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Mari Laanemets
Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts

FLIGHT INTO TOMORROW: RETHINKING ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN ESTONIA DURING THE 1970S (LEONHARD LAPIN)

Abstract:

This article observes how the new understanding of art which was introduced at the end of the 1960s by pop art influenced groups was pursued and radicalized in the second half of the 1970s, in a period generally referred to as the weakening of the avant-garde. It focuses on the texts by Leonhard Lapin, promoting art as a means of creating a new living environment. Taking Lapin's text as a framework, the author analyses the intervention in the official exhibition of monumental art in 1976.

Keywords:

pop art, environment, Leonhard Lapin, interdisciplinarity,
art in Soviet Estonia

The first steps in the rediscovery of unofficial art from Eastern Europe (and the Soviet Union) in the West, often in the form of summary articles about “art under communism” and written by a handful of more or less informed visitors from the Western side of the iron curtain, were taken around 1960 and went hand in hand with heated debates about that art’s nature and value.¹ Unofficial art from Eastern Europe was dismissed by critics as being a mere imitation of Western art and defended by its advocates as being more political due to its alleged “nonconformism.” These debates resurfaced in the 1990s, when newly independent post-Soviet nation-states such as Estonia presented their art to the world. Most art histories written after 1989 have tended to argue that it was the political situation in the second half of the 20th century that did not allow Estonian art to develop logically. “What we see,” Sirje Helme has noted, is “an endless amount of mimicry, malformation or mutation.”² Indeed, what has often been disregarded in these histories of art from the former Eastern Europe is precisely its political aspect. During the Soviet period, the forced politicization of art prescribed by official cultural politics tended to render any unofficial art with political ambitions suspicious; meanwhile, for official art history of the 1990s, the idea of political art was equally ambivalent. In fact historians of art of the Soviet period routinely assert that politics was simply “repulsive” to artists at the time.³ The political in art was exclusively associated with anti-Soviet dissidence, reducing the complexity of artistic practices to the confrontation between “official” and “unofficial” art. The only legitimate strategy (and possibly “political” gesture) was to retreat in defense of the autonomy of art.⁴ The idea of the autonomy of art, which was tentatively given up by the Western neo-avant-garde in favor of political and social concerns, was perceived in Eastern Europe on the contrary as fertile ground for resistance.

It was above all abstract art, such as the geometric abstraction that emerged in Estonia belatedly in the mid-1970s, that was viewed as an “art of elegant refusal” in that it purportedly confronted the official demands on art, including propaganda and education, with a “silent meaningful neutrality.”⁵ For art discourse as it developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union during the 1990s, this gesture of autonomy was of particular importance since it enabled local critics to connect Estonian art to international (Western) art history. This yearning for integration, however, led to a certain blindness toward the specificity of concepts and positions developed by local artists during the Soviet period.

In what follows, I recontextualize and rethink artistic practices of the 1970s through the example of a loosely affiliated group of artists, architects, and designers who worked in Tallinn during the 1970s.⁶ In accounts of Estonian art history, the decade of the 1970s has typically been described as reactionary: it was the time when direct Western influences, which were considered a crucial part of 1960s unofficial art in its opposition to the doctrine of Socialist Realism, were replaced by artistic trends from the beginning of the 20th century, especially Constructivism. Generally, this nonpolitical or apolitical recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde has been interpreted as an abandonment of avant-garde ideas and as a withdrawal from reality in search of “universal truths” and even cosmic values.⁷ This was perceived to be in keeping with the depressed social climate during the period of stagnation that followed the suppression of the so-called Prague Spring, which had dashed all hope for a reformed socialist society.⁸

Contrary to the accounts outlined above, I argue that Estonian unofficial art of the 1970s not only did not abandon its socially critical position, but in fact radicalized the critical art practices introduced in the late 1960s. My starting point is a series of texts by Leonhard Lapin, who is one of the most productive artists of his generation, and who in addition actively conceptualized his artistic production in the context of the generation of artists to which he belonged.

The Politics of Union Pop

Together with Ando Keskküla and Andres Tolts (joined later by Sirje Runge, Vilen Künnapu, Jüri Okas, and others), Lapin entered the Estonian art world in 1969 when he exhibited at the ambitious and aggressive pop art exhibition SOUP '69 in Tallinn's Café Pegasus, a popular meeting point for writers, artists, and other cultural producers. The poster for SOUP '69 featured Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can, “broken open by Estonian artists.”⁹ Estonian pop art, or union pop as it was labeled by Lapin to differentiate it from its American and British counterparts, was the first nonconformist art tendency in Estonia to engage with the Soviet reality, thus breaking with the unwritten taboo that unofficial art had to steer clear of all political involvement.¹⁰

Different in many ways from its counterparts in Britain and the United

States, union pop positioned Soviet ideology where Western pop art placed capitalist consumer culture and the mythologies of advertising. For artists working with union pop, the kind of popular culture created by official Soviet ideology with its heroes and fairy tales was an object of derision and became subject to parody. The best examples of union pop are Andres Tolts's collages depicting bizarre "scenes" of Soviet life. Tolts and Keskküla's poster for the Exhibition of Independent Student Works at the State Art Institute in 1968 depicts construction workers bursting with health on scaffolding; the poster mocks the image of the Soviet artist who takes on the role of the worker and participates in the construction of socialism.¹¹

Collages, assemblages, and ready-made objects were the preferred artistic media of union pop artists. Not surprisingly, Lapin too dismissed traditional painting as obsolete.¹² The SOUP '69 exhibition was followed by the Estonian Progressive Art exhibition, which took place the following year in the same café.¹³ Tolts and Peeter Urbla (from the Tartu-based group Visarid) showed assemblages made of cheap, mass-produced calico. While opposing mass production and attempting to disclose "the singularity inherent in every mass-product,"¹⁴ these objects (including their evidently erotic allusions) opened a critical and somewhat uncanny perspective on the surrounding standardized environment and conformity of everyday life in Soviet Estonia.

