes physical sedimentation, and therefore enjoys a purchase
in nature. The correspondence of the left-to-right distribution of objects to their
existence over time is pure convention, and that reading is encouraged by the
banner below. Formal distribution along the lines of bookends pedantically states
that the past is causal to the present, the October Revolution the rightful cause of the
glory surrounding its “XXXIII” anniversary. The ostensibly real exchange of
weapons for trowels and overalls borrows the motivated relationship of action and
result in nature, and lends it to the rest of the picture. Flags hoisted to fly emblems
recognizable in the Stalinist present hark back to the ideological fertility of the
revolutionary era, evoked by the blank red field in the flags to the left. These tactics
hinged on reconfiguring conventions that historically confirmed fixity of time and
space as a condition for the existence of objects in the real world.
These conventions for commemorating anniversaries established an irregular Soviet measurement of time. Where the Okas poster commemorates aspects of Soviet civilization in the period 1917-1950, other posters relate the special qualities of Soviet life to different periods. In a poster celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Estonian (Eesti Nõukogude Sotsialistlik Vabariik), two young Estonians parade the large image of Stalin, ensconced by an ornate frame, preceding a cortege of ruffling banners and flags. (Fig. 3.25) Floating in the space beneath the portrait, gold numerals confine the honor to the period since the end of Estonian independence, eliding any reference to violent resistance to Soviet occupation in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. A slightly earlier image memorializes the October revolution, proclaiming “Long Live Great October!” (Fig. 3.26) But here haphazard dashes of gray ink and chaotic scale redirect the inflammatory content of armed Estonian struggle against the Bolsheviks toward national pride rooted in the Russian overthrow of tsarism. As in the election poster described above, movement from background to foreground, increasing clarity, and a hierarchy of color resolve the composition in an upright figure with chiseled features, placed before a field of deep red. Viewed collectively, these images prevent the construal of a coherent temporality for understanding the end of tsarism, liberation of the proletariat, Estonian independence, and Soviet occupation as historical facts.

Analyzing another, far more recognizable image of Stalin suggests broader application of the visual rhetoric discussed so far. The model in question was projected across the mediums of photography, painting, drawing and printmaking.
As with the model of the Molotov-Ribbertrop photo, this projection further unfixed the causality between pictures that depicted the same thing. Referring to hagiography in the Byzantine and Orthodox icon traditions, Becker has termed this kind of source image “pre-textual.” This language is helpful as it suggests a range of symbolic function for the image as it moves between contexts – here, different idioms and traditions of representation. Consider a poster depicting the annual May 1 Victory Day parade commemorating the fall of Nazi Germany. (Fig. 3.27) Each regeneration across media transcends the proprietary conceits of each, in this case indexical truth-to-life and editorial interpretation. The model, or text, eventually plumbs the interior of each new medium as it relocates itself. The model of Stalin initially appears in other pictures, but grows to occupy a conceptual space definable only as propagandistic, commandeering spatial dimensions and delimiting a virtual reality. A photographic, reproducible and thus modular experience of the world, then, was what a viewer could expect in official imagery. A Stalin portrait that appears as a drawing in a poster exalting tireless study of Marxist-Leninist theory also appears in a 1951 May Day poster. (Fig. 3.28) The latter instance renders the leader’s image in a manner evocative of photographic verisimilitude not seen in the first poster. Similar to the image in the Reshetnikov, this portrait most likely originated from a photograph, namely a 1930s snapshot of Stalin with president of the USSR, M. Kalinin. (Fig. 3.29) The same portrait appeared in oil paintings by Vyacheslav Mariupolski and Aleksandr Laktionov as a picture within a picture. (Figs.

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3.30-1) In all of these pictures, the medium of the reproduced portrait is notably indeterminate. The plausibility of the photograph-after-a-photograph is complicated by its interpretation in oil, as suggested by the adjacent map in the former image, whose one-to-one relationship to the real is assumed. The later removal of Stalin’s image at Khruschev’s demand would have ruptured the implied empathy between visionary youth and leader, effectively destroying the painting.

The Estonian paradigm of totalized art meant that the question of truth in representation became inseparable from the very presence of representation. Propaganda became an object beyond suspicion. This is the bare aesthetics of Soviet totalitarianism, but that terminology has always been rather opaque. We should say that the full color of official Soviet art simply does not appear because it was never anything but deferred, always contingent. The concurrence of language, art and realia was guaranteed by their fusion in official culture. A strategy of indistinction between messages and between media enacted that fusion. That Soviet socialist realism achieved this aspecificity does not corroborate Cold War models of modernism eschewing modularity in favor of medium-specific opticality.

The Russian avant-garde consistently held the attitude that art must select the future rather than wait for it to issue out of the present. The Soviet version of history was equally selective, omitting undesirable events such as the unraveling of Bolshevik power in Estonia following the 1917 October Revolution.²²⁰ The authoritative power of the photograph was enlisted in such efforts to impress this

²²⁰ Raun, 99-104.
official history on the Estonian people. The photograph’s authority was an operative element in the Stalinist campaign to alter everyday visual culture during its vulnerable period following the war. After all, the Baltic Republics were a new acquisition, and the project of displacing local narratives with official history was an urgent concern. Not surprisingly, the postwar Soviet narrative acknowledged the 1918 German occupation of Estonia only obliquely as it celebrated the defeat of Fascism (a different regime entirely) at the conclusion of World War II.

To illustrate, a 1950 poster by the prolific Estonian designer L. Samoilov displaces that history by relegating it to a moment beyond what it acknowledges as relevant historical memory. (Fig. 3.32) Declaring “They Had Better Not Forget This!” the picture delimits a vision of the past in which mass killing and capitalist greed amount to an affront against the otherwise glorious upward march of the proletariat. The black margin works as a photographic frame to suggest two distinct images, captured separately and then brought into conflict: the still, moonlit yard of a prison, and a cartoonish gamut of characters signifying principal players in World War II. The prison yard element continues in an area at the lower-right, isolated between the continued frame and the form of an emaciated holocaust survivor. This device suggests an a posteriori condition: of having been spared the brunt of the historical dialectic. References to familiar details of ghetto and prison architecture seem attempts to offset with historical accuracy the utter absurdity of the equation. The figures of a Nazi official and a concentration camp survivor bracket depictions of a stereotypical cigar-puffing Churchill and a graying Roosevelt, whose irradiated hand clutches a miniature atomic bomb. Greenish complexions symbolize moral
putrefaction, particularly in the corpulent body type, an apparent hybrid of Churchill and the facial exaggeration of Hirohito made familiar in cartoons by Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss. (Fig. 3.33) The regularity of one noose per enumerated offender eases tension brought about by liberties taken with caricature and inconsistent scale. An enormous, muscular forearm with a rolled-up sleeve enters the picture from beyond the frame, from the present glory of the proletariat in its upward struggle. The postponed judgment forms a basis for the movement of temporal cues from left to right.

In a more schematic poster by Samoilov from about the same time, the artist uses a more didactic approach to figure a related theme. (Fig. 3.34) In a less artful design, vignettes accompany a simplistic parable of collective joy in the struggle against bourgeois imperialism. The parable is unnecessary to the self-explanatory composition, counteracting the artist’s skill with combining the textual lesson for the future with the containment of history within pictures. Similar to the other work, however, is the provision of an ideal history depicted in the contrast between ideologically skewed versions of past events. Text identifies the figure of the bloated capitalist in this poster as a Wall Street millionaire. The if-then pedantic binds figurative representations in a causal relationship through narrated time, compounded in the progression from the upper to the lower register. Tacitly extending his previous use of ample anatomy to signify imperialist greed in the body of Churchill, Samoilov’s capitalist unifies that narrative with anti-bourgeois sentiment specific to the USA, as well as touting Soviet alliance with China in the Sino-Japanese war.
Reliance on the instantaneous broadly describes the way we encounter another medium: photography. Only recently has the innocuous repose enjoyed by photographs been effectively challenged.\textsuperscript{221} In the 1950s, this photographic privilege saturated official graphics. The Soviet historical narrative was a constant production of molding the record of the past into whatever was most expedient in achieving the goals of the present. It was understood that correspondence between photographs and fact is not simply a matter of the visible world writing itself onto photographic emulsion to produce images. The observing subject supposes the unique bond of cause and effect in observations, transforming the observed into an event. But in Estonian propaganda after World War II the reality of historical events was produced through deft manipulation of the past via photography’s presumed innocence. The state enlisted not photography itself, but the \textit{photographic}. The difference in these terms is important here, and it lies in separating photography as a mechanical means from photography as a method of creating belief.

Photographs conceal this difference, and this is precisely why they afford an extraordinary command of mythology. One of photography’s principal conventions is its capacity to seize and select from spatial and temporal continuity, and then represent bits of that continuity as “events.” This quality of photographs readily aligns with the normal functions of memory precisely because it goes unnoticed. Like the memory, photography observes or chooses objects from realia and re-presents them: for the viewing subject to select and mentally attend to as though they were

real experiences. Martin Heidegger’s thinking is helpful here, as it suggests a model for understanding how this operation forms the subject. To paraphrase one author, the phantasmagoria of our existence only takes narrative form within our memory: in remembering, one reconstructs punctuations in temporal existence inserted by his unique attention. Memory construed as reconstructed attention approaches a sense of one’s being, or Dasein as Heidegger called it, issuing forth from one’s engagement with the world. The differentiation exerted on the lived world is one way of describing this engagement. And this engagement produces our being because it is all that remains, and it remains as memory.

Moving forward, inadvertent observation may be guided by one’s memory: unique experience informs a later, subjective taste for noticing certain kinds of things and not others. For lack of an empirical explanation, memory informs what can only be understood as subjective taste, and arguably causes the difference between attention and distraction. The photograph fulfils a similar program of one’s subjective selection, owing to a number of qualities whose power photography seduces the viewer out of consciously appreciating. The paradigm of attention versus distraction is perpetually renewed as one’s environs become lived – punctuation for later memory as opposed to the forgotten. The same, dynamic renewal generates the seductive power unique to photography, and perhaps defines

222 Joan Didion, The White Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): 11. Didion observed that we live “by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.”

it better than any of its other aesthetic or mechanical attributes. Inadvertent or willed, subjective choice is applied to objects and circumstances at hand such that they become *experienced*. In this way, observation continuously reinforces the subject’s assumption that his memories and experiences are worthwhile because they appear to cause each other. Photography’s mimicry of this mechanism is what is meant here by the term photographic.

The observing subject welcomes the photographic because it appeals to his desire for confirmation that the way he has experienced, and continues to experience the world, is indeed reliable. The famous photograph showing Rodchenko’s hanging *Spatial Constructions* at the Spring, 1921 OBMoKhu exhibition always enjoys superior authority to reconstructions of those objects in museums around the world. (Figs. 3.35-6) Despite the inherently constructed nature of photographs, other methods of representation are perceived as secondary, even if they more closely approximate the forms of the real artifact. Non-photographic reproduction suffers from the perception that margins for mediation are instantly broadened in the very remove from photo techniques. As David King and Leah Dickerman recently demonstrated, unconditional credence of photographic testimony is gravely misplaced. While such mediation is possible in photographs, the precedence of a photograph in the case of the Rodchenko replica presents a context to which the reconstruction points for its authority, claiming continuity with the historical contingency binding the original. This text always resides at a remove from the presumed one-to-one relationship between the photographic sign and its referent. Yet the presence of a reconstruction deflects the viewer’s attending doubt
away from the photograph, replacing the photograph’s dubious claim to truth with a degree of chastity. The viewer knows this innocence is illusive, and yet it remains intact precisely because the viewer prefers it to the reconstruction. The original context and the secondary text mutually reinforce each other. It is intuitive that the maker of photographic images is empowered in his freedom to deploy photographic seduction by his perceived inability to affect such seduction in techniques other than photography. Concealed by their appeal to the imagination is an array of functions endowing photographs with a secondary, also unique power to embody – or disembody – any medium. Soviet Estonian propagandists sought to overcome audiences’ faculties of critique of official images by transcending this perceived inability. This was achieved in the merger of photography’s testimonial authority with the authenticating potency of the handmade original in mass printmaking in the Estonian SSR.

Much scholarship on the Soviet heroic ideal exists in which the typical focus of inquiry is the development of archetypal imagery depicting workers, mothers, students and professionals or specialists in joyful advancement of collective utopia. There can be no doubting the importance of these idols to unofficial artists who turned painting to conceptual purposes in the 1970s and 80s, such as the Russian duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. (Fig. 3.37)²²⁴ But these studies usually ignore iconicity’s troubled relationship with objectivity, particularly as it played out in visual Soviet propaganda. Specifically, representations of a reality that can only

²²⁴ See my note on Degot’s reference to Soviet officiation of mass culture and its link to later unofficial art.
be purported necessarily entail torturing the conventions of objectivity as they
stride toward that aim. In order to be “realistic,” pictures must maintain a purchase
on the reality outside of themselves. The icons of Soviet utopia live in a world
where satisfaction of that condition is constantly postponed. This aspect of Soviet
socialist realism seems indebted to the revolutionary avant-garde. Groys has traced
this debt to Bolshevik cooption of the intelligentsia in the political climate of Lenin’s
early-1920s New Economic Policy. Pursuant to Groys’ concept of a total work of art,
the disbursal of images, most appreciably that of Josef Stalin, across different media
effectively destroyed the special character any of these might have otherwise
enjoyed. This was a totalizing effect, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* par excellence, and it does
more to explain Groys’ concept than any study to date. Neither the critique of a
culture of the distributed copy, nor the search for a universal will to vanguard
creative production does much to elucidate artistic tendencies that appeared in
postwar Estonia, whether Soviet or un-soviet. The Stalinization of Estonia was a
project that cross-fertilized official history with objective truth through a project
that homogenized historical traditions in visual art in the service of communist
utopia. That is, Stalinist culture enlisted graphic design in the service of re-
organizing life, collectivizing its representation into a monistic whole. It was this
whole that alternative Estonian art confronted at its inception following the cultural
Thaw of the 1950s and early 1960s.

The arrangement just described is important because it constitutes a sort of
antipode to modernism as classically understood in the Western examples cited
here. Indeed, Clement Greenberg’s mature notion of the distinction of art forms
judges the quality of an artwork by the degree to which it sequesters itself from other categories of technique. The present analysis confirms that the modernist character of Soviet Estonian mass culture was its assimilation and, subsequently, attempted absorption of distinct modes of meaning creation into a totalized field. In the mass culture of Soviet Estonia, this total field was pursued not through melding art with life, but by gradually rendering art forms indistinguishable from each other.
Chapter 4: Estonian Art and the Khrushchev Thaw

4.1 Introduction: It

On the evening of April 11, 1969, a performance took place before students gathered in the café of Tartu University, in central Estonia. (Fig. 4.1) a student of English language and literature named Toomas Raudam225 proceeded slowly between the tables, jingling a hand-bell periodically, to signify that “it” was beginning.226 A record player crackled hippie music from the Hair soundtrack while, directed by Enn Tegova and Peeter Urbla, Viktor Kerge posed in the form of a cross at the back of the room.227 Tegova and Urbla then traced the contour of their friend’s body, naked from the waist up, onto the wall in red. The occasion included readings of poetry about a seemingly remote subject whose parallels to life in Soviet Estonia were structural at best. As Raudam recalled,

the message was the same – long live freedom of creativity and the Republic of Biafra,228 which had just

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226 The only documentation I am aware of is “Toomas Raudam: Mina olen Visarid” (Toomas Raudam: I am the Visars) in ed. Kalju Põllu, Kunstirühmitus Visarid (The Artists’ Group Visarid), exh. cat. (Tallinn: Tallinn Art Hall Gallery, November 27 – December 14, 1997): 76-9. Originally published in Vikerraar (Estonia) 7 (1994): 49-54. Significantly, Raudam used the nondescript word “it” (Est. seda) to collectively name the events that were about to unfold.

227 Enn Tegova (born November 13, 1946 in Tartu, Estonia) studied livestock farming at the Estonian Academy of Agriculture until 1970. He meanwhile attended studio art classes at Tartu University, where he sat in on lectures in art history, Eastern Philosophy, and semiotics. Tegova enrolled at Tartu Art School in 1974 to study painting, and graduated in 1978. Founding member of Visarid in 1967. Peeter Urbla (born June 2, 1945 in Türi, Estonia) studied history at Tartu University from 1963 until his graduation in 1969. He became involved with the art studio in 1964. His paintings regularly appeared in the studio’s annual Spring exhibitions. No details of Viktor Kerge are known to me.

