A SEMIOTIC READING OF HYPERREALISM IN THE SOVIET UNION:
AS A NEW FORM OF CRITICAL REALISM

by

MARIA CRISTINA MORANDI

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Semiotic Reading of Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union: the Representation of Soviet Urbanscape in the 1970s and 1980s as a New Form of Critical Realism

By MARIA CRISTINA MORANDI

Dissertation Director:

Jane A. Sharp

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Western-established dichotomy between style and ideology, embodied by modernism and realism, was dominant. This dichotomy tended to suppress, marginalize or ostracize realism in the Soviet Union by reducing it to the leftist political project. This dissertation presents a critical reassessment of realism in the Soviet Union by challenging its representation as a monolithic phenomenon through the analysis of hyperrealism in the 1970s and 1980s. My analyses of Ando Keskküla, Jaan Elken, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist artworks, based on Yuri Lotman's semiotic theory of culture, show the influence on their artistic production of the social and cultural system of signs of the Soviet society, as displayed in architecture, means of transport, and housing, along with the artist’s personal agenda. Rather than the idealized conditions promoted by official doctrine, these artists adopted a unique strategy to subvert the predominant Socialist realist political rhetoric by representing the actual
conditions of decay and collapse of Tallinn and Moscow’s urban environment as a powerful metaphor for the existential condition of alienation and seclusion experienced by the population in the last years of the Soviet era. While Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk remained committed to a figurative style they also tested and broadened the boundaries of realism, by breaking its rules through means and visual strategies which included the concepts of mimesis, original creativity, the artists’ agency, use of quotation and technical reproduction. In doing so, they problematized the discourse on the perception of reality in a totalitarian society, while introducing a critical third way distinct from the socialist realism and the formalist praxis of non-conformist artists of their time.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Abstract | ii |
| List of illustrations | iv |
| Introduction: Framing the cityscape: Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union | 1 |
| **I.** The Dialogue Between Photography and the Artist’s Agenda in Hyperrealist Painting | 12 |
| **II.** Methodology | 21 |
| **II.1** A Semiotic Approach | 21 |
| **II.2** The City as a Reflection of the Soviet Society | 23 |
| **II.3** The Artistic Precedents: Peredvizhnik and Surovyi stil | 32 |
| **II.4** Socialist Realism and Hyperrealism: Points of Contact and Divergence | 36 |
| **III.** The position of Hyperrealism within the Second Avant-Garde in the 1970s and 1980s | 44 |
| **Chapter One: An Introduction to Hyperrealism’s Historical, Artistic and Social Context** | 51 |
| **1.1** The Development of Realism in Russia | 55 |
| **1.1.1** The Critical Realism of Peredvizhnik in the 19th Century | 55 |
| **1.1.2** The Birth of Socialist Realism: Lenin's Theory of Reflection | 60 |
| **1.1.3** Socialist Realism From the 1930s to the 1950s | 64 |
| **1.1.4** The Thaw as a New Cultural Phase, and the period of Stagnation | 72 |
afterwards

1.1.5 The Official Art of the 1950s: the Surovyi stil 79

1.2 The Non-Conformist Art Sphere 87

1.2.1 The Russian Non-Conformist Movements in the 1960s 89

1.2.2 From Conceptualism to AptArt: the last phase of the Soviet Non-Conformist Movements 95

1.2.3 Introduction to Estonia's Historical and Cultural Background 102

1.2.4 The Estonian Avant-Garde in the 1960s – 1970s 108

1.3 The development Soviet Urbanscape from the 1950s to the 1970s 117

1.3.1 The Concept of the City as a Semiotized Space 122

1.3.2 The Raising of Mikraions 127

1.3.3 Everyday Life in Soviet Suburbs 131

1.4 The New-Soviet Photography in the 1960s-1980s 137

Chapter Two: Four Urban Painters 145

2.1. Hyperrealism in Estonia in the 1970s 147

2.2. Ando Keskküla’s Intellectual Approach to Tallinn’s Urbanscape 159

2.3. Jaan Elken’s Personal Dialogue with Tallinn’s Architecture 172

2.4. Hyperrealism in the 1980s in Soviet Russia 180

2.5. Sergei Sherstiuk: A Look Behind the Curtain of Soviet Domestic Life 184
2.6. Semyon Faibisovich’s Hyperrealism with a Human Face 200

2.7. Conclusions 212

Chapter Three: Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken: The Representation of Tallinn’s Urbanscape as an Abandoned and Alienated Space 214

3.1 Ando Keskküla’s Metaphorical Realism 222

3.2 The Representation of the Loss of “Estoniana” by Sovietization in Jaan Elken’s Hyperralism 246

Chapter Four: Sergei Sherstiuk and Semyon Faibisovich: A Window on the Russian Byt in the 1980s 270

4.1 Sergei Sherstiuk: The Presence of the State’s Control in Soviet Apartments 281

4.2 Semyon Faibisovich: The Intersubjectivity Between Individuals and Public Space in the Soviet Society in the 1980s 305

Conclusion 335

Bibliography 347
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

42. Oscar Rabin, *Moscow Building n. 150*, 1963
84. Sergei Sherstiuk, *Hey, We are Waiting for You!*, 1982.
104. Jaan Elken, *In the Kalinin District*, 1978
115. AptArt exhibition, Mukhomer group installation, 1982
118. Sergei Sherstiuk, *Come In!* (second version), 1982
123. Semyon Faibisovich, *Stranger*, 1984..
131. Aleksandras Macjauskas, *Summer n. 9*, 1981
134. Vladimir Makovsky, *Don't Go*, 1892.
135. Ivan Bogdanov *The Novice*, 1890
Introduction: Framing the cityscape: Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union

Art criticism, and in particular formalist methodologies have often presented Socialist Realism as the “only” expression of realism in the Soviet Union. One reason can be attributed to the dominance of the dichotomy between style and ideology, embodied by the opposition between modernism and realism perpetuated in the 1950s and 1960s. This tended to simplify realism as a mere leftist political orientation voiced by socialist realism and consequently to suppress, marginalize or in some cases ostracize it in the contemporary art sphere.

This thesis aims to demonstrate how hyperrealism breaks this aut-aut by keeping an open dialogue with these two polarized fields of critical discourse. It will focus on four hyperrealist artists primarily active in the 1970s-1980s: the Estonians Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken, the Russian Semyon Faibisovich, and the Ukrainian Sergei Sherstiuk. I argue that by subverting the predominant Soviet rhetoric while remaining committed to a figurative style, these artists contradicted and challenged the depiction of realism as a monolithic phenomenon within both Western narratives and Soviet art criticism.

Moreover, their works, characterized as hyperrealist in the Soviet Union, also problematized the discourse on the perception of reality in a totalitarian and post-totalitarian society, and the credibility of realism as a truthful representational method within a politically controlled environment. This may explain why, according to Estonian scholar Kadi Talvoja, “[h]yperrealism is not an art historian’s favorite object of study, as

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1 I avoid using the definition “Soviet hyperrealism” since it frames the complex ensemble of different artists within the reductive sphere of the ideology of the period. I will instead use the definition “hyperrealism during the Soviet time” or “hyperrealism in the Soviet Union.”
is evident from the small number of monographs dedicated to it."² Art historian Jaak Kangilaski shares the same opinion: “A very complicated problem for the Moscow theorists seemed to be the interpretation of hyperrealism."³ Hyperrealism developed in the USA in the second half of the 1960s, and was introduced to the Soviet Union in 1975 by Armand Hammer’s Moscow exhibition titled "Contemporary American Art," where works by American artists such as Richard Estes and Chuck Close, among others, were featured.

However, hyperrealism’s main features, such as a photographic, cold, and ostensibly objective approach toward reality, underwent substantial variations in the Soviet Union, both in Estonia and in Russia, where it was deeply influenced by the artists’ specific social and cultural contexts. As the Russian art critic Olga Kozlova points out, “[i]n deed, our situation - the social and the artistic - sharply differed from the Western.”⁴

A general definition of hyperrealism as well as photorealism, with which it is often paired, describes them as styles that combine the tool of painting with the tool of photography to record ordinary subjects, cityscapes, and situations in an impersonal, cold manner⁵, and in detailed, high resolution, creating the illusion of being photographs.

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⁴ Ведь наша ситуация – и социальная, и художественная – резко отличалась от западной” Olga Kozlova, *Fotorealism* (Moscow: Galart, 1994). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Estonian and Russian are my own.
⁵ In the United States, this approach was meant to oppose the highly personal, romanticized and freestyle images of Abstract Expressionism which was considered by the new realist artists progressively unoriginal. This sharp critic is even more striking taking into account that many photorealist were educated as abstract painters before turning to realism, such as Chuck Close, Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings, and Philip Pearlstein. At the same time, American photorealists aimed to separate themselves from traditional features of realism, such as the emotional subjectivity and sentimentality, which they perceived as too conservative and old-fashioned. Realism was the prevalent style of American painting until the early years of the 20th century.
Nonetheless, while this definition is close to capturing Western hyperrealism\textsuperscript{6} as regards the Soviet Union, it is only partly accurate.\textsuperscript{7} The appearance of hyperrealism challenged assumptions about national temperaments in countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Russia, where it turned into a specific model of regional art.\textsuperscript{8}

Ants Juske, in the 1987 article "Hüperrealismi Kajastusi Eesti Kunstis!" (Hyperrealism in Estonian art) raises an interesting question for art criticism by asking what must be established as more “valuable” between the characteristics that are closer to an already familiar and “pure” style and the uniqueness of artwork developed further away at the periphery. For Juske, criticism begins to deal with the work of some artist or with a particular piece of work by looking for stylistic analogues with already known works. Thus, the object under investigation is placed under an already existing framework.\textsuperscript{9} However, I argue that most traditional criticism wrongly applies an American framework to hyperrealism within the Soviet Union—a society built on an entirely different system of signs.

Indeed, critics often have dismissed artworks produced in the Eastern hemisphere as mere copies of international movements, doubting their ability to participate in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{6} This general definition is contradicted by the art collector and creator of the word “photorealism” Louis K. Meisel, who believes that “there are as many techniques as there are Photo-Realists,” since a whole spectrum of regional specificities and creative individualities were superimposed to the skeleton of the photorealistic principles. Supporting this idea is also the fact that hyperrealism (or photorealism) neither in America nor in the Soviet Union was based on a manifesto: its characteristics were not written by a group of artists who also had no interest in expressing a declaration of ideas, which covered the whole phenomenon. (Louis K. Meisel, \textit{Photorealism since 1980}, (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993): 15.

\textsuperscript{7} For a more exhaustive analyses of the differences between American photorealism and Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union, see Maria Cristina Morandi, "Framing the Ordinary: Hyperrealism and Photorealism in America and in the Soviet Union" \textit{Hyperrealism, When Reality Becomes an Illusion exh.cat.} (Tretyakov Gallery, Galart, Moscow, 2015).

\textsuperscript{8} An interesting case is Lithuania, where hyperrealist artists such as Algimantas Švęgis or Bruno Vasilevskis’ did not employ slides or photos in making their paintings, which also covered a rather limited range of themes.

\end{footnotesize}
global art discourse or to be competitive on the market as a result of their belated relationship of resemblance to Western “originals.” In fact, this interpretation of hyperrealism is problematic if it is inserted within the wider discourse of the reception and reproduction of a style “in peripheral artistic cultures with metropolitan examples,” as the Estonian art critic Ants Juske suggests. An accurate example of this situation is the way in which Faibisovich's hyperrealist works have been repeatedly evaluated by both Western and Russian art markets as derivative of the American photorealist paintings of Richard Estes. A major factor in this trivialization of Faibisovich's multilayered work lies in the tendency of art critics to purposely focus either on a singular aspect seen as similar to some features of the Western movement or to an artist's distinctive trademark, and then to extend this characteristic to the whole art production, thus radically reducing its complexity.

10 Indeed, a common approach by the West is of reading the Russian culture just as supplementary to its own, or to recognize within Russian culture the unrealized variations of its own history. Jeremy Canwell's position opposes such point of view by claiming that it is essential to abandon an evaluation of Soviet art based on a constant reference or comparison for its evaluation of Western art. Moreover, Canwell claims 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”. Jeremy Canwell, Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2012): 6

11 “Probleem on eriti terav perifeerse kunstikultuuride uurimisel ja võrdlemisel metropolide eeskujudega. [...] imporditud stiilid siin aga puhtalt kujul, vaid kohaliku traditsiooni mõjul transformeerituna või kunstnikke poolt süneesituna.” Ants Juske, “Hüperrealismi Kajastusi Eesti Kunsti,” 9

12 See for example https://www.phillips.com/detail/semyon-faibisovich/uk000111726, where Faibisovich's The Vodka Line series, people in line to buy vodka is described as “The influence of 1960s American photorealism is evident in the artist’s work. Like Richard Estes, who painted from photographs of New York’s street life”. However, a close comparison between the two streets reveals that they have very little in common. In Estes' photorealist paintings people are almost totally absent. His street views are more a game of forms and colors. Meanwhile, in Faibisovich's hyperrealist painting is evident a critic of the Soviet society of the time by representing its influence on the citizen’s life.

13 This example well mirrors a tendency of the art market to eradicate differences in the visual art based on its minimal tolerance for artworks that are not easy to decode by Western standards. An important event which deeply contributed to establishing this approach is the Sotheby's auction held in Moscow in 1988: formerly unofficial artists found themselves on the legitimate market for the first time and the value of their artworks expressed in economic terms. The auction was a rousing success with 119 works sold for an impressive amount of more than 3.5 million dollars in total. Following this unexpected result, unofficial artists became suddenly popular in the abroad auction market, and Western art institutions became a crucial factor in the artistic and economic evolution of contemporary art in the Soviet Union. The tendency to
Finally, the word "style" risks treating the works of hyperrealist artists in the
Soviet Union monolithically, overshadowing their individual creative characteristics and
personal agendas. As the Estonian-Russian art historian Boris Bernstein claims “the
concept of style is in dramatic relation to the artistic nature of the work. Imagining a set
of general attributes, the concept of style is not capable of reflecting the uniqueness of an
art object, which is directly related to its artistry.”\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, I avoid the word “style” in
favor of “trend”, aligning my work with contemporary critics such as Sirje Helme,\textsuperscript{15} Anu
Allas,\textsuperscript{16} and Angelina Lucento,\textsuperscript{17} who saw it as better corresponding to the complex and
various expression of hyperrealism in the different Soviet Republics.

My thesis aims to introduce a novel analytic mode of approaching the complexity
of artworks in non-Western countries by following Walter Benjamin’s statement that “the
uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of
tradition.”\textsuperscript{18}

Hyperrealism in the late Soviet Union emerged through a melding of sources that
exemplify both Russian and Western art traditions: it incorporated several elements from
the Russian realism of the \textit{Peredvizhniki} (Wanderers) and \textit{Surovyi stil} (Severe Style), as
well as Western pop art and abstractionism,\textsuperscript{19} all under a photographic guise
approximating the documentary form. Each of these different sources enters into a

\textsuperscript{14} Boris Bernshteyn, “Iskusstvoznaniye i tipologiya Tekst,” \textit{Sovetskoye iskusstvoznaniye' 21. (M.:}
\textsuperscript{15} According to Helme in an interview with the author, “Keskkula didn't paint so many hyperrealist works,
but they were enough to create the trend”. Interview with the author, October 2011
\textsuperscript{17} http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2757
\textsuperscript{18} Walter Benjamin. \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction}, (Illuminations. London:
Fontana 1968)
\textsuperscript{19} The “ism” here has an important role since it was used by Soviet era critics to signify the secondary
status of Russian/Estonian abstraction as a kind of imitation and fakery.
dialogue with the others, generating a powerful portrayal of the Soviet society during the 1970s and 1980s and a new perspective through which we may examine the concept of Realism in the Soviet Union. However, hyperrealism’s heterogeneous composition renders problematic a definite interpretation of the trend, as evident from the lack of agreement among both American and Soviet art critics in finding a univocal terminology to define it.  

In the United States it was generally called “Super Realism,” “Photorealism,” and “New Realism,” while in the Soviet Union its definition followed more specific moments of interpretation by particular art critics, Terms such as “New Documentalism” or “Documentary Realism” in the 1970s stressed the documentary aspect of the art, while “Фотorealism” \( ^{21} \), and “Slaidism” \( ^{22} \) in the 1980s focused particular attention on the artificiality embodied by the “ism” suffix.

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\( ^{20} \) In his article “Hyperrealization of Slide Painting and Back”, Ants Juske, looking back at hyperrealism in Estonia in the 1970s, specifically points out that there were no consistent coexistence of the features in the works of young hyperrealist artists at the time. Ants Juske, “Hüperrealismist Slaidimaalini Ja Tagasi,” Noorte HALL n.37 13/02 (1983): 15

\( ^{21} \) The term “фотorealism” is used in Olga Kozlova's book Фотorealizm, which is the first, and one of the few publications on hyperrealism in the Soviet Union. According to Kozlova the version in the Soviet Union isn't strict hyperrealism since first the Western programmatic disappearance of the artist's gesture doesn't really apply there, and second the lack of advanced technical devices in Russia, often resulted in the complication of what she called “photomethod”, which definitely affects the resulting image. Therefore, Kozlova affirms that a more correct definition of it is “фотorealism” (as in the Russian translation of “photorealism”). (Словом, западный программный прием ремесленного “устранения” автора, создания гиперпроизведения как некоей вещи, принадлежавшей всем и никому, у нас не срабатывает. Причем нехватка чisto технических средств часто оборачивается усложнением фотометода, его “аранжировкой”, что, безусловно, влияет на получаемый образ. Недостаток идеальности выливается в создание новых качеств фотореалистического искусства. Минус парадоксально оборачивается плюсом. Именно поэтому советский вариант не является строгим гиперреализмом, и здесь использовано более корректное его определение – фотореализм). Kozlova, 37.

\( ^{22} \) The term “new documentalism” was coined by Ando Keskkula during an interview with Aleksei Korzukhin (Ando Keskkula and Aleksei. Korzhuin “Na puti I zhivopis”, Tvorcestwo, 12, (1983)). The term “Slaidism” needs a further explanation since it was coined by the Estonian art critic Sirje Helme, in the 1980, in connection with an exhibition of young artists, in the town of Tartu, in Estonia. The exhibition provoked a heated debate on the value and essence of the works exhibited. In fact, by dropping off the term “realism”, Helme, changed the phenomenon into an ambivalent form of “ism”. The term was also used to underlining the difference between a hyperrealist painting, from artworks whose photo-like effects had a primary role in creating a realistic painting, (see Miriam Peil, “Arutati noortekunsti. Peateemaks: kas on
In Estonia, the acceptance and use of one term rather than another also involved important theoretical and political issues which implied refusal to follow a path of self-colonization by using Western terminology. As confirmed by Estonian scholar Mari Laanemets, “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 a local context, taking into account those parts of Western culture that have not found assimilation here.”

The issue was particularly important in the country since Estonian artists like Ando Keskküla, Jaan Elken, Urmas Pedanik, Lemming Nagel, and Tõnu Virve were the first to explore the potential of the trend. However, in Estonia, Hyperrealism was not a united movement, but went through three different phases, embodied respectively by Ando Keskküla in the mid 1970s, Jaan Elken during the late 1970s, and, controversially, by Ilmar Kruusamae and Miljard Kilk in the 1980s. Eventually, from the 1980s onward, hyperrealism was pursued by artists in other Soviet republics: the Latvian Liga Purmale and her husband Miervaldis Polis, Moscow artists Semyon Faibisovich and Alexander Petrov, and the Ukrainian members of the Group of Six, which was built up by Sergei Sherstiuk, Aleksei Tegin, Sergei Bazilev, Sergei Geta, Nikolai Filatov, and Igor Kopystiansky.

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24 See footnote n. 17.
25 I am applying here Sirjie Helme’s distinction of the three phases of hyperrealism in Estonia, introduced in her essay “From the Ivory Tower to Postindustrial Culture”, in the catalog of the exhibition Tallinn-Moskva, 1956-1985.
However, ultimately even Estonian art criticism adopted the commonly used term “hyperrealism,” created in 1973 by art dealer Isy Brachot, as the title of the exhibition and its catalog, held at his gallery in Brussels. This new definition also brought a further distinction between the terms “hyperrealism” and “photorealism”—although the former is photographic in its essence, it aims to convey a reality not seen in the original photograph, while the latter wants to create the illusion that the painting is in fact a photograph.

In my thesis, I will use the term “hyperrealism” since the artists who are considered here are primarily interested in conveying the idea that the subject represented is real, rather than in creating the illusion that the picture is a photograph, despite their use of photographic sources. The focus is on the subject, while the medium, although fundamental for the execution of the works, is mediated by the artist’s personal agency, as I will show in my research. The approach I apply in analyzing hyperrealism in the Soviet Union evolved from having the experience of studying its main artworks up close in the Estonian, Russian and American museum, in the artists’ studios, and over time as the curator of the exhibition as Through the Looking Glass: Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union organized at the Zimmerli Art Museum in the United States, in 2015.

Hyperrealism also aroused controversy and political reactions from both non-conformist artists and Soviet authorities. For some art critics such as Enn Pooldros, Estonian artists embraced hyperrealism in an overly mechanical transposition, without

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26 For example, in the magazines Kunst 46.02.1974; Sirp ja Vasar 21.02.1975; Noorus Hall n. 37 13.02 (1983). However, the attribution of a definitive name was still an issue in the 1987, as showed by the review of the exhibition Fotoliku Motivina Eesti Kunstis (Photographic Motives In Estonia), by the art critic Ants Juske's. Despite hyperrealist and photorealistic works were the main works displayed on the show, the exhibition was displaying, the curators preferred to use a more generic term to introduce them to the public. Juske “Hüperrealismi Kajastusi Eesti Kunstis,” 9.
understanding its philosophical essence, while other artists of the so-called “Second Avant-Garde” criticized hyperrealism's return to a figurative approach as an attempt to compromise with Soviet authorities, due to what they considered a striking similarity with Socialist realism.

Indeed, the arrival of hyperrealism in the 1970s both reignited and furthered the debate raised within the second avant-garde in the 1960s regarding the reliability of realism as a “true document” to represent contemporary society and alternative ways to convey a more truthful representation of people's existential condition. At the same time, hyperrealism was considered dangerous by authorities who saw its strong documentary component as a potential threat to the foundation of realism, and its Western origin as a way for rebellious artists to introduce capitalist ideology into Communist society.

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27 After the Annual National Exhibition of Young artists held in Tallinn in 1975, Pooldros expresses his disappointment for the new direction in art stating that although hyperrealism allowed young artists to express reality in a cold and practical manner, finally free from the romanticism of the previous decades, at the same time he considered it a trend embodied by insecurity and uncertainty. Viktor Turtiin, “Huperrealismi Olemusest,” Sirp Ja Vasar, 21/02 (1975): 13.

28 The term “second Russian avant-garde” was first used by Western critics to refer to unofficial Russian culture. In the catalog for the exhibition The Non-conformist: The Second Russian Avant-garde by German scholar Hans-Peter Riess it is included in the international aesthetic language along with Western European Informal, American Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Arte Povera, since “it preserves a unique national coloration.” Hans P. Riese, ed. La seconda avanguardia russa. Non conformismo come fenomeno estetico e sociale, in L'arte vietata in U.R.S.S 1955-1988 Non-conformisti dalla collezione Bar-Gera, exh. cat. (April 7th – June 4th, 2000): 19. For their part, contemporary Russian art historians, unlike their Western colleagues, have demonstrated great caution in formulating their own set of research tools, thus proving the difficulty of taking a detached approach from the historical process they are within. Pavel Peipershtein leader of the art group Medical-hermeneutics believes that contemporary Russian art exists only within its own context, as a particular psychic condition. Indeed, Russian art is generally looked upon as an organic synthesis of culture and everyday life, demonstrating a bond between aesthetic experience and ordinary existence. The development of Russian art is cyclical and therefore constantly in conflict with the evolutionary progression of Western art. It tends toward an Eastern sense of time and approximates the natural rotation of life, death, and rebirth. Vitaly Patsiukov, The postwar Russian avant-garde, (Los Angeles: Curatorial Assistance, 1998): 203.

29 During an official meeting of art critics' section of the AU of USSR, held in Tallinn in 1974, the key speaker Viktor Zimenko called hyperrealism “a direct enemy of socialist realism” (ERA f.R-1665, n.2 s700, I.44)

30 In the article “Hüperrealismi Oelmusest” (Hyperrealist Concepts), the art critic Valerii Turchin affirms that in hyperrealist paintings the capitalist world is reproduced with a terrible illusionistic force. She also claims that after pop art symbols of mass media advertising, happenings, kinetic art, and optical visual puzzles, critics were stroken by the powerful of such illusionism, which reproduces the type of visual
However, while American photorealistic artists such as Jane Fish, Charles Bell, Robert Cottingham, and Richard Estes focused on the consumerist aspects of American society, including its overproduction of items and overwhelming advertisements, several hyperrealist artists in the Soviet Union focused instead on the dirty and dreadful aspects of Soviet everyday life. They distanced themselves from the official representation of life conveyed through slogans, propaganda, and images of party leaders displayed on billboards all over cities by the authorities. Some example can be found in Semyon Faibisovich's *After Work*, (1985), (Fig.1) Georgii Kichigin's *Still Life with Sink* (1981), (Fig. 2) or Romanas Vilkauskas' *Interior X* (1981) (Fig. 3), where the artists display and expose the fragility of the ideological and optimistic construction created by Soviet propaganda, and the misery of citizens’ existence that official images disguised.

In other words, although hyperrealism in the Soviet Union shares with its American counterpart a similar technique for depicting reality—the use of photographic sources to portray snapshot-like images of common urban views and ordinary people, as well as the use of the aerograph to convey the camera’s photographic vision and texture on canvas— their primary interest is to infuse psychological tension and spiritual depth into their paintings.

imagery that any capitalist country is exposed to every day: advertisements and posters, flashy metropolitan streets, stores and bars, interiors, auto, and people frozen by the camera lens. («Hüperrealism!» Nõnda alustasid oma artikleid paljude ismide karastustule läbiteinud meie kaasaja kodanliku kunsti kriitikud, kes kirjutasid kunstielu ülevaateid- Ameerika ja Euroopa ajalehtedele. Pärast popkunsti reklamisümboleid, häpnigite teatraalseid meeletusi, kineetilise, kunsti absurdseid automaate ning opkunsti visuaalset ristsõnamõistatusi nägid kriitikudnõud rabava illusionistliku jõuga reprodutseerivaid taieseid sellest samast maailmast, millega mis tahes kapitalistikus riigis võib kokku puutuda iga päev: kuulutustest ja plakatitest kirendavad suurimatuänavad, kaubamajad ja baaride interjöörid, week-end, autokalmistud, fotoaparaadi objektiivi ette tardunud inimesed ... ). Valerii Turchin, "Hyper Realism!" *Sirp ja vasar*, 21/02 (1975): 9.

31 The first works painted by an aerograph in the Soviet Union were Toni Virve's *High-rise* (1974), Heitti Polly's *Yellow Field* (1975) and Ando Keskküla's *Beach I and Beach II* (1975).
Estonian scholar Kädi Talvoja highlights this difference when she compares American and Estonian hyperrealism, referring in particular to Jaan Elken's style: “American hyperrealism lacks the artist's touch, it is a “style-based” art without the distinctive signature of the artist. There is too much of the expressive artist in Elken, to be identified simply with photography.”\(^{32}\) Indeed, although hyperrealism reproduces what the camera sees,\(^{33}\) the artist's personality is still a fundamental medium which leads him or her to choose, consciously or unconsciously, which subjects to capture and frame in the artwork. In works such as Elken's *Väike-Õismäe* (1981) (Fig. 4) Keskküla's *Construction* (1976) (Fig. 5), or Faibisovich's *Outskirt* (1984) (Fig. 6), the immediacy of the photo is enriched by the artist's act of painting, which patiently transfers onto the canvas what the camera can record quickly and effortlessly.

Whereas Richard Estes, one of the foremost representatives of American hyperrealism, focused almost exclusively on surfaces and their reflections, thus creating a sense of detachment in the viewer that forestalls an emotional response, Russian hyperrealist Sergei Bazilev affirms that “the scene captured embodies such sensory perception. Such realism is never a mechanical copy.”\(^{34}\) Bazilev thus highlights how the artist's perception usually remains the primary impulse at the base of a painting's creation. Bazilev's remark brings two important aspects to attention: the mutual influence between photography and the external world, and the role of the artist in creating an artwork that embodies a “universal” and “personal” message simultaneously.


I. The Dialogue Between Photography and the Artist’s Agenda in Hyperrealist Painting

The medium of photography occupied an important role in the Soviet Union's artistic and political discourse since the beginning of the 20th century. It played an extensive role in the first art experiments by the avant-garde, in conveying state propaganda in both official art and advertisements, and finally in expanding the creative vocabularies of contemporary non-official artists of the 1970s and 1980s.\(^{35}\)

The accusation by some critics and non-conformist artists that hyperrealism effected compromise with official power by incorporating a strong photographic documentary component similar to socialist realism arose from their juxtaposition against the new artistic oeuvres created by the second wave of avant-garde artists above mentioned. It is important therefore to analyze the role of photography in art, how it became a powerful tool in the hands of propaganda, and the attempts to liberate it by artists and photographers in the second half of the 20th century.

From the earliest days of photography, the question of its ability to document an objective representation of reality has consistently been raised by scholars, artists, and practitioners. It is interesting to note that in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century, the traditional painterly form of realism was often defined by its “photographic accuracy,”\(^{36}\) a term which highlighted the artwork's close adherence to its source. For example, the realist painter Ivan Kramskoi, one of the founders of the Peredvizhniki group in 1870, started his career as a photo retoucher. Kramskoi, like many other painters of his generation, based his portraits on photographs. His numerous portraits, characterized by a striking likeness to the

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35 See chapter one for some examples of the “New Soviet Photography” from the 1970s and 1980s.
subjects portrayed as well as an intense psychological depth, are the result of a dialogue and tension between his personal mysticism and acute photographic vision. However, there was also an important moral claim often made by painters—that the automatic process of recording the real in the photograph, diminished its human import, a value still attached to painterly devices that make the presence of the artist known and seen. This was one of the reasons why, at the end of the nineteenth century, the value of photography was confined to its appealing technical novelty as a tool to provide details that enriched the reading of paintings.\(^{37}\)

In the early years of Soviet power, Bolsheviks enlisted photography to serve their propaganda aims. Through the practice of “photomontage” in Soviet magazines and newspapers, for example, propaganda messages were subtly substituting reality by creating images that had no historical ground. An example can be found in the 19 January 1936 issue of the newspaper Soviet Art, whose cover shows a photograph, never taken in real life, of a young and smiling Stalin sitting on a bench with Lenin, with the purpose of reestablishing the friendship that should have bound the two and ultimately laying claim to Stalin's status as Lenin's successor.

Scholar Leah Dickerman raises an important point by remarking that “the desire for an ideologically true image is resolved into another paradox: the false document.”\(^{38}\) She explains that Soviet representations were based on a paradox. On the one hand, the reworking of a document testified to the need to offer visual proof of a particular, although false, historical narrative by relying on the power of photography's


authentication. On the other, the photograph, which was valued as a permanent
impression of a past moment in time, was constantly revised to accommodate the political
exigencies of the present. With Stalin’s ascension to the position of the General Secretary
of the Communist Party, the medium of painting was progressively seen as much more
suitable for creating idealized portraits of the leader, although the systematic
manipulation of photographic sources still played an important role in the construction of
Soviet history.  

In socialist realism, the paintings and photographic images mutually reinforced
each other. First, by controlling the meaning of historical photo documents in the public
sphere, and secondly, by “borrowing the reality-effects of the photograph in order to
naturalize the mythology of the artwork in the collective memory.”  

In the book, The Commissar Vanishes, art critic David King documents the systematic manipulation of
photographic images in order to manufacture Soviet history. To reach this end, a wide
variety of visual techniques, from airbrushing and scalpel to crude blacking-out,
cropping, and writing-in, were used to produce a seamless illusion of plausibility that
would naturalize ideology as mythology.

During the Stalinist era, the documentary aspect of photography was also
exploited by Socialist realist photojournalism, whose primary aim was to emphasize
social optimism, great achievements at work, and huge construction complexes.

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41 King, The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia. Photographs from the David King Collection: 30.
42 One of the most renowned examples is Rodchenko’s series of photographs portraying the construction of the Belomor Canal for the journal USSR in Construction, in 1933. Taken during the years of the Second Five-Year Plan (1933-37), the photographs were meant to document the construction of the canal and, at the same time, to show to a mass audience the benefits of the re-education of a labor camp. The series is
Jeremy Canwell points out, “the state enlisted not photography itself, but the photographic. The difference in terms is important here, and it lies in separating photography as a mechanical means from photography as a method of creating belief.”  

With the death of Stalin and the beginning of Khrushchev’s “Thaw”, renewed discussions took place on the relation between photography and art. However, the former was still considered “a stepchild of other arts in official art circles,” lacking the artist's personal vision and engagement with the subject that could move and inspire the viewer. Being left out from art exhibitions organized by the Artists' Union or Academy of Arts, photography had its own venues organized by the Union of Journalists with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture. Photography’s reputation as a political instrument in the hands of propaganda could be the reason why hyperrealism’s use of photography to create figurative artworks provoked a strongly negative reaction from the contemporary art community. Indeed, in the 1970s, photography and photographers were still charged with carrying out a mass media campaign to promote government activities, party leaders, and heroes of labor under Brezhnev’s government.

In Estonia, the backlash was particularly vehement, since already after World War II the country's historical events had been manipulated via the presumed neutrality of photography in order to alter everyday visual culture and impress the official history onto the Estonian people. Aside from the propaganda sphere, which mainly took the form of

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43 Canwell, 134
45 Ibid.
Soviet posters, photography was also an outcast in the Estonian official fine art system, being excluded from exhibition venues until the 1990s. One of the few exceptions was the semi-official Architecture Exhibition of 1978, held at the Academy of Sciences Library in Tallinn, which was dominated by photos of architectural projects enlarged in order to magnify the details of their execution. In particular two works in the 1978 exhibition that used photography with a conceptual approach: Monument to Lapin by Okas, and 20th Century Architectural Styles by Lapin (under the pseudonym Albert Trapeez). Even here, however, photography was still seen only as a tool to support another discipline.

The first attempts to liberate photography from its ideological aura took place already in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the term “artistic photo” was introduced to imply that the photograph was worthy of being considered art. An interesting example of this new approach can be found in the non-conformist works of Baltic and Russian artists, who established a dialogue between photography, painting, and performances as a way to expand the creative vocabulary of contemporary art in the Soviet Union.

In the same years, the rise of amateur photography and a new generation of photographers, who had developed a skeptical approach toward the reliability of Soviet

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46 Photography was admitted to official exhibitions only in 1993, at the first annual exhibition “Substance-Unsubstance” in the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, in Tallinn.
48 The outcome of these experiments was displayed at the “First Exposition of Photographic Art” held at the exposition hall on Malaia Gruzinskaia street in Moscow, in 1979. The show introduced the audience to a wide range of genres and styles, with four hundred unofficial works from all over the country, including experiments with the photographic image and its distortions -overexposure, underexposure, and , blurry effects, and random composite shifts at shooting.
49 The birth of amateur photography was partially due to an increasing interest in photography by the population, after the launch on the market of cheap cameras and equipment, which even non-professional
documentary photography, started to experiment with multiple uses of the camera in an attempt to avoid official rigid clichés, and to engage with their surroundings in a more personal way. A great influence in this period, in particular for the Baltic photography, was the Czechoslovak Revue Fotografie, published in Prague since 1957. The magazine became an inspiration for photographers who sought to approach photography as a distinctive medium and artistic language.

Indeed, some of the leading figures of this so-called “new Soviet photography” were Lithuanian and Latvian photographers such as Aleksandr Macijauskas, Antanas Sutkus, Vitas Luckus, and Zenta Dzividzinska, who “developed a critical reaction to the omnipotence of the image deployed as the property of the state.”50 They distanced themselves from professional photographers by introducing a new awareness of ordinary people's lives that transformed the trivial or common situation into something exceptional and worthy of being documented. In their photographs, they approached spontaneous situations and human bodies from perspectives that included both a collective and personal angle.

Photographers could be easily use. Photo amateurs embraced a range of different users and subjects: those who took pictures of family members and relatives, used the cameras only on vacation, or who submitted their photographs to newspapers and magazines. It also included those who were interested in technological innovations or used photography as a mean to artistically express themselves. An important step in that direction was the re-establishment in 1957 of the main journal on photography in the Soviet Union, Sovetskoe Foto, after it was shot down during the war. The journal was an important platform for photojournalists and amateurs - who were active participants in the public life - to meet, show and discuss their photographs. This also was due in particular to the increase of exhibitions organized in the 1960s, by photo-clubs, where amateurs photographers could present their photographs and experience first-hand other photographers' work. Indeed, events such as the “Week of Photographic Art” held in Tallinn in 1962 and “Interpress-Photo 66” in Moscow in 1966, both introduced the audience to works by the best photographers in the world, and inspired amateurs to raise the artistic level of their photographs. By the end of the 1960s professionals and amateurs began to exhibits together their works in the major photo-exhibitions in the country.

Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union was influenced by the way both non-conformist artists and the “new Soviet photographers” approached reality, which merged in the artworks of artists such as Jaan Elken, Ando Keskküla, Semyon Faibisovich, and Sergei Sherstiuk, dissolving the boundary between photography and painting. Although the camera has a pivotal role in structuring the composition of paintings, since often the details captured or the perspectives shown are not easily perceived by the naked eye, hyperrealist artists such as Sherstiuk and Faibisovich introduce the viewer into a deeper understanding of everyday life in the Soviet Union by recording mundane, unremarkable and, sometimes, unpleasant subjects that open a window on the struggles and difficulties people faced during the 1970s and 1980s. The human being is subject to semioticization both internally and externally. A person's everyday behavior, which includes the way he or she talks or dresses, creates behavioral typologies which point to a specific place occupied within a polyphonic society. These typologies, in turn, reinforce personal behavior by becoming a model to be followed. What is defined as byt, the flow of life in its practical form, acquires a symbolic meaning and becomes part of the sphere of culture.

“Snapshots” of ordinary scenes from the lives of working class and strangers lead these artists and photographers to penetrate the existential and psychological state of Soviet citizens, often by sharing the same physical space of the subjects they represent. These “fragments of reality,” once abstracted from the flux of time, become symbols of a universal condition. Moreover, by creating compelling compositions of ordinary people doing unremarkable deeds, Sherstiuk, Faibisovich, Macijauskas, Dvedzenika, and Luckus

51Aleksandras Macijauskas and Vitas Luckus are considered to be reformers of the traditional romantic realism within Lithuanian photography. Both passionate observers and travelers, they traveled on the territory of Russia to document the life in the countryside. While Macijauskas had several trips in 1968, which allowed him to portray people in rural villages, Lukus travelled from the 1960s to the mid-1980s across the Soviet bloc capturing peasants, performers, beggars, or young artists.
carried on an ideological resistance against propaganda directives that imposed a representation of Soviet society as optimistic, heroic, and prosperous. This aspect is extremely important in analyzing the impact of hyperrealism's introduction into the art sphere in the mid-1970s, a decade described as a period of political “stagnation” where official art was characterized by ostentation, lack of spirituality, and civic apathy while non-conformist artists were seeking to penetrate and reveal the human subconscious through a metaphysical journey into the landscape of the mind. The art critic Aleksei Korzuhhin recognized the importance of hyperrealism within this artistic panorama when he defined it as “the only truly new, powerful and worthwhile direction, the 'phenomenon' of this decade.”

The power of hyperrealism relies first on the artist's pivotal role in the artistic process of selecting events or subjects worthy of being photographed and eventually transferred to canvas. Indeed, behind the camera's eye is the artist's eye which “is looking for the essential shot.” The verb “looking for” spotlights a pivotal concept that I develop in my thesis: “idea-photo-memory” which implies that the artist's choice to photograph a precise subject at a particular moment is never accidental. In fact, what at first sight seems a fortuitous or accidental catch by the camera, is based or “guided” by the artist's distinctive a-priori idea, or experience, which informs his or her inclination to find certain subjects more worthy of immortalization than others. This process has its roots in a mechanism where a person's previous memory influences both his or her

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52 “[a]astate lõpulolid kõik enam-vähem tähelepanelikud Moskva kunstielu, iseäranis noorte maaliloomingu jälgijad valmis ühinema arvamusega, et peaaegu ainsaks tõeliselt uueks, jõuliseks ja tähelepanu väärivaks suunaks, selle aastakümne «nähtuseks» on saamas hüperrealism.” (in the end of the 1970th we were all more or less attentive to the Moscow art scene, especially young people who were ready to join the opinion that almost the only truly new, powerful and worthy direction, the phenomenon of this decade, is becoming hyperrealism). Aleksei Korzuhhin, “Esemehuvist Hüperrealismini,” Kunst 59.01, 1982: 41
53 Burlak, 234.
current contact with reality, which in turn creates a memory that guides further interactions, and the re-elaboration of that very specific memorized experience that becomes transformed by the distance of time and space into a different personal re-interpretation.

Photography is the medium enabling this mechanism in hyperrealism. Based on his readings of Estonian propaganda after World War II, Jeremy Canwell supports this idea when he writes that

“[o]ne 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.”

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54 Canwell, 153.
II. Methodology

II.1 A Semiotic Approach

“Memory” as a structural point in the creation of hyperrealist pictures, raises the importance of a semiotic reading, both for unveiling a deeper meaning behind the works, and for positioning hyperrealists, despite the objection of some artists like the Estonian Leonhard Lapin, within the non-conformist sphere of the 1970s and 1980s.

According to the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman,\textsuperscript{55} whose theories would become known among non-conformist artists from the second half of the 1970s,\textsuperscript{56} we live embedded in a dimension structured by a range of sign systems and the different processes of communication they produce. Semiotics considers these sign systems as models that shape the external world–environment, people and events–as well as a person's memory, his or her character, and their way of thinking. By analyzing these “sign systems” and their specific processes of communication, semioticians seek to comprehend the social behavior of a society. Because Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk were immersed in these theories, I argue that an appropriate methodology for interpreting their work may be found by examining the extent to which their own lives

\textsuperscript{55} Yuri Lotman was born in 1922 in Petrograd from a Jewish family. In 1950, he moved to Estonia in 1950 in response to anti-Semitic admission 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 of the early nineteenth century at the University of Tartu, where he started his research on semiotics. Lotman developed the first theoretical concepts during his lectures that centered on the structure of the artistic text and on the typology of culture, and later at the seminar of the Tartu's semiotic faculty in Kääriku, a small village in southeastern Estonia. In these years he established the influential Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, whose members included his close collaborators Boris Uspensky, Vladimir Toporov, Mikhail Gasparov, Aleksandr Pyatigorsky, and Isaak Revzin, among others. For further readings on the Tartu-Moscow School, see Maxim Waldstein, The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics (Saarbruchen: VDM, 2008).

\textsuperscript{56} Already in the 1960s Estonian society once again opened to new perspectives due to the introduction in the country of disciplines such as genetics, cybernetics, psychology and semiotics, and of several contemporary philosophical texts. The works of intellectual such as Sartre, Heidegger, Adorno, or Habermas to name a few - that were forbidden during the Stalin era, started circulating again in Estonia among the circles of artists and writers who could copy and study them.
and the works they create were also influenced by Lotman’s theory. The city with its architecture and daily routine rhythm was the main subject for the four artists to convey the complex interaction between different levels of sign systems. Thus, the canvas and the city within it become the space where these complex interactions are visualized.

Through a semiotic reading of urban landscapes—housing, means of transportation, and interiors—as represented by Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk, my thesis aims to demonstrate how they were able to convey the arduous living conditions of Soviet citizens in the 1970s and 1980s rather than adhering to the idealized images of the Soviet propaganda. By selecting a city's particular scenes and framing them within the limits of canvas, these artists not only invested them with new meaning, but also showed how a specific environment affects their own perception of society. Indeed, their art should be interpreted within a broader context of urban, industrial, and economic changes in the Soviet Union during its final decades. This emphasis on the changing urban environment was echoed by Sirje Helme on the occasion of the exhibition *Photograph and Art*:

“one should not absolutise the role of the photo in photorealistic art, but one ought to consider the process of the development as a whole, as well as the importance of urbanization. Its role is not so independent as far as it is connected with our previous realistic experience and tradition. However, analyzing photorealism in its present social role, one has to admit that it represents a result of the influence of developing urbanization, alienated perception of nature and an attack on technological progress.”

In the mid-1970s Ando Keskküla and Jann Elken began exposing the conditions of decay and collapse of Tallinn's urban environment by representing the Estonian capital as a deserted city of impersonal facades or empty home interiors immersed in a cool and secluded atmosphere. Their primary sources of inspiration were the residential districts of

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Mustamae and Lasnamae, built in 1962 and 1973 respectively, and their impact on the Estonian population. In 1980s Russia, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk introduced human presence into their compositions, embraced a range of subjects that chronicled urban life with its crowds, street scenes, and domestic life. What the hyperrealistic paintings of these four artists have in common is the sense of loneliness, abandonment, and alienation that emerges from the representation of a Soviet city where a higher power imposes on the population a system of signs and communication perceived as foreign or incomprehensible, but which must be accepted nevertheless.

II.2 The City as a Reflection of the Soviet Society

The choice of the urban environment as main subject by Ando Keskkülas, Jaan Elkens, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk requires an analysis of the “discursive” function of the city in their hyperrealist paintings as a mirror of the social and political situation of the country in a particular historical period. According to Tiit Remm, professor of semiotics at the University of Tartu, a physical space is a specific product of a particular socio-cultural milieu or system. The city, as both a concrete space and a “conceptual structure, is an abstract cultural concept designed and realized in material, social and cultural dimensions.” This is to say that it could also be considered the product of a socio-cultural system as Lotman affirms in *Universe of the Mind.* The dialogue established between social and physical spheres determines a complex of sign systems that generate meaning in a specific way and, therefore, define the distinctiveness of a

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59 Lotman, *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*: 194
particular culture. Lotman considers the city a place formed by a complex semiotic mechanism where all different national, social and stylistic codes and texts confront and re-code each other, making it a powerful generator of new information. His semiotic approach sees the city as a written text, where different components of life—architectural ensembles, rituals and ceremonies, the city plan, and street names—stand as symbols that become the basis upon which its structure is “composed”. 60

Architecture is a field that has often been studied by philosophers and semioticians such as Piritim Sorokin, Henri Lefebvre, Giovanni K. Koenig, Charles Jencks, and Umberto Eco. Each writer frames their discussion with a discursive methodology derived from the crossover between architecture and linguistic semiotic theory. Philosopher Roland Barthes expresses a similar idea when he affirms that “the city is a poem[...] but it is not a classic poem, a poem tidily centered on a subject. It is a poem which unfolds the signifier, and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing.” 61 By applying the “semiotic triangle” to the city it can be established that the single elements composing it, for example architectural objects and the spaces between them, are “signifiers” that together define the “signified” of a city—namely, its “identity” along with its specific rhythm and cultural character. The union of signifier and signified creates the “sign” of the city, which is the image it projects into the world. Therefore, in order to “grasp” the city’s sign it is necessary to

60 Ibid.
61 According to Roland Barthes, “we rediscover Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is a writing. He who moves about the city, e.g. the user of the city (what we all are), is a kind of reader who, following his obligations and his movements, appropriates fragments of the utterance in order to actualize them in secret.” Roland Barthes, “Semiologie et urbanisme,” L'aventure semiologique, (Paris: Seuil, 1985): 240.
take into consideration the multiple levels the urban environment is built on, including its architecture and space, everyday life, society, and culture.\textsuperscript{62}

The “signified” of the city is grasped by Keskküla, Elken, and to some extent Faibisovich through the representation of its architecture. This choice may be explained by their own personal experience, as they received their training in architecture and only later turned to painting.\textsuperscript{63} As Sirje Helme noted, “artists have started paying greater attention to their immediate environment, and their work has become more accurate and specific both in regard to their surroundings and the human activity around them by using a manner of painting that requires accurate knowledge of the object and a precise relationship to them.”\textsuperscript{64}

According to Umberto Eco, architectural objects are a form of meaning, produced under economic and cultural conditions, which convey the language of a particular society and at the same time are part of everyday life. Eco compares architectural structures to sentences within a narration that describes the atmosphere and the sense of lived experience.\textsuperscript{65} Architecture also plays an active role in producing messages that appeal to and are experienced by the masses inattentively, in the same way they would experience advertising messages. Therefore, Eco deduces that architecture has the same characteristics of mass communication,\textsuperscript{66} since its objects carry two fundamental aspects, one functional and one symbolic, with the latter taken for granted by a population

\textsuperscript{62} Remm, “Understanding the city through its semiotic spatialities,” 252.
\textsuperscript{63} Sergei Sherstiuk received instead formal training in painting, which is reflected in his close interest for both the human figure and the relationship between individuals displayed in his hyperrealist paintings.
\textsuperscript{64} Sirje Helme, “Noor Kunst ‘80”, Sirp ja Vasar, 21.03 (1980)
\textsuperscript{65} Eco Umberto, “Function an Sign,” Signs, symbols, and architecture, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1980): 41.
\textsuperscript{66} In ibid.
exposed to it on a daily basis,67 (Eco suggests the example of a chair and a throne to illustrate how different meanings could be attributed to the same object). However, as both spatial forms and architectural objects are created to signify something, both are capable of embodying a certain corresponding ideology and becoming coercive. Since architectural discourse and its practice are based on accepted premises, its objects exercise a strong mass appeal and elicit a certain type of tacit public consent. Therefore, according to Eco, architecture is “psychologically persuasive with a gentle hand (even if one is not aware of this as a form of manipulation) one is prompted to follow the 'instructions' implicit in the architectural message.”68

Architecture not only exerts a subtle persuasion on the population but on architects themselves, who are influenced equally in the creation of architectural objects by the cultural, political and social background they live in. This creates a circle where architectural models embody the “speech” of the object, which is imprinted in it by the architect, who is influenced by the culture he or she is exposed to—a culture in turn influenced by the environment within which the architect acts. Once again Roland Barthes shares the same approach when he writes that “[t]he city is a discourse, and the discourse is a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak to our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it.”69

Like any message, architectural “speech” can be interpreted, transformed, or perverted without the addressee being aware of it. The architect Giovanni K. Koenig

67 Eco breaks down the architectural code into three different codes: the technical, the synthetic, and the semantic one. The technical code does not have a communicative content, but only a structural logic, the synthetic code is exemplified by typological codes concerning articulation into spatial types, and finally, the semantic code, which concerns the relations established between individual architectural sign-vehicles and their connotative meanings. In ibid., 24.
68 In ibid., 46.
69 Roland Barthes, “Semiology and Urbanism,” (lecture given on 16 May 1967 at the University of Naples)
argues that the influence of architecture on people's behavior is more profound and prolonged than that of any verbal message, concluding: architecture is a “system of sign vehicles that promote certain kinds of behavior par excellence.” From this point, it can be deduced that architecture might also be used by one culture to impose certain behaviors on another. Indeed, when architects create architectural objects in which they juxtapose forms and codes embodied by a previous architectural model, the new “text” of the present architectural discourse transforms the text of the past. This process plays a pivotal role in the hyperrealist works of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and, even Sherstiuk. These four artists consider architectural objects and the domestic space as part of a specific culture that can indirectly influence a population's daily life. By focusing their attention on the urban landscapes of Tallinn and Moscow, they show how these cities' foundations are based on both perceived and unnoticed signs and codes which, once decoded, reveal a complex set of messages and meanings that profoundly shape citizen's lives and memory. Indeed, Elken sees the city through a semiotic perspective when he affirms that “the environment was defined by countless individual objects and street signs specific to the era,” thus highlighting the idea that architectural objects are defined by the time of their creation, and define the surrounding environment in turn. The artists' representation of a specific city's vista, neighborhoods, or corners opens hyperrealist paintings to a double dimension: one based on personal memories and

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71 Lotman, The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 194
72 In the 1970s Estonian writers started including architecture as a subject of their novels. For example, Mati Unt, one of the main representatives of this trend, often focused his novels on the city's urban development and on the lives of the dwellers living in the residential districts of Tallinn. By unveiling and shedding light on the life condition of the city's outskirts as place, like in his books Autumn Ball (Sügisball), where his characters experience magical or absurd situations in strange places, once the night falls, Unt symbolically refers to the life of the Estonian population under the Soviet occupation.
documentary perspectives. As mentioned, photography is the medium that brings these two dimensions together on a hyperrealist canvas. This process shows firstly how the act of photography consists not only in creating a picture but in producing a language, and secondly that even the simplest and apparently transparent recording of reality such as a photograph is, in fact, a cultural artifact, as much in need of decoding as a painting.

However, it must be pointed out that the art process is still the “primary” aspect of hyperrealist paintings. Lotman sees art, architecture, and music as “secondary modeling systems”, made by a set of rules whose function is to build a model of reality based on the primary system\textsuperscript{74} of language. Language is a primary system since it conveys the model through which we apprehend the world, being the fundamental operator that allows for correlation between different sign systems.\textsuperscript{75} I argue here that art is a special type of modeling system, one that operates on the level of “language” as conceived by Lotman. It is characterized simultaneously by practical and conventional behavior and by the speaker’s (or the artist’s) constant awareness of the possibility of alternate meanings to the one currently being perceived.\textsuperscript{76} As a product of art, architecture follows the same rules, and should be regarded as “secondary”, too. It is a being special type of modeling system that is capable of storing large amounts of complex information, while also increasing and transforming it.

For Lotman, the purpose of art is to render our ordinary representations as a metalanguage of some evident phenomenon by examining it in a new way, as Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk do in their artworks, transferring the language of the

\textsuperscript{74} Yuri Lotman's article from the third volume of the journal \textit{Trudy po Znakovym sistemam}, published in 1967.
\textsuperscript{75} For a further analyses of Lotman’s “primary modeling system” and “secondary modeling system” see Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{76} Lotman, \textit{Trudy po Znakovym sistemam}: 21
city, embodied by its architecture, into the language of art, embodied in the painting, via
the language of photography. The space of their paintings is thus transformed into a
“text” with its own order and internal relations; depicted space may be seen as a sort of
conceptual space where snapshot-like images are reallocated within the frame of the
canvas as “readymade” objects. The limits of the painting could be compared to what
Lotman defines as a boundary, a bilingual mechanism that joins two semiotic spheres,
one external and one internal, in a space he calls “the semiosphere”. When the systems at
the center of the semiosphere are gradually occupied by signs belonging to a culture
outside the boundaries of that semiosphere, the dialogue between the two cultures is
based on two opposite impulses: the texts coming from the external culture are foreign to
the culture that accepts them, but at the same time they become, to a certain degree,
homogeneous to this culture through their interpretation and translation that contribute
them to lose some of their specific properties.

Further, Lotman's theory proposes that everyday life is also a “boundary” zone
where our own practices and habits come into conflict with the codes and systems
imposed on us by the dominant discourse of the “center”. In Keskküla’s and Elken's
paintings, the boundary takes on an even more specific form when they depict the
convergence, or clash, of two different cultures such as the Estonian and the Russian,
through the representation of Tallinn's housing and architecture as ideologized zones of
power. By coupling architectural objects with different sign systems, these two artists
show how architecture conveys a reservoir of hidden meaning and signs, that once
decoded become a powerful metaphor for an existential condition of alienation and
seclusion experienced by Estonians during the Soviet occupation,\(^{77}\) as in Elken's painting *On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street* (1978), (Fig. 7) or Keskküla's *Evening* (1975), (Fig. 8). And the estrangement that follows from embedding an apparently insignificant subject in the sphere of art suggests the creative potential and complexity that may be drawn from the everyday sphere as it is well expressed by Sherstiuk and Faibisovich's paintings such as *Come In!* (1982) (Fig. 9), and *Outskirts*, (fig. 6) respectively. Furthermore, the space created on the canvas by Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk becomes a platform where three “languages”—photography, architecture, and painting—activate a communicative process that generates new information.

I also argue that to further understand the political and social implication embodied by the hyperrealist works of Sherstiuk and Faibisovich, it is useful to apply the concept of the “chronotope”. This concept was developed within the field of Russian literature by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1937 essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel".

A *chronotope* is both a cognitive concept and a narrative feature of language used in novels to unify time and space.\(^{78}\) In his essay, Bakhtin affirms that

“We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. [...] The chronotope as a formally

\(^{77}\) “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.” (Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front. The Soft Power of Midcentury Design*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 201

constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.”

More specifically, the Russian philosopher affirms that

“the graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and every day time are concentrated and condensed; at the same time, they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch. The epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time].”

Bakhtin’s theory of chronotopes can be applied to Faibisovich and Sherstiuk's representations of banal and somehow insignificant events and people. The frame of a page, where time and space meet and enter in dialogue, is translated into the space of the canvas, where this intrinsic connection is expressed artistically. Both page and canvas have the ability to display time and, on the other hand, to perceive space not as a static background, but as an emerging whole. In their paintings space ceases to be mere background and becomes identifiable with a particular historical era to such an extent that “present, past and future [are] linked by a process of genuine growth, which means that change does not take place in an arbitrary fashion.” The canvas becomes the space where the content depicted is the text that occupies a specific place in space and time, and where such space and time become a chronotope. As Lotman affirms, the world as reality is the content of art. In order to represent reality, art has to establish a relationship with the object it intends to represent, then to translate that object into its own language as a given system. In this respect, a work of art is always conventional, but at the same time

80 FTC: 247).
must be intuitively recognized as an analog of the object it represents. By reproducing the world, art helps to better understand it.\[82\]

II.3 The Artistic Precedents: *Peredvizhники* and *Surovyi stil*

Hyperrealism's representation of themes and subjects relating to individuals and their relationships and depiction of social struggle and contradictions within a changing society finds its predecessor in the Russian tradition of realism exemplified by the works of the aforementioned *Peredvizhники* group in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the *Surovyi stil* in the late 1950s. In fact, despite the tendency to consider socialist realism as the only expression of realism in Russia, realism itself—"critical" as well as "socialist"—actually underwent a constant process of evolution and historical re-definition\[83\] connected to the political and economic changes of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, as affirmed by art historian Susan Reid\[84\] and literary scholar Katerina Clark.\[85\]

The *Peredvizhники* were a group of Russian realist artists who formed a cooperative in Saint Petersburg in 1863 in protest of the reactionary attitude prevailing at the Academy of Arts. In 1870 it evolved into the *Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions* (*Tovarishechestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok*), which advocated for an


\[83\] Before the “birth” of socialist realism, the art scene witnessed a flourishing of different groups, such as The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AkhRR), and the OST, which aimed to create a language that represented the achievements of the revolution. The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AkhRR) was founded in 1922, and remained active until 1933. It promoted the newly born state after the revolution, and the construction of the Soviet society, through the mean of easel painting. OST founded in 1925 by the artists Aleksandr Deineka and Yuri Pimenov, to name two of the most representative, could be regarded as a bridge between the avant-garde tradition and the new realism advocated by the AkhRR. Indeed, although Ost members were primarily in support of easel painting, they often included in their compositions formal elements (which belonged to the avant-garde praxis) into their works.


\[85\] Fer Briony et al., *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, (Yale University Press, 1993)
art liberated from the stagnant tradition embodied by the Academic Neoclassicism, considered an outdated artistic. Instead, they addressed subjects tied to modern life, associated with the social situation of their time as embodied by story genre painting depicting scenes that were often critical of national injustices. Several trips and traveling exhibitions organized across Russia helped the artists to become documenters of Russian everyday life and to establish a personal involvement with the subjects of their paintings, mostly peasants and the provincial poor, as well as landscapes connecting them to the natural environment.

Through their works, these artists highlighted the inequities of contemporary society and became a vehicle for social reforms enabling the development of national consciousness. Indeed, works such as *Commissary of Rural Police Investigation*, (1857) (Fig. 10) by Vasili Grigorevich Perov and Ilya Efimovich Repin's monumental painting *Bargemen on the Volga* (1870-73) (Fig. 11) clearly critique the Russian aristocracy and its autocratic government. Perov's painting launches a sharp attack on police methods by showing a tied peasant man, part of his clothes ripped, as he is interrogated in a small and overcrowded room by the commissary. Repin's *Bargemen* addresses the social conditions

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86 Arguments over the appropriateness of Russian subject matters in paintings, and the Academic artificial distinction between genre and historical painting, began at the beginning of the nineteenth century and intensified as time went on. A group of students competing for the annual gold medal objected to the imposition of a specified subject and to the attempt by the authorities to suppress subjects taken contemporary life. Between them were Ivan Kramskoi; Vasily Perov, Grigori Myasoyedov, Nikolai Ge, Ivan Shishkin, Alexei Savrasov, Ilya Repin, to name some, which later would become the founder of the group of the *Peredvizhnik*.


88 The *Peredvizhnik*i's approach, which consisted in the treatment of elevated subjects as genre paintings, in opposition to the virtuoso Salon technique of the time, was heavily influenced by the theory of social revolutionary N.G. Chernuashevski, developed in his doctoral thesis, *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* (1855). For Chernuashevski, subjects and expressions are more important than form, in the interest of the social order. Therefore, he called for an art that was going to reflect life against the prevalent belief of art for art's sake.
of unfortunate workers in Russia who hauled the heavy boats against the Volga current. Repin charges the scene with pathos that denounces the brutal exploitation of human labor and the society that allowed it. Perov’s and Repin's realistic representations of the degraded life and working conditions of the masses in Russia surpassed anything that had been seen before that time.\(^89\)

The *Peredvizhniki* group’s critical realism would be revived in the mid-1950s by Severe Style artists such as Nikolai Andronov, Geli Korzhev, Tair Salahov, and Victor Ivanov, whose social documentary style reflected the dreary conditions of postwar society rather than the bright and idealized subjects of Socialist realism presented during Stalin’s time. Estonian scholar Kädi Talvoja expands this notion: “The Severe Style embodies the atmosphere of the progressive humanistic culture of the postwar world. After Stalin's death socialist realism gradually gives way to ordinary realism, and utopian dreams for a new appeal to the eternal values embodying the Russian people.”\(^90\)

After the de-Stalinization of Soviet art during the Thaw, official art experienced a renewed artistic dialogue with Western art, both past and present, laying the foundation for a debate concerning the parameters of realism that would continue through glasnost and the end of the long Cold War.\(^91\)

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\(^{89}\) This vein of rebellion gradually faded away after 1893, when the main members of the *Peredvizhniki* were absorbed into the Tzarist Reformed Academy of Art, which made them the officially sponsored school of Russian painting and the “guardians of the new academicism.” Elizabeth K. Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art in the State and Society: the Peredvizhniki and their Tradition.* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977). Eventually, in the 1930s, the *Peredvizhniki*’s critical social realism was refashioned into a prototype for the positive Socialist Realism that was eventually forced on artistic production.


\(^{91}\) The artists of the 1950s tried to embody the sense of global challenge and international struggle of the Soviet people after the victory over fascism, during the post-war reconstruction. The aestheticization of the national values, and the symbolism of the universal experience of a society that survived the war were some of their main subjects. An important step toward that direction was the Picasso Exhibition in 1956 that became a forum for discussions of contemporary culture, artistic creative freedom, and transformed Moscow in a cosmopolitan city.
Hyperrealism’s goal to widen the boundaries of realism could be traced back both to the already mentioned Peredvizhiki and to the Surovyi stil artists who, although still members of the official cultural sphere, attempted formal and stylistic innovations seeking a return to critical realism. Like the Peredvizhiki, these artists aimed at repudiating what they considered an outdated model of art and instead paint scenes better reflecting the conditions of contemporary life. This led to the gradual fading of the dichotomy between modernism and socialist realism into a new realism merging the two poles. In fact, an important aspect connecting hyperrealism and the Surovyi stil in the 1950s is the combination of realist elements with modernism, introducing a fresh view of the present by looking for new means to modernize its manner of depiction.

A pivotal characteristic that links the Peredvizhiki, the Surovyi stil artists, the hyperrealists, is the aim to personally establish a connection with the subjects and environments of their works. Instead of creating fictional characters and situations out of literary sources, myths, or propaganda through idealized portrayals of heroic laborers or party leaders, these artists expose to the general public the simplicity of collective farmers, miners, workers, commuters, family members, and friends—all known as “the Russian people” in the language of the authorities. It should be clarified here that the word “simplicity” does not mean shallowness or emptiness in their works.

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93 As a matter of fact, among Estonian art historians the term “severe style” is still controversial. The art history written after the regaining of the Estonian independence has preferred to view the phenomenon as a moderate modernist form of innovation. Therefore terms such as “modernist realism” or “socialist modernism” have been suggested to replace it. Sirje Helme considered important the connection of modernist realism of the 1960s with the contemporary scientific-technological revolution since the “sources and methods partly rely on classical modernism, but its style and image are linked with the so-called ideology of contemporaneity, which actually is balanced with propaganda”. Liisa Kaljula, “Severe style. Ideology of contemporaneity in Estonian Art during the thaw era”, Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia 3(8)(2013): 177-210.
contrary, in some of the *Surovyi stil* paintings such as Viktor Popkov's *Builders of Bratsk*, (1961) (Fig. 12), Aleksandr Smolin’s *Polar explorers* (1960) (Fig. 13), or Pavel Nikonov's *Geologists*,

94 (1962) (Fig. 14), the subjects represented display such an inner tension that they become quite provocative due to the attribution of a spiritual dimension to characters who were considered at the edge of the Soviet society. The same “simplicity” which resides in common people is also an aspect of Faibisovich's paintings, as in the series *Line*, particularly *Line up for the wine at last* (1987) (Fig. 15), and *In the Line for Vodka* (1990) (Fig. 16), which in defiance of the banal situations they represent, shed light on the devastating “plague” of alcoholism that Russian propaganda of the time conveniently avoided addressing. These works are devoid of any illusions; their uncompromising and merciless representation of the human being and the contemporary society were seen as destroying the optimism that characterized the Stalinist era, as well as the alleged grandeur of Khrushchev’s, Breznev's, and Gorbachev administrations.