When union pop became the official avant-garde movement during the 1990s, this was largely because its rebellious nature was then interpreted as "resistance to the system." However, the policy of the young artists of the SOUP group in the late 1960s seems to have been something more complex than mere playful opposition to the system, more than just a funny and ironic



Figure 1: Leonhard Lapin. Poster of the exhibition SOUP '69, 1969. Ink on paper, 61.2 x 32.3 cm. Art Museum of Estonia. Photo by Stanislav Stepaško. Image courtesy of the artist.

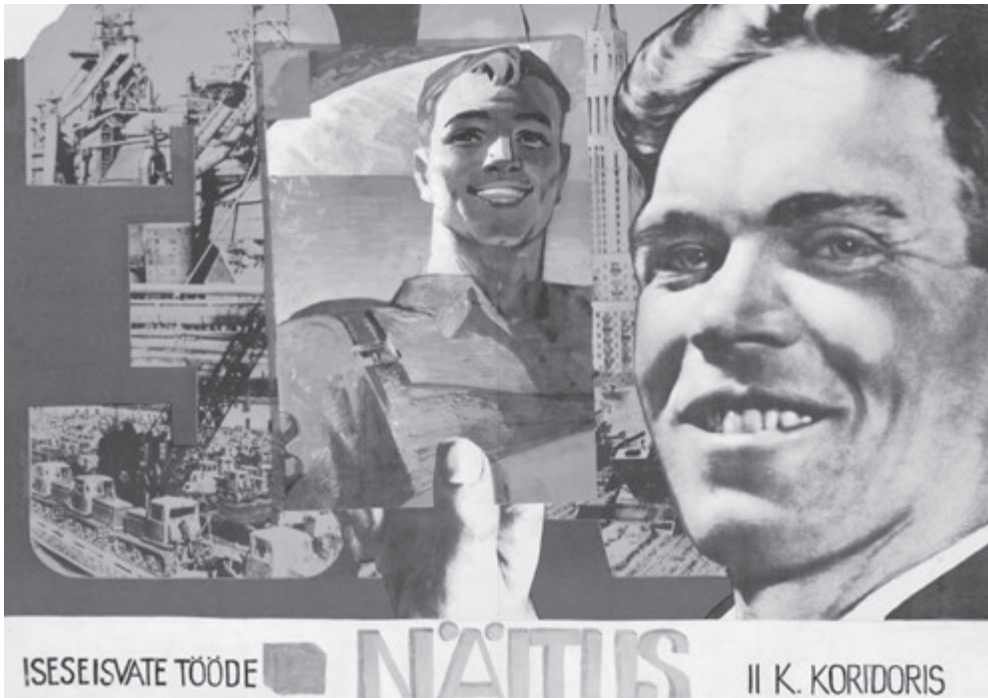


Figure 2: Ando Keskküla and Andres Tolts. Poster of the Exhibition of Independent Student Works at the State Art Institute, 1968. Collage, 59 x 77.5 cm. Art Museum of Estonia. Image courtesy of the artists.

mocking of Soviet mass culture and poorly mass produced goods. Behind their carefree parody lay a social sensitivity that considered art less a refuge than a means to shape a new cultural environment.¹⁵ As Lapin declared in a 1971 speech at the Exhibition of Independent Student Works, the interest in the popular should not be restricted to imitation in art by “presenting the objects of life on canvas,” but instead required a more active type of intervention. Lapin insisted that art must aim beyond the “beautiful” or “interesting,” beyond a merely decorative function, aiming instead at the production of a new environment.¹⁶

The Program of Objective Art

The period of 1960s union pop remained a short episode in the history of Estonian postwar art. Still, the fact that the artists involved in the movement raised crucial issues such as the social role of mass culture, the media, and the environment helped expand the traditional understanding of art as something that



Figure 3: Estonian Progressive Art. Exhibition in Café Pegasus, 1970. Image courtesy of Peeter Urbla. Photograph by Heimar Lenk.

creates beauty. In the wake of the union pop movement, artists during the 1970s sought a critical exploration of everyday reality that persistently questioned the relevance of art in society. In the aforementioned speech, titled “Art Designing the Environment,” Lapin proposed the creation of an environment involving every branch of art, from design to happenings, as the only legitimate aim of contemporary art. According to Lapin the very “possibility of human life on earth” depended on such an understanding of art.¹⁷

In Soviet Estonia, progressive art events often happened not only off-site, in spaces outside of state art institutions, in cafés or scientific institutes, but also at the peripheries of the “fine arts.” Artists resorted to design, monumental art, and architecture to blur the borders of existing disciplines. Especially during

the 1970s, artists - many of them graduates of architecture and design faculties - operated simultaneously in the domains of art, design, and architecture.¹⁸ The faculty of architecture, and first of all of the newly founded faculty of design,¹⁹ had a reputation of being more open to experimentation and of a more broadly conceived teaching curriculum. This may be explained by the fact that in the socialist state, architecture and design were traditionally regarded as ideologically less important than painting or sculpture.²⁰

This, in turn, led to the assertion that under the cover of design, “free” (i.e., formalist) creation was possible.²¹ I would additionally like to suggest a more complex relationship to design. The new art was not only concerned with the problems of form and color, but rather was exploring the functionality and operability of art, its (changing) role in a (changing) society. Form and color only compensate for “personal complexes of the artist,” as Lapin stated in 1971, whereas the true challenge for contemporary culture lies in the “human living environment.”²²

While looking for meaningful ways to relate to the world, design, approaching

the relationship of the human being to his or her industrially and technologically transformed environment, was inspiring for many artists. Design was not just a “semantic ruse,”²³ but was intrinsically linked to the new understanding of art.