228 The Republic of Biafra was the brief result of a nationalist movement in Nigeria in the late 1960s. On January 15, 1966, Major Chukuma Nzogwu had led the coup that ousted Nigeria’s pro-Muslim government and its head, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Having gained independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria remained divided along ethnic lines, with Hausa and Fulani groups in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast. Though nationalist sentiment motivated the coup, it was
recently regained its independence. And everyone knew what Kaplinski\textsuperscript{229} meant when at the end of his poem he cried: ‘Long live a free Biafra.’ Biafra was small and occupied just like Estonia, and what’s more, it had taken Sibelius’ ‘Finlandia’ for its hymn and placed blue, black and white in whatever order on their flag. It was free for a few years before being swallowed up again by Nigeria.\textsuperscript{230}

From his testimony, it is clear that Raudam and his friends sought to identify the plight of Estonian culture under Soviet subjugation with post-colonial struggles as embodied by the Biafra movement in Nigeria. This identification notably involved the participants in reinterpretation and, as Raudam’s testimony repeatedly demonstrates, outright exaggeration of verifiable facts. For example, he claims that Biafra “regained” its independence when, in reality, its brief existence was the first time in history that the borders of a nation-state – the modern geopolitical expression of national identity – corresponded to the territory where Igbo people lived. Secondly, the Biafran national anthem was actually “Land of the Rising Sun,” which was only based on Sibelius’ “Finlandia.” Lastly, Raudam asserts that the

\textsuperscript{229} Jaan Kaplinski (born January 22, 1941 in Tartu, Estonia), a poet, philosopher, and political activist, is a prominent Estonian intellectual. His father, Jerzy Kaplinski, had lectured at Tartu University and, a Pole by birth, was arrested and imprisoned by the NKVD (the predecessor to the Soviet KGB) during the war. He died in a Siberian labor camp. His son Jaan went on to study linguistics at Tartu, taking a degree in French philology in 1964. He was elected to Parliament in 1992, serving until 1995. In 1996, along with his countryman Jaan Kross, Kaplinski was a nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature.

\textsuperscript{230} Raudam, in ed. Põllu, 94.
palette of the Biafra movement’s tricolor resembled that of pre-war Estonia, which is simply untrue.\textsuperscript{231}

Moreover, he takes pains to point out that the Biafra performance was Estonia’s first “happening.”\textsuperscript{232} Yet, as he and his circle knew, their performance lacked precisely the singularity that awkward noun-verb was concocted to designate.\textsuperscript{233} Nor was it accidental that the act of tracing Kerge’s body onto the café wall resonated with impromptu drawings created by the American Jim Dine in his 1960 performances \textit{The Smiling Workman} and \textit{Car Crash}, and by visitors to Allan Kaprow’s \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts}, 1959. (Figs. 4.2-4) Surely, too, the Estonian instigators knew that the hippie musical \textit{Hair} had taken its name from a drawing by Dine, and that a bell signaled the beginning and end of various acts in Kaprow’s \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts}.\textsuperscript{234}

\textsuperscript{231} The tricolor flag of the Republic of Biafra was red, black, and green. This color scheme derived from the pan-African flag design of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. The rising sun had eleven rays, symbolizing each of Biafra’s provinces.

\textsuperscript{232} The term “happening” first appeared in Allan Kaprow’s 1959 article “The Demiurge,” in which he expressed the need for art that was “really new” (\textit{The Anthologist} [Rutgers University] 30/4 (1959): 4-24). In a section resembling a theater script and entitled “Something to take place: a happening,” the author described actions that surfaced in later happenings, including his most famous, \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts}. The author struggled to differentiate between “arts of the past” and happenings, which “have no structured beginning, middle or end. Their form is open-ended and fluid; nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences to which one is more than normally attentive. They exist for a single performance, or only a few more, and are gone forever, while new ones take their place.“ See Kaprow, “‘Happenings’ in the New York Scene,” \textit{Art News} 60/3 (May 1961): 58. The annoying vernacular use of the term to connote the spontaneous or casual may have eventually forced Kaprow to acknowledge that \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts} was both highly structured and heavily rehearsed. See Kaprow, “A Statement,” in ed. Michael Kirby \textit{Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology} (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1965): 47. While polemics revolving around the degrees to which different happenings were spontaneous are beyond the scope of this dissertation, the reader is referred to Kirby’s book for further reading. See also Joan Marter, “The Forgotten Legacy: Happenings, Pop Art, and Fluxus at Rutgers University” and Kristine Stiles, “Battle of the Yams: Contentless Form and the Recovery of Meaning in Events and Happenings” in ed. Marter \textit{Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963}, exh. cat. (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, February 18 – May 16, 1999): 1-48; 118-29 and André Lepecki, “Redoing \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts},” in eds. Barry Rosen and Michaela Unterdörfer \textit{18 Happenings in 6 Parts}, exh. cat. (Munich: Haus der Kunst, November 8-10, 2006): 45-50.
*Happenings.* Everything that was supposedly new about the event, in fact, cited a precedent.

And yet to dismiss Raudam’s errors for their factual inaccuracy would be to disregard the pattern of projection they follow. Nor should the surreptitious retooling of decade-old American happenings be condemned as plagiarism – or worse, excised altogether from art histories of this period. Rather, understood as significant excesses, they register an aesthetic impulse to reinterpret existing cultural texts for the creation of new subject positions. In the present case, comparison of Estonia to “small and occupied” Biafra raised queries about the legitimacy of Soviet cultural hegemony, renewed prospects for Estonian identity in the wake of Stalinism, and their expression in forms both intrinsic to and critical of the Estonian experience of modernity. To answer these questions, the performers and their audience joined an “imagined community,” collectively generating

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234 In a recent publication, Sirje Helme, director of the Art Museum of Estonia, made no reference to the Biafra happening or Raudam’s text, both of which she would have known through her involvement in the catalog I cite. This is presumably because the references to Kaprow and Dine in the Biafra happening were so overt. The unfortunately defensive tone of Helme’s concluding passage on Estonian happenings suggests, perhaps, anxiety to prevent the perceived “unoriginality” of such extreme examples from tainting Estonian art more generally. Lest it go unsaid, my steadfast opinion is that this likely anxiety is sadly misguided. Invoking “emulation,” Helme glossed – at an opportune moment to instead explore – the aesthetic implications of such referential work: “[...] we cannot overestimate the sometimes clear cases of the use of US or British Pop Art models. The emulation of models in the late 1960s can be compared to the teaching of drawing from plaster casts in an art school: in this way the artist was preparing for something which led to an independent work of art with a different meaning and value.” Sirje Helme, “Informatsioonikillud (Bits of Information)” in ed. Helme Popkunst Forever: Eesti Popkunst 1960. ja 1970. aastate vahetusel (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2010): 31-5.
concepts and vernacular language adequate to mediate experiences like that just described. 235

The Biafra happening will periodically serve as a point of orientation in the
course of this chapter, which reconstructs and analyzes Estonian underground art
and its display in the aftermath of Stalinism. Such reconstruction will suggest
continuity with adaptive practices of identity production as previously observed in
19th- and early-20th-century Estonian art. When situated in the context of post-
Stalin changes in the Soviet cultural climate, this art frequently appears to repossess
from official Socialist realism the historicist epithet discussed in Chapter 1. It did so
precisely as Soviet culture strived to reinvent itself as modern 236 in the eyes of a
public already literate in “revolutionary romanticism,” how held to be “narrow, one-
sided” by official decree. 237 By examining the function of audience literacy in both
official and unofficial art, my larger objective is to indicate paths toward a concept of
modernism that understands as aesthetic value the relational work done by

235 I borrow these terms from Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin
236 The most significant contributions in this area to date are Susan E. Reid’s. To my knowledge, this
study is the first to engage her findings with the Estonian case. See Susan E. Reid, “Destalinization
and the Remodernization of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism,” Ph.D Dissertation
(University of Pennsylvania, 1996); “Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-engagement with
Western Modernism in the Khrushchev Thaw,” in eds. Reid and Rosalind P. Blakesley Russian Art and
the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts (Dekalb: Northern
and the Contemporary Style of Painting,” in eds. Reid and David Crowley Style and Socialism:
237 From “Podgotovka k Vsesoiuznoi Khudozhestvennoi vystavke-vazhneishaia zadacha tvorcheskih
Control: From the 1917 Revolution to Khrushchev’s Thaw,” in eds. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton Dodge,
From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, exh. cat. (New Brunswick, NJ: Jane
Estonian art at its most salient. That aesthetic value in turn challenges an ethos of originality underpinning western Modernist theory since its inception, a matter I take up directly in the concluding chapter.

4.2 Official Ideology and Culture in the Thaw

The notion that those evening events in the café were a “first,” by which Raudman implied a sort of temporal break, is striking not merely because they reenacted\(^\text{239}\) previous performances. In stressing his point, Raudam suggested a qualitative departure from Estonian art made before 1969. In fact, the evening’s events followed a unique tradition of reinterpretation born in the Estonian National Awakening, briefly repressed by Stalin’s regime, and reinvigorated by unofficial artists over the course of the subsequent decade. In this view, the happening in question resembled a culmination more than a new beginning. Without a clearer understanding of this tradition and its roots in the national movement, Estonian art appears largely a sequence of “false interpretations,” as one curator described it.\(^\text{240}\) Raudam’s claims and their motivations\(^\text{241}\) aside, the late 1950s and 1960s saw Estonian artists reconnecting with Western art trajectories that Stalinist cultural repression obscured from view.

The art in question often attested to the use of a specific model through overt references to precedents. As in the described happening, such references compelled audiences to seek meanings that exceeded official history and ideology, thereby


\(^{241}\) By excluding any mention of Kaprow or Dine, Raudam exhibits symptoms of an anxiety among Estonian creative intellectuals over the perception that their work may be unoriginal. See also note 10.
transcending any vague notions of aesthetic autonomy. As stated above, this strategy was hardly new. Just as the Tartu happening recalled Kaprow, so the lobster atop an inclined platter in Alfred Hirv’s 1910s still-life opened a channel to the Dutch 17th-century, perhaps via the oeuvre of Willem Kalf, himself a renowned copyist. (Figs. 4.5-6)

A similar effect pervades Oskar Hoffmann’s 1902 portrait of an inn patron reading Postimees, the daily Estonian-language newssheet. (Fig. 4.7) Here, the features and habits of a typical middle-class Estonian man appear through tropes grafted from works by Jan Steen, which Hoffmann would have studied in the Hermitage.242 (Fig. 4.8) Freely translating to a local patois from Steen’s model, Hoffmann surrounded the sitter’s visage – more of it than likely visible from the given vantage point – with objects placed in a manner that is simultaneously casual and conspicuous, as in so many Dutch examples. Foreshortened or abruptly cropped episodes, while underscoring varying texture and luminosity, seem less concerned with the convincing depiction of objects, as in Steen’s 1660 The Doctor’s Visit, and more so with the seductive potential of the space around them. Even signing and dating objects in the painting, as was Steen’s habit, Hoffmann encoded his image of contemporary Estonian social mobility. Decidedly European in orientation, these ciphers extend to the identity of their male viewer, but only insofar as he becomes versed in European art history. Just three years later, the poet Gustav Suits condensed this aesthetic impulse, declaring in the almanac of the

group Noor Eesti (Young Estonia), “Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans!”

To better understand how unofficial Estonian art constituted a revival, this chapter traces the creative work of the Tartu avant-garde to its emergence in the late 1950s. In its assimilation of Western models, and in the public nature of forums in which this interpretative work began to place, 1960s Estonian art was shaped by drastic changes in Soviet life that followed Stalin’s death in March 1953. It will become clear that by employing historicist modes that assumed the viewer’s familiarity with external models, unofficial artists took command of a basic tenet of official Socialist realism: historical continuity. To demonstrate this, it is worthwhile to reconstruct here the official reaction to Stalin’s death.

In the February 1956 “secret speech” to the Twentieth Party Congress, his successor Nikita Khrushchev denounced the irrational cruelty of Stalin’s previous policies. Though they took the form of political accusations against his dead predecessor, Khrushchev’s admissions were momentous, signaling the onset of a more permissive atmosphere, but at the cost of acknowledging the regime’s capacity and need for self-examination. Subsequent Party rhetoric extolled progress toward communism in alignment with new moral imperatives, largely discarding the revolutionary fervor of Stalinism.


Official propaganda in the Estonian SSR soon reflected these changes, renewing the pictorial arsenal needed if communist ideology was to preserve one of its basic formulae: the universal satisfaction of human material need coupled with themes of equality. Marx had succinctly heralded the advent of communism in terms of material abundance: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”

This formula accounted for both human frailty and vigor in the production phase, and their potential disproportion in the consumption phase. In letter, the struggle to eradicate the injustices of want in the shadow of decadent opulence was just, especially so in the first years of Soviet life, when the memory of life under the Romanovs was still somewhat fresh. Having disavowed Stalinism, Party rhetoric in the thaw revived Marxist-Leninist tenets of egalitarianism as part of a longer struggle, thereby eliding the recent past:

The Communists reject the class morality of the exploiters; in contrast to the perverse, selfish views and morals of the old world, they promote communist morality, which is the noblest and most just morality, for it expresses the interests and ideals of the whole of working mankind [...]. Communist morality encompasses the fundamental norms of human morality which the masses of the people evolved in the course of millennia [...]. As socialist and communist construction progresses, communist morality is enriched with new principles, a new content.

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The program went on to restate Marx’s principle in the context of a “moral code,” linking cognitive states of communist devotion, love, and conscientiousness to biological sustenance: “he who does not work, neither shall he eat.” Imbedded in the old rhetoric – references to proto-communist thinking, predictions that classes will disappear, and the promise that the state will wither away – was a new Party line that reconciled selective historical memory to the cultural requirements of a post-Stalin society.

To renew its legitimacy, the Party strove to refashion itself by appealing to the formation of “a new content” in a material culture conceived as simultaneously socialist and modern. The program concluded, “Unlike all the preceding socio-economic formations, communist society does not develop spontaneously, but as a result of the conscious and purposeful efforts of the masses led by the Marxist-Leninist policy.”

Old rhetoric such as the spontaneity-continuity opposition was thus retooled to suit contemporary political goals. Corresponding adaptations occurred in official cultural forms, where a new and conciliatory attitude toward realism and abstraction emerged in the late-1950s. At odds in the Stalin era, realism and abstraction were accommodated to a hybrid aligned with Khrushchev’s palliative maneuvers. This hybrid required processes of formal adaptation, breeding new strategies to frame the consciousness of the viewing collective.

As described in Chapter 3, Stalinist mass culture activated a vast yet highly coherent program for cognitive coercion, instilling aesthetic, linguistic, and

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247 Ibid.
248 In ibid., 273.
behavioral norms in the viewing public. The Soviet command economy’s structure around targets spelled out in propaganda for five- and seven-year plans remains perhaps the most recognized expression of this program. Though seldom explored, changing circumstances caused this program to convulse as it realigned itself in order to create new meaning from the archive of official culture. The resemblances to the state of affairs once facing the revolutionary avant-garde should be obvious to the reader. While official forms had encoded utopian desire in a cogent set of themes, appealing to specific areas of struggle – dam construction, dairy production, government bond sales, etc. – goals fluctuated dramatically between propaganda campaigns in accordance with political expediency.

For example, Heino Sampu’s 1961 poster for Estonian dairy farms remobilized heroic subjectivity in keeping with Khrushchev’s corrective stance toward “conscious organization of production and social life.” (Fig. 4.9) Within four years, however, such individuation of the peasant class would be condemned along political lines, in line with Mikhail Suslov’s secret speech to the CPSU. Suslov denounced Khrushchev’s creation of local economic councils as follows:

The creation at Khrushchev’s initiative of two party organizations – industrial and rural – caused much confusion and represents the creation of two new parties, a workers’ party and a peasants’ party. [...] It is harder to struggle with a living cult than with a dead

249 In ibid., 270.
one. If Stalin destroyed people physically, Khrushchev destroyed them morally.\textsuperscript{250}

Stylistically, Sampu’s composition embodies the post-Stalin convergence of realist and “modernist” approaches previously deemed antithetical to socialist order.\textsuperscript{251} Modular forms, abstract or reductive passages of color, and a compressed sense of narrative center around a solitary human figure. The tableau thus corresponds to “socialist humanism,”\textsuperscript{252} a new realist style claimed by the international socialist camp exhibiting at the 1957 Festival of Youth in Moscow. Debates staged at the festival attempted to negotiate values entrenched in the realism-modernism dichotomy. As Susan Reid observed,

Where international modernism acted as the cultural arm of imperialism, denying human experience, suppressing national specificity, and imposing abstraction’s “cosmopolitan uniformity”... realism, by contrast, placed “man” at the center and was the


\textsuperscript{251} See Susan E. Reid, “Toward a New (Socialist) Realism,” in eds. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Reid \textit{Russian Art and the West. A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts} (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007): 229. A two-day debate was held in connection with exhibitions at the 1957 Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. Reid observes, “In the international socialist context in which Soviet art had now to stand up, in light of its self-appointed role as leader of the world socialist camp, the term realism began to be used almost interchangeably with a new term, the ‘art of humanism.’ [...] In a debate at the festival, the ‘art of humanism’ emerged as a kind of united front, a socialist international style of modernity to set against that other international style, the ‘anti-human’ art of modernism.”

\textsuperscript{252} Describing contemporary Polish posters in one display, a delegate noted, “the artist’s great emotional engagement, trying to create images that can capture the viewer, lapidary and laconic in form, and humanist in content.” Reid trans. The author cites Vadim Polevoi, “Khudozhnik i zhizn,” \textit{Iskusstvo} 6 (1957): 27. None of the Polish posters is reproduced in that source.
guarantor of national cultural autonomy and diversity.  