II.4. Socialist Realism and Hyperrealism: Points of Contact and Divergence

It is important from the outset to refute the accusation directed by some non-conformist artists that hyperrealism effected a compromise with socialist realism. The challenge for any art historian and art critic is to continue bringing to light the dissent that hyperrealist artists kept alive in the Soviet Union, without simply reducing it to the reality from which they dissented. Hyperrealists expanded the artistic discourse of their time, by distanc[ing themselves from both the predominant socialist realist rhetoric and modernist

94 Nikonov’s *Geologists* embodies the pathos, sacrifice, the heroic passions, and hopes of the Soviet period after the war. The painting shows an internal complexity and a psychological tension which are built on a particular perception of colors, plasticity and ensemble of elements. Aleksandr Kamensky, “The Reality of Metaphor”, *Tvorchestvo*, n. 8 (1969): 13-15.
practices, introducing a third critical way to open a dialogue with the political status quo of the 1970s and 1980s.

Although hyperrealism shares some of the visual techniques used by Soviet propaganda, such as the use of the airbrush and the blacking out and cropping of the photographic source, its aim is to achieve the opposite end: unmasking the power and control of the state over the often unaware population. Hyperrealists challenged the hegemonic perception of reality by reinterpreting the modernized and industrialized environment as emptied by Soviet rhetoric, while raising a deeper reflection on the role of the artist as creator.

Indeed, hyperrealism drops the utopian and idealistic representations of socialist realism and of a society free of conflicts moving toward a bright future, to focus instead on revealing the substratum of desolation and alienation of life in Soviet cities, as shown in Keskküla and Elken's urban views of Tallinn. As Mari Laanemets has observed regarding Elken's urbanscapes: “depictions of the emotionless new residential area are obvious reproaches which do not correspond to the utopia that served as the excuse for building them in the first place.” It is sufficient to have an immediate idea of these diametrically opposed approaches by comparing the painting *New Moscow*, (1937) (Fig. 17), by Yury Ivanovich Pimenov, which shows a Moscow immersed in a lively and pleasant atmosphere where tall buildings, new cars, and buses convey an image of

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95 It is not incidental that some hyperrealist artists became persons of interest for the police and the KGB. For example, Semyon Faibisovich was arrested several times by KGB officers who believed he was a spy, since he was taking a picture in public places, as he recounted in an interview with the author, (21 July, 2016). Sherstiuk was also harassed by the police who visited his studio and made several calls at his home. Moreover, Ando Keskküla was jailed for ten days, and his head shaved after participating in a performance on a beach during a summer camp, where he was accused of public disturbance for releasing pages of the newspaper *Pravda* into the air with others artists. He later incorporated the cut hair into a piece entitled *Head in the Basin*, which he showed later in a pop art exhibition by the group “Soup 69”. (Amy Bryzgel, *Performance in art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, (Manchester University Press, 2017).

prosperity in a socialist paradise, with Elken's Väike-Õismäe (Fig. 4), depicting a gloomy and deserted bus stop with a monotonous series of buildings towering in the background.

However, as mentioned before, with the Surovoyi stil socialist realism had undergone change both at the center, in Moscow, and in the periphery of the Empire, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as evidenced in works such as the Russian artists Georgy Nissky’s Under the Muscovy (1958) (Fig. 18) and Viktor Popkov’s Interior (1962) (Fig. 19), along with Estonian artist Valerian Loik’s Port of Tallinn in winter (1963) (Fig. 20). However, if we compare Keskküla’s and Elken’s interiors, with those of Popkov or Faibisovich’s images of Moscow’s train station with Nissky’s, it is evident how Surovyi stil representations maintained a neatness of color, precision, and control of forms showing how hyperrealism took a even further, and perhaps more radical shift.

Another feature shared by socialist realism and a variety of nonconformist orientations to the city is a presentation of space that avoids any adherence with a real cityscape. While the former is utopian, the latter is dystopian. In both types of images, the lack of any reference to history is substituted by a timeless dimension. This was evidenced in nonconformist art production of the 1970s such as the work of the Tallinn School, founded by a group of artists and architects including Leonhard Lapin, Tiit Kaljundi, and Vilen Kunnapu, who stated that they sought “to engage with reality in the avant-garde sense of the word.”97 The School was based on the theory that art was able to change society, by extending the field of artistic practice to the whole environment and by overcoming the boundaries of different disciplines. These artists also reflected on the social role of contemporary architects to promote a new approach toward a synthetic art

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as a fundamental component in city planning. However, “futuristic” views of Tallinn, such as Leonhard Lapin's *New Skyline of Tallin*, (1978) (Fig. 21), or Sirje Runge's *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn* (1975) (Fig. 22), were based on architectural premises not realizable in real life\textsuperscript{98}. No indication is given as to the temporality of the images, as these are not plans, but rather imaginary landscapes created to give the illusion of completion. It is significant that they were placing their projects in a hypothetical future, a trait that links them to the Russian avant-garde. Jeremy Canwell emphasizes this point of comparison: “[t]he Russian avant-garde consistently held the attitude that art must select the future rather than wait for it to issue out of the present.”\textsuperscript{99}

Socialist artists were as well required by Soviet ideology to portray an idealistic future as it was already realized in the present. The substitution of the real with a “utopian present” and an even more utopian future is typical of what Vladimir Paperny calls "mythological thinking,"\textsuperscript{100} the conviction that it is enough just to say loudly or write down what one wants to happen and it will inevitably occur. The gap between the rhetoric of public speech and the day-to-day lived reality ultimately led to a situation which might be described as "surreal" where the party mandate for socialist realism was to depict the “concreteness” of a society that everyone recognized did not actually exist.

Officially sanctioned art and the creations of the second avant-garde resemble each other in their modus operandi more closely than it might appear at first sight. Just as the former model their own will in accordance with the ideology of the party, the latter

\textsuperscript{98} It must be add here, that in Runge’s specific case, her diploma work at the Art Institute had very detailed working drawings for the same projects, on how to realise them. However, the term illusionary could be applied to some extent to the urban fantasies part of the project.

\textsuperscript{99} Canwell: 35

base their work on a personal vision of the world, both detached from the real society around them. The philosopher and art critic Boris Groys raises an interesting point when he affirms that the wish of nonconformist artists of the 1960s and 1970s to break free from the formal rules that condition official art proves to be unsuccessful because “despite their disapproval of Socialist Realism, they continued to perceive its cultural codes as phenomena of referential being, that is, in the same way as their counterpart viewed itself.”

In Groys’ view, the attempt to undertake a path diametrically opposed to the aesthetics of socialist realism only reinforces its referential and symbolic power since the avant-garde artists still end up identifying the official style, even in negative, as a reference point for their own artistic creation.

On the contrary, both the Surovyi stil and hyperrealism remained within the framework of the present, which they represent as alien from any mythic or utopian mystification, however unpleasant the result. The profound awareness of the individual’s existential condition leads hyperrealist artists to accept the current reality and face it through an extreme liberating act: by reproducing the city and its social life emptied of the rhetoric of a “bright future”. Moreover, by representing what was understandable to local viewers and recognizable at the level of everyday life through a photographic resemblance, hyperrealism appealed to the viewer's desire for confirmation that the way he or she experiences the world is indeed reliable. One of the main issues raised by Estonian critics of the avant-garde was that people who did not belong to the art sphere perceived its art processes as “obscure” or incomprehensible and its artists as looking for an escape in a dimension defined as an “ivory tower.”

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generations of avant-garde artists were steeped in a metaphysical context where their belief in the existence of truth led their art into a dimension of total autonomy and pure symbolism.

This retreat into a metaphysical dimension leads to the birth of what Boris Groys calls "artistic, closed, autonomous worlds," a universe of monads each with its own language and rules that are incomprehensible both for artists not belonging to the close circle, and for the people who were guilty of being the first users of the kitsch created by Socialist Realism. Eco synthesized this situation a decade earlier when he affirmed: “the moment arrives that the avant-garde (the modern) cannot go any further because it has now produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art).” To the contrary, I argue that by conveying “narrative, references, quotes, pastiches, bricolages, schizo-analyses,” hyperrealism in the East avoids claiming the definition of an “original” or “prophetic” style for itself. Maari Lanemets offers an interesting perspective when she suggests that such pronounced interdisciplinarity should be seen

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103 In the essay Avant-Garde and Kitsch Clement Greenberg claims that in Russia the population chose kitsch as the most suitable style to be approached. In fact, he says, in front of a hypothetical choice imposed by the State between a painting of Picasso or Repin, a Russian person would surely choose the latter. Greenberg’s explanation is that an average person who was “working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy, and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. […] In the end, the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort”. In the same years, the literary critic Renato Poggioli also analysed the impact of the avant-garde on the masses. Speaking about the avant-garde of the 1910s, he stated that the artists who chose to live and work in obscurity and poverty, were neither appreciated or understood by the masses, nor their art was acknowledged by an educated art audience. Poggioli also affirmed that outside the mainstream, these artists and writers could only gather together and form an ideology of failure and then justify the failure by claiming that they were too “advanced” for such unenlightened public. (Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

104 Boris Groys, Lo stalinismo, ovvero L’opera d’arte totale: 100.

105 “But the moment arrives that the avant-garde (the modern) cannot go any further, because it has now produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art)”. Umberto Eco, Il nome della rosa, (Milano: Bompiani 1985): 529

not as a compromise, but as a critical experiment to transform official art and its hierarchy, raising the question of whether these artists effectively prolonged the “death of the avant-garde.”\textsuperscript{107}

If we follow the logic of the texts discussed above, hyperrealism reads realism and the avant-garde practice through simulation and fusion of their technique, thereby inserting it in a particular context of Russian postmodernism. The hyperrealist canvases of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk convey within their frames dimensions of both the past and present of their culture. Contrary to modernism, which conceives only a progressive evolution without any regression to an earlier historical stage, postmodernism and hyperrealism show how the past is never simply past, but a “place” whose influence is on the present remains strong. As Umberto Eco points out, “the postmodern answer to the modern consists in recognizing that the past, since it cannot be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: with irony, in a non-innocent way.”\textsuperscript{108} In the works of these four artists, this is achieved through the representation of Soviet architecture through which they reinstate a dialogue with the social and ideological context in which it was created.

Nevertheless, the dialogue established by hyperrealism with different social and artistic sources, particularly with realism, contributed to a heated discussion over the dangerous nature of pseudo-realism within the criticism of the time, defined by the established dichotomy between “official” and "non-official” art production. These artists were accused of compromising their works and integrity by producing artworks that were

\textsuperscript{107} Maari Laanemets, “Art against Art. Rethinking the role and position of the artist in Estonian art in the 1970s,” 92-97.

\textsuperscript{108} “The post-modern answer to the modern consists in recognizing that the past, since it can not be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: with irony, in a non-innocent way” Umberto Eco, \textit{Il nome della rosa}: 529.
pandering to Estonian audiences familiar with the local narrative painterly mainstream, and, most importantly that were too close to the Socialist Realism aesthetic, which was considered the ultimate capitulation before the totalitarian system.
III. The position of Hyperrealism within the Second Avant-Garde in the 1970s and 1980s

The space of hyperrealist paintings joins together two antithetical dimensions: one referring to external objects and events, and one to the artist’s self-consciousness and personal past. This characteristic plays an important role in the debate over whether hyperrealism in the Soviet Union could still be considered part of the so-called “second avant-garde” of the 1970s, since it was sometimes accused of being a mere compromise with socialist realism. As Sirje Helme explains:

“hyperrealism has been seen as a certain official compromise between contemporary international art movements and official Soviet art politics. […] It is thereby that reproaches to hyperrealism have been made in later writings of being like a pseudo-bridge between two irreconcilable sides, using the advantages of both sides from time to time.”

The word “irreconcilable” well summarizes the opinion of some artists and critics who consider modernism and realism as two opposite worlds. Modernism, and more generally, the avant-garde, was primarily connected to abstract styles, which allowed artists to distance themselves from political and social concerns, while realism was often criticized as retrograde and narrowed to a totalitarian political orientation.

Hyperrealism was a problematic issue for Soviet authorities as well. While Western avant-garde art was condemned and rejected in the Soviet Union, the authorities considered allowing it to be displayed in public exhibitions. Usually, hyperrealist artists were not allowed to exhibit at official events. However, some exceptions were made for Estonian artists, although not until the 1980s and primarily for political reasons: to show

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109 One of the more vocal in this respect was the artist Leonhard Lapin in “Twenty Years Late,” Harku 1975-1995” (Tallinn: As Pakett, 1995): 63. See chapter two of this dissertation.

110 Author’s interview, Tallinn, October 2011.
a certain amount of public tolerance on the part of the occupying Soviet authorities in the Baltic Republics.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the first historical avant-garde purposely alienated itself from both the bourgeoisie with its utilitarian preferences who saw art as a way to reinforcing its own political and social power and from the middle-class audience interested in recognizable and traditional art. The avant-garde artists chose a path of rebellion by refusing to meet the expectations of society and by claiming instead the artist's right to express himself or herself freely. Benjamin Buchloh delineates avant-garde practice as

"a continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, the discovery and representation of new audiences, and the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and control all practices and spaces of representation."\(^{111}\)

In Estonia, the so-called “second avant-garde” took as a point of reference the avant-garde of the 1920s,\(^{112}\) as a way of preserving the ideals of identity and freedom in the occupied country. The main goal of these artists was the disruption of the official art sphere's dominant realism, accomplished by clearly rejecting within one's own works the language and contents of official art. The explicit break with the past is then characterized by a radical renewal of the artistic language, addressing the artist's inner world, which becomes a substitute for external reality and assumes the value of absolute truth.


Already in the 1960s philosopher and political activist Roger Garaudy\textsuperscript{113} tried to break down the political divides between socialist and bourgeois art by inviting Marxist critics to reclaim access to the important non-socialist art of the past and present as a matter of fundamental interest and concern for socialists. Garaudy advocated for an “open realism,” capable of incorporating both classic realism and the avant-garde. However, the dichotomy was still strongly entrenched decades later, as the Estonian scholar Mari Laanemets points out:

“One of the problems that haunts recent accounts of the history of Soviet period art is the neutralization of the complexity of artistic practices, reducing them to the confrontation of “official” and “unofficial”. This had led to a general blindness towards the specificity of critical concepts and the author's position, often reduced to political/ideological opposition.”\textsuperscript{114}

In order to demonstrate how such a dichotomy was problematic, and that contemporary art criticism, both Russian and Western, that still applies it at this point is outdated, I will analyze, in chapter four, the work of the official artist Andrei Volkov in connection to the hyperrealist works of Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk. Indeed, the fact that Volkov’s paintings were allowed at official exhibitions demonstrates how arbitrary were the parameters used by censors, critics, and sometimes even artists themselves in deciding what to admit or prohibit, or in stigmatizing one work of art rather than another. The connection often established\textsuperscript{115} between Volkov’s works with those of

\textsuperscript{115} In the art criticism of the 1980s, Volkov’s works are often presented in articles which analyzed hyperrealism. For example, the art critic Manin defines Volkov’s representation of the urbanscape as “illusory”. Manin also affirms that Volkov’s representation of the city, along with other hyperrealist artists such as Alexander Petrov, Jaan Elken or Illya Belyanov is neither interested in the beautiful or in the poetic. Meanwhile, Olga Kozlova inserts Volkov’s art production of the 1980s in her book \textit{Fotorealizm}. Although she recognizes that he never became a photorealist artist, she nevertheless establishes several point of contact with Aleksander Petrov and AmaSPIUR regarding his specific techniques, picturesque effects, and use of the color.
the two hyperrealist artists is based on both formal and theoretical principles. Volkov's artistic approach, which combines an almost photographic "precision" with dramatic composition, shares several aspects with the four artists of this dissertation: while remaining within the easel painting, he explores his perception of Moscow, and the constant change that scientific and technical progress brings to its image.

As Volkov’s case suggests, both the dimension of official and unofficial art could exist in the work of the same artist. The art critic Paul Wood presents a further interesting alternative when he suggests that both dimensions can reach a level of representation close to abstraction.116 Wood’s observation can be applied to hyperrealist works in general, and to the paintings of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk in particular, since they incorporate features from both realism and the avant-garde strategies of formalism. Indeed, although Keskküla borrows his motifs from real vistas, the use of artificial colors is his way of interweaving the preference of his “inner eye”, as in his paintings Industrial Interior (1976) (Fig. 23) and Industrial Interior (1977) (Fig. 5). Yet, it is exactly this characteristic that makes Keskküla's interpretation stand out as distinctive from similar representations in the art scene of the period. An even stronger intervention of the artist is evident in Elken's paintings, where the apparent contraction between the principle of an objective vision attributed to hyperrealism and the picturesque freedom claimed by the author could coexist in the same artwork, as in Untitled (1978) (Fig. 24), and Tartu Highway in the Evening (1981-82), (Fig 25). Here the artist combines a photographic vision with tactile brush strokes, creating abstract zones of colors. The artist's own painterly gesture is also an important trait in Sherstiuk's

116 Fer Briony et al., Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars, (Yale University Press, 1993)
paintings such as *Come In* (1982) (Fig. 118) and *The Television Set* (1983) (Fig. 90), where the illusion of the photographic snapshot is violently undermined by the intrusion of a second representational dimension embodied by spots or strings of paint. Finally, a dialogue between reality and abstraction is taken to the extreme in Faibisovich's paintings *Double Portrait of the Artist* (1987) (Fig. 26) and *In the Adjacent Subway Car* (1985) (Fig. 27) where the eye is triggered into a game of reflections that constantly confuses and unsettles the viewer's perception.

These are only a few examples of works that demonstrate how it is possible to open a productive dialogue between realism and modernism within the same artwork, and at the same time to develop a critique of the society that created them.

This aspect raises an important issue: whether hyperrealism should be considered political. As already mentioned, the “second avant-garde” rejected the political dimension permeating Soviet society to focus instead on a more spiritual sphere. Leonhard Lapin this viewpoint well: “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.”

Lapin set apart the life of the artist from the social and political environment he or she was living in, as if they were two unconnected worlds. By elevating seemingly unremarkable occurrences or objects to the level of legitimate art subjects,

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119 The representation and assemblage of household objects became the subject of some hyperrealist still lifes as in Bruno Vasilevskis' *My Passport* and Nagel Lemming's *Seljanka*. Vasilevskis presents the utmost simplicity in his still lifes: his compositions are occupied by few or even just one household item displayed
hyperrealism erases the traditional hierarchy that sees fine art in a position of supremacy, and popular culture below it as trivial. However, although these artists did not want to be called political artists, their work spoke of their condition of being situated within the fight against state oppression. According to the philosopher Jacques Ranciere\textsuperscript{120} politics is a matter of what people do, and in particular what they do that challenges the hierarchical order of a given set of social arrangements. To challenge such a hierarchical order is the concern of the people who have been rendered unequal by the hierarchical order. Aesthetics is also a challenge to a particular partition of the sensible, but in a different way. In fact, aesthetics is not, in Rancière's use, a reference term for art as a whole, but rather for a particular regime of artistic practice, a regime that, since it is severed from its traditional reference points, is open for new restructurings through the free play of aestheticization. This free play is one that reveals the contingency of a particular partition of the sensible by constructing another one not based upon the hierarchy of the current partition. Aesthetic practice, then, like politics, is dissent from a given partition of the sensible. As Rancière notes, "Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible"\textsuperscript{121}.

For Ranciere, the political character of aesthetics re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. In this way, it aids to help


\textsuperscript{121} in Ibid.
create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.

Hyperrealism greatly contributed to expanding the often rigid aesthetic framework of the art sphere of its time, blazing a path for a new generation of artists and viewers to approach their society with a closer look and a greater awareness.
Chapter One: An Introduction to Hyperrealism’s Historical, Social and Cul

This chapter introduces the artistic movements and the cultural and historical events in the Soviet Union that influenced the artistic production of Ando Keskküla, Jan Elken, Semyon Faibisovich, and Sergei Sherstiuk from the 1960s to 1980s.

Drawing from the methodology outlined in the previous chapter, here I describe the context for the paintings that are the focus of this thesis. I argue that this context has a crucial role in interpreting the development and execution of individual paintings, since an artwork is not a completely independent and self-contained object. On the contrary, it embraces a series of different links, meanings, and associations which ultimately contribute to the realization of the painting structure. Therefore, in order to get a more comprehensive whole understanding of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union it is essential to take into account the processes that occurred in its art sphere and in its society at large.

It is important for this study that the reader considers the broader historical, cultural and social contexts that shaped both the content and style of the artists' work and the audience's reception of it. In Lotman's semiotic, the relation between the artist and the viewer is seen in terms addressee of a message, the work of art which embodies such message, and the addresses of it that could be both the public or an individual. The channel that links them together is the semiotic space they are all immersed in.\footnote{Lotman, The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 123.}

This semiotic approach is particularly relevant to my study for historical reasons. In the 1960s in Moscow and Tartu, a town close to Tallinn where Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk created their first hyperrealist works, semioticians Boris
Uspensky, Yuri Lotman, Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, and Vladimir Toporov introduced the study and analyses of the sign systems of a specific culture and the processes of communication that these systems produce within it.\footnote{See introduction of this dissertation in section Methodology.} These intellectuals—Lotman in particular—had a strong impact on the development of hyperrealism. Lotman’s name was frequently mentioned in Estonian articles analyzing hyperrealism\footnote{For precedent uses of Lotman’s theory in the analysis of Keskküla and Elken see the articles in Sirp in Vasar 9 mai 1986, Noorte Hall n. 37, 13 febbraio 1983, Toimetised 2. 2004, Kunst 96.1 and Jaan Elken, exh. cat., (Tallinn: Eesti Kultuurkapital, 2011).} sometimes even by the artists themselves.\footnote{Author’s interview with Semyon Faibisovich (see footnote n. 70, chapter IV)}

At the core of their semiotic theory is that “Culture” is not a static entity but a dimension in which different languages coexist and work along many axes to compose an organic whole in continuous evolution. At the same time, Culture is also a generator of new information through a process of encoding and decoding texts, messages, objects and practices that are already within its limit, called by Lotman its semiosphere,\footnote{Lotman’s concept of Semiosphere can be understood both in the global sense and in a local sense - as global it embraces the whole space of signification, that is culture, while as local it interests a specific and determined semiotic space. A museum, for example, can be considered a local semiosphere, since it encloses several sign systems – local and foreign art objects and items, inscriptions and texts in native and international languages, instructions and explanatory text drawn up by the organizers, and the audience as well, as a component of this ongoing dialogue. Semiosphere consists of a center, where the most stable and dominant systems are located, and peripheral areas that are more flexible, elastic and mobile. Every culture begins by dividing the world into “its own” internal space and “their” external space. One’s own space has a specific language which is at the center, meanwhile, someone’s else language is at the periphery since it is unable to adequately reflect the reality beneath it. However, the center/periphery structure is not a rigid system, but the blurring of its boundaries, by inter-structural exchanges, opens it to a dynamism and dialogue between different cultural systems which generates new information within the semiosphere.} and through interaction with other cultures. By perpetuating this process, Culture organizes the social and cultural world structure that surrounds a person and, at the same time, imposes a specific model of behavior.\footnote{Lotman, Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 128.} On the one hand, Lotman’s theories propose a universal structure for interpreting specific historical phenomena, while on the other, he
provides a penetrating analysis of these specific cultural expressions. Indeed, it is then possible both to explain why that culture has produced those phenomena by analyzing which texts, practices, and objects are dominant in such culture, and to understand a single phenomenon by examining the culture that produced it.

By analyzing what Lotman calls second modeling systems, art, architecture and urban planning, among other elements—within Estonian and Russian culture, it would be possible to highlight the “language” dominant in these two societies, and the deep influence of their interaction on people's social background, personal lives, and way of thinking. Lotman ascribes to culture the role of organizing a 'collective personality with a common memory and a collective consciousness.”

Indeed, since every “culture” is within the flux of time, its political and social changes eventually have an impact on both people's memory and on their future personal and social behavior.

Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk created their hyperrealist works during the 1970s and 1980s, when Estonia was an occupied country under Soviet political and cultural control, and the Soviet Union was going through a period that later came to be called “Stagnation.”

These artists’ creative careers began in that specific milieu, and their art production is the embodiment of and, at the same time, a “cultural object” within it.

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128 Lotman states that a modelling system is a structure made by elements and by the rules of their combination which exist in a state of fixed analogy to the whole sphere of the object of perception, cognition, or organization. Deriving from the first modelling system—the natural language—second modelling systems are superstructures of it, as second-degree languages. Therefore, a second modelling system may be approached as a language that allows us to understand the world in a certain way and to speak about it. For further analysis, see the introduction of this dissertation.


130 The period so-called “stagnation” (in Russian, Переиод застоя) began during the administration of Leonid Brezhnev from 1964 to 1982 and continued under Yuri Andropov and later Konstantin Chernenko's government until 1985 which marked its end with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev.
By understanding the historical background of hyperrealism’s development, we can discern its complexities and the issues it raised at the time of its appearance. As the philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes suggests: “We must try to decompose microstructures in the same way that we can isolate little fragments of phrases in a long period; we must then get in the habit of making a quite elaborate analysis which will lead us to these microstructures and, inversely, we must get used to a broader analysis really arriving at the macro-structures.”\textsuperscript{131}

1.1 The Development of Realism in Russia

1.1.1 The Critical Realism of Peredvizhniki in the 19th Century

Writing about the development of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union requires an analysis of its artistic background which includes both realism, with its transformation into Socialist realism - as the official style that dictated the parameters to which artists had to conform - and the neo-avant-garde movements that rejected it.

Socialist realism can be considered the most well known “style” to define the general idea people had of Russian art not only within the Soviet Union but also abroad. However, for decades art critics had been, and still are, questioning its essence and struggling to find a stable and widely-accepted definition. Art critics debated the standards according to which a specific style could be called “realist”, or the role that art critic and self-identifying realist artists should play in its defining it.

An even more fundamental question is how realism actually works when it has to represent a society, such as the Soviet one, which is a system of simulacrum built on signs that do not refer to any real object or meaning. Artists themselves tried to deal with this question by either testing the boundaries of realism within the official sphere or by breaking its rules to convey a representation of reality through other means and visual strategies.

As the word “hyperrealism” suggests, realism had an important role in shaping some of its characteristics. Therefore, in order to position Keskküla's, Elken's, Faibisovich's and Sherstiuk's art production within the complex sphere of realism in the Soviet Union, it is fundamental to first analyze realism's main characteristics and their development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, although Russian’s and
Estonian's cultures are based on different systems of signs, as I aim to demonstrate in this dissertation, the Soviet official culture which was imposed on the Estonian's one contributed to shape the artists’ idea and perception of realism, and their further works.

The origin of realism in Russia can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the new progressive movement inspired not only several social reforms, aimed at improving the country's economic situation, but also deeply touched the Russian culture, which at the time was facing the problem of educating the masses. The art sphere, in particular, started to represent themes and subjects close to people's real interest: painting became a way for many Russian artists to denounce the social and economic contradiction of their society, and to turn their attention to the individual being and human relationships.

Realism was the first "contemporary art,"\textsuperscript{132} which showed the social and collective life of people – labor, tradition, and social struggle - in a rapidly changing reality of the mid-1800s, and a way to denounce the social and economic contradiction of society of the time.

The first artists that moved in that direction, in Russia were Ilya Repin and Vasilij Surikov, who conceived of art creation primarily as a social service. They were part of a group of artists called \textit{Peredvizhnikii},\textsuperscript{133} founded in 1870 and defined by the art historian Richard Brettel as

“among the premier vanguard figures in Russian 19th-century culture. Their paintings were met with the same mixture of disdain and fear greeted now famous

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Peredvizhnik}, are important to understanding Elken and Faibisovich's critical approach to the Soviet society and, to a certain extent to that of Keskküla and Sherstiuk's as well. Indeed, as \textit{Peredvizhnikii} introduced a different ways of perceiving reality after the general academic stagnation of the 1840s and 1850s, so too hyperrealism injected new vigor into painting in the 1970s and 1980s, the so-called “Stagnation” period.
works by Manet, Renoir, and Whistler in France. Their exhibitions were as subversive and – as “modern” - as those of the Impressionists and their progeny in France”.  

Essentially, during the fifty-three years of the Peredvizhnikii's existence, in the form of an artistic union, their primary mission was in educating the masses through numerous itinerant exhibitions organized in many cities across the country.  

Since several of the Peredvizhnik came from a peasant background, they were increasingly recognized as the authentic voice of the narod and worthy contributors to the enlightenment of Russia. As the art critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky explained:

“[b]ut by taking an interest in the phenomena of life, man cannot, consciously or not, pronounce his judgment upon them; the poet or the artist, not being able to cease to be a man [...] cannot avoid pronouncing his own judgment on the phenomena represented; this judgment manifests itself in his work, here is the new meaning of works of art, which is why art becomes part of the moral activities of man.”

Many members of the Peredvizhnikii, including such Ivan Kramskoi, Nikolai Jarosenko, Nikolai Ge, Vasily Perov and the already mentioned Ilya Repin, significantly surpassed the traditional hierarchy of genres by widening the boundaries previously established by the Academy. Their rejection of “eternal themes” was expressed by a constant search for subjects, themes, and motifs that were not considered popular at the time, often reflecting peasant life. Dramatic situations, tragic characters, and social issues were meant to arouse in the viewer indignation, deep compassion, and even shock. According to art historian David Jackson, “The peasant genre was a major

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136 Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Esteticeskie otnosenija k dejstvitel'nosti, (Moskva, Pravda 1974).
137 Ilya Repin identified the peasant as “the judge now, and we must reproduce his interests” as cited in David Jackson, The wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth-century Russian art, (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2006): 36
138 An example is how the problem of alcoholism which was generally treated as just a domestic drama,
influence in consolidating the *Peredvizhnikii's* reputation as documentors of their native land and its provincial customs, but at the same time, it addressed serious and contentious issues in a manner that unsettled many.**139**

The group introduced the conception of art as an instrument to serve high ideals and as the medium to present the ethical issues of the period, as suggested by Ivan Kramskoi’s painting *Inconsolable Grief*, (1884) (Fig. 28), Nikolai Jarosenko’s *Life Is Everywhere*, (1888) (Fig. 29), and Ilya Repin’s *They Did Not Expect Him* (1884-1888) (Fig. 30). All three paintings convey profound psychological innuendo and the impression of recreating a fragment which corresponded to the surrounding reality.**140** Indeed, one of the main intents of the *Peredvizhnikii's* art production was to reinforce the illusion of the reality represented in the painting, in order to psychologically involve the viewer in it, as in Ilya Repin's *Ivan the Terrible Killing His Son* (1885) (Fig. 31).

The portrait genre in particular allowed the *Peredvizhnikii* to explore the psychological dimension of the subjects represented, due in part to the introduction of the Russian culture to new scientific disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, and physiognomy, which affected the rationalistic approach of these artists towards their models. Writers, composers, scholars, artists, merchants, laborers, and even peasants were considered by these artists subjects worth of being immortalized, not only for their external appearance, but also for the individual characteristics that each of them brought to the painting, and for elevating daily life to the dimension of the sublime. Exemplar portraits are Vasily Petrov's *F.M. Dostoevsky* (1872) (Fig. 32), and Nikolai yarosenko's

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140 When he was a student Ilya Repin often took outdoor sketching and painting trips, despite it was a practice discouraged by the Academy.
The Stoker, (1878) (Fig. 33), which perfectly adhere to the critic Sergei Makovski's definition of a realist portrait: "The portraits had to 'come out of the frame'. Landscapes produce such an effect as if a window had been opened on authentic nature."\textsuperscript{141}

The expressive power of some of the Peredvizhniki's paintings relies upon the fact that these artists were not impartial documenters of Russian everyday life, but they often shared the same experience or event that they narrated on canvas. Instead of striving towards a detached, objective depiction of peasant life in post-reform Russia, Repin, Kramskoi and the others, consciously imbued their works with a personal, emotional input to produce images of the common people that were broadly humanitarian and sympathetic.\textsuperscript{142} The huge number of visitors to the group exhibitions shows how one of their art was meant to be accessible and understandable to the people.

Peredvizhniki's representation of themes and subjects close to people's real interests, and the display of their subjects’ psychological state, were embraced a century later by several hyperrealist artists in the Soviet Union, such as Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich. In fact, the denunciation of the social and economic contradiction of the Soviet society and the dialogue with new social disciplines were explored by Keskküla and Elken, while the focus on individual beings, and their existential struggle in a changing reality reverberated in Faibisovich's works. Finally, the portrait as a genre allowed Sherstiuk to explore and get closer to the inner dimension of his subjects.

Despite belonging to a movement that started with radical and idealistic intentions, by the beginning of the twentieth century most of the Peredvizhniki's artworks

\textsuperscript{141} S.Makovskij, Siluety russkich chudoznikov (Profiles of Russian artists), (Moskva, Respublika, 1999): 12
\textsuperscript{142} Jackson, The wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth-century Russian art: 54.
were considered part of the official production art establishment, due to the artists’ progressively close association with the Academy. Eventually, the group as a whole was considered “too compromised by its capitalist finance base and its imperial connections to serve as a model for the new world of communism egalitarianism.”

The political upheavals and Lenin’s rise of power, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were instrumental to the development of new forms of realism whose idea concerned the necessity of art to contribute to the Socialist project of reconstruction and shaping of the new collective life and culture.

1.1.2 The Birth of Socialist Realism: Lenin's Theory of Reflection

Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union has been considered a mere form of compromise with Socialist realism by some artists, such as Estonian architect and artist Leonhard Lapin. However, although it shares some characteristics with realism, as already shown in the previous section, the hyperrealist art production of Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich reacted against the form of propaganda brought by socialist realism. They created subversive works which challenged the boundaries of Socialist realism of their time. In order to understand these boundaries, it is necessary to first analyze their origins which can be traced back to Lenin's reflection theory.

After the October Revolution in 1917, the Bolsheviks realized that in order to establish the new government’s political stability and to legitimize their power, it was

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143 By the 1890s, the Academy of Arts started including the art production of Peredvizhniki in its teaching classes, and sometimes the artists themselves as teachers, such as Ilya Repin for example, who taught at the Higher Art School attached to the Academy of Arts, a position he held from 1894 until 1907. Gradually, the Peredvizhniki became a strong influence on artists and schools all over the nation.

144 Jackson David, The wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth-century Russian art: 166.
pivotal to obtain the trust and loyalty of the Soviet citizens. In order to achieve this goal, two strategies were applied. First, they sought to establish cohesion between the different social groups formed after the revolution through the creation of a common system of behavioral values, conventions, and rituals. Second, they needed to erase the memory of the Tsarist past, still deeply rooted in the consciences of the population.

Art was regarded as one of the most effective channels to convey this new ideological base, primarily due to the characteristic of the visual image of being instantaneously perceived along with the message it embodies. The choice of a visual medium found a further justification in the heterogeneous composition of the Russian population, formed by social classes separated by a profound gap in education, ranging from a cultured elite to the low literate or non-literate peasantry. The only element the population had in common was the exposure to the iconographic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church, with its sacred representations that, over the centuries, built up a detailed imaginary in people's mind.

Aware of the imperative impact of art on the viewer, Lenin imparted an educational role to visual representations. He elaborated an extreme epistemological realism, the so-called “copy of truth” or, as it was more commonly known, “theory of reflection”. In his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin lays the foundation of a theory based on the assertion that a reflection is the definite, fundamental and universal property of matter.\(^\text{145}\) The materialistic theory of reflection thus seizes objects and

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\(^{145}\) Reflection is at the core of the materialist conception of history, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles around 1845. The main idea is that all theoretical products and forms of consciousness - religion, philosophy, ethics- should be explained by the material production of life itself, and the form of intercourse connected with it. In his book *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx's analysis of history is based on his distinction between the means of production, which are necessary for the production of material goods, and the social relations of production, or the social relationships people enter into as they acquire and use the means of production. Together they constitute the mode of production, which is
phenomena accordingly to their own characteristics and consequently presents a faithful reflection of them. Moreover, Lenin's theory claims that although the truth is objective, it is also based on the unity between the object and the subject who aims to obtain the correct knowledge of it. Indeed, Lenin establishes a concept of reality as a preexisting matter which exists independently, also in a chronological sense, to the subject who is practicing the cognitive activity on it.146 However, the objective world is considered the only source of knowledge a human being can get, and the human consciousness as the highest degree of development of the property of matter.

The second element of Lenin's theory, the concept of “copy,” suggests that “a fragmentary, but nonetheless strictly structural isomorphism exists between the mental content and reality,”147 which led him to admit that the copy never totally resembles the thing copied.148 The only difference between the copy and the original thing lies is that one spect of the world process or another had been artificially isolated. Therefore, for Lenin, the distinction between relative and absolute truth is simply that the former is fragmentary while the latter is complete.149

Lenin's theory was the first step against both idealism and a representation of reality based on a dimension separated from the visible one. In fact, the concept of reflection separated the objective truth -- which refuses the existence of a reality independent from the objective world -- from the concept of symbolism -- the subjective truth -- which engages with an independent reality as a source of thought and knowledge.

147 Ibid.
149 Osborne “The Doctrine of Reflection in Soviet Aesthetics,” 252-258
It must be added here that Lenin developed the method of socialist literature and art from Marx's ideas. According to Marx, the proletarian culture had to be based on the knowledge developed by humankind throughout the history of its development, in opposition to the decadent anti-realistic trends that prevailed in the West.

The idea that a work of art should reflect only the objective truth, provided a standard which was then applied to evaluate not only individual artworks but also the political engagement of the artist with the new government and the communist ideology.

Lenin’s theory is important for the interpretation of the hyperrealist artworks present in this study. In fact, I argue that there is a common ground between them: both rely on visual imagery - already known to people, in order to convey a precise message with a sense of immediacy. While Lenin incorporated elements from the iconographic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church in Socialist realism, hyperrealism displayed the surrounding urbanscape with which people were familiar. Moreover, socialist realism “borrowed the reality-effect of the photograph,”\(^\text{150}\) and to a certain extent hyperrealism also bases its representations on subjects captured and framed as photographs, although to reach a different end. In fact, against Lenin’s assertion that a reflection seizes objects and phenomena according to their own characteristics and consequently presents a faithful reflection of them, Ando Keskküla, Jaan Elken, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk show how ultimately a representation always brings with it a component of manipulation. For Lenin, the difference between relative and absolute truth is simply that the former is fragmentary while the latter is complete. On the other hand, hyperrealist artists are aware that behind the choice of a specific subject and its representation always

lies a “mental a-priori.” In fact, each of their image selection is based on a visual pre-construction that the artist already has in mind. This image does not completely adhere to the phenomenon or object characteristics since it is created by the interconnected dialogue between different sources.

After Lenin's death and with the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), art became a fundamental instrument both in mobilizing the population and in encouraging economic growth on a large scale. Therefore, for the State it was crucial to control the art sphere of the time. The direction taken by realism during the Stalin era will be analyzed in the next section.

1.1.3 Socialist Realism From the 1930s to the 1950s

The official definition of Socialist Realism was established during the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 by the writer Maksim Gorkii. He invited the Soviet writers and intellectuals to present a truthful, historical and concrete representation of reality in its evolutionary development, which was linked with the ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism. However, aside from this general definition, the government did not provide a clear canon nor a list of aesthetic rules which were supposed to guide artistic production. The only principle that was clearly stated was that the content had to dictate the form, and that Soviet artists' personal style had to conform to the precepts of socialism, thus openly testifying their absolute adherence to the official ideology.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{151} Gerasimov's paintings are an example of this indeterminacy and arbitrariness: he often painted hagiographic depictions of leaders and idealizations of working people but at the same time also engaged in an active dialogue with Impressionism. Gerasimov's 1937 Holiday on the Kolkhoz is exemplary: the vigorous brushstrokes, the light palette and the impressionist-like landscape behind the group of figures contribute to promoting an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm about Soviet life.
Paradoxically, the Party defined which art styles were considered forbidden more clearly and precisely. Three main categories were outlined: first, the political art that was not supportive of the Party's ideology and politics including art that mocked the clichés of Socialism. Second, an art which embodied any kind of religious symbols and themes, along with erotic art, which was considered pornography. Finally, any art which deviated from Socialist realism as abstraction, cubism, surrealism, and impressionism. The last category was in particular under attack, since Socialist Realism was structured accordingly to the characteristics that Lenin believed were fundamental for art at the service of ideology. Partinost’, Dostupnost’ and Narodnost’, were the aspects of Russian life that faithfully reflected the objective world. Narod, as the spirit of the people, was in fact, one of the characteristics that realism had to embrace, together with Dostupnost’(accessibility), and Partiinost’ (the spirit of the party) according to the art critic Vladimir Stasov, one of the apologists of realism as a democratic art. The term Narodnost’, in particular, meant reproducing the life of the people in art, which was believed it could be expressed only through the language of realism.

Before the “birth” of socialist realism, the Russian art sphere from the 1910s to the early 1930s was a mosaic of artistic orientations which ranged from suprematism and constructivism, to a flourishing of different groups that dealt with the issue of creating a language that could represent the achievements of the Revolution.152 Indeed, according to

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152 Greenberg explains that the avant-garde in the 1910-20s moved toward a “complete self-referential autonomy, to be achieved by scrupulous attention to all that is specific to the practice: its own traditions and materials, its own difference from other art practices” (V. Burgin., “The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms,” The End of Art Theory, Communications and Culture, (London: Palgrave, 1986). However, according to the art historian Steven Mansbach, avant-garde by the end of the 1920s was itself partially responsible for its own dissolution and disappearance, due to destructive contention, dogmatic and uncompromising ideology and a general decrease of inventiveness, (Mansbach Steven, Modern art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939, (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Art historian John Ellis Bowlt claims the same opinion when he affirms that the
the art historian John Ellis Bowlt the non-representational aspect of the avant-garde was just one part within a process which grew out of the nineteenth century traditions. In fact, representational and realist art was rejected only by few artists (the avant-gardes). The rest of the Russian artists kept depicting scenes from everyday life and thus adapting to the Soviet authorities’ demands.

However, according to Bowlt the field of Soviet representational art from the early 1920s was not as one-sided and straightforward as the general opinion implies. On the contrary, it displayed a range of directions which were “not adequately contained within the exclusive framework of Socialist Realism.”

A brief analysis of those main directions would show that Socialist realism was far from being monolithic. In particular, in its early days it was a complex and rich ensemble of different sources which included both a component of realism and some features from the avant-garde tradition. This is in favor of my thesis that see hyperrealism not as a compromise with the official Socialist realism embedded with Stalinist propaganda, but as in an open dialogue with its more complex origins.

A perfect example of the above statement can be found in the group OST (Obschestvo Stankovistov or The Society of Easel Painters), founded in 1925 by Aleksandr Deineka, Yuri Pimenov and David Shterenberg who were strong supporters of the easel painting but at the same time added into their compositions formal elements,
which belonged to the avant-garde praxis, into their works.¹⁵⁴ These artists became a bridge between the avant-garde tradition and the new realism after the Revolution.

At the opposite pole of OST, stand the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) formed by artists who were active already painting before 1917, such as Pavel Radimov (who was the last chairman of Peredvizniki movement), Sergey Malyutin, Yevgeny Katzman and Pyotr Shukhmin, and a younger generation of artists which included Sergei Gerasimov and Isaak Brodsky. Active from 1922 until 1933, AKhRR strongly opposed both cubo-futurism and suprematism painting instead with scenes from the everyday life of the Russian working class after the Bolshevik Revolution in a realistic and documentary manner.¹⁵⁵ It supported the new government after the Revolution and the reconstruction of the Soviet society through easel painting.¹⁵⁶

Against this fragmented artistic background, and the “necrosis which avant-garde painting was facing,”¹⁵⁷ the rise of socialist realism in 1934 took on a particular significance. It was the official style sanctioned by the government as the visual manifestation of theoreticians and Party leaders' individual ideas. Indeed, despite Lenin's

¹⁵⁴ Pimenov's Milk Factory (1930), representing a milk factory and its cycle of production, is a perfect embodiment of Ost idea concerning the necessity for art to be part of the Socialist plan and to help in building the new life and culture. However, Deineka created work which is ambiguous in pursuing such a goal, since the bright, pure and primary colors of the composition are closer to the abstract style than to realism.

¹⁵⁵ Despite their different position on what should have been the style to convey the “Truth” both AKhRR and OST agreed that only with painting an artist could create an image able to condense all the information on a particular subject, although such image did not present an historical document.

¹⁵⁶ AKhRR advocated for an art that could be easily recognized and consumed by viewers, through the creation of homogeneous images and a unified description of the pictorial space, and whose message was aimed at being simple, unitary and clear in order to produce a pleasurable feeling in the beholder. Therefore, a realistic representation focusing primarily on immortalizing the greatest moment of Russian history was considered the best mean to achieve this end, as in Brodsky's painting Speech by Lenin at a Rally of Workers, dated 1929. The artwork was an important vehicle to present to the population an art with meaningful content, thus creating a defined separation from the avant-garde production, whose subject matters was not immediately recognizable by the masses. Abstract works were therefore lowered to the ranks of mere decoration without any critical function.

reflection theory, socialist realism was a call to process reality through the lens of ideology in order to create a manipulated version of this reality presented as truth.\textsuperscript{158} In his analysis of myth, the philosopher Roland Barthes claims that the human being transforms reality into a mythological discourse by working on a certain “material” and making it suitable for communication. Following this theory, it should be inferred that the myth is not inherent in the “nature” of things, but has only a historical foundation.\textsuperscript{159} Maksim Gorkii, was aware of this when, during the already mentioned First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, he called the method of Socialist realism “myth” and also a “construction,” "to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery - that is how we got realism [...] to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way."\textsuperscript{160}

In its initial conception, socialist realism was intended to be more than just an artistic movement. It was not created merely for propaganda purposes, but as a repository of Soviet cultural myths and as an example of “the twentieth-century mythological art.”\textsuperscript{161} Indeed, it was treated as a grid where high and popular genres, everyday events, and official spectacles were fully integrated\textsuperscript{162} to convey the idea of Soviet everyday life to the citizens.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} Roland Barthes, Mythologies, (Paris: Seuil, 1957): 192
\textsuperscript{162} There were substantial different opinions on the essence of socialist realism among the critics of the time: some argued that it was born as a single style in order to liberate the artist's personal initiative, while others believed that it brought some diversity within it. One supporter of the former opinion was the art critic Yu Borev who believed that socialist realism was a method and a style, while V. Prytkov, claimed that the concept of the style could not be simply reduced to a set of formal signs, since the development of realism, at each stage, brought distinctive stylistic features. Although Pritkov denied the need for a single regulatory socialist realism style, he agreed with the possibility of a stylistic commonality deriving from the unity of the creative method. As he claimed “Realism as a forceful and truthful reproduction of reality generates internal unity and, therefore, common stylistic trends in general.the style as a historically
After a beginning based on creative differences, from the 1930s-50s Socialist
Realism came to denote a figurative, narrative art form, that glorified a prefabricated
reality build up by the propaganda. The Party paid special attention to creating slogans
painted on banners or carved on monuments and public buildings, which presented words
associated with positive qualities. By combining them together the Party created internal
correspondences that developed "the automatization of the decoding process by the mass
consumers for whom it was primarily intended. Thus, communication took place on the
level of the subconscious and approximated the effect of ‘transrational speech’.”

The automatism in receiving certain messages, allowed the ideology to guide the population's
behavior in the desired direction, without people being aware of it. The citizens thus lost
their own autonomy and subjected instead to a social structure and collective behavior
that dictated and influenced the mechanisms that conditioned their actions and choices.

Professor of Russian culture Gian Piero Piretto affirms that the ideology at the
base of Socialist realism ceased to be a philosophical doctrine and a system of ideas to
become instead a technique of conditioning the citizens into a Soviet Man and Woman.

During the first period of Stalin's government, a completely new heroic connotation was
attributed to the proletariat whose characteristics were synthesized in standardized,
precise and recurrent elements that were easy to recognize and memorize, which created

The art historian Gisela Shcherbina also condemned the point of view of the unity of the style by affirming
that any attempt to develop a uniform stylistic definition would have inevitably lead to the canonization of
one of the existing stylistic trends at the expense of others. Nina Dmitrieva, “K voprosu o sovremennom
stile”, Tvorchestvo, n. 6, 1958: 9-12.


164 The highest example of the new “type” of the Soviet citizen was Aleksei Stachanov, a miner from the
Donbass region in Ukraine, who reached fame and glory for having reached the highest level of production
of all time, through the reorganization of his work procedure. He was then presented as a State hero by the
party by a mass campaign aimed at soliciting workers to increase their work productivity by following his
example.
several “types” of people that could be displayed on monuments, works of art and posters.

Piretto also explains that the Party provoked the exact reaction needed from the population at a given moment through an ideology based on a system of systematic procedures. Indeed, Soviet citizens were required to repeat imposed slogans and to participate in daily social and private rituals, which included both public events, and a highly controlled private routine between family members, neighbors, and friends.

The aforementioned aspects are fundamental to understanding the subversive impact of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union. It unveiled how this system of ideas, created for controlling and conditioning people's lives, was also embodied and carried on by the urban environment of cities like Tallinn and Moscow.

Another important contribution of socialist realism's subjects was to promote an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm about the Soviet life which was lacking from the real conditions of the society of the time. One of the most well-known examples is Sergei Gerasimov's painting *A Kolkhoz Celebration* (1937) (Fig. 34), with its vigorous brushstrokes, the light palette, and the luxuriant landscape behind the group of figures.

In the years following the Second World War, the key role played by the Soviet Union in the victory over the Nazis contributed to strengthening people's nationalistic spirit. The pride for the achieved victory, and the greatness of Soviet Union implied by it, was further reinforced by the Stalinist propaganda, which nurtured the illusion of the imminent implementation of the Communist project. Fyodor Shurpin's painting *The Morning of Our Motherland* (1948) (Fig. 35), well embodies the spirit of these years: the

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mechanization and economic achievements of the Soviet Union represented in a positive and celebratory light. As well described by the specialist on Russian politics Mark Bassin through various iconographic markers Shurpin “guides the viewer to envision the eventual agricultural bounty as the product, not so much of the forces of nature as of human agency – specifically, of Soviet planning and labor.”

Another example of that renewed faith in the future is *The New Apartment* (1952) (Fig. 36), by Aleksandr Laktionov, an artist who was famous for his genre scene paintings. In this work, a war decorated woman and her son - a Young Pioneer - stands at the center of a room while above them, a portrait of Stalin hangs on a wall, as if taking the role of the man of the house. What is represented here is a celebration of the Soviet collective life: the friendly neighbors on the threshold of the next room -- the woman with a kitten in her arms and the man with a bicycle surrounded by a constellation of disparate objects -- seem calm and satisfied with their accommodation. The message *The New Apartment* conveys is that under Stalin's watch and guidance, life is peaceful and rewarding for people who are productive members of society, such as the young pioneer and the war heroine.

Paintings like *Morning of Our Motherland* and *The New Apartment* were part of an elaborate system created during Stalin's time to conceal the emptiness of the Soviet society. The two paintings suggest that the system people were living in was the best possible one, since Stalin -- a demi-god always present and attentive to the citizens' needs -- was its demiurge.

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The Soviet society of those decades raises an important question as to whether realism could still maintain its characteristic adherence to reality in a system of simulacra that had no connection with the real world. The Surovyi stil which developed after Stalin's death, during the period called “The Thaw”, can be seen as a both possible answer to this question, and a precedent for hyperrealism’s more direct figurative approach to contemporary Soviet reality.

1.1.4 The Thaw as a New Cultural Phase, and the Period of Stagnation

Afterwards

On September 7, 1953, six months after Stalin's death, and after a series of internal party struggles for the election of his successor, Nikita Khrushchev became the First Secretary of the General Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Following the authoritarian and paternalistic control experienced by the population under Stalin’s dictatorship for three decades, Khrushchev seemed to embody the figure of a new leader able to convey a sense of security and reliability.

The contrast between the two leaders became even more evident at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on February 1956, when Khrushchev—in addition to calling for the country's new social and economic future—delivered his now famous “secret speech” denouncing the crimes committed by and under Stalin's administration. The new leader also explicitly declared his intention to rectify the errors committed by the previous government by rehabilitating and liberating political victims of the Stalinist purges.

After years of violence, purges, deportations and incarcerations, the second half of the 1950s saw a surge of confidence and optimism that stemmed from the improvements
in living standards and more symbolic achievements, such as the Soviet space program, which re-enforced in the population the nationalist belief that Soviet socialism was the right step toward a communist future.

Among Khrushchev's main goals was to reach and surpass the economic and social level of Western countries, in particular of the United States, by pushing for industrial growth and an increase in the production of consumer goods consumption as quickly as possible. The acceleration of industrial development also included taking care of the housing problem, which grew considerably during the 1950s due to rural-to-urban migration to big cities, like Moscow, looking for a job. However, the competition with the West led Khrushchev to pursue a series of excessively risky reforms that, in the early 1960s, plunged the nation into a serious economic crisis.  

During the years of the so-called cultural Thaw, from the second half of the 1950s to the beginning of 1960s, the country experienced quite a significant decrease of State control over the artistic and literary production, as shown by the number of intellectuals and artists rehabilitated such as Lev Kropivnitsky, Lev Steinberg, and Ülo Sooster, to name few. In this regard, the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956 was an important step toward a greater engagement with Western artistic production, in order to establish new relationships based on dialogue, confrontation, and exchange. During this brief period of liberalization, which culminated and ended in 1962 with the Manege exhibition in Moscow, artists who previously refused to conform to the heavy restrictions of Socialist realism were allowed to display their works publicly.

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167 The famous “kitchen debate” between Nixon and Khrushchev which took place at the American National Exhibition in 1959, although was an impromptu discussion on the apparently harmless topic of kitchen furnishings and devices, eventually became a potent propaganda platform where both politicians presented arguments for the industrial conquests of their countries.
This new cultural direction also implied a higher degree of acceptance of some Western European and American contemporary artists and movements, which had been strictly forbidden until then as an expression of the enemy's culture. Cities like Saint Petersburg and Moscow became privileged places to show foreign art. The opening of new cafes and clubs created alternative places where artists and intellectuals could meet and bring discussions and debate out of private homes where they were previously relegated. The art critic Viktor Misiano described this period as follows: "in three years, from 1956 to 1959, the convictions, crystallized in decades, were completely overturned on what art was and on what and how to paint." 168

However, despite the considerable progress in establishing a freer environment for culture, Khrushchev's approach toward art and literature remained linked to a utilitarian use, primarily aimed at representing the greatness of the Communist Party and the proletariat through clear and comprehensible representations. As his predecessor had done, Khrushchev continued to attribute to the cultural sphere the role of control and coercion over citizens' will. The exhibition at the Manege in Moscow in 1962 revealed it in all its clarity. 169 Khrushchev's attack on the artists of the abstract paintings on exhibit not only showed his lack of understanding of these new artistic manifestations, but also the Party's concern about a possible rebirth of artistic currents that were not adhering to

169 For the thirtieth anniversary of the Moscow Section of the Artists' Union on December 1, 1962, a show on modern Soviet paintings was inaugurated at the Manege exhibition hall. It included works of artists such as Ulo Sooster, Ernst Neizvestny, Yuri Sobolev and Vladimir Yankilevsky, to name a few. Their art production did not conform to the official directives on art. Although the Manege exhibition apparently seemed to confirm a new tolerance from the authorities of styles not strictly adhering to Socialist realism, it was actually the last exhibition of this kind.
the principles of Communist ideology. Ultimately, the dogma of Socialist Realism
remained strong despite the initial changes brought on by the “Thaw.”¹⁷₀

Despite a return to tight control by the State over art production, an increasing
dissatisfaction grew within the government apparatus with respect to the economics and
bureaucracy of Khrushchev's administration, which eventually led to his resignation as
First Party Secretary in October of 1964. The Secretary of the Central Committee, Leonid
Brezhnev, was later elected to hold this position.

In order to regain the population's trust for the Party leadership, which had been
weakened by the economic crisis mainly caused by Khrushchev's ambitious but
unsuccessful plans, Brezhnev sought to restore the Party image and to return to an
autocratic leadership.¹⁷¹ His plan was primarily characterized by the reestablishment of
“ideological purity” as well as the First Secretary’s cult of personality. The dialogue with
the West, promoted by Khrushchev, was then counterbalanced by a cultural stiffening
aimed at preventing access to corrupting external influences and the production of
national publications abroad.¹⁷² However, for the Soviet youth this represented a period

¹⁷₀ An interesting point is made by the historians Aleksandr Nekric and Michel Geller: "Khrushchev had
shown that terror was fractionable. Terror was not limited but fractional. Its essence remained unchanged,
but its character was transformed". Aleksandr Nekric and Michel Geller, History of the USSR From 1917
¹⁷¹ The first half of the seventies saw the implementation of the IX Five-Year Plan (1971-75), which was
supposed to provide an increase of industrial consumer goods and gross national income, in a society
greatly affected by the first waves of the world economic crisis. However, as Nekric and Geller point out,
"the fanciful promises of Khrushchev had given way to the unattainable promises of Brezhnev. Above all,
the passage to "real socialism" was announced, that is, to a new higher stage towards the Purpose". In ibid.,
737-739.
¹⁷² In 1966 and 1967 the State initiated a series of trials against writers and artists, who were charged with
promoting anti-Soviet propaganda. The publication of Andrei Siniavsky’s The Trial Begins (1962) and Yuri
Daniel’s This is Moscow Speaking (1959) in the West caught the attention of KGB, and the two authors
were found guilty of ridiculing the Communist regime and sentenced to seven and five years of internment
in a labor camp respectively. Siniavsky and Daniel were prosecuted on the basis of the content of their
novels, interpreted by the censors not as fictional material, but a real expression of the authors’ lives and
their ideological thinking. Art and life once again were considered tied together and one was used as a
charge for the other.
of discussions, expressions of discontent and sometimes even of open protest contrast with the regime through a wave of national and international demonstrations which inspired the birth of the modern Soviet dissident movement.\textsuperscript{173}

Faced with these manifestations of open opposition, the Party started a campaign of "ideological righting"\textsuperscript{174} in order to regain control over education and to exercise once again its coercive power over the intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{175} In 1969 the government issued an order that established the approval of the Union of Soviet Artists as a requirement for any public exhibition, with the evident purpose of preventing any public display by artists who were not part of the official sphere.\textsuperscript{176}

By 1972 the regime’s intimidation silenced most of those who had persisted in openly articulating dissenting opinions over the preceding five or six years, as well as

\textsuperscript{173} The arrest of the civil rights leader Petro Grigorenko in 1969 led to the formation of the Action Group, the very first independent group for the defense of human rights in Russia. It was an important step towards the placement of social problems of the USSR in the world political context after its numerous appeals to the UN and to various Western organizations.

\textsuperscript{174} The article 50 of the third and last Soviet Constitution, also known as the Brezhnev Constitution, unanimously adopted in 1977 at the 7th (Special) Session of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union well epitomized the double connotation that characterized these years: one official and public, and another real but away from public observation. The article 50 declared that "In accordance with the interests of the people and in order to strengthen and develop the socialist system, citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly, meetings, street processions, and demonstrations. The Exercise of these political freedoms is ensured by putting public buildings, streets, and squares at the disposal of the working people and their organizations, by broad dissemination of information, and by the opportunity to use the press, television, and radio." However, this alleged freedom was guaranteed only if its expression corresponded to the purpose of strengthening the socialist system, and accordingly, to the objectives of building communism.


\textsuperscript{176} It was part of the three institutions which were designed to oversee the artistic life of the country: the Union of Soviet Artists, the Academy of Arts of the USSR and the Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Meanwhile, the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, founded in 1922, was the official censorship and state secret protection organ in the Soviet Union. The agency had full decision-making power over culture and art, establishing whether a work was suitable for publicity or had to be denounced as anti-Soviet and, consequently, declared illegal. Trends that deviated from the paradigm of Socialist Realism were branded as subversive and incurred severe punishments established by the criminal code.
dismantled any structures not directly controlled by the Party. Indeed, the 1970s have been described as reactionary.

Many intellectual--who were already disillusioned by the turning of the government’s “openness” into a renewed form of repression resulting in the violent suppression of the Spring Prague in 1968 - lived a schizophrenic existence. While they publicly conformed to the rules and collective rituals imposed by the regime, in the privacy of their homes they expressed their personal ideas and beliefs. In particular, the kitchen became the privileged room for artists, dissidents, and intellectuals to gather in and openly discuss forbidden topics without the fear of being heard and reported to the authorities.

The expulsion of the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for publishing his book *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1974 was the apex of a situation that saw the production of samizdats, by dissidents having a wider and stronger impact on the official cultural sphere. Indeed, dozens of samizdat publications proliferated in these years, which were

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179 Gian Piero Piretto, professor of Russian culture, describes this situation as following: “They moved indoors, refusing clubs offered ‘magnanimously’ by power, preferring the safer intimacy of an apartment, of a kitchen. And it was the kitchens that saw the debut of the samizdat, to declare its success, to transform them into works of art, to make them fit into that category of ‘musics that make the circle’ to which Lotman refers when he defines his interior cultural-spiritual.” Gian Piero Piretto, *Il radioso avvenire. Mitologie culturali sovietiche*, (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2001): 300. [My translation from Italian].
180 Gathering in a close and restricted space of a certain type of kitchen meant “meeting trustworthy and sincere friends, share cultural, personal, and political emotions, getting or providing news, have discussion without fear of problems, anxieties, worries [...] elaborate a 'discourse'; not necessarily anti-Soviet, not necessarily dissident, only non-conformist, unofficial, private, autonomous, humanly secret and intimate ”. In ibid., 289.
181 The term was coined in 1944 by the poet Nikolai Glaskov when he wrote the word ”Sam-Sebja-Izdat (self-published) on the front page of his typewritten poems. Since then it has been used to indicate the publication and illegal distribution of writings (by hand or typewriter), forbidden by censorship because it was considered anti-Soviet.
182 An author had only two solutions if he or she wished to make known his or her work but was denied the official "imprimitur" by the censorship: either the distribution of the manuscript within the country in the
devoted to the oppression of nationalities and religious groups, the defense of human rights, the regeneration of political and social life, as well as police activity and social injustices.\textsuperscript{183}

With Brezhnev's death in 1982, the role Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party was taken by Yuri Andropov, the KGB chairman since 1967. Once in power, he implemented harsh repression towards dissidents which included psychiatric detention, prisons hospitals and pressure on dissidents to emigrate abroad. The new Secretary aimed at "the destruction of dissent in all its forms."\textsuperscript{184} However, his government lasted only fifteen months due to his death in February, 1984.

Eventually, with Mikhail Gorbachev in power in 1985 the Soviet Union entered a period which is known as \textit{Perestroika} (restructuring)--a series of reforms aimed at reorganizing the economy and the political and social structure of the country and renewing the fundamental values of the Soviet society. In order to facilitate the "acceleration" of socio-economic development, the government gave priority to the mechanical industry by encouraging the restructuring of the entire production complex. However, the initiatives promoted in 1985-1986 had little success. The mid-eighties already signaled the last phase of Soviet power and of socialism as an ideology, and total collapse followed at the end of the decade.

This transitional situation not only impacted the politics of the country but also deeply affected the art criticism of the time and its belief in the doctrine of Socialist

\textsuperscript{183} Already under a tight control by KGB in the 1960s, in the 1970s dissidents became subjects of threats that extended also to their families and friends and often resorted to aggressive restraining measures such as arrests and incarcerations. Agents-spies also infiltrated unofficial groups of artists, which intensified the climate of discomfort and suspicion that accompanied artists' daily lives.

Realism and afterwards led to the blurring and re-position of the previously established hierarchies in art.

1.1.5 The Official Art of the 1950s: the Surovyi stil

Before his death, in March 1953, Stalin wrote an article, later published as a pamphlet, titled *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* in which he anticipated some of the changes that took place in the official interpretation of Socialist Realism, during the following years. He also solicited Soviet artists to move from creating just mere “pretty pictures”, to expressing a higher level of criticism. This position was reiterated in 1952 at the Nineteenth Communist Party Congress by the Secretary of the Central Committee Georgy Malenkov, who invited the Soviet artists to create artworks critical of Soviet society.

This new direction in art found its peak during Nikita Khrushchev's administration\(^{185}\), among the goals of which was to prompt Soviet artists to avoid trite subject matters, old patriotic themes and images of individual leaders, and to represent instead in a simpler form, people in contemporary roles and activities in a modern and developing society.

The Party's need to renew its legitimacy led to a significant development in the socialist art: a conciliatory attitude toward the co-presence of realism and abstraction, to the extent that “both were accommodated to a hybrid alignment which required processes

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\(^{185}\) Some of the changes included, for example, the establishment by the Ministry of Culture of a commission to improve the economic status of the artists in order to encourage them to create new artworks. This period of liberalization involved also the art market: Soviet art was sold for the first time publicly since the Stalin era, thus showing that culture was no longer just a form of propaganda but was also considered a consumer item.
of formal adaptation, breeding new strategies to frame the consciousness of the viewing collective.”\textsuperscript{186}

An important step in this direction was the opening of the official art venues to Western art. While the exhibition 'Fourteenth to Twentieth-Century French Art' in 1955 at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, contributed to rehabilitating impressionism on the eyes of censorship, Pablo Picasso's works displayed at the Pushkin Museum, in Moscow in 1956, and the exhibition of US art at the park "Sokolniki" in Moscow in 1959 introduced abstract expressionism to the Russian audience. Moreover, the acceptance of Western influences in the country was due to the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 in Moscow. The event which attracted more than thirty thousand young people from 131 countries, gave Soviet artists the opportunity to see for the first time, the latest cultural developments in the West for the first time. This atmosphere of tolerance toward styles and artists previously considered forbidden also contributed to reinserting Russia's own modern masters into the public discourse. Russian avant-garde artists such as Malevich Kandinsky Chagall Tatlin and Rodchenko, were finally part of a national heritage to be proud of.

The first expressions of the \textit{Surovyi stil} which developed within this political and cultural backdrop was marked by a new attitude toward Western artistic production, and by a profound rethinking of the characteristics attributed to Socialist realism. It must be added, however, that although Soviet painters were no longer required to paint in accordance to one firm prescribed formula, they also had to be careful and not push their experiments too far, since the authorities were grappling with delineating the precise

\textsuperscript{186} Canwell, \textit{Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation:} 150.
parameters of Socialist Realism, which was still considered the official style. The main period of activity of the *Surovyi stil* could be circumscribed from 1957 to 1962, although many of its stylistic features were carried on throughout the 1960s. According to art historian Susan Reid, the search for a contemporary style by the *Surovyi stil* masters was an attempt to specifically restore aesthetic criteria to the discourse of art, and to define a style which was going to clearly mark “Khrushchevism” from Stalinism.\(^{187}\)

The art critic Aleksandr Kamensky was the first to use the name *Surovyi stil*, in his article *Reality Metaphors* (published in 1969), to define the new realism that developed in the second half of the 1950s. The adjective *surovyi* (severe) was meant to express the semantic intonation of the style that arose in contrast to the cheerful and joyful art of the Socialist realism of the previous decades. On the other hand, since most of the artists of *Surovyi stil* were brought up in the traditions of the Moscow school of painting at the Surikov Institute as disciples of Sergei Gerasimov, they still retained a romantic attitude toward Soviet life.