Six years after the SOUP '69 exhibition, Lapin launched his idea for a practice of the future he called “objective art.”²⁴ The occasion for the launch of this concept was the exhibition *Event Harku '75: Objects, Concepts* at the Institute of Experimental Biology in Harku, near Tallinn. The exhibition displayed an eclectic mix of trends such as pop art, kinetic objects, concrete poetry, and geometric abstraction and became the most important artistic event of the second half of the 1970s. In a programmatic speech presented at the symposium that accompanied the exhibition, Lapin formulated the historical and theoretical framework for the show.²⁵ Even though the official subject of the symposium was conceptualism as the most relevant tendency in contemporary art,²⁶ participants mainly discussed more general themes, such as the crisis in art and the role and function of art and the artist in society.

In his speech Lapin addressed the need, in this moment of crisis, for art to create a new (objective) imagery that would be developed in accordance with contemporary industrial reality and technological progress. In this context Lapin pointed to changes in the environment, developments in industrial production, as



Figure 4: *Event Harku '75: Objects, Concepts*, 1975. Image courtesy of Jaan Klõšeiko. Photograph by Jaan Klõšeiko. View of the exhibition: in the foreground kinetic objects by Kaarel Kurismaa; in the middle Sirje Runge's *Altar*; on the right tea bags by Jaan Ollik and Villu Järmut; on the back wall bus tickets by Järmut, Ollik, and Illimar Paul; in the left corner prints from Leonhard Lapin's series *Woman-Machine*.

well as innovations in communications technology. According to him, these changes made it imperative for artists to reconsider their practice as they fundamentally changed not only the concept of art but also the role of the artist.²⁷

Objective art, Lapin declared, doesn't express the "artist's arbitrary fun by playing with the forms taken from reality," but instead "turns to universal ideas, objective structures and materials."²⁸ He continued that objective art "is not an imitation of reality but part of reality, or reality itself."²⁹ The objective artist does not present his or her subjective view of the world, but "constructs; his creative process is not so much emotional and spontaneous as it is intellectual."³⁰

Lapin's main objective here was the creation of a new aesthetic system, an integral culture that would resonate with the logic of a new, technology-driven environment.³¹ Given the focus of the symposium, the term objectivity — the demand that the artist get rid of his or her personal emotions and abandon the ambition of singularity — referred first and foremost to conceptualism. Objectivity and the depersonalization of the creative process were the battle cries of the neo-avant-garde in the West, and in particular of conceptual art.³² Here a predefined concept determined the form of the work, liberating it from the authoritative subjectivity of the artist. Lapin indeed mentioned conceptualism as the most radical current of objective art, an art of pure ideas.³³ According to him, this led to a situation whereby art does not need any special means or social acceptance since it can be made, literally, by anyone: "[E]very human being is an artist [. . .]. This will set off a whole chain of spontaneous actions, an avalanche of aimless acts, destroying the myth of art as a product of a special kind of human activity."³⁴

Lapin's understanding of objective art and its role in society was influenced by various, even divergent ideas from different historical periods of art. In his brief historical introduction Lapin mentioned Cézanne, the cubists, the futurists, Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus — artists and artistic movements that all searched for a new aesthetic system suited to a new (industrial) civilization. The principal objective artist for Lapin, however, was Malevich. Crucially, Lapin's understanding of art as having a social purpose and as an investigation of the "visual structures" of a future world that would make the entire environment the object of the artist's creative agency can be traced back to similar ideas developed by artists associated with Constructivism.³⁵ In Lapin's understanding, Constructivism succeeded in connecting Suprematist (objective) imagery with new methods of production; it

was a necessary utilization of Suprematist ideas to create new objectivity.³⁶ This also explains Lapin's demand that artists not simply imitate or reinterpret life, but actively engage with it. By designing a new environment, Lapin claimed, art would "solve the problem of the humanmachine relationship."³⁷

It is not by coincidence that in his speech at the Harku conference Lapin quoted Märt Laarman, an Estonian Constructivist and editor of *The Book of New Art* (1928), the manifesto of Estonian Constructivism. In Laarman's words, "Art that entertained or diversified life is now in charge of organizing life."³⁸ According to Laarman, the artist "confines his expression to a set of strict rules and by adopting them joins the collective [. . .]. [W]e are proud that we do not build on the common. As a result of this, new art is international."³⁹ This statement is remarkable, even if, according to Jaak Kangilaski, "personal style" was very important for the restoration of artistic autonomy and for signaling one's opposition toward the official establishment.⁴⁰ Whereas intelligibility and collectivism were official requirements for art, internationality was its ideology. Nevertheless, Lapin's reference to Constructivism was not just a mimicry to legalize contemporary concerns with history,⁴¹ but was entirely sincere and serious.

In October 1975, two months before the opening of the Harku exhibition, Lapin and his then wife Sirje Runge traveled to Moscow. The reason for the trip was the 9th ICSID (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) congress, titled *Design for Man and Society*.⁴² During their stay in Moscow they visited Georgi Costakis's collection of Soviet art in his apartment, which made a lasting impression on both of them.⁴³ In the same year the Lapins became acquainted with the Leningrad artist Pavel Kondratiev, a pupil of Malevich's and Pavel Filonov's, with whom they became good friends until Kondratiev's death in 1985.⁴⁴

Prior to Lapin, the Estonian artist group Visarid had espoused ideas similar to Lapin's. In their manifesto, written in 1971, they had called for a new kind of art that would be appropriate to "tomorrow's automated recreational society," declaring, "The aim of the artist is no longer to seek refuge and to turn his back on the world, but to constantly enhance his participation in the facts of life. He leads people to better understand the essence of the new reality."⁴⁵ The new art was to break down the walls separating different branches of artistic practice, creating a synthesis: "In the future, individual artists will no longer create separate works of art, but groups of artists will reorganize the whole environment, designing not individual commodities,

but the whole ambience for everyday activities.”⁴⁶ Instead of the traditional work of the artist as a creator of unique objects, he or she was given a new role as an “irreplaceable interior designer of the new society.”⁴⁷