The Sampu poster also adheres to the program adopted by the Communist Party in late 1961 in that it implies a specific managerial task. Perfunctory typography, broad passages of contrasting colors and laconic formal repetition situate the edition within a recently modernized vocabulary of official graphic address. The text in red establishes, in thousands of tons, yearly quotas for meat and milk yields met by the Estonian SSR. The farm’s representative was expected to fill in the spaces in the white margin at the bottom, declaring,

OUR [farm name]  PRODUCED [number] TONS OF MEAT  
AND [number] TONS OF MILK

Through the act of recording these figures, the farm representative performed at several levels. Script added by hand created a dialogic system, responding to the poster’s language while extending the pictorial field to include the marks of the declaring subject, made in present time and space. Naming the farm in the possessive “our” (meie) the farmers became a collective subject in a ritualized performance encompassing pictorial, verbal, and spatial dimensions that encompassed the body of the updated Soviet citizen.

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253 In Ibid.
The bulk of the 1961 Party Program proposed tasks for the ideological instruction of Soviet people. The longest section treats the indoctrinating potential of the scientific and cultural spheres, with the “molding of the new man” heading the agenda. This process was to be achieved through “rationality” precipitating from new modes of social organization remarkably consistent with those elicited by the farm poster:

As communist forms of social organization are created, communist ideas will become more firmly rooted in life and work and in human relations, and people will develop the ability to enjoy the benefits of communism in a rational way. Joint planned labour by the members of society, their daily participation in the management of state and public affairs, and the development of communist relations of comradely cooperation and mutual support recast the minds of people in a spirit of collectivism, industry, and humanism.²⁵⁴

Sampu’s design creatively mobilized collective subjectivity through administrating a ritual of public congregation and regulated speech act. Empirical measurement of the farm’s contribution to net dairy production is a mere pretense for this collectivizing ritual. Their clear inscription in bright, contrasting colors lends the numbered units and measured time a veil of scientific objectivity and thus innocent design. Appealing to a scientific impulse, the composition masks its coercive purpose behind a carefully crafted, arguably reflective surface whose differences

from Laktionov’s canvas, described in Chapter 1, are at most formal. In attempting to describe this surface, we approach an understanding of the performative dimensions in which Party propagandists staged official culture’s reinvention.

The manufacture of Soviet culture was more than a matter of reduplication, as Ekaterina Degot recently claimed. Rather, it entailed generating new signs, frequent paradoxes of which the leadership groped to rationalize. Under the rubric of erasing capitalist forms from the “minds and behaviour of people,” the new program observed that, “The power of example in public affairs and in private life, in the performance of one’s public duty, acquires tremendous educational significance.” Officially, public behavior, spaces, speech acts and other forms of “social organization” were believed to facilitate the reconstruction of language – to produce new meaning – insofar as their initial intelligibility was ensured by a battery of symbolic relationships already conventionalized by Soviet propaganda.

Nonetheless, official culture grew increasingly incoherent as progress toward utopia became a matter of technological advance. For now it is sufficient to note that political stagecraft, and not just the advance of the Soviet worker along the path to communism, motivated increased appeals to outpace Western competitors. The Soviet Union famously entered a contest with the United States at the Moscow American Exhibition where, before an RCA television display, Khrushchev announced to US Vice-President Richard Nixon, “In another seven years we will be

256 In ed. Daniels., 271. My emphasis.
on the same level as America. When we catch up with you, while passing by we will wave back to you.”257  This prediction ultimately contradicted utopian themes heralded at home: with the abundance of communism, physical labor was supposed to diminish, the working day shorten.258  As one recent study found, “Torn between promises of plenty and rationalizations for scarcity, the project to cultivate an enlightened socialist consumer instead became a finishing school for citizen alienation.”259  It may have been to alleviate this contradiction that Party ideologues crafted the sacrosanct notion of “Communist Morality.” Claiming “Labour for the benefit of society is the sacred duty of all,” Khrushchev’s program called for faith and the suspension of critical discourse:

In the course of transition to communism, the moral principles of society become increasingly important; the sphere of action of the moral factor expands and the importance of the administrative control of human relations diminishes accordingly. The Party will encourage all forms of conscious civic self-discipline leading to the assertion and promotion of the basic rules of the communist way of life.260

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259 Castillo, 204.
260 See Daniels, 270.
Progress along the utopian path was a matter of correct perspective termed “the moral factor,” a prescribed behavioral code whose validity lacked any manifest proof.

Efforts to align the moral righteousness of the Soviet subject with progress toward the construction of communism involved campaigns to distinguish socialist and post-colonial cultures from their imperialist, bourgeois counterparts. The Festival of Youth had hosted delegations representing Soviet republics and the Peoples Republics in the Eastern Bloc, as well as “Left-wing” or “progressive” tendencies within capitalist countries. The desired outcome of exchanges and debates there was the coherence – and commitment to memory - of a modern style corresponding to the new goals of socialism as it adopted an increasingly international scope.261

Estonian graphics produced in the late 1950s reflected this overall shift. The most prolific poster designers turned their efforts from exhorting labor in construction and agriculture, for instance, to figuring the diversity of nations in a unified, peaceful pursuit of communist paradise. A. Pilar’s 1957 poster, “Hail 1 May!” celebrates WWII Soviet victory over Germany, but only superficially. (Fig. 4.10) For the present argument, it represents several new developments in official culture, including the modified use of historic commemoration. The composition depicts an army of workers clad in uniform overalls and joined at the hands. Skin

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261 Reid, 226. At the Festival of Youth, Reid noted, “Some saw the artistic events as an opportunity to consolidate a world movement of ‘democratic’ realism – or the ‘art of humanism’ – as Soviet ideologues began to call it.” Reid cites A. Kamenskii, “Razmysleniiia na festival’noi vystavke,” Moskovskii khudozhnik (30 August 1957): 3.
color in the hands continues from the stereotyped faces, distributing the workers in a racial array of Caucasian, Asian, Latino, and undifferentiated “brown.” A banner of national flags from every continent, one for each worker, defines the frieze. This element reinforces the abstract space, suggesting an interpretive search for corresponding signifiers as the viewer’s main task. Just five years earlier, the viewer was expected to correlate Pilar’s landscape realism of the Volga-Don dam with a corresponding map image, and to extend that correlation metaphorically to the vision of the Great Leader. (Fig. 4.11) Specific attribution of national folk heritage, language, and racial type had been a staple of Stalinist poster imagery, as in Rudolf Pangsepp’s 1951 “The Power of Peace Is Invincible!” (Fig. 4.12) In Pilar’s later poster, the respective racial identity of each country’s majority population is actually unrelated to the distribution of flags and racial signifiers. In the thaw, continuous spaces and modular deployment of form were used to relocate, to a now global ideological space, boundaries that once glorified insular economic policy.

In Stalin-era Victory Day posters, cameos often served to legitimize the leader cult by establishing its pedigree, flowing from Marx and Engels, through Lenin and finally Stalin. (Fig. 4.13) In contrast, posters of the thaw likely dispensed with this device because it had thematized Stalin’s program for “Socialism in one country.” Largely concerned with growing the Soviet economy by harnessing the land under collectivized agriculture, Stalinist rhetoric would have instantly conjured memories of terror campaigns for contemporary viewers. Themes tainted with Stalin’s isolationist policies quickly yielded to new campaigns extolling solidarity among people from around the globe, commingling signifiers of diverse ethnic and
cultural backgrounds. From Siima Škop’s 1958 poster, praising Peace-Friendship-Collaboration (Rahu-Sooprus-Koostoo), meanings concordant with the new rhetoric flowed through racially essentialized portraits of a Chinese, an Arab, an African, etc. (Fig. 4.14) While conserving the legibility of the cameo, the design translated the earlier conceit of Stalin’s lineage into an ideologically updated message of pluralism and ubiquity.

Reconciliation with the effects of Stalin’s rule largely motivated the regime’s campaign to recast itself as morally just, formalized through denunciations and reconfigured ideology. In Soviet Estonia, propaganda campaigns clearly favored designs that redeemed established tropes to accommodate the Party’s changing rhetoric. A host of secondary conditions accompanied these principal efforts, all of which contributed to fostering unofficial art in Estonia. Primarily, Khrushchev implemented economic reforms just weeks after Stalin’s death in March 1953, part of which restored decision-making power to the Estonian Communist Party. Similarly the NKVD, the Kremlin-controlled security force so feared under Stalin, was dissolved in 1954 and replaced by the KGB, the local organ of which operated under the jurisdiction of the Estonian SSR Council of Ministers. At the governing level, the Russian-Estonian Ivan Käbin rose to first secretary of the ECP in 1950. Käbin increasingly tolerated, if not advocated, the resurgence of Estonian national

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262 Narodnii komissariat vnutrennikh del (People’s Ministry of Internal Affairs), 1934-1954. Lavrentii Beria (1899-1953), Stalin’s chief of state security and a fellow Georgian, led the NKVD as it carried out the brutal purges of Estonian peasants, intellectuals, and political figures in the aftermath of the Second World War. On the orders of Khrushchev’s Politburo, Beria was shot in the basement of Moscow’s Lubyanka prison for his questionable involvement in the 1953 East German uprising. 263 Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security), 1954-1991.
ambitions under Khrushchev. Over the course of the thaw, members of the creative intelligentsia deported to gulags in Stalin’s purges, gradually returned, their sentences commuted with the new leaders’ approval. Along with them returned the legacy of the independent Republic of Estonia (1918-1940) and its vibrant artistic culture, at one time animated by adaptive approaches to European modernism.

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264 Born in Estonia, Ivan (Johannes) Käbin (b. 1905) emigrated to Russia as a child, returning only in 1941. See “The Post-Stalin Era,” in Toivo Raun Estonia and the Estonians (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001): 192. The author observes, “Over the years his command of Estonian improved, and in a sense he became re-Estonianized. In the late 1950s the Soviet Estonian press still referred to him as ‘Ivan’; by the mid-1960s he had become ‘Johannes.’ In time, Käbin gained the reputation of a pragmatic and rational leader whose role as a buffer against inordinate demands from Moscow was appreciated.” Raun cites Rahva Hääl, January 29, 1958, p. 1 and Sirp ja Vasar, December 17, 1965, p. 1. I have not yet been able to consult these sources.
4.3 The Tartu Renaissance

The first decade of the Cold War closed with the successful Russian launch of Sputnik on October 4, 1957, which firmly established the technological prowess of the Soviet Union.\(^{265}\) This watershed moment in the Soviet scientific rivalry with the United States came amid new rhetoric of “peaceful coexistence”\(^{266}\) with the West. As part of a new climate of openness, the Soviet leadership sanctioned two important Moscow exhibitions that brought Soviet citizens face to face with examples of contemporary art from the United States – the *Sixth Festival of Youth and Students*, 1957, and the *American Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture*, 1959. The regime’s motivations were more complex than the rhetoric perhaps suggests. Previously identified with the West, as Reid pointed out, modernism had “played a crucial constitutive and unifying role as socialist realism’s ‘other’.”\(^{267}\) This paradigm eroded with the Party’s claim to support the socialist aspirations of peoples with diverse cultural backgrounds abroad, from France and Italy to Algeria and


Mexico. Embracing “progressive” artists in this newly broadened context demanded the official acceptance of modern styles of art and design.

The formal and ideological renovation of official propaganda described in the previous section was a related outcome of this new agenda. Far more meaningful for unofficial artists from across the Soviet Union was its manifestation in the 1956 Picasso exhibition that opened in Moscow and then traveled to Leningrad. To cultural officials, as Michael Scammell suggested, the exhibition had seemed a “safe” move. The artist’s renown as a member of the Communist Party in France and the long presence of his works in Soviet museum collections, hidden away in storage vaults and thus unknown to contemporary audiences, ensured its welcome by the public. The exhibitions’ result was the opposite of the palliative effect authorities had hoped for, sparking widespread public debate over matters of history – the cultural past in general and the fate of the revolutionary avant-garde in particular – that found no satisfactory explanation in official doctrine or visual culture. The modern art holdings of Soviet museum collections were consequently rehabilitated through officially sanctioned, public exhibitions of European masters from Manet to Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and finally, in 1977, Malevich.

As the cultural past was rehabilitated, resonance between the political and cultural upheavals experienced by Estonians and the fate of modern art’s main

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268 Reid, 225.
269 For further general reading on the topic of modern design in the thaw, see Greg Castillo’s Cold War on the Home Front, The Soft Power of Midcentury Design (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
European protagonists was unmistakable. Numerous leading modernists had fled cultural capitals like Berlin and Paris in time to escape the destruction, persecution, and massive human loss of WWII. Estonia’s annexation to the Soviet Union in the interim had abruptly severed artists’ connections to the rest of Europe – lifelines that had sustained the national movement from its inception. The thaw revealed to Estonians the broader consequences for European modernism brought about by the war. Beginning perhaps with the closure of the Bauhaus in 1933 and increasingly with the threat of war, European émigrés including Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko – each in his own way an heir to the legacies of Europe’s avant-gardes – steadily made their way to the United States. Over the course of the ensuing decade, new tendencies emerged to suggest that the vanguard flag once flown over Europe’s capital cities was now firmly planted in American soil, where a new generation of Americans appeared to lead the trajectory of modern art in New York.

Through attendance and secondhand accounts of the Moscow exhibitions, Estonians became reacquainted with, and began to re-assimilate modernist practices of adaptation underpinning the rich artistic culture of the national movement. Visitors from Tartu and Tallinn attended the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students, where over 4,500 works by artists from around the globe were on display. The Festival exhibition distilled the richness and variety of experimental forms and practices of which Stalinist isolation had kept them ignorant since the conclusion of WWII. Crowds of Soviet spectators even witnessed a demonstration of
Jackson Pollock’s “action painting” technique, which ultimately derives from French Surrealist automatism. Hanging beside Pollock’s Abstract Expressionist works in the 1959 American Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture were gestural works by many of the émigrés mentioned above.

In addition to the continuities and innovations Estonians discovered at these exhibitions, Khrushchev’s liberalizing policies entailed denouncing the arbitrary excesses and naked brutality of his predecessor’s leadership. Survivors of Stalin’s purges were accordingly released and rehabilitated in 1956. Among those exiled to Siberian labor camps in 1949 were Tartu art students Henn Roode, Ülo Sooster, and Heldur Viires. At first, their return appeared to revitalize memories of contact with the prewar European modernisms, from the Barbizon School to Dutch De Stijl. I have already discussed strategies adapted from those movements and the national identity to which those pre-war assimilations gave artistic form. Yet the vigor and plurality with which Estonian artists revived these practices in the thaw remains poorly understood. This lack is easily attributed to its cause; histories of this period strive to authenticate the mythology surrounding a single man: Ülo Sooster.

The Sooster myth fulfills a broad and complex function. As a former student of Kits and Vabbe, Sooster embodied the legacies of the Pallas Art School and thus Estonian interwar independence and its flourishing avant-garde. This may explain why, upon his return to Tallinn, the Artists Union rejected his membership application. With no prospects of working, either as an artist or educator at the

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271 For further reading on this demonstration and its impact on Estonian artists, particularly Lola Makarova (b. 1928), see Sepp, 58-9.
State Art Institute,\textsuperscript{272} Sooster decided to settle in Moscow with his wife, Lidia Serkh, whom he had met during their incarceration in Karaganda. Sooster’s movements between communities of Russian, Estonian, and Jewish intellectuals were relatively effortless, partially due to the Russian language ability he acquired in prison. Komissarov observed that, unlike his friends Viires and Roode, Sooster enjoyed considerable freedom in his commitments because he “belonged neither here nor there.”\textsuperscript{273} Through his newly ambiguous political and national identity, the nomadic Sooster incorporated precisely the vital flux that the national movement had lost to the terror of Stalin in 1949.

Art histories have shaped this aspect of Sooster’s reappearance to suit a narrative that valorizes genius and its origins. A fair measure of the messianic heights to which historians have elevated him is the reproduction, wherever possible,\textsuperscript{274} of a 1967 photograph of Sooster in a performance with Juri Sobolev.\textsuperscript{275} (Fig. 4.15) The bare-chested Sooster’s outstretched arms span the picture horizontally, imbuing the image with the Christian narrative of crucifixion and resurrection. Sobolev’s presence in the role of Pontius Pilate all but ensures an

\textsuperscript{272}The State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR was relocated from Tartu to Tallinn in 1950.
\textsuperscript{273}Sepp, 132, note 24.
\textsuperscript{275}Juri Sobolev introduced Sooster to the Moscow unofficial art circles. Sobolev was also the artistic director of the Znamia publishing house, commissions from which provided Sooster with steady income.
intended reference to Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel, *The Master and Margarita*. The novel portrays Pilate as conflicted yet ultimately ruthless, and therefore morally repugnant. The common interpretation holds Bulgakov’s Pilate as an allegory for the Soviet citizenry, whose idle awareness of Stalin’s brutality the author equated with complicity. Indeed the cigarette between Sobolev’s lips is likely a Belomorканal, Stalin’s preferred brand, named for the massive industrial undertaking that claimed thousands of lives. A symbolic language of material-cultural forms accrues through the added presence of Sobolev’s toga and dark sunglasses, conjoining disparate historical moments – ancient Rome, the Stalin era, and nineteen-sixties Moscow. Most prominent, however, is the relative visibility of gazes. As Sobolev’s eyes are concealed, the viewer is easily seduced into the position of the camera’s eye, becoming the unobstructed object of Sooster’s gaze. If the surrounding symbolism suggests an experience of history as simultaneous, then the former prisoner’s gaze is a powerful metaphor for the return of many pasts: his own, and thereby the interwar avant-garde, untouched by the turmoil of Soviet occupation.