Painters whose names are closely associated with the development of the Surovyi stil are Peter Ossovsky, Pavel Nikonov, Nikolay Andronov, Victor Popkov, Geli Korzhev, Tahir Salahov, Andrei Vasnetsov, Igor Obrosov, and the brothers Alexander and Peter Smolin. They adopted a variety of plastic languages and formal methods often inspired by or referring to the work of artists from the 1920s,\(^ {188}\) post-impressionists, the

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\(^{188}\) The return to some aspects of the 1920s art production by the *Surovoy stil’* artists could be seen in terms of Khrushchev's wish to look back at Lenin, and post-Lenin periods, before Stalin put his mark on Soviet society. Indeed, the 1920s was considered a decade less morally and aesthetically debased than the end of 1950s. However, this was actually the last period when Soviet artists were allowed to embrace the influence of modernist movements in their works. Matthew Bown Cullerne, *Socialist Realist Painting*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998): 34.
Russian avant-garde, and the group the "Jack of Diamonds" - Petr Konchalovsky, and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, in particular. Therefore, Surovyi stil artists not only contributed to the broadening of Socialist realism's traditional boundaries, but also to the resurrection of parts of Russian art production that had been condemned under Stalin.

These artists also responded to the technological progress of their time by adopting techniques borrowed from contemporary photography and cinema, such as angles of views, framing of the composition and "freeze-frame" like shots, to name a few. Some of the best examples can be found in the works of Pavel Nikonov such as Our Working Days, (1960) (Fig. 37), where the vantage point seems to be conveyed through the angle of a camera lens, or through an extreme cropping of the scene as in Tahir Salahov's Repairmen, (1960) (Fig. 38), and Viktor Ivanov's Family. 1945 (1958-1964) (Fig. 39), which creates the effect of a zoom that underlines internal, emotional tension and dramatic expressiveness.\(^{189}\)

*Surovyi stil* depicted the miserable living condition of the poor and illiterate sector of the population who did not fit in the ideal representations of joyous Soviet workers, god-like Party leaders, the country’s industrial achievements during Stalin's time. Instead of perpetuating such idealized scenes, *Surovyi stil* artists captured distinctive but common individuals, everyday uneventful moments in people's lives, or “vulgar” occupations of builders, geologists, shoe repairmen, raftsmen, explorers and other characters who show their difficult life. Through the representation of their perseverance, and spiritual and

\(^{189}\) Neo-realist paintings and cinema also played an important role in the development of the art production of this period. They facilitated the penetration of neorealism into the consciousness of Soviet artists' aesthetic. In particular, Vittorio De Sica, Giuseppe De Santis and Roberto Rossellini's close-ups, expressive and occasionally paradoxical blow-ups, and pictorial language combined with a documentary approach were an important influence for *Surovoy stil* artists.
physical strength Surovyi stil' artists were meant to make the viewer, consciously or unconsciously, proud of his or her contemporaries. Paintings such as the already mentioned Nikonov’s *Our Working Days*, which presents five grim-faced construction workers in the Siberia mid-winter, or *Geologists* (1962) (Fig. 14), with its exhausted-looking characters and monochrome coloring, aimed at focusing on the emotional state of their characters, and then transferred their inner world on canvas. However, often their subjects were also focusing on the generation of Soviet citizen who fought and survived the war, and that eventually provided with a different point of view on the Soviet “idyllic” life conveyed by the propaganda.

Indeed, at the heart of the Surovyi stil art production, analogous to the *Peredzniki*, was an active interest in the actual social conditions experienced by people, paired with the search for new forms of expressions to faithfully reflect their lives and environment. Often, the artists' biographies were mixed with these subjects, since the artists’ attempt to rethink their national cultural heritage was translated into the search for their own identity. Artists such as Pavel Nikonov, and Nikolai Andronov, who displayed in their works an ambivalent and complex engagement with the contemporary reality, far from the uni-dimensional official optimism promoted by the propaganda, sometimes did not fit with the regime's requirements.¹⁹⁰ According to art historian Susan Reid, in campaigning for a more effective and aesthetically satisfying art “the reformists were also attempting to reclaim a degree of professional autonomy from the demagogues.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ The painting *Geologists* was subjected to harsh criticism by the authorities, to the point that a larger version of it was initially declined by the Tretyakov Gallery which refused to pay Nikonov for the work. [http://www.russianartdealer.com/artwork/pavel--geologists](http://www.russianartdealer.com/artwork/pavel--geologists).

¹⁹¹ Susan E Reid., *Destalinization and Remodernization of Soviet Art: The search for a contemporary Realism*: 26
The increase of dramatic tension in *Surovyi stil* paintings at the beginning of the 1960s, led to the creation of subjects which explored an allegorical and lyrical dimension where symbolism and real observations sometimes intertwined, such as in Nikonov's painting *Meat* (1960-61) (Fig. 40), exhibited in 1961 in Leningrad. The composition presents a brutal and grim image of a butcher in his shop next to an animal carcass open in two, hanging from the ceiling, painted in an expressionist style. The simple action at the center of the composition assumes a special, autonomous meaning and reaches a dimension of poetic metaphor.

This new stage of the *Surovyi stil* creative research proved the artists' desire to understand the laws at the base of the Soviet society, through plastic techniques which often implied a new and an unfamiliar sharpness to the composition. However, they still remained faithful to the framework of the realist tradition by keeping its unity of time, place and action, and by depicting specific life scenes taken from people's daily routine.

The characters depicted in *Surovyi stil* paintings are often isolated, separated from each other: the scenes cease to look like just an illustration of events and become, in effect, a psychological portrait. The considerably freer of *Surovyi stil* became a platform for philosophical reflections. The essence of what is happening is not expressed in the actions of the characters, but by the internal tension between them as a reflection of the

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193 Ibid.
194 It is worth mentioning here the painting *Gymnasts of the USSR* and the triptych *In the New Lands*, by D.I.Zhilinsky. The artist brushes out with scrupulous care every small detail from the characters, who stand out in perfect isolation. It is indeed remarkable how each of them is having an individual and predetermined meaning and role, although without having a physical or psychological relationship with the others.
spiritual process the characters are going through.\textsuperscript{195} They are not pictured as mere productive workers, but also as human beings with an emotional and psychological dimension which invite a frank dialogue with the viewer.

In conclusion, artworks such as *Meat, Family. 1945*, or *Repairmen* show how figurative representations presented under the guise of “Socialist realism” could bring at the same time a component of ambiguity and metaphorical innuendo, which adds a timeless reading to them. An element of ambiguity is also embodied in the style within which the boundaries between realism and the avant-garde were blurred in favor of an open dialogue between them.\textsuperscript{196}

Indeed, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of the main focuses of critical discussions, raised by *Surovyi stil*, became the possibility of a unified and international contemporary style with the related idea of a co-existence between communism and bourgeois culture. Such search for a higher dimension in art, which Socialist realism and the avant-garde movements shared in the 1960s, was brought to an abrupt halt with the Manege exhibition in 1962. This event is generally considered the mark of the end of the Thaw, and the beginning of a new stage of development for the non-conformist art sphere.

In this study I argue that Keskküla's, Elken's, Faibisovich's and Sherstiuk's hyperrealism shares several characteristics with *Surovyi stil*. First, both take on an ambivalent and complex engagement with their contemporary reality. In fact, although these four artists they did not avoid dealing with the past, as they integrated previous

\textsuperscript{195} Vladimir Salnikov calls the new hero "complex personality", "maverick", "conscious loner" and even "neurotic", which departs from the Stalinist hero part of the stereotype of the standardized Soviet way of life. Salnikov Vladimir, “The 1960s in the SSSR”, *Khudozhestvenny zhurnal*, n.51/52, 2003: 27.

\textsuperscript{196} A dialogue that the authorities were not always able to understand or accept as the painting *Geologists* proves it. See note n. 94
artistic expressions within their works, they also responded to the technological progress of their time by adopting techniques borrowed from contemporary photography and cinema. Second, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk paid a similar attention to common characters, and everyday uneventful moments in people's lives, as—the aforementioned artists Pavel Nikonov, Tahir Salahov, and Nikolai Andronov, who also pursued an analogous search for new forms of expressions to faithfully reflect both people's social conditions and their psychological portrait.

This aspect in particular kept Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich in an open dialogue with the non-conformist sphere of their time, whose characteristics are analyzed in the following section.
1.2 The Non-Conformist Art Sphere

An important factor in the development of Keskküla's, Elken's, Faibisovich's and Sherstiuk's artistic career was their initial contact with the non-conformist art scene of their time. Indeed, the hyperrealist artworks analyzed in this dissertation incorporate in their compositions several techniques borrowed from different non-conformist styles, such as abstraction, conceptualism, collage and action painting.

Under Nikita Khrushchev, the imposed monolithic idealization of reality which characterized Socialist Realism of the previous decades was largely questioned by both the new government and its official cultural apparatus. Artists and intellectuals previously relegated to the margins of society began openly discussing concepts such as “originality,” “contemporary style” and “creative freedom,” in a new attempt to stretch the predetermined creative space, and at the same time to emancipate their works from the communist ideology.

Indeed, according to the art critic Aleksei Bobrikov, the second half of the 1950s was characterized by an “infantile euphoria of freedom,” developed into a clear rejection of the dogmas and the form of expressions created by the Stalinist culture. The re-appropriation of an independent art practice brought back the artist’s individuality to the “development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and control all practices and spaces of representation.”

As a matter of fact, at the end of the 1950's the

myth of Western modernism with its paradigms of individual authorship overlapped the authoritarian 'I' of the State.

The new generation of artists looked to the lost Russian art tradition of the avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular, to Malevich, Rodchenko, and Filonov, to whom they felt ideologically close. One of the strategies adopted by this so-called “second avant-garde” was to raise the artist's inner life and perception to a metaphysical dimension of pure symbolism separated from the manipulated ideological language and subjects embedded in Socialist realism. But, despite this transcendence into a wider range of themes and styles, artistic freedom remained limited as indicated by the fact that there were no openings of new galleries or modern art museums. Eventually, this brief period of relative freedom reached an end in 1962 with Khruschchev’s already mentioned public attack on a group of artists at Manege exhibition.199

As previously mentioned, the event deeply changed the status of non-conformist artists, who found themselves once again as outsiders of the official art sphere. The most part of them was excluded from the Artists' Union, and their works were forbidden in public venues. Therefore, they withdrew into private apartments, cafes, or scientific

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199 The artist Yuri Sobolev expressed the feeling of these artists after 1962 as follows: “Our 'dispersion' by Khruschev and his retinue at the Manège exhibition was a great lesson for me. Suddenly I realized how helpless I was [...] The powerful feeling of being defenseless personally that we tried was useful, just that sentiment forced us from time to time to go and visit each other and hold hands. And then to build us around walls, without which it was absolutely impossible to live. This also reflected on the whole 'unofficial art' in the country that even today cannot free itself from an inferiority complex.” Vitaly Patsukov, Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde, ed. Art Center College of Design. Pasadena, exh.cat., (Los Angeles: Curatorial Assistance, 1998): 222.

research institutes -- the latter ones thanks to some scientists who become influential patrons -- as alternative places to show their creations.

The situation worsened during Brezhnev's administration which considered non-conformist artists as enemies of the State, and imposed new restrictions on their art production which led to their almost complete alienation from the official culture. The apogee of the artists' persecution by the authorities was reached in 1974 with the show later called the “Bulldozer exhibition,” held in an abandoned field in Beljaevo, a suburb of Moscow. The display of abstract, conceptualist and sots art paintings was shut down by the intervention of bulldozers led by plainclothes policemen, which caused the destruction of several artworks and a wave of international protests. In a system where everything was defined as political, the very attempt to escape politics, as non-conformist artists believed to do by choosing as a location for their exhibition an abandoned field, was still considered a political act by the authorities.

Outlining a list and description of the non-conformist movements and artists active in the 1960s and 1970s would be beyond the scope of this work. The following two sections will approach and analyze only those artists and groups who, directly and indirectly influenced the hyperrealist works of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk, who are the focus of this study.201

1.2.1 The Russian Non-Conformist Movements in the 1960s

One aspect that links the works of the artists of this section, whose contribution was fundamental to the Soviet non-conformist scene in the 1960s, and hyperrealism in

201 For a description of the dialogue established between hyperrealist works and the some of the main exponents of the non-conformist art scene artproduction see Chatper Three and Four.
the 1970s and 1980s, is the focus on different aspects of people's everyday life, both across social and domestic dimension.

An influential and active unofficial group in the late 1950s was the Lianozovo Group, named after the village where its members lived: Lydia Masterkova, Vladimir Nemukhin, Dmitri Plavinsky, Evgenii Kropivnitsky, and Oscar Rabin. While Kropivnitsky, Nemukhin, and Masterkova were trying to break beyond the boundaries of everyday reality, through abstract expressionism, Oscar Rabin preferred to explore a dimension of social criticism. His semi-figurative paintings of the 1960s, such as *Barack with Moon* (1959) (Fig. 41), or *Moscow Building n. 150* (1963) (Fig. 42), emphasize the anti-humanity of the Soviet environment through the aestheticization of miserable and poor city's neighborhoods – sometimes even his own.

The anonymous ideological symbolism of Socialist Realism is confronted by Rabin in a deeply individual way by transforming the banality of everyday life, with its common and sometimes defective objects, into art subjects imbued with a higher significance that referred to the constrictions, prohibitions and injustices the Soviet social and political environment imposed on its citizens.

Rabin's singular realism elevated the Russian byt to an aesthetic dimension which often had a strong impact on the viewer who was not used to facing a display of misery and poverty, so deeply different from the merry and positive images presented by Socialist Realism. In *Rubbish Bin No. 8* (1958) (Fig. 43), for example, a dirty street (probably one of Liazonoivo's suburbs where Rabin lived with his wife), is overlooked by

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202 Oscar Rabin, became the first unofficial artist to exhibit abroad. His works were part of a show in London in 1964, and he had a one-man show at the Arleigh Gallery in San Francisco in 1965. Yet in the same years his work was banned by the official venues in Russia.
a distorted trash bin surrounded by garbage, and illuminated by the faint light of a street lamp. The only hint of hope in an otherwise gloomy atmosphere is embodied by the presence of a miserable and shabby barrack in the background. The tenuous light coming from its window is the only sign of human presence in this deserted environment. Indeed, Rabin's works were never ironic: they did not give any catharsis or liberation to the viewer, but instead conveyed a sense of the grotesque that was tinged with tragedy and despair thus mirroring the life in poor neighborhoods in cities all over Soviet Russia.

Mikhail Roginsky, was another pivotal figure in the non-conformist art of the period, who centered his art production on the representation of everyday life. He focused his attention on objects of domestic use in Soviet apartments from the perspective of ordinary people. Roginsky did not consider these objects as simple kitsch, but as elements which symbolized an existential condition. By abstracting a familiar item from its usual context and then placing it within the space of the canvas, he highlighted the difficult housing conditions that afflicted millions of Soviet citizens during the 1960s. The painting *Kerosene Stove 1-2-3* (1965) (Fig. 44), for example, rises in the viewer a whole series of new and unexpected associations by centering the composition on a simple magnified kerosene kitchen stove. The coldness of the objects, along with the general feeling of loneliness that pervades the picture, recall the poor quality of the consumer goods and furniture in most of the Soviet apartments. Through these metaphorical windows that opened to people's daily life, Roginsky is able to reflect on his own life and experience as he confirms: “I think the banality of the subject, the fact that it
was not included in the set of what is customarily portrayed in the picture, freed and allowed me to express myself.”

Artists like Oscar Rabin and Mikhail Roginsky, paved the way for the Sretensky Boulevard group founded in the second half of the 1960s by Ilya Kabakov, Ulo Sooster, Ernst Neizvestny, Eric Bulatov, and Oleg Vasiliev to name few. Despite these artists not having a precise program or a homogeneous style, they shared the same interest in the interpretation and definition of the mechanisms and rules at the base of language of the Soviet society.

Moscow artist Ilya Kabakov was the first to analyze the analogy between conceptual art and bureaucratic practices in contemporary society, with his ten albums *10 Characters* (created from 1971 to 1974) -- a series of drawings which chronicle the life of various dwellers who lived in the same cramped communal apartment in Moscow. Through the experience of these ten characters, the artist explores the spectrum of various relationships, clichés, language and behavioral stereotypes which constituted the essence of the Soviet communal life. The combination of drawings with literary, satirical, or elevated commentary in the albums blurs the formal separation between art and text and opens the single sheet to a multiplicity of meanings. Reflecting on this juxtaposition the art critic Marina Balina affirms that “The text itself begins to disintegrate on the visual level, a process that demonstrates to the viewer the writing as a purely visual sign in a context of other visual signs.” Moreover, the camouflage of the artist's authorial 'I'...

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behind the character's experience, transforms his personal experience into the expression of the universal feeling of dehumanization induced by communal living. However, unlike in Oscar Rabin's painting, in Kabakov's works this experience could also lead to a positive outcome, as Kabakov affirms: "It is only when you are lying on the floor of a boarding house of the lowest degree that you begin to look up at the sky: the man who lies in the dust looks upward."206

Eric Bulatov's aesthetic was also centered on the display of everyday language and symbols of the Soviet society and on the representation of the citizens' alienation within it. Many of his paintings of the 1960s and 1970s combined conceptual elements with photographic or photographic-based reproductions. Photography is an important tool in the artist's creative process since he believed that “truth” lies before our eyes, therefore the medium allows him to prove the objectivity of the world as he claims: “Photography is the guarantor of an objective reality. I must not deform the world, should not touch it. [...] I must represent not the perfect, not the horrible, but the most usual.”207

Indeed, although Bulatov painted his subjects freehand instead of using a projector, he did not wish to reveal any trace of the brush strokes and intentionally made the surface of the canvas look like a photograph. But he was not interested just in simply recording situations and events. On the contrary, he mirrored the changes both in society and in the social interconnection between people who were affected by those changes. His paintings of landscapes and urban scenes typically include fragments of the language and verbal

clichés of everyday life, common in Soviet propaganda posters, which interact with images derived from photographic reproductions of well-known city-scapes or historical figures.

Bulatov believed that reality was framed by two forms of space: the social space we inhabit in our daily lives, which exist in front of the picture plane, and the artistic space behind it. In the painting *Krasikov street* (1977) (Fig. 45) Bulatov proves that “social space is not all of reality” by combining the flatness of suprematism, with the three-dimensional realistic picture of a street with pedestrians. The photographic illusion of the image is broken by the huge poster of Lenin hanging in the sky which transforms the road below into a “dead-end” that passersby will eventually hit up against.

Eric Bulatov's works contributed to creating a distance between the reality his paintings represented and the viewers' consciousness in order to help them to understand the evolution from the visual image to its ideological manipulation.

The aforementioned works indirectly influenced the conception of space displayed in the paintings of Estonian artists Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken through a net of artists’ connections. Indeed, they both shared with Eric Bulatov a similar interest in photographic reproductions, both artistic and real, and in the manipulation of consciousness through visual representations. The hyperrealist artists explored these issues within the context of non-conformist art in the 1970s. Despite this decade being defined as “Stagnation,” according to art historian Eha Komissarov the dialogue of Estonian art with the Western tradition of modernism reached its culmination in the 1970s, as did the number experimenting artists and the variety of the trends. The art of

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the 1970s can be regarded, she affirms, as a basic model of art innovation built up on Soviet dialectics – the unity of development and the opponents hindering development.  

1.2.2 From Conceptualism to AptArt: the last phase of the Soviet Non-Conformist Movements

Although the ideological control over the cultural scene had already intensified in the mid-1960s, it was after the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 that Brezhnev's government restored the conditions of extensive repression, reprisals, and banishment for those intellectuals and artists who opposed, or even questioned the Party's policy. The aim of the authorities was to maintain full jurisdiction over the youth culture in order to prevent the emergence of any type of counter-culture movements.

In response to the State's tight control, the intelligentsia developed a critical attitude towards the State's monopoly over the representation of reality conveyed by mass media and aimed at unveiling the mechanisms of power and the language of ideological propaganda. A number of scholars have argued that a decisive role in this regard was played by conceptualism whose emergence at the beginning of the 1970s could be linked to the emphasis on the textual orientation of Soviet mass culture and to the sudden intrusion of everyday dialogues into visual arts. The visual impact of propaganda on the streets was also a significant phenomenon that moved conceptualist artists.

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210 According to Margarita Tupitsyn, the importance of textual elements should be attributed to the “enormous empire of speech in the Soviet Union. After the Bolshevik Revolution, when formalism reached its peak, language continued to infiltrate abstract designs, particularly in the form of didactic political slogans. After Lenin's death political text were incorporated as a crucial component of many artworks. Margarita Tupitsyn, “On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism,” Nonconformist art: the Soviet experience, 1956-1986: 303.
Commentary, interpretation, self-interpretation and the visualization of verbal concepts thus became important aspects of the conceptual art in the 1970s.  

Of the artists who explored the potential of conceptualism in the Soviet Union, most scholars have focused on Ilya Kabakov, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, Andrei Monastyrski, Eric Bulatov and the Collective Actions group. For others, Komar and Melamid, Dmitri Prigov and the Nest group, represent a divergent trend in conceptualism which existed in parallel with the art production of Sots art.

As art historian Raoul Eshelman affirms “Instead of viewing socialist realism as a successful escape from cultural history, the conceptualists saw in it a kind of sunken cultural heritage that could be aesthetically recycled and reintegrated into cultural history from a new, ironic perspective.” Conceptualism's reflection on the role of visual and verbal language in the formation of the mass consciousness, and on the absence of content and the sterility of Soviet propaganda communication was highlighted within the space of the canvas by putting image and text on the same level to expose the procedure that defined all of Soviet culture.

Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, and Komar and Melamid, in particular, worked with ideological clichés and propaganda slogans, by inserting them into the space of the painting in order to exploit and analyze the Soviet official discourse. These artists also singled out mass media not only as a means to convey official propaganda but also as a source for their own artistic creation.

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211 Ibid.
215 During the Stalinist regime it was in fact obligatory to accompany the texts with illustrations, as explained by Paperny, “Culture Two made illustration not only possible but almost mandatory, because
It should be added here(180,183),(821,799) that in the 1970s, during Brezhnev's administration, Soviet society became one again highly bureaucratized, considering the number of edicts, directives, decrees, resolutions, slogans, and discourses that were constantly transmitted to the people on a daily basis.

Komar and Melamid, and Eric Bulatov desemantized the text by reducing it to a simple signifying gesture emptied of its usual semantic content or context. Komar and Melamid's *Our Goal is Communism* (1972) (Fig. 46), and Bulatov's *Danger* (1972) (Fig. 47), show how the excessive verbalism that saturated the Soviet society with its bureaucracy carried to the extremes can also become an excellent source for conceptual art. In these two works the trite propaganda language is transformed into a new language by presenting it just as visual images placed within a different context. This allow the artist to convey a new message -- sometimes ironic, and often contrary to the one first attributed by the propaganda. As Vitaly Komar affirmed "Besides the Socialist Realism, there was also the Socialist Conceptual Art - the official art of slogans. [...] In Russia the banners would become official conceptual art." The de-contextualization and reinterpretation of the text within a new context recalls closely the ready-made. Indeed Komar and Melamid explicitly cite Marcel Duchamp as an important source of inspiration.

The 1970s were also a decade for nonconformist artists to approach their close environment as a source of information and as a space to deal with the development of every form of art in this culture was virtually expected to reconstruct its language in order to be able to express a verbal text. Thus, the languages of art became standardized. Illustration, that is the layering of different translations from the same verbal original one on top of other, resulted in a surplus of information, ensuring the correct reading of the genuine text". Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin, Culture Two*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 180.

Interview with the author, New York, November, 2007.

Ibid
technology and means of communication that the country was experiencing, since the 1960s. Moreover, the increasingly technological society prompted questions about the role of the artist in imagining alternatives to the socialist environment and at the same time imagining a range of new possibilities for the technical execution of the art creation.

In Estonia, this approach was deeply explored within semi-official youth exhibitions,\(^{218}\) which became the platforms for non-conformist artists to present their experiments of new alternatives to the prevailing artistic, social and spatial models. Three exhibitions, in particular, became turning moments: *Saku 1973*, organized by Tõnis Vint in 1973, *Harku' 75: Objects, Concepts* curated by Leonhard Lapin in 1975, and *Architecture Exhibition* organized under the supervision of the Tallinn School group in 1978. The exhibition *Saku 1973*, held at the Saku Agriculture Institute, in the suburbs of Tallinn, included the participation of artists such as Malle Leis, Mare Vint, Aili Vint, Juri Arrak, Leonhard Lapin and Raul Meel. Their works meant to break the official *status quo*, by introducing the most influential developments in Estonian alternative art of the time, such as abstractionism, surrealism, and conceptualism to the numerous Russian and foreign art critics, collectors, public figures and diplomats who attended the show. The exhibition was also an attempt to prove that Estonian art could significantly contribute to the development of art in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the different styles of the works

\(^{218}\) In the official art scene, a heated debate started on the issue of which kind of artworks were allowed in official exhibition. For example, during a meeting of the Communist Party in Tallinn, in 1970 a conflict raised between some of its participants: the artist Priidu Aavik affirmed the need to establish some precise limits for exhibiting non-realistic works. In response, Enn Poldroos, the party leader of the Artists' Union in Estonia claimed that experiments in the art should have been seeing as advancements in the art field and that no a particular style should have been privileged over another. A statement that provoked the strong reaction of Olaf Utt, the representative of the Central Committee of the Estonian Central Party who replied to Poldroos that not all experiments should be allowed to be part of the official exhibition venue. Jaak Kangilaski, “The Theory of socialist realism as a means of manipulating Estonian artists,” *Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia* 3(8)/2013: 172-177
mounted on the wall contributed to raising the underlying debate over realism being the only “strategy” able to convey a realistic view of Soviet society.

The continued repression, and the severe restrictive measures imposed on certain ethnic minorities, and on numerous members of the intelligentsia, caused the immigration of a considerable number of intellectuals and artists, towards the West in the second half of the 1970s.

The events of the 1980s represent to many historians the last phase of Soviet power and of socialism as an ideology that ultimately led to the collapse of both at the end of the decade. The motto “Moscow the Third Rome,” which synthesized the belief that Russia was the destined ruler of the world after the Roman and Byzantine empires, became openly questioned by artists who saw the supposed strength of the Imperialist power as a farce. This transitional situation not only affected the country's politics but also weakened the power of Socialist realism as the official style along with the blurring and re-positioning the previously consolidated hierarchies in art.

A new generation of artists moved away from the conceptualism of the previous decade in search of a new language and new forms of expression. By seeming to scrupulously adhere to Socialist Realism's canons and subjects, they actually satirized its political message with elements of irony, playfulness and sometimes even an element of

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220 This situation reached its climax at the All-Union Conference of Art History in 1987 sponsored by the Union of Artists of the SSSR in Moscow. On that occasion, two opposite factions from art educators clashed on their respective ideas on socialist realism as creative and evaluative method. From one side, Dmitrii Sarab'ianov, former chairman of the Department of Russian Art History at Moscow State University advocated for new categories to guide socialist realism in order to make its “borders” more flexible. On the opposite side, Vladimir Pogodin, historian, and publicist, argued for both its retention, and for the removal of its opposition. As the art historian John Bowlt points out, the fact that Sarab'ianov and his colleagues were calling for “the rejection of a system that they themselves supported for many years, is indicative of the new-found freedom of expression in the Soviet Union”. John Bowlt, “Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 71, N. 4 (Dec. 1989): 542-550
“buffoonery.” Although allegorical or symbolic content was still present in the composition, it came from the artist's deliberate choice and not from a need to outwit the censor. One of the first examples of this new direction was the Exhibition of 23 organized in 1981 at the Central House of Artists in Moscow. The work on display embodied a passage from socialist realism into a new stage which though still realistic in style, was bringing strong overtones of surreal, irony and social criticism.

Some artists aimed at opening a dialogue with the Soviet society at large, through performances, happenings, and other forms and themes that addressed conversations and situations taken directly from everyday life -- often from the domestic sphere. The apartment became a space to display and discuss the artists' works and ideas. By the end of the Gorbachev's era, the very space of the apartment became an object of aesthetic reflection through a series of exhibitions defined as AptArt, a short name for “apartment art”. Apt Art was the manifestation of art “swallowing” life, and of life merging with art: the shows presented multiple installations where artists freely combined ephemeral materials, domestic items, verbal clichés, and personalized words and phrases. The first show of the AptArt project took place in the Moscow apartment of the artists Nikita Alekseev in 1982 followed by a sequence of shows organized by Sergei Anufriev, Yurii Leiderman, Nikita Alekseev, the Mukhomor group, and Yurii Albert, to name a few. Apt Art reenacted the kommunalka life which, as socialist realism, contributed to shaping their daily life and form their common memories.

Parallel to the art sphere, a new wave of songs soon came to replace what was

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222 Among the participants were Olga Bulgakova, Boris Kocheishvili, Natalia Nesterova, and Vladimir Soskiev.
223 [http://conceptualism.letov.ru/TOTART/APTART.htm](http://conceptualism.letov.ru/TOTART/APTART.htm)
considered the false and pseudo-romantic pathos of the 1970s with a more understandable language that addressed social issues and familiar subjects. Young representatives of the emerging rock music scene of the time, such as the widely known performers Boris Grebenshchikov and Victor Tsoy, aspired to return to simple primary elements of everyday life and human relationships.

A renewed interest in the private and domestic dimension was also shared by the contemporary theatre production of the 1980s, by writers such as Vladimir Arro, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Galina Volchek and Alexander Sokolov, who re-introduced the daily conflicts of ordinary people into the plots of their plays. Worth mentioning here is the performance by Alexander Volodin in the play *Factory Girl* at the City Council Theater in Moscow in 1984, whose set design created by the stage designer M. Rybasovoj, was directly linked by some critics with the aesthetics of photorealism.\(^\text{224}\)

The documentary approach of many artworks in the 1980s was a starting point for some artists to distill a higher meaning from their lives and social milieu and to explore social paradoxes or develop ironic approach to dealing with the growing mechanization and standardization brought on by new scientific and technological developments.

Several similar characteristics are shared by hyperrealism and the aforementioned artistic directions of the non-conformist art sphere of the 1970s and 1980s. The documentary approach, for example, which addressed conversations and situations from people's everyday life, became a fundamental aspect also in Faibisovich's and Sherstiuk's hyperrealism. Through a closer look at their public and private environment, these two

\(^{224}\text{Olga Kozlova, Fotorealizm, (Moscow: Galart, 1994): 25}\)
artists unveiled the existential condition of the individual “I” within the anonymous and collective Soviet space.

Jaan Elken and Ando Keskküla share their reflection on the role of language, both visual and verbal, with conceptualism. By bringing together image and text on the same level within the space of the canvas, Elken analyzes and criticizes the impact of Soviet official discourse on the occupied country of Estonia. Meanwhile Keskküla acknowledges his partial debt to conceptualism by openly calling his hyperrealist works as “a form of conceptualism”, due to the mental creative process behind their creation.

Keskküla's and Elken's focus on the urban environment and its dialogue with conceptualism opens on a wider perspective to Estonia’s complex and multifaceted historical, cultural and social context in the twentieth century.

1.2.3 Introduction to Estonia's Historical and Cultural Background

Estonia's cultural policy has been and still is, deeply determined by the country's complex historical pattern. As an occupied country Estonia had been under Soviet government control until 1991, except for a period of independence from 1918 to 1939.

225 The emergence of the Estonian National Awakening took place first under the reformist period launched by the Tsar Alexander II, from 1855 to 1881 when agrarian reforms and amelioration in the education system along with social mobility contributed to raising a sense of self-determination in the Estonian population which acknowledged itself as a nation deserving the right to establish an autonomous government. A central feature of this process of “awakening” was the emergence of an Estonian romantic tradition in the cultural sphere, whose main exponent was Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzvald, with his poem *Kalevipoeg*. Published in 1857, it is considered the Estonian national epic. The poem narrates the story of a giant hero named Kalevipoeg and his journey from Estonia to hell to become a king and to expand his knowledge of life. In the epic, Kreutzvald displays the Romantic notion of a land and its population, where the human soul is limited by the physical territory, meanwhile, Nature is a sublime dimension, the reign of supernatural gods. Of particular relevance were also the poem's illustrations by the painter Kristjan Raud, added later in 1935. With Raud's powerful interpretation of folklore and epic themes, merged into the creation of archaic images, the universal archetypes buried into the consciousness of the population were brought to the surface and displayed in front it. An essential role in setting the visual imagery of this phase is also played by artists such as Johann Köler, with his heroic landscapes Paul Raud who created portraits of peasants, mostly in an impressionistic manner, and open-air landscapes, which would eventually set the characteristics of open-air painting in Estonian art and the sculptor August Weizenberg, founder of the Estonian national sculpture, whose source of inspiration was Estonian mythology.
However, the country's geographical position situated at the border of both Russian and Finland, a Western state, contributed to making of it a multilayered socio-economic and political system.

The geographical proximity of these three countries, which could be defined, using Yuri Lotman’s term as “semiotic borders,” implied also a cultural and social interaction, a process of exchange, assimilation, and translation of the manifestations of human culture – texts, language, art and architecture. However, when Russia unilaterally imposed its own sign systems, by occupying the Estonian territory, the process of exchange was overcome by a clash between the two cultures, which deeply affected the traditional Estonian cultural and art sphere that had been restored during the years of its independence. Indeed, the art critic Jaak Kangilaski has distinguished in Estonia's art sphere three main cultural discourses: “These were the art political discourses of the occupying powers, of the orientation to avant-garde, and of the national-conservative forces.”

Before the Soviet occupation, in the 1930s, conservatism already overpowered the Estonian cultural sphere. A gradual return to realism and national themes followed by an almost total rejection of the avant-garde ideas of the previous decade was the prevalent approach to visual art in those years. Estonian painters’ avoidance of representing the war

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226 Lotman, Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 205
227 The achieved independence in the 1920s was followed by the creation of schools and museums, in Tallinn and Tartu, where the local intelligentsia and artists could study and practice European styles and movements, such as art-nouveau, impressionism, and expressionism, without actually going to Europe. One of the most representative artists of this period is Konrad Mägi, a landscape painter and portraitist who favored pure colors and forms influenced by post-impressionism, fauvism and expressionism. After few years abroad, he came back to Estonia where he became one of the founders of the Pallas Art School in 1919. It provided a professional education in painting, sculpture and graphic art to a great number of Estonian artists such as Konrad Mägi, Ado Vabbe, Nikolai Triik and the graphic artist Eduard Witralt to name few. Due to the increasing popularity of the Art School and the opening of new classes, in 1924 Pallas changed its profile and became an institution of higher education. Its curriculum was based primarily on the influence of Western European expressionism and constructivism.
and its effect on the population and the cities -- aimed in particular at maintaining hope and keeping the population's spirit optimistic – led to a positive representation of nature and life, with a style that displayed a palette and brushwork of soft colors.

However, the occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by the Red Army in 1940, sanctioned the annexation of these Baltic republics into the Russian sphere of control. The Soviet occupation had a strong impact on the population of ethnic Estonians, Russified Estonians, and Russians who were relocated to the Baltic republics. The policy of “Russification,” implemented soon after the occupation, amounted to the control and organization of the social and intellectual spheres of these countries. National flags and symbols were forbidden, political opposition was silenced, and Russian was established as the official language. In these years of schizophrenic political domination, Estonia entered a long period of cultural decline which could explain the nation's return to folk traditions in order to regain a certain level of autonomy. Continuing the approach of the 1930s, Estonian painters consciously sought artistic refuge from the political situation in pastoral idylls and untouched nature subjects.

After the war, Estonian national art had to deal with the tremendous impact of the Soviet occupation, and in particular with the forced collectivization and mass deportation promoted from 1947 to 1949. A wide campaign against bourgeois nationalism, tied to the Sovietization of Estonian culture, included the dismantling of all local artists' organizations which were replaced by a centralized system of Soviet artistic unions.

229 Canwell, Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation, 13.
The anti-nationalist campaign aimed to destroy both all pre-war art traditions and works influenced by contemporary Western movements. In order to condition Estonian audience, the propaganda campaign gradually modified the public visual field “through epistemological concepts operating in local customs. The new Baltic acquisition called for an influx of visual material to propagate the Soviet narrative.” As Jaan Kangilaski explains, “Together with the 1940 occupation, Soviet art theory invaded Estonia as well and became one of the means of [subjugating] local art life. Attempts to assert creative independence were met with severe punishment such as prison sentences, exile or even execution. Socialist Realism became the official style.”

Faced with the tight regulation of their artistic production, Estonian artists and intellectuals took two different paths: some bent to the process of Sovietization and conformed their works to the requirements of Socialist realism; others hid behind non-political subjects such as still-lifes and landscapes due to the impossibility of approaching social themes and issues in a personal way. No experiments or divergences from Socialist Realism were possible between 1944 and 1953 without suffering punishment or deportation.

Stalin's death and Khrushchev's de-Stalinization meant for Estonia an extensive administrative reorganization which included the regaining of Estonian Communist Party’s authority in local decision-making, and the formation in 1957 of a temporary decentralized economic management made up of a system of regional economic councils.
From 1957 until 1965 Estonia had the most relaxed political regime and the most prosperous economy within the Soviet Union, due to its economic growth and improved standard of living to the extent that the 1960s were considered the “golden age.” To achieve such modernization, the country's industrial production was restructured to comply with increasing automation of the everyday life sphere as well as a constant expansion of the artificial, human-made environment, both based on the idea of science as a productive force.

Although still subordinated to the dictates of Moscow, art politics experienced relative freedom from the Party's ideological control. The tolerant attitude of the leader of the Estonian Communist Party (EKP), Johannes Kabin and of liberals appointed to leading positions in the local Artists' Association allowed artists to attain a certain degree of stylistic regional autonomy. Both the renewal and rehabilitation of impressionism and the Paris school through the Pallas School of Art, and the Estonian unofficial artists’ engagement with global art styles had an important role in re-positioning the Estonian art within Western art trajectories previously forbidden during Stalinist repression. Meanwhile, the legitimization of moderate modernism became “irreversible” and ideological control over the artists gradually became only formal: the criteria for being displayed in a public exhibition became the quality of the work and the artist's avoidance of direct political provocations and extremism. Indeed, the late 1950s and 1960s were years of relative freedom and audacious experiments which led Estonia to be referred to

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234 The first Soviet Institute of Cybernetics was established by the Estonian Academy of Sciences in 1960 whose investigation into new technologies and their role in everyday life formed an important part of its studies and researches.
as the “Soviet West” (Sovetski zapad),\textsuperscript{236} “a window of Western modernity directed toward the East, and a window of Soviet modernity directed towards the West.”\textsuperscript{237} The expansion of the limits of what was permitted blurred the relation between official art and non-conformist artists “up to the point that different roles could be mixed up within a single artist.”\textsuperscript{238}

As to realism, although the Severe Style embraced a greater expressiveness than the previous decades, non-conformist artists still considered it tied to the state ideology. The dichotomy of Modernism-Socialism, the former as independent from politics, the latter a tool of propaganda, became a common belief, and one of the parameters - following Greenberg elevation of medium specificity as the main criterion to locate a work of art either within the American post-war art or official Soviet art.\textsuperscript{239}

The suppression of "Prague Spring" in 1968 had a devastating effect on many Soviet intellectuals. As a reaction, the majority of Estonian artists withdrew from the experiments of the 1960s and started performing in a more conservative style, closer to tradition.\textsuperscript{240}

\begin{flushleft}
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\textsuperscript{236} “Direct contacts developed with foreign countries, the Estonian diaspora and representatives of the Russian academic intelligentsia, who gladly visited the Baltic countries, which, further east, had developed a somewhat glorified reputation as the Soviet West (sovetski zapad) and as a showcase of Socialism,” V. Sirk and T. Karjaharm, Kohanemine ja vastupanu: Eesti haritlaskond 1940-1987, (Tallinn: Argo, 2007): 265-266.
\textsuperscript{237} Kaljula, “Severe style. Ideology of contemporaneity in Estonian Art during the thaw era,” 177-210
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid. Moreover, in the essay Aesthetic autonomy and ideological opposition in Estonia in the 1960s and 1970s, or how the avant-garde lost its political edge, the art critic Tõnis Tatar reports two examples that mirror this situation - the Youth Exhibition, in 1966 which introduced modern art (in particular abstraction) to a larger artistic venue, and the exhibition dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the ELKNU (Central Committee of the Estonian Leninist-Communist Youth League). The latter was particularly important since marked an attempt of reconciliation between the Artists' Association of Estonian SSR and the new generation of artists.
\textsuperscript{239} This position was also shared by some Estonian art critics of the time such as Eda Sepp (see Chapter of Introduction).
\textsuperscript{240} Some exceptions can be found in Malle Leis' solo exhibition in 1968 at the Tallinn Art Salon, where she displayed a fusion of abstractionism and pop art works, or with Kaljo Pollu, who showed his ready-made collages at the Baltic printmaking exhibition in the Art Hall of Tallinn, the same year.
\end{flushleft}
For Estonian intellectuals who believed in the independence of Estonia, the previous optimistic attitude slowly disappeared, replaced by a renewed pessimism. By the end of the early 1970s, a growing sense of the historical dead-end was the prevailing feeling raised by the chasm between the promise of a bright communist future and the life daily experienced by the population. It was in these years in Tallinn, that the first hyperrealist experiments in the Soviet Union took place. Their main features were shaped by the reaction to the aforementioned Modernism-Socialism dichotomy along with the political and cultural impasse Estonia was experiencing in those years.

### 1.2.4 The Estonian Avant-Garde in the 1960s – 1970s

Hyperrealism in Estonia should be placed within the wider context of a new, young generation of artists and architects whose approach was characterized by the ambition to open a serious dialogue with both the urban environment and the development of new technologies in the second half of the 1970s.

The term “avant-garde” has been used, in contemporary Estonian art criticism, to refer to any art movement that deviated from the dominant culture and consequently was banned or restricted. From Estonia to Slovenia modern movements such as expressionism, cubism, abstraction and hyperrealism were adapted to the national characteristics in order to promote the expression and preservation of the national consciousness within a rapidly modernizing Europe.²⁴¹

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²⁴¹ Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Clement Greenberg's “elevation of the medium specificity as a pivotal criterion to distinguish American post-war art from official Soviet art” had an important role in the self-positioning of Estonian artists within the panorama of Soviet art in the 1960s. (Canwell, *Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation*. According to art critic Sirje Helme, Estonian artists reacted to the social and political environment by closing themselves in a
According to art historian Jeremy Canwell after Stalin's death, Estonian unofficial artists found “new creative options for critical engagement with global geopolitics as well as new life into their national identity. Estonian artists many of whom had no memory of life before Stalin, secured modernism to nationalism in the rebirth of Estonian identity.”

Indeed, Estonian unofficial artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970 turned toward modernism for inspiration in part as a reaction to the Russification of the country’s cultural life. As a matter of fact, during the 1960s and 1970s Estonia was, in some aspects, more oriented to the West than other republics of the Soviet Union. Tallinn, for example, was a favorite holiday spot for foreign tourists -- ships operating between Helsinki and Tallinn were constantly bringing streams of tourists as well as intellectuals and artists who collaborated with their Estonian colleagues. Finnish television, to which most of the population in Tallinn had access, also contributed to Estonian's contact with the Western programs not influenced by Soviet propaganda. Therefore, as a border state, Estonia evolved culturally under the influences of both Europe/the West and under the regulations of the Soviet Union, sometimes causing a sense of cultural schizophrenia.

Ibid., 50. The pre-war Estonian avant-garde in the 1910s and 1920 was represented by the Pallas Art School which was Estonia's cultural nucleus. Pallas affiliated such as Arnol Akberg and Mart Laanraman in Tallinn and Ado Vabbe in Tartu, among others, mediated the developing of Estonian culture under technological transformation through synthesized forms and theories borrowed from contemporary European vanguards. In the 1930s a major pedagogical change which saw a shift from the previous abstract experiments toward monumental compositions. The diversity of style in which Pallas positioned its art production, found an abrupt stop in 1948 when Moscow began demanding and expecting just Soviet themes.
In the 1960s, abstraction, pop art, surrealism, and later conceptualism were considered the only styles for Estonian non-conformist artists to truly express their individual freedom.\textsuperscript{243} A pivotal role in marking a new beginning for abstraction and surrealism at the time was the influence of Ülo Sooster,\textsuperscript{244} who, after being introduced by Yuri Sobolev to Moscow's art sphere, became a link between the non-conformist movements in Tallinn and Moscow.

The 1960s saw the formation of three Estonian groups which although not stylistically homogeneous, shared the same commitment to artistic experimentation: ANK’64 and SOUP ‘69 in Tallinn in 1964 and 1969, the Visarid in Tartu in 1967.

The ANK’64 group counted among its members Juri Arrak, Kristiina Kaasik, Malle Leis, Marju Mutsu, and Aili Vint and her husband, Tonis Vint who was considered one of the spiritual fathers of the Estonian avant-garde. As Eda Sepp has observed, ANK’64 artists emphasis on linearity and flat planes later gradually developed a common tendency toward geometry that culminated in a “school” of geometric abstraction in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{245} These artists also shared the same ambition: exchanging theoretical ideas through the organization of private seminars and exhibitions on modern art outside the official channels.

The breakthrough for Estonian avant-garde, and for the ANK’64 group in particular, came in 1966 with the annual exhibition of young artists at the Tallinn Art

\textsuperscript{243} However, as Jeremy Canwell claims “while Estonian artists disavow any contingent relationship, even a critical one, between their work and official culture, their practices actually relied on, critically reflect upon, and frequently disrupted the experience of the Soviet public sphere” Canwell, Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation: 218.

\textsuperscript{244} As a member of the Sretensky Boulevard group, Ülo Sooster experimented with a wide range of styles in his drawings such as pure abstraction, surrealism, cubism, expressionism, and even realism. He died in 1970 but the relationships between Estonian and Moscow artists remained strong until the 1980s.

Hall. On that occasion abstract and surrealist works were accepted by and gained the recognition of an official venue. The event also contributed to the creation of Estonia's reputation as a permissive country in exhibiting works incompatible with the official Communist Party directions.\textsuperscript{246}

Probably encouraged by the success of the Tallinn Art Hall Exhibition, the artist Kaljo Pollu formed the group Visarid in Tartu the following year in Tartu. Like ANK'64, the group’s aim was to push the boundaries of the Estonian art sphere with new visual experiments and forms that would embody the artists’ own artistic experience. Between 1968 and 1970, Visarid contributed to circulating contemporary art theories from Estonia and the West,\textsuperscript{247} through the production of albums and numerous articles written by internationally established authors. The importance of Visarid also resided in the discussions and debates it hosted and nurtured, which notably opened the doors to the introduction of pop and op art in Estonia.

Pop art in particular “reflected a paradigm shift in culture.”\textsuperscript{248} Although it lasted only for a brief period, its impact on the non-conformist and the official art spheres in

\textsuperscript{246} It must be added that in these years, the prestige and the influence of socialist realism continued to decrease, even among Party members. Sirje Helme, \textit{Pop Kunst Forever:} 33. As Helme affirmed in an interview with the author “after the 1960s Socialist Realism actually was emptied, it lost any meaning. It was not a style anymore, but an instrument for administrative people to impose some rules and somehow to keep the control. In Estonia, Socialist Realism lost its meaning, I think, already at the end of 1950s”. Author's undocumented interview, Tallinn October 2011 The prestige of traditional realism was also undermined by the book \textit{D'un realism sans rivages}, written by one of the leaders of the Communist Party of France, Roger Garaudy whose ideas were introduced to Estonia in the 1960s. Jaak Kangilaski, “The Theory of Socialist Realism as a Means of Manipulating Estonian Artists” \textit{Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia} 3(8)/2013: 172-176.

\textsuperscript{247} Officially subscribed magazines from East Europe and art journals - brought from abroad by artists or friends - and second-hand bookshops and samizdat were another important source of information on local and Western art tendencies. Through Polish (Projekt, Przeglad, Artystyczny) and Czechoslovakian (Tvar, Vytvare Umeni, Vytvarne Prace) magazines, which carried illustrations on artists' artworks from different countries and reported cultural events throughout the area, the Estonian Art Institute was able in the mid-1960s to introduce to students an alternative visual thinking and the most recent art practices in the other socialist countries.

Estonia, is evidenced by the fact that “pop art” was often used as a synonym for “avant-garde.” Indeed, Estonian pop art could be described in terms of a double opposition: to the authorized forms of expressions imposed by Moscow, and to the locally accepted aesthetic code of the Parisian school of painting. The latter, in particular, was strongly connected with the politicized identity of post-war Estonian art promoted by the already mentioned Pallas Art School.

Pop art became a political act for young Estonian artists to reconnect with their environment. It was practiced simultaneously by artists belonging to different groups such as Visarid, ANK'64, and SOUP'69. The Visarid, and Kaljo Pollu (Fig. 48), in particular created works based on film experience and pop images, collages, ready-mades and assemblages, while ANK'64 explored the style through Aili Vint’s colorful gouaches (Fig. 49), and Malle Leis’ visionary paintings (Fig. 50), which synthesized abstraction and pop art.

These first pop art attempts were later followed by the young art students Leonhard Lapin, Andres Tolts and Ando Keskküla who formed the creative core of the group SOUP'69. The name appeared after an exhibition opened in December 1969 at the Pegasus café – a popular gathering place in Tallinn for writers, artists, architects, and musicians, where the three artists displayed their works and for which Leonhard Lapin designed a poster featuring an image of a Warhol Campbell's soup can (Fig. 51).

It must be clarified that the banal images and pop icons used in American Pop art – Coca Cola bottles, Marilyn Monroe, Mao, etc. – and their meaning were perceived in the Estonian cultural landscape not as aspects of mass culture, but as something

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249 In Ibid., 184.
extraordinary, novel and special.\textsuperscript{250} The importance of pop art in Estonia lay in its ability to turn the lack of mass consumerism, the desire created by this lack and the uniformity of Soviet everyday goods into works of art. As art critic Ants Juske claims “Union Pop did not concentrate on commercial banality, but on the banality which was introduced into Estonian life by the Soviet system.”\textsuperscript{251}

While the Western society was characterized by an overproduction of consumer goods, the Soviet Union was overflown by a massive campaign of slogans, banners, and images of Party's leaders produced by the Soviet ideology.

The different impact of pop art in the United States and in the Soviet Union was symptomatic of the art market divergences of the two blocs. Especially in the first phase of its development, pop art in Estonia was consigned to the underground art circuit,\textsuperscript{252} and displayed in short-term exhibitions in apartments --sometimes only for one day-- often organized by the artists themselves.\textsuperscript{253} Meanwhile American Pop art quickly gained exceptional success with the art critics and general public both nationally and internationally.

In Estonia, pop art helped contemporary artists to disengage their art practice from the academic teaching of the State institutes. Although in Estonia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was not a cohesive stylistic movement, groups such as SOUP'69 and

\textsuperscript{251}Ants Juske's press release for the exhibition “Masters of the Estonian Avant-Garde” at the Luum Gallery, 11 June – 5 July 1992
\textsuperscript{252}The Union of Artists in Estonia was interested in preserving a good relationship with Moscow officials, in order to keep relatively local freedom in representing Estonian traditions of the pre-war period. Although cultural exchanges with Soviet Russia were regular and active, Estonia authorities applied a very strict selection process on the works to be displayed at local exhibitions. This was primarily done in order to avoid irritating central authorities. Within such context, the local Artists' Union considered pop art as a rebellious movement, one that could threaten the balance so far achieved.
\textsuperscript{253}Classic and commercial art were united, in Estonia: the juries of art exhibitions considered high-quality art only the artworks that conformed to the aesthetic code imposed by the state, which was the only official purchaser of them. In fact, in spite of purchases by private individuals, local galleries were still part of the Estonian Art Fund, controlled by the State, thus making high art automatically commercialized art.
Visarid often collaborated in joint exhibitions and debates in Tallinn and Tartu along with individual performances and happenings. A common idea shared by the artists of both groups was the belief that the public space had to embody a different meaning from the one attributed to it by the Soviet authorities. Art critic Sirje Helme perfectly summarizes this aspect: “the change of paradigm was created by young pop art, with other materials, with another understanding of the role of art since pop artists were mainly architects and designers who added an architectural and environmental view to our pop art.”

As a matter of fact SOUP’69 gathered students of design and architecture together, such as Ando Keskküla, Leonhard Lapin and Andres Tolts (Fig. 52), whose attention was caught by the mundane dimension of their surroundings and the monotonous architecture of the city's outskirts with its peculiar trash items, cheap commodities and discarded furniture. The aim of these three artists was to take these everyday objects from their original context and insert them into a ready-made composition in order to highlight the prevailing kitsch dimension in Soviet society. Ando Keskküla described the process as follows: “One influence of Pop Art, and a liberating channel, was that the artist was able to deal with objects, make new combinations, create a new syntax, and utilize the elements of expression in a conceptual work of art.”

By 1972 both Visarid and SOUP’69 ceased their activity as groups, but pop art techniques and imagery -- flat surface, pure colors, the use of mundane items or social signs in artworks and most importantly, a special sensitivity to the environment-- were adopted later by hyperrealist artists. Regarding this historical dynamic, Sirje Helme has affirmed that “Perhaps we should view the heyday of our pop art and hyperrealist

254 Author's interview, Tallinn, October 2011.
painting as being connected with the inability of the Soviet Union to deal with the problems of the modern urban environment and design.”

Artistic approaches popular with young artists in the late 1960s such as op, pop art, assemblages and happenings all addressed the post-industrial world, changes of lifestyle and the ongoing process of urbanization. In fact, the State switched priorities in the Soviet manufacturing industry by focusing then on the production of consumers goods, specifically household goods and electronics devices.

These new appliances began their gradual entrance into the market, changing the Soviet citizens living standards and, at the same time, strongly influencing the artists' interest in documenting the environment or directly intervening in it through architecture and design. As Ando Keskküla points out “It became clear that an object does not exist separately in reality and that design is a phenomenon of the synthesis of material culture – the social, ideological, cultural and other influences have always been integrated into art.”

A channel for propagating the new movement was the magazine Kunst ja Kodu (Art and Home) whose editor was Andres Tolts from 1973. It had a large circulation and provided a unique platform for young artists such as Tolts, Keskküla and Lapin to develop discussions about emerging design as a means to create a new physical and cultural environment. Topics discussed in the magazines also deal with the idea of privatization and aestheticisation of the standardized Soviet spatial policy.

Furthermore, this new approach also encouraged artists and designers in the 1970s, to view the industrialized and urbanized environment of Tallinn as an opportunity

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256 In Ibid., 161.
to explore new architectural and design alternatives by considering the new technologies as an extension of the human being's “subjectivity.” On this regard, two semi-official exhibitions *Sündmus Harkus. Objektid, kontseptsioonid*, and *Architecture Exhibition 1978* were held in the 1970s, which encouraged non-conformist artists to take an active role in imagining new alternatives to challenge the urban environment ruled by rigid Soviet regulations and monotonous mass constructions, established by the Central Committee based in Moscow.

In order to understand the reasons why such standardized and monotonous urbanscape had a powerful impact on the non-conformist art production in the 1970s and 1980s, and more importantly for this study on hyperrealism, it is necessary to see how new architectural building and urban planning often radically altered the layout of big and small cities in the Soviet Union from the 1950s onward.

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258 Mari Laanemets, “Pilk sotsialistliku linna tuhermaadele ja tagahoovidesse: happening'id, mangud ja jalutuskaigud Tallinnas 1970. aastatel”: 139-178
1.3 The development of Soviet Urbanscape from the 1950s to the 1970s

After Stalin's death in 1954, Kruschev had to face two main problems connected with the renewal and enlargement of Soviet cities connected both to their development and to the increased growth of the population. In reference to the first problem, architects were pressured to abandon decorative details and constructivists styles characteristic of earlier Soviet buildings and to proceed instead with the creation of type-plans based on city-forming factors such as the growth of the economy and the country's expanding industrialization.

Soviet architects of the Khrushchev’s era primarily worked on applying the method of socialist realism, still the only “creative method of Soviet architecture,” in a contemporary way and to address society’s contemporary needs. The response was to create mono-type utilitarian buildings that could house a part of the population who had previously been living in barracks.

Indeed, housing, in particular, was one of the principal means by which Khrushchev promised to overtake the capitalist West, in terms of living standards. Mechanization, better living conditions, and increased mobility became the official utopia promise which informed the following twenty-years city planning, including the

260 Although architects had to follow the Party's direction on how to design buildings, sometimes they reacted to the prevailing homogeneity and lack of individual expression. One example are the apartment buildings on Begovia street in Moscow which were built in 1975 by A. Meerson, who was a renewed architect at the time. The Begovia street building presented a heavy appearance with vertical volumes of staircases made of brutal concrete, and massive balconies. The ensemble created an atmosphere of bleakness and aggressiveness. This building represented Meerson's desire to protest and rebel against the unbearable leveling and sameness of creation, as laid down by the bureaucracy. He chose this aggressive style as a weapon of protest, thus transforming the building into a manifesto of architectural uniqueness against the prevailing standards. A.V Ryabushin and N. I Smolina, Landmarks of Soviet Architecture, 1917-1991, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1992)
regulation of cities' street layouts, residential areas, commercial public centers, green space, and housing projects. By the end of the 1960s economics, technology, sociology, and architecture became tied together as part of the planning of new housing projects. However, the rush to develop quick and efficient building technologies pushed architectural questions into the background along with the social status of architects. Once at the center of the avant-garde, under Khrushchev’s administration architects instead “typically worked anonymously at state design offices where they functioned as engineers and managers more than designers.”261

What the Secretary was de facto demanding of architects and engineers was to sacrifice quality over quantity by designing and building as many urban units as quickly and cheaply as possible, in order to solve the pressing problem of the housing shortage.262 Standardized prefabricated housing parts and wall-size load bearing panels -- made from pre-stressed concrete -- replaced the conventional building materials of brick, steel, and lumber. The creation of this housing type -- over 50 million units were constructed in the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1984263 -- accounted for at least 75 percent of all construction in cities with more than 1 million people264

An important consequence of Khrushchev's regulation on the architectural and construction sectors was its impact on the urban structure of cities like Moscow and

262 Plans for housing and urban development were often changed several times, causing delays and lack of unified development, due to the involvement of several different organizations and the complex bureaucratic iter necessary to get the projects approved.
Tallinn, to name a few, which saw their historical city’s layouts distorted by the penetration of new and monotonous buildings and areas. The case of Kalinin Avenue in Moscow, in the 1960s is a perfect example of how a high edifice of concrete, steel and glass could “invade” the space of a seventeenth-century architectural monument, the Church of St. Antipius not only by creating a sharp visual contrast between the two edifices, but also by setting the path for further transformation of the city. Indeed, a decade later, the art historian Andrei Ikonnikov defined Moscow as “a city of many faces, each the reflection of a different age which reminds you of the flow of history and the passage of time.”

What was ordered in Moscow was applied in Tallinn and other cosmopolitan centers. The reorganization of the industry, technology and communication system throughout the USSR in the 1960s also prompted questions in Estonia about the prevailing social and spatial models. According to the Soviet architect A. Gavrickov, Tallinn’s most urgent problem in the 1960s was to find a strategy to combine the city’s well preserved and viable historic core with a new urban structure and housing which would transform it into a modern urban organism. The ultimate goal was “the transformation of the city of Tallinn, into a communist city, in which everything valuable and historical must enter into a harmonious unity with the new.”

The “modernization” of the city of Tallinn undertaken by applying Soviet parameters to merge old parts with new ones, takes on a primary role in Ando Keskküla's and Jaan Elken's hyperrealism. Both artists show the contradictions implied in such a

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267 “Сегодня же мы имеем четкие перспективы превращения города в Таллинн коммунистически, город, в котором все ценное, историческое должно войти в гармоничное единство с новым”. Ibid.
“harmonious unity” by representing the actual forced imposition of the communist ideology onto Tallinn's public and private urbanscape.

Indeed, as reported by Gavrickov, projects to achieve that the modernization of Tallinn within a harmonious urbanscape ranged from some that suggested the demolition of buildings with a significant historical value, with the exception of monuments, and their substitution with high modern buildings of aluminum, glass, and concrete, to projects that opted for just restoration and conservation. As the complete demolition of part of the city was considered too expensive, eventually planners preferred the reconstruction of individual elements of the old parts of Tallinn, and the allocation of modern trade enterprises in residential buildings.

At the beginning of the Thaw, Estonian architects returned to address international trends, aiming to align the capital with Western standards. Among the most representative of the period include the “White House” of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party built in 1968, the Viru Hotel in 1971, and the Radio Building in 1972. The Viru Hotel was Tallinn's first skyscraper and a embodiment of Estonian's Soviet “Westerness”, while the Radio Building was an example of the “international skyscraper style” with its glassy facade and slim profile. However, most of the population of Tallinn perceived the presence of these new buildings as one of the consequences of the Soviet occupation rather than the country's aim at self-determination. Furthermore, although these impressive and monumental buildings were an important landmark in the city ensemble, they notably affected Tallinn's skyline by breaking the harmony of the old city environment.268

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268 Tallinn became a “metropolis” only at the end of the 1970s, as a result of the boom of constructions brought by the Moscow Olympics sailing competition which was held in the district of Pirita, on the Tallinn
The growing population was one important factor in the architecture discourse which at the time was dominated by an extensive program of construction of new apartment buildings and the raising of a new neighborhood which stretched the housing capacities of cities but also required the incorporation of suburbs and undeveloped land into the preexisting urban structure. However, for many Estonians, a modern flat in a new residential district remained a dream since, as architectural historian Mart Kalm explains, between the 1960s and 1980s a large work-force mainly Russian-speaking, was imported from factories all over the Soviet Union to support the country's massive industrialization, and allocated new flats. A side effect of this immigration was the sense of inferiority that developed among the local population. Indeed, Kalm affirms that “the dull uniformity of planned cities has been widely criticized, and in various cases, the negative impact can even double, for instance when the State housing policy uses new residential areas as a means of colonialism.”

Gradually a sense of alienation and loneliness characterized both Russian and the increasing number of Estonians who were allocated in new suburbs housings. In fact, the lack of communal space and the development of mono-functional zones disconnected from each other, eventually boosted he ghettoization of the dwellers. The art critic Triin bay.

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269 According to Mart Kalm “Immigration was so intense that after regaining independence in 1991, the percentage of Estonians in the capital Tallinn was less than half, whereas during the pre-Soviet occupation the percentage of Estonians in the capital has been 90”. Mart Kalm., “Some Political aspects of the modern city”, *Estonian Art* 2000 (2): 23.

270 According to Eha Komissarov in particular the 1980s were a time “when Russification intensified and the non-Estonian population increased. (…) the balance between the Estonian and Russian communities was lost, because the number of immigrants arriving from remote villages in Russia was staggering”. Epner Eero, “1980s As the Absolute Top of Estonian art?”, *Estonian Art*, 2/2010: 2.

271 Mart Kalm., “Some Political aspects of the modern city,” 23.

272 In Ibid., 21
Ojari points out that “a normative and regulated planning of residential districts was meant to obstruct the formation of communities.”

In particular, the megalomaniac faceless residential blocks of Mustamäe and Lasnamäe built in Tallinn in respectively in the 1962 and in 1973, became emblems for the negative social and urban results of the Soviet monotonous mass housing projects in occupied Estonia. In Kalm's opinion, Tallinn was prevented to experience a process of self-determination and modernization as Helsinki by Stalin' program to shut down the Functionalist project that had been planned for the city during the First Republic. For Kalm the program alienated Estonian cities from being part of the twentieth-century European modernist discourse.

The examples of Tallinn and Moscow highlight how the State was well aware of the political connotation carried by the physical urban-space, and how its configuration could convey ideological and cultural messages which deeply shaped people's ideas their daily routine. A semiotic reading of the urban space in the Soviet Union is fundamental to both understand the degree of such coercion and to appreciate the role of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union to unmask it.

1.3.1 The Concept of the City as a Semiotized Space

Designer and architectural historian Vladimir Paperny affirms that during the period he calls “Culture Two”, associated with socialist realism, the city's space was defined by an implied hierarchy. Specifically, “Some point in space (as well as some people) were more valuable than others; therefore, in those places it was possible to

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construct taller and more resplendent buildings than in others. At the same time, though, the idea of an ideal form that can be multiplied indefinitely continued to live in this culture, an idea with echoes of Culture One – the period of the avant-garde. Paperny's perspective, therefore, recognizes different degrees of power ascribed by Soviet authority to the city's major spaces. His thesis clearly shares a similar semiotic approach by Yury Lotman in *The Universe of Mind* to the urban and social environment. In fact, the semiotician states that structures of urban communities are symbolic systems as well. One clear example is how the different buildings in the city are allocated – if the most important administrative buildings are allocated to the center meanwhile, social groups or houses that are considered below a certain social value are settled in the periphery – on the outskirts, in the suburbs.

Philosophers such as the mentioned Yuri Lotman, as well as Pitirim Sorokin, Umberto Eco, and Henri Lefebvre, to name the major theorists, critics and architects read from the 1930s and 1970s, also studied the meanings created by urban forms' signs and symbols, and their social connotations related to ideology and power structures. Translated into terms specific to the field, of semiotics, a sign is characterized on the basis of a codified meaning that is attributed to the sign vehicle in a given cultural context. Architectural signs are vehicles with precise functions that can be described, cataloged and interpreted in light of certain codes. Subsequent meanings are then filled into these sign vehicles.