These discussions of the future of art, which called for the creation of environmentally encompassing works and the application of new technologies across different disciplines, drew significantly on Pierre Restany’s book *Livre blanc – objet blanc* (1969).⁴⁸ In this book Restany attempted to redefine the role of art within the new technological reality of the entertainment society. He encouraged artists to use new technological means and media to create what he called “total art,” suggesting a cooperation of artists from different fields to create a new kind of environment in which art would merge with reality.⁴⁹ Significantly, Lapin ended his Harku speech with a remark that was clearly indebted to Restany: “The future of objective art is that art will come to the streets. Museums will become centers of information and production. Academies will become laboratories. Monuments and fetishes that were meant to be eternal will be replaced by multiple changes in form.”⁵⁰

From Monument to Environment: Estonian Monumental Art 1902–1975

Lapin revealed what his new objective art would look like a year later at a survey show on 20th-century Estonian monumental sculpture titled Estonian Monumental Art 1902–1975. The exhibition, which opened in May 1976, was organized by the Exhibitions Department of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR, with Lapin as the show’s designer. The main exhibition consisted of Soviet monuments displayed in photographs and slides, neutral and decorative sculptures, and even a few constructivist compositions from the 1920s. The experimental work in the show’s last section (New Work) featured models and architectural projects, kinetic objects, abstract paintings, and prints, and was very different from the exhibition in other rooms. (These works were not included in the main catalogue but were added to it in a separate leaflet). It was in this experimental section of the exhibition that Lapin presented his project for *A Monument to Tallinn* — a 345-meter-tall monument located in the new residential area of Mustamäe. On each story of this Suprematist-styled monument, a period of the history of Tallinn would be displayed using audiovisual multimedia. At night “from 18 to 6 single elements glow colorfully and split away

to outer space. Unrepeatable spatial situations are regulated by a computer.”⁵¹

The experimental section was part of an ongoing discussion about monumental art and responded to the protracted crisis monumental art had experienced since the 1960s as a result of the transformation of the urban context and increased industrialization.⁵² After Lenin’s Decree on the Removal of Monuments Erected in Honor of the Tsars and Their Servants and on the Development of Sketches for Monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution (1918),⁵³ monumental art became the

foundation for the connection between art and power in the Soviet Union and one of the most important genres of Soviet art. It might therefore appear that there could not possibly be anything more outdated than for young Estonian artists who were associated with the independent art scene to be engaged with monumental art. However, despite these appearances, monumental art seemed to offer new possibilities to artists with an interest in urban space to respond to their immediate surroundings. Lapin for one appropriated the official genre of monumental art and reshaped it in an extensive effort to redesign public urban space.⁵⁴ In this respect, much like Vladimir Tatlin’s concept of the “monuments of the new era,” monuments were for him not objects of veneration but fully operational sites used for various social activities, and they included lecture rooms, sports halls, information centers, print shops, cafeterias, and other social venues.⁵⁵

Estonian Monumental Art 1902–1975 can easily be overlooked as a kind of “practical opportunism” that presented abstract art, or art that did not conform to official cultural ideology, disguised as “monumental” art. I would like to suggest that this exhibition was different. One anonymous review in a local arts magazine (written by Lapin himself) noted that the designs presented at the exhibition did not refer so much to real future monuments as they opened up possibilities for a new kind of monumental art, creating an integral and (syn)aesthetic environment.⁵⁶



Figure 5: Leonhard Lapin. *A Monument to Tallinn*, 1976. Gouache on wood, 100 x 100 cm. Museum of Estonian Architecture. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Peeter Sirge.

Lapin's understanding of (monumental) art viewed the latter as part of a larger system whose understanding required an interdisciplinary approach. Already in 1974, in an article on what he called "synthetic architecture," Lapin had extended these ideas to architecture as a "synthetic" art that integrated "philosophical ideas, sociology, psychology, research in theology and theater experiments, the formal aesthetics of visual arts, the efforts of the scientific-technological world and industrial possibilities."⁵⁷

One of the most intriguing works in the exhibition was the *New Visual Environment* by architect Tiit Kaljundi. Kaljundi suggested the planting of

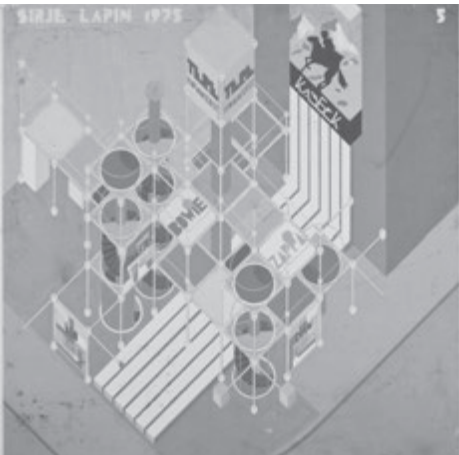


Figure 6: Sirje Runge. *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn*, 1975. Display board 7, gouache on cardboard, 100 x 100 cm. Museum of Estonian Architecture. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Tiit Veermäe.

cereal crops on the grounds between anonymous Soviet-style apartment blocks in the satellite suburbs of Tallinn.⁵⁸ Different sorts of crops would be rotated annually and would play an important role in the aesthetic reconfiguration of the urban landscape. With the wind blowing across them, the cornfields would become a kinetic work of art that would best be observed from the buildings' upper balconies. At the same time, the seasonal harvests would become a participatory spectacle for local inhabitants.⁵⁹