To my knowledge, the foregoing is the most detailed analysis of this photograph to date. It seems necessary because the literature implies that Estonian artists became but local representatives of an otherwise unified unofficial art world

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276 Notably, a Frankfurt publisher released an edition of the novel in 1967 (the year in which the photograph was taken), reconstituting from *samizdat* sources those elements removed by censors from its earlier appearance in the journal *Moskva* 11 (1966); 1 (1967). Source not yet consulted.
– one to whose center in Moscow Sooster supposedly provided a direct conduit.\textsuperscript{277}

Much emphasis has been placed on Sooster’s close personal and professional relationships with Russian artists collectively termed the Sretensky Boulevard group. Erik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, and Juri Sobolev were among these artists who, by Komissarov’s description, formed “the original core of Moscow conceptualism” and “regarded themselves as representatives of essentially non-official art.”\textsuperscript{278} Sooster’s involvement in the 1962 Manège exhibition,\textsuperscript{279} along with Ernst Neizvestny, Sobolev, Vladimir Yankilevsky and others, is rarely omitted from these histories. Clearly, Sooster represents historians’ best chance to secure a position of prestige for Estonian unofficial art by tethering it to protagonists of the famed Moscow conceptual movement.\textsuperscript{280}

But art histories of the thaw quickly promote Sooster in the service of a more specific art historical function. According to Komissarov, Roode and Sooster embraced “radically different interpretations of modernism”,\textsuperscript{281} the former’s based in painterly abstraction, the latter’s in surrealism. Her interpretation reduces both


\textsuperscript{279} The innovative works shown by Moscow avant-garde artists at this exhibition were banned after First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev intervened.

\textsuperscript{280} Eha Komissarov, “Art in Tartu during the Soviet Occupation,” in eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, \textit{Art of the Baltics}, 149. The author stressed Kabakov’s interest in Sooster’s development, from which “one can recognize that several of Sooster’s friends became the founders of the Moscow conceptual art movement.” See also Reet Varblane, “Valve Janov,” in ed. Johannes Saar \textit{Eesti Kunstnikud} (Tallinn: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998): 29. Saar goes as far as stating that “Sooster got to know the up-and-coming young artists and Moscow and became their leader thanks to his education in the spirit of late Pallas classical modernism.”

\textsuperscript{281} Eha Komissarov, “Art in Tartu during the Soviet Occupation,” in eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, \textit{Art of the Baltics}, 151.
practices to formal variants of fragmentation expressive of national rupture – a framework valorizing the expressivity as such of cubist abstraction or surrealist collage. That is, the author understands the works of these artists and their circle as overly biographical, in formal analyses that construe them as texts in isolation. In paintings by Sooster’s acolyte, Valve Janov, meaning is accordingly construed as purely personal:

I like to depict flowers, fish or buildings which I do not believe exist... I work long and never want to finish. I feel that as long as I am working I live in the space that I myself have created.\(^{282}\)

Janov’s use of collage and gestural abstraction in her paintings (Fig. 4.16) combined Roode and Sooster’s “radically different” conceptions of modernism, seemingly uniting the fragments in which Estonian modern art appeared in the thaw. “Under the spell of Sooster,”\(^{283}\) according to Sepp, Janov worked to fulfill Sooster’s project of mending historical ruptures. Sooster demanded, according to Sobolev,

that we should restore, in a compressed way, the whole chain of development of the last thirty years: the principles of deformation of cubism and expressionism, the spatial inventions of Picasso, Braque, De Chirico, and Morandi, the abstractions of Mondrian and Pollock,

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\(^{283}\) Sepp, 49.
the surrealism of Max Ernst and Rene Magritte, the poetics of Klee and Miro.\textsuperscript{284}

It should be clear that this prevailing narrative infantilizes Estonian art during and after the Khrushchev thaw. At the very least, it overshadows the construction of audience literacy begun by other artists, mainly female, at first gathered around Sooster in Tartu following his release in 1956. An important consideration in these women’s creative output is the fact that they lost the institutional support of the Tartu Art Institute in the late 1940s, when Stalin’s plan for the collectivization of Estonian resources suddenly accelerated. By official directive in 1951, the State Art Institute was relocated from Tartu to the administrative capital in Tallinn. As a result, Silvia Jõgever was relegated to a teaching position at Tartu’s eighth secondary school. In 1950, Kaja Kärner was fired from the teaching position she took after graduating in 1948, expelled from the Artists Union, and forced to become a sign painter in a local department store. Henn Roode, Heldur Viires and their wives began commuting between Tartu and the new Estonian State Art Institute in Tallinn.\textsuperscript{285}

The 1960 exhibition organized by Silvia Jõgever at the secondary school where she taught bore the referential dimensions characterizing the Tartu Renaissance. The show had the approval of neither the Artists Union nor the


\textsuperscript{285} Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika,” in eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, Art of the Baltics, 45
Ministry of Culture but, by comparison, this was a minor transgression.\textsuperscript{286} An accompanying statement by Jõgever flouted official ideas of Socialist Realism, expressing the artists’ “reliance on color and light in expressing form and emphasis on individuality and subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{287} More importantly, the statement was handwritten in blue ink, under a black title, on white paper. This instance of public speech, in the colors of the flag of the independent Republic of Estonia, was an unmistakable reference: Estonian nationalists defiantly planted the tricolor atop the main building of Tartu University in the 1918-1920 War of Independence. The authorities quickly dismantled the exhibition, “considering it an unsuitable glorification of political prisoners.”\textsuperscript{288} Jõgever was ordered to present all the works to the Executive Committee of the Artists Union in Tallinn. The ironic outcome was that several members expressed admiration for her efforts, and sent her to Moscow to “familiarize herself with proper Socialist Realist art.”\textsuperscript{289}

The comparative obscurity of the work of Jõgever, Kärner, and Viires – Sooster’s former classmates – suggests that these artists’ lives and works are of secondary importance to understanding unofficial art of this period. Rather, their creative production and the conditions they endured shed light on artistic strategies of identity creation, and the persistence of a national culture of adaptive exchange.

\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 52. The show reportedly included works by Sooster, Janov, Kärner, Jõgever, Viires, Lüüdia Vallimäe-Mark, Lembit Saarts, and Valdur Ohakas. I am unaware of any documentation beyond the cited list provided by Sepp.
\textsuperscript{287} In ibid, 52.
\textsuperscript{288} Komissarov, “Art in Tartu during the Soviet Occupation,” in eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, \textit{Art of the Baltics}, 145.
\textsuperscript{289} Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika,” in ibid., 52. According to the author, Jõgever “spent most of her time in Sooster’s studio, visiting dissident artists and looking at art books in the Library of Foreign Literature.”
It was in this aspect that Sooster’s influence is best appreciated. As Sepp fairly reported, Sooster’s visits from Moscow were a catalyst for his former friends’ development. In addition to reporting on the various artistic events in Moscow, he urged his friends to begin to paint again, to pick up where they had left off before the ill-fated year of 1949. All his former friends credit Sooster for their renewal and their new enthusiasm.²⁹⁰

More than picking up “where they had left off,” the Tartu group absorbed the fervor for artistic and experiential discovery sparked by the official exhibitions in Moscow mentioned at the beginning of this section. Kärner mingled collage elements and strokes of gouache in untitled works of 1958-61 in which she evokes a modernist subjectivity that is at once the nominal, agent, and unique female self, as well as the object of a mass culture that constantly reconceptualizes her imagination, at least insofar as it must appeal to that imagination. (Figs. 17-8) An aerial view of Disneyland’s Frontierland, perhaps cut from a brochure acquired at the American National Exhibition in Moscow,²⁹¹ continues the physique of the left figure while conforming to wrought-iron arabesques clipped from a magazine photo. The presence of partial text and intersecting planes of color suggests an

²⁹⁰ Sepp, 45.
²⁹¹ Sepp reports that Kärner never went to Moscow, but that Sooster corresponded with her at length about the exhibitions, and brought her books on his frequent visits to Estonia. Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika,” in eds. Rosenfeld and Dodge, Art of the Baltics, 50: 133, n. 45.
affinity for, at least in reproduction, similar devices in the work of Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Mark Rothko, and others.

Unlike Soostor, Kärner’s partner Heldur Viires was admitted to the State Art Institute in Tallinn shortly after his return in 1956. On his frequent visits to Tartu, he became familiar with materials Kärner had obtained from Soostor, who was also a close friend. Having learned Russian during his seven years in the Vorkuta prison camp, Viires moved easily among the Moscow circles into which Soostor introduced him during his visit in the winter of 1961-62. His 1961 compositions in ink and watercolor, of which the Dodge Collection holds a considerable number, suggest more than a passing interest in the abstract experiments of Arshile Gorky, whose work appeared in the Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture in Moscow in 1959. In one example, Viires’ use of ink varies from scumbled description of form to spare, linear passages. (Fig. 19) These latter phrases contain, delineate, or restate the contours of colored areas suggesting anatomical organs reminiscent of Gorky’s forms.

Silvia Jõgever’s work of this period varied from painted realism to geometric abstraction to surrealist collage. Most compelling, for the present argument, is a small collage completed in 1963. (Fig. 20) Lace, felt, and other textiles gesture broadly to European handicraft traditions. Yet their purpose as garments turns the composition inward, toward the body itself, present perhaps in the yellow passages of gouache in the background. The artist may have conceived the overall composition as corresponding to her own body, especially given the
collage element at top-center, which resembles traditional depictions of women’s hair in Estonian folk art. Its contours converge upon what the viewer at first believes to be a shock of blond hair. Only upon close inspection does the true identity of the individual strands appear: they are some flattened organic material, perhaps flax, but not human hair. The effect of this subtle simulation has the overwhelming effect of casting the entire composition, and the viewer’s presumptive appraisal of its elements, into suspicion. The real attains its innocuous privilege within the belief of the viewing subject. This privilege or the real is in fact a conceit, susceptible to subtle manipulation and even outright reversal: in slippages from material fact to the semiotic disconnect entailed in symbolic signification. That signification relies on semiotic convention, a product of collective memory whose deceptive recruitment, in turn, is an absolute requirement for effective simulation, as Jõgever’s laconic work demonstrates.

Kärner, Viires, and Jõgever were already well-known figures in Tartu by 1962. It was then, with the arrival of Kaljo Põllu, that the Tartu Renaissance accelerated in earnest, culminating perhaps in the Biafra performance described at the opening of this chapter. Mention must be made here of some changes, connected with the Khrushchev thaw, to the university curriculum in Tartu. Though the State Art Institute had been relocated to Tallinn in 1951, 1957 saw the addition of an art studio, a music studio, and a “domestic science class”292 to the teacher training sub-department at Tartu State University. The stated purpose was to equip

with specialties its graduates, who were bound for teaching positions in the provinces. The first head of the art studio, Juhan Püttsepp, announced his retirement in 1962. When the studio requested a replacement from the Estonian State Art Institute in Tallinn, Kaljo Põllu must have appeared uniquely qualified, having trained as a teacher at Haapsalu Pedagogical College before graduating from the State Art Institute.

Paradoxically, it was in accordance with official regulations that much of the underground activity was conducted through the art studio. Through his position in Tartu, Põllu secured subscriptions to contemporary art journals from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and even Vietnam and China. As head of the art library, he and his students stayed abreast of new book titles as they appeared, and saw images appearing on the covers, as these were reproduced in catalogs the library received from publishers. These materials, as well as journals, books, and samizdat items circulated through Tallinn from Moscow via Tõnis Vint and others. Põllu and his students, many of whom were philologists, organized the systematic translation, reproduction and distribution of these forbidden materials among the art community:

The way this was done and the choices made were very characteristic of the period. Firstly, it met the academic requirements of the day – four cultural regions were systematically explored,materials about them collected,

\[293\] In ibid., 6. I rely on Helme’s account here, the only one of its kind of which I am aware.
translated, typed, copied (with carbon paper!), provided with illustrations.294

Helme, a student in Tartu at the time, explains that the four resulting albums “were later renamed ‘information bulletins’ at the suggestion of the University Communist Party Committee.”295 Thus the Tartu art studio disseminated current Western art literature under pretenses of the legitimate study of culture, a practice that was currently achieving the credentials of a scientific discipline at Tartu in the theory of cultural semiotics developed by Jüri Lotman and his colleagues. Among the works eventually translated and manually duplicated, aside from countless periodicals, were Aldo Pellegrini’s New Tendencies in Art (1971), Pierre Daix’s Picasso (1967), and Herbert Read’s A Concise History of Modern Painting (1968).296

By 1969, as discussed above, students had become familiar with Allan Kaprow’s writings on Happenings.297 In the interim, annual spring exhibitions of students’ work were mounted in the Art Studio itself. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the studio curriculum, contributions came from art and art history students, as well as the philology and history faculties. Including regular shows mounted in the University Café, Helme estimates that, in just 13 years, 47 exhibitions of works by Tallinn and Tartu artists were held. The Visarid were the major force behind this activity – a group of artists whose formation actually

\[294 \text{In ibid., 6-7.}\]
\[295 \text{Ibid.}\]
\[296 \text{In ibid., 80. The most frequent references made by artists and other sources are to the translation and reproduction of Aldo Pellegrini, New Tendencies in Art (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966), Pierre Daix, Picasso (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), and Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964).}\]
\[297 \text{See note 234.}\]
depended on the exercise of official exhibition norms. In December, 1967, Põllu, Peeter Lukats and Enn Tegova had to retrieve their works, which had been rejected from an Estonia-wide exhibition in Tartu. Rejection for “unconventional form or the absence of an art institute diploma”298 became the condition upon which works would be accepted to an alternative exhibition mounted in the University Café. This was the first exhibition of the Visarid.299

In light of their intense involvement in foreign art trends, a major concern among the Visarid was of course the looming specter of epignism. In a passage highly reminiscent of Lotman’s theory of boundary, Helme stated the group’s major problem as

> living on the contact line of eastern and western culture meant being subjected to certain fields of influences. To preserve one’s identity at a critical time and a in a critical area has always been one of the main issues of culture.300

Concerned that critics might see the group’s artistic output as merely secondary or imitative, Põllu, who penned the Visarid Manifesto, stressed that the “sources” of influential form might well be directed toward creative work that was both new and local:

299 A rough English translation of this word might be “discontented s.”
in order to avoid the alarming influence of modern mass culture we must become familiar with its sources and seek means for understanding our own time, the key to the future.\(^3\)

Over the course of the 1960s, artists grouped around the Tartu Art Studio enjoyed a lively public discourse. This of course consisted of public discussions surrounding the various exhibitions, as well as press coverage in the Tartu University Newspaper and the journal Noorus (Youth). While providing discursive spaces for dialogue with the public, making reinterpretations of American and European art forms intelligible to audiences, the arts coverage in the press occurred within official institutional structures. At the end of the 1960s however, with Brezhnev’s rise to power, ideological pressure at the University increased. In an atmosphere of increasing censorship, the art studio was moved to the city’s periphery, and the principal artists and teachers gradually left the city for better prospects in the capital. A primary advantage in late-1960s Tallinn was access to audiences from throughout the Soviet Union, even abroad.

Perhaps the most important development of the Tartu Renaissance was the realization that increasing audience literacy led to collective imagining that transcended the power of the individual. My problematic use of the term “resonance” at the beginning of this chapter is intentional. It refers to an imaginary that grew as artists and audiences became increasingly fluent in international

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contemporary art. The Moscow exhibitions of the late 1950s again posed the
question of contemporary art literacy. As the intelligibility of references to art
beyond the Iron Curtain grew, aesthetic encounters expanded to include audience
discussions beyond art’s official spaces, in turn engendering literacy in international
contemporary art. It is important to understand that this practice was not
spontaneously manifested, but re-emerged in the Khrushchev thaw.

The European orientation of the former Pallas School indeed returned in the
release of exiles, furnishing artists not merely with a single alternative to official
canons, but with options: to resuscitate either the experimentation with French
Post-Impressionist, or “colorist” style, or to return to the abstraction of the Eesti
Kunstnikude Rühm. After all, the former – known as the “Paris School” had been
eclipsed in the interwar period, co-opted by the authoritarian Päts regime and
recast in a nationalist-realist vein akin to the art of Hitler’s Third Reich or the
Tsarist institutions Päts emulated. Judging from the preceding discussion, the
question whether the Tartu Renaissance missed the opportunity to revive the vision
born out of the 19th century Estonian national movement, seems more an expression
of nostalgia than a real problem in Estonian art history. Estonian artists of the thaw
engaged modernism’s post-war trajectories just as they became visible through
renewed contacts with the West. Unofficial art critically oriented itself through
these debates, resuscitating precisely those interpretive artistic tendencies that had
set the cultural tenor of the National Awakening.
In closing, useful description of the 1969 Biafra happening in the Tartu University Café demands acknowledging artists’ desire for continuity with a past tradition that, through creative resituation in the form of public display and performance, allowed them to shape their own histories, probing novel subject positions that remained susceptible to reimagining through creative misprision. At the risk of repeating, this reimagining relied on token appeals to recognized precedent – by a *tessera* – and thus the malleable nature of memory at the collective, audience level. The inventory of cultural referents is limited only by the scope of the spectator’s memory. As mentioned in the Introduction, this limitation only decreases with each audience convened for the rehearsal of collective cultural literacy. Transcending historical and geopolitical limits in “empty time,” the Tartu Renaissance resuscitated the elasticity such modular referentiality affords, once again expressing and securing for perpetuity the national essence which lives only in the popular imagination.