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275 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*: 131
Different combinations of singular elements belonging to each sphere of architecture form a unit which conveys a precise “speech.” This speech is made by a meaning and a message, as in language, where single words create a sentence. According to David Crowley and Susan E. Reid

“In the 1920s radical efforts to effect a total cultural revolution were premised on the principle of environmental determinism [...] To change how a person thought and behaved one must change his or her material surroundings. Thus the architectural form of the city and planning of urban space were vested with a social-transformative role in the lives of its residents. The configuration of cities was 'the strongest factor for organizing the psyche of the masses.'”277

In this dissertation I argue that this "speech" is at the core of Keskküla's and Elken's works, and it is indirectly addressed by Faibisovich and Sherstiuk since they displayed the effect of such speech on the population. In fact, according to Susan Reid, during the 1950s and 1960s the environmental determinism concept was reinvigorated in sociology.278 My study aims to demonstrate how architectural elements, interiors, buildings, or suburban areas of the cities of Tallinn and Moscow becomes the materialization of the “language” of the Soviet propaganda in the hyperrealist paintings in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, it will be also demonstrated how by elevating these elements as subjects of their compositions, these four artists refused a passive subjugation to this language by opposing its power over them.

Umberto Eco, believed that people experience architecture as communication, even while they recognize its functionality.”279 He supported this idea with the example of triumphal arches as they refer at the same time to the possibility of a passage and embody the idea of “triumph” and “celebration.” Eco claimed that an architectural object

278 Ibid.
is a twofold matter with a signifier. He identifies this signifier with form, space, surface and volume – and supra-physical properties such as rhythm, colors, texture, and density, to name a few. However, for Eco a distinction existed between sign vehicles and meanings: while the former is observable and describable apart from the meanings people attribute to it, the latter changes according to the codes people use to read the sign vehicles. In this way, we can see how Eco (in the West) comes close to the type of methodology offered at the same time by Lotman (in the East).

An interesting example can be seen in the propensity in the 1960s, for wide windows and giant transparent walls that replaced richly decorated walls with stucco facades and sculpture in the Soviet Union. The new effect of a rhythm between internal and external spaces was meant to embody the criteria of the era - openness and liberation –shared by a concern with modernization/reform in the USSR as in Western Europe. In fact, it became the basis for such buildings as the Kremlin Palace of Congresses (1961), the Soviet pavilion at the World Exhibition in Brussels (1958), and the central building of the Palace of Pioneers on the Sparrow Hills (1959-1963).

Space, as a heterogeneous concept made by different disciplinary areas, that intersect with each other, influences people's daily experience. The interaction between the physical and the social sphere creates a singular and determined socio-cultural milieu. In her book *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, art historian Svetlana Boym demonstrates how “common places” have in fact a fundamental role in

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280 Ibid.
281 At the World Exhibition in Brussels, the pavilions of the Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia showcased an unexpected new modernist style expressed in glass, concrete, and steel which surprised many visitors. Indeed, these countries regional architecture at the time was mainly associated to the monumental scale and opaque materiality of Socialist Realism, while this new version of modernism was a revival of forms and concepts that were prominent in avant-garde circles.
the understanding of Soviet Russian culture. Boym employs a descriptive, semiotic, and interpretative analysis of different aspects of everyday life in order to prove how authorities in the Soviet Union permeated with ideology not only public places such as workplaces and public ceremonies, but also the most intimate aspects of the everyday dimension. In the following chapters I will demonstrate how Elken and Sherstiuk, in particular, shed a light on the invasive, but subtle, presence of the ideological discourse in apparently harmless domestic spaces, such as bathrooms, living rooms and bedrooms.

Clearly, as many scholars have argued, space as a socializing platform has an impact on the shaping of the citizens' personality, as housing, workplaces, and cities urban layouts were modeled according to the State directions and created a pre-fixed pattern for social relations. Indeed, Katerina Clark poses an important question which can be related to this point, when she asks “to what extent did the experience of socialism, over seventy years in the Soviet Union and forty years in the Eastern Bloc, succeed in creating new kinds of subjects and shaping new consciousness?”

My analysis of Keskküla's, Elken's, Faibisovich's and Sherstiuk's hyperrealist paintings demonstrates how the ideology imposed on Tallinn's and Moscow's layout deeply affected the citizens’ routines, habits and social relations. These artists are not just documenters of a period of political and cultural transition- As part of this milieu, through a "new type of subjects" and "new consciousness" -- to recall Clark's words -- they propose a more complex and faceted reading of the Soviet people of the time. The next sections, which focus on the architecture and the everyday in the Soviet suburbs,

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contribute to shedding light on the milieu they shared with millions of fellow citizens and the routine they experienced.

### 1.3.2 The Raising of Mikraions

My analysis of imagery in Sherstiuk's paintings in the first half of the 1980s confirms and more clearly elucidates how artists responded to the profoundly altered everyday lives of the population, as result of six decades during which the urbanization process took place, throughout specific forms of architecture, in big cities and in smaller towns, all over the Soviet republics.

It is important to observe the scale on which such reforms/changes took place. From the 1950s, major urban centers such as Moscow and Leningrad, which concentrated political and industrial power, attracted people from the countryside and villages nearby. This phenomenon of immigration contributed to the increase of the housing shortage.\textsuperscript{285} In order to address this urgent need, new constructions were added to the already existent 70 percent of all urban units owned by the state, which also controlled their allocation to the population.\textsuperscript{286}

The main characteristic of the program was the formulation of standard designs\textsuperscript{287} for apartment houses across all the Soviet republics, based on the premise of essentiality,

\textsuperscript{285} Until Stalin's death, the State's primary goal was to rebuild and expand the country's heavy industry as rapidly as possible, while housing and the production of consumer goods were considered of secondary importance. Faced with a situation he could not postpone any longer, the new Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev launched the most ambitious governmental housing program in the country history for the next three Five-Years Plans in order to providing every Soviet family with a separate apartment. (Henry. W. Morton, “Housing in the Soviet Union,” Proceeding of the Academy of Political Science, Vol.35 n. 3: 69.

\textsuperscript{286} As a “product” of the State, housing was regarded primarily as a social good: since state agencies were holding a monopoly in the distribution of housing, it became an essential aspect of the reward system of the Soviet society – new apartments were assigned accordingly to people's occupational work and their achievements and only secondarily on people's real needs.

\textsuperscript{287} Housing was primarily measured by the number of square meters of “living space” per person, which included bedrooms and the living room but not the kitchen, bathroom, corridors, and storage space. Living
both in terms of forms and costs. Since housing was considered just another “production problem,” Soviet policies, were oblivious of any attempt to add a sense of human quality to it. As the sociologist Gregory D. Andrusz explains, “Placing their faith in industrialization and prefabrication of the construction industry, Soviet leaders have significantly heightened the tempo and lowered the cost of housing construction and made it a year-round possibility.”

By the time of Brezhnev's administration, the Soviet housing industry had to match the pace of house building with that of urban migration and growth. Consequently, most of the thousands of new apartments were often low-quality, poorly planned, shabbily constructed and quickly deteriorating, to the extent that they were almost uninhabitable only twenty years later.

By representing the results of such mismanagement, Keskküla and Elken publicly expose both the impact of the imposed Soviet housing on the Estonian cities in the 1970s, and the deceptive predominant Soviet rhetoric behind it.

The continuously growing number of apartment buildings and the migration from the country to big cities, had an overwhelming impact on the urban environment, by the early 1960s, pressuring the Soviet housing industry to find new solutions for faster, and cheaper construction. The new housing sites, large-scale suburbs (mikroraions), with

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290 As Olga Medvedkov, professor of geography, shows in her book Soviet urbanisation, between 1917 and 1989 the urban population in the Soviet Union increased from 18 percent to 66 percent. (Olga Medvedkov, Soviet Urbanization, (New York: Routledge, 1990): 4. In particular, this growth was connected to large cities with a population rate of over 1 million inhabitants, within the total population of urban settlements.
their multi-story apartment buildings at the cities' outskirts, seemed to answer those problems.

The wave of new incomers into metropolitan areas forced urban planners to plan a large-scale program which involved, the resurgence of the mikroraion (neighborhood unit), defined as “a complex of residential buildings combined with a variety of services and retail outlets meeting the population's daily needs.”291 A characteristic of mikroraions was to form a suburban systemic whole where small communities of several thousand inhabitants could develop a collectivist spirit within the much larger system of the city. They were composed of large residential blocks which were intended to integrate social, cultural and commercial services -- schools, nurseries, stores, sports and recreational facilities, cinemas, clubhouses, and cafeterias -- available to residents within easy walking distance. The blocks were also thought to be a sort of “city's garden zones” removed from the dangers of congested, dirty and noisy urban districts of the old industrial city. In 1962 Moscow's model micro-district construction became one of the first experiments in economical standardized mass-housing design.

At the time, its proponents argued that, the building of mirkoraions seemed a significant step toward the introduction into urban housing construction of greater social and cultural components. Yet, after only a few years they were strongly criticized for their monotony and plain architectural elements.292 Furthermore, most city dwellers lived

291 Andrusz, Housing and Urban Development in the USSR: 74
292 The film Ирония судьбы, или С легким паром! (1975) vividly represent this situation and the possible consequences of such uniform and monotonous environment. At the beginning of the movie a voiceover says that “In bygone days when someone found himself in a strange city, he felt lost and lonely. Everything around was strange: houses, streets, and life itself. But it's all different now. A person comes to a strange city, but feels at home there. To think what lengths of absurdity our ancestors went to, when they designed different architectural projects! Nowadays in every city, you will find a standard movie theatre “Rocket”, where you can see a standard film. Name of the streets are not too inventive either. Staircases that all look the same are all painted with a standard pleasant color. Standard apartments furnished with standard
in city blocks which were delimited only by streets, whose layout sometimes even dictated the forced alignment of buildings accordingly, thus depriving many of them of sunlight or the free flow of fresh air. Significantly, the newspaper Pravda's issue of September 1969 published an article whose headline reported the significant question “Why is the New Tenant Unhappy?”, to introduce the difficulties of those dwellers who moved to the new residential area in Chelyabinsk where the lack of public services was epitomized by the total absence of a single kindergarten in the entire district.

Another factor that contributed to sometimes creating a hopeless feeling in the population of mikroraions was the prohibition against moving to another part of the city–like the center–or to another city, if a family or single individuals was not satisfied with their housing situation. The prohibition came primarily from the authorities in order to prevent cities, in particular Moscow, from being overrun by rural and provincial migrants.

As already mentioned, mikroraiones often lacked basic services and stores that provided everyday goods, thus turning several micro-districts into just bedroom communities, with more and more Soviet citizen commuting to the city's main areas to

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furniture, standard locks cut into blind featureless doors”. The introduction of the film is actually a cartoon which describes the iter of an architect who after drawing a project for a building with balconies and architectonic decorations submit it to the authorities to have it approved. However, the cartoon shows how approval after approval by each office the building in the project loses some decorative parts from the original plan. In the end, after the definitive approval, what remains of the original building is just a simple structure that looks like a Soviet block. The movie then shifts in style and the first sequences is an impressive panoramic view of a long series of close-ups of real Soviet blocks under the snow. These first scenes reinforce the plot of the movie which focuses on a group of old friends who, as a tradition, go to a public bath house on New Year's Eve. After drinking too much vodka and beer one of them (Zhenya) becomes unconscious and is trade places with his friend (Sasha) to go to Leningrad. Once awake at the Leningrad airport, Zhenya, who believes he is still in Moscow, takes a taxi and goes to what he thinks is his home -- since the name of the street, the façade, and the building number and even of the apartment itself look the same. When his own keys also fit in the door, the misunderstanding is complete. When the real dweller, a woman named Nadia, enters her apartment and finds a stranger, Zhenya, sleeping in it without trousers, the situation becomes almost surreal. Eventually, Nadia and Zhenya fall in love and happily live together in the faceless building in Leningrad.
get to the main services. According to an article in Pravda from 2 December 1980, about 80 percent of the urban population lived in separate apartments in twelve- to sixteen-story buildings in major cities, with a smaller number residing in taller buildings as high as twenty-five stories, while in large and middle-sized cities, the construction of nine-story buildings was predominant.

This situation heavily conditioned the daily life of citizens, who spent hours each week in packed and overused subways, buses, and trams that did not provide any comfort, and also their domestic life by forcing families constantly to leave their neighborhoods for work and in search of amenities.

### 1.3.3 Everyday Life in Soviet Suburbs

The concept of “everyday life” centered on these issues was defined by the ethnographers L.A. Anokhina, V. Yu. Krupyanskaya and M.N. Shmeleva as “people's day-to-day way of life based on conventional routine, traditions, established relationships and other phenomena that have taken shape during people's social (including productive) activity, their family and domestic lives. From that standpoint, it is legitimate to speak of social, productive and domestic (or, more widely, family) everyday life.” For these ethnographers, in a person's everyday life exists a direct and straightforward connection between working time and various parts of non-working time. By contrast, for sociologist Ivan Trufanov, everyday life is connected to social relations and class structure, as he

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293 Long commuting was a burden for millions of suburbanites: by 1977, the traffic volume exceeded 48 million people, and public transport above ground accounted for well over 90 percent of the traffic. If during the work week it was already hard to be on time at the job, during the weekends the situation worsened with people rushing from one queue in a store to another in order to get to supplies and food, since such sources and services were available only in more centrally-located neighborhoods. Vysokovskii Aleksandr, “Will Domesticity Return?” 284.

defined it “a day-to-day, historically-shaped way of satisfying personal material and cultural requirements which have taken shape under the influence of the traditions and customs of class, social group and nationality reinforced in the sphere of ethno-social psychology.”

Trufanov's analysis on the influence of social and class identity on people's needs is reflected in the population's composition of different city's neighborhoods, as Paperny explains: “The gradually emerging hierarchy of people was grafted to the gradually emerging hierarchy of space. The result was that the ‘better’ people, from Culture Two's perspective, were closer to Moscow, the center of the world (and even to the center of Moscow), while the 'poorer' people occupied the periphery.” As already mentioned, housing assignments were connected to several factors including the citizen's position in the social hierarchy and his or her achievement as a worker. As a result, people living in apartments in or near the center of town were generally families of politicians, or elite members of the military, security, economic, scientific, cultural, or educational sector. Meanwhile the poorest classes occupied the housing beyond the fringes of large cities.

The emergence of new dormitory areas and residential districts all over the Soviet Union, deeply transformed the layout of cities like Tallinn and Moscow --the subjects of my study-- and also had a profound impact on the life of their residents, who felt as outcasts. The alienation associated with urbanization became amplified and intensified: the inadequate service infrastructures and the aesthetically monotonous buildings produced an environment that was not only physically but also psychologically debilitating. According to Aleksandr Vysokovskii, who analyzed the situation from the

296 Paperny, Architecture in the Age of Stalin. Culture Two: 78
297 Medvedkov, Soviet Urbanization: 284.
1990s perspective, the housing situation in the Soviet Union “was unprecedented in its alienating effect, in its uniformity, and in its desiderability, yet it is inherently deeply dehumanized.”

Desirability and dehumanizing are two words that perfectly summarize the life of citizens who lived in the mikroraions: although nearly all urban housing offered indoor plumbing, hot and cold running water, and electricity, all features expected and desired by the population, the lifestyle in the Soviet suburbs was often characterized by fatigue, struggle with inefficient services, and exhausting commuting.

Thus, at the end of the 1980s, Soviet citizens were housed in massive apartments blocks of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev period, which were much different from the overcrowded communal apartments of the Stalinist era. However, despite these reform efforts, the Party had failed to provide the promised cultural and social improvements. Moreover, the extensive districts in the urban periphery, isolated one from another, gradually affected and destabilized the space perception and social dynamics of their inhabitants. This point is mentioned in the book *Russian Housing in the Modern Age*, where Vysokovskii affirms that most of the city-dwellers who lived in the high-rise mikroraions developed a passive relationship with their environment and neighborhood, since these neighborhoods were created without taking into account their particular tastes or preferences.

In response to the alienating public environment, people turned to the intimate and safe dimension of apartments as places based on interactions between family and friends. Yet, ideological control by the ruling elite was still exerted on the domestic

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298 Vysokovskii, “Will domesticity return?” 284
299 Ibid.
300 In Ibid., 289
sphere and dwellers' personal needs—though more subtly, by regulations which controlled the size of the apartments, the disposition of their rooms and the furniture.

During Stalin's time, the *kommunalka* (communal apartment)—housing where several unrelated families were forced to live together and to share the main rooms (kitchens, bathrooms)—was the prevailing apartment type in the Soviet Union. As Katerina Gerasimova remarks, the concept of privacy was not contemplated in these arrangements, since in most cases a home turned out to be the least private place of all, a living example of the ever-present collective socialist life.\(^\text{301}\) Indeed, it was difficult to attain domestic intimacy in a house deprived of a private space and where its occupants' personal taste had to yield to the standardization and uniformity of space and furniture (whose prevailing features were large, heavy and dark).

With the advent of the Thaw in the 1950s, a process of privatization of domestic space was set up to establish a different configuration between the private and public, through mass construction of prefabricated blocks of individual apartments. One of the main questions raised by this new arrangement was whether with the comfort of several rooms in each apartment and less interaction with other tenants outside the family circle, the Soviet citizen was going to withdraw from participating in voluntary communal activities. The *mikroraiion* was meant to avoid this possibility by placing at the center of life not individual apartments but rather the entire complex and to encircle each resident in a controlled connection with the entire urban neighborhood.

The inflexible and bureaucratic State guidelines were also ruling how apartments had to be built according to new industrial methods that demanded a far different arrangement of internal living spaces from those of the earlier, prewar buildings.

\(^{301}\) Crowley and Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*: 44.
Correspondingly, in the mid-1960s furniture designers were asked to reorient and restructure the very meaning of domestic space by planning furniture apartments that would conform to precise, standardized parameters.

Nevertheless, a margin of choice was given, indirectly, to dwellers, when the Central Scientific Research and Experimental Planning Division of the Institute of Housing conducted surveys to gather information about how people in Moscow spent their time at home, which places were most used in the kitchen or how to best rearrange its equipment to make the most rational use of it.³⁰² But, the purpose of fulfilling dwellers' needs was overpowered by the urgency to abide by the rapid increase of the guidelines established by central planners and by the State's strict deadlines. It was not uncommon that buildings were approved for occupancy before they were fully completed leaving new tenants to deal with construction defects, cracks in the panels, unfinished facades, low-quality furniture, and poor drainage causing water to collect on walkways and grounds.

Already in the 1960s, the state of abandonment and quick deterioration of the housing blocks and individual apartments affected the expectations of citizens for an improved life: the relief a resident felt once she or he had obtained a private apartment gave way to a sense of dissatisfaction and lack of any hope for recourse or amelioration. Despite the fact that special configuration meant to respond to evolving consumer taste, the oppressive uniformity and cheap quality of furniture conditioned people's domestic life: the official directives promoting a specific type of furniture, or instructing where to locate different rooms in a house, were part of the State's project to also control the families' routine inside their apartments. This aspect is fundamental to understanding the

³⁰² Andrusz, Housing and Urban Development in the USSR: 77.
reasons behind both Keskküla’s and Elken’s depictions of abandoned and deteriorating state of the Soviet housing. By showing a common, everyday scenario that the viewer was used to seeing, and at the same time magnifying and elevating it to the level of an aesthetic subject, they not only highlight its materiality, but also hit the viewers with their extremely visual realism, forcing them to reflect on their personal life.

The focus on people's everyday life in mikroraions, rural villages or on the outskirts of big cities had also previously been one of the main subject of the new generation of Soviet photographers who became active from the 1960s on. Their contributions, which conveyed a powerful representation of the multiple aspects of Soviet society without the frills and typical embellishments of Soviet photojournalism during Stalin's era, were fundamental, directly and indirectly, for artists such as Faibisovich and Sherstiuk. Their fresh view on the human body, on spontaneous situations, and on collective and individual life in general is explored in the last section of this chapter.
1.4. The New-Soviet Photography in the 1960s-1980s

The number of photographers who developed experimental and inventive forms to echo the life and absurdity of Soviet society from the 1960s to 1980s is too broad to be fully described here. In my thesis, I show how the works of the photographers Aleksandras Macijauskas, Vitas Luckus, Zenta Dzividzinska, Antanas Sutkus, and Boris Mikhailov can be associated, directly or indirectly, with the artistic production of Faibisovich, Sherstiuk, Keskküla, and Elken. The conception at the core of these artists and photographers was to grasp a singular, specific moment in the life-stream of common people and to raise it as the epitome of the spirit of the society of the time.

During Stalin's government, photography was almost exclusively attached to the sphere of propaganda promoted by Soviet authorities: photographic information served almost exclusively “to mobilize the broad masses to successfully complete the tasks proposed by the party and the government.” Despite its “minor” status, the photograph emerged as central to the ongoing definition/redefinition of socialist realism, even in the position taken by major painters. The socialist realist painter Boris Ioganson described the characteristic of a photograph taken with an agenda as follows: “a casually snapped color photograph in which composition and the purposeful will of the photographer are absent is pure naturalism. A color photograph taken with a definite purpose in mind and edited by the photographer's will, however, is a manifestation of conscious realism.” Indeed, such manifestations of “conscious realism” became the main element of exemplary Soviet photography from the late 1930s through the early 1950s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the development of photography and the camera apparatus, along with the growing influence of television on the population's domestic routine, had a noticeable impact on shaping people's perception of the surrounding society. As to the photographic sphere, amateur clubs in the Baltic countries hosted the most prolific, original and free experimentation of the new "speech" of photography by introducing a new, frank, and honest approach to capturing people's everyday life. This approach is shared, in particular, by Faibisovich's disenchanted gaze towards the people he met daily on public transport, and by Sherstiuk's exploration of the different kind of relationships established within the apparent privacy of the domestic interiors, and the role of television in shaping them.

The most important photo clubs were founded in the Lithuanian towns of Kaunas in 1963, of Panevezys and Siauliai in 1966. Their activities included the publication of catalogs and the organization of exhibitions, with works by some of the most representative photographers of the time, Marijus Baranauskas, Vitalijus Butyrinas, Algimantas Kuncius, Vitas Luckus, Aleksandras Macijauskas, Liudas Miežanskas, Romualdas Rakauskas, Liudvikas Ruikas and Antanas Sutkus.

Aleksandras Macijauskas is considered one of the most influential Lithuanian photographers. His photographs greatly contributed to challenging the static and monumental nature of Soviet photography through a renewed interest in the lives of the

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305 Some of the most important were the "Exhibition of Four" at the Vilnius Museum of Art in 1968, followed the next year by the Moscow show "Nine Lithuanian Photographers", When the Kaunas photo club showed its collection of the Tsentrality Dom Zhurnalista (Central House of Artists) in Moscow in 1969, the masters of Moscow photojournalism could not understand the style of Lithuanian photographer’s works. The elder colleagues were perturbed by the frank and honest presentation of reality.

306 These exhibitions led to the founding of the Association of Lithuanian Photography Artists in Vilnius in 1969, the only organization that attracted photographers and critics from different republics in the Soviet period and propagated the photographic arts with the help of exhibitions, publications, creative camps, theoretical seminars, and participation in competitions abroad.
Lithuanian people, common farmers, villagers, and traders and in their social and personal experiences outside of the propaganda agenda.

Between 1969 and 1987 Macijauskas created two groundbreaking photographic series, *Village Markets* (1972 – 1984) (Fig.53), and *In the veterinary clinics* (1977 – 1994) (Fig.54), which display the exhausting and sometime brutal work on farms and in veterinary clinics of rural Russia. Through a stylistic approach that combined social realism with early avant-garde principles and the aid of diagonal angles, geometric forms, and enlarged close-up views, Macijauskas transforms a pig's head, a group of old women, and a farmer selling goods at the market into unrealistic but at the same time heroic and poetic beings endowed with a special dynamism in their normal actions and everyday gestures. A parallel could be established between Faibisovich and Macijauskas: although most of the people they captured in their photographs or paintings were just nameless characters, their stories became a metaphor for people's daily struggles, failures, and moments of joy and sorrow in the Soviet era.

A close interest in people's lives is also an important aspect in the work of Antanas Sutkus, the spiritual father of the *Society for Creative Photography of the Lithuanian SSR*. Emotionally marked by a traumatic past—the suicide of his father as a protest against the Stalinist control followed by the death of his mother, and his own illness of tuberculosis—Sutkus presents in his photographs a very human and honest portrayal of people's everyday routines and of Lithuania's changing life under Soviet regulations. A restless observer of the human being, Sutkus' camera captured the unfinished black and white photographic series *People of Lithuania* (1970-1985) (Fig. 55). The series documents ordinary people in different moods—laughing, pensive, excited
or immersed in private thoughts—moments to which Sutkus imparts profundity and symbolism. This characteristic is similar to some of Sherstiuk's paintings, in which he represents his family and friends caught in different moments of their dailyy routine, mostly in the domestic interiors of Moscow's housing. Sutkus himself admitted, “Photography is my way of communicating with people […] My main aim is to create a psychological portrait of the man today,” the act of taking a photo thus became a process of cognition.

A third photographer who focused on recording the complexity of Soviet society through its everyday life was Vitas Luckus, a pivotal figure in the Soviet photography scene of the 1970s and 1980s. From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, Luckus traveled across the Soviet bloc, visiting Georgia, Bashkiria, Azerbaijan, and Altai, following his passion for capturing the drama and the feelings behind ordinary lives of people like peasants, performers, psychiatric patients, and soldiers in army barracks. Luckus's close observation of people led him to establish a connection with his subjects – sometimes by sharing the same living space – and to open a dialogue between reality and the emotions such reality inspires. He often sought to reveal the inner dimension of his subjects by intentionally snapping the shutter at the moment he caught a spontaneous or natural expression, like in the photo In Bashkiria (1981) (Fig. 56).

One of the few women in the competitive circle of unofficial art photographers in Riga was Zenta Dzividzinska. A member of the Riga Camera Club founded in the 1960s,

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309 The secret police were a constant presence in his life, burgling his home and beating him. He tragically died in 1987, at the age of 43.
she shared the same interest of her generation of photographers in new ways creating compelling compositions. Though the use of frequent blurring and casual cropping, she introduces a fresh take on the portrayal of ordinary people in unremarkable settings. Dzividzinska aim to disrupt a codified feminine glamour and the common belief that plain features somehow compromise a person happiness and self-worth. Indeed, her photographic production primarily relies on the representation of a non-conventional notion of beauty. Her subjects are often average overweight, and ruffled Soviet women caught during their daily routines. Photographs as Untitled VI (1968) (Fig. 57), shows her interest in “non beautiful” people, or at least not in the traditional male concepts of beauty or femininity, and at the same time convey a sense that she felt a constant respect for the subjects' autonomy without presuming to aim an omniscient lens at them.310

The representation of the failure of Soviet society to provide a merry and joyful future is exposed most prominently by two Russian photographers: Boris Savelev and Boris Mikhailov. In an interview with Alina Sandulyak in 2017, Boris Savelev defines Mikhailov’s style as “Theatrical photography” in order to underline the difference between his own “direct” photographs - taken without any previous preparation of the scene – and Mikhailov, which he defines as “not a photograph as such, it is a photographic fixation of reminiscences.”311

Boris Savelev was a former rocket scientist who turned to photography in 1976. During Brezhnev's period of stagnation, his photographs outlined a sly criticism of the

310 Dzividzinska’s representations of the unglamorized female form in contrast to sexualized and glamorous male depictions of women’s bodies, was not appreciated by male photographers, and sometimes even ridiculed by the same male club members who thought her way to depict women’s bodies was not appropriate or conformed to the accepted standard of “beauty,” of the time.
false humanism of the Soviet official photography by opposing the “elegant observational realism”312 of his works. Coming from the “Seventies” underground photography movement, Savelev’s style focuses on capturing the feelings of listlessness and boredom, by simply framing a fleeting moment in the life of random people.313 His first published work, a collection of color photographs of urban scenes from the streets of Moscow and Leningrad titled The Secret City (1981) (Fig. 58), was generally banned from publication and exhibitions in official venues, in the Soviet Union, since it did not affirm the socialist values of Soviet photography.314

The definition of “theatrical photography” could be applied only to a period of Mikhailov’s multilayered career as a photographer. In fact, as he claimed, his creative creed was always based on “catching the constant changes, because in front of my eyes everything that should be photographed is disappearing rapidly. What I am interested in today had by tomorrow already become the past and it is up to us, the photographers, to catch the rapid transformations of our life.”315 He thus is strongly affirming his need to fix a present in constant flux, instead of fabricating one.

As a persistent and deep observer of his environment - Mikhailov made a point to become acquainted with his subjects. He often tried to catch the present by representing activities of masses of people - as in the cycles Dance (1978), Sots Art I (1978) (Fig. 59),

313 Although Savelev’s main purpose was to catch a visual effect, following the example of Walker Evans and Eugene Atge, as he admits in an interview with Alina Sandulyak in 2017: “Есть прямая фотография и театральная. Театральная фотография это, например, то, чем Михайлов занимается. Это не фотография как таковая, это фотофиксация реминисценций. Сейчас такое искусство достаточно модно. Но для меня это не интересно”. http://artukraine.com.ua/a/boris-savelev—v-povsednevnosti-ya-ishchu-unikalnye-veshchi--svet-sostoyanie-situacii/#WyPBtSB9iU
314 He used Orwochrome film and then after the Kodachrome. The introduction in the Soviet Union of the color film ORWOCHROM film, made in the GDR, replaced the monochrome pictures and slides images previously published in journals and art magazines.
315 Ian Jeffrey, Another Russia, Through the eyes of the new Soviet photographers, (Thames and Hudson, 1986): 163
or in *Berdyansk Beach* (1981-1986) (Fig. 132), where he caught people in moments of leisure or contentment instead of participating to some ideological activity.

Yet, in later works Mikhailov introduced a component of artificiality in his photos by hand coloring them with aniline dye, as in the case of the above-mentioned series of photographs Sots Art I. By reinterpreting his own black and white photographs, Mikhailov thus stepped away from amateur photography, which had always been welcome in the Soviet Union, toward unofficial photography, which was considered a legal offense.\(^{316}\) By depriving his photographs of technical perfection and making the viewer aware of the deliberate manipulation behind them, Mikhailov creates a “factography” of the period of the socialist system's final decline\(^{317}\), and shows how his photography production is not only documentation of a failing society, but also art and experimentation.

Mikhailov's photographs, as well as Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk', hyperrealist paintings rely on both being “documents” of an era, and also on disrupting an apparently “objective” representation, by his personal “intrusion”. In fact, according to art historian Olga Kozlova, “the photorealistic picture should represent a stage of development of this or that plot as more developed in comparison with a photo at least because over an initial material the artist works on.”\(^{318}\)

In conclusion, in this chapter I have summarized and analyzed the “initial material” and the influences – historical, environmental, artistic and photographic - that contributed to the development of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich, and Sherstiuk's hyperrealist works. Each aspect became part of a narrative within their paintings which

\(^{316}\) Ibid.

\(^{317}\) Ibid.

\(^{318}\) Kozlova, *Fotorealizm*: 26
not only became the description of a specific period of the Soviet era, but also of the universal human condition of existence. How each of these four artists conveyed this world through their own personal creativity is the subject of the next chapter.


Chapter Two: Four Urban Painters

The narrative of this dissertation follows a historical and chronological, as well as a thematic arc, in order to introduce the different phases and most representative artists of hyperrealism, a trend within the broader realist movement introduced in Tallinn in 1975 and focusing on lived environments.

The first part of this chapter will focus on Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken who were, as I argue, the first and leading Estonian exponents of hyperrealism. In the second part of the chapter I will focus on the development of this trend in Russia through the artworks of Sergei Sherstiuk and Semyon Faibisovich. All of these hyperrealist artists focused on and exposed the negative effects on the population of the newly industrialized Soviet society during Khrushchev and Brezhnev's time. In fact, artists and architects responded to the daily life challenges pertaining to the rapid growth of urban planimetry and the radical changes of city planning begun in the 1960s.

In this chapter I aim to demonstrate that Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk's representations of ordinary cityscapes and people's trivial routines could be considered both powerful documents of this era and an existential response exceeding the plain mimesis. In fact, Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken's paintings of framed cityscapes of Tallinn in the 1970s, as a series of alienated and abandoned neighborhoods suspended in a timeless atmosphere, should be seen as allegories for the alienation and detachment of Estonian citizens caused by the imposition of Soviet culture onto their own. Likewise, in the 1980s, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk’s display of moments of interaction between ordinary citizens in their everyday activities and their surrounding urban environment became an existential postcard of a generation living in a crucial moment of transition,
both political and cultural. Moreover, by capturing and enlarging the multifaceted and fragmented components of their quotidian context, these artists raised two important issues: the possibility of objectively representing a photograph after translating it onto a canvas, and the role of personal ideas, memories and experiences in affecting people's perception and objective representation of their own culture and society.
2.1 Hyperrealism in Estonia in the 1970s

According to art critic Eha Komissarov, Estonian art was not ready for the new aesthetic introduced by Estonian hyperrealism in the second half of the 1970s, in direct opposition to the established tradition of Estonian landscape painting. Komissarov explains that with the arrival of hyperrealism, “a different suburban milieu, unified, impersonal and estranged, therefore foreign to Estonian tradition, twisted the established parameters.”

Indeed, generally speaking, the landscape and nature more broadly had been a characteristic inspiration for Estonian national art, along with agricultural labor and rustic subjects. Artists like Konrad Mägi, Kristjan Teder (Fig. 60) Evald Okas, Richard Sagrits (Fig. 61), or Richard Uutmaa painted natural landscapes, meadows, portraits of peasants, and intimate interiors in an atmosphere of calm melancholy suffused by lyrical tones and warm colors.

In contrast, most of the Estonian hyperrealist artists focused on showing their new artificial environment in a critically realistic and often cold light. Eha Komissarov, suggests that Ando Keskküla's dispassionate portrayal of this new environment “breaks all the convention of painting,” conventions that referred to both Estonian traditional art and the non-conformist movements of the time. In part, hyperrealism provoked turmoil within the art sphere of the time because it introduced a sense of uncertainty missing from the idyllic tradition of landscape painting—a tradition that had embodied a secure and predictable representation of Estonian identity. Instead, Keskküla and Elken's representations abruptly returned the viewer's attention to his or her actual lived present.

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320 In ibid.
In this chapter, I focus on two sources that directly and indirectly influenced both Keskküla and Elken's hyperrealist works: Lotman's theory on semiotics, and the Tallinn School of Architecture projects. I also summarize individual sources which contributed to shaping each artist's production. Keskküla and Elken transformed their hyperrealist paintings into a platform where different art genres such as realism, photography, formalism, and architecture were engaged in an open dialogue with each other in order to unveil the multifaceted complexity and potentiality of the contemporary Estonian artistic sphere.

Another fundamental aspect of Keskküla and Elken' work is that it disclosed the full impact of Soviet urban housing policy newly imposed on Estonian cities in the 1970s, exposing the deceptively optimistic Soviet rhetoric by representing crumbling buildings, cracked walls, collapsing facades, and poor neighborhoods in a stark photographic manner. In this way, their paintings introduce the viewer into a particular form of realism where human beings do not exist and only common objects or glimpses of cityscapes become the primary means to convey the surrounding reality. Indeed, crumbling facades, dirty interiors, and empty squalid streets become for Keskküla and Elken a personification of the miserable life experienced by the bulk of the Estonian population.

In my semiotic reading of Tallinn's architecture, I consider it as incorporating an ensemble of signs that reveal how deeply the Sovietization of the cityscape impacted the population's personal and collective life, consciousness, and memory. Such an approach draws from the theories of Yuri Lotman and his Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics. This
theory profoundly shaped Keskküla and Elken's perspective on Tallinn. By adopting such a reading, my aim is to perceive their works from the artists' own point of view.

Lotman considered the city as a complex semiotic mechanism made of a melting-pot of different national, social, and stylistic codes belonging to all kinds of languages and levels of communication. Following this idea, he considered the re-coding, hybridization, and semiotic translations of these different sources as a powerful generator of what he defined as a “culture.” Furthermore, Lotman notes that every culture begins by dividing the world into two spaces: “center/periphery”. According to this concept, the most stable and dominant semiotic systems are at the “center”, which forms 'its own' internal space, with its own specific language. Meanwhile, those at the “periphery” form 'their' external space with someone else's language, rendered more flexible and mobile precisely due to their inability to adequately reflect their underlying reality.

The Soviet occupation and Russification of both Estonia's environment and mass-culture provoked a switch between center and periphery, as evidenced in Keskküla and Elken's paintings. During the period of Soviet occupation, the capital of Tallinn, once considered the administrative and cultural center of the country, was deprived of its autonomy and became a peripheral branch of the Soviet government. Therefore, in Estonia, the Russian cultural sign system, previously part of its periphery since Russia had been at its geographical border, became the dominant culture in Estonia while the local language and culture became secondary and peripheral. Furthermore, Lotman states that a geographical space is a domain of semiotic modeling, since spatial forms are imbued with semiotic meanings. Keskküla and Elken's paintings such as *Evening* (1975)

322 Ibid.
(Fig. 8), and Tallinn. Kopli Depot (1982) (Fig. 62), convey such idea of the urban planning, as based both on practical concerns and specific symbolism.\textsuperscript{323}

Along with control of the cityscape, another consequence of the occupation was the massive introduction into the Estonian space of cultural materials and texts from Russia. To a certain extent, this is a normal process for two cultures that are in geographic or ideological proximity, as Lotman suggests by describing how texts from different cultures outside the boundaries of a \textit{semiosphere} can come to invade and affect its internal structure. In fact, he affirms that “across any synchronic section of the \textit{semiosphere} different languages at different stages of development are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own.”\textsuperscript{324} However, this process was strongly reversed by the Russification of the bureaucratic, administrative and educational sectors of Estonian society.

Even though the encounter between these two cultures produced a semiotic dynamism, it also introduced a hybridization of Estonian language on a daily basis, with advertisements, public documents, and store signs in Russian, Estonian words rendered in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, or even the creation of new words by combining the two languages. Indeed, when a cultural system such as the Russian one juxtaposes its own objects—new buildings, everyday items, and signage—into a different culture, it also introduces a new sign system along with them. By imposing a new bureaucratic system, followed by a different style of urban planning, all conducted through a foreign language, the Soviet authorities forced Estonian people to become as foreigners in their own country. Art historian Jeremy Canwell underlines this important point when he writes that

\textsuperscript{323} Lotman, \textit{The Universe of Mind, A Semiotic Theory of Culture}: 172
\textsuperscript{324} In ibid., 126
“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.”

Keskküla and Elken's hyperrealism explores the impact of Sovietization on the Estonian population, including on themselves through the language of architecture and design. They recreate in their works this “speech of the objects” by translating urban signs—street signs, road signs, advertising—“the rhythm of doors and windows” that forms the population's daily environment—into the language of painting like in Keskküla's *Still Life with View of the City* (1976) (Fig. 63) and Elken's *In the Kalinin District*, (1978) (Fig. 64). Moreover, the representation of familiar places and objects allows them to both unleash their own memories and manipulate the viewer's. This is mirrored by the words of Enn Põldroos:

> “Whatever topics we tackle in our art, they can all be pushed into one common denominator. This is the gaze with which a Soviet citizen observes the world, his work, friends, enemies, flowers, landscapes, and past events. It is, after all, also the gaze of the Soviet artist himself. The gaze differs from one of its predecessors not only because of what it is directed at, what it denies and what it affirms but in its inseparable feature is the stamp left by the rhythm of life of its time.”

Both Keskküla and Elken began their career as architects, and this experience with urban issues concerning the city of Tallinn shaped their approach toward architecture and urban space as influential signs systems shaping the individual’s daily life. Elken indeed was attracted by the cultural signs of the city, which he defined as “the fluidum of the environment.” Speaking of that period Elken recalls:

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328 Jaan Elken, *Jaan Elken*: 105
“One of the trends in my work was to reconstruct the Estonian era, I circled above Estonian interwar-era architecture, the catalyst was an unaccountable yearning for a mythical past. [...] In parallel to the above, it was self-evident that the absurdity of the city's environment was documented. It was a time when Tallinn was a Russian city on the level of street signs, but in addition to soldiers, militia women, and Ladas, there were also a great many Estonians to be seen on the street.”

The space presented in Elken's hyperrealist paintings with its ensemble of different sign—buildings, street signs, objects, and interiors—embodies the concept of Lotman's *semiosphere*. In fact, their positions and relations to each other amplify their individual meaning and create a complex and multi-layered dimension that strongly engages the viewer once accepted as realistic.

In both artists' hyperrealist works, the city's different spaces are depicted not only in relation to the objects within them, but also to different socio-cultural phenomena. For example, space and time become essential socio-cultural categories: by choosing to represent the atmosphere that pervaded Tallinn's suburbs at specific moments of the day and sometimes night, as in *A Lighting at the Construction site* (1978) (Fig. 65), and *Väike-Õismäe* (1981) (Fig. 4), they highlight the condition of constant alienation and isolation of working-class residential housing. Furthermore, they take to an extreme the sense of estrangement experienced by the Estonian population by provocatively deleting the human being from the picture. What remains after the “actors” disappear is only the “stage”—the city with its “objects” that becomes the visual language which materializes the effects of occupation. This aspect in particular indirectly highlights the contradictions of Soviet propaganda between the official elevation of the heroic Soviet citizen as the

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329 In ibid., 103
foundation of society, and of the Moscow planning authorities' disregard for physical and social needs in pursuit of ambitious but unreachable abstract goals.

Although the focus of my study is painting, it is essential to recognize the importance of design and architecture in Keskküla and Elken's hyperrealism as well as in the Estonian art sphere more broadly. At the time, theory and criticism surrounding architecture and design was merging with that of the other visual arts: designers and architects were seen as the initiators of a new kind of art able to follow the modernization of the city and its living standards by simultaneously approaching the social and aesthetic spheres of the urban environment.\(^\text{331}\)

The Tallinn Architecture School's work in the early 1970s was a crucible for the development of these ideas. The school was founded by a group of artists and architects whose main members were Leonhard Lapin, Tiit Kaljundi, Vilen Kunnapu, Avo-Himm Looveer and Ulevi Eljand.\(^\text{332}\) Their 1972 manifesto, titled “Program for an Exhibition of New Architecture,” was considered the beginning of the redefinition of architecture in Estonia, and its importance was registered immediately. As suggested in this manifesto, the artist and architect share an inquiring approach toward the essence of architecture as a practice, its impact on society, and the social role of contemporary architects.

In a presentation titled “Art Developing the Environment” at the Estonian Art Institute in 1971, Leonhard Lapin, one of the founders of the group, advocated for the inclusion of art into the architecture practice, introducing the notion of architecture-as-art


\(^\text{332}\) Leonhard Lapin and Ulevi Eljand - both at the same time architects and artists - experimented with pop art. Meanwhile, Tiit Kaljundi and Vilen Kunapuu were well established architects who contributed to advance the theory of architecture in Estonia in the 1970s.
in order to “use contemporary art to organize the environment, and to implement it as a critique of the institution of architecture.”

Thus, Lapin and the other members of the group promoted an idea of architecture as a synthetic art capable of merging philosophical, sociological and psychological concepts with the most recent technological and industrial developments. As the art historian Mari Laanemets has observed, this perspective envisioned a “total art work involving all spheres of human activity.” In this regard, Lapin believed in the role of art as a pivotal component in the creation of a new vision of the modern city as a complex system able to influence and develop people's consciousness and way of thinking. To achieve this goal, a new figure of the “architect-artist” was meant to replace the previous “architect-engineer” associated with constructivism, in order to redefine the concept of architecture by broadening its theoretical and aesthetic premises.

The show *Harku '75: Objects, Concepts*, considered to have been the last unofficial show in Soviet Estonia, was a key platform for architects and designers of the time to present and at the same time establish a new approach toward the artificial manmade environment. Organized at the Institute of Experimental Microbiology in the town of Harku in northern Estonia, it played a pivotal role in two respects. Firstly, the occasion encouraged a dialogue between the general public, artists, and members of Soviet scientific institutions. Secondly, the installation itself, by virtue of the diverse and

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333 Kurg, “Foreword”: 38
335 The poet Juhan Viiding and the architect Vilen Künnapu published an article in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* in 1972 where they called for artists to actively intervene in the city space. They advocated that by painting and decorating buildings, backyards and alleys they could have been transformed into spaces for aesthetics enjoyment or open air exhibitions. See Vilen Künnapu and Juhan Viiding, “Ettepanek,” *Sirp ja Vasar* 1.IX (1972): 8-9.
336 [http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/event harku 75 objects concepts/](http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/event harku 75 objects concepts/)
eclectic trends displayed, marked a break between two eras. As Lapin recounts: “1975 marks the end of Estonian avant-garde’s childhood, times of games and experiments and initiates ‘manhood’ with every artist striving to find his/her personal way to spiritual liberation.”

During the event, ten artists introduced to their audience, more than 150 participants, the results of their creative exploration – primarily kinetic pop sculptures, large-scale installations, concrete poetry, and geometric abstract works (Fig. 66).

Moreover, at the symposium organized at the end of the exhibition, Lapin made a speech that advocated for artists to play an active role in transforming society by moving from the margins of unofficial artistic production to the center of the Soviet public sphere. He strongly urged contemporary artists to engage with the new industrial and technological progress that the country was experiencing, by imagining new alternatives for an urban environment ruled by the Moscow Central Committee's inflexible building regulations and mass construction, which had led to the often catastrophic reconfiguration of the Estonian landscape.

The Tallinn School organized two other important shows in the second half of the 1970s which challenged the architectural and city planning discourse of the time—Estonian Monumental Art 1902-1975 at the Tallinn Art Hall in 1976, and Architecture Exhibition 1978 at the Academy of Sciences Library. As Lapin claimed the goal of

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338 As the title suggests, the exhibition was a retrospective of twentieth-century Estonian monumental sculpture and at the same time an introduction to a new broader concept of monumental art which was supposed to include the organization of the whole environment, not only single monuments. The idea that connected all the works displayed was the need for the new and modern city to have a new kind of monuments, in a new constructed public space. For the first time, architects, designers, and artists were presented without differentiation, in an attempt to redefine the relationship between art, architecture and their role in the synthesis of arts. According to architectural historian Andres Kurg, “One important aim was to create a public and open space for people that would have been no longer “a hostile territory
both was to present “architecture as an independent form of art, a manifestation of the spiritual, but also as an independent and influential feature that played a part in social processes.”

Besides their futuristic vision, some of the Tallinn School's paper architectural works like Leonhard Lapin's project New Skyline of Tallinn (1978) (Fig. 21) rendering Tallinn similar to a Western city like New York, Sirje Runge's diploma work Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn (1975) (Fig. 22), or Tonis Vint's Mandala House (1978) (Fig. 67), carried a idealistic, or even mythic element, as in Vint's project. Indeed, Mari Laanemets's claim regarding Lapin's plans for the city of Tallinn could be extended to the projects of the most members of the Tallinn School: “it cannot be taken altogether seriously, but does it express the desire for a fancy and diverse metropolis.”

stretching from work to home” (Kurg, “Foreword”: 38). The second show, Architecture Exhibition 1978, focused on the failure of Modernist architecture and the city planning whose negative example was the prefabricated and anonymous housing areas in the city's outskirts. Fourteen architect-artists-designers used the show as a platform to question architecture's social role and to “launch an architectural dialogue with the cultural sphere rather than that of civil engineering” (Andres Kurg, “Modernism's Endgame, Tallinn 1978”, Environment, Project, Concepts. Architects of the Tallinn School 1972-1985, (Museum of Estonian Architecture, Tallinn, 2008): 56). The show displayed drawings, photos, paintings, and collages often with a critical or ironic cut on the changed city-scape, most of them presenting Utopian plans, instead of practical solutions, for the reconstruction of the urban areas. The presence of irony was unusual in an architectural exhibition. According to Andres Kurg, “Irony worked as a way for the artist to position his work in relation to the dominant architectural discourse without neither being compliant to the bureaucratic system nor taking an open dissident position”. Ibid., 89.


340 Paper Architecture was the name used in the Soviet Union to describe a body of works that “countered inflexible building regulations by using imaginative architectural drawings and saw graphic work as its end result. Gaining recognition in international competitions from 1970s onward, the Soviet paper projects have often been seen as a withdrawal from official design practice, as they turned away from rationalist and collective values.” http://www.grahamfoundation.org/grantees/5289-paper-architecture-and-late-soviet-practices-of-socialization-19751985.

341 Sirje Runge graduated in 1975 at the department of industrial art at the Estonian State Art Institute. Despite the general utopian nature of Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn, it actually offered eight “practical” solutions to the organization of Tallinn's city space. The project aimed to establish a correspondence within the diverse functions of a contemporary city, while simultaneously actively defining them.

342 Mari Laanemets, “Before the Spaces are Constructed: Concerning the Relationship Between Architecture and Art in the practice of The Tallinn School Architects,” 88. It is interesting that Andres Kurg’s interpretation of Lapin’s skyline diverges from Mari Laanemets’s one. Kurg affirms that Lapin’s skyline...
This was in accordance with Lapin's insistence that architects should stop considering architecture as a field dealing exclusively with objects, and instead seek to broaden its expertise to the sphere of ideas, as suggested by the title of his article *Fantastiline projekteerimine (Fantastic Design).*\(^{343}\)

Nonetheless, the Tallinn Architecture School motivated artists, architects, and designers to move from the previously marginalized art sphere where they had voluntarily secluded themselves to the center of art and architectural practice in dialogue with social and political issues. This new approach had a remarkable impact on Keskküla and Elken, who considered public space as an important platform for the development of the micro-environment, constituted by the people's social and psychological interaction with each other and with their surrounding urban environment. Therefore, they initially turned to architecture as a language through which they could interpret and develop a critique of the social and political conditions of their time.

Although hyperrealist artists such as Keskküla, and Elken shared the Tallinn Architecture School's rejection of the dissolution of architecture into the mass construction promoted by Soviet Socialism, they diverged in their criticism of the Sovietization of Tallinn's urban environment. The difference between these two discourses eventually created a division within the non-conformist art sphere of the time.

While the Tallinn Architecture School's goal was to re-invent the city's environment with avant-garde architectural solutions often based on utopian premises, hyperrealism was by no means utopian. Keskküla and Elken created paintings which showed Tallinn's buildings, streets and home interiors as falling apart, dirty, abandoned, was “a critic of consumerism and the ways in which national pagan symbols were appropriated by Soviet factories producing banal everyday items.”

and gloomy, as in Keskküla's *Industrial Interior* (1977) (Fig. 5) and Elken's *Men's section* (1980) (Fig. 68). Their works mirrored the absurdity of the Soviet occupation and the mendacity of its propaganda, by conveying a realistic depiction of Tallinn's suburbs. Indeed, in contrast to Lapin’s artificial landscapes, Keskküla and Elken's method relies on recording familiar places through photography, which holds an undeniable and unique importance for both. As will be further explored in my third chapter, photography not only provided a pattern for organizing the different sign systems embodied by the images in their works, but also allowed these artists to remind the viewer that the reality portrayed actually existed by relying on the documentary characteristic attributed to the medium.

By contrast, Lapin and Runge's projects often present futuristic visions of Tallinn, dealing not with real buildings but with the concept of “a fancy and diverse metropolis.” Therefore, I argue that such projects often ended up envisioning dystopian cityscapes that inadvertently paralleled the Soviet housing plans they were opposing, the real needs of citizens similarly absent from their planning.

After taking a photograph, both Keskküla and Elken would “personalize” it while transferring it onto the canvas by inserting some elements drawn from their own memories, by highlighting some details with a personal stroke, or even by changing the photograph's original colors to unnatural or brighter tones. Thus, Keskküla and Elken succeeded in showing that the transformation of Tallinn, following the imposition of Russia's foreign cultural system, not only affected the Estonian population's collective memory, but also their own personal memories and perception of reality.

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344 Laanemets, “Before the Spaces are Constructed: Concerning the Relationship Between Architecture and Art in the practice of The Tallinn School Architects,” 88.
2.2 Ando Keskküla's Intellectual Approach to Tallinn’s Urbanscape

Keskküla's hyperrealist phase, in which his theory regarding the effects of the environment on the population found its full development, covers roughly the years between 1974-75 and the early 1980s. His first hyperrealist artworks were introduced at the aforementioned Young Artists Exhibition, in Tallinn in 1975, along with works by Heitti Polli, Uramas Pedanik, Lemming Nagel, Tõnu Virve and Vladimir Timofejev (Taiger) (Figs 69-71), who are considered to be the beginner of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union. These artists shared these three features: a plain surface image, the use of cold tones, and a relative freedom in processing the photo motif. It was precisely these characteristics that were fundamental in highlighting the important contribution of hyperrealism to the Estonian art sphere, particularly when set against the romantic landscape tradition preceding it.

Like Lapin and most of the artists of the Tallinn Architecture School, Keskküla believed in erasing the border between design and art in order to create a new figure of the artist-designer, able both to capture and document different aspects of the Soviet environment's modernization, and at the same time to intervene directly in shaping it. Keskküla also conveyed in his hyperrealist works the School's idea that the artist-designer had to take on the role of a master of matter, shaping the surrounding environment with specific forms in order to influence the viewer's consciousness. As

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Mari Laanemets points out: “in his work composition, space and structure strike the eye, turning the copy of reality into a reality constructed by the artist himself.”\(^{348}\) Control of this new environment also demanded a distinctive language which had to rise directly from within it. But, at the same time it had to shake its very foundations by creating impromptu paradoxes aimed at contrasting against the mechanical uniformity and standardization of the new scientific and technological society.

Keskküla's art production had already moved toward this direction at the end of the 1960s, when he'd founded the pop art group SOUP'69 with the artists Leonhard Lapin and Andres Tolts, who focused on converting the symbols of Soviet mass culture embodied by the propaganda of the time into pop imagery.\(^{349}\) The three artists often displayed their pop installations at events organized in Keskküla's house,\(^{350}\) which art historian Jaak Kangilasky described as “full of mystery and of a strange tension, by using very common details.”\(^{351}\)

Tallinn's working-class suburb where Keskküla and Tolts lived played an important role as source material for their assemblages and inspiration for their composition. As Lapin recalls:

“We often walked in the city neighborhoods, becoming familiar with their multi-layered nature, and discovering their “hideous” areas, in addition to the postcard visualization of beautiful old Tallinn. The motifs of poor neighborhoods,


\(^{349}\) SOUP'69 first appearance was in 1969 in a summer camp organized by the magazine Noorus, during a happening organized by Ando Keskküla, Andres Tolts and Leonhard Lapin at Kabli beach, near the town of Parnu. The same year, the group exhibited their works at a exhibition of young artists at the Pegasus Café in Tallinn. Here Keskküla presented the works *Head in the Basin* and *Another Girl in Your Company* which Lapin described as a remarkable compositions for the purity of colors, the openness of the picture space, and the skillfulness of execution (*Ando Keskula*, ed. Leonhard Lapin): unpaginated.

\(^{350}\) Keskküla's installations can be considered the first manifestation of the concept of “environmental art” in Estonia, which was epitomized by the exhibition organized by Ando Keskküla on the 30th of December 1968 in his apartment, which introduced a new aesthetic of Pop art in Estonia.

abandoned objects, railways realities, warehouses, and waste dumps attracted us.”

Indeed, Keskküla's artworks of this period were characterized by witty pop assemblages often composed of unexpected mishmashes of banal and vividly colored objects, meant to highlight the false humanization of everyday objects conveyed by the kitschy mass culture of the Soviet consumer market. This aspect was also developed later in his hyperrealist phase, as in the paintings Kuiv Tanav, 6A I (1978-1980) (Fig. 72), and Still Life with View of the City (1976) (Fig. 63), which focus on an assembly of unrelated objects juxtaposed together and positioned against the an anonymous city backdrop.

By assembling found common objects together, Keskküla assigns them a new meaning, based on an interpretation that emphasizes the banality of everyday life in the Soviet Union and highlights the one-dimensional quality of the surrounding environment by contrasting it with the extravagance of his creations—made from the objects of that same environment. As Lapin explained the idea underlying his compositions:

“The large number of commodities that have flooded the world create the most amazing and controversial associations in everyday life. The pop artist, who creates unusual and simplified pictorial worlds, is part of daily life, and is a mediator of the world's aesthetic essence.”

With works such as Head in the Basin, (1969) Keskküla shows his rejection of art as a commodity and proposes instead the possibility of its use as a means of cultural reaction to the political and social establishment. The object is an assembled composition made from a broken head of a bronze sculpture, glued to an enamel basin, on Keskküla

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352 Lapin, Ando Kesskula: unpaginated
354 Lapin, Ando Kesskula: unpaginated
glued his own hair, which were cut off by the police who arrested him after he participated to an happening-performance with the group SOUP’69. Indeed, Estonian pop art emerged as a subculture of the post-war generation, both in response to Western pop music and pop culture and as an artistic form of expression outside of local artistic and political systems. Proceeding from pop art to hyperrealism was a logical step for Keskküla, since pop art was the first non-conformist tendency to engage with the Soviet reality and its environment. However, the artist later defined his method as “new documentalism” to clarify his unique approach to re-creating Tallinn's urban areas on his hyperrealist canvases.

Another important influence on Keskküla's concern with the urban environment were the artists Ludmilla Siim and Juri Palm, part of the artistic generation that created a renewed interest in the artificial urban environment as well as directly participating in analyzing and shaping it. Their creative work in the 1970s brought into the Estonian art sphere a new figurative painting style considered by art critics to be closely linked to pop art and to American hyperrealism.

Keskküla met Ludmilla Siim while he was studying industrial design at the State Art Institute of Estonia SSSR, where a special study program at the Faculty of Architecture had been established in 1966. According to the artist, he preferred industrial design over painting since the former provided better training to understand and grasp the reality he was living in. The aim of the State Art Institute under the supervision of

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356 Eda Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art From the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika,” 76
358 Ludmilla Siim’s and Juri Palm's work could be also placed within the discussion, popular in the Seventies, on the importance of a comfortable and pleasant environment – as for example a familial comfort and a likable working atmosphere - to improve people lives.
department head Bruno Tomber was to offer a “universal education” to art students which would have included subjects such as bionics, sociology, and information theory. For the generation of the 60s, disciplines like genetics, cybernetics, cosmology, psychology, and semiotics opened new perspectives and a multidimensional view of the outside world. Indeed, it is important to highlight that in these years official institutions were often important channels to providing Estonian young intellectuals with many philosophical and scientific contemporary texts that had been forbidden after the Soviet occupation.

Ludmilla Siim was the art teacher at Tallinn Secondary School from 1965 to 1969, where Keskküla graduated. She taught him to portray objects and cityscapes through a method based both on a rational, almost photographic, approach to the urban environment, and on new visual methods of rendering space and architecture in painting, which he later perfected in his hyperrealist works. Siim believed that “entering into a comprehensive relationship with the city is the only way to make something strange one's own, to recapture a lost place.” To achieve such re-appropriation of the Estonian environment, she often intentionally erased from her paintings everything ordinary or “ugly in order to amplify the myth, circulating in the Soviet Union, of Tallinn as a modern seaside city where life was freer, better, and more Western that was possible in the other Soviet Republics. In this regard, some of her compositions such as Radio Building (1970) (Fig. 73) and In the City Center (1973) (Fig. 74) representing an


\[361\] The painting is Ludmilla Siim' first “urban work”. It was exhibited at the Youth Exhibition in Tartu in 1970, which marked the introduction of a new generation of artists captivated by the artificial environment. The painting represents the new Radio building erected in Tallinn in the same year, which eventually became an important symbol for the youth mass-culture of the time.
“anxiety-free environment” where the population, all young and with identical facial features, live in high-rise glass buildings and residential areas, recall the futuristic and idealistic atmosphere of the Tallinn Architect School group.362

Nonetheless, Siim's portrayal of a flawless society, instead of conveying an atmosphere of safety and peace, induces in the viewer a disturbing feeling of alienation and detachment due to the use of extremely bright colors and modern yet strangely sterile locations.

Juri Palm's paintings display the same sense of alienation, but from an opposite perspective. In open contrast to the official representations by Soviet propaganda, he reveals the decline of Soviet society through the transformation of Estonian space into a public political sphere, representing it as burdened by insecurities and existential fear. In particular, Palm uses the image of the city by night as a metaphor of the “disturbed and dysfunctional territory, which is characterized by catastrophes and traffic accidents that occur with monotonous regularity, as well as conflicts that break out for no reason.”363 Thus, his characters are often lost in a hypothetical nocturnal city in a context of violence or involved in events related to death and trauma. In the painting The Flow of Lights (1973-1974) (Fig. 75), for example, the image of a collision between a car and a motorcycle conveyed in grotesque pictorial language goes beyond the singular accident to become a metaphor of Estonia's precarious existence as an occupied country.

Ludmilla Siim and Juri Palm also played a pivotal role in presenting new ways to approach the urban environment in a photographic form, later influencing Keskküla's critical and rational approach toward the Soviet urbanization and modernization of

362 Kaljula, “Alone in the City: Ludmilla Siim and Jüri Palm,” 14
363 In ibid., 48.
Tallinn. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the contemporary Estonian art sphere had been centered on a romantic and self-centered representation of Estonian traditional landscapes characterized by warm colors and idyllic scenes of rural life. According to art critic Sirje Helme

“The defense mechanism in Estonian art that took shape in the 1960s about one's own imaginary space, stressed certain peculiarities of Estonian art and signified a mental protective wall against Soviet art life. This inward turn created a reserve, individualism, avoidance of social themes, and a fondness for landscapes and still life. A timeless metaphysical space outside place emerged.”

Landscape painting was so deeply rooted in the Estonian painting tradition that not even Keskküla managed to get away from it, though the influence was mainly confined to the beginning of his hyperrealist phase. Indeed, in the mid-1970s he opened a dialogue with the tradition of the landscape painting in his compositions *Northern Estonian Landscape* (1974) (Fig. 76), and *Beach* (1975) (Fig. 77). These paintings convey a subtle metaphor for the condition of the modern Estonian in transition between familiar surroundings, mostly rural or semi-urban, to an environment characterized by a series of faceless blocks of buildings and objects imposed by the Soviet urban planning.

Keskküla's interest in the influence of the surrounding environment was already explicit in 1973, when he created the animated film *Bluff* for his diploma project in design and architecture. The film explored issues raised by the increasing role of design in society, its influence on the environment, and its strong influence on interpersonal interaction. Moreover, it “provided a critical comment on consumption and the excess of things in the contemporary world.”

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made environment is an ecosystem made by a communication net connecting people's subjectivity through a visible and invisible circuit and actively influencing people's everyday life. In particular, Keskküla addressed the overlapping and gradual substitution of new objects introduced by new technologies for previously existing “old” ones, which in turn generated social conflict by requiring the user to develop new psychological patterns in order to re-establish a relationship with their surroundings, often quite different from the previous one. The same issue would be raised later in the paintings *Summer Still Life* (1975) (Fig. 78) and *Industrial Interior*, (1976) (Fig. 23).

The analysis of such conflict is extended by Keskküla to Tallinn's architecture and urban planning. His multilayered compositions, as in the paintings *Evening* (Fig. 8) or *Industrial Interior* (1977) (Fig. 5), where he establishes a dialogue between the photographic approach and the artist's own intellectual vision of the environment, show how the imposition of Soviet housing could transform a familiar space into something alien and unrecognizable.

Keskküla also masterfully captured and expressed the condition of “the inner world of his contemporaries” characterized primarily by insecurity and a feeling of constant powerlessness, through the revolutionary act of completely excluding from his hyperrealist paintings any human figures that the viewer could relate to or identify with. The deserted streets, apartments, and interiors also reinforced the atmosphere of unfamiliarity, alienation, and desperation that characterized the suburbs of Tallinn. In an interview with the artist Kaire Nurk in 2005, Keskküla also attributed his avoidance of reproducing human beings in his works to the belief that “the controlling or influencing

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367 Although paintings like the triptych *Tallin Harbor with Unfinished Seascapes* (1980-81) show some people in their composition, they are mostly just shadows or silhouettes, without any individual feature.
of any individual by artful, unfair, or insidious means, without his knowledge or against his will”368 was a manipulation that was already happening in the Soviet society of the time.

It must be noted that some of Keskküla's works should not be interpreted on the basis of an existing photograph of a particular urban building or interior, but rather as a metaphysical space that is a blend of several existing ones, nevertheless rendered extremely realistic and believable through its photographic resemblance to an actual specific location. In fact, the role of photography in his work is not just as an end in itself, but as part of the artistic process that aimed to force a contrast between the use of slides to convey the image of an environment, and the final composition where Keskküla's personal intervention transforms it into a geometrically well-organized space.

I argue that the important contribution of Keskküla's hyperrealism to the contemporary non-conformist sphere lies exactly in this combination of an unreal dimension merged with realistic representation that blurs the boundaries between art and reality. He challenges the convention, accepted by the viewer, of the realistic nature of the picture, created by the illusion of three dimensions in a two-dimensional space. By transforming a real place into a fictional element and at the same time doing the reverse, Keskküla's hyperrealist paintings embrace both conceptual art and documentation, a sort of “conceptual realism”369 that was quite outstanding for the Estonian art sphere of the time. The technique of aerosol spray, often combined in his hyperrealist works with the

369 According to Keskküla, hyperrealism was something related to conceptualism, since “we cannot say that the object describes all […] the object is not a truthful information. All that is coming is already an interpretation”. Ibid.
use of cold and artificial colors, amplified such an effect. It also enabled Keskküla to convey in paintings like *A Lighting at the Construction site* (Fig.65), and *Evening* (Fig. 8) the illusion of diffused light in an artificial space, thus adding a dimension of unreality to the photographic-like representation.

A consequence of this use of photography in painting is the dimension of ambiguity that pervades most of Keskküla's hyperrealist paintings, reinforced by the artist's apparent detachment and lack of any personal emotional attitude toward the portrayed subject. This induces an unbalancing sense of estrangement in the viewer, who is presented with a society where there is no space for anything or anyone: not for culture, not for creation, and not for humanity.

However, Ando Keskküla considered his paintings to be fragments of an ongoing process, rather than finished products. As he explains:

“Art is a system of coding and decoding. Their intersection is the appropriate linguistic mastery. Yet, I do not think that with film, video, photo, the reality would be more intimate, quite the contrary. I would say the more the image resembles the so-called reality, the less real it is. Meaning that reality is ever more limited by its own reality. In this respect, painting can be regarded as a super programming language.”