On the one hand, Kaljundi's project critically addresses the monotony of modernization. However, in doing so it implies the city's mobilization rather than its abandonment. The idea of croplands goes back to land art and may be a reference to Dennis Oppenheim's work *Cancelled Crop* (1969). However, the crossing paths also reflect more mundane activities, such as the informal paths the inhabitants of newly constructed Soviet suburbs routinely created as they navigated their way across the no-man's land between their apartment blocks.⁶⁰

In his Harku speech, Lapin mentioned Sirje Runge's diploma work *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn* (1975) as the most significant example of objective art to date. Blending pop and Constructivist aesthetics with new

technologies, Runge's project consisted of nine design boards investigating the means for reconstructing different locations, most of which Runge envisioned turning into a dynamic urban environment.⁶¹

Runge's project included three kinds of interventions: First were urban "decorations" that consisted of repainting the buildings' facades with decorative patterns, a measure that would also help improve the appearance of the bleak inner courtyards. Second, there were to be two modular aluminum constructions, each up to six stories in height and equipped with cinema and TV screens, music boxes, communal information boards, and kiosks. These structures were intended to turn disused, neglected, or abandoned urban territories into dynamic points of communication. Runge's constructions reacted to the demands of post-industrialist recreational society and offered inhabitants opportunities for relaxation and physical recreation.⁶² In the cubic, cylindrical, or spherical boxes, constructed from corrugated plastic and either painted over or polished, one could relax, listen to music, or meet with friends.⁶³

The third urban intervention envisaged by *Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn* consisted of what Runge called "urban design fantasies." One of the display boards showed colorful chimneys in a labyrinthine park to be constructed on the site of a former power station, with the aim of reintegrating a neglected area into the city. The park's chimneys would emit colorful and pleasantly scented smoke — a new kind of fountain that also sought to signal the historical legacy of their location.⁶⁴ Another board proposed installing a cogwheel clock on a square in central Tallinn. The clock's old-fashioned mechanism reintroduced a certain irrationality into city life, interrupting the clockwise rhythm of its movements.⁶⁵

In the mid-1970s Runge began working on a series of geometric abstractions that were exhibited in the exhibition of monumental art. Dealing with the construction of space in a more abstract way, her geometric paintings can be seen in the context of the architectural synthesis envisioned by Lapin's concept of objective art, and before the background of the debate about the renewal of monumental art. Runge's focus in these works was not the picture plane but rather relations in space and generative processes involving color and shape. As experiments, they were designed to function as prototypes for Runge's architectural projects, such as her design for the playgrounds of the KEK kindergarten in Pärnu (1977).

Of course, the work by Runge and other abstract work at Estonian

Monumental Art 1902–1975, such as the prints by Raul Meel, the drawings by Tõnis Vint, and the kinetic objects by the engineer Villu Jõgeva, might be considered designs for monumental paintings or decorations whose function was to smuggle abstract work into the show. However, I want to suggest that at least from Lapin’s point of view this was not the case. For him, such works should not be looked at as paintings or sculptures but as experiments in visual perception and the organization of space that would open possibilities for large-scale spatial productions and lead to the “formation of habitable audio-visual surroundings.”⁶⁶

Estonian Monumental Art 1902–1975, and Lapin specifically, proposed a different understanding of monumental art in which the monument was set apart from political propaganda and its traditional commemorative function.⁶⁷ (Lapin himself submitted a design for a sculpture — a tree symbolizing the unity of nature and cultural environment — that dissolves into the outer space.) Lapin’s “new monumental art” moved away from objects (monuments) toward an integrated environment; his idea was not to replace the old figurative monuments with more abstract compositions of “urban sculpture” as suggested by the official press, but rather to create a new kind of environment and, as a result, a different kind of public space.⁶⁸ For Sirje Runge, too, the redesign of the urban environment did not imply the development of a static and merely functional structure but rather the creation of a “multimedia [environment] employing every technical means.”⁶⁹ Unlike the traditional monuments with their specific ideological function, the purpose of Lapin’s and Runge’s more temporary constructions was to create a “neutral space of intimacy” rather than grand and heroic moments.⁷⁰

The new monumental art envisioned by Lapin for the first time in 1971 blended the 19th-century ideas of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with its notion of a total aesthetic environment,⁷¹ with more contemporary theories of design and “total art” that used new technologies and relied on modern communications media.⁷² However, since Lapin clearly did not envision the artist as an entertainer but as an *organizer*, what did “organization” mean in this context?

For an exhibition of young architects in 1978, Lapin produced *The City of the Living – The City of the Dead*.⁷³ In this project he proposed building cemeteries in the courtyards between apartment blocks where deceased inhabitants could be buried together with their cars. In a way Lapin’s project is a perfect example of the principle of the Soviet satellite suburb (*mikrorayon*) since the “inhabitants [would]

be able to remain in their neighborhoods forever without ever needing to cross a single highway.”⁷⁴ The multifunctional tombstones would also act as objects of play. Andres Kurg has pointed out that Lapin was not suggesting that the process of industrialization could be reversed, for example, by demolishing the new urban developments or by making them “homely.” Instead he sought to “destabilize the present” by introducing an alienating perspective.⁷⁵ His goal was neither a harmonious environment that would efface all the contradictions of the new industrial situation, nor the control of “chaos” by means of total design.⁷⁶ Instead, Lapin was interested in disrupting the rationality and functionality of modern urban space, confronting it with irrational, illogical, and even destructive elements as a means of intervening in the meansends logic of modern technocratic society.⁷⁷

Calls, such as Lapin’s, for an aesthetically rejuvenated environment fully integrated with technology are certainly controversial. Indeed, they have been criticized for being complacent with the capitalist systems and consumer society.⁷⁸ However, in the case of the former Soviet Union, such appeals need to be recontextualized as the retooling of the city into a kind of experiential space in a way that offered a true alternative to official approaches to urban space. In the 1970s, such “aesthetic” interventions had emancipatory potential: reclaiming neglected and marginal spaces and opening them up for public use challenged and contested the bureaucratic hold over an indifferent society.