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302 Benedict Anderson has described as “empty time” the effect of cultural forms that recognizably resituate or recycle from precedents. These forms point to the existence, he says, of an “inventory” of cultural forms whose reuse, I would add, testifies to an awareness of power residing in their legibility across time and space. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
Chapter 5: From Tartu to Tallinn – Unofficial Exhibitions in Soviet Science Museums

Similar measures to the relocation of the State Art Institute from Tartu to Tallinn in 1951 were taken in scientific disciplines. Physics and biology research facilities were moved to the outskirts of Tallinn in accordance with centralized authority and the proposed acceleration of the command economy. Two exhibitions held in the early 1970s, “Saku ‘73” and “Harku ‘75,” with revivals mounted following Estonian Independence in 1991, highlight tendencies of adaptation and reinstatement of recognized artistic precedents. Whereas Greenberg’s theory of aesthetic autonomy was rooted in the refinement of materials, trenchant engagement with their historical circumstances demanded that Estonian artists at once subject indigenous traditions, official Soviet culture, and contemporary Western art to critical procedures of assimilation. At its most productive moments, Estonian unofficial culture of the 1970s occupied sites (“filters” as Lotman termed them) where adaptive exchange with official zones of labor and speech – by now conceived as translation – might bring about new modes of critical display, drawing from official culture and policy as well as the reascent Estonian national imaginary.

As this section will show, these strategies of adaptive exchange refitted concerns glimpsed in contemporary art abroad and in the reemergence of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes.303

303 Estonian artists and scholars have long used the term “avant-garde” superficially, generously, and with great variety to qualify creative work as underground, abstract, or dating from an early period of experimentation in the oeuvres of both Estonians and their counterparts abroad. See, for example,
Changing conditions of urban life in post-thaw Estonia are of primary importance to appreciating the exhibitions considered here. Art events staged in towns outlying the Estonian capital constituted exercises of freedom to organize and display, challenging official control over knowledge at the sites of its creation: institutes of scientific research. Raul Meel gives his account of these exhibitions in a section of his memoir concerned to describe increased energy in the early 1970s among young artists, many of whom strove to attend foreign exhibitions.\(^\text{304}\) Due to its rarity, his account has been the primary source for previous discussion of unofficial art in the early 1970s. Meel and others associate alternative artists' elevated activity with milestones heralding a more general modernization of urban Estonian conditions.\(^\text{305}\) The most prominent of these was the conflict between official Soviet and Western accounts following violent Soviet repression in August, 1968 of the liberalizing movement in Czechoslovakia.\(^\text{306}\) For Lapin, the Estonian

Sirje Helme, "The Catalogue of the One-Man-Show in the State Art Museum of the ESSR, 1987," in eds Sirje Helme and Tamara Luuk Okas (Perioodika Repro, 2000): 11. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Lapin began to describe his art as “avant-garde” in order, it seemed, to imply his continuity with the past and thus to distinguish his project from the pop and hyperrealism of his contemporaries, particularly Vive Tolli, Andres Tolts, and Ando Keskküla.\(^\text{304}\) Raul Meel, trans. Tiia Keskküla, \textit{Conspicuous of the Past}, unpublished manuscript, 2002 (Dodge Research Collection): 59.\(^\text{305}\) Beyond the rehabilitation of deportees and downgraded status of the feared Soviet security forces, de-Stalinization in Estonia included broad administrative reorganization, increasing the breadth of authority in governance at the local level. In the post-Stalin 1950s, village Soviets, the province system, and other administrative units established in 1952 was abolished. The Estonian Communist Party regained its authority in local decision-making, and Khrushchev temporarily decentralized economic management in 1957, establishing a system of regional economic councils. From 1957 until 1965, the reconsolidated Estonian economic council absorbed the tasks of several industrial ministries. See Toivo Raun, \textit{Estonia and the Estonians} (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987): 189-194.\(^\text{306}\) See H. Gordon Skilling, \textit{Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976): 62-89. See also Meel, 23. Meel writes, “It has been claimed that the invasion of Czechoslovakia resulted in a significant rise in the development of dissident activity in Russia. Similar activities in Estonia centred on the attempt to protect the provinces from the Russification policy of the Soviet empire.”
experience of the Prague events via radio and television was only the most
momentous aspect of a larger influx of technological and social innovation from
Western Europe, heralding an end to the “contemptuous” attitudes prevailing under
Stalin, when “even new objects of consumption were produced in old-fashioned
patterns.”307 The gradual proliferation of new materials such as television sets,
refrigerators and cars substantially altered the Estonian domestic experience. At
the same time the establishment of a weekly ferry in 1965 between Tallinn and
Helsinki, and the 1971 completion of the modernist Viru Hotel to accommodate a
growing number of Western visitors, redefined the social and built environment of
the capital.308 By Lapin’s account, the regime’s increased opposition to
democratizing or nationalist309 trends following the Prague Spring was
paradoxically accompanied by increased travel opportunity and a wealth of material
comforts. A sudden challenge to the resolve of Estonian artists resulted: to either
“conform to political prostitution and take up propaganda or to continue as a
performer of anti-Soviet avant-garde [...]”310 Lapin frequently describes the
corrupting effects of official power upon individual creative will in terms of erotic
objectification. Indeed early in his printmaking career the theme of sexual freedom

307 Leonhard Lapin, “Twenty Years Later,” in Harku 1975-1995, exh. cat. (Tallinn: Tallinn City Gallery,
308 According to Raun the number of tourists from outside the Soviet bloc increased tenfold, from
9,400 in 1965 to 94,100 in 1977. Raun, 189.
309 There has been debate over whether demands in the late 1960s for civil rights – which include
national rights – for unionwide groups were nationalist in “origin or content.” By 1972, however,
dissent took issue with decidedly national questions: the Estonian National Front and the Estonian
Democratic Movement signed memoranda, both dated October 24, 1972, demanding that the General
Assembly and the Secretary General of the United Nations supervise elections to restore Estonia’s
independence. In 1975 members from both groups were sentenced to prison terms for “anti-Soviet
agitation and propaganda.” See Tõnu Parming and Elmar Järvesoo, eds. A Case Study of a Soviet
310 Lapin, “Twenty Years Later,” 61.
surfaced as a device through which to resist the collectivization of modern experience.

The Saku show opened March 30, 1973 in the exhibition pavilion of the Saku Agriculture Institute, twenty miles southwest of Tallinn. The exhibition was organized with the director’s cooperation by Leonhard Lapin, Tõnis Vint and Jüri Arrak. Also showing their work were Malle Leis, Silvi Liiva, Raul Meel, Marju Mutsu, Vello Vinn, Aili Vint, Mari Vint, and Toomas Vint. The 138 works displayed were either paintings or prints, and tended toward abstract and serial forms contemplating the themes of birth, growth, decay and regeneration. Bundles of grain approximating the dimensions of the human body were arranged in a large circle at the middle of the pavilion. (Fig. 5.1) This seemingly innocent motif instantiated a classical form from the official Soviet rubric celebrating agricultural production, but it brought along the indelible narratives of forced requisitions and the calamitous environmental effects of postwar Soviet land management in Estonia. Attending the spirit of the exhibition overall was an ironic embrace of the deceptive semiotic chastity of nature’s forms. After Artists Union censors forbid Sirje Runge-Lapin and Jüri Okas from participating because they were “too young,”311 Okas installed an automobile-sized egg on the square in front of the Estonian National Theater. (Fig. 5.2) This particular site was viewed as the temple of Soviet collaborators, a view which Okas’ installation underscored by its utter

311 Ibid.
vagueness: of all the symbols taken from nature to thematize the Soviet utopian project, the egg was conspicuously not one.312

The exhibition was not publicly advertised, and only a single and very general review by Martti Preem appeared in the Tartu University weekly.313 Nonetheless, some 300 people from Russia and abroad attended the opening.314 The scale and popularity of the exhibition attracted the ire of top cultural officials.315 What followed at first was a sort of show trial that convened artists with leaders of the Communist Party cultural department, the Ministry of Culture, and the Artists Association. In a speech, Ilmar Torn, chairman of the Artists Association, expressed regret that some work in the exhibition did not “display more communist ideas.” O.-K. Utt, head of the cultural department, was more vehement, singling out Meel for his “formalist efforts in art” and “erroneous theorizing.”316 But the vitriol seems to have subsided there, even by Meel’s account, as a dynamic of reciprocation and exchange took hold. As part of the meeting Meel and Tõnis Vint, among others, spoke at length to officials and the public about their individual works. As Meel suggests, the spirit of this exchange seemed to be one not of political officials reforming the views of artists, but the other way around. In outspoken opposition

312 Ibid.
314 See Leonhard Lapin, “Twenty Years Later,” in Harku, 1975-1995, 61. Lapin recalls an intense atmosphere of cultural interchange in Estonia at the time: “Practically all of the élite of modern Soviet art frequented Tallinn in 1970s looking for possibilities to exhibit, draw contracts and get information [that could be get [sic] via Finland] about the ‘free world.’ [...]. Saku 1973 was visited by numerous artists, art critics and collectors as well as public figures and diplomats from both Russia and foreign countries.”
315 See Meel, 59-63. I rely on Meel’s and Lapin’s memoirs for details of the Saku exhibition, as no other account is known to me.
316 In ibid., 62.
to the events of the exhibition, Soviet cultural leaders realized the need to present an alternative to the critical arena carved out at Saku. From a suddenly defensive posture, administrators organized subsequent exhibitions entitled “Man and Factory,” “Let Us Build Communism!” and “Man and Field.” The latter was inaugurated in the same exhibition pavilion of the Saku Agriculture Institute and subsequently traveled to Tartu and even Pskov, Russia. These undertakings mobilized the support of state propaganda, and officials offered entry enticements to artists who had participated in Saku. Artists reportedly discouraged each other from accepting invitations to show in these official exhibitions. Yet as we have seen, the interface between official ideological control and unofficial art entailed a complex interplay of institutional identity and mobility, participation in public display and public address, and freedom of personal choice. Within this interplay, the fact that artists positioned themselves in the suburbs suggests a new sphere in which to stage encounters between opposing cultural discourses. The breadth and intensity of official reaction reveals that their strategy not only threatened official confidence. Artists had actually forced the regime to speak in the language of insurrection.

Among the oppositions made evident by works mounted at these exhibitions was an underlying polemics on the critical efficacy of realism as a strategy of resistance to official norms. For Lapin, “[...] the split between ‘depictive’ artists –

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317 Ibid. Meel quoted cultural leaders describing these official shows as “exhibitions opposing the Saku exhibition.”
318 In ibid., 62-3. While Meel downplays artists’ willingness to participate in the official shows that followed, Andres Tolts acknowledges taking part in “Man and Field.”
those actually compromising with the official art – and ‘non-depictive’ artists – i.e. those following the hard way of avant-garde – began to emerge.”\textsuperscript{319} Lapin has situated this issue within a broader grievance over what he perceived as the conflation of “modern” with “official” modes of artistic practice. Without specifying them by name, Lapin bemoaned the ease with which younger artists adopted photorealistic technique – hyperrealism as it is known in Estonia – and thus garnered official support.\textsuperscript{320} Having identified this trend, in one memoir Lapin hastened to count himself among the artists “breaking away from restraints” and “good taste” in a turn toward geometric abstraction.\textsuperscript{321} In an effort to cleanse his creative output of the supposed stigma of mimesis, he further asserted the appearance of a second camp whose work derived from pop art, only to immediately distance himself from it by asserting a kinship between illusionistic realism and pop’s immediacy.\textsuperscript{322} This positioning is problematic, and requires some context if it is to be adequately understood.

Lapin had been a founding member of the pop art collective SOUP, along with Ando Keskküla and Andres Tolts, mounting an inaugural exhibition in 1969 at the Pegasus café, near Tallinn’s central Raekoja Plats.\textsuperscript{323} The group’s name combined signifiers drawn from the Russian (soyuz pop) and English languages (SOviet Union

\textsuperscript{319} Lapin, “Twenty Years Later,” 62.
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid. “[..] together with the emergence of super realism which partly overlapped with socialist realism, several younger artists, having combined these two, found themselves all of a sudden treated as both ‘modern’ and ‘official.’”
\textsuperscript{321} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{323} The other participating artists were Ülevi Eljand, Gunnar Meyer and Rein Mets.
Pop), with a reference to Andy Warhol’s repertoire of soup cans, which the
Estonians knew well through the arrival of Lucy Lippard’s book *Pop Art* from the
West via Hungary.324 In his poster for the show, Lapin mimicked the decorative
floral motifs, roundels and stripes in Warhol’s silkscreen prints of soup cans from
the mid-sixties.325 (Figs. 5.3-4) The addition to the poster of a descending spoon
produces narrative dimensions lacking in the Warhol. The white expanse between
the spoon and open can below concisely eroticizes the otherwise – for Soviet
Estonians – senseless aesthetics of consumption frequently associated with Warhol
in Western art histories.326 For Hal Foster, Warhol’s challenge was to depict
collective subjectivity: “One way to at least evoke the mass subject is through its
proxies, that is, through its objects of taste […] and/or its objects of consumption
[...] But can one *figure* this subject … or is it displaced in the fetishism of the
commodity-sign…?”327 The apparent frivolity with which Warhol mixed colors in his
soup cans compounds the irony of their dual manufacture. At odds with both the
Campbell’s trademark and colors typically associated with tomato soup in our

324 Lucy R. Lippard *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Eha Komissarov, “The Two Arrivals of
Warhol,” *Estonian Art* 9 (January 2001), unpaginated. According to Komissarov, for Estonians
Warhol’s soup can was, “the most famous culinary object in the world.” By her account, “I got the
book from a biologist who had acquired it not so much for the sake of art as because of the magic
word pop. We quite simply had no choice, and in that primitive black-and-white world the most
honest means of self-expression was to be fans of Warhol, Joplin or The Doors as the representatives
of ‘the other.’”
325 A color reproduction of Warhol’s 1965 oil and silkscreen, *Four Campbell’s Soup Cans*, as well as
images of works by American pop artists James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann, and Roy Lichtenstein,
among others, appeared in the pages of Lippard’s book.
326 In his 1962 installation, *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, at Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, Warhol mounted
pictures of individual soups – representing the entire product line – such that they both hung from
the wall in salon fashion and sat atop a long, white shelf like consumer products in a store. The
installation thus commingled the context and rhetoric of unique masterpieces with those of the
culture, Warhol’s campy oranges and blues coincide with the forms of the can, enjoying as impostors the sense of continuity that accrues only in the commercial brand. Warhol gave visual form to critically and ethically ambivalent subject positions vis-à-vis consumerism through images drawn from that very milieu. Lapin’s is a reference to Warhol in the barest sense of the word. In 1960s-Soviet Estonia, there were two avenues of meaning that a reference to Pop art could not avoid: 1. instantly recognizable and 2. a citation of an extremely remote referent (geographically, culturally, and ideologically.)

Pop images therefore struck viewers as unmediated, at once delineating their difference from the practical or moralizing concerns normally expressed with such urgency. Ubiquitous official imagery encoded the routines of Soviet life in predictable forms such that public spaces were experienced as ideologically saturated zones. One expected regular encounters with large-scale representations affirming predictable hierarchies. The frail self was most often reflected negatively in images idealizing every aspect of human life, from personal health and stature to sex, complexion, professional identity, etc. The space in which one recognized one’s own positive likeness was exceedingly tiny as well. This condition remained intact, even if altered in the liberal atmosphere of the Khrushchev thaw. As two scholars recently observed,

[...] the Soviet populace had become entirely disconnected from its artificially perfected public image projected upon them by the authorities. Thus it may be said that the Soviet collective was officially
disembodied, stripped of its right (though not the desire) to experience its material being.328

An entire generation of Estonians had come of age in an environment crowded with images that figured sensuality and desire as a conspicuous void. The private self had withered and retreated from the public sphere where official speech insisted on pronouncing its name in the dialect of the collective.

The operative concept of Lapin’s soup can is visibility itself, which he uses to suggest a fracture of mass experience into manifold, non-public, even intimate dimensions. In the poster, a ragged piece of savagely torn tin extends upward toward a plunging spoon patterned in the same high contrast. The alternating black-white used to describe reflective surfaces easily translates to physical rhythms of the biological body. The logical interplay of positive and negative values leaves no margins for the superfluous is perhaps euphemistic: the body is born, grows and lives, but without exception it ultimately returns to oblivion. His design jolts the inner reservations and compulsions of one’s private relationship to lewdness – his specialty – thereby restaging formless remainders of official art as a contemplative likeness of the modern Estonian self.