Here Keskküla establishes two important elements that shaped his approach as an artist: denying that a close resemblance between the photographic image and the original source makes the former more “real”, and defining painting as a “super programming language” that brings the viewer closer to reality. This second aspect may be traced to the

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370 Although Tonu Virve was the first painter in Estonia to use the airbrush in his painting *High Raise* in 1974, Ando Keskküla brought the technique to a higher level of development. According to Ilmar Malin that Keskkula was “the first to have successfully implemented the aerograph.” Ilmar Malin, “Uuema Maali Tunnusiooni,” *Sirp ja Vasar* 5/05/1978: 8.
371 Lapin, Ando Kesskla: unpaginated.
influence of Yuri Lotman's theory. The definition of painting as a “super programming language” closely recalls Lotman's definition of art as a “secondary modeling system”. In fact, for Lotman, art is modeled after the “primary modeling system” of language, which is able to convey an array of alternate meanings. Furthermore, art is also a system suitable for storing very large amounts of complex information that in turn could also transform the viewer's perception.\footnote{Lotman, “Trudy po znakovym sistemam,” 20.}

It is precisely through painting that Keskküla aims to “bring the viewer closer to reality” in order to open his or her perception of it. In fact, this reality is an entity that encompasses, as mentioned, both a visible and recognizable place—an industrial interior, an apartment, or a harbor—and a timeless dimension. Keskküla transforms the perception of the viewer used to a certain image of reality by presenting the existence of a more complex and multi-faceted one. Equally important, he opens an active dialogue with his fellow abstract artists of the contemporary non-conformist by introducing new creative solutions transcending the dichotomy of realism and abstraction.

The complexity of Keskküla's hyperrealist work prompted different interpretations by Estonian critics: Maria Shashkina saw his approach as deeply concerned about the inner world of his contemporaries, while attempting to uncover the figurative world primarily through the human environment.\footnote{Shashkina and Keskküla, Ando Keskküla; 15.} For others like Sirje Helme, “his approach to the environment – whether it is a natural or artificial environment – is that of an intellectual manipulation; the environment, which is treated figuratively will become a metaphor.”\footnote{Sirje Helme, “Ando Keskküla,” Eesti Kunstnikud (Tallinn: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998): 57}
However, the reception of Keskküla's hyperrealism differed from one critic to another, the vast majority of contemporary art critics and historians agreed that his artworks were an example to be emulated by younger generations of artists.

As a result of this broad critical response, the impact of Keskküla's work on the Estonian art sphere remains considerable and expanded beyond Estonia's borders; his solo exhibition in 1975 at the Tallinn Art Hall resulted not only in praise from art experts but also his admittance to the Soviet Estonian Artists Union in the same year. Additionally, even during the Soviet period, when borders were closed to most non-conformist artists, Keskküla was given the opportunity to design several exhibitions in Moscow and occasionally even abroad.

Despite differing and occasionally discordant interpretations from critics and artists, Keskküla's hyperrealism was a fundamental contribution to the art sphere of the time. As an architect, he was deeply involved in the technical and urban processes Estonia was experiencing in the 1970s, a decade that saw the country increasingly concerned about the threat of cultural Russification to the Estonian language and national identity. However, Instead of seeking refuge in abstract or utopian worlds, or in a pacified representation of reality, Keskküla challenged the viewer as well as himself to face the constantly changing paradigms—political, social and cultural—his country was experiencing under the Soviet occupation.

Keskküla's creative principles were to perceive the limit of the modernist idiom, remain aware of the influence of the environment on his own art production, and understand the laws of life in the contemporary urban environment. Moreover, although the human being seems forgotten in his paintings, Keskküla reveals a deep understanding
of the human experience by examining the visual reality before our eyes, the eyes of his contemporaries. His use of visual techniques and aesthetic possibilities of photography also played an important role in broadening the horizons of young artists from the 1970's, such as Jaan Elken, the main artist of the second phase of hyperrealism in Estonia, whose art production will be described in the next section.
2.3 Jaan Elken’s Personal Dialogue with Tallinn’s Architecture

As part of the second stage of Estonian hyperrealism, which developed at the end of the 1970s, Jaan Elken expanded its approach by putting a greater emphasis than Keskküla on the photographic source imagery, combining it with a strong pictorial and personal brush style. In fact, despite the photographic vision that dominates Elken's hyperrealist works, the artist's subjectivity paradoxically is embodied by a painterly free gesture. In this way, he distances his representations from being mere photo-reproductions. In fact, hyperrealist works often failed to receive respect from some contemporary Soviet art critics, who considered them a mere technical transference of a photographic image onto canvas. Enn Poldross in particular pointed out what he perceived as their lack of professionalism, as well as their insecurity in interpreting the hyperrealism philosophy.377

On the contrary, the conflict between the subjectivity of Elken’s personal style and the objectivity of a photograph allowed him to explore the possibility that an authentic reproduction of a photograph, when paired with a biographical component, delivers a deeply personal agenda. This may be one reason that art historian Mari Laanemets claims that the Estonian hyperrealism of the second half of the 1970s is semantically superior to the later photorealistic variation.378 Her distinction, as Jeremy Canwell points out, “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 beginning of Elken's creative career was characterized by both local and foreign influences: the former consisted of both the architectural training he received at the Estonian State Art Institute in Tallinn, which included a well-rounded education in arts and sciences, and his dialogue with Tallinn's contemporary intellectual sphere. He also closely studied the work of the Tallinn Architect School group active in the same years. While the latter included literary sources such as international books and magazines from the United States and Europe, by Elken's own admission, the foreign models referenced in the painterly technique of his hyperrealist work were taken primarily from Ursula Meyer's book *Conceptual Art* (which reached Estonia via art critic Jaak Kangilaski) and the Polish magazines *Stuk Hout* and *Builten Kunstmagazine*, along with some references to American artists Edward Hopper and Wayne Thiebaud. In particular, Elken cites Edward Hopper as an important predecessor for his personal interpretation of hyperrealism. The particular feeling of loneliness and human individuality displayed by Hopper's characters, which reflected his personal vision of modern American life, resonated in Elken's cold and deserted representations of Tallinn.

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380 Elken revealed to the author, primarily because he could easily buy and read them in the privacy of his home. Author's undocumented interview, October 2011.
381 Elken graduated from the Tallinn 21 High School where he was attending a special English language class which, in part, encouraged his interest in Anglo-American art and culture.
382 Wayne Thiebaud, an American hyperrealist artist, became famous for his colorful paintings depicting commonplace objects — lipsticks, paint cans, ice cream cones, pastries, and hot dogs—as well as for his landscapes, cityscapes and figure subjects. He was also associated with pop art due to his focus on objects of mass culture. Thiebaud's technique was characterized by the use of heavy pigment and exaggerated colors to depict his subjects, which also often included reproductions of advertisements.
Elken completed his studies in 1977 with a graduation project focused on the regeneration of the triangular quarter of Voidu Square, Lauristini Street and Parnu Highway in Tallinn, and later found a job at the Tallinn Head Office of Architecture and Planning, where he worked for two years as a city architect. However, after winning the first prize at the Baltic young artists triennial that took place in Vilnius in 1979, he left architecture to exclusively pursue painting.

Although Elken transferred his passion from architecture to painting, his interest and personal involvement in Tallinn's architecture and urban planning remained strong; his compositions of the second half of the 1970s were usually based on photographs of Tallinn's streets and suburban neighborhoods personally taken by the artist. This could be partly explained by his job as a city architect, where one of the assignments was to take pictures of areas that were planned to be renovated by the Tallinn Head Office of Architecture and Planning Projects. For Elken the transfer of a photograph he had personally taken to the medium of painting became a perfect solution, to show “the absurdity of the city's environment when Tallinn was a Russian city on the level of street signs.” From the late 1970s to the first half of the 1980s, Elken painted snapshot-like images of dirty and gloomy streets, interiors, and residential areas of Tallinn, which he transformed into symbols of the existential condition of loneliness and alienation.

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383 According to Elken, he was able to borrow the original designs of nearly all the buildings from the City Architecture Administration archives. However, although he included the existing old architecture into the renovation project, the final version was more utopian than practical. Elken's intention in this regard is confirmed by his words: “the realization of the gap between reality and utopia becomes the main impulse for seeking a new way of expression”. Juske Ants, “The Work of Jaan Elken—an Interim Summary,” Jaan Elken, (Tallinn, 2011): 8

384 Elken was using the ORWO films (an abbreviation for "Original Wolfen"), produced in the East Germany after the Second World War. He remembers that he was very selective in choosing the motives to photograph: “the searching lasted for hours and days, with a camera around my neck like a sketchpad. And rolls of ORWO slide film”. Liivrand, “Identity:Painter,” 104

385 Ibid.
Estonian and Russian citizens were experiencing during the years of Soviet occupation in the residential districts of Tallinn. Appropriately, Elken defines his *modus operandi* as “anthropological research of the Soviet urban environment,” particularly of residential districts such as Lasnamae where he lived and maintained a studio in the late 1970s.

A starting point to analyze Elken's art production could be how he defined himself as an artist: “In terms of method, I am a hyperrealist; by social leaning, a critical realist; in spirit I am an incurable romantic.” These three different styles—hyperrealism, realism, and romanticism—already stress how Elken’s creative method resists unilateral labeling. In fact, during the development of his career, Elken's technique proved to be based on stylistic dichotomies—realism versus abstraction, painterly versus plain surfaces, painting versus texts—blended together to create a powerful synthesis.

Regarding the first dichotomy—realism versus abstraction—in his early hyperrealist works, Elken created a balanced dialogue between the photographic image and the abstract areas of color, which he painted with different nuances of strength and intensity. However, an intensification of the abstract elements is progressively evident in Elken's hyperrealist works from the beginning of the 1980s throughout the 1990s.

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386 The art critic Anders Harm does not agree with the idea that Elken's work fits into the category of hyperrealism. In Harm's opinion, the artist is rather "an existentialist painter of urban loneliness than a urban city-man". Anders Härm, “Lost/hyper Reality (?): Concerning Elken From an Anthropologist Point of View,” Kunst.ee 1 (2001): 12-14. Harm's point of view could be in part valid since existentialism investigates the meaning of the human being's existence in the world and so did Jaan Elken, who scrutinize the existence of Soviet citizen in Estonia. However, existentialists are not concerned about everyday life, but they aim primarily to transcendentalism. On the contrary, Elken is concerned about the trivial reality which surrounds him in order to decipher it and consequently to better understand himself as a human being, and as a citizen who is part of that system.


388 Elken's studio was located at the 10th floor in a building without lift. In order to reach his floor he had to pass through nine stories whose walls were filled with “urbanist symbols” and graffiti, which become part of his imagery and that later felt compelled to introduce in his works, as he admits “perhaps my hand was forced, living in an environment with that degree of visual pollution?” Liivrand Harry, “Identity:Painter,” 110.

389 In ibid., 104.
Further, in his works during the 2000s, the relation between image and abstraction is reversed to such an extent that the figurative subject slowly disappears and is substituted by predominant abstract zones, extremely plastic brushstrokes, and graffiti texts. However, as Elken mentioned, he was also an “incurable romantic,” which he clearly expressed through his “need to leave his mark” as part of his creative process through a highly perceptible painterly gesture. A particular precision in the rendering of some details, often biographical, became an integral part of his narrative, as he admits:

“...narration is essential to any sort of reception process. Or that the narrative is created from something else, from the important and unimportant factors in the artist's life history, in the form of a parallel world to the artwork. After all, we consume reality through narratives, and every one of us assembles a matrix from a chaos of facts.”

Indeed, the artist's personal life and experience was often an important element used to filter and convey the outside reality in his hyperrealist works, as confirmed by Leonhard Lapin: “[Elken's] inner world makes contact with the public world, and in some of his works one could describe these as re-created historical documents that are deeply personal.”

A biographical component is also displayed by Elken in the objects and places he chose to represent, often related to his own everyday life. As he explains, “my point of departure has mainly been the environment I know, with which I share some sort of direct experience.” Yet, like Keskküla, Elken did not draw too much attention to his own attitudes by depicting motives and subjects too personal or too connected to his own memory, which would risk alienating the viewer's attention and interest. He instead

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390 Talvoja, Eesti hüperrealism- kompromisside kunst: 51.
withdrew to the position of an observer, letting Tallinn's environment in the 1970s “defined by countless individual objects and street signs specific to the era,” convey his narration. And like Keskküla, Elken attributes to everyday objects not only a plain practical function but also the power to create a network of functional connections that shape our environment and our perception of it. According to Ando Keskküla, we can understand the environment through the objects that communicate it for us, since objects like a wheel or a road are means of communication that extend human capabilities and determine the way people interact with their surroundings.

As a means of communication that carry an emotional component along with an aesthetic one, objects also form a person's private or more familiar environment, such as the door of one's own building in *Triumphant Arch with Pobeda* (1981) (Fig. 79), a shower in *Men's Section* (1980) (Fig. 68), or the window of a house landing in *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1978) (Fig. 80). Indeed, by enlarging, radically cropping, and representing from unusual angles these banal or trivial subjects, Elken affirms that even the most common objects are worthy of attention and can be considered reliable catalysts of the absurd decade of Soviet urbanism and mass-culture aesthetics in Estonia. As he remarks, “architecture […] attracts the detritus of lives, the times, memories, our passions crises and success. I am the kind of artist who feeds primarily on the environment and visual semiotics.”

Elken's hyperrealist paintings also magnify and center places that are often unnoticed by casual passersby such as street corners, bus stops, train depots, and highways, in order to force viewers to reconsider their personal daily routine and

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394 Ibid.
395 Ibid.
396 Liivrand, “Identity: Painter,” 105
relationship with the urban environment. The artist himself clarifies that such places are not randomly chosen: “the choice of image was everything. I doubt, that I could express the same in words. I hope that that energetic field is recorded in those paintings from that time.” The recreation of the energetic “atmosphere” of the city, which formed people's daily life, and its rhythm, sometimes schizophrenic, sometimes quite surreal—as in Väike-Õismäe (1981) (Fig. 4)—is recurrent in Elken's hyperrealist production.

Subjects introduced in paintings like No Title (1978) (Fig. 24) or Tallinn. Kopli Depot (1982) (Fig. 62), could be considered a window on Elken's private life and family history. Both works aim at inducing or unlocking in the viewer certain associations: the first refers to a painful situation for Estonian citizens—the closing of the country's borders by the Soviet authorities after the occupation and annexation in 1940—while the second was the place where the journey began for many who were deported to Siberia, Elken's parents included. It is therefore understandable that Elken once defined himself a “political artist,” since he never wished to embellish his compositions or to avoid coming to terms with reality in order to be accepted by the authorities. On the contrary, Elken looked directly at what was at the core of contemporary Estonian society’s problems and narrated it through images, thus fostering both a personal and collective awareness of them.

The Hyperrealist movement lasted in Estonia until the early 1980s, when Keskküla and Elken turned to more painterly idioms and video art became the prevalent

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398 The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz developed the theory of the “atmosphere” and “atmospheric places” within the discourse of neo-phenomenology, for further information see Chapter One of this dissertation.
399 After the war, Jan Elken's parents were deported to Siberia where his mother became a Sovkhoz milkmaid.
means of expression for the younger generation of Estonian artists. At the beginning of the 1980s Estonian hyperrealism entered its last stage, with work that took a radical turn toward anecdotal and narrative elements, along with sentimentality. The main exponents of this new trend were the painters Ilmar Kruusamäe and Miljard Kilk, whose style primarily aimed at creating the illusion of a photograph on a canvas, by representing snapshot-like scenes taken from their own private life with friends and family members. Such a radically different approach from that of previous hyperrealist artists eventually led to a controversy within the art criticism of the time, and to art critic Sirje Helme's attribution of the term “slide paintings” to Kruusamäe and Milk's works. The term, meant to underline their apparent lack of tension or psychological depth in contrast to the works of Keskkula and Elken, would mark the transformation of hyperrealism into a radically different phenomenon.
2.4 Hyperrealism in the 1980s in Soviet Russia

At the beginning of the 1980s, hyperrealism found a new following in Russia, primarily in Moscow, where the style entered a new phase of development. Artists such as Semyon Faibisovich, Sergei Sherstiuk, Alexander Petrov, Sergei Geta, Sergei Basilev, Georgii Kichigin, and Sergi Shablavin, among many others, directed their lens on the human being and his or her social environment, exposing the ambiguities and difficulties of Soviet society by recording Moscow's urban life with its crowds, street events, and people's domestic routines.

Moreover, personal experience became the medium to capture and frame that part of Soviet society left out by official socialist realist works; instead of representing life as a series of heroic figures and memorable deeds, hyperrealists in Russia drew attention to characters and situations that were considered too trivial or not “cheerful” enough for Socialist standards. With a personal camera, they wandered around the city of Moscow to catch “insignificant” moments in the daily routines of strangers, family members, or friends, then transferred them to canvas, thus raising the trivial to a subject of ‘high’ art. At the same time, they cast these common situations and people as epitomes of the dramatic changes brought about by Perestroika in the Soviet society in the 1980s. Indeed, as I argue below, Semion Faibisovich and Ukrainian Sergei Sherstiuk's artworks are

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401 A network between the city of Tallinn and Moscow was already established in the 1960s, with the leadership of the Estonian artist Ulo Sooster, who settled in Moscow in 1956. Along with his circle of friends, Sooster founded an experimental laboratory focused on collages and abstract works which contributed to build a channel with the unofficial art sphere in the city. This connection was perpetuated throughout the 1980s by Leonid Bazhanov along with some intellectual from the Moscow University, who shared his interest on the relation between the process of modernization and its effects on the environment. A dialogue between Estonian and Russian artists was also established during public events as the seminar organized by the Moscow Technical Aesthetics Center in 1981, one of the key events of the decade, which counted between its participants several Estonian artists. Another important moment for the dialogue between Russian and Estonian artists was the exhibitions *Photography and Art* held at the Tartu Museum, where Ilya Kabakov and Ando Keskküla' works were displayed together.
suspended in an ‘open time’ between the tradition of the Moscow underground of the 1960s and the 1980s generation's original and shrewd way of entering into a dialogue with the wider art world.

By choosing ordinary people as their subjects, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich subvert the ostentation and grandiosity of Soviet representation by creating new archetypes of the Soviet citizen. Mundane actions remain mundane in their representation, and it is exactly this ordinariness, attributable to anyone’s life, that compels the viewer to empathize with the work. The ‘this-could-be-me’ effect also shows Sherstiuk and Faibisovich's skill in capturing and highlighting the timelessness of human behavior, which helps to build a connection between the viewer and the artist. The resemblance of the paintings to their photographic sources also persuades the viewer of the real development of the scene that he or she is "witnessing". The two artists' approach to the medium of photography, should be seen in the context of the Russian and Baltic photography of the 1960s-1980s, which witnessed the development of the so-called “new Soviet photography” characterized by a shared space between photographer and subject, who exist on equal grounds in a continuous process of interaction, dialogue, and mutual influence. Aleksandras Macjuskas, Vitas Luckus, Alexander Slyusarev, and Boris Mikhailov, who were some of the main interpreters of this “new photography”, extensively captured the lives of ordinary people in a very personal style, elevating the ordinary to the level of the exceptional.402

However, their relationship with photography is much more complex than what catches the eye. In fact, it is important to stress that Sherstiuk and Faibisovich staged their compositions before making them, although each in a different way. While

402 For the description of some of their works see Chapter Three and Four.
Sherstiuk literally planned the position of his subjects before taking the picture, Faibisovich began with the composition in his mind, then tried to find a copy as close as possible to it in the environment and people around him. Both aimed not only to “translate” onto canvas what was in front of their eyes, but also to draw attention to the alienation experienced on a daily basis by those who lived in the suburbs of Moscow, often by confining their characters into private or narrow spaces in order to expose and amplify the conditions of constraint and immobility they perceived around them.

By doing so, they subverted the official Soviet myth of ‘happy and optimistic builders of Communism’ to instead present a more nuanced imagery of late Soviet everyday life—Faibisovich through images of dark and gloomy means of transportation, and Sherstiuk through claustrophobic domestic interiors.

In *The Universe of Mind*, Yuri Lotman claims: “Humanity, immersed in its cultural space, always creates around itself an organized spatial sphere. This sphere includes both ideas and semiotic models and people's recreative activity, since the world which people artificially create correlates with their semiotic models,” a statement that is mirrored by Faibisovich and Sherstiuk's hyperrealist representations that open a metaphorical window onto to the interconnections within Soviet society and the personal inner lives of single human beings. Their art productions of the 1980s can be read as a crafty reflection of people's lives as a chain of monotonous and repetitive actions—taking a bus, or train to go to work, queuing to buy food and liquor, or watching television in an empty apartment. These images reflect generalized forms of human behavior. It is in these repetitive moments that the artist, implicitly looming behind the image, transforms

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Lotman, *The Universe of Mind, A Semiotic Theory of Culture*: 203
everyday situations to the archetypal—“a typology of behavior, a phase of companionship that characterized those years,” in the words of art critic Olga Kozlova.

Sherstiuk and Faibisovich chose the to represent the experience of Soviet daily life, or быт, as a way to challenge the conventional and accepted vision of both socialist realism and the by then progressively commercialized non-conformist art of the 1980s. By stepping outside the canonical frameworks of their decade, their work expanded and diversified the imagery of Soviet life and society.

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404 Kozlova, Fotorealizm: 47
2.5 Sergei Sherstiuk: A Look Behind the Curtain of Soviet Domestic Life

Sergei Sherstiuk played an important role in the art sphere of the 1980s since shifting away from representing the ‘macrocosm’ of public spaces that had occupied the hyperrealism of Keskkla, Elken, and Faibisovich, and focusing instead on the domestic lives of his own friends and family members in Moscow. His “domestic hyperrealism” opposed the image of Soviet private life depicted by the official art sphere by presenting diverse scenarios of life within the walls of Soviet apartments that raised new subject matter.

Sherstiuk began his artistic career at the Taras Shevchenko Republic State Art School in Kyiv, graduating in the 1970s together with some of his friends who later became part of the group of artists known as the “Kyiv School”. During his years there, Sherstiuk cultivated an interest in Western art and esoteric and oriental studies that would later have a great impact on his work., mainly due to his acquaintance with the artist Sergei Yakutovich and the philosopher Fedir Tetyanych. According to Maksim Dobrovolsky, Sherstiuk's friend and biographer, while Yakutovich played a key role in originating and shaping the Kyiv School's aesthetics and in introducing Sherstiuk to Western art, Cézanne in particular, Fedir Tetyanych initiated the artist into the history of

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405 This “enlarged family” became an important aspect in Sherstiuk's life, as his friend Sergei Geta explains “Our closeness was very important to us because society was fractured into different groups and clans”. Oleg Burlak, *Art Emigrants*, exh.cat., (Kiev: Modern Fine Arts Museum of Ukraine, 2008): 238
406 Sergei Yakutovich was a classmate and close friend of Sherstiuk, He was an Ukrainian painter, graphic designer, and book illustrator whose deeply individual style found its best expression in graphic art and in particular in etching. He created illustrations for both international and national famous literature books. Sergei's father, George Yakutovich, also a graphic artist, was known for his work as an art director in Sergei Parajanov's film “Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors”.
407 Fedir Tetyanych was a Ukrainian artist, philosopher, and “unrecognized saint”. His philosophy focused primarily on the concept of freedom which he developed both in his pictures and in his performances. He based his life on the concepts of “Free Puliya” and “Graceful Infinity”, two terms coined by himself to describe the eternal free pulsation of the Universe and the eternal grace of God. Later “Free Puliya” became his nickname within some Ukrainian artistic circles. Tetyanych was also one of the initiators of the art performance movement in post-soviet Ukraine.
metaphysics, which he believed shared a common language with the original foundations and laws of fine art.\textsuperscript{408} This had such a strong impact on Sherstiuk's aesthetic that he even created a character based on Tetyanych in his 1997 novel \textit{Crash}. \\

During the years spent in Kiev, Sherstiuk experimented with different art forms and performances that already evidenced a full awareness of the country's lack of political freedoms, described by himself as “pure nonconformism” and “acts of defiance”\textsuperscript{409} despite not being politically explicit. Sergei Bazin, Sherstiuk's friend and member of the Kyiv School, explained:

“Of course each of us living in a totalitarian state had our own degree of freedom and lack of it […]. Therefore, the problem of freedom will, of course, worry everyone who is disturbed by lack of it. And so it will be present in each work, either by Kabakov or Sherstiuk – doesn't matter[…] We did not have that much of fear like people who were involved with politics and political dissidence did. Politics for us was a soiled thing. We aspired to a natural life condition, to have no connection with politics.”\textsuperscript{410}

Bazin's words also reveal the ambiguity of how these artists perceived their work in such a highly politicized context. As Canwell affirms, “by insisting on the autonomy of their approach typical of what Fredric Jameson called the ideology of modernism,”\textsuperscript{411} on the one hand they did not bend to the dictates of official art, but on the other they resisted the label of "political artists".

Years later, in an interview with art historian Renee Baigell, Shertiuk confirmed that already at the beginning of his career as an artist, he had come to believe that Soviet mass culture and everything connected with it was fake:

\textsuperscript{408} Maksim Dobrovol’skii, \textit{Angel in the Doorway}, 233.  
\textsuperscript{410} In ibid., 357  
“I don't know anybody of my generation who was able to connect his life to his art. We organized performances and spectacles that were separated from our lives. We tried to turn our lives into art, to elevate them into art. But it did not really work. The actual lived life and art did not mix.”412

In the same interview, he also recalled the difficulties of living as a citizen and as an artist in a tightly controlled society:

“We had to live with the hierarchical system that included people from the Ministry of Culture and artists' unions. These organizations controlled our cultural lives. They appointed curators who knew nothing about art. They were simply appointed, and then they passed judgment on our art based on their ideology, which for art was socialist realism.”413

After moving with his family to Moscow following his father's new assignment as a military general, Sherstiuk had the opportunity to see for the first time the works of some American hyperrealist painters in an exhibition organized at the Pushkin State Museum in 1975. Among the works exhibited, Chuck Close's giant self-portrait had a considerable impact on Sherstiuk's work. As he admitted, “Close influenced me for about a year and a half […] I never imitated him, but I felt like a disciple.”414 Indeed, in the following years, Sherstiuk experienced a remarkable change, both personal and artistic, while he was enrolled at the History and Art department of Lomonosov State University. This is confirmed by the artist in an interview with the art critic Baigell:

“after the abstractions of the late 1970s I began representations of natural phenomena that were totally fictitious. […] The viewer had to decode the underlying meaning and had to penetrate my world of illusions. With perestroika, this illusory world began to annoy me because it was not real or honest.”415

In the same interview Sherstiuk also confirmed his decision to “stop making fictitious paintings,” becoming more interested in "[himself] as an artist, more involved

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412 Renee Baigell and Mathew Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika: 357
413 In ibid., 359
414 In ibid., 358
415 In ibid., 365
with [his] own individuality.” In 1980, the search for a deeper connection with his own artistic voice brought Sherstiuk to form the so-called “Group of Six” with Aleksei Tegin, Sergei Basilev, Sergei Geta, Igor Kopystianski, and Nikolai Filatov, who had previously belonged to the Kyiv School and had moved as well to Moscow. The group's internal dynamics were characterized by a constant exchange of ideas and a close interest in photography which they regarded as a new form to represent reality. In response to a question from art critic Olga Kozlova about why they had rejected the traditional painting (as part of a self-inquiry submitted to the artists in 1994), the participants revealed a harsh criticism toward the form. According to Kopystyanski, for example “the activity of the language of photography could not be compared with the figurative and plastic lethargy of traditional painting,” while for Filatov, “photographs and slides seemed livelier than paintings,” and Bazilev claimed that he had “never been satisfied with the possibilities of pure plastic.” Thus, the group distanced themselves from what they'd perceived in Soviet Russian art as obsolete and no longer able to represent their contemporary conditions.

Sergei Geta summarized the background and main goal of the group as follows:

“We were brought up by what we actually saw and experienced. We had a separate life 'for the others': we were painting collective farms, plants, and stuff like that. But the other parallel life was a real, absolutely private, inviolable and truly intimate for each of us. That life was saturated with a powerful taste of Romanticism which made our life different from anything else. It was our own life free from everything.”

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416 In ibid., 356.
417 “Группа 6” провела самоопрос. На вопрос: “С чем был связан ваш отказ от традиционной живописи? “ ее участники ответили, в частности: “Активность языка фотографии не шла ни в какое сравнение с образной и пластической вялостью традиционной живописи” (И. Копыстяныйский); “Работая в традиционной системе, чувствовал ее искусственность и ограниченность для современной жизни. Фотографии и слайды казались живее живописи” (Н. Филатов); “Меня никогда не удовлетворяли возможности чистой пластики” (С. Базилев). Kozlova, Fotorealizm: 27.
418 Burlak, Art Emigrants: 238.
Indeed, the artists' method can be characterized by the use of the photographic medium to capture their subjects—usually people they knew or directly came into contact with—in spontaneous situations, thus adding a further element of reality to their compositions. This confinement in a private dimension and the search for a personal artistic individuality, in pure romantic spirit, brings them closer to their subjects not only emotionally but literally and physically through a series of close-ups, quite unique in the panorama of Soviet hyperrealism.

Moreover, the numerous close-ups of friends and ordinary people by the Group of Six artists, like Sergei Geta's *Women* (1983) (Fig. 81), Sergei Bazilev's *Doll* (1983) (Fig. 82), or Sherstiuk's *Look Who Is Here!* (1981) (Fig. 83), to name a few, reverse the perspective of Keskküla, Elken, or Urmas Pedanik's hyperrealism, where the urban environment, usually devoid of any human presence, is the angle used to criticize the imposition of the Soviet system on the population. On the other side, the Group of Six focuses on the impact and effects of such system on the population's daily lives by returning to the human being as the center of the painting composition—an artistic path that would be partly shared, even if from a different perspective, by Semyon Faibisovich in the second half of the 1980s.

In fact, the Group of Six artists aimed at capturing with their cameras particular moments in the stream of ordinary people's lives. In particular, their hyperrealist art production heavily relied on integrating unexpected situations into their artistic

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419 Sherstiuk's first audience was just his close group of friends/artists, with whom he exchanged opinions and ideas, and privately exhibited his works in their apartments. However, Sherstiuk’s main concern was to exhibit publicly—regardless of the existing ideology—in order to make his work visible to everyone, official artists included. This approach led him to displaying his paintings in official exhibitions, mostly group shows, from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s.

420 Pedanik was along with Elken part of the second wave of hyperrealism in Estonia.
production,\textsuperscript{421} which would unveil a deeper essence in the process. Sherstiuk and the other members considered the artist to be the primary medium and the camera a secondary one, through which everyday life with its contradictory moments could be captured and framed.

As a matter of fact, Sherstiuk began to explore hyperrealism precisely at the moment when he managed to buy a camera and could finally shoot his own pictures. However, it should be remarked here that by his own admission, the importance of photography in his work has been secondary; like Faibisovich, he always refused to be called photorealist. As the artist recalls: “I became not a photorealist, but a hyperrealist. Photographs were always just one of my materials. My interest was to affect the viewer directly.”\textsuperscript{422} Indeed, Sherstiuk did not create his hyperrealist works simply to show his skill in creating paintings of accurate, realistic precision. As it had been for Jaan Elken and Ando Keskküla, Sherstiuk's expression of his own artistic voice through the insertion of random spots of paint or visible brushstrokes is fundamental to awaken in the viewer the awareness that a photograph, or an art work that mimics it, is not an objective representation of what is depicted, but actually contains a component of the creator’s subjective point of view or personal agenda. In works such as \textit{Come In!}, for example, Sherstiuk aggressively broke this illusion of a photograph by deliberately putting spurts of paint on the canvas, thus simultaneously preserving its integrity as a painting and reminding the viewer of the artistic process involved in its creation.

\textsuperscript{421} Sergei Bazilev expanded this notion when he said that “you have to take pictures all the time, so that eventually one the most accidental shot would turn out to be the most essential.” Oleg Burlak, \textit{Art Emigrants}: 237

\textsuperscript{422} R. Baigell and M. Baigell, \textit{Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika}: 358. Sherstiuk was not the only artist of the Group of Six to prefer the term ‘hyperrealism’ (see interviews with the artists in Oleg Burlak’s \textit{Art Emigrants}).
Significant examples that show how Sherstiuk engaged the camera's "false objectivity" are the paintings *Look Who is Here!* (Fig. 83), and *Artist and Actor* (1982) (Fig. 112) whose subjects seem to be caught unexpectedly by a voyeuristic intrusion while in the privacy of their home. However, such apparent spontaneous reactions are actually the result of a previous staging by the artist before taking the photograph that was to be transferred onto canvas, a characteristic that can be partly traced back to Sherstiuk's time spent working in contact with the theater scene as set designer and by being later married with the well-known Russian actress Elena Mayorova.423

By staging his subjects and inserting into the composition an element that destroys the apparent naturalness of the situation represented, Sherstiuk also aimed to break one of the main illusions of his time: that a private apartment was a place where it was really possible to seek a private, intimate, and safe space in the otherwise disconnected, controlling, and surveilling society of the Soviet era. The private dimension of a family apartment, invariably featured by official propaganda as the one of the state’s biggest achievements, turned out to be just another of its deceptions, since the lack of privacy was still an issue given the sound-permeability of the walls that separated one apartment from another, forcing a participation in the lives of the neighbors. By magnifying and at the same time framing everyday situations in cramped or claustrophobic spaces, Sherstiuk implies either forced intimacy or the isolation that people felt in an imposed urban environment such as that of Soviet residential areas in Moscow. Moreover, the artist's choice for a cold color palette to represent both his friends and their apartments,

423 Elena Mayorova, played in the film *Forgotten Melody for Flute*, centered on the difference between the life of Soviet officials and ordinary people at the end of Soviet power. The movie was censored by the authorities since it openly displayed bureaucratism of officials, sex and the meager life of ordinary Soviet citizens.
the insertion of light white strokes resembling the flash of a camera, and the often rigid postures given to his characters, as in the paintings *Hey, We are Waiting for You!*, (Fig. 84), *Islands* (1982) (Fig. 85), and *The Flash* (1983) (Fig. 86), hint at this condition of being constantly aware of living in a controlled society.

By representing a scene that allegedly conveys a “true representation of life” but is actually is the result of the artist's intervention, Sherstiuk reproduces the same *modus operandi* of socialist realism, characteristic particularly of the Stalinist period, where painting borrows the reality-effect of the photographed image in order to present a fact or an event that had previously been manipulated for propaganda purposes. Yet, there is no such purpose in Sherstiuk's work. His aim is instead to show how the photographic image can become the opposite of what is believed to be its essence: rather than spontaneity, it can approach the point of being a radical construction. An example in this regard is Sherstiuk's diptych *The Man of One Family* (1985) (Figs. 87-88), which despite appearing to be painted from two family portraits is not based on photographs but on a request from the artist’s father and on the stories he told Sherstiuk about the men represented, who include his uncle and grandfather. According to Sherstiuk, “Modern man is between reality and its illusion,” an ambivalence that plays an important role in several of his works where random brush strokes or spots of paint are juxtaposed into the photographic-like image, as in *Come in!*, (1982) (Fig. 9), *The Poet* (1984) (Fig. 89), or *The Television Set* (1983) (Fig. 90). In these paintings the artist's personal gesture powerfully crashes into the composition, not only destroying the illusion of the photo-like image, but extending its critique to the very ground for the possibility of objectivity in art, and of mimesis in realism.

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424 Burlak, *Art-Emigrants*, 102
Following the above-mentioned analyses, it becomes evident that the apparently simple domestic scenarios portrayed by Sherstiuk hide a collision between an external text (the title), the image represented, and a hidden subtext that brings in internal semantics and metaphorical elements, thus precluding complete understanding in viewers who are alien to the work's geographical and temporal context. Sergei Bazilev comments on this aspect of Sherstiuk's works:

“Despite evident and transparent openness […] only the initiated person can understand what this is really about. However, on the other hand, this conversation is not concealed from anyone. There is no secret language, encoding or some kind of conspiracy though there is a language indeed, a language of communication.”

Sherstiuk's fondness for filling his compositions with a background story that requires a deeper or more attentive reading could be linked to his work as a writer. As a matter of fact, literature was an important influence for all the artists within the Group of Six, whose artistic training was first shaped by Russian classics, especially the novels of Gogol and Dostoevsky, which focused on the life of ordinary people in a society they could neither control nor understand. Sergei Bazin goes even further in establishing a connection with Dostoevsky when he affirms that “we took a fancy to his novels because we had realized once everything dramatic art and means of such new language as cinematograph had, was in fact invented by Dostoevsky.”

Another writer, this time British, who was formative in Sherstiuk's fondness for small, extremely accurate details and enlarged snapshots was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In Doyle's novels, Sherlock Holmes, his most famous character, applies the famous deductive method that consists of analyzing details to reach a general principle that

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425 In Ibid., 236
426 In Art-Emigrants, Sergei Bazin openly affirms that for the Kyiv School “appetite for books was almost the determinant for the genesis and maturing of our generation” In ibid., 237
427 Ibid.
would solve the murder case, often committed in a closed environment such as a room. Similarly, Sherstiu’s scenes also often take place in apartments, as in Islands, kitchens, as in The Flash, or studios, as in Artist and Actor, all of which he represents in a very detailed way, thus “solving” the mystery of how life actually was for the population in the Soviet Union during Perestroika. As Norton Dodge acutely summarized in the introduction for the exhibition catalog of Sherstiuk's solo show in 1990, "Each accomplished painting is like a riddle asking the viewer for an answer or solution."  

The notion of coding, or purposeful ambiguity implied in Dodge’s comment recalls another important source for Sherstiu’s art production in the 1980s: Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar.

Cortazar’s novels and poetry, according to Sherstiu’s close friend Maksim Dobrovol’skii, undoubtedly served as an inspiration for the Group of Six's interest in hyperrealism. Cortazar's first Russian translation appeared in the USSR in 1971 with a collection of short stories titled Drugoe Nebo (The Other Sky) and taught these artists about the "opportunities in fine arts which are offered by applying of optical means—the elementary institution of photography and cinema."  

In this regard, Dobrovol’skii particularly singles out the story Sliuni D’iavola (The Saliva of the Devil), which in 1966 became the inspiration for Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's film Blow Up. Cortazar's story is about an amateur photographer, Roberto Michael, who takes random pictures while wandering around a Parisian park on a Sunday morning. Suddenly, he comes across a woman and her son,
takes pictures of them, and magnifies them back at home. The images of the two, once taken from reality and fixed in the rigid structure of the photograph come alive again in the photographer’s mind and force him to rethink the scene.432

*The Saliva of the Devil* contributed also to sparking the artists' interest in the unnoticed aspects of everyday life:

“In Cortazar we actually liked exactly what we suspected: routine has a secret curtain which hides the other reality. An artist also has a feeling, that there is some other reality, otherwise, an artist would not have worked. The function of an artist is to create a different reality. While painting an artist creates a different reality on his canvas.”433

In the short story, Cortazar describes an apparently common and irrelevant situation from everyday life that, when increased to hypertrophic size, actually turns out to hide something deeper. Some interesting parallels can be traced between Sherstiuk and the character of the photographer, from both the novel and Antonioni’s film. First, both try to get closer to reality, to return things to their truth through a series of enlargements. Photography is their way to fight the emptiness of life—by grasping the revealing gesture, the expression that summarizes everything, or the rhythm that characterizes the lives of people around them—to match them with a universal idea. Second, for both, the main issue is how to convey the truth of what they witnessed or experienced, and at the same time to question whether such representation can be objective. This again recalls

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432 Julio Cortázar, *Las babas del diablo*, Saúl Yurkiévich and Gladis Anchieri (eds.), (Cuentos, Barcelona 2003): 295–308. An important influence for the group was also Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blow Up* (1966) that also exploits Cortázar’s story. The film follows a fashion photographer in London who meets and photographs a beautiful and mysterious woman in a park. The already unusual encounter takes a more sinister turn when the photographer blows up the negatives once in his studio. When he takes a look at an enlarged picture, he discovers that he might have caught a murder in progress that was happening behind the woman. Thus, what looked like an ordinary shot, actually unveils a different and more complicated reality.

433 Burlak, *Art-Emigrants*: 239
Sherstiuk’s aim to remind the viewer that what seems to be an objective and transparent representation of the world is, in fact, a creation of the artist who is the real “demiurge”.

Indeed, both Sherstiuk and Cortazar’s and Antonioni’s protagonists see the surrounding reality “photographically”, and then take a shot that would reproduce this *a priori* image they have pictured in their mind. In the *Saliva of the Devil*, Roberto Michael, after hanging the magnified picture on a wall of his room, tries to remember the scene he previously saw, in a comparative and melancholic operation between memory and the lost reality. Such “petrified memory”, as displayed in the photograph, lives in a dimension where the real dominant presence is the “nothing”—the absence of the physical subjects that are portrayed in it, a blurred memory of them, and a photograph which freezes just a moment in the flux of their lives. Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist works therefore become metaphors of the human existential condition—the whole ‘truth’ will always remain outside people’s grasp, and therefore an artwork can only capture fragments of it.

Sherstiuk’s interest in the flux of life prompted him to become a writer as well: among the books he wrote during his artistic career, two of his best-known texts are his diaries *Dzhazovye improvizatsii na temu smerti* [Jazz Improvisation on the Matter of Death] and *Ukradennaia kniga* [A Stolen Book]. The artist presents in chronological order, from the 1970s to 1990s, a recollection of the last decades historical events of the 20th century in the Soviet Union. Along with historical facts, Sherstiuk shares with the reader observations and concerns about life in the Soviet Union, personal philosophical ideas, and suggestions for new novels and even films.

The format of the diary finds a correspondence with Sherstiuk's hyperrealist cycles of works in the first half of the 1980s, where he partitioned his personal life experience and that of his friends into several paintings connected to each other by a wider theme, as for example in the series *Couple* (1981–1983), *Theater* (1982–1984), *Friendship* (1985), and *The Man of one Family* (1985).

Each of painting of the cycle becomes an ideal page of Sherstiuk's diary translated onto the canvas where he progressively develops, as if page after page, his personal reflection on the complexity of human existence and his own self-consciousness within the surrounding social and cultural world.

Speaking with art curator Elena Kornetchuk, Sherstiuk clearly explained his vision of his paintings as pages and the role of each within his art production:

“Culture is a book, and art is its page. The meaning of the book is unknown because its pages are infinite. No artist is given the opportunity to see the end. At times I think of myself as a man who is given a book printed on Xerox machine. The book drops to the floor and I crawl along the floor assembling the book, page by page, not reading it. Only at times I read the top few lines of a page. It sounds like the truth. And that is the subject of my paintings.”

Sherstiuk’s above statement confirms what I previously argued in this chapter: he is aware that the extent of the whole truth is beyond the human’s comprehension. What an artist is able to convey are only parts of it. This seems to bring Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist painting near Lenin’s concept of copy, according to which “a fragmentary, but nonetheless strictly structural isomorphism exists between the mental content and reality,” where the only difference between the copy and the original lies in the fact that one aspect of the world development or another has been artificially isolated.

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435 Dodge, Sergei Sherstiuk, 16.
436 Lenin, Collected Works, 235
However, Sherstiuk’s clearly states that his work “sounds like the truth”, thus placing his own perception as the filter of such truth. This is one of the greatest contributions of Sherstiuk’s interpretation of hyperrealism, along with that of Keskkula, Elken and Faibisovich’s in the panorama of realism in the Soviet Union. Sherstiuk is aware that behind the choice of a specific subject and its representation often lies a “mental a-priori”, which leads the artist to select that very image based on one they already have in mind. On the contrary, in the socialist realist painting of the Stalinist era, albeit with different emphasis during its two decades, a painting was not really a part of an already whole existing 'book', but the reverse. Each page or painting was meant to bring into existence the book that had yet to be written. Artists were required to draw and condense all the information on a particular subject or event and create an image that summed them up, even if often they were not based on an actual history that occurred.

In his preface to Sherstiuk’s book *Ukradennaia Kniga (Stolen Book)*, Ukrainian writer Igor’ Klekh reflects on the parallels between literature and painting in application to the artist’s life:

“...a book, like a painting, is not a ‘mirror’ for making faces and posing, but an attempt to construct or find a ‘window’, which will be the only way to find and learn one’s true self while seen from ‘there’ (which is why this rule that Sherstiuk learned in iconology is equally valid for a reader of books and a viewer of paintings).

Indeed, Klekh’s reference to iconology is traceable in Sherstiuk’s ability to introduce in his paintings ambivalent characters and situations, which embody both specific attributes that make them unique, and universal traits that elevate them to the

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status of icons or archetypes—an aspect that can be attributed to his deep knowledge of art historian Erwin Panofsky's research on iconography.\textsuperscript{438} Within different environments, Sherstiuk imbued his characters with specific social and professional roles, as in the paintings whose titles make these explicit, such as \textit{Artist and Actor, Friends, Poet}, and \textit{The Man of one Family}. Even in portraits which represent a specific person, like \textit{Oleg} (1983) (Fig. 91) and \textit{Lola} (1983) (Fig. 92), Sherstiuk managed to elevate the person to a "social icon,” taken not from Soviet propaganda, but from the stream of a less idealistic everyday life. This could be one of the reasons why Sherstiuk was not spared from being targeted by Soviet authorities, despite their willingness to allow his later works into official exhibitions. In the aforementioned interview with Renee Baigell, the artist remembers when in 1983 during a meeting of the Academy of Art, Pyotr Demichev, then minister of culture, boosted a group of old established artists to discipline and reprimand an artist named Sherstiuk, which would have implied complete exclusion from both exhibiting in official venues and selling his works publicly. Fortunately, with the arrival of Perestroika, Demichev lost his position as minister and Sherstiuk was allowed to keep his membership in the artists' union, though he was still completely isolated.\textsuperscript{439}

“Truth” was the ultimate subject in all Sherstiuk's paintings, which he constantly chased by both unveiling the constructed image of Soviet society created by propaganda, and by presenting his version of truth as a construction as well. Sherstiuk's hyperrealism keeps the viewer, and the artist, questioning the possibility of the existence of such “truth” in our private or collective life.

\textsuperscript{438} Burlak, \textit{Art-Emigrants}: 238.
\textsuperscript{439} Baigell and Baigell, \textit{Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika}: 361
Along with Sergei Sherstiuk, Semyon Faibisovch also played a fundamental role in expanding viewers' horizon on the perception of their society, by displaying the existence of ordinary people as fragmented, entangled, or lost in a society they cannot completely understand.
2.6 Semion Faibisovich’s Hyperrealism with a Human Face

Although Semyon Faibisovich has been called the “singer of Moscow,” he revealed in an interview that he'd always had difficulty adapting to Soviet society:

“I always feel myself to be a little bit of a stranger. And this individualism, alienation from the world and at the same time, involvement in it […] When there was an extreme situation, very often intense, loving, or dramatic, and I was totally immersed in it, and at the same time I saw myself as if I were apart, and I see myself in this story. It is this ability that has helped me to become an underground artist, to provide distance and stay within it.”

This ambivalent relationship that Faibisovich established with Soviet society is mirrored in his work. The atmosphere of “enigma”, as the artist defined it, that characterizes most of his paintings leaves the viewer in a constant tension between two kinds of reality: one as the “infinite theater of Soviet reality,” and one that is created by the artist under the deeper influence of a past tradition affecting his imaginary.

Like a number of unofficial artists of his generation, Faibisovich's first exhibitions in the 1980s took place literally underground, in a basement on Malaya Gruzinskaya Street. And like Jaan Elken, Faibisovich also began his artistic career as an architect at the Bureau of Industrial Architecture in Moscow, after graduating from the Moscow Architectural Institute in 1972. The training he received at the Institute later influenced

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440 Jo Vickery, “Jo Vickery Talks with Semyon Faibisovich,” Three In One, exh.cat. (Regina Gallery, Moscow, 2011): 10
441 “я всегда чувствую себя немножко чужим. И вот этот индивидуализм, отчужденность от мира и в тоже время включенность в него. […] когда в какой то экстремальной ситуации, часто критической, напряженной, любовной, или еще какая то там драма, и ты полностью в ней растворяешься как бы, и в то же время смотрешь со стороны и видишь себя в этой истории. В какой то степени это мне и помогло стать художником андерграунда, дистанцию обеспечить и оставаться внутри нее”.
442 Ekaterina Degot, “A Man with a Mobile Phone,” Comeback, exh.cat., (Regina Gallery, Moscow, 2008): 8
443 In ibid., 11
444 Faibisovich participated at the realization of the design for the Olympic venue of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.
his distinctive way of representing the space in his hyperrealist works, as he confirmed to the author of this dissertation:

“I am an architect, and architecture for me is very important. I treat the painting as a project, I design it. Its geometry, its construction, its space. When I first started, I was blamed for being an architect, but I realized that I could not build the space in the works if I did not have an architectural school training, a real design school background. Architecture is the organization of space, and a painting is also an organization of space. It is not only of the architectural elements in it, but the main thing is that the principle of creation is similar.”

Yet in 1975, Faibisovich turned to oil painting, after realizing that as an architect with personal ambitions his space for maneuvering was very limited, due to the restrictions imposed by the State on architects' personal creativity. As Faibisovich confesses, this change had a pivotal role in his life since it was “a way to free myself and to have the time to clear my relationship with the surrounding reality, because this relationship was complicated and tense. As consequence, I ended up with the underground.”

The “underground” could also refer to the environment he chose to represent in his hyperrealist works in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing primarily on Moscow's suburbs and their daily routine, with its difficulties and struggles. What attracts Faibisovich's

445 “Я архитектор и архитектура для меня очень важна. Я отношусь к картине, как к проекту, я ее конструирую. Ее геометрию, ее конструкцию, ее пространство. […] я понимал, что строить пространство в работах я не смог бы, если бы у меня не было архитектурной школы, школы реального проектирования. Архитектура, это организация пространства, и картина это организация в том числе пространства, то есть дело не в архитектурных элементах там, могут они быть или нет, когда они появляются, я доволен, это мой хлеб, но главное что схож принцип создания, ведь в любой работе это опытне разговор, который к фотореализму не имеет ни какого отношения, потому что фотография пространства не передает. Поскольку глаз – объектив это монокуляр, а пространство видит только бикуляр, а для меня любая картина это прежде всего организация ее пространства, воздуха, который там ее наполняет и создает кулисное или еще какое то построение. Вот здесь, в этой работе, например, и перспектива, и перебивки ее, и ритмы и злома, здесь очень сложная пространственная игра. И там эти перерубленные лица и вся композиция при этом должна быть цельная, строиться от поверхности в глубину.” Author's interview, Moscow July 21, 2016.
446 Ibid., “это было как выход на свободу и возможность выяснить отношения сжизнью, которая меня окружала, которые были сложны е и напряженней, поэтому, естественно я оказался в андерграунде”.
interest was the routine of commuters, bus drivers, shoppers, and streetwalkers that he directly entered into contact with while living and commuting to work in the Moscow district of Yasenevo. Art historian Ekaterina Degot observes that although Faibisovich's heroes are small people, they must be interpreted as means through which power itself speaks.447

Faibisovich's highly personalized style is the result of a complex jigsaw of different sources which actively speak with each other. For example, the Russian social-critical art of Peredvizniki and of the Surovyi stil with its idea of socialist realism with a “human face” is entangled with the representation of a gloomy society in the works of non-conformist artist Oscar Rabin, while allusions to the Baltic photography of the 1960s and 1970s also call to mind the photorealism of Richard Estes. Surovyi stil artists such as Geli Korzhev, Victor Ivanov, and Tair Salahov observed and documented the life of Russian villagers and countryside folk through a firsthand perspective gained by traveling all over the country and personally interacting with their world. In their monumental paintings, the Surovyi stil artists displayed a contemporary view of the issues that ordinary people faced while dealing with their daily activities. The unvarnished, although still romantic images of the Surovyi stil paintings convey a powerful sense of individuality and open a window on the inner dimension of subjects previously excluded from Socialist Realism.448

Despite some similarities between the two styles, some artists of the Surovyi stil accused hyperrealist artists of “spurning the romance of living in a socialist country”.

447 Degot, “Soviet or Social?” 12
They called hyperrealism “apologetics for the macabre” and “the art of putrefaction.” Versions of this definition would also be applied to Oscar Rabin's art production of the 1960s. Rabin's synthesis between culture and everyday life, aesthetic experience and ordinary existence, found a revived force in Faibisovich's hyperrealism. Rabin applied a distorted perspective, “emotionally” saturated colors, and the destruction of conventional relationships between elements of the composition to create a suggestive vision of the Soviet environment. The muddy tones predominant in his compositions become the emblem of the miserable conditions and desperation in which the majority of the population was living. His paintings exhibit the grim existence of proletarian barrack life in suburban slums while exposing the duplicity of Socialist Realism's alleged prosperity. De facto, some of Rabin’s paintings represent garbage or dirty corners of streets and neighborhoods, an aspect also recalled in some of Faibisovich's works, as in the triptych *Garbage Dump Next Door*, (Fig. 93-95). In Faibisovich's words:

“This is everyday life. I had a feeling that the system that social artists described with signs, symbols, portraits of leaders, that it (the system) itself most clearly expresses itself in any garbage can, in any shabby corner, that is, where there is nothing, there it all is. This zero (zero) is the most telling me, part of this life. Zero—and it was my theme all the Soviet years.”

Highlighting the “garbage” that both literally and metaphorically characterized aspects of the Soviet life was Faibisovich's way to be critical, to challenge the system he was living in.

A further characteristic that connects some of the Severe Style artists such as Pavel Nikonov, Viktor Ivanov, Oscar Rabin, and Semyon Faibisovich is the

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449 Oleg Torchinsky, *Sergei Sherstiuk painter*, exh.cat (Moscow: M'ARS, 1994)
450 “Это повседневная жизнь. У меня было ощущение, что система которую соц артисты описывали знаками, символами, портретами вождей, что она (система ) себя я рще всего выражает в любом мусорном баке, в любом обшарпанном углу, то есть, там где ничего нет, вот там все и есть. Вот это зэро (zero) оно самое говорящее мне, часть этой жизни. Зеро — и было моей темой все советские годы.” Author's interview, Moscow July 21, 2016,
predominance in their paintings of a dark palette, used not only for aesthetic purposes, but also as a way to convey a previously suppressed critique of Soviet society. The physical qualities of these artists' paintings became a metaphor for the poverty and dreadful conditions they witnessed every day around them and even in their own homes. As for Faibisovich, most of the situations Faibisovich depicted in his 1980s compositions were first fixed with an old Zenit camera and then transferred to a canvas with a projector.451

He transformed the disadvantages of the Soviet photographic equipment of the time into a political statement: the characteristic yellow/brown color which pervades most of his paintings could be read both as a literal reference to the poor quality of Soviet technology and semiotically as a metaphor for the impoverished conditions and deprivation that still burdened the population, contrary to the cheerful image of a happy society presented by Soviet propaganda. As the artist confirms:

“It was a dull life, there were no flowers either in clothes, in the architecture, or in cars, everything was so dirty and dull, and I just somehow modified it in the style of the old masters, to make this mud a painting. Everything happened in a natural way. In that life, there was no color.”452

451 Ekaterina Degot calls Faibisovich's ability to remain unnoticed while taking pictures of passersby “artistic espionage”. Degot, “A Man with a mobile phone,” 16. This definition also well synthesizes how people perceived Faibisovich' while he was taking pictures in public. As the artist confirmed to the author of this work, he was arrested more than once by KGB officers called by passersby who believed he was a spy, since he was taking pictures of people in the metro wagon, or in line to get vodka. Author's interview, Moscow July 21, 2016,

452 “это была тусклая жизнь, не было цветов ни в одежде, ни в архитектуре, ни в автомобилях, все было такое грязное, тусклое, и я это просто каким то образом модифицировал под старых мастеров, чтобы эту грязь превратить в живопись. Все произошло естественным образом. В той жизни не было цвета. А поскольку свет я видел, то надо было каким то образом донести ощущение цвета, тут говорить о чем, а ощущение света, который каким образом всю эту "помойку" освещает.” The opposite phenomenon stroke Faibisovich the first time he travelled to NY. According to the artist once in the city, he noticed that the color blue was predominant everywhere even in newspapers, architecture and clothes. And this made him perceive even stronger the difference with his works and the American artists of the time. Ibid.
However, it is important to remark here that Faibisovich did not simply aim at transferring a picture to a painting, but at the reverse process; the idea of the composition—which situation or person one is paying special attention to or how one imagines them framed—begins in the artist's mind and is then fixed by the photograph. Nevertheless, the camera still plays a crucial role. As Faibisovich explains:

“Everything changes all the time, it is impossible to draw everything from memory. [...] I took into my hands a camera. I needed to fix the moment of my visual inspiration. The photographs became the basis, the ground in which an idea nurtured.”

Some of Faibisovich's compositions that heavily relied on camera effects such as flash, reflections, and distorted angles to mimic the photographic image have been often considered as derivative of the paintings of American photorealist Richard Estes. At first sight, such an interpretation may seem justified, as both artists' paintings often represented multiple reflections, with mirrors becoming the key principles of compositional organization, as in Faibisovich’s *Outskirts* (1984) (Fig. 6), and Estes’s *Telephone Booths* (1967) (Fig. 96).

However, I argue that even Faibisovich's most “illusionistic” paintings, like the aforementioned *Outskirts*, *Lobnia Station* (1985) (Fig. 97), and *In the Adjacent Subway Car* (1985) (Fig. 27), are more than just “visual mazes with reflections.” Faibisovich personally confirms this point during an interview. Indeed, he recalled that after seeing some of Estes’ works at the exhibition of American hyperrealism and photorealism at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow in 1975 he needed to take some time off from painting, in

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453 Degot, “Everything is on Sale,” 11
454 Barabanov, Analysis of the unidentified: 18
455 Hal Foster, et all eds. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, and Postmodernism, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005)
order to understand where his vision was leading him. He describes his realization as follows:

“What I did was a completely different thing. These people (photorealists) demonstrate the language, whereas for me it is [author's emphasis] the language that I want to speak. As soon as I realized it, then I was able to move forward, now without hesitation.”

Nevertheless, the aspect of Faibisovich’s work that critics hold in the highest regard when defining his production is still the reflective feature.

My analysis of Faibisovich’s works will show how the similarity between his paintings and Estes' photorealism is exclusively dependent on agreement between the “signifiers”, since the “signified” in their works explored different aspects of the artists’ lived experience. Richard Estes focused almost exclusively on surfaces and their reflections, to the point that his paintings closely resemble abstract works. City streets appear in his paintings as cold and inhabited; the few human beings that are sometimes represented, are either just shadows in building's glass reflections, or anonymous and uncommunicative passers-by in public spaces, resembling mannequins more than real people. On the contrary, human psychology and inner dimension are at the core of Faibisovich's compositions. Although his subjects sometimes are represented as segments or reflections, they are actually in physical and emotional communication with their surrounding environment, which is conveyed by the artist through their gestures, gazes, and expressions. The role of the mirror as reflector and of the people reflected in it become a metaphor for the artist's own consciousness and his self-positioning in the

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456 “Я на некоторое время прекратил свои занятия, стремясь понять в чем дело и через какое то время до меня дошло что я занимаюсь другим. Если эти люди (фотореалисты), у них демонстрация языка, а для меня это язык, на котором я хочу разговаривать. Когда я себе это объяснил, тогда я пошел дальше, уже без комплексов.” Author's interview, Moscow July 2016.

457 “Эстэс показывает мир холодным, у него люди где то там мелькают, прячутся в отражениях, их собственно говоря, нет. А для меня лица, эти фактуры, эти рожи, они главные герои. На самом деле все наоборот.” Author's interview, Moscow July 21, 2016
world, both within and apart from it. As he explains: “the mirror allows you to make a
split, both what is part of this world and what is different from it, and you are not part of
it.”

Faibisovich’s ambivalent approach to photography is another aspect that distances
his works from American photorealism. This is confirmed by the fact that he never
agreed with any definition of his work as photorealism:

“I am so against the notion that I am a photorealist […] Any work is primarily a
dialogue, which has nothing to do with photorealism. Because photography does
not convey space, since the eye is a monocular lens, but space is seen only by the
binocular. And for me any picture is primarily the organization of its space, the air
that fills it and creates a wedge or some other construct.”

In fact, when recalling how American critics approached his art he affirms that

“When I was discovered by the Americans, in the mid-1980s, I started to go to America,
they never used this word, photorealism, because they knew that this was something else,
not photorealism.”

It should be added that at the beginning of his career, Faibisovich experienced
some problems in dealing with the photograph’s alleged objectivity: he discovered that
once developed, the shots he had taken were quite different from what he had pictured in

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458 “что как раз зеркало позволяет здесь осуществлять раздвоение, и часть этого мира и то что от
него отличается, и ты не являешься его частью”. Ibid.
459 “я так противлюсь тому что я фотореалист. Я архитектор и архитектура для меня очень важна. Я
отношуся к картине, как к проекту, я ее конструирую. Ее геометрию, ее конструкцию, ее
пространство. Когда я только начинал, меня об виняли в том, что я как архитектор, не использую
свои возможности в живописи, как например Васнецов и другие, которые обыгрывали свое
архитектурное образование, а я не обыгрывал. Но архитектура, это организация пространства, и
картина это организация в том числе пространства […] в любой работе это опытъе разговор,
который к фотореализму не имеет ни какого отношения, потому что фотография пространства не
передает.Поскольку глаз – объектив это моникуляр, а пространство видит только бикуляр, а для
меня любая картина это прежде всего организация ее пространства, воздуха, который там ее
наполняет и создает кулисное или еще какое то построение.” Ibid.
460 “Вот когда меня открыли американцы в середине 80х годов и когда я начал туда ездить, они не
употребляли этого слова, они знаят что это что то другое, не фотorealизм). Ibid.
his mind. This was primarily due to the impossibility of matching the memory of the pictures he had already imagined, or rather created with his “mental eyes”, to the subjects that were standing in front of him. This realization led him to accept the impossibility of conveying an exact representation of what he was considering “reality”, or even recalling the exact sensations that prompted him to take the shots in the first place. This impasse led the artist to a personal crisis and his abandonment of photography for a year. However, the period of inactivity allowed him to reconnect and, in a way, reconcile the memories he had while shooting certain photographs with the final results in front of him.

After resuming his activity as a painter at the beginning of the 1980s, Faibisovich incorporated in his works the fundamental concept of “idea-photo-memory,” which would shape his art production for the following decades. The concept implied that he first was “painting” with his mind and then with his eyes, thus making his work primarily “cerebral” and then “visual”. Therefore, photography may not be important in itself, but rather as “ready knowledge,” in the words of the art critic Alexander Barabanov, who considers Faibisovich's paintings as illustrations of abstract ideas, meta-codes of texts that have been re-coded in symbols. As he explains:

“Faibisovich does not cast doubt on the ascertaining ability of discourse to return an image to the world of knowledge, i.e., to the symbolic universe. In his system, knowledge also constitutes the image and its recognition – to the same degree as knowledge constitutes and is constituted by the technical image. This is the reason for the artist's close attention to the symbolic order of culture, which considers photography to be but a conventional sign for the “fact.”

Indeed, the artist's yearning to exceed the contingency of the everyday life and to raise his works to a dimension of transcendence also informs his representation of

\[461\] Ibid.
\[462\] Barabanov, Analysis of the unidentified: 20
common people as archetypes. Faibisovich revealed his approach to this process to art critic Ekaterina Degot, during an interview:

“You just look at one face, an absolutely concrete face, do it as it is, and everybody begins to recognize their friends or colleagues. You just have to look really hard without getting stuck in this life or positioning yourself higher or lower like “we are servants of the people” or “they are cattle”. There was nothing of the kind in my work, but my awareness of alienation, of missing something, created a distance I exploited.”

The result of this method is a sketch of common and typified characters or places, of archetypes such as “a friend”, “a colleague”, the “neighbor”, that become familiar to the viewer who eventually starts to connect with them. Faibisovich directly confirms this effect of his work: “in this face, you start seeing everything. And this is why my characters often are images and not concrete faces, but images and realizations of something.”

Moreover, by inserting within the frame of a canvas common people often considered by society as ugly or banal, such as commuters, beggars, pedestrians, drunkards, or people queuing in front of a shop to buy wine, Faibisovich breaks their “invisibility” and forces the viewer to deal with this reality that is often their own as well. It is worth mentioning here that art critic Ekaterina Degot suggests that Faibisovich’s “heroes are small people,” which led her to coined the definition of “heroic realism” to describe his artistic language.

Degot’s definition singling out a “heroic dimension” in the artist’s hyperrealism has captured, to a certain extent, the essence of his work, since he does raise the activity of common people to the level of artistic subjects. However, I argue that the use of the

463 Degot, “Soviet or Social?” 13
464 “вглядывание в конкретное лицо, ни какое, случайное. И в нем, именно в нем ты начинаешь видеть все. И поэтому, естественно мои персонажи очень часто и как правило образы, не только конкретные лица, но и образы и воплощение чего то.” Author's interview, Moscow, July 2016.
word “heroic” diminishes the subversive characteristics of Faibisovich’s paintings, as this connotation inserts it within the same process of transforming Soviet citizens into heroes carried out by socialist realism.

Instead, “antihero” appears to be a more suitable term for Faibisovich’s characters. In fact, there is a close resemblance between the description of the Underground Man—the main character in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, recognized by the critics as the prototype of the “antihero”—and the choice of the subjects in Faibisovich’s paintings. First, neither of them is completely likable, but at the same time it is easy to identify with their imperfections. Secondly, their personal struggle to survive each day is placed within a wider context of a conflicted society progressively headed toward its political and social dissolution.

A more general parallel may also be established between Faibisovich’s fondness for creating cycles of paintings, and literature. From picture to picture as from page to page, or chapter to chapter, in a book, cycles such as *City Bus*, *Suburban Trains*, and *Moscow Subway*, form a mosaic of stories that introduce the viewer into the everyday journey of millions of commuters from the Moscow suburbs.

Through the description of Faibisovich’s main hyperrealist works of the 1980s, chapter four will show how, despite representing some “archetypes” of Moscow society, Faibisovich's mastery relies on his ability to capture the psychological state of the individuals he met. In particular, he is attracted by subjects who display state of pensiveness or withdrawal, conveying this mental state in paintings such as *Boy* (1985) (Fig. 98), *After Work*, (1986) (Fig. 1) and *In the Vestibule* (1987) (Fig. 99). Dimitry

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Prigov, artist and Faibisovich's personal friend, appropriately defined the artist's works as “hyperrealism with a human face.”