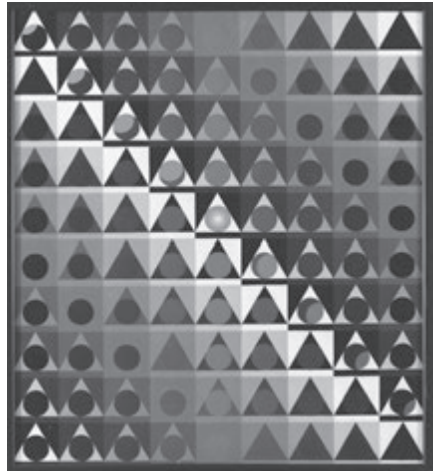


Figure 7: Sirje Runge. *Space II*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 100 x 90 cm. Art Museum of Estonia. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Stanislav Stepaško.



Figure 8: Leonhard Lapin. *The City of the Living – The City of the Dead*, 1978. Display board, gouache, leterset on cardboard, 100 x 100 cm. Museum of Estonian Architecture. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Peeter Sirge.

The belief that art is capable of imagining alternatives to the dominant order is what makes the art of Lapin, Kaljundi, and Runge political, even if they would not call themselves political artists. We are therefore not talking about political art in a traditional sense; unofficial artists in Estonia during the 1970s were not interested in politics *per se*; instead, they sought to renegotiate the social function of art and rethink the relation between art and politics. In their critique they called on other artists to define their position — why they created, and for whom.⁷⁹ Lapin, Runge, and Kaljundi were convinced that this could happen only if art actively intervened and transformed everyday living space. The turn toward such an understanding of the social role of art was not an “escape,” but instead stood for an artistic involvement motivated by the particular social situation of the 1970s, and by the demands it placed on Estonian artists.⁸⁰

Lapin and his fellow artists had given up on the idealistic notion that one could exist outside of society, that there could be an independent unofficial realm parallel to the official one, as was believed by the first generation of Estonian unofficial artists. They recognized that the unofficial art scene was in fact an integral part of the existing system, and consequently they looked for art to occupy a more influential position within that system: the artist could and must intervene. The position taken by Lapin and his friends would have been unthinkable without the groundwork laid by the union pop artists; it was they who first started to take an active interest in Soviet reality. However, the parodic attitude of pop artists, who relativized and ridiculed everything, didn't seem relevant in the altered social context of the 1970s. The potential for resistance theorized by Lapin consisted not in the “elegant refusal” but in an active readiness to engage the system from within. In a text titled “Art Against Art” (1977), Lapin writes that “art is no longer happy onanism in a Finnish [i.e., Western] bathroom.”⁸¹ Lapin goes on to compare the contemporary artist to a philistine who entertains himself “in the morgue of material prosperity and intellectual conformity” and whose awareness of reality is limited to “apartment, pub and office.”⁸² In the same text Lapin speaks out against the hierarchical differentiation of the arts and calls on his colleagues to “protest against their profession”: “Artists must see visual culture as a whole and they must search for means to eliminate the boundaries between individual fields; creative artists must not limit themselves to one art, but aspire to all the techniques available.”⁸³ Lapin further criticizes the lack of unity in contemporary (modernist) art practice and its bureaucratic/hierarchic organization that manifested

itself most glaringly in the labyrinthine structure of the different subassociations that made up the official Artists' Union, and he opposes this to an extensive artistic practice that would integrate all fields of life.

“Art Against Art” reads like a critique of the hedonistic strategies of pop art that mimicked Soviet reality and its absurd rituals without transforming it. Seen from this vantage point, the Tallinn exhibition of new monumental art could be seen as an attempt, counter pop, to harness architecture and design to the invention of new futures from within existing institutions. Lapin’s interdisciplinary approach, his aspiration to collapse art into life, went hand in hand with a persistent questioning of his own role as an artist. If in one sense such self-questioning was a strategy for disrupting the normative, hierarchical, and institutional structure of art; in another it was an affirmative redefinition of his own artistic position and a way to return to the institution from which he had been excluded.

Eastern European unofficial art of the “period of stagnation” is often seen as a series of efforts to escape from grim political reality into the relatively autonomous realm of (apolitical) art. However, as the example from Estonia shows, certain artworks and texts from the period reveal a political sensitivity that did not consider art a refuge but on the contrary a means to shape a new environment. At the 1978 exhibition of young architects mentioned above, Lapin presented a vision of Tallinn as the “New York of Estonia.” Though Lapin’s *New Skyline of Tallinn* cannot be taken altogether seriously, it does express the desire for a dynamic environment, of which the artists would be the architects; as if to prove this, in the left corner of the skyline stands Lapin’s own monument to Tallinn. Following the experiments of union pop, its critique of everydayness, and its interest in the new industrial and artificial environment, objective art provided the artist with a constructive goal: to “engage” with reality in a newly recovered, avant-garde sense of the word.



Figure 9: Leonhard Lapin. *New Skyline of Tallinn*, 1978. Display board, gouache, letraset on cardboard, 100 x 100 cm. Museum of Estonian Architecture. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Peeter Sirge.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, “How Art Exists under Communism, a Compendium of Interviews and Reports”, *Artnews* 57, no. 2, April 1958; and *Artnews* 57, no. 8, December 1958. These reports included phrases such as “inner emigration” and “artists go underground”. See also “Editorial: Art under Communism Today 2”, *Artnews* 57, no. 8, December 1958, 23. The December issue of *Artnews* also published a “travelogue” by the American action painter Harry L. Colman, who had participated in the 6th *World Festival of Youth and Students* in Moscow in 1957. H. L. Colman, “An American Action Painter Invades Moscow”, *Artnews* 57, no. 8, December 1958, 33, 56–57.