Lapin’s eventual turn to heightened abstraction may have been a reaction to what he saw as his SOUP peers’ deference to the facile transportation of the viewer in photorealist works of American pop, particularly those of Tom Wesselmann and

James Rosenquist. Unlike Warhol’s iconic vocabulary, adaptable to both asserting otherness and re-aestheticizing quotidian Soviet materials, desires and behaviors, For Lapin much of American pop art could not survive translation. A literature of consumer spectacle elicited by the sheen of Wesselmann’s chromed Volkswagen, and the accruing photographic identity of protests specific to contemporary America in Rosenquist’s *F-111*, tarnished much of pop’s caché for Lapin. (Figs. 5.5-6) Photographic realism in pop, inadvertently or not, appealed immediately to established Soviet habits of visual perception. But it also smacked ominously of what Lapin expressed as artists’ betrayal of their intellectual integrity in exchange for just such material comforts as those pictured in Western pop. The considerable benefits enjoyed by artists who toed the ideological line included a wealth of material resources such as studio space and equipment, apartments, cars, and money in one’s pocket. Though Lapin referred to goods in exchange as immediate support to his jealous accusations, perhaps more important was the sense of fulfillment attained through those less tangible advantages of official recognition.329 Beyond their eligibility for state commissions and purchases, members of the Artists Union were approached with regular opportunities to publicly engage audiences in those sites where, according to official power, art took place. The art museum was only the physical manifestation of a discursive realm from which Lapin and his friends were excluded. Official favor meant an artist could bask in the promotional

light of state-run publicity channels as they advocated on his behalf. Overall, Artists
Union membership granted the creative intellect a coherent, professional identity.

Over the course of the 1970s, Tolts and Keskküla increasingly employed
photographic realism in their paintings. In canvases such as *Evening*, Keskküla
perhaps aspired to challenge conceits of neutrality imbedded in photographic
reproduction at the hands of Soviet authority, both in the press and official art. (Fig.
5.7) At first glance, Keskküla’s canvas reproduces the facts of Soviet construction
pictorial language of camera optics. Squeezing from between cinder blocks,
insulating foam efficiently signifies the shoddy construction of the Soviet version of
modern architecture, now ubiquitous in Estonia. Massive housing projects in the
outlying suburbs of Mustamäe, Lasnamäe, and Öismäe transformed the landscape of
Tallinn. The resulting public space is a bizarre experience of new ruins in spaces
that, absent the Soviet occupation, might have figured actual monuments to support
public memory of the national past. Like detritus gathered against the central wall,
the varying focal clarity is perhaps a euphemism for the public’s abandonment of
Soviet-imposed forms of history. Light effects are captured in bits of dust frozen for
extended contemplation. Mimicking the indiscriminate focal distortion of the lens, a
slight blur radiates from objects in the middle ground, gradually saturating a picture
plausibly concerned with the fitting out of Soviet dwellings with goods. Realistic
shadows give the impression of wall sections separating the immediate foreground
from the enclosure and the landscape beyond. This initially coherent materiality
collapses, as twin black squares, seemingly oriented around the view of the dual
landscape, break free from the planar vocabulary of the depicted space. Vertical
zones flanking the composition pair with the squares and windows, and the slippage of trees and other objects in the landscape. Keskküla deploys the trappings of an encounter requiring coordination of the body, the eyes, and cognitive faculties for viewing, only to demand their partition, radically jarring temporal and spatial stasis, a patent of both real and illusionistic viewing. The quaint interior eerily replicates conditions at work inside the viewer’s own, disembodied head. Hardly a neutral business to be likened with linear processes of material production and consumption under Soviet planning, photographic verisimilitude, Keskküla suggests, is a literature of conditioned response.

Regardless of the potentially rich conceptual potential of pop’s photorealistic tendencies, the idea of selecting devices from the language of Western pop, for Lapin, seemed a categorically glib eulogy to an absent culture of commodity spectacle. Western, militarized colonialism stands out as a spectral corollary of industrial dominance in Rosenquist’s *F-111*. At eighty-six feet long, this work suggests the viewer’s procession through historic narrative akin to that of a classical frieze. Synecdoche including a Firestone tire at first summarizes the ubiquity of material comforts in the daily lives of Americans. Sequential icons within such an expansive framework gradually decouple the mythology linking widespread luxury with localized corporate prosperity. Manufacturing plants in Akron, African rubber plantations, military conquest in Southeast Asia and the nuclear arms race come into singular, telescopic focus. The culmination of photographic reproductions and frankly handmade passages metaphorically implicates growing photographic identification with these episodes in the twentieth-century, American imagination.
For its part, as a colony under Soviet imperialism, Estonia’s natural resources were extracted and exported at enormous and visible cost to the local, natural environment. Centralized production and forced Russification in every facet of life positioned Estonia as an antipode to the kind of colonial fictions entertained in American and Western European daily life, and of which Western pop’s underlying ironies partook. With the remodernization of Soviet photographic culture after the Khrushchev Thaw, photographic identity acquired a distinctly Soviet political specificity that was anathema to photo interventions known to Estonians through pop art. These factors may partially explain why Lapin took pains to construct a personal history in which pop tactics appear as only a momentary fancy.

At Saku Lapin showed series of works contemplating the disjunction between regularizing effects of modernist order and the whimsical behaviors of natural forms. In his series *Bleeding Pictures*, flames burst along lines of a grid enunciating the picture plane of the initial sheet. (Fig. 5.8) Successive sheets fulfill the spatial potential of the grid as it folds into the spatial dimensions suggested by the natural process of fire. Solid forms in the final sheets resolve the chaotic element of spatial ambiguity in axonometric handling of line, a device the artist owed to Gustav Klutsis and El Lissitsky, and whose works he knew from the Rubinstein collection, shown in Tallinn in 1966. (Fig. 5.9) Lapin gives a distilled genealogy in which norms for form creation derive from originating principles of...
void, presence, and proportion. Most importantly, he presents these norms as the emerging products of a *tradition*. However, he withholds a viable symbolic order within which this system might otherwise flourish, frustrating a progression whose initial clarity portends a world organized according to, and therefore reinforcing human experiential conditions. Much of Lapin’s writing in the 1970s struggled with human adaptation to environment – an opposition he soon learned jibed perfectly with concerns of early-twentieth-century avant-gardes. His series both evokes and confounds an almost cinematic compulsion for linear singularity.\(^\text{331}\) By the metonymy of flames, the natural world withdraws from its original complicity in this process, flickering out with the onset of a reality both total and philistine. Droplets of blood gradually issue from the series’ concrete forms, as human will to represent gradually displaces nature’s motivating purchase on the appearance of the lived environment.

For Lapin, people only command arbitrarily the universal principles of order they find in nature, whose dominion over the sign is as inadvertent and innocent as it is absolute. As he has argued, the modernist practice of ordering the inhabited world produces effects which alienate its functions from those of “living nature,”\(^\text{332}\) while rendering it incommensurate with the scale of human experience:


\(^{332}\) See Leonhard Lapin, “Inner Space and the Free Image,” in *Void and Space II* (Tuhjus ja ruum II) (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2004): 112. In his recent lectures Lapin elaborated on much of his artistic activity preceding perestroika. He distinguished between man’s experience of and influence on the world, and the world per se. His latent assertion that moral relativism found in Christian doctrine is absent from uninhabited nature is likely a zen lesson: “The conceptual sense has often
local and historical traditions have been given up in exchange for the new move toward the minimalist, high-tech machine. A building can move (liikuta) from place to place just like a car, identifying more closely with the neutral structures holding together micro- and macrocosms than with the local colours.\textsuperscript{333}

Lapin’s image of an edifice flying through a total space suggests an analogous, opposite social form: man whose existence is confined to a secondary plane upon which nothing is “a part of reality but rather a representation of it.”\textsuperscript{334} He seems to tear at the limits of this confinement with destructive gestures implied in the other pictures he showed at Saku. In a work entitled \textit{Fountain}, two life-sized, outstretched forearms bear nearly identical contours and chiaroscuro, establishing terms for encoding an archetype. (Fig. 5.10) With this pair Lapin asserts that the archetypical is not a representation of the real, but a representation of itself. Though presented within the logic of compartments, the body still obeys its chaotic nature, spurting blood haphazardly from the cut flesh of the forearms and bullet holes in the doubled heads.

In his writing and lectures, Lapin frequently envisioned a world in which the living artist is the creator. Inevitably he will confront the simulacrum of himself, and it will be of his own making. Jean Baudrillard described the hypermarket as a

\textsuperscript{334} Ibid.
set of circumstances presenting “No relief, no perspective, no vanishing point where
the gaze might risk losing itself, but a total screen where, in their uninterrupted
display, the billboards and the products themselves act as equivalent and successive
signs.”335 Lapin’s Soviet body proliferates in isolation from Baudrillard’s
commodity-fetish. Unlike the abstracted, reified anatomy in Warhol’s Before and
After, in which the body image straddles racial and gender identity politics and the
market economics of plastic surgery, Lapin’s body remains devoid of terms for its
equation in exchange value. (Fig. 5.11) It is only subjected to the dissimulating
power exerted on it by representation, by which the creative potential of the self is
experienced only as icon. Lapin frequently plays up this content by picturing the
body as experienced by the self, as though the viewer were in that body. In Lapin’s
Bleeding Finger, erratic outpouring of blood from the body proposes a rhetoric at
odds with the exchange of the icon for its referent, supposing a text without a sign,
as suggested by the finger’s erect arrangement, as if pointing to an unseen object,
perhaps probing the metaphysics of indication in the absence of even the barest
semiotic convention – the nominal. (Fig. 5.12) Nonetheless, the replicable precision
of marks upon the body establishes reference to conventions – Baudrillard’s
“screen” – subjugating the body to regularized exchange in a symbolic world beyond
its limits. The putative content of a “real,” unmediated world creatively
individuated by the conscious self, as suggested by the indicating gesture of the

finger, is but a stubborn fiction. It is the intractable tension between “living nature” and the semiotic veil that conditions our experience and defines the real.

At Harku, Lapin hung works from his Woman-Machine series, begun in 1974, between a highly cerebral progression by Meel, and Jaan Olik and Villu Järmut’s joint works consisting of monumentalized bus tickets and hanging tea bags. (Figs. 5.13-14) Later serving as raw material for experimental silkscreen multiples, Lapin’s series began as unique gouaches. At first, schematic handling of line and mass yields to the viewer a notion of the occasional, as in the idiosyncrasies of the body’s irregular contours and fleshy folds. The appearance and distribution of arcs and discs in the border of each quadrant is consistently chaotic, suggesting the presence of a constant and universal force. Successive reduction of the capricious to a canon of regular orientation and replication brutalizes the drama of frailty surrounding biological reproduction and nurture, perverting it into a depository of architectonic devices. Through an allegory of symbolic mechanization, Lapin contemplates human proneness to the violence of the very allegorizing processes he sees as residual to industrial and scientific advance. Lapin, the artist, is complicit in this business, and he positions himself as an active party to the subjection of the romantic, tenuous, and fleeting to the cruelty of formal economy.

Eda Sepp noted Lapin’s presence by the intimate signifier “LEO” in A Machine VII, an earlier iteration of this series, situating him as both creative subject and
object.\textsuperscript{336} (Fig. 5.15) But this assertion of the self can only ever be partial. As his sterile handling of elemental forms suggests, the advent of the modern, assertive self is an arrival to affairs already underway. A constant formal arrangement in Lapin’s oeuvre, void surrounded by enclosure connotes experimental space while animating, by surrogate, conditions of an already mediated existence. Lapin figures as a glyph, between picture and name, in spare rectilinear and circular forms emerging as a sequence from modular parts. Declaring the self within a context of natural genesis foregrounds the fundamental idea that names are what separate Lapin’s notion of “living nature” from humanity.\textsuperscript{337} Against the background of pondering barriers to the self, nature, and world-creation, Lapin sets forth that names are coeval with texts, forming the basis of ideological thought. He surreptitiously affirms that nature is not available for recruitment in the utopian project to engender ideology with necessity of an absolute degree.

An architect by training, part of Lapin’s creative practice lay precisely in the schematic projection of built realities through a grammar of conventions. Based on a contemporary postcard, a 1970 lithograph merges the artist with the picturing, and thus the very creation, of the world around him. (Fig. 5.16) As in the Soup ’69 poster, Lapin initially defers to the hyperbole of recognized form, harnessing its complacency in order to dissociate platitude from the habitualized comforts it normally presumes. The artist represents himself – the bearded Lapin as a stylized cartoon creature – and his continued world-creation from within formulaic

\textsuperscript{337} See note 332.
constraints, here the tapestry of cartoon. Appearing in both the picture on the easel and in a highly schematized reality, the frog figures the world as already a product of convention. Lapin’s self-portrayal compounds his suggestion that the viewer capitulates a priori to a tyrannical logic whereby even the self is recovered only on established conditions of exchange. That is, the self is a perpetual product of behaviors which it cannot redress.

Lapin’s historicizing is likely an attempt to fabricate his alignment with international, primarily Russian phenomena to which he had only briefly been exposed by the early 1970s, and that really only began to impact his creativity after 1975. The artist’s apparent aim is to establish a mythology of artistic origins linking him to mileposts in modernism’s broader heritage. He has long lectured and published on his professed ties with the concerns of interwar Estonian abstract artists, particularly the Estonian Artists Group (Eesti Kunstnikude Rühm), protagonists of the Russian avant-garde, particularly Malevich and El Lissitzky, and through them a connection with 20th-century, Western European art generally. But this positioning occurred mainly after the fact. By claiming a gradual withdrawal from figuration between Saku 1973 and Harku 1975, Lapin elides the historical reality of an abrupt split with figuration indebted to pop art. Despite his claims to the contrary, comparison of the works Lapin showed at Saku and Harku hardly illustrates even a gradual shift in his oeuvre between depictive and non-depictive

338 Lapin nonetheless characterized as “influential” the 1966 Tallinn exhibition of Yakov Rubenstein’s collection of Russian avant-garde art, including works by David Burliuk, Yelena Guro, Vasilii Kandinsky, Gustav Klutsis, Ivan Kliun, Mikhail Larionov, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Matyushin, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Robert Falk, and Aleksandra Ekster.
form, between pop tendencies and pure abstraction. Rather, it suggests a profound concern with persistent metaphysical questions that lie firmly in the depictive act. Because he relied on the very availability of his pictorial imagery to the average person through the early 1970s, his attempt to assert his difference with figuration between the exhibitions at Saku and Harku against the foil of pop art is hardly tenable. In actuality, Lapin awakened to a curriculum for broadening his engagement with metaphysical problems through zen Buddhism around 1975 in lectures at Tartu University.339 At about the same time Lapin, along with Meel, Ilya Kabakov, Vitali Patsiukov and others, visited the Moscow collection of George Costakis.340 This experience, together with his Buddhist studies, probably encouraged Lapin’s involvement in the metaphysical queries of classical avant-garde protagonists, especially Malevich. His close relationship with Pavel Kondratiev, a Leningrad disciple of Pavel Filonov, influenced Lapin’s earnest turn toward non-objectivity and the classical avant-garde, Suprematism in particular. The latter, however, seems to have occurred no earlier than Lapin’s 1973 Cold Bloody Exact Machinery of Spring, which introduces bodily temporality to the absolute space of Suprematism. (Fig. 5.17) By 1976, Lapin’s historical positioning had grown quite literally archival, inserting the artist in the contemporary

recuperation of the avant-garde. His growing obsession with spirituality and avant-garde avenues to the absolute merged with authorial impersonation in *Modern Machine-Art, Homage to Lissitzky*, a kind of record combining Suprematist squares with elements from the Prouns (*proekt utverzhdeniya novogo*) the Russian had begun in the late teens. (Fig. 5.18) He embraced pure non-objectivity partly out of frustration with pop – specifically, photorealism’s uncomplicated deference to, and reproduction of, established habits of experience. The passage of time only encouraged his further elaboration of the narrative he had found the tools to construct. Commenting in 1995 on the exhibition “Photograph and Art,” held at Tartu Art Museum in 1984, he stated “The exhibition as a whole was, however, disproportionate, since the avant-garde had been ‘diluted’ by Estonian works from outside avant-garde perimeters and by modifications of socialist realism, called hyperrealism.”

The Moscow artists shown included Francisco Infante, Erik Bulatov and Ilya Kabakov, all first-tier protagonists in the While he may have begun experimenting as early as 1973 with classical avant-garde abstraction, this activity certainly was not reflected in the works he mounted in Saku and Harku. For Lapin, pure abstraction became a useable artifact for metaphysical exploration and, more importantly, of fungible historical specificity for his self-positioning vis-à-vis Soviet control over his creative existence and the recovery of the avant-garde.

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For the exhibition “Harku 1975,” artists employed a tactic of institutional assimilation like that used in Saku. Similarly, the degree to which the exhibition can be considered outright subterfuge is a matter for consideration. Lapin, along with Meel, Sirje Runge-Lapin, and the physicist Tõnu Karu, installed paintings, prints and objects in the hall of the Institute of Experimental Biology of the Academy of Sciences in Harku, another suburb just outside Tallinn. Also participating were Silvi Allik, Villu Järmut, Jaan Ollik, Illimar Paul, Toomas Kall, Kaarel Kurismaa, Jüri Okas, Jaan Ollik and Silver Vahlre. The display was planned and implemented quickly and in secrecy, but ultimately with the pretenses of legitimacy: the exhibition was unveiled as part of an official occasion on which young artists were to meet with members of the scientific community one week prior to a symposium on art and science. One-hundred-fifty participants, more than 30 from Tartu, spoke on subjects ranging from physics and photography to art from the Far East. Though the exhibition lasted only one week, the symposium reportedly drew large crowds and was followed by stimulated exchange between the public, artists, and scientists.\textsuperscript{342} And whereas only one review appeared in the press, Meel published 5 copies of a samizdat almanac reproducing, in typewritten form, copies of each of the papers presented.