Speaking about his subjects, Faibisovich explains:

“I portrayed the gaze of my fellow traveler staring somewhere into space, away from the viewer. There was such loneliness in the crowd. When people think that nobody is watching them something happens to them: they become isolated and sink deep into themselves.”

The semiotic reading on which I base my analysis of Faibisovich’s works reveals how this state of suspension between reality and the subject's inner dimension is well symbolized by locations – buses, train platforms, metros – that are usually considered “non-lieu”, areas where people are just in transition to reach their destinations. Indeed, I argue that Faibisovich transforms these into a metaphor for the transition that Soviet citizens were experiencing during the last years of the Perestroika era and of the country's precarious existence. Thus, his works can be considered, borrowing from Ekaterina Degot’s definition, “a dissident language of truth which stands against the false totalitarian “viewpoint of the majority.”

By returning to the artist's role as a mediator between life and art, which for him included the refusal to provide a utopian or romanticized representation of reality, Faibisovich conveyed a new vision of Soviet society that brought hyperrealism to a relevant position in the Moscow art scene of the 1980s.

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467 “А вот Пригородов Дмитрий Александрович, как то одну из моих первых работ посмотрел и сказал что это "гиперреализм с человеческим лицом." Author's interview, Moscow July 2016

468 Degot, “Soviet or Social?”, 12

469 Ekaterina Degot, Contemporary Painting in Russia. (Roseville East, New South Wales: Craftsman House, 1995): 46
2.7 Conclusions

In the nonconformist art scene of the 1970s and 1980s, Ando Keskküla, Jann Elken, Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk were the few artists who succeeded in powerfully and directly conveying the progressive collapse experienced by the Soviet Union in those years through a figurative representation of the Soviet urban environment. Their representation of the cities of Tallinn and Moscow as a complex and multilevel ensemble of signs and languages unveiled a reservoir of symbols embodied by unsuspected places such as train stations, street signs, and common apartments, used by the authority to exercise passive control over the lives of the citizens. Moreover, by capturing and enlarging the multifaceted and fragmented components of their quotidian context, these artists raised important issues concerning the possibility of objectively representing a photograph after translating it onto canvas and the role of personal ideas, memories, and experiences in affecting the artist's perception and representation of their own social and cultural system.

The works of these artists demonstrate that the reproduction of the subject of a photograph onto canvas is a complex process that starts from a phase more closely linked to an intellectual process that takes place both at an unconscious and conscious level, followed by a more “mechanical” stage that lies in the snapshot of a photograph and in its re-execution on canvas. As for the intellectual phase, the environment, both at the level of its language and architectonic sphere, unconsciously influences the artist's development of his or her imagination which produces “types” or “stereotypes” of images. It is in this phase that the role of the authorities' official channels control such imagery through the manipulation of society's different sign systems—architecture, texts, street signs,
language, art, music, and so on. As for the “mechanical” phase, the artist eventually seeks it out in the scenarios offered by everyday life, each in their own individual way: Keskküla by assembling together several image-types, Elken and Faibisovich by recreating point of view, scenes, and subjects common to the imagery of millions of citizens, and finally Sherstiuik with his staged domestic situations reenacting his private experience.

By challenging the possibility of objectively representing reality, Keskküla, Sherstiuik, Faibisovich, and Elken also challenge the credibility of realism as a representational method in the Soviet Union. By subverting the predominant Soviet rhetoric but still remaining committed to a figurative style, these artists demonstrate that there is a new perspective from which to approach the concept of realism. Their apparently harmless pictures, even accused of being deferential to the status quo, were actually “a charge of dynamite placed under the foundation of the official art with its ideology of optimism.” Indeed, Faibisovich's words seem to adequately summarize the four artists' method: “when you look at commonplaces, including nostalgic ones, from the outside, they seem all soiled and dirty: nothing but banal non-entities. However, if you look a bit more closely and try to penetrate with your gaze, “behind” the emasculated appearance – if you, for example, illuminate them a bit from the inside – you reset the counter to zero, and everything begins all over again.”

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Chapter Three: Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken: The Representation of Tallinn’s Urbanscape as an Abandoned and Alienated Space

Chapter three and chapter four aim to present a new approach to the study of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union through a close analysis of paintings by Ando Keskküla, Jaan Elken, Sergei Sherstiuk and Semyon Faibisovich—artists whose works are the most representative of hyperrealism’s historical development in the Soviet Union. The analysis of their paintings will engage one of the more fundamental questions of the art sphere of the time, namely how realism could actually produce a reliable representation of a society, such as the Soviet one, whose cultural and ideological system was itself a simulacrum built on signs that do not refer to any real objects or meanings. This study will examine how these four artists addressed this issue by both testing and broadening the boundaries of realism and breaking its rules to convey a representation of reality through other means and visual strategies.

Existing scholarship on the subject of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union has often focused exclusively on the formal analysis of the technical features of the trend—its photographic quality, use of cold palette, and characteristically detached approach toward the subject. This study instead based its method of analysis on the semiotic method, starting from Yuri Lotman’s theory that there are “complicated negotiations that constitute everyday life as a sect of activity mediating between our sense of who we are and our embeddedness in larger codes that seem external, yet not entirely irrelevant, to our identities.” In fact, it will be demonstrated how by reading these artists’ hyperrealist works from the semiotic perspective, one can better account for artists’

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personal agency in choosing and representing their specific subjects and the influence of the Soviet social and cultural system of signs on their creations.

Indeed, the works analyzed in this chapter are crucial to showing how Keskküla’s metaphysical approach to the urban space introduced the trend of hyperrealism to the Soviet Union, while Elken contributed to fundamentally changing the expectations for the trend’s motifs by inserting his own personal gesture and biographical elements into the otherwise photographic-like compositions. The substantial number of works by these two artists created in the second half of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s also became an important platform for developing a personal dialogue with the predominant dichotomies of the time such as nature-technology, culture-myth, tradition-modernity, individual-society, which had shaped debates over Estonian national identity since the beginning of the 20th century.

The analysis of their works is placed in the last two chapters of this dissertation in order to situate the paintings within the political, social, and artistic context which has been laid out in the previous chapters. This dissertation is also the first to present an analysis of paintings by Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk, and Faibisovich in sequence. This approach has several aims: to provide an exhaustive chronological study of each artist’s development in terms of creative method, thematic concerns and subject matter; to underline the coherence of their visual strategy overtime; and to establish their crucial position within the development of the trend in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the interpretative approach adopted in the following analysis is descriptive, as these paintings themselves were strategically created as visual statements by the artists.
Another important contribution of this chapter is that the analysis of individual paintings will demonstrate that despite the importance of photography to both Keskküla’s and Elken’s creative method--as the internal organization of the sign systems in their paintings is based on a photographic configuration of the visual elements the artists emphasize photography’s mediated quality over its presumed objectivity. By doing so, they create a synthesis between the immediacy of a photograph, the artist’s personal memory, and the act of painting.

Indeed, their works demonstrate that the what could be seen as just the transfer of the subject of a photograph onto canvas is a complex process. It involves a phase more closely linked to an imaginative process, both conscious and unconscious, followed by a more technical stage that involves the photographic snapshot and its re-execution on canvas.

As for the imaginative phase, the environment--both at the level of its linguistic and architectonic sphere - unconsciously influences the artist's development of his or her imagination which produces “types” or “stereotypes” of images. It is in this phase that the authorities' official channels influence such imagery through the manipulation of the above-mentioned society's different sign systems. As for the technical phase, the artist eventually looks for the same image, or one close to it, in the outside world and everyday life. Keskküla is doing so by assembling together several image-types to create one that become “universal,” and Elken by seeking places and objects whose features would be familiar and immediately recognizable to the Soviet citizen.

Finally, in the act of painting the artist’s memory of the original source and the photographic image combine to create a personal interpretation of referents in the
composition. In the process of transferring these images onto a canvas, the artist changes the original color palette, manipulates the scale, and introduces painterly gestures, graffiti, or sometimes even collage elements. The resulting new image in turn re-enters in the circle idea-photo-memory, by creating new memories of a given subject that become part of the a-priori idea.

A close reading of Ando Keskküla’s and Jaan Elken’s works is fundamental to demonstrating how their complex engagement with their contemporary reality and search for new forms of representing it offered a third perspective to artists in the Soviet Union in order to escape from the established and generally accepted realism/modernism dichotomy predominant in both Western and Eastern artistic discourses of the time. A precedent to this approach can be found in the official artistic representations of Surovyi stil, a style that emerged for only for a brief period, between turn of the 1950s and 1960s. Keskküla’s and Elken’s hyperrealism shares with it not only the depiction of the dreary conditions of the Soviet society, but also the aim to broaden the parameters of realism by renewing a dialogue with avant-garde and non-conformist practices, and the technological progress of their time, in particular contemporary photography and cinema.

They were able to achieve this goal through the formal and stylistic innovation of inserting abstract elements that would interact with the figurative representations and the photographic source in the painting. Such interdisciplinary dialogue between realism and the avant-garde practices demonstrates the possibility of operating within a traditional artistic referent, such as realism, while openly acknowledging its deficiencies. Furthermore, by playing with the intrinsic contradictions and paradoxes of Socialist
realism, this practice could lead to dismantle the image presented by the ideology through propaganda.

The works studied here will show how despite sharing some common elements with Socialist realism’s *modus operandi* – namely, using airbrush, cropping the photographic source, or magnifying the subject - hyperrealism actually works to achieve an opposite end: to unveil the mechanism of the State power and the coercive influence it exercised over the population through the manipulation of photography and painting. And by doing so, these hyperrealist works challenge the possibility of an objective representation of reality attributed to both mediums by propaganda. In fact, while in the propagandistic photography and painting the real issue is what it is not pictured and purposely hidden from the viewer, hyperrealistic paintings actually show what is obscured by the censorship. Thus, hyperrealism destroys ideological literacy by presenting critical literacy in its stead.

Keskküla’s and Elken’s figurative style presents an open, radical criticism of Khrushchev’s and Breznev’s failure to deliver on their promises to achieve better social, economic, and technological conditions in the country and the impact this had on the Estonian population. In doing so, Keskküla’s and Elken’s work moved the boundaries of realism toward a more social documentary style and away from the bright and idealized subjects that characterize Socialist realism.

Common threads may be found between Keskküla’s and Elken’s hyperrealism and the critical realism of the *Peredvizhniki* in the nineteenth century, ignored by Socialist realism during the Stalinist years. Keskküla’s and Elken’s representation of the inadequate infrastructure, services, and housing conditions of the Estonian society of the
1970s from a personal approach share parallels with the *Peredvizhnik*s representation of the inequities, injustice and national issues in Russian society as well as their direct contact with the subjects and social environment of their paintings.

Keskküla’s and Elken’s hyperrealist works are especially compelling if contextualized within the period when both audiences and the new generation of artists alike sought to articulate their perception of Estonia’s transforming urban environment. The city, and in particular Tallinn, is perceived in Keskküla’s and Elken’s hyperrealist paintings as a space where the complex interaction between architectural objects, sign streets, interiors, urban planning, and housing defined by Lotman as sign systems—create a specific socio-cultural environment that characterized the city’s identity. By framing within the pictorial space, the dialectical interplay caused by the insertion of the Russian sign system into Estonian culture, Keskküla and Elken comment on the devastating impact of the occupation of their country on the individual and collective behavior, everyday life, and long term cultural memory of the Estonian population.473

Keskküla's and Elken's pictorial treatment of the architectural subject should also be inserted into the specific context of the increasing popularity of a new urban literature trend in Estonia, whose main exponent is considered to be the writer, essayist, and theater director Mati Unt. In his book *Autumn Ball* (Sügisball),474 for example, the new residential district of Mustamäe, which is also often the place from which Keskküla and Elken draw their subjects, is represented not simply as a tangible entity, but also as a powerful symbol of the life and spirituality of its residents. Mati Unt’s description of the

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473 Sirje Helme synthesizes this situation well when she says that “Our ideological and official metropolis was Moscow: as far as our identity was concerned, the metropolis was found in the first Republic of Estonia and the ultimate metropolis was within the artists themselves.” Sirje Helme, *Personal Time: Art of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania 1945-1996*, cat. exh. (Warsaw: Zacheta Art Gallery, 1996): 20.

474 See footnote n.72, in Chapter of Introduction.
atmosphere of mikroraions of Tallinn as one of disillusion, alienation, and suffocation brought on by the end of the economic “optimism” of the 1960s is indeed vividly mirrored in Keskküla’s and Elken’s hyperrealist representations. However, both artists amplify this condition of continuous suspension in an indefinite, inhospitable and hostile urban landscape even further by provocatively removing any human beings from their representations of interiors and cityscapes. Through the complete absence of figures within a desolated city, Keskküla and Elken convey a powerful visual image of the devastating effects of the Soviet occupation on the Estonian population, whose identity and needs were completely overlooked by the State’s political and social agenda.

While architectural historians have argued that the configuration of a city was “the strongest factor for organizing the psyche of the masses,”475 it was not the only factor. As Keskküla’s and Elken’s specific works will show, ordinary objects were also vested with a socio-transformative role in people’s lives.

They found their predecessor in the pop art practice of the second half of the 1960s in Estonia, which was also an important influence for Keskküla who focused on converting the symbols of Soviet mass culture embodied by the propaganda of the time into pop imagery. Both Elken and Keskküla address in their hyperrealist works the social conflict generated by the overlapping and gradual substitution of new objects, or of their use value, introduced by new technologies. In turn, these objects contributed to creating new psychological patterns in people that affect, or shape, their relationship with their environment. Moreover, by abstracting domestic objects or familiar items from their usual context and then placing them within the space of the canvas, Keskküla and Elken

make them symbols of the difficult housing conditions that afflicted millions of Soviet citizens in the 1970s.

Both visual and verbal language is an essential element in how Keskküla and Elken in particular examine the formation of mass consciousness in their works. By juxtaposing images and texts or placing two different languages - Estonian and Russian - close together, the artists highlight and expose the deep implications of the Russification of Estonia under the Soviet occupation. In doing so, both artists openly reject a work of art’s function as a commodity and a tool for propaganda, and instead treat it as a platform for the artist to react to the political situation of his or her time by reflecting on the role of language, both visual and verbal, within the occupied Estonian society.
3.1 Ando Keskküla’s Metaphorical Realism

The first phase of Keskküla’s hyperrealism, from 1974 to 1976, already exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union, as the paintings display a dialogue between photography and Estonian art sphere's three main cultural discourses: the art political discourses of the occupying powers, of the orientation to avant-garde, and of the national-conservative forces, as identified by art critic Jaak Kangilaski.476 These apparently disconnected approaches are combined in Keskküla’s paintings through the inclusion of still-lifes, natural landscapes, and elements of abstraction combined with forced color contrasts.

Indeed, Keskküla does not create his paintings after an immediate experience caught by the camera, but relies on a complex process based on both conscious and unconscious influence of the social, cultural, and artistic environment, a “mechanical” phase of assembling together several photographs to create a certain “type” of image, and finally the artist’s memory embodied in his personal touch that conveys his perception of a space.

In his first phase, Keskküla’s creative process is still influenced by the traditional theme of landscape painting, and his personal memories of it. Paintings such as Northern Estonian Landscape (1974) (Fig. 76), Summer Still Life (1975) (Fig. 78), and in Beach (1976) (Fig. 77), show Keskküla’s position regarding social and artistic issues that were raised at the time, namely the growing gap between the human-made environment and the natural one, and the progressive disappearance of the feeling of home connected with

a domestic environment. Moreover, they become a platform where traditional painting, new experiments with photography, and the avant-garde practice are connected in an open dialogue with each other.

*Northern Estonian Landscape* and *Summer Still Life* should be understood both within the context of a new generation of artists engaged in Tallinn's urban environment transformation, and Keskküla’s personal reaction to the completion of the Soviet *mikroraiones* of Mustamäe and Lasnamäe in those years. Indeed, in these paintings both the landscape, once a symbol of a familiar and secure environment amidst the political turmoil of the Second World War, and the domestic space, perceived as “home,” become gradually fragmentary and stalled in time, carrying a cold and silent feeling of alienation. In fact, both paintings illuminate Keskküla’s refusal to confine his art to the utilitarian function of inspiring hope and optimism, as with the Estonian painters who depicted pastoral idylls and untouched landscapes while consciously avoiding representation of political or social issues.

In *Northern Estonian Landscape*, the traditional inviting and peaceful vista of the Estonian painting tradition is transformed into a cold and unattractive panorama, carrying an atmosphere of depth and tension. Keskküla subtly refers here to the progressive detachment of modern people from nature, and the need to find refuge in the domestic environment, still considered “home” judging by the presence of a few objects from the artist's personal biography—a light bulb, a Russian electrical shaver, an envelope, and a cigarette package with a map of the Soviet Union drawn on it—displayed on a white table that shapes the artist’s memory and affects his perception of the domestic environment.

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surrounding. However, on closer analysis, there is an apparent distance between alienated nature and a safe home environment.

The glass door that divides the room's interior from the natural world is not simply a surface separating inside from outside, but on the contrary, its transparency embodies the complex interchange between the two spheres, the modern human condition, and the artist’s personal experience. In fact, while, the ambiguity created by the transparent glass implies the artist’s illusion of still being in a close relationship with the natural and domestic environment, the rusty spikes that are only partly visible from above the house refer to the environment's progressively hostile position in his life as well as that of Estonian citizens more generally. Further support for such a reading is expressed in the meaning assigned by Keskküla to the objects on the table. Apparently just items part of his everyday routine, they actually emphasize the intrusion brought by the Soviet occupation of new objects and designs into the Estonian domestic, as symbolized by the packet of Soviet Belomor-Kanal cigarettes bearing the map of the Soviet Empire.

An ensemble of menacing clouds on the horizon impeding the view render the landscape quite sinister and transform it into an even more “hostile environment,” as described by art critic Evi Pihlak as cold and distant. An element that reinforces the sense of separation between interior and exterior is the flash of a camera that creates white squares reflected in the glass and seems to emphasize that what we are seeing is actually a picture created by the artist. Sirje Helme defined the painting as an “intellectual

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478 Keskküla daily used these objects while he was in the army, and then right after coming back from the war he painted them. Eda Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika” Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991: 110.
manipulation" in order to convey to the viewer the idea that any apparent closeness between man and nature is just an illusion.

As already mentioned with *Northern Estonian Landscape*, Keskküla’s creative process opens a dialogue between different styles and creative practices, as the two white squares reflected on the glass door become a meta-structural element that raises the composition to a metaphysical dimension and the photographic accuracy into the realm of abstraction. Indeed, by doubling the photographic-likeness of the scene with the abstract dimension, Keskküla challenges the ontological assumption that a photo is an objective representation of reality, showing instead how every reproduction is part of both the art creation and the artist’s interpretation of it. In fact, as Lotman affirms, the insertion of an object such as a mirror as a reflection of reality is "as remarkable as the role of the reflection metaphor for the art of self-consciousness."

The functional and symbolic role of everyday objects in society and people’s everyday routines was first explored by Keskküla in his pop art production of witty pop assemblages using common or abandoned objects with the group SOUP’69 at the beginning of 1970s. This was a criticism of the introduction of new Soviet design where the products of Soviet mass culture were actually received as kitsch.

Such criticism becomes increasingly the focus when dealing with the paintings *Summer Still Life* (Fig. 78), *Beach* (Fig. 77), *Still Life with View of The City* (1976) (Fig. 63), and the diptych *Kuiv Tanav, 6A I* (1980) (Fig. 72). According to Leonhard Lapin,

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480 Mark Allen Svede, “Many Easels, Some Abandoned. Latvian Art after Socialist Realism,” 110
who was also a former member of the group with Keskküla, “the large number of commodities that have flooded the world create the most amazing and controversial associations in everyday life. The POP artist, who creates unusual and simplified pictorial worlds, is part of daily life and is a mediator of the world's aesthetic essence.”

In the painting *Summer Still Life*, the natural landscape and the human dimension, represented only by some random objects, are confronted more directly than in North Estonian Landscape. The nature represented here is green, lush, and in a sense more pacifying and welcoming. On the left side of the painting, a still life scene is separated from a green landscape that dominates the right part of the composition by the side of the table, creating a division between the two antithetical environments.

Keskküla's pop assemblages are re-staged here in a similar bizarre juxtaposition of mishmashed objects of different shapes and colors: a series of red polka dot boxes on top of each other next to a blue vase, an open brown box, and the most bizarre object of all: a stuffed bird leaning onto a branch mounted on a small pedestal. A glass overturned on the table, whose liquid, instead of leaking out and pouring into the open drawer below, remains perfectly contained, along with the plate in the foreground featuring branches with buds of flowers and leaves, contributes to the surreal impression of the ensemble. An even further touch of surrealism is embodied by some unidentifiable objects on a plate arranged in the shape of an insect, spider, or ant, leaving the viewer with a feeling of discomfort. Such a process of assembling objects according to the artist's subjective flux of consciousness is described by Keskküla as follows: “One

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484 The assemblage of disparate objects is similar to Ludmilla Siim's painting *Evening* (1975) a still-life composition of flowers, plants, fruits and objects of various kinds into a messy heap.
influence of Pop Art, as a liberating channel was that the artist was able to deal with objects, make new combinations, create a new syntax, and utilize the elements of expression in a conceptual work of art.  

With Summer Still Life, Keskküla conveys the general belief arising in the 1960s of the "conquest of nature" by civilization, as claimed by the Soviet propaganda, while at the same time he highlights the failure of this development to bring improvement at the level of everyday life, as most of the peculiar objects displayed on the table do not hold any practical value.

With the painting Beach (FIG. 77) created in 1976, Keskküla creates a complex composition in which he masterfully addresses the central themes of his hyper-realistic production: the unbalanced relation between nature and a progressively overpowering human-made environment, the relation between photography and the artist’s personal memory, his open dialogue with the avant-garde practices, and the impact of the Soviet occupation on Estonian society.

The painting shows just a single close-up on a simple magnified object—a piece of cloth. Keskküla explains the origin of the composition as the result of gazing at an object for a long time and relaxing the eyes so that the image blurred, an effect that on canvas is obtained with the technique of the airbrush, used here by him for the first time.


The implementation of the IX Five-Year plan (1971-75), was supposed to provide an increase of industrial consumer goods and gross national income, in a society greatly affected by the first waves of the world economic crisis.

random objects such as razor blades, hairpins, matches, and a cigarette, seems to blend with the background on the one hand, while standing out due to its strange form on the other.

Although the point of view of composition mimics the perspective of a photographic lens pointed directly down to the object from above, the camera is actually, as defined by art critic Mark Svede, a "mind's camera," with the lens being the artist's eyes. Moreover, the landscape is not real, which according to Keskküla is what makes it hyperrealist, since it does not represent a specific beach, but rather a photographic image as an abstraction. Indeed, with Beach, Keskküla highlights the mediated role of photography in his paintings through his personal interpretation, and agenda, conferring psychological tension and spiritual depth to his subjects.

The reference to the turning of the photographic image towards an abstract dimension is also supported by the intense yet artificial dominance of the color blue, which conveys an aura of unreality, highlighted by the color red that seems to spill out from the inside of the wrapped object, and from the imprints made by a razor blade in the foreground.

The centering of the composition on a single magnified object recalls the art production of the non-conformist artist Mikhail Roginsky in the 1960s, as in his painting Kerosene Stove 1-2-3 (1965) (Fig. 44). For both artists, the use of cold colors, along with the feeling of abandonment surrounding the object—a kerosene stove, or a piece of cloth—recalls the poor quality of consumer goods in the Soviet market, and at the same

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489 Ibid.
490 Ibid.
time opens a window on the living conditions of most of the population, including that of the artist.

In the same years, Keskküla also explored the role of consumers goods and their design in shaping Estonian society at large. Indicative of this direction is the painting *Still Life with View of the City* (Fig. 63) (1976), which displays an ensemble of everyday disparate objects abstracted from their habitual original context and re-allocated as ready-made compositions in front of a distant cityscape. The painting illustrates Keskküla’s critical commentary on consumption and the excess of objects in the contemporary human-made environment. In particular, it shows his concern about the conflict generated in society by the overlapping and gradually substitution of “old” objects with new ones introduced by new technologies and Russian traditions, which in turn required the development of new psychological patterns to re-establish a relationship with them. The bigger size of the objects on the foreground in relation to the small dimension of the city in the background visually highlights this point. The confrontation between such colorful still-life and a white and anonymous cityscape could also be based on Lotman's idea that culture and technology are two opposite spheres. For Lotman, unlike culture, whose ensemble of parts still work in the present, “the technologization of the city which happened too rapidly in the twentieth century has inevitably led to the destruction of the city as historical organism.”

Keskküla’s art production of this period should also be contextualized within the wider historical framework of the contemporary artistic generation that created a renewed interest in the artificial urban environment following Leonhard Lapin's presentation “Art Developing the Environment” at the Estonian Art Institute in 1971, which proposed as its

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491 Yuri Lotman, *The Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*: 194
goal the creation of a new living environment involving every branch of art, from design to performance. Sharing the same belief, Keskküla's artistic practice was based on the concept that the city environment is mediated by an invisible structure—a socio-cultural system created by the dialogue between social and physical spheres—whose design is an important element of influence on both the environment and people's relationship with it.

Returning to the analysis of Still Life with View of the City, Keskküla further develops his interest in the mundane dimension of Tallinn's surroundings from the already mentioned pop art period, which was oriented toward the monotonous architecture of the city's outskirts with their peculiar trash items, cheap commodities, and discarded furniture. In fact, the still life in the painting is made by a wide range of commonly used objects—keys, tapes, plates with numbers, electric sockets, bottles, jars and slides—along with abstract geometric figures such as cones and cylinders. The work presents a striking resemblance to Ludmilla Siim's art production of the 1970s, in particular her painting Still-Life Against an Urban Background (1974) (Fig. 100), which also lines up a still life arrangement of fruits, vegetables, and knives in front of the city of Tallinn with its old town and skyscrapers.

Keskküla’s Still Life with View of the City shows the artist’s engagement in the context of the rising interest on the part of non-conformist artists towards the role played by design and architecture in the situation of Estonian society under Soviet occupation. According to Maria Shashkina,

“the most natural and familiar it feels on the streets of his native Tallinn, on building sites, in its new areas. However, he does not just love the city. Keskküla
with extreme sensitivity and subtlety of feeling its scale, feels his space, understands the laws of life in the contemporary urban environment.\textsuperscript{492}

Indeed, the painting carries a metaphysical subtext of the disorientation created in the population's existence by the introduction to the surrounding environment of new objects, along with their new uses and different functions, by the Russification of everyday life, or of new technologies by Soviet modernization.

Considering the architectural element displayed in \textit{Still Life with View of the City}, it is evident how the Estonian cultural identity is now reduced to a geometric and anonymous city, the product of a conformist, imposed design and architectural plan. Keskküla asks the modern viewer whether the overproduction of big or small, necessary or unnecessary goods could ever fill in the feeling of alienation and emptiness. He answers by showing how they offer only an escape into a phantasmagorical fake environment. The recurrent abstract elements in Keskküla's paintings are here embodied by two white squares on top of two long-stemmed objects, which seem to frame the composition and to direct the viewer's gaze.

A similar view from a distant perspective is also displayed in \textit{Two Bouquets on a City Background} (Fig. 101), painted one year earlier. The monumental size of the composition—150cm x 180cm—and the almost monochromatic rendering of the city conveys a metaphysical architectonic vision. In fact, the city presented by Keskküla here recalls some of Sirje Runge's projects such as \textit{Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn}, (1975), (Fig. 22), or Runge-Lapin's animated film frames in \textit{Colorful Birds}, (1974), (Fig. 102).

Runge's proposal consists of eight designs investigating the means for reconstructing different locations, mostly neglected courtyards and abandoned industrial areas around the Tallinn city center, while his animated film shows a bored future society starting to come alive with the addition of primary colors. However, Runge's aim was to “convince people that the city was not a 'hostile territory stretching from work to home' and to reanimate the space through an active design process which contemplated modern and flexible structures replacing old monuments. Her nearly abstract buildings convey the idea of modernity, while in Keskküla's work they actually carry the idea of historical regression and alienation. Despite being more detailed and outlined than in Still-Life, the buildings in Two Bouquets on a City Background are still quite two-dimensional and mostly geometric. The only edifices that stand out from the others is a brown skyscraper, probably the Viru Hotel, on the right side of the composition and the white Town Hall in Raekoda Square. The fact that all houses and buildings are white could be seen as a reference to the white apartments in Mustamäe, or to the fact that

“white houses in landscapes seem to have been one of the favorite themes for Estonian artists in the 1970s and 1980s. [...] The white houses that appeared in Estonian architecture in the early 1970s were a programmatic neo-functionalist trend whose ideal was expressed in the work of pre-war Estonian architects, and the development of a modernistic body of ideas.”

In Two Bouquets on a City Background, the pristine white geometry of the city buildings is confronted with two black rectangles disguised as the roofs of two plain


494 However, Runge called “urban design fantasies” the third urban intervention envisaged by Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn. Mari Laanemets, “Flight into Tomorrow: Rethinking Artistic Practice in Estonia During the 1970s” (Leonhard Lapin), Art Margins, Volume 2, Issue 2, June 2013: 155

495 Tonis Saadoja, Urmas Ploomipuu’s White House, (Eesti Kunstimuuseum Kumu: Tallinn, 2011): 84
houses in the foreground.\textsuperscript{496} The presence of these black geometric shapes could be considered Keskküla's personal re-interpretation of Malevich’s nihilism transposed onto the Estonian cityscape, whose national and traditional characteristics are progressively reduced to an ensemble of monotonous buildings. The black rectangles also reflect the attempt of non-conformist artists to contrast the official artistic sphere with their inner creativity as the true image of reality.

The housing conditions in Tallinn’s mikroraions are further and more closely explored in paintings like \textit{Industrial Interior} (Fig. 5), and \textit{Evening} (Fig. 8), whose subject “conveys a sense of metaphysical space and the intertwining of different realities, different moments and scales […] where light dominates color,”\textsuperscript{497} as pointed out by Lapin. In these works, Keskküla presents an industrial or urban environment as a living space, and at the same time as an object of aesthetic analysis. Indeed, the artist’s use of a “metaphysical light creates architectonic visions,”\textsuperscript{498} which embeds a certain “mysticism”\textsuperscript{499} into the plasticity of those architectural representations.

The conflict between a realistic representation of architecture based on a photographic source and the spiritual dimension attributed to it opens once again Keskküla’s artistic discourse to the double dimension of personal memories and documentary perspective. In fact, the apparently dispassionate representation of the interiors in \textit{Evening} and \textit{Construction} became a further analysis of these elements, a

\textsuperscript{496} These black forms recall Boris Groys' statement that Russian history of art and reality continue to pass through the “black square” of total annihilation, after which traditional art forms lose their former status as the cognitive reflection of life. In fact, he claims that Malevich's “Black Square” has been transformed by the second Russian avant-garde into the symbol of a death-generating zone, of a realism of death. Boris Groys, \textit{Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde}, exh. cat. (Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, Curatorial Assistance, Los Angeles): 222.

\textsuperscript{497} Leonhard Lapin, ed., \textit{Ando Keskküla}, cat.exhib, (Eesti NSV Riiklik Kunstimuseum, Tallinn, 1986): n.p

\textsuperscript{498} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{499} Ibid.
metaphor for the life of the Estonian population under Soviet occupation. As discussed in Chapter Two, this approach to architecture as a symbol of an existential condition could be attributed to the influence of both the semiotician Yuri Lotman and Keskküla’s teacher Ludmilla Siim, who believed that “entering into a comprehensive relationship with the city is the only way to make something strange one's own, to recapture a lost place.”

*Evening*, is one of Keskküla's first hyperrealist works showing his switch of focus from nature to interiors. Indeed, the perspective of *Northern Estonian Landscape*, where nature is at the center of the composition and the interior only suggested, is here reversed with the attention directed primarily to the language of architecture and its deep impact on people’s quality of life. The representation of an anonymous and barren interior that is falling apart becomes in Keskküla's work a reservoir of hidden signs which bring a series of new metaphorical meaning to the composition. Through the attribution of single elements to a symbolic meaning, as words on a page, here Keskküla is conveying the decline of the Estonian society via the Moscow central government's transformation of private and public space into a political sphere. Moreover, Evening is one example of how his hyperrealist paintings can be seen as negatives of the representations of Socialist realism. If in the Socialist realism the question is what is not shown in the picture, the answer is found in his hyper-realistic paintings that show what is obscured by censorship. By doing so, Keskküla’s hyperrealism destroys ideological literacy, turning instead to critical literacy.

The anonymity of the interior in Evening may in fact refer to the residential districts of Mustamäe or Lasnamäe, which drastically changed the image of Tallinn’s cityscape from the historical buildings in the city center. Meanwhile the strange

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500 See note n. 44, in Chapter Two.
collapsing detritus gathered against the central wall could refer to the shoddy constructions of Soviet modernist architecture as well as the cheap material employed during the construction of these buildings. As discussed in chapter one, during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev governments, standardized prefabricated housing parts and wall-size load bearing panels made from pre-stressed concrete replaced the conventional building material of brick, steel, and lumber. Moreover, Keskküla seems also to remind the viewer how often buildings were approved for occupancy before they were actually fully completed, thus leaving the new tenants to deal with construction defects, cracks in the panels, unfinished facades, low-quality furniture, and poor drainage causing water to collect on walks and grounds.

The visual discrepancy between the new Soviet architecture imposed in that decade on the preexistent Estonian cityscape is referred to in *Evening* by the insulating foam squeezed between the wall blocks, while the detritus that almost completely covers the ground could allude to the filling out of Soviet apartments with consumer goods, whose production was massively increased in the 1960s.

In the painting's title “Evening” could also be found a hidden meaning: beside referring to the ending of the day, it could also indicate the end of Estonian citizens' hopes to have a home which could be an intimate space from the overwhelming Soviet presence and provide for their daily needs. The viewer is dragged into the composition by realist shadows giving the impression of wall sections, framing the composition and at the same time conveying the illusion of peering into the room. The involvement of the viewer is counterbalanced by the artist's apparently impersonal approach, which actually embodies a personal critique of the alienation that the new but monotonous and already
defective Soviet mass housing imposed on the city's historical identity and the people who lived there. The absence of any human being further underlines the abandonment and loneliness linked to these residential districts.

Here again, Keskküla maintains an open dialogue with the avant-garde by inserting a pair of squares, this time black, on the apartment windows facing the outdoor landscape. The squares' opposition to the slippage of trees alludes both to the aggressive imposition of the Soviet man-made environment on Estonia's untouched countryside, and to the opposition between the abstractionism embraced by contemporary non-conformist artists and the traditional landscape painting that avoided any political reference.

The blurred effect of the picture, which mimics the focal distortions of the camera lens along with its unnatural colors, adds an element of artificiality to enhance the viewer's disorientation by presenting a different reality from that which they were normally used to. This disorientation is amplified by the doubled identical point of view that shows a repetitive sequence of the room as if the citizen were living a double life, one belonging to Estonian culture and one imposed by the Soviet authorities.

Keskküla's ability to open a dialogue between the official discourse of realism in Russia and the non-conformist practices of the second half of the 20th century is masterfully displayed in *A Lighting at the Construction Site* (1978) (Fig. 65). In this painting the artist transforms a deserted urban interior into a geometrically well-
organized space, ruled by a pattern that disregards real spatial relationships, along with the insertion of abstract elements that interact with both the figurative representations and the photographic source. Photography plays a role here as part of the artistic process that takes to its limits the contrast between the use of slides as a base for the representation and the final result. The dialogue between photography and the artist's personal interpretation creates a hybrid composition that merges the use of cold and saturated colors, applied with the technique of aerosol spray,\textsuperscript{503} and documentation. However, as with several of Keskküla's works, \textit{A Lighting at the Construction Site} should not be interpreted on the basis of a photograph but as a blend of several existing physical spaces that create a metaphysical one, made believable by the photographic resemblance to their source.

Untitled presents what art historian Anu Liivak defines as the effect of estrangement characteristic of most of Keskküla's works due to his “depicting in painting with exact preciseness the photographic image, but also his own attitude toward the motive. The latter is attractive for the artist as real […] and a structure providing interesting possibilities for artistic interpretation.”\textsuperscript{504} The use of the aerosol technique highly contributes to amplifying such possibilities by conveying a dimension of unreality and artificiality to the illusion of the photographic-like representation through the effect of a diffused light.\textsuperscript{505} Such a sense of unreality is even more amplified by the emptiness of the space which, as in Evening, seems to allude to the sense of alienation prevailing in Soviet apartments through the imposition of standardized furniture and everyday objects.

\textsuperscript{503} Ando Keskküla was one of the first artists to employ airbrush in the creation of his paintings in Estonia. The aerosol technique was a quite unknown technique before he started to apply it when he turned to oil paint in 1971.

\textsuperscript{504} Anu Liivak, “Let’s stay Estonians, let’s become European,” 42.

\textsuperscript{505} Leonhard Lapin, ed., \textit{Ando Kesskula}: unpaginated.
characteristic of the Russian socio-cultural background. A further critique of the housing conditions is embodied in the pieces of ceiling fallen on the floor that refer to the quick degradation of Soviet interiors due to the use of cheap materials, and in the grass that emerges from the left side of the picture, reinforcing the sense of abandonment. At the same time, the sole ray of light penetrating from the openings on the ceiling, along with abstract elements such as four orange lines floating in the air crossing the center of the composition, lights that draw white rectangles on the floor, and red objects lying on the ground, creates an even more unreal and detached atmosphere.

By showing the real housing conditions in the mikraions of Tallinn, Keskküla is able to subvert the Soviet rhetoric of the time by destroying the optimism of the grandiose representation of society typical in propaganda, and through his figurative style, bringing realism back to its critical phase. Two paintings titled Construction, and Industrial Interior created in 1976 clearly illuminate such an approach.

In the painting Industrial Interior (Fig. 23) made in 1976, Keskküla continues to display interior settings as ideologized spatial forms that embody the imposition of one society's language onto another. As the title suggests, here at the center of the artist’s focus is not a dwelling but the interior of a factory, thus extending his critique to the alleged technological progress brought by Khrushchev and Brezhnev’s plans in the 1960s-70s and touted by Soviet propaganda. Moreover, here the artist’s personal gesture through the free use of painting, with color marks applied by the airbrush on one side of the composition, openly challenges the precise and accurate representation of the interior on the other side. In fact, the painting is divided into two parts: the right side occupied by the factory's control unit, motors, wires, pipes and protective mesh, and the left one with
the aforementioned color marks and random letters assembled on the upper part. The insertion of such abstract elements becomes a violent counterpart to the precision of the technical equipment. Keskküla here seems to remind the viewer that the artist's creative process is always a fundamental component of any representation, even the most realistic one.

By taking a closer look at this equipment the letter “I” in Cyrillic is visible at the left edge of the picture, whose proximity, whether on purpose or by chance, to the skull symbolizing “danger” conveys an unconscious association between Russian culture and peril, hinting at the overpowering presence of the Soviet occupation on Estonian society. Although the machinery seems technologically advanced and perfectly functioning, the symbol of death reminds us of its other implications, and becomes a way to refer to the oppression, danger, and death experienced by many citizens who have refused to follow the rules imposed by Soviet authorities—much like those who do not follow the safety instructions of the machine risk their own lives).

With the *Construction* (Fig. 5) painting, Keskküla builds up psychological tension by representing a neon light leaning against a moldy and peeling wall in a barren room. The fact that the neon is broken first highlights the failure of the authorities in achieving the alleged modernity and technological progress claimed by propaganda, and secondly refers to the home's previous human occupation. The scene's unbalancing sense of estrangement is paired with the repetition of a sequence of identical confined narrow spaces, perceived as even more claustrophobic by the close-framed image.\(^5^0^6\) This aspect in particular seems to stress the lie at the base of the era's Soviet housing projects, which promised to provide people with accommodation in huge apartments building, but were

\(^{506}\) Anu Liivak., “Let's stay Estonian, let's become European,” 42
instead strictly rationed by square meter per person, and whose infrastructure often remained largely nonexistent. Indeed, the neon light laying against the wall could refer to both the lack of electricity and the state of general abandonment in the mikroraiões at the outskirts of Tallinn. The detached attitude and lack of any personal emotional participation toward the subject displayed by Keskküla here seems to embody his opinion that what is left is a society where there is no space for human beings, real progress, or improvement in their living conditions.

One of Keskküla’s works that summarizes the aforementioned statement is the diptych *Kuiv Tavav 6 A I* (1978-1980) (Fig. 72), which also marks the artist's return to a closer adherence to the photographic-like illusion. In fact, it seems that here Keskküla relies on the objective power of photography to convey greater credibility to the scene represented: the interior of two rooms, with the owner's personal belongings scattered all around in the first painting and a minimal furniture ensemble in the second. The chaos and randomness in the distribution of the items—in the foreground are recognizable a light-blue bag, letter envelopes, paper sheets, files, boxes, and books, while a black desk, a shelf, and a stool entirely occupy the background—are contrasted by the extremely precise rendering of the aerosol technique. However, Keskküla inserts his personal touch with abstract elements like the zigzag lines and paint dots on the bag, the white square papers, and the artificial and saturated colors of the whole composition.

The anarchy that dominates the room could indicate either the absence of any human habitation, as if the place has been abandoned for a long time, or as if the owner suddenly disappeared without having time to tidy up his belongings. The scene
represented by Keskküla mirrors Aleksandr Vysokovskii's description of the living environment in the Soviet Union as the model of chaos where

“the jumble of different places in the modern cramped apartment is not part of some well-considered plan, […] Rather it is literally disorder, the random dumping together of typical bits of everyday life. If the living environment follows a cultural model, then in the Soviet Union is re-created a model not of the cosmos but of chaos. Its model is a culture “exploded” with no discernible logical center.”

Indeed, in Keskküla’s *Kuiv Tavav 6 A I*, the cluster of scattered objects become a metaphor of the overproduction of goods in the Soviet society and the intrusion and gradual substitution of particular items connected with the Russian culture into Estonian domesticity. As objects are a form of meaning formed in specific economic and cultural conditions, which convey the language of a specific society, the conflict created by the overlapping of the two different realms produces “chaos”, as showed in Keskküla’s room in the first painting. Moreover, the sinister atmosphere that pervades the composition seems to point out that in Soviet society domestic privacy could be turned upside down through constant control from an outside power, not only directly with propaganda, but also indirectly through the coercive influence of apparently innocuous objects.

The room in the second painting of the diptych is, on the contrary, more minimalistic, as it is furnished only by a few objects—a lamp, two closets, and a table with some geometrical objects on it, the color palette reduced mainly to red and black. A green and flourishing landscape view depicted on a small postcard is attached to the red closet; by inserting the postcard into the room, Keskküla aims at tricking the viewer's vision and belief, counterpoising the objectivity represented by the realistic rendering of the postcard landscape, and the illusionistic rendering embodied by the photographic-

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507 Aleksandr Vysokovskii, “Will domesticity return?” 283
likeness of the painting itself. However, Keskküla breaks this deceptive appearance with the intrusion of the “camera” embodied by the flash reflected on the black cabinet surface, which reinserts both mediums into the sphere of the language of art by stressing that we what are looking is actually a picture created by the artist. According to Sirje Helme, Keskküla was still experimenting with reproducing reality in this painting, although she considered it an already sophisticated and brilliant solution. Indeed, the audience was allowed to look inside not only the artist's creative process but also into his personal space, his home, and the rhythm of his life, to feel the inner pulse of his creation as a modern artist.508

As the conclusion of a circle, one of Keskküla's last hyperrealist paintings, *Tallinn Harbour with an Unfinished Seascape*, made in 1980-81 (Fig. 103), returns to interconnect the medium of photography with the three main cultural discourses of Estonia's art sphere: the occupying power with socialist realism, conservative forces with the tradition of the landscape painting, and the avant-garde with abstraction. Indeed, the triptych becomes Keskküla’s platform to show his ability to master different styles and techniques along with his interest in merging contrasting creative solutions together.

The triptych portrays a detailed description of different aspects of the port of Tallinn: in the first painting a view of the sea, in the second the port terminal, and in the last the interior of the Tallinn’s sea passenger port. The first painting combines several elements from abstract and action painting, such as the black “half moon” leaking paint at

508 Maria Shashkina and Ando Keskküla eds., *Ando Keskküla - Urban Man*, 33: “В картине "Таллин. Улица Куив, 6а И" (1980) изображен интерьер кабинета. Мы видим перед собой рабочий стол. Может быть, он принадлежит художнику, может быть, журналисту или писателю. Хозяин неожиданно вышел куда-то, и зрителю было позволено заглянуть в святая святых - кабинет, мир творчества, почувствовать внутренний пульс этого мира. Оказывается, и обстановка, и ритм жизни творческой личности сегодня понятны и близки каждому. Бытие современного человека горожанина подчинено единому темпу, обширимозномерностям".
the center of the composition, or the white lines randomly applied all over the surface, while white arrows point towards the vertical edges of the image at the top of the frame. The scene is framed by a rectangle made by three thick lines at each side, while the sea is just an expanse of water, disturbed by some small waves. The distinctive colors, in particular the intensive blue of the sky and sea, and the pasty texture of the painting create an intense rhythm underlined by the waves that seem to break at the edges of the painting. An image of a seagull on the right side of the picture has been crossed by Keskküla with some paint, as if to symbolize a detachment of the animal world from humanity's new relationship with nature.

In the second painting, a dark-haired man in a blue suit, which is something extremely rare in Keskküla's hyperrealist paintings, is walking by a large crane that dominates and completely attracts his attention. The point of view of the scene suggests that the perspective is from a camera lens, which guides the viewer's gaze towards the direction of the man between two rows of pallets. Here Keskküla creates a comparison between nature, in this context embodied by the sea, and human technological achievement and progress, symbolized by the metal crane. Furthermore, through the simple gesture of the man staring at the crane, Keskküla implies the modern person's progressive shift of interest from nature towards technology.

In the last painting of the triptych, the human figure loses its contours and becomes just a series of shadows and silhouettes reflected in the building's glass doors, entangled in a game of visual illusions reminiscent of Semyon Faibisovich's bus series paintings of the same period. Although the sea is still visible from distance, it is now just a remote element, along with a white ship, the quay, and the harbor buildings, partially
covered by the windows and glass door. Massive dark blue clouds on the sky stand over the tower of the Oleviste Church and some city houses. The geometrical structure of the painting pushes the composition to the limit of abstraction and closes the triptych narrative started in the first painting.

*Tallinn Harbour with an Unfinished Seascape* perfectly summarizes, already in the title's use of the word “unfinished”, Keskküla's approach toward his paintings as parts of an ongoing process rather than as finished products. As he affirms

“art is a system of coding and decoding. Their intersection is the appropriate linguistic mastery. Yet, I do not think that with film, video, photo, the reality would be more intimate, quite the contrary. I would say the more similar the image has with the so-called reality, the less real it is. Meaning that reality is ever more limited by its own reality. In this respect, painting can be regarded as a super programming language.”

Keskküla’s definition of painting as a “super programming language” which helps the viewer to get closer to reality shows the influence of Yuri Lotman's theory. Lotman's defined art as a “secondary modelling system”, which is able to convey an alternate meaning to the one that is currently being perceived and is suitable for storing a very large amount of complex information that can also transform the consumer. It is precisely through painting that Keskküla is able to “get the viewer closer to reality”, which is both a “reality” that sums up together a visible and recognizable place such as an industrial interior, an apartment, or a harbor, and a timeless and unreal dimension introduced by abstract elements. The latter allows him to conveys a sense of metaphysical space and at the same time to open a dialogue with his fellow abstract artists of the contemporary non-conformist scene. Keskküla's ability to masterfully interweave

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509 Nurk Kaire, “Elu Room” (Life Space): 41
510 Lotman, “Trudy po znakovym sistemam,” 21
different realities, both constructed and natural, sharpen the viewer's perception in relation to space and consequently, also their part in it as citizen and human being.

Ando Keskküla’s hyperrealism played an important role in broadening the horizons of young artists from the 1970's. Indeed, his approach challenging the limits of the modernist idiom by exploring of visual reality through the techniques and aesthetic possibilities of photography, was shared by Jaan Elken in the second half of the 1970s.

The new form of realism presented by both artists, based on a photographic-like representation of Tallinn's public and private cityscape as a series of oppressive and alienated sites, demonstrate how the ideology imposed by Soviet occupation on the Estonian population deeply affected the citizens’ routines, habits and social relations. In fact, with their hyperrealist works Keskküla and Elken break the automatism of the encoded messages conveyed by the party ideology embodied by the city’s architecture and housing language that dictated and influenced the mechanisms that conditioned the population's behavior. In particular Elken focuses his reflection on the role of language as a powerful tool used by the Party’s ideology, highlighting the Sovietization of the Estonian language as one of the ways used to impose the political occupation and social control over the population, mirroring Lotman's idea that “Art is not a form of play, but the elements of play exist both in the behavior of the creator and the audience.”

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511 Ibid.
3.2 The representation of the Loss of “Estoniana” by Sovietization in Jaan Elken’s Hyperrealism

In *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Katerina Clark analyses the temporal structure of the Socialist Realist novel in terms of mythic ‘Great Time’. She claims that events of the present become meaningful only insofar as they imitate a mythical archetype which resides in a historic past or an unspecified time. In the Soviet discourse, affirms Clark, ordinary spaces could become, by analogy “Great Spaces,” through a connection with the “grand spatial narrative” of socialism.

Jaan Elken's hyperrealist art production could be framed within a reverse transformation of the above-mentioned phenomenon: he re-transforms places in Estonian cities that are charged with mythical great Soviet narratives into ordinary spaces, by showing the triviality and banality of their everyday existence. Moreover, through his works Elken shows how history activates a process that both empties and fills forms, divesting them of meanings and adding new ones. The artist himself explains the process on which his art production was based at the beginning of his career: “in the 1970s and 1980s, one of the trends in my work was to reconstruct the Estonian era. I circled above Estonian interwar-era architecture, the catalyst was an unaccountable yearning for a mythical past”. However, this search based on the “yearning for a

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513 An example of this is the city of Tallinn in the 1960s. According to architecture historian A. Gavrickov, despite in the 1966 Tallinn attracted masses of tourists, the old town looked too old to be a real attraction for them. Therefore, the architecture main efforts of that years focused on a more harmonious balance on the whole city, between areas of development and historical sites. The urban planning thus aimed at turning the “complete contradictions of a capitalist city into a harmonious socialist urban organism” (из полного противоречий капиталистического города в гармоничный социалистический городской организм). Yuri Iaralov, “Советская архитектура,” *Искусство*, п.18, 1969: 217-222.
514 Liivrand, “Identity: Painter,” 103
mythical past” put Elken face to face with his native city, Tallinn, which had lost this aura, and forced him to come to terms with a present that he felt did not belong to him, or to his fellow Estonian citizens.

As already discussed, Elken represents the city architecture formed by streets, buildings, and prohibition signs, since he believed that “Depicting the city environment is nevertheless only a means, and depicting material with no life at all should reconstruct or recreate certain mood states in the viewer's mind, that is the whole point.”  

Elken's search for the past should also be extended to his own since, as Kädi Talvoja points out, a characteristic of Elken’s works is the insertion of his subjectivity and personal experience into the compositions: “He does observe the contemporary city with an indifferent photographic eye, but leaves his mark—“I was here.” This mark in several of his hyperrealist works is created by his open brush-technique, by the insertion of abstract areas of colors into the photographic image, and by other highly perceptible details, often biographical, that aggressively invade the smooth surfaces painted with the aerograph. Such visible intervention of the artist’s presence is Elken’s way to show how his perception remains the primary impulse at the base of the work's creation.

A biographical aspect is displayed in the objects and places Elken represented in the painting No Title (Fig. 24) created in 1978, where the artist's memory plays an important role in the development of the composition. The scene shows an airplane in the background, while in the foreground towers a menacing sign that says “Ülekäiku ei ole.

515 Ibid., 110.
516 Talvoja, “Eesti Hüperrealism – Kompromisside Kunst,” 51
517 Elken stated in his biography that “the environment was defined by countless of individual objects and street signs specific to the era. A traffic sign on the wall of a building had a preferential position compared to the interplay of windows and doors. Architecture (…) here attracts the detritus of lives, the time and memories.” Liivrand, “Identity: Painter,” 105.
Переходи нет” (No crossing) written both in Russian and Estonian. The prominence of the sign within the whole composition clearly refers to the years of political schizophrenic domination, by the Soviet occupation and the strong impact it had on the population, which eventually created a combination of ethnic Estonians, Russified Estonians, and Russians who were relocated to the Baltic Republics. The hyperrealist features and political implications of Untitled confirm Elken's definition of himself as a political artist on account of his interest in searching for meanings that were critical of Estonian society, such as deportation and occupation by the Soviet authorities.

Moreover, No Title is also an example of Elken's “reconstructive memory,” as Anders Härm calls it, and the artist's “anthropological research of the Soviet urban environment,” particularly in the second half of the 1970s.

Indeed, the airport tarmac and the plane bring forth several meanings: first, they allude to Estonia's geographical position as at the border of both Russia and Finland, a Western state, which generated in the past a multilayered socio-economic and political system. Although the encounter between Russian and Estonian culture produced a semiotic dynamism in the socio-cultural sphere, it also induced a hybridization of Estonian language on a daily basis through advertisements, public documents, and urban and store signs by introducing Russian as the first language, replacing Estonian words with their Russian equivalents, or even with the creation of new words by the mix of the two languages. Furthermore, by imposing a new bureaucratic system followed by a different style of urban planning, the Soviet authorities forced Estonian people to become

518 Canwell, “Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation,” 13
519 Ibid. 20
520 Härm, “Lost / hyper reality (?): concerning Elken from an anthropologist’s point of view”: 12–14.
521 Ibid.
as foreigners in their own country, as underlined by the large sign in Untitled. Second, the proximity of the sign and the airplane symbolizes the closing of the Soviet borders for Estonian citizens after 1940 and the forced collectivization and mass deportation of Estonians, such as Elken's parents, to Siberia from 1947 to 1949. Elken explains the experience on which this work is based: “the visiting of the port was a source of constant frustration to me. I felt mentally strangely disintegrated. Due to communication with Russian border guards, I was in contact with the repressive system, while my whole creation was differently oriented.”

With No Title, Elken shows how even such a simple object as the sign in the painting can activate in the viewer a wave of memories and resurface some painful feelings, a concept that Ando Keskküla well develops when he affirms that

“Psychophysiological influence obtained through the senses mixes with cultural-informational data, the connection takes place not on the level of isolated, psychic phenomena but on the level of the full individual, where various outer influences are filtered and transformed, depending on the situation, the individual’s previous experiences and activities.”

The painting includes also graffiti texts, which in the 1990s became an important element in Elken's art production. From this perspective, Elken's works are similar to some of Eric Bulatov's paintings from the 1960s and 1970s, where the latter combines conceptual elements with photographic or photographic-based reproductions, in order to mirror the fragmented reality of Soviet society and the role of language and the visual apparatus of ideology in shaping it. Elken also includes fragments of everyday language, such as the piece of paper glued to the canvas in No Title, interacting with images derived from photographic reproductions of well-known cityscapes. Another detail that

apparently seems out of place within the scene portrayed is the face of a man, inserted on the lower left side of the painting, whose enigmatic smirk adds a surreal dimension to the whole composition.

A further example of Elken's earlier “reconstructive memory” applied to architectural objects as strictly bounded with a specific language and of his personal social critique of an Estonian society under a constant process of Russification is displayed in the painting On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street (1978) (Fig. 7). As he explains: “my attempts to document functionalist architecture in the early and mid-1980s always featured some sort of twist: perhaps buildings juxtaposed with an eroded ground surface as if from sci-fi film – the golden age of Estonian architecture vs. the 1980s reality.”

Although here Elken refers in particular to his activity in the 1980s, On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street already shows some of the aforementioned “twists”. In the painting, based on photographs taken by the artist as in several of his hyperrealist works from the late 1970s, Elken pairs a street sign with a collapsing Soviet building, thus activating an interplay between different codified signs whose proximity within a given context conveys a new meaning. In fact, the meaning of the image here relies on both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (the street sign and the crumbling façade), and their dialogue which Elken masterfully reproduces within the frame of the canvas. The streets named after the national romantic poetess Lidia Koidula and Estonian red revolutionary Alexander Leiner, - mentioned in the painting's title - represent the Estonian tradition, which stands out from the highly tactile cracked color of the building's wall. By using these simple common objects, Elken is able to visually convey an

ideological representation of the counter-cultural milieu of the time: the close-up on the street sign named after the national intellectual and the insertion in the title of the revolutionary highlights the “sense of alienation generated on a daily basis on the Estonian speaking population by the Russification of the city’s street signs.” At the same time, it also refers to the opposition of the Estonian cultural sphere to the Soviet authorities' domination. Elken’s approach in On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street in translating the city signs into the language of art becomes “a primary mechanism of consciousness,” mirroring Lotman's idea that a translation of something in another language is never a simple re-creation of an idea into a new code, but also a way to both understand it, and to generate a new set of information and memories. This statement serves to define both the process of Sovietization of Estonian culture, as well as the act of opposition of artists like Elken who use the same modus operandi employed by propaganda to achieve the opposite effect of its demystification. In fact, the artist's textural gesture here not only evokes a sense of decay in the building wall combined with exposed wires and a rusty electricity box, but also tosses a reproach towards the condition of the city buildings and, in a wider sense, the utopian ideal that had served as the excuse for building them.

Elken’s statement that “the environment was defined by countless of individual objects and street signs specific to the era,” is also presented in In the Kalinin District, (1978) (Fig. 64). The painting embodies the artist’s idea that every subject and object,

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526 Ibid.
527 Lotman, The Universe of Mind A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 127
528 Ibid.
even the most unnoticed, was equally worthy of attention and, as part of the society’s “language,” could become the means to convey a picture of Soviet urbanism and the mass-culture aesthetics of the time.

With *In the Kalinin District*, Elken built a visual tension by enlarging, radically cropping, and choosing an unusual angle of perspective on the neon sign of a hotel in Tallinn. This distinctive characteristic led some Estonian critics such as Evi Pihlak and Kädi Talvoja to compare his paintings with American artist Robert Cottingham’s artworks of the late 1960s. Indeed, Cottingham, like Elken, saw his works not as mere painterly translations of photographs, but primary expressions of the subject matter, the so-called Americana. However, while Cottingham often changed the words in his facades to alter the meaning of the composition in order to convey the sense of American culture as a whole, Elken’s aim is to represent the progressive loss of the “Estoniana” through the existent city’s signs that testify to its progressive Sovietization. Speaking about the origin of *In the Kalinin District*, Elken affirmed that he “started to paint the signs of hotels in Tallinn where people have never been, because during Soviet times it was prohibited to live in a hotel when you have a permanent living place in the same town.” In fact the subject of *In the Kalinin District* is a close-up image of the Kopli Hotel neon sign, with its Russian translation “гостиница”, hanging on the facade of a derelict building. Besides displaying the name of the hotel, the word “гостиница” could also refer to the absurd prohibition by Soviet authorities against renting a hotel room to Tallinn citizens in their own city, a fact well known by the local population. On a more personal level, the hotel carries particular memories for Elken:

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531 Author’s interview with the artists, Tallinn, October 2011.
“I lived in Mahe district in a summer home built by my parents. As I waited for bus NO. 8, a vignette of the central train station area became etched in my memory, the ramshackle blue-light Kopli Hotel with its large marquee emanating cosmopolitan flair. Add the chrestomathic (word used by Elken), title - “In the Kalinin district” - and the cultural anthropological treatise on the Soviet urban environment was complete. There would have been no other way to talk about the ongoing process of Russification.”

The juxtaposition between the hotel sign, named after a working-class neighborhood in Tallinn, a “real sububria”, and the facade where it is exhibited, conveys an atmosphere of distorted luxury and misery at the same time. The peeling paint and the provisional electrical wiring alongside the pretentious modern bilingual light box sign present the contradictions of the Estonian society of the time, split between the alleged grandeur claimed by the propaganda and real-life misery. The sense of decay typical of these parts of the city is also amplified by the crashing of tactile brushes into the photographic-like image painted with a spray gun. On the building facade, two windows, one open and one closed, create another point of attention, although the main focus remains the Kopli sign; as Elken affirms, “a traffic sign on the wall of a building had a preferential position compared to the interplay of windows and doors.” Indeed, the window was a recurrent element in Elken's hyperrealist works of the late 1970s and 1980s; sometimes, it contributed to breaking the gloomy atmosphere of a narrow space, at others it created a rhythm in the architectural monotony.

In addition to the prohibition for Tallinn citizens to rent a room in the city's hotel, \textit{In the Kalinin District} raises a further political innuendo: the Kopli district was close to Tallinn's only railway station, which during the 1970s was serving only two lines that connected Russians to the Estonian capital—one connecting to Moscow and one to St.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{532} Ibid.\textsuperscript{533} Liivrand, “Identity: Painter,” 105.}
Petersburg. Elken seems to imply that the city of Tallinn was considered as just a “hotel” for some Russian tourists, indeed a gostinitsa, and Estonian people as “guest” (‘gost’ in the sign), in their own country as clearly written in Russian on the sign. With In the Kalinin District Elken masterfully conveys through just a simple neon sign not only the sense of alienation generated on a daily basis towards the Estonian-speaking population, but also the impact of the Soviet occupation on people's freedom and individual choices.

The paintings No Title, On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street and In The Kalinin District clearly display Elken's attraction for the city's cultural signs, which he defined as “the “fluidum of the environment,”534 and the important role he attributed to language and texts in shaping people's perception of their environment. Moreover, they show how the different combination of singular elements belonging to the sphere of architecture, such as a neon sign or a street sign, could form or pervert an instance of speech in order to convey a precise meaning and message, just as in a text the combination of single words creates a precise sentence.535

From the representation of the decaying facades of buildings, Elken moves to interiors that show the dirty conditions of the Soviet housing in residential neighborhoods, as in the paintings Upstairs, Downstairs (1978) (Fig. 80), Damp Places I (1980) (Fig. 105), and Men's section (1980) (Fig. 68). The locations represented in these three paintings—a landing, a sauna, and a shower box—are taken from places Elken had a direct experience of, as he confirmed:

535 In 1972 Ursula Meyer’s “Conceptual Art” reached Estonia via art critic Jaak Kangilaski, who brought it along with some literature about contemporary art. The critic contributed to the circulation of the book’s ideas by lending it to several artists, Elken included, which had a fundamental role in shaping the artists approach to conceptualism. As Elken confirmed: “I think the text was sometimes disciplined and contributed to the conceptualization of my otherwise baroque painting masquerade.” Sirk, 01. April 2005: “Ma arvan, et tekst kohati distsiplineeris ja aitas kontseptualiseerida minu muidu barokseks kippuvat maalimismaneeri”.
“In the early 1980s I had a studio in Tallinn at 77 Tartu Highway, and I painted the dingy interiors photographed there, sauna shower rooms. [...] There it was: the socialist work ideal followed by the cheerful-decrepit shower room that awaited after the day was done.”

With these paintings, Elken subverts the rhetoric of Socialist realism with its positive and celebratory representation of life in the Soviet communal apartments, as in Aleksandr Laktionov’ The New Apartment (1952) (Fig. 36), to engage his work with the critical realism of the Peredvizhniki and the later Surovyi stil documentation of the actual conditions of the Soviet society, in a new form of expression that would faithfully reflect the dreary everyday life of the population.

Elken’s choice of the subjects of the three paintings, domestic as well intimate interiors, should be contextualized within the debate prevalent in the 1970s regarding whether people were a product of their surroundings, which led to the belief that contentment was connected with a comfortable home and a satisfying job in a pleasant working environment. This paintings point out how Elken agreed with this idea, while reversing it by showing how a decrepit environment could instead create domestic unhappiness. Elken's subjectivity also connects with the viewer's personal experience, and as suggested by Evi Pihlak, “quite boldly engraved in spectator's memory,” as most of the Soviet citizens visiting his exhibitions would have experienced the difficult and often uncomfortable living condition represented in the three paintings above.

In Upstairs, Downstairs, Elken represents a glimpse of a staircase landing and an open window in an anonymous building. The element of the window introduces here a glimpse of blue sky which partially enlightens the otherwise dark, dirty, and oppressive

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539 Interview with the Author, Tallinn, October 2011.
space. Windows are also recurrent elements in Edward Hopper's paintings, which Elken names as an important influence for his hyperrealism in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{539} Indeed, an interesting comparison could be established between Elken's \textit{Upstairs, Downstairs} and Hopper's painting \textit{Room in Brooklyn} (1932), (Fig. 106) which portrays a woman sit a room, admiring the view from wide glass window. In both paintings, the light brought into the interior by the open window creates a play of lights and points of illumination that enliven a rather bare and simple environment. However, as with Cottingham, the resemblance is more in form than in content; while in Hopper's painting the whole composition conveys a feeling of openness and cleanliness due particularly to the widened view the lady can admire from her chair, in \textit{Upstairs, Downstairs} the window does not achieve such a result. In fact, despite some light rays in the form of short white brushstrokes, concentrated mainly on the handrail of the ladder and the edge of the window, the interior is still quite dark. The atmosphere of the landing, suspended between dark and light, seems to mirror the life of most citizens living in Tallinn’s \textit{mikroonas}, who, despite living in oppressive building conditions imposed by anonymous urban planners, tried to keep the Estonian tradition alive in their homes.

The quite gloomy atmosphere of \textit{Upstairs, Downstairs}, becomes even more oppressive and claustrophobic in the cycle \textit{Damp Places}, which was created in a time span of almost thirty years. The style of the cycle is characterized by an increasingly pictorial and material brushstroke that highlights the artist's gesture, partially overcoming the photographic-like illusion of his previous artworks. With this cycle, Elken forces the viewer to reconsider his or her routine under a different light: by showing diverse domestic interiors, he underlines how objects that are part of a person's private

\textsuperscript{539} Interview with the Author, Tallinn, October 2011.
environment and daily routine, such as a window or a shower, carry an aesthetic value that provokes an emotional reaction and shapes a state of mind.

The first painting of the cycle, *Damp Places I*, 1980 (Fig. 105), centers on the state of abandonment or neglect that characterized many Soviet buildings and interiors at the time. Considering the title and the objects displayed—a bench, an open cupboard, a mat, and two unidentified objects, one on the ground and one on the windowsill—the interior could be a bathroom or, more probably, a sauna, which was, and still is, very popular in Estonia and more generally in northern Europe and Russia.