² S. Helme, “Personal Time”, *Personal Time: Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1945–1996*, vol. 1, ed. A. Rottenberg, Warsaw 1996, 20.

³ See S. Helme and J. Kangilaski, *Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, Tallinn 1999, 192. See also J. Kangilaski, “Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine”, *Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist*, Ilmamaa, Tartu 2000, 228–35; and P. Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski, London 2009, 179.

⁴ Boris Bernštein has conceived the concept of “ethics of non-commitment”. B. Bernštein, “ANK kui eetiline fenomen”, *AMK '64*, ed. A. Liivak, Tallinn 1995, n.p.

⁵ S. Helme, “Artforumi ajad”, *1970ndate kultuuriruumi idealism: Lisandusi Eesti kunstiloole*, ed. S. Helme, Tallinn 2002, 15–16.

⁶ They were united primarily by a shared educational background – having entered the State Art Institute in the late 1960s – and by their interest in issues of the contemporary living environment, industrialization, and related changes in art.

⁷ Helme and Kangilaski 1999, 210. The rediscovery of Constructivism was accompanied by a significant shift in the movement’s evaluation, from social reform to a kind of esoteric internalization. See also Piotrowski 2009, 141.

⁸ On the period of stagnation and its focus on apolitical privacy and material well-being, see R. J. Misiunas and R. Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940–1990*, Berkeley 1993, 204–50.

⁹ L. Lapin, “Startinud kuuekümnendatel. Mälestusi ja mõtteid”, *Kunst 68*, no. 1, 1986, 20. He also mentioned Lucy Lippard’s *Pop Art* (1966), which he had brought along from a trip to Hungary in 1969.

¹⁰ Boris Bernštein writes about the work of the previous generation of unofficial artists that there is no single piece “on the basis of which a future archaeologist could make a conclusion about the existence of Soviet power at that time – there is no trace of it”. Bernštein 1995, n.p.

¹¹ *The Exhibition of Independent Student Works* was an exhibition format initiated in 1966 by the artist Tõnis Vint, who was himself a student at the time. It enabled students to show works that were created outside of their specific curricular tasks.

¹² Lapin called painting an “academic junk word”, that is, “incompatible with contemporary thinking”. Leonhard Lapin, “Taie kujundamas keskkonda”, (1971), in: L. Lapin, *Kaks kunsti. Valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist 1971–1995*, Tallinn 1997, 16. Widespread among these artists were Indian ink or colored pencil drawings, whereas serigraphy – one of pop art’s exemplary media – was rarely accessible.

¹³ The only existing photographs of the exhibition do not try to blend out the context; on the contrary, they appear to reflect the café’s animated atmosphere.

¹⁴ A. Tolts, “Muster—tekstiil—ruum”, *Kunst ja Kodu 42*, no. 1, 1974, 38.

¹⁵ This was noticed at the time. For instance, the art critic Ene Lamp described the works as a protest against “cosy and well-organized bourgeois life”. “The aim of the art work is not the creation of beauty”, she wrote, but to “shake the audience and make them think”. E. Lamp, “Uusi taotlusi eesti maalis”, *Kunst 39*, no. 1, 1971, 11.

¹⁶ Lapin 1997, 18. The opening of this exhibition a few days earlier had culminated with a joint “happening” in a turn-of-the-century suburb of Tallinn, where art and architecture students repainted a rundown playground.

¹⁷ Lapin 1997, 16.

¹⁸ Lapin was trained as an architect; his colleagues Andres Tolts and Ando Keskküla as well as Lapin’s then wife Sirje Runge were graduates of the Department of Industrial Art.

¹⁹ The study of design was introduced at the State Art Institut of the Estonian SSR in 1966. In 1968 a separate department for industrial design was founded. The intention of the head of the department and initiator of the program, Bruno Tomberg, was to educate not product designers but professionals with universal skills. Tomberg's understanding of design was related to the Ulm School, to designers and theoreticians such as Tomás Maldonado, Gui Bonsiepe, and Victor Papanek.

²⁰ S. Helme, *Popkunst Forever: Estonian Pop Art at the Turn of the 1960s and 1970s*, Tallinn 2010, 99-100.

²¹ For example, M. A. Svede, "Many Easels, Some Abandoned: Latvian Art after Socialist Realism", *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, ed. A. Rosenfeld and N. T. Dodge, New Brunswick, NJ 2002, 234-41. Svede mentions the strategy to exhibit abstract paintings in the section of design, suggesting they were designs rather than paintings. The use of the word design to veil an artist's "formalist" tendencies was highlighted recently by the exhibition *And Others: Movements, Explorations and Artists in Latvia 1960–1984*, organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, Riga, 2010.

²² Lapin 1997, 16.

²³ Svede 2002, 234.

²⁴ For a translation of the text of Lapin's speech, see L. Lapin, "Objective Art", *ARTMargins* 2:2, 2013, 172-85. For commentary by Andres Kurg (Tallinn) on this speech, see A. Kurg, "Introduction to Leonhard Lapin's 'Objective Art'", *ARTMargins* 2:2, 2013, 163-71.

²⁵ The exhibition was initiated by the artists Lapin, Sirje Runge, and Raul Meel and the physicist Tõnu Karu.

²⁶ M. Preem, "Sündmus Harkus", *Harku 1975–1995*, ed. L. Lapin, A. Liivak, and R. Meel, Tallinn 1995, 46, originally published in *TRÜ ajaleht*, December 12, 1975.

²⁷ L. Lapin, "Objektivne kunst", in: Lapin 1997, 28.

²⁸ Lapin 1997, 23. My translation.

²⁹ Lapin 1997, translation by Andres Kurg, *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 172.

³⁰ Lapin 1997, trans. Kurg, 172.

³¹ Lapin 1997, 24.

³² Knowledge of Western conceptual art in Estonia was limited at the time, though it was far from unknown.