At Harku, Meel displayed a work whose critical stance toward positivist viewership in the space of graphics was highly distilled. The series \textit{Gold Rush} from 1975 begins with a sheet almost entirely of silver monochrome, save for a thin

\textsuperscript{342} In ibid., 63. Meel does not mention any reaction by officials.
yellow band across the top (Fig. 5.19). Marks resembling enlarged quotation marks, beginning in a vertical row at center, multiply with each successive sheet until the marks fill the entire field. The final sheet is entirely black except, again, for the yellow band. The difference between the initial silver field and the first set of marks is clear: the progression is from an empty field to one filled with several marks. The opposite of the empty field is an entirely full field, but Meel negates the notion of an absolute opposite. Parallel and irreconcilable conceptions of fullness and total mark appear as the silver void is either obliterated by black ink or filled with individual marks. The investiture of time through process renders the reverse unthinkable. We know that the progression begins when the first set of marks is made on the silver field, but cognitive attempts to unify the series in a single, linear progression of meaning are futile. The instant terms are introduced to record regular action over time, those terms are presumed to have an origin and an end. But the terminal stage at either end of this series presents a total question, emphasized by the continuous yellow band. Serial progression, and the time within which it is considered, are both complicit in the experience – and the artist’s fabrication – of the total work.

The progressions of temporal-cognitive incongruity in Gold Rush occur within a context of elusive allegory that requires some explanation. The yellow band at the top of each sheet evokes a horizon suggested by the movement evoked in the title. The horizon is a pictorial trope frequently deployed in Socialist realist compositions, particularly those centered around the themes of agriculture and the industrialized environment. In Fedor S. Shurpin’s 1949 canvas, The Morning of our
Native Land, the horizon line serves as a visual cognate for the moment of synthesis in dialectical materialism. (Fig. 5.20) Ordered by modernized agriculture and electrification, Shurpin’s landscape figures utopia as continuously postponed, just beyond the horizon. The painting resolves the struggles of collective labor under visionary leadership in a symbolic shift secondary to the production narrative of the Five Year Plans. The viewer’s eye follows the diminution of tractors and convergence of power lines that orient perspective toward a point on the horizon obscured by Stalin’s folded hands in the foreground. The artist’s own remarks suggest interpretation at the sensory level: “In the sound of the tractors, the movement of trains, in the fresh breathing of the limitless spring fields – in everything I saw and felt the image of the leader of the people.” Through a coy disjuncture between optical and haptic encounter – between exterior visual appraisal and the desire for bodily assimilation of the viewed – the subject is reconstituted in the proxy of Stalin’s gaze toward a secondary horizon, beyond the canvas. The framed window on an arguably real landscape turns out to be a mirror in absentia, announcing the spectator’s role of transformation and reincorporation as Soviet beholder.

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344 In his analysis of Gustave Courbet’s ca. 1848 View of Châtel Saint-Denis, Michael Fried theorizes a structure of beholding in which the viewing subject assimilates the artist’s one-time presence before the river Loue, approaching physical insertion into the depicted landscape, “[...] in his seeing in the back-and-forth progress of the Loue through its powerfully sculpted environs a means of evoking an experience of journeying similarly through space and even [...] of filling space corporeally as opposed to merely viewing a world present to eyesight but otherwise out of reach.” See Michael Fried, “The Structure of Beholding in Courbet’s Burial at Ornans,” Critical Inquiry 9 (June 1983): 654.
The implicit transience of the beholder recalls bifurcation between the assumed viewer and the interlocutor in Edouard Manet’s *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*. (Fig. 5.21) While the latter appears only in reflection, the viewer oscillates in and out of identity with him. Manet further disrupted the linear logic of a singular viewing subject, merging optical distortion with the incommensurate, haptic experience of blemishes to the reflective surface behind the barmaid. The marred, gray sections are at once *at* the painted surface and *in* the mirror, between the viewer and the revelers depicted across a doubled space that both envelops and resists the body of the viewer. Collapsing an equivalent disruption into the body and vision of Stalin, Shurpin assembles a constellation that refracts the gaze in order to re-emboby the beholder entirely: in a deferred encounter with the triumph of Soviet history in Communism. He made numerous versions of this composition, and it was widely reproduced in the Soviet Union, as in the Estonian E. Vaha’s 1952 poster proclaiming “The Greatest Happiness is to Grow and Study in the Soviet School.” (Fig. 5.22) The poster depicts pioneer schoolgirls gleaming as they stride forward toward the object of the leader’s vision, which, by virtue of displacement emanating from the Shurpin picture, assumes meta-dimensional plausibility. Through the girl in the background, her gaze fixed on Stalin’s hands, the poster viewer enters a hermeneutic space of embodiment coerced by vision. Iconic Socialist realist propaganda thus saturated the horizon, a fundamentally unifying device of mimesis, with tremendous ideological potential.

Real space, by extension, became vulnerable to ideological configuration. Propaganda graphics abundantly demonstrated the iconographic pliability of the
golden aura radiating from the future, Communist paradise, distilling it in ubiquitous five-pointed, golden stars and other regalia. R. Pangsepp’s 1951 poster commemorating the 34th anniversary of the October Revolution is a literal example of this encoding process, and of the Stalinist campaign to supplant local histories with the official Russian narrative. (Fig. 5.23) The device of a globe ensconced by sheaves of wheat and a golden hammer and sickle confers upon the Soviet world the simultaneous functions of sun and earth, center and periphery. In the space separating medallions to symbolize the 16 Soviet Socialist Republics, a nebulous glow issuing from behind the globe transforms into rays of light that illuminate a bejeweled skyline below. At once reducing and exploding the scale of the horizon, the miniature forms a pair with the globe, collapsing the logic of center-periphery within a universal luminosity.

Artists throughout the Soviet Union were quite familiar with such official tactics for requisitioning signifiers from both the manmade and natural realms. Indeed to Soviet audiences in general, representation organized around realistic perspective, whether landscape, interior or portrait, always implied the existence of a horizon. Encountering these representations, the viewer unconsciously subjects his cognitive responses to cues such as convergence and repetition. The beholder concedes absorption into a hermeneutics that reinforces the otherwise tenuous proposition of simultaneously imagining one reality while practicing another. The real produced by realistic art is therefore a product of mimetic action on the part of both the object and the viewing subject. That is, realism requests from its viewer a momentary measure of temporal and spatial solidarity in exchange for temporary
custody of its illusions. Judith Butler has written at length on the “irrecoverable” nature of processes that generate the subject, and her language seems useful here:

 [...] the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms [...] The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence [...] The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge.\(^{345}\)

At its most cogent, Socialist realism proposes norms by which the viewer will not distinguish between memory of that custody – a constitutive element of subjectivity – and the utopian narratives in which its illusions are bathed. On a scale approximating that of official painting, Meel’s golden horizon reiterates the conceits of propagandized display and the construction of Soviet viewership. Yet his series disrupts performance, and thus the formation of a subject “available to conscious knowledge,” by preventing linear accretion of parts into a whole whose temporality the viewer might match to his own and thereby construct memory. Meel’s is an utterance in the absence of conventions for constituting meaning from fragments, despite the trappings of systemic logic – an act of address without a viable addressee.

Whereas Meel referenced a tradition of representation, Okas’s *Land Art* installation outside the exhibition hall of the Harku Academy appealed to direct

mediation of the landscape. (Fig. 5.24) Okas arranged black, rectilinear elements atop rods inserted into the ground, arraying them along lines of sight extending toward the forest in the distance. The artist’s black and white photograph of the installation shows two figures standing in a snowy field along an axis marked by black squares standing at waist height. The photo is a tableau commingling forms whose capacity to signify varies across a universalizing spectrum. Broad striations of dark and light separate the balcony, the middle ground, the forest and the sky above. A gradual register of objects whose physical form and appearance is strictly motivated by nature crystallizes: contours of snow accreted upon branches backed by even, overcast sky; dark lines of twigs against the field of snow. Bare ground shows through footprints in the snow, indices to the beholder’s movement along and across the axes formed by the signposts. Lines formed by the snow-covered balcony against the landscaped hedge and the secondary, more gradual limit where the clearing again yields to growth, seem to support a hierarchy of ordered nature, with the built environment of the Academy at the base. As one contemporary critic observed, “[…] the artist robs himself of the perspective to develop in his own system: the continuous and even presence of the opposites as the prerequisite of his world does not rule out their transition into each other.”346 But Okas’s intervention here is more than a semiotic blurring of arbitrary order and natural chaos. As the short stature of the signposts suggests, the route ahead emphasizes the conventional division of the ambulant body and the gaze. The beholder moves

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through a matrix that organizes the space both architecturally, as an object for human occupancy, and optically, as a machine for viewing. Aligning one’s view at the line projecting through the center of the squares effectively inhibits a view of the other members establishing the projection. Thus each axis simultaneously privileges and impedes the optical, summoning the body’s faculties of movement and placement of the self in space. The encounter confounds the cognitive merger of channels of experience whose versatility Soviet modernity assumes and reinforces. Okas’s installations gradually render the distinction between these channels incommensurable to the task of beholding.

As with the egg he installed at the Estonia Theater in 1973, at Harku Okas provided a solvent to isolate and emphasize the sign-seeking practices of visitors to the field. In terms of addressing a viewing subject, his *Land Art* only separately affirms the viability of the optical organ and the navigation faculties of the human body. In this sense, the installation seemed to function mainly to *indicate* the viewer, presenting multiple vantage points for assessing objects and voids around the field outlying the exhibition hall. But this privatizing effect can only partially account for the time one would have spent moving through the field, between the positions singled out for viewing. The would-be beholder fluctuates between zones that alternately reinforce and then perplex the stasis normally maintained in, indeed crucial to embodied spectatorship. This pulsation evokes an experiential
metamorphosis, from ritual contemplator of mediated reality to demiurge.\textsuperscript{347} Okas’s 

\textit{Land Art} installations charge the visitor with the construction of sensory-cognitive order \textit{ex nihilo}.

Like Lapin’s works discussed above, Okas’s installation also emphasized the universal fact that natural forms are resistant to ideological motives: the snow cannot be made to fall in a manner consistent with the rhetoric of revolution.

Analyzing the Soviet poster, Boris Groys identified the project to create a total, ideological object in visual art:

Twentieth-century utopias could not rightfully accept [the] division of visual space into two distinct zones, inherited from the classical opposition between the \textit{vita contemplativa} and the \textit{vita activa}. In various ways, these ideologies made an effort to erase the difference which separates art from non-art in order to unite life-space into a single aesthetic experience in which the border between art and life, the museum and practical living, and contemplation and action disappear.\textsuperscript{348}

Soviet authority arguably merged political and artistic discourses, namely by absorbing institutions for the support and display of creative work. However, by

\textsuperscript{347} See ibid, 36, 43. In her treatment of Okas’s oeuvre, Tamaru Luuk never relates her judgments to specific works. Nor does she directly situate Okas’s creativity within the context of official Soviet culture. Euphemistic references to the quotidian experience of Soviet hegemony, such as “the sphere outside the art,” occlude substantive consideration of Okas’s works as acts of dissidence. Through a passage employing Christian narrative, Luuk qualifies her concept of “demiurg” (sic) as a process of conscious renewal against forces of modernism abstracted from any political circumstances: “First, you have to lose your faith for a moment, like Christ lost it on the cross. That means that a human being has to suffer everything that preceded the crucifixion, even the incarnation into the carnal world, carried out through materialism. He has to die. He has to be utterly deserted by God.... Only when he does not have anything left he discovers the Christian substance of his self-perception and really accepts it.”

privileging the object, Groys downplayed the underlying but equally urgent effort to enforce the sublimation of the senses in the creation of ideologically correct cognition. In turning to nature as art, Okas underscored and resisted the propagandist project waged by Socialist realism to commandeer the senses in the creation of an ideological subject. Doing so in a space where natural and manmade environs merged, he also established the possibility of orienting creativity, display and spectacle around an idiom that resists absolutely efforts to subjugate its forms to ideological conditions: nature.

Lapin, Meel, and other Estonian underground artists insist that they worked “outside” the Soviet system. Artists’ and art scholars’ frequent claims of autonomous creative will, liberated from the dismal prospect of self-expression contingent upon realities imposed by a totalitarian regime, are entirely understandable. Unfortunately, an overwhelming tendency to ignore altogether the official culture that largely determined the appearance of public places, for one, has come to characterize a trenchant fundamentalism maintained even in post-Soviet Estonian art histories. In reality, the space of public display in the Soviet Union was highly inflected by officiated representation and distribution, and by artificial norms for speech and demonstration. For example, at a party meeting called to endorse the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, Tartu University Communists refused, with one faculty member reportedly declaring, “In the house of the hanged man one does

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349 Author’s interview, 2008.
not speak of rope.”\textsuperscript{351} Similarly, Meel, Okas, and Lapin could not but address their work to a viewing public whose memories and expectations conditioned, and were conditioned by, the lived encounter with the display object. That these experiences and expectations changed dramatically with the onset of Estonian national dissent in the late 1960s and early 1970s testifies to the susceptibility of artistic creation, display and viewership to whims beyond the artist’s control.\textsuperscript{352} Indeed while the art museum as an institution had ceased to be a locus for robust historical dialogue between the past and present, the forests and fields of rural Estonia, the beaches at Pirita, even the urban public square became stages for spontaneous, raucous performances and happenings. (Fig. 5.25) So while Estonian artists disavow any contingent relationship, even a critical one, between their work and official culture, their practices actually relied on, critically reflected upon, and frequently disrupted the experience of the Soviet public sphere.

The turn to nature did not mean, as one might assume, an aversion to confronting official control over artistic production. To some degree it may actually elucidate toward exactly what kind of “outside” artists like Lapin hoped their work pointed. As stated above, these artists staged their exchanges with official legitimacy at suburban locations of Soviet organs of scientific endeavor. As in Saku, abstract forms that authorities would have faulted for their perceived irrelevance to communist ideology attended the events in Harku. But here artists successfully used the Academy’s official, institutional identity to explore interstices conjoining

\textsuperscript{351} See Parming and Järvesoo, 78.
\textsuperscript{352} See note 19.
that identity with experimental concerns shared across intellectual disciplines, including art. They adhered the practice of inquiry in the visual arts to concerns that might now be deemed parallels in the physical sciences, proclaiming the existence of an order of ambiguity in the state's authority as it was expressed in fully fledged institutions of scientific progress. By doing so, artists shone light on a method of insurrection that lingered at the limits of what the state recognized, unmasking the incongruence of those limits with the state's proclaimed ideals of exploratory endeavor. This newfound option created a channel for address never intended for the public space, which artists now shared with Soviet officialdom and the art-going public. The power of that option lay not in overt resistance to state-directed norms, but in collusion with institutions that upheld them. Furthermore Lapin, Meel and Okas mounted works that explicated, commandeered, and obliterated official tactics to pre-arrange the outcome of confrontations between display and viewer in the public space.

On April 10, 1979 Meel, Lapin, Okas and Tõnis Vint mounted an exhibition of graphics at the Riga Planetarium in neighboring Latvia. Lapin, who made contacts with artists there while serving in the Soviet army, facilitated the arrangements. According to Meel, “in Estonia the only repercussions heard were in the form of official investigations and scorn.”353 While the exhibition was ostensibly a Rigan event, the Estonians nonetheless used the occasion to travel to Riga and meet their Latvian counterparts and visit their workspaces. It was also on this occasion that

353 In ibid., 64.
the Estonians developed contact with the organizer Janis Borgs, and the curator Irena Buzhinska. Despite the fact that the works mounted were categorically Estonian, the dialogue would have been one of intra-Baltic tendencies in creative work and public display under Soviet power.\textsuperscript{354} In a sense, having crossed the border into the Latvian SSR, the Riga exhibition muted the crystalline logic of centralized administration invented by Napoleon and around which Soviet power was formulated.\textsuperscript{355}

Perhaps more important, as in the exhibitions discussed above, the artists co-opted the institutional authority of the venue, the State Planetarium, as a legitimizing context for the display of work that was a product of labor officially indistinguishable as science, engineering, or even applied or decorative art. Meel showed three ensembles from his silkscreen series \textit{Under the Sky}, a work whose only connection with astronomy is its title. (Fig. 5.26) Meel and others have described this work as politically subversive (\textit{poliitiline akt}) only in its use of color: the white, black and blue of the forbidden Estonian Republican flag.\textsuperscript{356} Temporal multiplicity in these sheets, however, suggests a more nuanced and penetrating criticism of official history and the construction of fact in the public realm. In \textit{Under the Sky}, viewers at the Riga Planetarium saw lines descending in fluid arcs derived

\textsuperscript{354} Ibid. Meel’s account is cursory here.

\textsuperscript{355} See Leonhard Lapin, “The Estonian Avant-Garde Tradition and Estonian-Russian Art Contacts,” in ed. Anu Liivak \textit{Moskva-Tallinn, 1956-1985} exh. cat. (Tallinn: Tallinn Art Hall, 1996): 206. “...mutual contacts between the Baltic states were made obligatory by the State. Still, the main axis of avant-garde culture formed between Tallinn and Moscow and any ties with Leningrad, Riga and Vilnius were usually established through Moscow.”

from charts recording the behavior of electrical charges over time. The basic form came from a chart in an engineering textbook displaying traces of energy as they are selectively measured and recorded by sophisticated apparatus. That is, the charts convey the purported factuality of a physical event through a highly conventionalized register. With the exception of complications restricted to postulates made in theoretical physics, fixity of time, especially in the past, is foundational to claims on the real advanced in scientific proof. By duplicating and then colliding equivalent and inverse graphic representations whose content both depends upon and reinforces temporal linearity and specificity, Meel renders the fundamentally humanist practice of positive reference purely equivocal.