Elken transforms a sauna, which for many people is synonymous with cleanliness, relaxation, and intimacy, into a place of discomfort, dirt, and neglect, displayed particularly in the description of the missing tiles under the window, in the bench, and in the abandoned object on the ground. Even the window, which in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, served as a light source, in *Damp Places I*, is closed. The only ray of light that filters through it, coming from a small hole, is simply absorbed by the white of the tiles and of the carpet. Nevertheless, despite the scene's appearance of complete abandonment, a closer look at the white and apparently clean object, perhaps a towel or a soap dish, placed on the windowsill, reveals that someone is still coming to use the space.

Considering that housing in particular was one of the principals means by which Khrushchev promised to surpass the capitalist West in the 1960s in terms of living standards, paintings like *Damp Places I*, and the following *Men's Section* (Fig. 68), show the powerful and radical criticism of Elken's hyperrealism to the State’s housing policy, and the failure of the ideology behind it and Soviet society at large.
Men's Section, also painted in 1980, presents once again an interior, this time a bathroom, more closely framed than the sauna in the previous work. Here, Elken’s eye focuses almost exclusively on a shower stall. The only other object in the room is what looks like a soap bar lying on the tiled wall that divides the shower space from the rest of the room. The intensity of the brush strokes, especially in the description of the shower tubes, creates an effect of dirt, decay, and abandonment similar to the one in Damp Places I, although in Men's Section it is accentuated by the yellow partially consumed soap. On the contrary, the tiles and the dirt that covers some parts of the tube surface are rendered in a quite detailed way, which transmits a realistic aspect to the whole composition.

The interiors portrayed in the three above analyzed paintings recall in some aspects the locations of Andrei Tarkovsky’s film Stalker, which was shot in Tallinn in 1979. Elken himself referred to the science-fiction genre, speaking about “buildings juxtaposed with an eroded ground surface as if from sci-fi film.” At the beginning of the film, the Stalker and his passengers drive to an abandoned and filthy area of warehouses, workshops, and railway tracks, which run through a transitional boundary area of empty shacks and car parks in the shadow of a hulking and empty power station. These places are known in the film as the eerie and depopulated "Zone," a region taken over by a mysterious force that upends the laws of physics, conveying those who dare enter it into a dreamscape of magic and terror. A parallel could be established here between the force which took the “Zone” and the Soviet cultural and political imposition on the Estonian territory, which Elken visualizes in his hyperrealist paintings, like Tarkovsky in his film, as specific “zones” of Tallinn.

Indeed, in the 1980s Elken gradually shifted his attention to the Tallinn's wider cityscape, which included its means of transportation such as cars, buses, and trains as in the paintings *Triumphal arch with Pobeda* (Fig. 79) and *Väike-Õismäe* (Fig. 4), both painted in 1981, *Tartu Highway in the Evening* in 1981-82 (Fig. 25), and *Tallinn. Kopli depot* in 1982 (Fig. 62).

In *Triumphal arch with Pobeda*, Elken continues his critique of the power and role of architecture in producing ideological messages that appeal to and are experienced by the masses inattentively, which in turn contribute to the formation of mass consciousness. The painting shows a building whose entrance is an arch overlooking a street bordered by another building in front of it. This was a common view for most of the city dwellers who lived in the city blocks of the many residential neighborhoods of Tallinn. In fact, the street layouts were often dictated by the forced alignment of buildings imposed by the city’s urban plans, that deprived many houses of natural sunlight and fresh air. The absence of human beings in the painting amplifies the claustrophobic and desolated general atmosphere, and symbolizes how the city urban planning usually was conducted without taking into account the residents' needs.

A further analysis of the architectural elements of *Triumphal arch with Pobeda* reveals Elken’s interest in the double aspects of objects: functional, and symbolic. The arch in the painting, for example, was a typology of entrance common to thousands of buildings throughout the former Soviet bloc. However, in Elken's painting, the arch became the symbol of something more than just access to a street. According to the semiotician Umberto Eco, people experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality, and to clarify the statement Eco provides the example of
triumphal arches. For Eco, such architectural objects make possible a passage, and at the same time connote signify “triumph” and “celebration.” Indeed, in the Roman empire, triumphal arches were one of the most influential and distinctive types of architecture associated to the time. They were erected to celebrate victorious generals or to commemorate important public events.

The reference here to the Roman Empire is also in connection to the motto, still strongly supported by the authorities in the Eighties, of “Moscow the Third Rome”. The motto synthesized the belief that Russia was the destined ruler of the world after the Roman and Byzantine empires, despite the progressive collapse of Soviet power and socialism in the Soviet Empire. Eventually, it became openly questioned by some non-conformist artists, such as the Boris Orlov, who was one of the most representative artists from the Sotsart movement in the 1970s, who represented in his art production of the 1980s this supposed strength of Imperialist power as a carnivalesque farce. In *Triumphal arch with Pobeda*, Elken takes on a similar stance by mocking the pretentiousness and pompousness of Soviet propaganda, but in a subtler way. A way to understand the mockery behind the painting is to apply Umberto Eco's approach to architecture, and the distinction he made between sign vehicles and meanings. While the former is observable and describable apart from the meanings people attribute to it, the latter changes according to the codes used to read them. Consequently, the arch in Elken's painting could be seen not only as an architectural object, but also as the propaganda plan to transfer the heroic spirit of the Roman Empire’s monuments into the Soviet architecture. However, an even more thorough analysis unveils a whole different meaning that is the opposite of the title's literal meaning, since Elken attributes the adjective “triumphal” to a

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simple, plain arch which lacks any grandiose ornament. Therefore, the powerful adjective is reversed into a mockery of contemporary Soviet architecture, presented by propaganda as a triumph of progress, and characteristic of a society projected into the future. The paradox between language and image is also supported by the presence of the car Pobeda,\textsuperscript{542} which in Russian means "victory", parked in front of the shabby arch. By pairing two common objects as a machine and the plain entrance of a building and by attributing to them pretentious names, Elken amplifies the irony of the scene and performs an act of desecrating the alleged greatness of the Soviet empire.

\textit{Triumphal arch with Pobeda} perfectly embodies what art historian Viktor Misiano has observed about Soviet art in general: “the comparison between Soviet models and their genetic ancestors has an unmasking effect. Compared to the Christian iconostasis or Roman emperors, the Soviet pantheon, with its sailors, sportsmen, pilots, etc., seems an absurd historical farce.”\textsuperscript{543} Moreover, with this painting, Elken shows that what can be easily proclaimed by words as being great and majestic, as in the title of the painting, is actually contradicted by the everyday reality of millions of people, and reflected in the misery of the environment and in its objects that are anything but triumphal.

\textsuperscript{542} Named in honor of the victory of Nazi Germany in World War Two, Pobeda was a passenger car produced in the Soviet Union by GAZ from 1946 until 1958. The car plate in the painting probably refers to the year it was made. Originally intended to be called "Rodina" (Homeland), the name "Pobeda" (Victory) was preferred by Joseph Stalin since in those years the victory of Russia in the World War II began to seem likely, and the car was to be a model for post-war times. A. Thompson, \textit{Cars of the Soviet Union} (Somerset, UK: Haynes Publishing, 2008): 52. Moreover, Pobeda was one of the first Soviet cars of original design which introduced a new vogue in automobile design. The car came to be a symbol of postwar Soviet life due to the fact that “was the first car that was accessible to an ordinary citizen of the Soviet Union”. \url{https://todiscoverrussia.com/pobeda-a-legendary-automobile}

\textsuperscript{543} Viktor Misiano, \textit{Il Carnevale del Potere} (Contemporanea International Art Magazine, febbraio, 1990): 49. (my translation)
This idea of desolation is also conveyed by the color palette reduced to mostly gray and brown tones, and the simplicity of the architectural form and elements, like the five windows represented—three in the foreground and two on the opposite building—which look more like cracks on the wall rather than sources of light. Unlike the windows in Elken's previous paintings, these seem to suck in any light from inside the house, which transforms into black and anonymous holes. Some elements keep the painting connected to reality, such as the street sign on the right wall of the building, which forbids the entrance of trams through the arch, the loose yellow tube of gas on the ground, and a small information board for tenants on the left wall.

Another portrayal of a desolate cityscape is displayed in Väike-Õismäe, (Fig. 4), which shows the sub-district of Väike-Õismäe, as mentioned in the title, in Haabersti, one of the eight districts of Tallinn. Elken here recreates part of the “atmosphere” of discomfort, alienation and fear Estonian people were experiencing at the time, by representing a bus stop in a cool foggy and empty street, and a series of monotonous buildings in the background.

Built in the 1970s, this sub-district was supposed to provide a good example of Soviet urban planning by presenting a self-contained area, with its own shops, hospital, schools, kindergartens, and entertainments. From an architectonic point of view, the district’s round design with a block of houses around a pond, creating the effect of petals that its name refers to, is considered legendary in Estonia. However, the ensemble eventually turned out to be far from matching the residents' needs and comforts. Despite

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544 The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz developed the theory of the “atmosphere” and “atmospheric places” within the discourse of neo-phenomenology, for further information see Chapter One of this dissertation.

545 The name Väike-Õismäe in Estonian means “little flower petal mountain”.

the poetic name, “trying to move among the houses on foot or by car proved to be
disorienting, and connecting with public transport to the city center was a trial.”  

Indeed, for many Estonians, a modern flat in a new residential district remained a
distant dream since, as explained by architectural historian Mart Kalm, between the
1960s and 1980s a large and mainly Russian-speaking work-force was imported from
factories all over the Soviet Union to spur the country's massive industrialization. The
sense of alienation that such a situation contributed to is highlighted in Väike-Õismäe by
the use of cold and pure colors and the upside down glasses on the lower right side of the
canvas, the only trace of a human presence. A parallel can be traced here with the
painting Kuiv Tanav 6A II by Ando Keskkula, where apparently abandoned objects on the
ground refers to the disturbing disappearance of the people who lived there, and at the
same time add a sense of estrangement and tension to the whole composition.

With Väike-Õismäe, as in several of Elken's paintings, the play between reality
and a surreal dimension has an important role in conveying the absurdity of the Soviet
society of the time. The bus is an example of such ambiguity: although it is represented a
specific model, the Ikarus, whose manufacturer was based in Hungary during the
Communist era and dominated the market of the entire Eastern Bloc, does not have a
license plate, transporting the scene to a timeless dimension.

The viewpoint that mimics the camera angle intensifies the objectivity of the
representation, which recalls another Edward Hopper painting, titled Gas Station  

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546 https://www.traveller.ee/blog/tallinn/7-awesome-examples-of-soviet-architecture-in-estonia/.
547 According to Mart Kalm “Immigration was so intense that after regaining independence in 1991, the
percentage of Estonians in the capital Tallinn was less than half, whereas during the pre-Soviet occupation
the percentage of Estonians in the capital has been 90”. Mart Kalm, “Some Political aspects of the modern
548 Although Gas Station resulted from a composite representation of several gasoline stations seen by
Hopper. Indeed, after trying without succes to find a gas station that was similar to the one he had
Both paintings are very “filmic” but at the same time mastered to create a very tangible moment of suspension. Like Elken, Hopper also aimed to show the loneliness of an American country road. In Gas Station, the light, both natural and artificial, projects onto the scene of the gas station and its lone attendant at dusk an underlying sense of drama. Like Elken's nervous brush strokes in Väike-Õismäe, which add a dynamic energy into the stillness of the objects represented, Hopper conveys in his painting a dimension of tension and anxiety. However, if in the latter painting it arises from the solitude of a human being surrounded by nature, which seems to be taking back the small territory that the protagonist has made with his gas pump, Elken's Väike-Õismäe takes a step further and completely erases any human presence. In the work of the Estonian artist, the bus, street, and light poles project themselves toward the Soviet bloc buildings at the center of the painting, which are taking over, or invading, the old town's “territory”. By representing that specific scene, Elken seems to hint at the idea of the Soviet city as an independent organism regardless of the needs of the population, who are left behind, like the aforementioned glasses on the roadside.

As in No Title, also in Tallinn. Kopli depot, and Tartu Highway in the Evening, Elken demonstrates his mastery in bringing a political and social meaning to his hyperrealist works, by reallocating the language of a specific zone of the city into the language of art, which reveals its ideologized power. Tallinn. Kopli depot (Fig. 62), addresses not only the physical place but also its political significance. This is in line with Yuri Lotman's idea that “notions of moral value and of locality fuse together: places have a moral significance and morals have a localized significance. Geography becomes a kind

imagined he made several drawings, and then a painting. Gas is not therefore, a representation of reality, but the consequence of a preparatory work based on an idea.
At the same time the painting also becomes the platform for opening a balanced dialogue between the realism of the image through the photographic-likeness of the scene, and the abstract areas of color, which raise the painting to a lyrical dimension.

The dreary and cold train depot in Kopli was the place where the journey began for many who were deported to Siberia, as indicated by one of the wagons in the composition that has the year '48 stenciled on the side (though the actual deportations took place a year later). The gloomy atmosphere that characterized the place is conveyed in the painting by dark colors, although whites strings of paint illuminate part of the composition. Some elements of the graffiti texts that appeared in his later art production are combined with a more pronounced painterly manner than in Elken's previous hyperrealist works. However, Elken still manages to convey a sense of realism, especially in the detail of the train cars.

By adopting a point of view from above the tracks, Elken manages to join together three different parts of Tallinn: the station, the old city, and the Soviet housing. The first embodies its social and political aspect, the impossibility for Estonian citizens to move out of the country, and the trains that deported to Siberia; the second represents the national and historical tradition, symbolized by historical buildings such as Toompea; the third, perceived in the canvas as distant but standing out, represents the imposition of the Soviet life system, embodied by its architecture.

The white brushstrokes converging above the wagons recall the seagull in Elken's coeval painting *Seagull* (1982) (FIG. 108), which is flying toward a white boat that is supposed to leave to Helsinki, the symbol of freedom. However, the illusion is broken by the bird's shadow, revealing that the boat is just a poster, an image that the seagull cannot

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actually reach. In a similar way, the seagull in *Tallinn, Kopli depot*, normally the symbol of freedom, is shown flying above the wagons that in this context signify the opposite: the lack of freedom for the people deported to the labor camps.

A similar display of the city's schizophrenic architecture ensemble is shown in *Tartu Highway in the Evening* (FIG. 25), which balances painterly materiality with smooth surfaces. This mélange of different style mirrors in a way, the Soviet architect A. Gavrikov's claim that the city's most urgent problem in the 1960s was to find a strategy to combine Tallinn's preserved viable historic core with a new urban structure and housing that would transform it into a modern urban organism in order to align the capital to Western standards.

In *Tartu Highway in the Evening*, Elkens shows the contradiction implied in such “harmonious unity” by representing how these additions notably affected Tallinn's skyline by breaking the harmony of the old city environment, and people’s perception of such innovation, since a large part of the population in Tallinn perceived their presence as one of the consequences of the Soviet occupation rather than the country's progress toward self determination.

*Tartu Highway in the Evening* could be divided in two parts: the left one that is with a material brushstroke that blurs the contours of the buildings, and the right one that brings a greater precision and clarity to the rendering of the houses and the tram. In the foreground, Elken places a sign, though not easily visible, with the words “Kesklinna”, "city center" and its Russian translation. This seems to highlights, once again, the

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551 Tallinn became a “metropolis” only at the end of the 1970s, in connection with the boom of constructions brought by the Moscow Olympics sailing competition which was held in the district of Pirita, on the Tallinn bay.
imposition of the Russian language on even the most basic aspects of the Estonian society: the street signs. The bilingual sign in the painting could also hint that even the core of the city, its heart as the medieval and historical city center, was occupied by a foreign power. As architect historian Mart Kalm affirms, “the dull uniformity of planned cities has been widely criticized, and in various cases the negative impact can even double, for instance when the state housing policy uses new residential areas as a means of colonialism.”

By placing the sign on the darker and gloomier side of the composition Elken seems to allude to the alienation of this part of the city due to Soviet occupation. The desolation and filthiness of this district also recall Oscar Rabin's urban views, tying his use of the colors brown and black to a symbolic meaning. Like Rabin, also Elken expresses his vision of the dichotomy on which the Estonian society is based through a deliberate choice by using two styles and different color tones to represent two parts of the city. Thus, on the brighter side he locates the old city’s houses and the tower represented in a higher definition and lighter colors.

Furthermore, the sense of alienation characteristic of most of Rabin's paintings is amplified by Elken once again through the exclusion of any human beings, which reaches its apex in the absence of even a driver in the running bus. On the contrary, the electricity wires that are so well defined seem to convey the idea of Tallinn as a modern city, even if they create a visual contrast with the old houses on the left. Finally, the choice to represent the scene at sunset softens the gloominess of the whole picture and creates an aura of romantic nostalgia, possibly the same as the artist felt while observing such view, and seems to support Elken's idea of himself as an “incurable romantic.”

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552 Mart Kalm, “Some Political aspects of the modern city,” 21
Not all artists followed Elken's example in the 1970, but seek a different approach toward Tallinn’s architecture, as Urmas Pedanik’s hyperrealist art production. With works such as the series *Printed Scheme* (1977-2011), Pedanik, represented in an original way the alienation and desolation of Soviet Tallinn by opening a dialogue between hyperrealism and abstraction. As part of the hyperrealist wave of his time, Urmas Pedanik perfectly applies hyperrealism's message that “Art is everywhere”, even in what might appear at first glance to be the opposite of art, such as technology and transistors.

While still a student at the Estonian State Art Institute, where he focused on industrial art, Pedanik painted *Printed Scheme I-II* (109-110) in 1977 and *Light on an Electrical Switchboard* in 1978 (Fig. 111), works that were defined as “electronic poetry.” Both works represent two electrical schemes as huge photo-like enlargements, which resemble landscapes photographed from an aerial point of view. Kädi Talvoja well describes the effect created by Pedanik as “the optical illusion, which transformed the enlarged views of the computer's insides into deserted industrial landscapes lit by streetlamps in a city's outlying districts, and the resistors, transistors and processors into silent industrial buildings.” As in some of Elken's compositions, the final visual result of these paintings is an open dialogue between hyperrealism and conceptualism: Pedanik's electronic cityscapes are a mechanism developed to express a metaphorical state of mind that collided with his surrounding reality.

In conclusion, Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken create something that was different from both the official and non-conformist art production of their time: a realism focused on the society they were actually living in, in order to show the “truth” under the city's

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555 Ibid.
surface. Unlike the non-conformist artists’ utopian, dystopian or unrealistic approach to the city’s urbanscape and architecture, which neither became actually subversive nor offered practical solutions, Keskkula’s and Elken’s hyperrealism remains within the framework of the present, and represents it as alien to any mythic or idealistic portrayal. Although not promoting any substantial change, they are aware of the importance of facing the Soviet system in order to be able to dismantle it. Indeed, with his hyperrealist works in the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s, Keskkula was actually able to subvert the predominant Soviet rhetoric and diminish Socialist Realism’s credibility as an objective portrayal of reality, by representing in a figurative way the “anti-humanity” of the contemporary Soviet urban environment.

Moreover, the hyperrealists’ artworks openly and directly highlight the clash between the Russian and Estonian cultures, and the devastating impact of the Russian sign system’s imposition onto traditional Estonian society and culture.

Finally, Ando Keskkula and Jaan Elken opened a new perspective to the art practice of the time, by creating artworks that deviated from the official Socialist realism clichés, while remaining within the figurative approach without depriving it of aesthetic value. By doing so, their art works, unique in the Estonian artistic panorama of the 1970s, become documents and at the same time metaphysical portraits of Soviet society, making the hyperrealist artists “portraitists of a meta-historical decade.”

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556 Lapin opinion of an artist as Juri Okas for example is that “his graphic works of the period are as if illustrations to his architectural ideas that were almost impossible to realize in the Soviet country with its poor economy and primitive architectural culture. Leonhard Lapin, “Twenty Years Later,” Harku 1975-1995: 63

557 Aleksandr Kamensky, “Documentalni Realizm,” 15
Chapter Four: Sergei Sherstiuk and Semyon Faibisovich: A Window on the Russian Byt in the 1980s

This chapter illustrates how Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk’s works are an answer to the question how realism could be an objective representation of reality when its subject is a society, such as Soviet society, which is a system of simulacrum built on signs that do not refer to any real object or meaning. I will demonstrate how Faibisovich and Sherstiuk deal with this issue by both broadening the border of realism within the official sphere and breaking the official sphere’s rules to convey a representation of reality through visual strategies and other means.

Hyperrealist artists Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk move from the Estonian observation of the city as an empty place to capture “people's day-to-day way of life.” With the use of their camera, they frame daily routine, relationships, habits---developed both in the city’s public sphere and in private apartments— in the Moscow suburbs.

In this chapter, I explore Sherstiuk's portrayal of people’s intimate moments in tiny rooms, which can convey familial connections or forced intimacy, and Faibisovich's representation of commuters on cramped or poky public means of transportation. The analysis of their hyperrealist paintings will demonstrate how people caught in mundane moments of their personal lives become fragments of a wider picture portraying life during Perestroika. Moreover, I will highlight how Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s representation of people’s inner dimensions through their gestures, expressions, and gazes becomes a powerful frescos of the flaws, fragility, and insecurities that belong to the human being in a universal sense.

558 J. H. Bater, The Soviet City (University of California, SAGE, 1980): 1
Through the analysis of Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s most representative works in the 1980s, I will demonstrate how hyperrealism can penetrate the existential and psychological state of contemporary Soviet citizens through exploration of the dialogue between the technical mediums of photography and painting, which (in their hyperrealist works) reach a degree of complexity characterized by the concept of idea-photo-memory, which opens a dimension of documentary perspective and personal memories.

The first element—the idea—is consciously and unconsciously linked to the intellectual process developed by both artists: an a priori image is created in their minds as the product of several semiotic influences from the society in which they lived, both at the level of language and in the architectonic sphere (from architecture to mass media). Indeed, the environment influences the artist's development of his or her imagination, which produces “types” or “stereotypes” of images. The second element—photography—embodies the “mechanical” phase, as the artist seeks out this image in the scenarios offered by everyday life in order to grasp and fix the image. Faibisovich does this by recreating point of view, scenes, and subjects common to the imagery of millions of citizens Sherstiuk does this by reenacting common domestic situations. The last aspect implies the re-execution on canvas of the snapshot. This stage involves the artist’s memory of such images, which contributes a personal interpretation to the composition as, for example, by adding an emotional meaning to the use of specific colors, or emphasizing distinct physical characteristics to unveil the subjects’ inner state. The final image in the painting in turn becomes part of the circle idea-photo-memory, by creating new memories as well, which will be part of the a priori idea.
The primary contribution of this chapter to this dissertation is showing how despite the fact that photography has an important role in Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s compositions, its apparent immediacy is actually mediated by artist’s personality and agency, because both artists intend primarily to convey a psychological depth to their subjects. By dissolving the boundaries between photography and painting, their hyperrealism introduces the viewer into a deeper understanding of existential sphere of people life in the Soviet Union.

The characteristics introduced above have been often overlooked, or ignored, by part of the modern and contemporary art criticism (both Western and Eastern), as well as by some of the artists within Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s same nonconformist sphere. Indeed, the photographic-likeness of their works was often judged as a way for both artists to either copy the Western photorealistic trend or to dodge Soviet censorship.

Through the analysis of their paintings in this chapter, I will show that Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s hyperrealist creative method challenged the boundaries of the Socialist realism practice, although they share several formal characteristics. Indeed, they rely on the power of photography’s authentication, while reworking the photographic source to accommodate a specific agency. However, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich problematize the credibility of realism as true recording of the real and challenge the hegemonic percept of reality conveyed by it, by subverting Soviet rhetoric and its claim of being a representational method in the Soviet Union. They show that there is a new perspective from which to approach the concept of realism, by reinterpreting the modernized and industrialized environment, emptied by Soviet rhetoric. Their works show the precarious, difficult and alienating conditions of living in the Soviet Union, with regard to various
aspects of the society such as architecture, housing, design, and public transportation. By doing so, they unmask the manipulative power and control of the state over the population and show how the authorities' official channels subtly control their everyday life and their perception of it.

An important contribution of Faibisovich and Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist paintings is that by selecting the city’s specific environment (mikro-raion) and framing its architecture and interiors, within the space of a canvas, they show the impact of such environments on people, behavior, relationships, habits, and the psychology of their residents\(^{559}\) and the environment’s influence on people’s perception of Soviet society and in the development of the artist’s own approach toward these subjects.

The artists’ analysis of such specific elements, which characterized the urban planning in the Soviet Union from the late 1950s until late 1980s, leads to a broader observation based on Vladimir Paperny and Yuri Lotman’s reading of the physical and social structure of the city and its meaning as whole ensemble. For Paperny, varying degrees of power were ascribed by the Soviet authority to different city's spaces. Yuri Lotman developed a similar idea, according to which the structures of urban communities embody a symbolic meaning, and housing and architecture are not just material objects but also ideologized power zones.\(^{560}\) Therefore, for both theoreticians, the allocation of different buildings in the city mirrors their level of power in the city’s hierarchy—the most important administrative buildings are in the center of the city, whereas social groups and houses that are considered below a certain social value are located in the periphery (outskirts/suburbs).

\(^{560}\) Lotman, The Universe of the Mind, A Semiotic Theory of Culture: 131.
The semiotic analysis I apply to Sherstiuak and Faibisovich’s hyperrealism in this chapter highlights the way their paintings re-enact the complex semiotic mechanism displayed within the city, where the complex interactions of the different sign system codes confront each other, and through such confrontation they re-code each. By analyzing what Lotman calls second modeling systems\(^{561}\) as the architecture (Sherstiuak’s approach to Soviet housing) and urban spaces (Faibisovich’s view of means of transportation), in these artists’ paintings, I show their awareness of people being exposed, either consciously or unconsciously, to the dominant “language” of the society.

In fact, according to architecture historian Susan Reid, the configuration of Soviet cities was “the strongest factor for organizing the psyche of the masses.”\(^{562}\) Indeed, the architectural form of the city and planning of urban space were vested with a social-transformative role in the lives of its residents accordingly to the belief that in order to change a person’s way of thinking and behaving was necessary to re-configure the material surroundings.

Sherstiuak and Faibisovich’s paintings show how human beings are subject to semiotization through behavioral typologies shaped by several factors, one of them is the material environment, which become models to be followed. The interaction of these typologies with the surrounding environment creates (what is called in Russian) byt--the flow of life in its practical form. In fact, Paperny extends to people the attribution by authorities of a symbolic role accordingly to the physical place they

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\(^{561}\) Lotman states that a *modelling system* is a structure made by elements and by the rules of their combination that exist in a state of fixed analogy to the whole sphere of the object of perception, cognition, or organization. Deriving from the first modelling system — the natural language — second modelling systems are superstructures of it, as second degree languages. Therefore, a second modelling system may be approached as a language that allows us to understand the world in a certain way, and to speak about it. For further analyses, see the introduction of this dissertation.

occupy in the city. He explains: “the gradually emerging hierarchy of ‘better’ people, from Culture Two's perspective, were closer to Moscow, the center of the world (and even to the center of Moscow), while the 'poorer' people occupied the periphery.”

This byt became the point of view from which Sherstiuk and Faibisovich based their hyperrealist paintings. Moreover, since the byt is within the flux of time, they show how the political and social changes within it eventually have an impact on people's memory and on their future personal and social behavior, and finally on the artist as well, thus reconnecting his or her art production with the concept of idea-photo-memory.

This critique of the political and social conditions of their society, in opposition to the forms of propaganda brought by socialist realism, takes back Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s hyperrealism to the critical realism of the Russian group of Peredvizhniki in the nineteenth century, and the Surovoyi stil in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like both of them, Sherstlik and Faibisovich’s portrayal of individual existence, and its struggle in a contradictory society, characterized by inequities, injustice and national issues becomes an accusation of failure of Soviet politics of the last decades, and of its leaders (Khrushchev’s unsucceeded Thaw in the 1960s, Brezhnev’s period of stagnation in the 1970s, and Gorbachiev’s ineffective Perestroika in the 1980s). The living conditions in the mikroraion and its means of transportation become (in Faibisovich and Sherstlik’s works) the symbol of such failure.

Through the representation of domestic interiors, for example, Sherstlik contradicts the State propaganda of the previous twenty years, according to which

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first the main purpose of housing plans was to fulfill dwellers' needs, and second the *mikroraiions* were intended to be places where inhabitants could develop a collectivist spirit within the much larger system of the city. In contrast, Sherstiuk’s hyperrealism shed a light on the extended control of the State over the families' routine within the domestic intimacy of their houses, which raises in its inhabitants’ loneliness and alienation, through a complex ensemble of different sources: cheap quality of furniture, State strict guidelines of space organization, and the pervading influence of television.

Faibisovich’s point of view focuses instead on highlighting the deficiency of Soviet ideology on another side of the urban planning: the failure of the promised creation of residential areas, intended to integrate social, cultural and commercial services to form a suburban systemic available to residents within easy walking distance without commuting to the center of the city. Such failure is shown in the artist’s hyperrealist paintings by displaying its effects on the population: long commuting hours, overcrowded means of transportation, tired and alienated commuters, long queues in front of shops, and dirty streets full of loitering.

Indeed, a semiotic reading of Faibisovich’s paintings reveal how buses, train platforms, and subways that are usually considered “non-lieu”—areas where people are just in transition to reach their destinations – in his works become the symbol of people’s state of suspension between two dimensions. From one side, they live in the “infinite
theater of Soviet reality”\textsuperscript{564} and on the other they are part of a wider context of a conflicted society progressively headed toward its political and social dissolution.

In this chapter, I also apply Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the \textit{chronotope} to both Faibisovich and Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist paintings, which embody and visualize the \textit{byt} of Soviet society in the 1980s, by condensing and framing this specific time and space in the space of the canvas, from the flux of historical time. As Bakhtin’s chronotope embodies the intrinsic connection of temporal and spatial relationship expressed in literature, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk’s space of the canvas express a similar connection. In their hyperrealist works, like with the chronotope, time becomes visible, whereas the space is responsive to the movement of both time (the Soviet time) and history, as the Soviet time and history (real and created by the ideology narrative). They also introduce the viewer into the everyday domestic life and journey of millions of citizens from the Moscow suburbs into the metaphorical journey of the last years of the Soviet era. By doing so, they show a personal reflection on the complexity of human existence and on their own self-consciousness within the surrounding social and cultural world. Indeed, while speaking\textsuperscript{565} with the author of this study on the role of mirror in his art production, Faibisovich affirmed that

“within the framework of what Lotman is speaking [the role of mirrors], I had a certain period, a time of self-determination, a time of determining where you are, where the world is and what is between you, and how the world is reflected in you and you are in the world, therefore in most of the early works then the mirror plays an active role.”\textsuperscript{566}

\textsuperscript{564} Ekaterina Degot, “Everything is on Sale,” 11
\textsuperscript{565} Author’s interview, Moscow July 21, 2016
\textsuperscript{566} Ibid. “в рамках того, о чем говорит Лотман, это у меня был определенный период время самоопределения, время определения где ты, где мир и что находится между вами, и каким образом
A parallel between their works and the creative method of literature is also evident in the fondness for creating cycles of paintings from both artists. The succession of the same theme in several paintings, connected to each other by a wider theme, as the ligature of a book, highlights the overall coherence of their ideas in the development of their art production. This dissertation is the first study that adopts such point of view in analyzing the main paintings of their cycles.

Moreover, this chapter is also the first attempt to establish a connection between Faibisovich and Sherstiuk’s hyperrealism, and the critical realism represented by Peredvizhnik’s group and the artists of the Surovyi stil, by showing how their artistic productions share several characteristics. They became documenters of everyday life in Russia, by establishing a direct contact or personal involvement with their subjects (by exploring their psychological dimension), and social environment of their paintings, in order to develop a social critique of the iniquities and dreary conditions of their society. Furthermore, they tried to closely engaging the viewer to the scene, events and people represented by reinforcing through visual strategies the illusion of their authenticity.

Often the Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s biographies are integrated within the narrative of their paintings, thus raising their attempt to rethink the national cultural heritage into a personal search for their own identity. Sherstiuk, for example, inserts his friends and spouse, or sometimes even himself in the composition, while Faibisovich portrays himself by physically participating on the commuting of the people he represents.

мир отражается в тебе и ты в мире, поэтому большинство ранних работ, там зеркало играет активную роль.”

567 See footnote n. 466.
The aforementioned goal of engaging the viewer is also amplified by the combination of the photographic-like images with the larger-than-life size of their paintings. These two elements coupled together reflect the reality presented from a different point of view, or a different perspective, and shake the viewer's habitual expectations. By magnifying ordinary and familiar subjects, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich defamiliarize people’s vision of daily objects and situations. The three languages in their paintings activate a communicative process that generates new information: the language of the city (its architecture) into the language of art (the painting) through the language of photography.

The hyperrealist artwork analyzed in this chapter shows how the renewed approach to the broadening of the parameters of realism, brings Sherstiuk and Faibisovich to adopt formal methods often inspired by the Russian avant-garde practices, such as abstraction and action painting, the use of artificial colors, objective vision and picturesque freedom, and artist personal gesture. Indeed, their paintings join two antithetical dimensions in order to reflect both people’s social conditions and their psychological portrait: from one side, external objects and events and from the other, the subject and the artists self-consciousness and personal past.

In conclusion, this chapter underlines the important role of Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s hyperrealist paintings within the art sphere of the 1980s, as they demonstrate that it was possible to combine in the same work realist elements and the modernism dimension (generally considered antithetical) with new means that present a fresh view of their present.

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568 For a further analysis of the concept of defamiliarization (or ostranenie), see the Introduction to this chapter and Viktor Shklovsky's explanation of the concept in Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007): 3–5.
Moreover, by claiming that each representation brings with it a component of manipulation, and that an artist can convey only his or her own perception of the world, hyperrealist artists deconstruct the dogmatism of the Socialist realism created by propaganda. Indeed, hyperrealism becomes political, as it shows that behind the choice of a specific subject and its representation lies a precise agenda, which leads to the creation of a constructed image. At the same time, by presenting their works as also being constructions as well, avoid to make their paintings falling in the same trap.
4.1 Sergei Sherstiuk: The Presence of the State’s Control in Soviet Apartments

Literary theorist Mikhail Epstein affirms that the preference for closeness can be seen in Russia as a manifestation of a more general need of the population to escape from the surrounding empty space outdoors. Therefore, he claims, closeness is not only a physical condition it also becomes a metaphysical reality.\(^{569}\) Khrushchev’s administration in the 1950s can be seen as the embodiment of this concept, being that its main task was to connect such “outdoor empty space” with people's lives inside apartments by building *mikro-raions* in the outskirts of cities. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the Secretary’s main idea was to create “a complex of residential buildings combined with a variety of services and retail outlets meeting the population's daily needs.”\(^{570}\) This new organization of the social life was meant to “produce new social relations that would, in turn, produce a new consciousness.”\(^{571}\)

Such an ambitious program was based on Khrushchev's belief that through new ways of organizing both private and public spaces, Soviet citizen would become more enthusiastic for the Communist system and consequently more productive. According to Svetlana Boy in her book *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*,\(^{572}\) Soviet authorities tried to permeate the social and most intimate aspects of the citizens’ everyday life with ideology. However, despite the promises made in by the State’s propaganda, the *mikro-raions* and their private apartments built in the 1970s and 1980s did not even nearly meet the population's demands and needs.


\(^{571}\) D. Crowley, S. E. Reid, “Social Spaces: Sites of Every Life in the Eastern Block,” 15

Sergei Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist paintings represent the "privacy of the domestic life" in these apartments in order to convey the atmosphere that surrounded most of the dwellers and, at the same time, disclose the pervasive presence of the external “eye” that scrutinized or shaped not only the citizen public persona but also the citizen’s private existence. The presence of such a metaphorical eye is explicitly displayed, for example, in paintings such as Look Who is Here (1981) (Fig.83), Artist and Actor (1982) (Fig. 112), and The Elevator (1989) (Fig. 113). These paintings show one of more individuals either surprised or annoyed at being unexpectedly caught by the flash of the artist’s camera in intimate moments in their apartments. Indeed, Sherstiuk’s interest in people’s various psychological reactions at the moment they become aware of being under the gaze of a “voyeuristic” intruder is amplified by mimicking effect of the flash. Such an alien element and the cold and light colors that highlight it, transforms these intimate moments into aseptic and detached situations and transforms the viewer into an uneasy watcher.

The act of peering into someone’s life performed in the aforementioned works could also be attributed to the influence of the Argentinian writer Julio Cortazar on Sherstiuk, and the more general the writer’s influence on the hyperrealist Group of Six. In particular, the writer’s short story The Saliva of the Devil contributed to raising the artists' interest in the unnoticed aspects of everyday life. In fact, as the photographer in the story, Sherstiuk get closer to the scenes he “witnessed” by enlarging/magnifying people’s reactions while they are confined in narrow (almost claustrophobic) space.

One of Sherstiuk’s first hyperrealist works, Look Who is Here!, introduces characteristics that Sherstiuk developed in his subsequent works: first the choice of the
color tone to convey a precise feeling and second the introduction of realistic objects with a surreal element inside, which makes the composition ambiguous. *Look who is Here!* shows a woman and a man surprised by the artist’s arrival in their apartment. The aforementioned ambiguity is already suggested by the place where the action takes place. In fact, although the furniture is described in detail, the place where the scene takes place could easily be either a kitchen (considering the tiles on the wall) or a living room, judging by the curtains on the window. This aspect mirrors an issue that was common to small Soviet apartments—the interchangeability in the attribution of the functions of single rooms use as confirmed by Aleksandr Vysokovskii: “In cramped apartments…everything is mixed together in the most confusing way. The couch and a portion of the living room, where in the evening guests visit, become a two-person bed and a bedroom at night.” The ambiguity of the scene is reinforced by a close-up on the woman's face: on the one hand, such short distance facilitates a visual connection between the viewer and her. From another the cold white tone of her face that mimic the effect of an overexposed photo by the camera flash, along with her bright white sweater create the impression of being in front of an unreal creature. Indeed, a closer look at the woman’s eye reveals that her pupils have the shape of a pentagon, which makes the eyes simultaneously intense, yet also phantasmagorical. In contrast to the woman's bewildered expression, the man behind her seems instead welcoming the artist intrusion into his private space considering his open smile. However, like the woman’s porcelain-like face, also the man’s pronounced features seem more like a mask than like a genuine and

573 Aleksandr Vysokovskii, “Will domesticity return?”, 282
spontaneous expression, which recalls more the unironic smiles in Soviet photography in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{574}

A similar situation is presented in \textit{Artist and Actor}, painted one year later. Here again a couple is surprised in an intimate moment, as indicated by the man’s outfit that consists only of a pair of underwear, and the woman’s surprised and annoyed gaze (she is probably the same of \textit{Look who is here}) at such an uninvited appearance. An element of ambiguity is embodied here first in the painting’s title, which leaves the viewer wondering who is the artist and who is the actor, and second as in \textit{Look Who is Here}, on the unclear scene location that seems to be either an interior or a veranda. Indeed, the window position that should help our perception of the room, adds instead an element of duplicity to the composition. However, unlike in the previous painting, the man in \textit{Artist and Actor} is staring at the ground, showing a genuine lack of interest, or maybe resignation of being under a scrutiny by an external gaze into his privacy. Sherstiuk’s attention to detail is displayed here in the woman’s teeth, earring, and spot of sun shining on her face, and on the wall behind the man. Such a photographic illusion is broken by two large spots of red and orange paint on the woman's back and glass window, which keep open the dialogue with the modernist practice of the action painting, thus bringing back the viewer within the dimension of an art creation.

A progressive passage from surprise to open annoyance in front of the intrusion into someone's personal space is displayed in \textit{The Elevator} (Fig. 113), painted in 1989. The dynamic between the two men mirrors the one of the couples in \textit{Look Who is Here}, since one of them is smiling, as welcoming such diversion into an otherwise uneventful

elevator ride. However, in this painting the play between the artist's presence and the subjects of the composition reaches a meta level: Sherstiuk insert his own image in the scene, as the surprised man on the left who paradoxically is surprised by his own intrusion (as both the artist and the intruder) into the small space of the elevator. This particular, with the black-and-white format, the string of paint that recreate the effects of an old picture, and the date of the painting, seems to suggest that Sherstiuk finally felt free to face his role not only as an artist through the art creation, but also as a citizen who was part of the society he was unveiling.

With the painting *The Flash* (Fig.86) Sherstiuk seems once again to question whether it is possible in Soviet society to reach this dimension of "private" or genuine intimacy, as people felt they were under the watch of both the authorities (in the public sphere) and neighbors (in the domestic life), symbolically represented by the camera flash, as the title suggests. Moreover, the painting subject and the title highlight the important of the immediacy attributed to the medium of photography in Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist works in order to convey a genuine reaction from his subjects. In fact, the couple represented here is caught by having a heated conversation, judging by the woman's body language, while sitting around a table, in a living room. With this painting, Sherstiuk makes a step forward from the previous works, by inserting into the composition detailed domestic items—cigarettes, a bottle of Fanta, glasses with wine, a decorated plate—which open a window into the domestic life of the Soviet young generation during the years of Perestroika. Indeed, like Ando Keskkula, Sherstiuk also sees such domestic items not only as having a utilitarian purpose, but also as a means with which to create a specific sociocultural system that influences and shapes people’s
behavior and their daily routine. This aspect is also confirmed by Aleksandr Vysokovskii: “the main path to the individualization of the standard apartment, with its impersonal, mass-produced furniture and fixtures, lies in do-it-yourself home improvement. The concept applies to literally everything within the apartment, including the nuts and bolts.”575 The bottle of Fanta, and the decorated plate hanging on the wall behind the woman are two examples of it. In fact, by placing the Fanta, symbol of the Western society, under a traditional decorative element as the plate that embody the Russian national handcraft tradition as decoration of people's houses, Sherstiuk highlights the profound contradictions of his generation, from one hand still rooted in its own tradition, and on the other logging to the American capitalist society considered free from the control of ideology. The apparently spontaneous atmosphere that pervades the room is disturbed by the woman’s accentuated cheekbones, chin, and mouth, which transform her features into a grotesque mask. Her enigmatic smile (partly due to the illumination of the camera flash) reinforces such an effect.

A painting of the same years that present a powerful image of alienation from the surrounding environment is Hey, We are Waiting for you! (1982) (Fig. 84). The scene represents two men in a bedroom waiting for a third person to join them, as suggested by the title. However, a striking contrast lies between the title that suggest a close friendship, and their body language, which gave the opposite impression. In particular, the man who is lying on the bed seems so taken by the conversation at the phone that is ignoring the presence of the other, thus once again remarking, as in the other paintings already analyzed in this chapter, a physical closeness yet an emotional distance. On the other

575 Aleksandr Vysokovskii, “Will Domesticity Return?” 284
hand, the man sit on the bed is completely lost in his own thoughts as stares blankly in front of him. In this stare, Sherstiuk embodies an existential void that most people felt during the Soviet era. Moreover, the man's empty stare brings to mind two other paintings made one century earlier, Vasily Petrov’s *F.M. Dostoevsky*\(^{576}\) (1872) (Fig. 32), and the barmaid of Eduard Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (Fig. 114), whose characters have a similar expression: Sherstiuk’s character, Dostoevsky portrait, and Manet's barmaid appear isolated and disconnected from their surroundings, as just objects occupying a space, or trapped in the constraints of a social life without any real power on it. The condition of the two men waiting for their friend could also symbolize the situation of suspension of most of Soviet citizens between waiting for an improvement in their existence promised by Soviet propaganda, and the real state of the society heading toward its dissolution.

As already seen in *The Flash*, Sherstiuk represents with great details their clothes and the objects that surround the two man, in order to both counterbalance their stiffness and unnaturalness posture and convey a cultural and social meaning. By wearing a pair of jeans, the two men represent the part of the generation in the 1980s that considered buying or wearing Western items and clothes as a gesture of emancipation from the Soviet system.

A further reference to a broaden visual and cultural dimension, although less direct, is represented by the glass door behind the two men, which displays a patchwork of ancient statues, ladies’ portraits, abstract paintings and still-lifes. By placing these art genres at the center of the painting, and at the same time by inserting his work within the

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\(^{576}\) The Russian writer was one of Sherstiuk's formative influences, and in particular the bond he created in his novel between aesthetic experience and ordinary existence. For further information, see Chapter Two.
wider discourse on realism as a mimesis of the real, Sherstiuk seems to challenge this established but already drained art tradition with the new approach of hyperrealism with its dialogue between the medium of photography and painting, and the new possibilities they grant to the artist in terms of conveying both realistic and personal images.

Moreover, by avoiding of breaking the photographic-like appearance of the composition with his brush gesture, Sherstiuk does not deny or raise doubt about the authenticity of the existential loneliness and alienation of these subjects in front of the viewer.

In the same period, Sherstiuk created Islands (1982) (Fig. 85) and The Television Set (1983) (Fig. 90)—two paintings that are fundamental in his art production and that display a similar alienated existential condition. In these works, the atmosphere of estrangement is, however, paired with a component of the surreal that challenges the viewer’s accepted limits imposed by logic and reason. Indeed, these two paintings in particular demonstrate Sherstiuk’s fascination with “the surreal in the banality” influenced by Cortazar’s short stories, such as the collection Final del juego (End of the Game) (1956) and Un tal Lucas (A Certain Lucas) (1979). In Cortazar’s stories and Sherstiuk’s paintings, the inclusion of a banal object with an out-of-place element into a domestic uneventful situation raises conventional situations into a multilayered dimension that allows a variety of interpretations. By breaking a daily routine with the unexpected in Island and The Television Set, Sherstiuk aims to show how “attaining domesticity is essentially a constant struggle against standardization, against the bleak uniformity of buildings, apartments complexes, and furniture. Soviets had long grown
accustomed to seeing everyday life as an endless struggle. Unfortunately, it was always perceived as a losing battle, precisely because it went on forever.”\textsuperscript{577}

Sherstiuk’s placement of domestic objects into the space of the canvas had a precedent in both Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken’s art production. This was mentioned in Chapter Three (paintings of the nonconformist artist Mikhail Roginsky). In these artists’ works, objects become important not for their functionality, but rather as elements that symbolize the existential and living conditions of most of the population in the Soviet Union, and that symbolize the artist’s personal existence.

In Sherstiuk’s \textit{Islands} and \textit{The Television Set}, a television set plays this role. Sherstiuk believed that the existential condition of modern humans is suspended between reality and the illusion of its existence, being that a person's perception was constituted by a selection of parts from the whole reality singled out by the media, and the reassembled in order to create a new and particular version of it.\textsuperscript{578} Indeed, these two paintings embody one of the main issues of Sherstiuk’s creative method: whether any representation can be really objective and the extent to which the whole truth is within the bounds of human comprehension.

In the 1980s, Marshall McLuhan’s book \textit{Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man} (published in 1964) and its theory of the pervasive effects on the collective imagination and alienation as one of the side effects of television and radio were well known, and they influenced Russian artists. Indeed, the television era encouraged the development of "technical arts" and new artistic expression, such as hyperrealism, as subtly indicated by the box on the floor where Sherstiuk juxtaposes the name of Gertsch

\textsuperscript{577} Aleksander Vysokovskii, “Will Domesticity Return?” 283.
\textsuperscript{578} Kozlova, \textit{Fotorealizm}; 22.
(a Swiss hyperrealist artist he admired), with “Vermeer,” which is printed on it. As in *Hey, We are Waiting for you!*, here too Sherstiuk engages and challenges the classical art tradition with the photographic approach of the composition that overpowers the former.

However, in the 1980s, many hyperrealists voiced concern about the extensive use of television as a channel used by the State’s propaganda to infiltrate the apartment spaces. Sherstiuk’s *Island* and *The Television Set* are a subtle critique of both television as a powerful instrument used to convey Soviet ideology and the passive acceptance by the population of the (literal and metaphorical) space that the television was taking in their lives.

The painting *Islands* portrays two people in a room watching television, in an almost barren room, with their backs turned away from the viewer. The lack of interaction between the two and the immobility of the scene reminds us of the similar situation in the painting *Hey Are Waiting For You!* Nonetheless, the apparent banality of the scene is broken by the oddly small television set at the center of the room, whose screen (upon close examination) shows images from the TV program *Malvinsky Islands*, thus explaining the painting’s title. According to art historian Elena Kornetchuk, “Sherstiuk explains that the thoughts behind the painting were conceived with the Falklands War in mind, which happened the same year the painting was made. Upon looking closely at the screen once can see that the islands are in fact people.”

The Falklands War (1982) was a major episode in the confrontation between Argentina and

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580 Burlak, Art Emigrants: 105
581 The role of the television in apartments was explored in the same years by the first APTART exhibition in Autumn 1982 (Fig. 116), by artists such as the Mukhomor group, where the tv screen becomes the place where insert the artists messages. See [https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125364/anti-shows/](https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125364/anti-shows/).
582 Dodge, Sergei Sherstiuk: 15.
the British government over the territories' sovereignty. Whereas Argentina asserted that the islands were its territory, the British government regarded them as its territory since 1841. The war lasted ten weeks and ended with the Argentine surrender and the return of the islands to British control. The mention of the Falklands War in the painting could be seen as Sherstiuk’s hidden allusion and wish to create a parallel between the imposed control of the British Empire on the Islands, and the contemporary political situation of Soviet occupation of Eastern countries.

I argue that Bachtin's concept of chronotope (already mentioned in this chapter) could be applied to Islands, because a political event become pictured in artistic images, whereas space (of the canvas and of the room in the painting) becomes responsive to the movements of time and history. Indeed, the visible markers of the historical event--the people on the television screen involved in such an historical moment--are brought together to the artist’s time, as the painting was created in the same year as the Falklands War, which in turn affects the private lives of the two people who are watching it from their home.

Moreover, in Islands, the opposition between the community of people represented on the television screen and the distance between the man and the woman in the room both highlight the gap that differentiates the utopian image of the late Soviet society conveyed in mass media by the propaganda and the everyday reality of human relationships. The way the two people are quietly watching the television suggests that they are aware of being powerless in the face of political events that are larger than they are. Finally, the sense of dreariness that pervades the atmosphere of the barren room in
Island could be a metaphor of the condition of poverty and the sense of abandonment experienced by the Soviet population.

As already mentioned in this chapter, despite the apartment space was envisioned to respond to the evolving dweller taste, furniture designers were asked to reorient and restructure the meaning of domestic space by planning furniture apartments conforming to precise standardized parameters.\textsuperscript{583} The result was uniform, low-quality furniture, which conditioned people's domestic life and raised a deep sense of dissatisfaction. Such a situation is represented in The Television Set, which shows a woman in a white nightgown, with her back turned to the viewer while staring at a TV screen in a dark and heavily-furnished living room. Such furniture should be contextualized within the already mentioned State's project started with Khrushchev. This project aimed to control families’ daily routines in their apartment through mass-produced items. In fact, Sherstiuk also displays here attention to detail in the objects in the room: a big table that occupies most of the space with (Kaloriica) pastries on a plate, a television, headphones, a radio, and a recorder player. Nevertheless, the real focus and strong force of attraction on the girl's attention is the television set in front of her, which emphasizes once again the fundamental role of the medium of TV as source of entertainment in Soviet domestic life. This apparently banal situation is raised to a surreal dimension once it becomes clear that the screen that kept the girl’s interest is switched off. Its surface just reflects of the table and the others parts of the room furniture.

\textsuperscript{583} Housing was primarily measured by the number of square meters of “living space” per person, which included bedrooms and the living room but not the kitchen, bathroom, corridors, and storage space. Living and nonliving areas make up the aggregate “useful housing space” of a dwelling – which accounts for about two-thirds of the total. But each of the fifteen republics has determined by law the minimum housing standard for its citizens.
Sherstiuk critiques television as substitute for reality and critiques TV’s power to mesmerize people and numb their personal will. Sherstiuk’s critique is brought here to the limit of the paradox, by portraying a switched off television as a catalyst of an undivided attention. According to Sherstiuk, this work intended to show that nothing was really happening. This emptiness is a metaphor for the emptiness in people’s lives. The emptiness of the Soviet world as a “fact of life” (as he called it) is reinforced by the bare gray wall in the room and a white string painted on the right side of the scene, which violently breaks the composition.

As in Island, Sherstiuk here creates a surreal atmosphere on an otherwise ordinary scene just by inserting a small detail, which could metaphorically represent the void in the woman’s life and/or the intrusion by an exterior entity --the artist’s hand or the hands of propaganda in her familiar surroundings. The hypnotic atmosphere that pervades the room is paired with the girl’s white gown, which confers upon her an ethereal appearance, as she is a ghost trapped in the house. Considering the painting’s pessimistic message, it is not surprising that The Television Set annoyed Soviet authorities, who saw a deviation from the official, approved discourse. Incidentally, Sherstiuk's painting is subversive compared with the well-known painting The New Apartment (1952) (Fig. 36), by Aleksandr Laktionov, which was a celebration of Soviet collective life and an example of that renewed faith in the future.

585 Ibid.
586 Ibid.
587 The New Apartment aims to convey the idea that under Stalin's look and guidance, life is peaceful and rewarding for people who are part of the society, such as the young pioneer and the war heroine. However the first look hides a different meaning: The gazes of the characters do not meet--the mother looks toward the invisible source of light (the bright future perhaps); the son looks up at his proud mother; and Stalin looks in the opposite direction, watching the half-open door, guarding the future ahead of them, while the
An apparent opposite situation from the two paintings presented above is the subject of *Come In!* (1982) (Fig. 9), which shows a “snapshot” of an intimate and joyful gathering of Sherstiuk (the man with the glasses) and his friends. The title embodies one of the principles on which Soviet mikroraions were built: to place at the center of the dwellers’ life not individual apartments but rather the entire complex, in order to encircle residents with daily contacts with their neighbors. However, the rapid growth of Socialist cities and the connected process of privatization of apartments, beginning in the late 1950s, instead destabilized the population. The social dynamics were shaped by a progressive loosening of human connection between people in the anonymous prefabricated block apartments, which were isolated from each other. A situation that increasingly prompt people to search for intimate gatherings in private apartments where the feeling of detachment from the own environment was faced by trying to create a personal private and safe dimension.

With *Come In!* Sherstiuk masterfully visualizes such a contradictory situation by creating a collision between the external text (the title) and the image represented, and he casts doubt on the achievement of a safe domestic dimension through a series of details that bring a hidden subtext and a different meaning. The artist tries to convey the illusion of naturalness and spontaneity, as indicated by the fuzzy appearance of the man on the far right of the picture caught by surprise by the “snapshot.” However, a closer look reveals a rigidity and affectation that do not correspond to such intent. Indeed, the three people visible in the room exhibit a range of responses in front of the camera: Sherstiuk is the only one smiling at the arrival of the new person/photographer, aware of being the two neighbors do not look at them or at each other. Although what is represented here is a celebration of the Soviet collective life and friendly neighbors, it seems to show a different situation.
subject of a photograph, whereas the woman seems surprised but not displeased. The quiet man in the red shirt is the only one who does not seem to be either bothered or interested in the new visitor. As a universal in Sherstiuk’s works several details in the painting become an indirect document on the life of the young generation of the 1980s: the food and beverages on the table, the kitchen as a favorite meeting place, and people’s clothes. Sherstiuk's painting highlights the importance of food in both Russian and Soviet cultural history, which correlates with the long periods of shortages and starvation the population has experienced periodically. According to the book *Food in Russian History and Culture*, food became a powerful symbol that represented security and comfort: “Food was, and still is, a poignant and evocative device. Even today, in order to show extraordinary hospitality or respect Russian try to lavish on guest.”^588^ However, *Come In!* deviates from the traditional representations of big gathering in Stalinist paintings, such as Arkady Plastov's *A Collective Farm Festival* (1937) (Fig. 116), or Sergei Gerasimov's *A Kolkhoz Celebration* (1937) (Fig. 34), as Sherstiuk’s characters are eating and drinking the refreshments displayed on the table. Plastov and Gerasimov’s works intended to display happy people celebrating with an ample amount of food everywhere. Yet nobody consumed the food. The scene in *Come In!* is also different from that in *Family, 1945* (by the *Surovoy stil’* artist Viktor Ivanov). In Ivanov’s painting, although the family consumed a meal, the atmosphere is openly tragic. In *Comin In!* the three friends who invite the new guest to join them at the table convey instead an apparent feeling of comfort and intimacy, as per social custom. The presence of alcohol introduces another aspect of the social customs: the tradition of presenting in cookbooks delicious and

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healthy food along with introducing alcoholic beverages both as being gustatory and as having medicinal properties. In the popular book *Kniga o Vkusnoi i Zdorovoi Pishche*, for example, the illustrations of dishes were accompanied by appetizing illustrations with colorfully labeled bottles standing on a richly covered table. Although in *Come In!* the glasses of wine that Sherstiuk and the woman are drinking are neither colorful or richly decorated, altogether they convey an idea of joviality and (combined with the food) contentment. On the social level, the woman at the table smoking portrays an image of modernity and independence because cigarette smoking, like alcohol consumption, was traditionally considered a male activity, and it was not always socially acceptable for women to smoke and drink within the patriarchal system of state Socialism. In summary, *Come In!* displays a happy evening between friends who are enjoying food and wine (in the intimate and warm atmosphere created by each other’s company) and who are open to share it with others.

However, as already mentioned, Sherstiuk's scenes often bring a second meaning carried by small details that reveal a different view. In fact, even if the title expresses an invitation, neither the body language of the people in the room nor the food on the table supports such a proposition. First, Sherstiuk’s smile (which seems open and welcoming) is actually more a frozen expression for the camera’s benefit, and somehow recalls the fixity of a mask, similar to the men’s smile in *Look Who is Here*. Second, the man on the far left not only does not care about the arrival of a new guest (as already mentioned), he also does not seem to be enjoying the company of the other people at the table.

A further detail that unveils a different narrative from the one immediately perceived is that although there are at least four people in the room, only two actually eat,
judging from the smaller number of plates on the table. The ambivalence of the whole scene, due to the above-mentioned details, changes the immediate feeling of openness into an unexpected intrusion. Sherstiuk makes us reflect on the need to look more closely at the reality that is presented to us, because even if at first sight, the arrangement of the elements seems to convey one message, a closer look to these same elements reveals something different. Skepticism is therefore important, because the truth (if it exists) can be manipulated. Sherstiuk also implies here that the concept of domestic life in the Soviet Union was not the equivalent of privacy, because in the 1980s citizens still feared being persecuted.

In the same year, Sherstiuk created a second version of *Come In!* (Fig. 118) — a unique case in his artistic production—where he adds his own hand passing a brushstroke of yellow paint over the canvas. With such a simple gesture, he can introduce a new meaning to the composition. In fact, the artist's gesture and the visible brush violently undermine and cancel out the illusion of the photographic snapshot, thus reminding the viewer of the artistic process behind the painting. Indeed, the intrusion of Sherstiuk's hand not only shatters the idyll of this domestic interior, it also reminds us that what appears as an objective and transparent representation of the world is, in fact, the artist’s creation. Moreover, by representing a scene that allegedly conveys a “true representation of life” but is in fact Sherstiuk’s manipulation (as the brushstroke embodies it), Sherstiuk mirrors on canvas the intertwining between reality and a prefabricated version of it to which people's lives are constantly exposed by propaganda and official art, thus raising the question of *mimesis* not only in his art production, but also in realism.
Mimesis brings up the concept of idea-photo-memory in Sherstiuk's hyperrealism: the apparent spontaneity and naturalness of the moments caught by his brush/camera were often images he had previously (in his mind) staged, photographed and then transferred onto the canvas. In fact, his “snapshots” were often the materialization of a pre-existing mental picture, which places his hyperrealist work closer to the Russian photographer Eugene Likhosherst,\footnote{For a further analysis of Eugene Likhosherst’s photograph practice, see Chapter One.} whose photographs from the series Untitled Row (1982) (Fig. 118), share similarities with Come In! Both works represent a gathering of friends sitting around a table in a simply furnished room. Both the photographer and the artist look directly at the camera, although the former looks annoyed by the viewer's gaze. Finally, both Likhosherst and Sherstiuk apparently try to convey a naturalness and spontaneity that is contradicted by the stiffness of the subjects.

With the diptychs The Men of One Family, 1941 and 1945 (1985) (Figs. 87-88) and Father and I (1983–1984) (Fig. 119), Sherstiuk fully illustrates the role of an a priori image created in the artist’s mind/imagination, which produces archetypal images, and camera’s “false objectivity” in relation with memory. The Men of One Family appear to be painted from two family photographs. However, they are based on a series of stories Sherstiuk's father told him about his uncle and grandfather's life before and during the World War II.\footnote{Dodge, Sergei Sherstiuk: 22} The first painting of the diptych shows his uncle and grandfather standing in front of the camera with other men before going to war in 1941. Here the artist follows the same modus operandi of socialist realism—he mimicks on canvas the photographic image, in order to present the subject represented as taken from a real situation, while he actually manipulated the original source. However, Sherstiuk aims to
achieve something at the opposite end of the propaganda: a credible image, yet an evident radical construction.

The second painting, in contrast, shows a less heroic scene, as only three injured men are left from the previous composition—three survivors—each staring bleakly at the viewer. In both pictures, “spontaneous” gestures—the man on the right with the cigarette and the one at his side, who casually puts his hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him—are meant both to persuade the viewer of the reality of the scene and to enhance the viewer’s memory of this type of war photograph. However, in the first painting, the stiff and unnatural posture of the two subjects in the foreground creates a contrast with such apparent naturalness.

The physical distance that separates the men in *The Men of One Family, 1941 and 1945* (and the tension that rises from it) is reminiscent of Viktor Popkov's painting *The Builders of Bratsk* (1960) (Fig. 12), as the men depicted are lined up side by side yet are also in their own autonomous space. This physical distance, and the space that separates them, assumes in Sherstiuk and Popkov’s scenes the role of a metaphor of an existential condition. Indeed, in both compositions, the meaning of the scene is not expressed in the character’s actions, but rather in the internal tension that the soldiers or workers are experiencing before going to war or to work.

Through the representation of banal objects, raised to the status of symbols, Sherstiuk masterfully summarizes the devastating consequences of World War II. The empty chairs, for example, symbolize the deadness of the men previously represented as young and strong and the void left in the lives of people, or beloved ones, who have survived them after the war. The plain and fake landscape behind the men in the two
composition, which resembles more the painted backdrops characteristic of the late-nineteenth-century group photos, or of the scenario in theatre stages, also become the symbol death. In fact, the difference between the two landscapes in the diptych has a specific meaning: whereas in The Men of One Family, 1941 the wheat field appears at the height of his growth (so as to mirror condition of youth and vigor of the characters), in The Men of One Family, 1945 the wheat field is plowed, symbolizing the loss of people in the picture, and the tolls at war.

By confronting The Men of One Family, 1941 with The Men of One Family, 1945, we can that Viktor, Gregori and Danii, who are the only three survivors from the war (as evident in the second painting), are placed next to each other by Sherstiuk. Although this detail could seem insignificant, it reveals a precise narrative behind the composition and reveals how the painting is more than a transposition of a picture into the canvas and rather is the result of the artist’s personal interpretation.

With Father and I (as in the diptych The Men of One Family, 1941 and 1945), Sherstyuk wants to convey the idea that even when painting reaches a high level of mimesis, painting is primarily a product of the artist's “invention,” sometimes to the extent of being a radical construction. The analysis of the influence of memory on our perception of reality and the role of art in our manipulation of reality (by creating fake scenarios) is further explored in the diptych Father and I (Fig. 119). Sherstiuk represents two versions\(^\text{\textsuperscript{591}}\) of an almost identical “photograph” of himself next to his father, who is wearing a war uniform. Sherstiuk invites the viewer to match the details of both paintings--the faces' likeness, the difference in clothing, and the two men's stare intensity.

\(^{\text{591}}\) The first was purchased by the International Confederation of Artists' Unions, whereas the second was a second copy created by the artist for the Tretyakov Gallery.
The images of father and son, who should be the same in both paintings, are different in some respects. Whereas the first picture could be read as a demonstration of the continuity of generations, the second emphasizes the natural passing of time, which separates them.

Sherstiuk’s search for artistic individuality is also evident in his portraits where he gets closer to his sitters (who are often his friends) with a series of close-ups that convey not only their physical likeness but also their emotional state, such as in Oleg (1983) (Fig. 91), Lola (1983) (Fig. 92), and The Poet (1984) (Fig. 89). These blown-up portraits resemble the large-scale portraits of Chuck Close, who Sherstiuk openly acknowledged was an influence on his work: “Close influenced me for about a year and a half…I never imitated him, but I felt like a disciple.” Indeed, both artists display a closer contemplation of the human figure, often of people they personally knew, rather than a generic type. The magnified size of the subjects portrayed also helps the viewer to connect emotionally with them. Close’s illusionistic portraits of monumental expressionless heads suggest a superiority that is counterbalanced by rendering the distinctive features (including the imperfections) of the person depicted. However, by stressing the photographic quality and by keeping the lighting constant, Close treats his subjects more as objects than as beings, as in his portrait of Richard Serra (1969) (Fig. 120). In contrast, Sherstiuk aims to maintain the human and individual nature of his sitters by adding small details—a prominent beauty mark, a double chin, or accentuated cheekbones, as in the portraits of Lola and Oleg. These portraits illustrate Sherstiuk’s

593 Baigell, and. Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika: 358
ability to balance the artist’s gaze on the portrait subject as a person close to him (e.g., his ex-wife or his friend, the writer Oleg Mingalyov) and as an aesthetic subject.

Sherstiuk’s portraits should be contextualized within a wider discourse on portraiture in Russian and Soviet art. In particular, they should be contextualized as in a dialogue with the Peredvizhniki artists in the nineteenth century. These artists created portraits that explored the psychological dimension of their sitters (who were often artists, merchants, workers, and even peasants), thus creating individual portraits that simultaneously elevate the subject to the dimension of the sublime, as in the already mentioned Petrov's portrait of F.M. Doestoevsky (Fig. 32), or Mykola Yaroshenko’s The Stoker (1878) (Fig. 33). In Lola and Oleg, the subject’s gaze is what primarily attracts the viewer’s attention. In fact, Lola, appear almost hypnotized by the camera. In contrast, in Oleg, their gaze reveals instead a more intense and inquiring look. By enlightening the subjects’ physical imperfections yet at the same time revealing their consciousness through their gaze, the artist reminds the viewer that art subjects are individual people.