The ascendancy of the documented past to convention in humanity’s positivist efforts to understand and control the physical bears an unmistakable parallel to the post-revolutionary project to circumscribe consciousness via a new epistemology termed “literature of fact.” In “A Writer’s Handbook,” his introduction to the 1929 Lef anthology Literature of Fact, Nikolai Chuzhak identified a historical process that co-opts politically “occasional and subordinate” works of literature, transforming them into objects for detached “nonutilitarian,” aesthetic contemplation:

_Gulliver’s Travels_ was written as an urgent political pamphlet, but time canonized this subordinate genre as a timeless literary tale [...]. Yesterday’s satire _Don Quixote_ became an object of aesthetic consumption; and so what is stopping us from borrowing an aesthetic tool to make it serve the needs of our time – _with its_
conventionality in mind? There are no absolutes in the world, and all phenomena acquire significance only when bound to time and place.\footnote{Nikolai Chuzhak, “Pisatel'skaia pamiatka” (1929), trans. Devin Fore and Douglas Greenfield as “A Writer’s Handbook,” in October 118 (Fall 2006): 85. Original emphasis.}

Suggesting the possibility of a reverse process, Chuzhak proposed the “demystification” of aesthetic forms, advocating a new, revolutionary experience of reality by banishing the novelistic tendency to depict the general or “typical”\footnote{In ibid, 87.} in favor of what Lef theorist Sergei Tretiakov termed the “fixation of fact.”\footnote{See Leah Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” October 118 (Fall 2006): 138. The author cites Tretiakov, “Chto Novogo?,” Novyi Lef 9 (1928)): 4; trans. as “What’s New?,” in Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, Russian Formalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988): 270.} The reoriented representation of Soviet life put forward by Lef meant the death of the prose novel in literature and the constructed model in photography, to be replaced by unmediated work that addressed audiences in the first person. A novel practice of “factography” would formulate the new subject in zhiznestroeniiia, or life-construction, by a dual path to document the recent past in exhortation to build the future utopia.

Meel appears to recuperate the prospect of a pre-constructed, re-mystified subject-position by arranging interfaces with phenomena that defy symbolic order. By rotating screens made after the engineering charts, Meel confronts the graphic explication of otherwise unobservable events with its most powerful foe – its equivalent. Mirror images of the same screen compete within a matrix normally policed by singular and exclusive integrity of form. Meel now deploys the moiré effect as a medium per se to suspend the event of the sign within an elegant flicker.
The customary function of color as an identifying quality of a positive mark, in an inversion of the chart – as phenomenon – compounds an operation of insubordination. The viewer can neither prize the fact-giving authenticity of the linear traces nor isolate their contingent relationship with one color or another, never mind the loyalty of the original chart to the physical event. The temporal explication that gives identity to the entire form is dispersed onto an infinite continuum, mystifying the conventions of empirical authority at the very site of their presumed coalescence. Meel arguably inverts the terms of a central debate in the foundational agenda to construct Soviet subjecthood through the demystification of artistic form dating to the late-1920s avant-garde. That he does so amid the trappings of scientific advance only installs an updated rebellion to the transformation Chuzhak and his Lef colleagues undertook.

Socialist realism arguably grew out of the debates between the Lef remnants of the classical avant-garde and its rival group, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR). This official style, in a dialectical-material vein, depended on a strict division between the past and the future – between documented, official history and plan. Under the Sky contemplates that division, underscoring the simultaneously diminished and expanded capacity to know events in the era of technological advance under totalitarian ideology. One thinks of the documentary projects of Soviet photographers Aleksandr Rodchenko and Arkadii Shaikhet in the decade following the revolution, whose techniques delimited time, and the viewer’s experience of it, through specialized encounters between the camera and the social world, rounding out new efforts to reshape that chaotic world
into a classless homogeneity. Though this practice originated among artists and theorists in Moscow decades earlier, it cropped up in state media across the USSR in a vigorous push to stimulate renewal in the sciences, particularly physics and astronomy, during the Khrushchev Thaw from 1953 to 1964. Established newspapers such as Pravda and Sovietskii soiuz were joined by new mass publications focusing on cultural development, such as Literaturnaia Rossiia and Decorative Arts of the USSR, while publication of Sovetskoe foto resumed in 1957. In the initial numbers of the latter, rhetoric imploring readers to participate in the project of reconstituting the photographic image of Soviet life resembled that of the Lef theorists: amateur photographers were asked to become “active participants in public life” as “future historians would see how the countenance of the great country of socialism had changed.”

The photographic image was seen as both a tool for dismantling Stalin’s legacy by chiseling away at the trite precepts of Socialist realism, as well as a discursive space for refashioning the union between art and political voice. Pavel Satiukov, president of the Union of Journalists and chief editor of Pravda, had announced in 1961,

> In our days the role of photojournalism has grown immeasurably. Photography now occupies a place of

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honor in newspapers and journals, and we apply new high standards to photographs, regarding them as a political document truthfully reflecting the life of our people constructing Communism, and at the same time as works of art.\textsuperscript{362}

Meel sensed a stake in this business of renewal. His critical dialogue with the return of photography's constructive capacity is traceable in a 1969-73 mixed media series in which the phrase “DELE MÄGE !!!!!!! ÜLES !!!!!!! ÜLES” (\textit{Run for the Hills!}) in bold red superimposes a photo of university researchers appearing in a January 1, 1960 edition of the Estonian newspaper “Kodumaa” (\textit{Homeland}). (Fig. 5.27) For this series, Meel chose newspaper pages illustrated with both photographic reproductions and hand-drawn cartoons, such as the January 1, 1958 issue of the weekly “Kommunist,” celebrating the new year in the context of the successful space exploration undertaken with the Sputnik program.\textsuperscript{363} (Fig. 5.28) Superficially drawing on the principle of random sample – most of the issues are from new year’s day – the series isolates and compresses the campaign to recapture the public imagination of history in an arena of increasingly photographic mass spectacle. Stalin-era icons like the tired, cartoonish locomotive illustrating the front page of a 1950 edition of \textit{Eesti Raudteelan} (Estonian Railway Worker), quickly yielded to the visual culture of the space race. (Fig. 5.29) Poster designers, too, enlisted the accrediting power of photographic testimony to monumentalize the achievements of state power within daily public consciousness. Compare the sketchy generality of


\textsuperscript{363} The Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik-1 into Earth’s orbit on October 4, 1957.
Alfred Saldre’s *Glory to Soviet Science!* of 1961 with the precision of Heino Sampu’s 1966 *The First Orbit.* (Figs. 5.30-1) In the later poster, an artfully cropped press photo of Yuri Gagarin advances telescopically from the rocket, suggestively unifying the power of photographic verisimilitude with command of the heavens.

Meel took an unambiguous stance toward state efforts to redefine visual culture by repossessing mass photographic spectacle. In *Run for the Hills!,* the fate of the viewing, reading subject is confined to the dire options of either fleeing into the natural world or succumbing to the reinvigorated, photographic conditions of censored representation that mediated official Soviet public address, and thus the collective experience of history. Estonian art historian Eha Komissarov recalled a homogenizing threat in the cultural milieu of the 1960s: “One significant element here was the fact that everybody had to play in the same sandpit with the state which managed to turn the idea of progress, cosmic odyssey and internationalism into a hollow platitude adorning its own ideology.”

Meel’s selection foregrounds his concern for the vulnerability of mass spectatorship in the liberal period of cultural thaw – apprehensive of a shift toward *false* effects of photographic objectivity. Doing so in the context of syndicated newspapers rendered his creative work a rare (for Meel) dimension of populist incident.

The decision by Meel and his colleagues to tether their displays, often derived from empirical procedures, to iconic sites in Saku, Harku and Riga whose

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function was the pursuit of empirical truth, disrupted the rhetoric of institutionalized distinction between Soviet doctrine on the arts and the expanding horizons of scientific discovery. Though he did not show them in these exhibitions, a 1971 series of plastic transparencies aptly entitled *Visual Poetry* evokes the editorial quality that scientific documentation represses as a matter of conceit. (Fig. 5.32) Cyrillic notation appears within a web of lines and points arrayed across each sheet, a vestige of the forms' original didactic purpose. The blown-up scale of each picture further isolates it from the literature of its original context, probably an engineering textbook. Moreover the work presumes a certain subject, positioned before what is no longer a page bound within a canon of conventions, but rather subjugated to its changing situation. Available light, static electricity, air current, and the varying rigidity and folds of the support usher in a flurry of conditions from which scientific materials and data must be isolated if they are to engender meaning. The viewer's perceived inexpertise becomes a matter of mere tradition, indeed foreign to the encounter with the work's stated, poetic intentions. Concerns of instruction in electrical phenomena and their industrial or experimental application in post-Stalinist Soviet economy assume a remote periphery to the present act of seeing the things, as they are. That act of seeing and being reconstitutes, in miniature, the permeability between conventionalized public address and personal inquiry Meel and the others exposed at the fringes of institutional practice in these exhibitions. In the context of electrical engineering, the Russian word *peremychka* translates roughly as "jumper," or a bridge joining two different sites or modes. Its preservation here underscores Meel's project to
revive language and form in their pre-conventional abstract potential. His
decontextualized series inaugurates a transfer across realms of consciousness, from
the flattening effects of universal standards for information exchange and utility to
individual cognition and resulting emotional states.

Meel’s oblique attempt to name the mystical object of his proposal identifies
a conceptual gap between realia, on one hand, and processes that conventionalize
primeval, or first experience, on the other: “The world happens. My perception and
imagination of the world happen as well.”365 The specialization and ensuing
mechanization of disciplines, for Meel, has increasingly sought to control or resist
nature.366 This was especially so in Estonia under Stalin’s breakneck program to
industrialize agriculture, forestry and mining. It also suggests his discontent with
uncritical acquiescence to modernity - the perception that cultural modernity means
the reductive, homogeneous transformation of lived experience into a monistic
whole. For this Estonian artist, the expense of that acquiescence has included the
potentially motivating force of biological necessity in creative work, thus precluding
its assimilation, its integration with the modern. The resulting condition might have
approached that earlier modernism, theorized by Moholy-Nagy in 1925, before the
upheavals of war and totalitarianism:

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365 Author’s interview, 2008.
366 Ibid.
Rather will unity have to be produced by conceiving and carrying out every creation from within its fully active and therefore life-forming propensity and fitness.\textsuperscript{367}

\textsuperscript{367} Moholy-Nagy, 17-8.
Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore modern art in Estonia through two alternative theoretical models. László Moholy-Nagy’s 1925 call for a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk prescribed forms motivated by vital impulses and necessity, whose resistance to the specialization and alienation of recent forms might perfect the union of art and the modern subject. Juri Lotman’s semiotic theory of culture – the semiosphere – lends dynamism to Moholy’s vision. Lotman understood cultural development over time in nearly Darwinian terms of organic growth occurring in translation at boundaries between distinct semiotic systems. These models may prove useful in understanding complex operations emerging in contemporary art, in Estonia and elsewhere.

Most recently, Catharina Manchanda’s exhibition All Things Equal explored how different cultures’ official repositories of knowledge differ in defining the terms capitalism, socialism, and terrorism – predominant in discourses of power in the 20th century. Manchanda’s project tasked artists from 22 countries with creatively responding to a simple request: to submit their culture’s official definition of each term. Indeed, as those repositories themselves are undergoing radical change, the responses varied broadly. For instance Olga Chernysheva found that the online version of the standard Soviet encyclopedia contained no entries for the chosen terms, whereas the older, printed version did. As the curator explained,

Although Wikipedia has emerged as an alternative to the objective definition of the standard reference book, many users seem to forget that the publicly compiled entries may have omissions or peculiarities of their
own. Whatever the source(s) we like to consult, our individual interpretation of these key terms might diverge or place different emphases. The process of selection and translation highlights in a larger sense that which we include or exclude, individually as much as geo-politically.  

Lee Mingwei’s entry underscores the emphases, inclusions and exclusions to which Manchanda refers. By including the first-person, singular pronoun under the definition for “capitalism,” the artists disorients the reader’s attempt to distinguish official from unofficial, public from private, etc. (Fig. ii.i)

A networked globe entails subtle conceits whose ubiquity lends them an innocuous, but nonetheless suspicious air. A prime example is the presumption of linguistic equivalence that one encounters on the Wikipedia home page Manchanda mentions. The user may choose to view entries in one of ten languages in blue (English, ПУССКИЙ, Español, etc.), surrounding a partial sphere. (Fig. ii.ii) The incompleteness of the sphere implies that the construction of the site’s entries is ongoing, as it is user-driven and thus “democratic.” But the sphere or globe is constructed of intact puzzle pieces, each bearing a character recognizable as Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, etc., thus suggesting that language is a stable set of parts from which to simply choose in linguistic representation – in turn, a stable whole. From this perspective, Lee laconically exposes covert problems facing an artist still seeking a harmonious arrangement – between technological transformation and his own being.

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368 Catharina Manchanda, from All Things Equal, exh. cat. (Seattle, WA: Hedreen Gallery, Seattle University, 2011): unpaginated
In 2002, Estonian artist and art historian Katrin Kivimaa began collaborating with Leeds-based artist Clare Charnley on *Speech*, a series of performances that began with an audience gathered in the seaside town of Haapsalu. (Fig. ii.iii) The best summary of the project’s form is Kivimaa’s own description of the performance:

The idea of the performance was relatively simple: Clare would give a speech in the Estonian language to a predominantly Estonian audience. In reality, she would merely repeat the sounds - meaningless to her - which I, hidden from the audience, whispered into a microphone connected to the earpiece she would be wearing. Thus, her task was to give the appearance of making a speech, by pretending that she understood what she was repeating.369

The series included eleven subsequent performances in languages from Polish to Chinese, each with a different collaborator “speaking” the native language of the audience through Clare. Owing to her ignorance of the cadences and bodily gestures expected to accompany the speech elements, Charnley explained,

Sometimes I would say something that made the audience explode with laughter, other times they looked grave, thoughtful, puzzled. At moments I lost faith in my ability to understand their expressions at all, a kind of floating exhilaration.370

Kivimaa and Charnley’s descriptions of their experience, while they differ largely, share the sense of a subject disembodied and, curiously, fragmented into discrete shortcomings. The hidden whisperer is empowered with the knowledge of the speech’s content, and therefore capable of foreseeing its reception and reflection in the bodies of the audience. And yet this knowledge, along with her native accent and apparent Estonian ethnicity, are removed from the performance itself, replaced by a speaker whose appearance and diction reveal foremost her foreign origin. She can only guess how to respond to the audience’s expectations as they reveal themselves in culturally constructed forms – facial expressions, for instance – with which she is intentionally unfamiliar.

Kivimaa’s conclusion suggests that, among the traumas remaining after the long-awaited reunion with Europe following Soviet Occupation, still concerns the construction of Estonian culture and identity: “[W]e do treat our language as a sacred gift and we’re not yet ready to deal with the fact that different accents and new idioms will, irrespective of our disapproval, change the language as we know it.”371 She continues,

But one might respond that the language has always been changing and will continue to do so. Even so, are we ready to recognize the Estonian language, with all of the beauty and poetry that we’re proud of, when it is delivered through a foreigner’s harsh accent? [...] Are we too lazy to listen to the voice of difference?372

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372 Ibid.
A recent symposium of Estonian scholars in Tallinn, concluded with an appeal for an approach to art history that accounts for adaptation and interpretive exchange as motivating forces of cultural production.\textsuperscript{373} Succinctly capturing the dire need to reassess the constitutive function of originality may be the conclusion to Rosalind Krauss’s famous essay, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde”:

> What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy? What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals...?\textsuperscript{374}

The case of modern art in Estonia presents fruitful avenues for revision along lines suggested by Nicolas Bourriaud, as I discussed earlier. Through methods that comb visual culture while seeking the exchanges, adaptations, and translations that continue to complicate histories of modern art, previous values and commitments might be relinquished for a better grasp of more recent work and its operative concepts. Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics approaches what I have called a modernism of translation, one which has no antitheses or aftermaths. As I have tried to argue in this dissertation, this modernism is ongoing.


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![Image of abstract art]


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KODUMAA

DELE MÄGE

!!!!!! ÜLES

!!!!!!! ÜLES

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<table>
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<th><strong>capitalism</strong></th>
<th><strong>socialism</strong></th>
<th><strong>terrorism</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>资本主义</td>
<td>社会主义</td>
<td>恐怖主义</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An economic system in which factories, farms, and other properties are privately owned. It is against this background that I wish to consider the contemporary crisis of capitalism.</td>
<td>A system in which things such as factories and businesses are owned and controlled by the public or the government. Only socialism can save China, and only socialism can develop China. Same as collectivism, communism.</td>
<td>Use of violence and intimidation, especially for political purposes. Having more than one child is a set of terrorism in China.</td>
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