The Poet is also a portrait of a writer; the subject is believed to be (once again) Oleg Mingalyov, depicted in the act of declaiming one of his poems (probably from the piece of paper in his hand), in front of an audience that is hidden from the viewer’s perspective. In contrast with the Lola and Oleg portraits, the subject in The Poet is represented bottom-up and is represented in an almost monochromatic palette of grays and whites, which confers upon him quite a towering appearance and highlights the
spiritual dimension of the language of poetry transferred to his whole persona. However, the man's towering appearance sharply contrasts with his emaciated face, whose thinness is accentuated by the “flash” of the camera, thus revealing his real state not as a famous declaiming poet, but rather as a starving artist. The photographic realism is also evident in the accurate description of the bony left hand with detailed knuckles and nails.

In *The Poet*, as in several of Sherstiuk’s paintings previously analyzed, colored spots of paint are juxtaposed with the photographic-like image, which not only breaks its illusion but also adds a dynamism to the poet’s otherwise immobile posture. Such immobility is also amplified by Sherstkiuk’s choice to confine the poet within a narrow frame, which conveys two meanings: On the physical level, the small dimension of the room conveys a sense of claustrophobia and oppression, reinforced by the close door behind him. In contrast, on the metaphorical level, such forced restriction seems to symbolize how intellectuals who did not align with the official discourse were forced to self-relegate to a private dimension by the censorship that forbade them from expressing their creations in public venues.

Although still little explored in Russian and Western art criticism, Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist art production of the first half of the has made a fundamental contribution in conveying with a cold and lucid eye the duality and ambiguity of the existence of the Soviet population during the last years of the Soviet era. Moreover, his paintings introduced a fresh point of view into the sphere of what was considered the unofficial art of the time, as well as into he historical debate between the ability of art and photography to convey a truthful depiction of reality. By breaking the photographic-like image of his hyperrealist works through his visible brush gesture (like Ando Keskküla, and Jaan
Elken), Sergei Sherstiuk questioned himself and the viewer about the possibility of the existence of such “truth” in both in art and real life. At the same time, the striking and introduction into his compositions of unbalancing elements such as intruders, out-of-place objects, spots of paint, and blurring effects shows that despite Sherstiuk’s acknowledging his being part of the Soviet cultural, social and political environment and acknowledging its influence on him, Sherstiuk reacts against being just a passive witness of his time.

Semyon Faibisovich, like Sergei Sherstiuk, opens a window on the flux of the Russian byt through a position as artist and citizen that is simultaneously inside and outside the rhetorical field of the Soviet discourse. Sherstiuk transforms acquaintances, friends, and intimate environments into aseptic, cold and mask-like entities. In contrast, Faibisovich's "deliberate humanism" does the opposite, by unveiling a complex emotional depth behind strangers and impersonal environments.
4.2 Semyon Faibisovich: The Intersubjectivity between Individuals and Public Space in the Soviet Society in the 1980s

“I regarded Soviet life as a hypnotic ‘ready-made work of art’ and tried to out-stare it like a rabbit faced by a boa-constrictor.”

Semyon Faibisovich’s hyperrealist art production in the late 1980s focuses on means of transportation of Moscow’s mikraions and on the population that daily commuted on them. Although the artist’s method was still committed to traditional oil painting, photography played an important role in his creative process, as he walked around Moscow's streets with his camera seeking “snapshots” of ordinary scenes as subjects for his works. He was particularly interested in travelers and strangers whose gestures and expressions conveyed their individual inner state as human beings and at the same time embodied a defined “typology” of Soviet citizenry. Faibisovich explains his interest in these subjects:

“you realise you are surrounded by these people, even if you don't usually see them, and you see others better. This bothered me. For the Metro [subway]…that's about the working class because nowadays, plenty of people with money can buy cars, but the people with no money for cars take the metro, this is the reality.”

Faibisovich’s words recall Svetlana Boym’s theory, according to which “common places” have a fundamental role in the understanding of Soviet Russian culture.

Indeed, Faibisovich’s representation of the means of transportation in Moscow's mikraions in the 1980s opens a window on the life of his fellow citizens in a social environment where the lack of basic goods and services influenced people’s daily life, including the hours spent each week in crowded, uncomfortable subways, buses, and

594 Jo Vickery, “Jo Vickery Talks with Semyon Faibisovich,” 35.
595 Ibid.
trams. This situation is confirmed by photographer Boris Savelev—whose 1980s photographs outlined the false humanism of Soviet official photography—when he affirms that “the outskirts of Moscow, in a wasteland of tower blocks…People waited an age for buses and there was an everyday despair. It's all built up with cars and buildings now.”

Through the representation, of citizens’ daily struggles, Faibisovich mirrors his own experience of living and commuting in the Moscow suburbs. Indeed, the verb mirror is particularly applicable when describing two self-portraits created by the artist in 1983 and 1987, where he establishes a dialogue between his persona (as a man and as an artist) and his surroundings through a visual game with reflections and mirrors.

Two portraits, Self-Portrait (1983) (Fig. 121) and Double Portrait of the Artist at Work (1987) (Fig. 26), symbolize Faibisovich’s personal involvement with the subjects and the environment he frames is. These two works also become a platform for Faibisovich to explore the creative possibility involved in simultaneously painting both an object (his body) and his own gaze directed at this object by depicting himself reflected in a window surface. For Yuri Lotman, the mirror is a meta structural element that (once introduced in a painting as a reflection of reality) assumes the role of a metaphor for artistic self-consciousness: the artist’s self-positioning within the world and being apart from the world. The doubling of reality introduces the ontological assumption of becoming the numeno and its reflection at the same time due to the doubling.

Faibisovich's belief of the role of the mirror in his art production involves a process of

self-determination and an open reciprocity between the image of the world relating to his own position and the way he reflects its image. This idea could be framed (as already mentioned) within the framework of what Lotman’s idea of the role of mirrors.\textsuperscript{599}

*Self-Portrait* is one of the first paintings where Faibisovich's experiments with mirrors, reflections, visual *trompe l'oeil*, and doubling of images. This painting can be considered Faibisovich’s manifesto, because it embodies elements that are recurrent in his later works: his simultaneous participation in the scene depicted and the detachment from it through the use of mirrors, his play with reflection, means of transportation as one of the main subjects, and the dialogue between the external cityscape and the life of individual subjects.

During an interview with Ekaterina Degot, Faibisovich affirmed that “the main thing is that it is life that excites me initially, not art. It is the texture around me, the texture of people in the trolleybus.”\textsuperscript{600} Literally, *Self-Portrait* shows Faibisovich himself in the role of a bus driver simultaneously looking at the passengers and looking at the viewer from the rear mirror above him. The mirror here acts as a filter to direct eye contact between his gaze (which is inquisitive and distant), the passengers, and the viewer. The artist’s external position as creator looking at himself in the painting as a character, whose image is reflected in a mirror, underscores his aim to share the daily life experience of the subjects of his works. Yet at the same time he wants to position himself as just an observer, evident in the fact that he takes the role of the driver, not passenger.

\textsuperscript{599} Author's interview, July 21, 2016. “в рамках того, о чем говорит Лотман, это у меня был определенный период самоопределения, время самоопределения, время определения где ты, где мир и что находится между вами, и каким образом мир отражается в тебе и ты в мире, поэтому большинство ранних работ, там зеркало играет активную роль.”

\textsuperscript{600} Ekaterina Degot, “A man with a mobile phone,” 12.
Speaking of Faibisovich's use of mirrors, art critic Yevgeniy Barabanov establishes a connection with philosopher Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.\textsuperscript{601} According to this theory, the vision of ourselves in a mirror is mediated by our body image, so one cannot look at one’s mirror image in the same way that one can appreciate the appearance of others. Therefore, our body should be conceived as our means of communication with the world, rather than merely as an object.\textsuperscript{602}

*Double Portrait of the Artist at Work* illustrates Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body’s capacity as an avenue of communication of occupying the position of both the perceiving subject and the object of perception.\textsuperscript{603} Here the artist's body it is presented not in its concrete appearance but rather as absorbed by its reflections on a window, which produces a disorienting effect on the viewer's perception. Indeed, art critic Matthew Cullerne Bown affirms that Faibisovich tends to “confound…the formerly clear distinction between physical phenomena and mental activities, between the objective and subjective states.”\textsuperscript{604} The artist's camera and elbow (within such a labyrinth of signs) convey the idea of the presence of a real body, which gives the viewer a sense of orientation in *Double portrait of the Artist at Work*. The ambiguity created here by the doubling of Faibisovich’s image as the one who looks at the object and at the same time as the object of his own gaze, follows the artist’s belief in the condition of the human being’s existence as lying between the state of subject and object. In fact, he affirms that “true reflection presents me to myself not as an idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing

\textsuperscript{603} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{604} Matthew Bown, “We Are Not Cameras”, Evidence – Faibisovich, cat. exh. (Regina Gallery, 2010): 30.
it: I am all that I see, I am an inter-subjective field, not despite my body and historical situation but on the contrary by being this body and this situation, ad through them, everything.”

Faibisovich’s last statement is essential for understanding both his method and the subjects he chose to represent, since he was persuaded that only in a state of intersubjectivity, which embodies a determined moment in time, is possible to completely achieve an experience. Such a state of intersubjectivity is often reached in his painting by the images of mirrors: the doubling through reflections of the artist’s image or commuters and passers-by becomes the artist's way of reflecting on and questioning their position within society and their level of awareness of being part of society. This is one of the most radical differences between the representations of Socialist realism (despite the short period of the Surovoy stil) and Faibisovich's hyperrealism. Indeed, while in the former single individuals are deprived of having a voice on neither political matters or on private issues, Faibisovich gives them the space and the possibility of having personal feelings through the representation of their gaze.

Mirrors and reflections play a more structural role in the cycles City Bus, Suburban Trains and Moscow Subway, where (according to Barabanov) the mirror acts as a key principle—the base for the organization of the graphic sheet and the painting. The image on the sheet or canvas is constructed like an architectural form, in which the correlation of the elements, content and meaning is internally motivated.

In the aforementioned cycles of paintings, Faibisovich aims to make the viewer aware that what he or she believes to be “reality” or to be objective (even something as plain as a ride on a bus or on a train) could just be a distorted reflection of the thing.

Degot, “A man with a mobile phone”, 16.

Yevgeniy Barabanov, “Analysis of the unidentified,” 19.
In fact, these cycles of paintings introduce the viewer to Moscow's means of transportation and to commuters who ride them, mostly through their reflections in car windshields, windows and surfaces. In fact, in paintings that are part of those cycles, such as Outskirts (1984) (Fig. 6), On the Bus (1984) (Fig. 122), The Adjacent Subway Car (1985) (Fig. 27), and Lobnia Station (1985) (Fig. 97), reflections are not only the principle according to which the elements in the composition are structured but reflections become a substitute for reality.

Outskirts, which is part of the cycle City Bus, is one of the most cogent examples of such a statement. The passengers on a bus are represented only partially, through fragments of a series of reflections on the window and on the driver's rear-view mirror. Moreover, by transforming people into fragmented images, Faibisovich creates a powerful metaphor of the condition of precariousness experienced by Soviet citizenry, within the context of the historical alternating of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev's governments, whose political plans have led the country to the brink of social, political and economical collapse.

On the Bus could be read as revealing the atmosphere of tiredness and alienation characteristic of the buses on the outskirts of Moscow and the metaphor of Soviet

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607 I argue that an interesting dialogue could be established between Faibisovich's representation of the Soviet society through shadows and reflections, and Plato's allegory of the cave. In the Greek philosopher's allegory, a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, face a blank wall, where shadows are projected from objects passing in front of a fire behind them. The shadows are the prisoners' reality, and therefore they do not desire to leave their prison, since they do not know a better life. On the other hand, the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows are not reality, as he can finally perceive the true form of reality rather than the manufactured one presented to the prisoners. In Faibisovich’s cycle of paintings based on reflections, the passengers depicted are both the prisoners who are presented with a reality that is the projection of the Soviet ideology, and they are also embedded in such reality as the only one they know and therefore passively accept. Meanwhile, Faibisovich, like the philosopher of Plato’s allegory, has freed himself in terms of awareness of the distortion of the Soviet reality, but (as already mentioned) he remains within that system in order to reveal its deformation.
citizens’ passive acceptance of a life, which was imposed on them. Faibisovich chose to represent the scene from inside a bus, without the filter of a window or a mirror. However, he still manages to create a detachment and alienation by hiding their faces and emotional expression and showing only their backs. Paradoxically, people's coats and hats are illustrated in detail, as if they were going to replace the individuality of the missing faces, and to anchor the image to a real situation. The atmosphere of complete immobility in the bus is amplified by the commuter’s disturbing stillness as they just let the bus simply carry them as they (metaphorically) quietly accept the imposition of the authorities in guiding their public and personal life.

With *The Adjacent Subway Car*—part of the *Moscow Subway*—Faibisovich’s open dialogue between hyperrealism and the avant-garde practice attains a level of complexity such that the distorted reality verges on abstraction. Faibisovich not only visually challenges the viewer’s perception and the viewer’s belief of what is real versus what is the product of the artistic creation and the parameters of the realism–modernism dichotomy established by both artists and critics of the time.

The painting seems to be the reproduction of a photograph taken by the artist through a window carriage while he was standing outside the subway platform. The intensity of the lights reflected in the subway car overpowers the images of the two passengers (a man and a woman), who are almost melted with them. The visual “schizophrenia” created by the light reflections is puzzling, and it forces the viewer to get closer to the image in order to grasp both the whole composition and the details. The only part still recognizable is the man's face, which is staring at the viewer.
Lobnia Station, is from the Suburban Train cycle and was created in the same year. It masterfully displays is a visual and intellectual challenge to the viewer is. Lobnia Station illustrates how in Faibisovich’s hyperrealism the means of transportation usually considered as transitional or waiting places could also become symbols of Soviet society in the 1980s. This painting portrays a man on a platform waiting for his train; inside another train car, a woman is waiting for her train to leave the station. From the point of view of the scene depicted, Faibisovich appears to be in the same the train as the woman; however, from the reflection on the glass, he appears to be looking at the man and the woman through the window of a different car. The banality of the scene is counterbalanced by the photographic effect of a superimposition of two urbanscapes—an industrial landscape with two big silos and a building—which conveys an atmosphere suspended between reality and illusion. Such suspension is also embodied by the man and woman in the act of waiting for something—literally a train but metaphorically something that has been promised them for decades by the propaganda: a society with better living conditions.

In the late 1980s, Faibisovich’s interest progressively turned toward the representation of single subjects and their psychological state, as in Stranger (1984) (Fig. 123), Boy (1985) (Fig. 98), After Work (1986) (Fig. 1), and In the Vestibule (1987) (Fig. 99). What is remarkable in these paintings is Faibisovich’s skills in catching and conveying the state of pensiveness and withdrawal of bus and train passengers while they are looking out of a window and are unaware of other people’s presence (perhaps in the only moment during the day that they have for themselves), while returning home from work. Discussing his subjects, Faibisovich admits, “I portrayed the gaze of my fellow
traveler staring somewhere into space, away from the viewer. There was such a loneliness in the crowd. When people think that nobody is watching them something happens to them: they become isolated and sink deep into themselves.” The physical and emotional closeness of the artist to these people withdrawn into their inner world could also be seen as an open window into the artist's consciousness, embodied in his work not through the brush gesture, as in Elken or Sherstiuk’s works, but through the artist's own gaze, which becomes the medium between the viewer and the emotional state of the subject represented.

Faibisovich establishes a further personal connection with the characters of his paintings through his choice of a different color palette accordingly to the degree of his empathy for them, thus again blurring the border between realism and avant-garde tradition. As Faibisovich explains, “the trolleybus was a universe and there are all sorts of planets in it and therefore every motive needed a different expression.”

In Stranger, the atmosphere of pensiveness, which surrounds a young and blond woman (whose face is hidden from us) is represented by the warm tones of ocher and brown, whereas the distant parking lot (outside the train window) is rendered in a foggy white and gray. The use of brown (used in particular in her upper body) not only mimics the shadow that surrounds her but also indicates her emotional state. Indeed, her posture and the rigidity of her head suggest that she is not really looking at the landscapes outside, but something more serious is taking her mind away.

A similar moment of pensiveness is portrayed in Boy, which (as the title suggests), shows a child staring outside the window of a train. However, unlike the

609 Ibid., 20.
woman in *Stranger*, his face becomes the exclusive center of the scene, even if a fragment of urbanscape is still visible from the window. The whole composition is pervaded by an aura of profound humanity, which highlights Faibisovich's mastery in catching such intense feelings and such a sense of loneliness in a child. The smooth surface and soft colors with which Faibisovich portrays the boy and the interior of the train evoke a “haze of suppressed childhood memories and dreams and to create a strange intensity...a strong feeling of unreality. The lighting perfectly complements the subdue mood and alludes to the possible fears, desires, and fantasies of a young boy.” A similar empathy with melancholic, solitary and pensiveness in a child is shared by two photographers who are contemporaries of Faibisovich: the Russian Boris Savelev in *Metro Girl, Moscow* (1985) (Fig. 58), and the Lithuanian Vital Luckus in *In Bashkiria* (1981) (Fig.56). Although the artist did not explicitly admit this influence (which he claimed in my interview with him), the similarity in the formal setting and in the subject represented demonstrate how the system of cultural and visual signs of the time crossed different mediums and unconsciously influenced the imagery of artists and photography, which support the concept of idea-photo-memory.

Like Faibisovich, the two photographers seized the inner dimension of a young person by reaching a physical closeness with them and by snapping the shutter at the moment they caught a spontaneous expression: Lukus’s picture shows a boy enjoying an intense emotional moment of peace immersed in the nature, whereas Savelev frames an angry-looking girl on a metro (subway) car. His photography in particular highlights Sherstuk's visual debt to the photography of his time. *Boy, Metro Girl, Moscow, and In

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611 Author’s interview. Moscow, July 21, 2016
*Bashkiria* radiate with a profound fascination in the universality of human nature and the desire to explore it within the artistic space, which are a considerable deviation from the often bidimensional characters presented by the official photojournalism of the time, imbued by propaganda.

The sense of loneliness of the child in *Boy* is further explored in *After Work*, this time in the form of the detachment and isolation between commuters—two women and a man—on a bus. The painting is one of the few black-and-white works in Faibisovich’s art production. The color pallete once again here becomes a fundamental component in order to emphasize the atmosphere of tiredness and passivity of the three travelers. In fact, despite the fact that the woman on the left occupies most of the space in the painting, the real center of the composition is created by the opposite trajectory of their gazes, which creates an emotional and physical space between them. However, unlike the other two passengers, whose blank stare seems to reflect emptiness, the woman in the foreground reveals an intense gaze that deeply contrasts with the empty stares of the two other travelers. Faibisovich is like a contemporary *Prometeus* who gives the spark of knowledge to human beings with fire. By adding to her eyes just two small white dots, Faibisovich to invest her gaze of intensity and self-awareness, thus changing an apparent unremarkable character into a figure that catches the viewer's interest. The artist's decision to represent a woman whose age and body are different from the archetypal images of healthy, well-shaped and young women presented to Soviet citizens by the propaganda of the time.

The woman in *After Work* closely reminds the typology of women displayed in the works of the Latvian photographer Zenta Dzividzinska, who were often oblivious to
codified feminine glamour. Indeed, her powerful and compelling portrayals of Latvian women in bland settings (as in Untitled VII (Fig. 57), share with Faibisovich the similar respect for her subjects, which places her outside the frame of an omniscient lens to instead give to her subjects an autonomy within the composition that also introduce a fresh and honest look at ordinary women’s bodies.

A powerful stare is displayed by another middle-aged woman on a train in the painting In the Vestibule. However, in contrast with After Work, this woman’s gaze is not wondering on the landscape outside the window. Rather, her gaze focuses on a specific point, which is excluded from the viewer's point of view. This time Faibisovich does not share the same space in the train car, as if he does not want to break the intensity of the moment with his presence, but instead keeps a distance by looking at her through the window of the adjacent car. The emotional strength that seems to go through her body is particularly embodied by her arms, which cling to the glass in a gesture that reveals strength, whether it is for something unknown to us or for the journey she is taking.

After Work is one of Faibisovich’s paintings that shows the importance of the influence of the critical realism of Surovoy Stil’ on his interest in people's psychological and emotional status. In particular, a predecessor of such an approach is Geli Korzhev. In fact, the woman’s posture and her gaze recall a similar character in Korzhev’s Before a Long Journey (1970–1976) (Fig. 124), Korzhev’s works of the mid-1950s were defined by a range of subjects from everyday life, which he isolated and magnified in order to understand their state of mind. In Before a Long Journey, Korzhev shows a moment of deep introspection of a young lady who appears (according to her uniform) to belong to the military. Her expression in front of the mirror and the cold color palette used to
render it hint at the unhappiness of her thoughts confronted by the conflicting demands of home, state, and workplace. Similar to Faibisovich's women and the boy on a train, this young’s girl gaze in Korzhev's painting becomes a window into her innermost thoughts: the fear of leaving her home and and the fear of never returning.

Another resemblance between Faibisovich and Korzhev is their characteristic way of catching and then conveying on canvas their subjects’ most intimate thoughts and emotions, through a physical and emotional closeness, as in The Bench: Stop! Danger Zone! (1989) by Faibisovich (Fig. 125) and Mother (1964–1967) (Fig. 126) by Korzhev; both represent a moment of sorrow of elderly ladies.

In The Bench: Stop! Danger Zone!, Faibisovich portrays three old women sitting on a bench on what looks like a bus stop. The scene has an aura of profound humanity and hopelessness, as the women’s hands are covering their faces in a gesture of deep sorrow. The strength and intensity of this scene lies not in the characters’ gaze but rather in the absence of this look from the viewer. The hands are the nucleus of the composition, where the woman’s feelings are materialized. The sense of desperation is reinforced by the fact that, despite their proximity, none of them is acknowledging the presence of the others, as they are too secluded into their own sorrow. A similar posture and atmosphere of hopelessness, desperation and unbearable loss is also conveyed by Korzhev's Mother; the woman’s emotional and psychological depth is also amplified here by the woman’s hand, which covers part of her face, leaving only one eye visible, looking downward--a sign of anguish. Furthermore, the prominent role of the hand in the

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612 A description of simultaneous physical closeness and emotional distance between characters is also a characteristic of some Surovoyi stil paintings. An example is Our Working Days (1960) by Nikonov, which shows men exhausted after a day of work, lying absent-mindedly on a truck that is bringing them home. Their clothes and the surrounding environment also highlight the struggle of working in such extremely cold temperatures.
composition is underscored by the artist’s accuracy in representing her veins, which also exposes the artist's emotional and physical closeness to his mother.

What is compelling in Faibisovich’s compositions, such as *The Bench: Stop! Danger Zone!, After Work* and *Boy*, is the artist’s ability to establish an emotional contact with strangers, after just briefly meeting them on public transportation. The duality of not knowing them yet at the same time reaching their inner emotional state allows Faibisovich to transform his personal experience into the expression of a universal feeling.

This characteristic could explain the reason his characters become archetypes (while remaining real entities) — a forgettable moment in the life of an individual person, become the embodiment of the living conditions of millions of Soviet citizens. Accordingly, Ekaterina Degot links Faibisovich's representation of Russian people as an expression of the nineteenth-century realism in the promotion of the noble and democratic ideals of exposing the class structures of reality in their colossal historical scale.\(^{613}\)

Another example can be found in another painting titled *After work* (Fig. 127), made in 1985, where Faibisovich focuses his attention on an old woman seated on a subway who is so tired during her ride home that she’s fallen asleep. The lady's posture and her red nose (due to the winter cold) contribute to the realism of the scene and help the viewer connect and empathize with her situation of working and commuting in a cold country.

The class structure of Soviet social reality in the “colossal historical scale” could be from a certain point of view in the cycle *At the Train Station*, a series of large

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\(^{613}\) Degot, “A Man with a Mobile Phone,” 16.
paintings where Faibisovich display the specific rhythm of Moscow’s train stations. As already addressed in the introduction of this study, urbanologist and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has introduced the concept of rhythmanalysis⁶¹⁴ as “a description of the contrapuntal rhythms that articulate an experience of the city,”⁶¹⁵ which (I argue) could be applied to Faibisovich’s monumental cycles.

In fact, Faibisovich's hyperrealist paintings that shift the focus from individuals' emotional states (while immersed in the urbanscape) to the representation of flux of masses of people can be read through the sociology idea that the variety of human everyday practices is constituted by parts that are purely physical and parts that are sociocultural. In *Getting On* (1987) (Fig. 128)—a large composition—Faibisovich depicts a traveler walking on a train station platform. The rhythm of the composition is amplified by the interweaving of images of passengers walking on the platform, and just reflections of the city on the train cars, which helps convey the hectic atmosphere of a train station in a big city like Moscow. Despite this supposed movement, the painting presents at the same time a photographic fixity that such frozen rhythm and relegates it to a timeless dimension. The juxtaposition of these two forces--active space and passive time--reveals how both are a construction, not only in the artist’s artistic creation, but also in the image promulgated by Soviet propaganda.

Such an “out of time” atmosphere is supported by the absence of a recognizable face among the people on the platform, which transforms them into just the type of citizen who takes the train to work every day. The detachment from a particular moment in time is enhanced by the prevalence of ocher and brown colors, which makes it almost a

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⁶¹⁵ Ibid.
monochromatic work and vintage picture. Here Faibisovich’s choice of a specific use of color not only acts (as it does in the previous paintings) as a way to convey an emotion or atmosphere but also as a political statement. In fact, he transformed the disadvantages of Soviet photographic equipment of the time into the characteristic yellow/brown color that pervades most of his paintings in order to raise a more general critique of the poor quality of Soviet technology.

Another big canvas, *Leningrad Line* (1988) (Fig. 129), uses photographic effects to convey a specific atmosphere, and a hidden critique of Soviet society, which focuses on a crowd walking at the entrance of the Moscow's station *Leningrad*. However, in contrast with *Getting On*, the train cars here are just barely visible from a distance and the travelers' faces are hidden from us, except for two men in the foreground, who are still blurred. A couple at the center of the painting, wrapped in a tender embrace, both underscores and opposes the individualism and alienation characteristic of the train stations. Against the anonymity of the passengers, Faibisovich goes to great effort to describe their clothes, which helps him to anchor the scene in the 1980s in opposition to the impersonal and detached atmosphere that prevails in the composition.

With *Leningrad Line*, Faibisovich raises to a mythical dimension a moment happening in front of our eyes during an average busy day at a train station. He accomplishes this through the use of light and bright colors, which mimics the effects of an overexposed "film." Such a photographic-like effect contributes to an atmosphere of anticipation, as if these people are not just walking to take a train but also walking toward the destiny that history has reserved for them.
In the same years he created these large frescoes of masses, Faibisovich does not lose interest in the representation of singular subjects, by continuing the exploration of real bodies particularly female bodies), often excluded from the official artistic production of Socialist realism (with healthy, athletic, and well-maintained bodies, deprived of individuality), as a vehicle to explore the stratified composition of Soviet society.

The series *On the Beach* (1986–1992), and particularly the painting *Before Bathing* (1988) (Fig. 130), presents a location atypical in Faibisovich hyperrealism: a summer resort. In this painting, the body takes absolute preeminence over people's faces and actions. In fact, once again Faibisovich introduces a situation where a group of people are waiting for something that is absent from the viewer's view, although it seems to keep the interest of the woman and the child in the foreground. Here the excessive brightness of the palette is reserved for the left side of the picture, particularly the body of the young, skinny guy. However, the true center of the composition is the already-mentioned boy and the woman in the foreground. Once again Faibisovich uses color for symbolic meaning: the light tones are reserved for the youth embodied by the child, whereas for the woman he chooses a darker palette in order to emphasize the age difference. However, the scene is extremely realistic, as the artist avoids idealizing youth through the representation of an athletic body (which is typical in most official art): both the young boy and the older woman are depicted without omitting any human characteristic – a prominent belly, love handles, or wrinkles.
A fascination with people during their leisure time on the beach resorts is also shown by the Lithuanian photographer Aleksandras Macijauskas in *Summer n. 9* (1981) (Fig. 131) and Russian photographer Boris Mikhailov in his *Salt Lake* series (1986) (Fig. 132). According to Mikhailov, “We were under ideological pressure to discover who we were, I realized that the average anthropological type was found on the beach. Anthropologically speaking the human body has changed. The hero had become fat, obese. He took vacations. He got naked and ceased being merely Soviet, or a social being. This ‘disrobing’ of the hero was my next important move.” As a matter of fact, art critic Matthew Bown defines both Mikhailov’s social-documentary photography and Faibisovich’s hyperrealist works approach toward the complex and dangerous situation in the Soviet Union, as “confrontational”, whereas other members of the underground art movement dealt with it in a subtler way, using irony and Aesopian desconstruction.

The confrontational aspect of Faibisovich’s hyperrealism becomes even more evident in the subsequent years, with works that recall the denunciation of the social and economic contradiction of the Soviet society of the time by the already mentioned critical realism of *Peredvizhnik*. The trivial subjects represented by the artist (e.g., people queuing in a line or garbage spread on the ground) unveils a side of Soviet society that either was hidden from the media or was not considered worthy of being an art subject, and it epitomizes the situation of political and social disintegration in the Soviet Union in its final phase.

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616 In an interview with me, Faibisovich denied any influence of Macjauskas's photograph on his painting. However, the close resemblance between their works proves how the visual imagery that was circulating in these years could have unconsciously influenced his way of picturing events of images.


618 Bown, “We Are Not Cameras,” 32.
Faibisovich’s series *Line* consists of thirteen paintings made from 1987 to 1990. *Line* sheds light on people queuing in front of a shop to buy alcohol and food, breaks their “invisibility” as uncomfortable subjects, and forces the viewer to deal with such reality, which was common to millions of people. In this respect, Faibisovich’s hyperrealism is radically different from socialist realism; he visualizes what the other hides from the viewer, as if his paintings are the negative side of the picture of Soviet life.

Being in one or more queues on a daily or weekly basis was part of the citizen’s necessary routine to obtain food, and it was a spatial manifestation of the “economy of shortage,” which characterized Eastern Bloc countries.\(^\text{61}\) In fact, according to Aleksandr Vysokovskii, under socialism “the deficit situation had become part of Soviet citizens' flesh and blood. They were introduced to shortage at an early age, before other cultural standards and values, and it produced in them a kind of deficit mentality, a deficit mode of behavior.”\(^\text{62}\)

However, albeit much hated, the queue outside shops encouraged forms of sociality that demonstrate the existence of values and a close-knit of solidarity in spite of the alienating effects of socialism.\(^\text{63}\) This aspect is well presented by the novel *The Queue*, written in 1983 and published two years later, by Vladimir Sorokin. The book is the form of a long dialogue, which tells through a cacophony of voices the stories of several people in line to get goods, and how they deal with this situation of uncertainty and indeterminacy. As the dialogue progresses, the reader gets the sense that the people on the queue do not know what objects are they in line for. *Who’s the Last in Line* (1987),

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\(^\text{62}\) Aleksandr Vysokovskii, “Will domesticity return?” 279
\(^\text{63}\) David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Social Spaces: Sites of Every Life in the Eastern Block*: 15.
one of Faibisovich’s paintings in this series, could be interpreted as a visualization of one of the recurrent questions that could be heard in such situations, which is incorporated in the composition. This is also the case with Sorokin’s The Queue, with its plot centered on common speeches.

An aspect of being in line developed in Faibisovich’s series is the alienation and despair felt by people after being on a line four hours without any certainty of eventually getting what they were in line for. Indeed, the empty expression of the man standing on the foreground in Sausage Line (1989) (Fig. 4.51) displays such an emotional annihilation and disconnection from the other people around him, which reminds us of a similar emotional state in Sherstiuk’s Hey We Are Looking for You. Each man’s gaze mirrors the feeling of not being able to fit in the society they are living in.

The series Lines also highlights another issue that impacted social and political life—alcoholism. Already in the nineteenth-century, alcoholism became the subject of genre artwork by the Peredvizhniki, as Vladimir Makovsky’s Don’t Go (1892) (Fig. 134), and Ivan Bogdanov’s The Novice (1890) (Fig. 135). These paintings highlight the devastating physical and social effects of alcoholism, not only for those who suffer from it but also for family members who are indirect victims.622

The paintings Line Up For the Wine at Last (1987) (Fig. 15) and In the Line for Vodka (1990) (Fig. 16) also illustrate the devastating effects of alcoholism by showing the tired and resigned men waiting to get wine or vodka. The body postures of the men on

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622 The State treated alcoholism as a domestic and private issue. While pretending to fight alcoholism, the State encouraged it, because part of its revenue came from the sale of alcoholic beverages. Moreover, drunkenness distracted the population from the worries of a difficult life, and social disintegration due to corruption and generalized intoxication consolidates the state: all citizens are guilty and the state is free to punish or grace them, see David Jackson, The wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth-century Russian art, (Manchester University Press, 2006): 48.
line for hours in the street are a powerful visual embodiment of the writer Mati Unt's description of the life in several mikroraiones all over the Soviet Union: “the senseless large fields between the dull monsters that were the buildings were neither nature nor street, neither places nor spaces, neither roads nor squares. One could neither relax nor stroll there, neither lie down nor take a breath of fresh air, and the only idea they really seemed to suggest was that of drinking.”

Faibisovic's works should be contextualized within the anti-alcohol campaign started in 1985: rising alcohol prices during 1985–1986 and measures to restrict access to alcohol, with decreases in production that led to massive shortages. The consequences of these changes were immediately apparent, such as the evidence of long queues at official alcohol outlets, up to 3000 people in one case. However, the effect of the campaign was short-lived; by the mid-1980s, “the age at which people began to drink had fallen, increasing numbers of women and children were heavy drinkers, and in some cities the average consumption among working adults was a bottle of vodka each day.”

In Faibisovich’s triptych Garbage Dump Next Door (1987–1988) (Figs. 93–95), the garbage amassed on the city's street becomes the symbol of the condition of abandonment of the city itself. This image mirrors (from another angle) the “decadence” of the last years of Soviet society. Indeed, Jo Vickery identifies Faibisovich's interest in

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623 See footnote n.7, Chapter Three.
624 With the anti-alcohol campaign launched by Gorbachev, Brezhnev was known to be a very heavy drinker, while Gorbachev launched the anti-alcohol campaign in May 1985 banning drinking of alcohol at all workplaces, including formerly legal bars, such as those in higher education establishments; banning sales before 2 p.m.; restricting alcohol sales to off-licences; and banning sales on trains (including dining cars) and similar establishments.
625 Martin McKee, “Alcohol in Russia,” Alcohol and Alcoholism, 34(6), November 1, 1999: 824–829. Indeed, although this anti-alcohol campaign was initially effective, it failed, and despite a temporary decline of alcohol-related mortality, it was accompanied by loss of life because of the massive consumption of home-made alcohol, synthetic fluids, and perfumery. In general, the quality of alcoholic beverages deteriorated at that time.
the other side of Moscow as follows: “on one hand he is preoccupied by its traditional beauty, but on the other he is also looking at beauty that shines through the everyday ugliness. He sees that in this everyday ugliness there is a different reality which exists.”

With the paintings *Garbage Dump next Door #1* (1987) (Fig. 93), *Garbage Dump next Door #2* (1988) (Fig. 94), and *Garbage Dump next Door #3* (1988) (Fig. 95), Faibisovich also presents a powerful disclosure of the progressing collapse of the Soviet Empire by portraying a still life of garbage on the ground in its different stages of decomposition. The progressive dating of the paintings parallels the progressive decomposition of the trash, and perhaps symbolically refers to the gradual degeneration of Soviet society before its fall in 1991. In fact, in Faibisovich’s own words, “this is everyday life. I had a feeling that the system that social artists described with signs, symbols, portraits of leaders, that it [the system] itself most clearly expresses itself in any garbage can, in any shabby corner.”

In *Garbage Dump Next Door #1*, the objects piled up are still recognizable—fragments of pages from the newspaper *Izvestia*, empty packages of kefir and milk, eggs shells, shrimp, sheets, and remains of various food. However, in the other two paintings, the trash gradually becomes increasingly unidentifiable. In fact, in *Garbage Dump next Door #2*, some objects are still recognizable, although they lost their contours. In *Garbage Dump Next Door #3*, the garbage is smoothly blending in with the watery floor; the garbage is just a revolting brown shapeless mash of waste melted together. The

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626 Jo Vickery, “Jo Vickery Talks with Semyon Faibisovich,”: 10
627 “Это повседневная жизнь. У меня было ощущение, что система которую соц артисты описывали знаками, символами, портретами вождей, что она (система ) себя я рце всего выражает в любом мусорном баке, в любом обшарпанном углу, то есть, там где ничего нет, вот там все и есть.” Author's interview, Moscow July 21, 2016,
presence of rotten garbage on the streets of Moscow could be Faibisovich’s metaphor to critique the degradation and corruption of Soviet society, pervaded by favoritism and bribery as an integral part of the foundation of the country's political system.

This aspect brings Faibisovich close to the art production of one of the most important artists of the non-conformist sphere in 1960, Oscar Rabin, who also included garbage in several of his compositions, such as *Moscow Evening* (1970) (Fig. 136), which shows dark glimpses of the part of Moscow with rubbish scattered on the ground, and *Rubbish Bin No. 8* (1958) (Fig. 43).

In Rabin's *Rubbish bin No. 8* in particular, a dirty street, probably one of Liazonovo's suburbs, is overlooked by a distorted trash bin surrounded by garbage, a fishbone and an empty bottle, illumintated by the faint light of a street lamp. The only hint of hope in an otherwise gloomy atmosphere is embodied by the presence of the background of a miserable and shabby barrack, whose tenuous light is coming from its window; this is the only sign of human presence in a deserted environment. Indeed, Rabin deeply transformed the "banality of everyday life" into art subjects, which symbolized the constrictions, prohibitions and injustices of the Soviet social and political environment. Rabin's singular realism elevated the Russian *byt* to an aesthetic dimension that often had a strong impact on viewers who were not used to being faced with a display of misery and poverty--so different from the merry and positive images presented by Socialist Realism. Oscar Rabin's "harsh, sad and hopeless, little people" are condemned to poverty and drunkenness in the world of barracks and garbage. His paintings such as *Barrack with Moon* (Fig. 41), and *Moscow Building n. 150* (Fig. 42)
emphasize the “inhumanity” of the Soviet environment through the aesthetization of miserable and poor city neighborhoods, including his own.

For both Faibisovich and Rabin, the physical quality of the painting plays an important role in conveying a social critique. Both Rabin and Faibisovich believed in conveying to the viewer the intensity of their perception of life through the blackening of the palette: the dark tones predominant in most of their works are not just an aesthetic mean but also become an emblem of the impoverished conditions that burdened most of the population's life. However, in Rabin's works, there is no catharsis or liberation, and the sense of the grotesque that is tinged with tragedy and despair is much stronger than it is in Faibisovich's hyperrealist paintings.

Faibisovich’s critique of the last years of Perestroika is extended at the end of the 1980s to the performative reproduction of the hypernormalized forms of the ideological authoritative discourse such as public rituals, discourses, and demonstrations. Indeed, according to anthropologist Aleksei Yurchak, the more the immutable forms of the system's authoritative discourse were reproduced everywhere, the more the system was experiencing a profound internal displacement. Such paradoxical processes of late socialism are expressed by Faibisovich’s portraying people demonstrating in the streets of Moscow, as in Civil Police (1989) (Fig. 137), and Cultivated People (1990) (Fig. 138), (both from the series Workers Festive March series 1988–1990).

In these paintings, Faibisovich highlights the climate of fear, suspicion and tight control behind the public demonstrations in the 1980s. Faibisovich hints here at the implications of living in a state where the Party control is everywhere and can be

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embodied by anyone. As Sherstiuk reveals how the authority’s control in private apartments could come from people’s neighbors, or unexpected visits, so Faibisovich shows how everyone could contribute to sustain the spirit of suspicion, spying and uncertainty promoted by the Party.

In both *Cultivated People* and *Civil Police*, three men attending a demonstration are at the center of the painting. An interesting aspect that comes to attention while analyzing these two pictures is that whereas in *Civil Police*, the three men participate at the event are recognizable public officers sent by the authorities to supervise the demonstration, those who really convey a feeling of control and conspiracy are the men, in *Cultivated people*. Once again, Faibisovich conveys the meaning of the whole composition through the gaze of his characters. For example, the different directions of the three men in *Civil Police* (each encompassing a different part of the demonstration) convey the idea of wide control over the crowd; meanwhile the whispering man with the insinuating gaze seems to have found someone to report to the authorities. The color palette of cold tones—blue, white, and gray—in the two paintings mirrors the detachment of the main characters from the mass scene that takes place behind them, and at the same time conveys to the viewer the chilly atmosphere of threat and suspicion throughout the composition.

*Cultivated People* and *Civil Police*, and in general the series of works analyzed in this chapter, support Faibisovich’s claim that he chose to pursue an artistic career as an unofficial artist because he believed it was the only way to be free and to establish a clear relationships with the reality around him.629 Yet his display of life in the Soviet Union “how it was” elicited negative reactions from critics and fellows artists who could not

629 Author’s interview, Moscow July 21, 2016
place his paintings within any specific movement. For example, during an exhibition of young artists in Moscow in the 1980s the artist Andrei Volkov, according to Faibisovich’s narration to the author of this dissertation, felt the urge to offer him some advices in order to improve one of his paintings.

The fact that it was specifically Andrei Volkov is significant, considering the characteristics of his art production, which in several aspects are close to hyperrealism, despite being an official painter and a member of the Russian Academy of Arts. Indeed, the above-mentioned episode highlights the complex situation of the Soviet art world in the 1970s and 1980s and the way the “officialdom–non-conformism” dichotomy, applied until recently in Russian and Western criticism, is outdated. We need to analyze the work of Andrei Volkov in order to demonstrate how both the authorities’ permission to grant public venues to some artists instead of others and the role of critics (and sometimes the role of artists themselves, in stigmatizing one work of art rather than another) was based mainly on pre-established parameters.

Andrei Volkov belongs to the generation of the 1970s. He was prone to widen the old painting canons. Indeed, his artistic approach in the 1980s shares several characteristics with Ando Keskküla, Jaan Elken, Sergei Sherstiuk and Semyon Faibisovich’s hyperrealism. First, while remaining within the traditional realistic easel painting, his creative method often illustrates a deliberate juxtaposition and contrast within a single composition of different genres: still lifes, interior designs, exterior landscape, and architecture, in an active cooperation with each other. Second, he also opens a dialogue between photography and art, by combining an almost photographic

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630 Ibid.
631 See Chapter of Introduction and Chapter Two of this dissertation.
"precision" with a dramatic composition, by first photographing his subjects and then painting them, although (like the four hyperrealist artists of this study) he does not considers his works to be just a copy of photographs. Moreover, Volkov’s representation of the urban environment is close in several aspects to the work of Ando Keskkula and Jaan Elken, as the image in his work is often expressed in alienated and geometrized structure and compositions with no human being. Furthermore, like Keskkula and Elken, Volkov highlights how the penetration of the scientific and technical revolution into the city's life imperceptibly became the leading element of people’s lives. Close to Faibisovich and Sherstiuk's hyperrealism, Volkov's paintings embody the “metaphysical significance of everyday existence…where looking out of a window or walk through areas of Moscow became a spiritual experience.”

Despite this element in common with artists who were considered nonconformists by the art critics, Volkov categorically refuses to be called “dissident” and to be enlisted among the dissident artists of the time, claiming that he simply represented what he liked, what he thought was interesting or beautiful. Nevertheless, his official works deviated from the generally accepted parameters and pushed the traditional boundaries in the contemporary Soviet: In fact, what he considered “interesting and beautiful” was tightly connected with the complex sense of life, with its colors, rhythms, and tensions.

The search for such these particular aspects led him to see their materialization in Moscow and the city’s constant change as the mirror of both the universe's image and the symbol of the variable destiny of the human being. However, one pivotal aspect that is

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different in Volkov than it is in the four artists who are the focus of this work is that Volkov does not believe in any metaphorical meaning of his work. As he overtly affirmed in an interview with Alexander Petrov, “The concept of symbolism here, in my opinion, is totally unnecessary. Symbol, it seems to me is making the picture as something alien.”

Volkov’s painting *Zlem* (1982) (Fig. 139) is one of his most complex works, and it embodies the aforementioned elements: with precision the artist reproduces a building and a house on the waterfront Bersenevskaya. The vertical rhythm of the building’s facade forms a harmonious counterbalance to the pipes of the central vertical composition. The steel gray, with its shades of blue, green, and yellow with colored rectangles and the large windows as sources of light, seem like an interpretation of the city’s electrification. The window is a particularly important element in several of his works, being that it often is a key element for the balance of the compositional structure, and to a certain extent it becomes the mirror of the artist’s soul. In fact, although in *Zlem*, Volkov inserted his self-portrait, it is more just a silhouette meant to symbolize a typical modern young man. The dialogue with light continues with a light cloud and modern urban streetlights in the right part of the picture, the luminous windows in the houses, and the headlights of racing car on the embankment. Indeed, for Volkov (as with Keskkula and Sherstiuk), light (direct and reflected) is not just a lyrical ornamentation; it also unveils a deeper meaning behind the everyday and ordinary. Another font of light, this time natural as the sun, expands the height and depth of the landscape space.
dialogue between nature and the city takes place on the river where the image of the two merges on the surface, which absorbs and reflects their colors.

With his paintings, Andrei Volkov became part of that wave of artists who, despite any official or established categorization, broke the limited frame imposed by the Socialist realism of their time by approaching broader issues such as the relation of science and technology to nature; the relation of a single human being to a changing environment; and, finally, the artist’s consciousness as a reflection of the world.

The role of the artist as a reflector of the social, cultural and political environment is also expressed in Semyon Faibisovich and Sergei Sherstiuk’s art production. The paintings analyzed in this chapter can be read as symbolic but also as a literal reflection of people’s ordinary lives, which are raised in their hyperrealist works as archetypes of the universal behavior of human beings. In contrast, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk did not aim to show the Soviet Man and Soviet Woman as preconstructed identities whose characteristics were typified, as socialist realism did. In fact, the pivotal contribution of these two artists to the art sphere of their time is that they reversed such a strategy, by presenting their individuality as complex and nuanced despite the appearance of being common Soviet people. Moreover, by transforming the oppressiveness of the surrounding landscape into narrow rooms, train carriages, and subway platforms, they convey the feeling of alienation experienced in Moscow. By directly or indirectly including themselves as part of such an environment, Sherstiuk and Faibisovich’s authorial “I,” which lies behind the character's experience, transforms the artist's autobiographical experience into the expression and portrayal of the universal human being.
Last, but not least, as artists they aimed to approach one of the most fundamental problems in the contemporary art--namely the relation between the real, the mimesis, and the origin of the imaginary. Through a dialogue between photography, memory and imagination, they explore the issues implied in the concept of “truth” and the challenge the representation of it. By doing so, they also keep the viewer questioning the possibility of the existence of such “truth” in his or her private or collective life. By unveiling the constructed image of Soviet society created by the propaganda means of communication, and by presenting his version of truth as a construction as well.
Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to present a new approach in the analysis of Soviet hyperrealism in order to distinguish the discourse from Western-oriented definitions based usually on formalist methodologies. Previous critics and scholars for the most part either argued, or assumed that Socialist Realism as the only expression of realism in the Soviet Union was the only expression of realism in the Soviet Union. For decades in the 1950s and 1960s, the dominance of the Western “style” established a dichotomy between style and ideology, embodied by the opposition of modernism to realism, and tended to suppress, marginalize, or ostracize all realism in the Soviet Union by simply linking it to the leftist political project.

The original contribution of this work lies in the demonstration of a third perspective through which we may now approach the concept of realism in Soviet Union, and that at the time provides the possibility for artists to escape such a dichotomy by opening a dialogue within these polarized fields of critical discourse. I argue they did so by developing a creative approach that drew from both historical traditions.

On this basis, my study performed an analysis of hyperrealist works by Estonian artists Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken, Ukrainian Sergei Sherstiuk, and Russian Semyon Faibisovich—the main representative artists of hyperrealism in the 1970s and 1980s. Although other artists worked in the same direction, these four artists developed a unique artistic strategy to subvert the predominant Socialist Realist rhetoric by figuratively representing their familiar urban environment as a place of abandonment, loneliness, inhumanity, and solitude. By implying a level of social criticism in the details they selected, these artists revealed the miserable existence and living conditions of Soviet
citizens, presenting a more effective response to external living conditions and a more accurate reflection of the ordinary citizen's life than either Socialist Realist painting or modernist styles. This is also the first attempt to demonstrate how hyperrealism's return to a figurative style can be inserted within the overall trajectory of realism in the Soviet Union, expressed by both the critical realism embraced by the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the Surovoy stil (Severe Style) that emerged in the Post-Stalinist era. Through analysis of works of Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk, and Faibisovich, this study highlights how in their respective periods, Peredvizhniki, Surovyi stil, and hyperrealism paintings were “illustrations” of the possibility to widen the boundaries of Socialist Realism toward a more social documentary style reflecting the dreary conditions of their time, rather than representing the bright and idealized subjects of the past. Focusing on the paintings evolved from actually having the experience of studying them up close, and over time as the curator of the exhibition as Through the Looking Glass: Hyperrealism in the Soviet Union organized at the Zimmerli Art Museum in the United States.

This study also widens the traditional approach of art criticism, which is often focused exclusively on formal analysis of the role of photography in the creative method of hyperrealist artists, implying the artist’s passive attitude and the neutrality of photography. Instead, I propose a reinterpretation of this relationship based on both the tradition of Baltic photography, which introduced a new awareness of the human body as well as collective and individual everyday life, and the artist's personal re-elaboration of the content of the single photograph as bound up with their memory and personal agenda. Moreover, through the dialogue established in their works between photography and art,
these artists question the possibility of either medium being able to give an objective representation or to convey “truth”, be it the one promoted by the official style of Socialist Realism, or the one embodied by the avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

A valuable contribution of this dissertation is that it provides a framework to analyze hyperrealism in the Soviet Union within the philosophical and semiotic systems of both Eastern and Western writers such as Yuri Lotman, Roger Garaudy, Mikhail Bakhtin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre, Julio Cortazar, and Mati Unt, while engaging with the way that artists like Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk, and Faibisovich in depict the cities of Tallinn and Moscow. Their portrayal of public buildings, mass housing complexes, and apartments exposed the actual conditions of decay and collapsing of the urban environment, at the same time conveying a reservoir of hidden meaning and signs that, once decoded, became a metaphor and powerful image of the existential condition of alienation and seclusion experienced by Soviet citizens. The artists also acknowledged the profound influence that the surrounding environment, both physical and cultural, exerted on their personal and collective thoughts, behavior, and memory, projected through the works, in their artistic persona.

This approach and the discourse established by it adds an original critique to a growing body of a tradition of art criticism whose interpretation and formulation of hyperrealism's main problems has transformed considerably over time. Prior to its public appearance in the exhibition of Youth Artists in Tallinn in 1975, several articles published in Estonian media had already set the stage for a political reading of hyperrealism. In the article *Hiiperrealism ja tehiskeskkond*638 the artist Tõnis Vint described hyperrealism in the United Stated as depicting the “material world” of capitalist

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society and embodying its bourgeois ideology, thus attributing a political content to it. This interpretation was shared during the meeting of the art critics section of the AU of the USSR, held in Tallinn in 1974, by the keynote speaker Viktor Zimenko, who called hyperrealism “a direct enemy of socialist realism”639. Such a political reading is paired with a technical criticism of the works belonging to the first and second waves of hyperrealists in Estonia represented by Ando Keskküla640, Heitti Polli, Tõnu Virve, and Jaan Elken, mainly based on a comparison with the American trend as exemplified in Enn Põldroos’ article Noortenäitusest ajendatuna (Driven by a Youth Show)641 in 1975, or by Ants Juske's Hüperealismist Slaidimaalini ja Tagasi (From Hyperrealism to Slide Paint and Back)642 in 1983.

This specific approach to hyperrealism should be contextualized within the local art criticism that, beginning from the 1960s, increasingly considered art production in terms of Western models. My dissertation pursued instead a different approach, suggested by both Estonian art critic Eha Kommissarov and Western scholar as Jeremy

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639 ERA f.R-1665, n.2, s700, I.44
640 Critics praised Ando Keskküla’s art production in the second half of the 1970s as an important contribution of the development of hyperrealism in Estonia, as the articles “Ando Keskküla Maalid” (Ando Keskküla Paintings) by Evi Pihlak in Sirp ja Vasar 12.09.1977, “Ando Keskküla” by Jaak Olep in Noorus 1977, n.1: 32, and “Uuema Maali Tunnusjuoni” (Newer Painting Features) by Ilmar Malin in Sirp ja Vasar 5.05.1978. However, their analysis were almost exclusively based on the Keskküla’s paintings formal characteristics in relation to what they considered the correspondend formal features of the American hyperrealism: the pursuit of objectivity, a certain disregard of the creative process, and an emphasis on photographic effect.
642 Speaking about the state of Estonian art in the 1980s, the critic states that Estonian art reached a level of maturity that did not take any more mechanically from foreign trends. In particular, he cites the confusion created by the arrival of hyperrealism in Estonia: although at the beginning there was a copy of foreign characteristics in order to “acquire the technical arsenal of hyperrealism,” the result after the local interpretation is something that does not relate to the characteristics of pure hyperrealism. It is remarkable here how Juske uses the word “pure” (puhas), thus reinforcing from one side the idea of originality and pure expression typical of the modernist approach, and second a consideration of hyperrealism in the United States as a monolithic phenomenon, which was far from what it actually was. It should be add, however, that Juske states that include an artistic manifestation into a "genre" is, to a greater or lesser extent, an artistic abstraction that must be handled with great care. In fact, he believed that each generalization includes the exclusion of certain aspects of the specificities. Ants Juske “Hüperealismist Slaidimaalini Ja Tagasi”: 15.
Canwell. The former underlines the risk of a self-colonialist approach by affirming that “all interpretations so far have tried to stress and prove the Estonian slide painting's Western origins, which may produce contradictory results. The ability of slide painting to participate in avantgarde art discussion is significant only as a reflection of that phenomenon.” Canwell similarly maintains that the case of Estonia exemplifies the fact that the experiences of modernity have been many and complex, and should not be evaluated through Western modernist discourse.

The analysis applied in this study aimed to find a common theoretical and artistic ground between Ando Keskküla’s and Jaan Elken’s representations of Tallinn’s cityscape. An important contribution to such a task was Jaak Olep’s article Jaan Elkeni Kiindumus (Jaan Elken’s Devotion) in 1980, in which the critic, after exploring the reasons behind the Estonian artists's belated interest in the “changed palette of the city’s peripheral residential and industrial districts,” suggests a different way for artists to examine Tallinn’s urban development by claiming that “the peripheral parts of the city [...] need to be looked at in a meaningful way,” and by identifying in Keskküla’s and Elken’s works the sign of a change in that direction. Jaan Elken in particular, was over the next decade the subject of several articles that explored his approach to the city, for example Juta Kivimäe. Jaan Elkeni teistmoodi tegelikkus [Jaan Elken’s other reality], Johannes Saar. Teateid tegelikkusest [Messages from reality], Reet Varblane.

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644 Canwell, Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation: 3
647 Johannes Saar, “Teateid tegelikkusest” (Messages from reality), Postimees 31.10 (1997): 19
However, in the art criticism of the time few articles were actually devoted to an overall analysis of hyperrealism in the Soviet Union, as most of the publications focused instead on singular artists’ creative development, often lacking a theoretical analysis of the problematic raised.

Art critic Sirje Helme, a major critic and curator was among the first to argue that hyper-realism as a phenomenon was treated quite generally, primarily based on works originating from the turn of the decade and the early 1980s, thus excluding most of the Estonian artists of the first and second wave. Another scholar, Olga Kozlova based her book Fotorealizm, and her method on the same premises. Like Helme’s writing, Kozlova’s book can be considered one of the most important contributions to the studies of hyperrealism, including this dissertation, as it presents a general view of hyperrealism in the Soviet Republics of Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, and Russia. However, in some of the book’s passages, Kozlova still affirms that the Soviet situation, both social and artistic, differs from the Western, and that because Moscow and the Baltic countries were the most advanced parts of the USSR, hyperrealists' depiction of paintings showing developed urban environments or advanced technology or design paradoxically became a tool to idealize reality. Although some of the hyperrealist artists in the 1980s indeed represented a version of the city as a contemporary metropolis, and Kozlova recognizes the importance of the documentary approach by Estonian artists such as

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Keskküla, Elken, and Rein Tammik, her view is still confirmed by hyperrealism's Russian phase of the 1980s. Moreover, despite trying to deal with the contents of the works through an in-depth analysis, the critique is still based primarily on hyperrealism's dialogue with photography, as the title of the book suggests.

At the same time, the year 1984 saw two important exhibitions, *Meie Maa Noorus* (Our Country Youth), organized by Alexei Kamenski, and "Photography and Art", designed by Keskküla, which led the art criticism of the time to consider hyperrealism under a renewed lens. Kamenski’s show displayed together the works of Ando Keskküla, Lemming Nagel, Heitti Polli, Rein Tammik, and Jaan Elken based on their increased interest in the new era and its changes.651 “Photography and Art," which hosted both Russian and Estonian artists, was an important moment as it addressed theoretical questions concerning the sphere of influence of fine art, photography, and politics. Some of the key speakers’ speech titles are significant to understanding the state of art criticism regarding hyperrealism at the time, including Sirje Helme's “How to evaluate a photo realism?”, Mare Ruus's “Art and photography from an old dispute", Ando Keskküla's “Hyperrealism like he wants to be”, which reintroduced hyperrealism within a discourse beyond the analysis of its exclusively technical characteristics.

This dissertation also provides an alternative approach to the art production of Semyon Faibisovich in the 1980s, marked by the reception of Western and Russian criticism connecting his work to that the American photorealist Richard Estes. This

651 Anu Kallaste defined the artists represented as follows: “despite their youth, are mature and brilliant masters and whose works stand out with stylistic integrity and finality.” Anu Kallaste, “Näituselt: Meie Maa Noorus”, Kunst 1984 n. 63.1 («kes oma noorusele vaatamata on küpsed ja hiilgavad meistrid ning kelle teosed paistavad silma stiililise terviklikkuse ja lõpetatusega»)
became clear, following the Sotheby's auction held in Moscow in 1988\textsuperscript{652}, when Western art institutions and Western money became crucial factors in the artistic and economic evaluation of contemporary art and of opened a season of buying Soviet non-conformist works. As soon as the art market detected a possible connection between the two artists based on their representation of reflections on surfaces, it exploited it. Indicative examples can be found in both Western and Russian auction websites\textsuperscript{653} where a juxtaposition between the two artists' works aimed to create a comfortable and understandable ground for western buyers and make them more willing to invest in Soviet or Russian art.\textsuperscript{654}. Recently, a series of solo exhibitions organized by the Regina Gallery in Moscow and their catalogs in the 2000s such as \textit{Comeback}, (2008), and \textit{Evidence}, or \textit{Three in One} (2011), shifted the point of view, in particular the catalog essays written by art critics Ekaterina Degot and Yevgeniy Barabanov, which introduced an analysis of Faibisovich’s art production based not only on a reading of the formal components, but of the artist’s personal agenda in dialogue with philosophical, political, and social issues of Soviet society,

While my dissertation shares such an approach, it also advocated for an analysis that, without obliterating the artist's personal agenda, extended toward a more exhaustive overview placing Faibisovich's work within the Russian tradition of realism and the

\textsuperscript{652} The same event was repeated the following year in London by Michael Ainslie, president of Sotheby's Holding. Solidifying the importance of the sale auction, Ainslie states, “we want to move away from the big event effect presented in Moscow and make the Soviet painters part of the world market in a more normalized way. We didn't do this to have a one shot event. We did it to build a market and to build international collecting interest”.

\textsuperscript{653} For example, the Russian online platform Art Investment.Ru often pairs Faibisovich’s paintings with famous America photorealist painters such as Richard Estes, Chuck Close, and Duane Hanson, in order to highlight the correspondence of style among them.

\textsuperscript{654} An example can be found on the catalog \textit{Contemporary Art, London Evening Sales 10 february 2014} by the Phillis Gallery, on which the description of Faibisovich’s painting \textit{Winter Day} is linked to Richard Estes’ 42nd Street Crosstown Bus. Moreover, in order to show an even tighter connection, the catalog uses the word “photorealism” in order to describe both painters, although Faibisovich always refused to be identified as photorealistic.
avant-garde practice of the time, as a method which allows a deeper understanding of both the work and the social and artistic implications behind it.

For the study of Sergei Sherstiuk, a key element is the corpus of texts from the 1990s, which placed his work in the context of the hyperrealist movement in the late USSR. Some important contributions are the aforementioned Fotorealizm by Kozlova, the catalog of the solo exhibition introducing the description of paintings from the Norton and Dodge collection, and the interview with the artist by Renee and Matthew Baigell published in 1995, which opened a window on the political situation of the time and its role in influencing hyperrealist art.

A further important contribution to this dissertation has been Elken’s, Faibisovich’s, and Sherstiuk’s direct analysis of their own works and theoretical approaches through interviews in exhibition catalogs and books dedicated to them. As Sherstiuk’s hyperrealist production is barely explored by either Russian or Western criticism, my interpretation of the artist's art production is greatly indebted to the catalog Art-Emigrants. Published in 2008, it presents the Ukrainian historian Maksim Dobrovolsky and art critic Oleg Burlak in open conversation with the hyperrealist artists belonging to the Group of Six. The book offers a first inside look at the content, technical approach, and philosophy behind the work of Sergei Geta, Sergei Sherstiuk, Sergei Bazilev, and Evgeni Gordiets, both in the Ukrainian and Russian historical and artistic contexts during the first half of the 1980s. These artists also connect their works with a global cultural and literary narrative that offers a wider range of sources to interpret their compositions. Sherstiuk also authored several books and diaries, which equally provide

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an insight into his life and work; for example, *Ukradennaia kniga*⁶⁵⁶ and *Sergei Sherstiuk: Soviet Post Socialist Realism*,⁶⁵⁷ both pivotal for my understanding of Sherstyuk’s artistic and personal background displayed in his paintings.

A key influence in the semiotic approach of Jaan Elken’s art production has been his solo exhibition and catalog published in 2011 by critics Ants Juske, Harry Liivrand, and Rauno Thomas Moss. Through a series of essays and interviews with the artist, these critics present the most extensive treatment of Elken's work to date, whose analysis is based on both technical, historical, political, and semiotic readings, and an almost complete body of reproductions of his major works in chronological order.

Finally, exhibitions such as *Hyperrealism: When Reality Becomes an Illusion* at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and *Cold Look. Variations of Hyperrealism in Estonia Art* at the Kumu Museum in Tallinn present to the public an in-depth discourse on the versatility of the trend in the 1970s and 1980s, its dialogue with the photographic technique, and its role as a mediator of contemporary political, social, and metaphysical issues of the time.

Future studies could investigate the association between hyperrealism and postmodernism in the Soviet Union⁶⁵⁸, deliberately excluded from this dissertation as an element that requires further investigation. The dialogue between the two could be established for several reasons. First, hyperrealism embodies the postmodern reaction against the avant-garde's perceived elitism with its abstractionism, dogmatic reductionism, and denial of the past. Second, just as with postmodernism,

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⁶⁵⁸ The connection between hyperrealism and postmodernism is already suggested in 2009 by the artist Leonhard Lapin, who defined Ando Keskkula the first postmodernist painter in Estonia. Leonhard Lapin, “Paintings of Ando Keskküla,” *Estonian Art*, 1 (2009): 24
Keskküla, Elken, Sherstiuk, and Faibisovich, represent their society with its contradictions, struggles, and alienation, recognizing the impossibility of art to emancipate itself from a society deeply saturated by ideology and propaganda. Finally, both these artists and Russian postmodernists presented a new model of dealing with the interaction between art and reality, a model which worked from a position within and at the same time outside these two spheres. As Russian critic and philosopher Michail Epstein posits, “Postmodernism's greatest contribution has been to recognize that “any particular meaning system in society takes its place among – and receives social validation from – the total pattern of semiotic systems that structure society.”

Future research on hyperrealism might also study the different role hyperrealism took in the following stages of each artist’s artistic production. For Keskküla, it becomes the starting point for an in-depth analysis of the role of technology in the society in which he lived. His work in the early 1980s saw the gradual introduction into his hyperrealist subjects of new techniques entangled with different realities and a dialogue with painting based on the execution of “the picture within a picture.” However, in the early 1990s he completely abandoned traditional materials and explored the field of electronic technologies, video installations, and the interaction of these systems with each other. Meanwhile Jaan Elken’s work shifted towards an increasing predominance of abstraction and the inclusion of graffiti and text elements in the second half of the 1980s, displacing the urban themes of his work in the previous decade.

The premature death of Sergei Sherstiuk, at just 47, left a more limited body of work. At the beginning of 1990s (the last stage of his career), Sherstiuk's art conveys a

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complex interrelation between realism, hyperrealism, and surrealism, as in *Russian Roulettes*. The series of paintings, in which different characters gathered around a table in an empty room are caught doing apparently nonsense actions, seems to become a mirror and metaphor of a society now in disarray, waiting only for an announced cataclysm that brings about its destruction.

Unlike the other three artists, Semyon Faibisovich continued to work within the hyperrealist trend, although in 1995 he quit painting and devoted several years to writing. Towards the end of the decade he came back to art, but this time engaging exclusively in photography, installations, and video. The full-fledged comeback to painting happened in 2007, with a series of portraits that produced a kind of a new language when confronting the reality around him, using low-resolution mobile camera shots, which are then digitally magnified, photo-edited, and then transferred on canvas.

To conclude, the last fundamental contribution of this work is having showed how the hyperrealist message of Keskküla, Elken, Faibisovich and Sherstiuk still speaks to present-day artists and viewers. Indeed, their paintings' subjects, increased sizes, and often unnatural colors and photographic sources break the automatism of the viewer's perception by displaying the world under a different light. They worked on “the knife’s edge” as artists drawing on and exploiting a way of painting that was so heavily censored, or at the least scrutinized, while managing to find an original way to rethink painting in relation to photography and to narratives of daily life repressed or long obscured by institutions (official) and individuals (nonconformists).
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