³³ Lapin 1997, 23.

³⁴ Lapin 1997, 28, trans. Kurg, 184. Lapin is tacitly alluding to Joseph Beuys's assertion that "everyone is an artist."

³⁵ Lapin's call for unity between an artwork and the environment is also reminiscent of De Stijl. In 1974 he and Sirje Runge worked as artists on the animated film *The Colorful Bird*, directed by Rein Raamat (Tallinnfilm), which showed geometric views of the city that were evidently inspired by neoplasticist compositions.

³⁶ Lapin 1997, 24. See also L. Lapin, *Avangard*, Tartu Ülikoolikirjastus, Tartu 2003, 69–83.

³⁷ Lapin 1997, 28. Trans. Kurg, 184.

³⁸ Lapin 1997, 25. Trans. Kurg, 179. Laarman was referring to El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg's preface to the first volume of the trilingual journal *Beuys/Objet/Gegenstand* (1922), where Lissitzky and Ehrenburg appeal to a "constructive art" that "is not intended to alienate people from life, but to summon, to contribute to organizing it." E. Lissitzky and I. Ehrenburg, "Die Blockade Rußlands geht ihrem Ende entgegen", *El Lissitzky. Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften*, ed. S. Lissitzky-Küppers, Verlag der Kunst, Dresden 1976, 341.

³⁹ Lapin 1997, 25. Trans. Kurg, 178–79.

⁴⁰ J. Kangilaski, "Paradigma muutus 1970. Aastate lääne kunstis ja selle kajastus Eesti kunstielus", *Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist*, 220–21.

⁴¹ S. Helme, "In the Beginning There Was No Word!", Lapin, *Kaks*, 194.

⁴² The congress, with prominent international participants like Tomás Maldonado, was visited by a delegation of Estonian designers and artists. Another lecturer, the artist Raul Meel, referred to the congress in his speech.

⁴³ E. Sepp, "Leonhard Lapin: Autoportrait as Paradox and Parody", *Leonhard Lapin. Maal, graafika, skulptuur, arhitektuur*, ed. L. Lapin, Eesti Kunstimuseum, Tallinn 1997, 21.

⁴⁴ L. Lapin, "Pavel Mihhailovitš Kondratjev 1902–1985", *Kunst 68*, no. 1, 1986, 55. Both Laarman

(whom Lapin quotes extensively) and Arnold Akberg — another member of the Constructivist group Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhm (Group of Estonian Artists), which was founded in 1923 — were still alive in the 1970s.

⁴⁵ *The Visarid Artists' Group, Tartu 1967–1972*, ed. K. Põllu and A. Liivak, Tallinna Kunstihoone, Tallinn 1997, 89. The group formed around the art studio at Tartu State University in 1967. One of the studio's activities, initiated by its head, the artist Kaljo Põllu, was the translation and “publication” of art criticism. Reviews and articles from Eastern European art magazines such as *Vý tvárné Umění* and *Projekt*, but also from *Art in America* and *Studio International*, were translated by students and made available in the form of self-edited volumes titled *Visarid*.

⁴⁶ *Visarid*, 89.

⁴⁷ *Visarid*, 89.

⁴⁸ For an assessment of the influence of Restany on contemporary art in Estonia, see A. Kurg, “Feedback Environment: Rethinking Art and Design Practices in Tallinn during the Early 1970s”, *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 20, nos. 1–2, 2011, 48.

⁴⁹ P. Restany, *Valkoinen kirja*, WSOY, Porvoo 1970, 33–34, originally published as *Livre blanc-objet blanc* (Apollinaire, Milan 1969).

⁵⁰ Lapin, “Objective Art”, 185. Trans. Kurg, 185.

⁵¹ Text on the board; see *Environment, Projects, Concepts: Architects of the Tallinn School, 1972–1985*, ed. A. Kurg and M. Laanemets, Eesti Arhitektuurimuseum, Tallinn 2008, 173.

⁵² L. Gens, “Traditsiooniline skulptuur ja uus arhitektuur”, *Sirp ja Vasar*, June 11, 1976, 9. Modernism in architecture was introduced already in the late 1950s as the only principle of architectural form, based on the industrialization of the building process.

⁵³ See *Zwischen Revolutionskunst und Sozialistischem Realismus. Dokumente und Kommentare: Kunstdebatten in der Sowjetunion von 1917 bis 1934*, ed. H. Gassner and Eckhard Gillen, DuMont, Cologne 1979, 441.

⁵⁴ “Uudislooming monumentaalkunsti näitusel,” *Kunst* 52, no. 2, 1978, 35.

⁵⁵ V. Tatlin, “Uut tüüpi monumentidest” (1919), *Arhitektid arhitektuurist. Nõukogude arhitektuurimeistrid arhitektuurist*, ed. L. Lapin, Kunst, Tallinn 1989, 97.

⁵⁶ “Uudislooming,” 35.

⁵⁷ L. Lapin, “Kunstide süntees kaasaegses arhitektuuris—“Sünteeiline arhitektuur””, *Kunst* 45, no. 1, 1974, 57.

⁵⁸ These empty yards, which seemed to have no specific use value, were in fact an elementary part of socialist city planning: they aimed to prevent any intimate communication between the inhabitants of adjacent buildings and, as a result, the formation of independent urban communities. T. Ojari, “Elamispind. Modernistlik elamuehitusideoloogia ja Mustamäe”, *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 13, no. 2, 2004, 65.

⁵⁹ Text on the board; see *Environment*, 284–85.

⁶⁰ Other proposals by Kaljundi included a project for turning abandoned heaps of slag in former mining areas in eastern Estonia into ski resorts. These would have been, Kaljundi explained, “active monuments to the transformation of natural resources.” T. Kaljundi, “Maastikuarhitektuurist. Presentation at the Young Architects' Seminar, April 12, 1978”, *Architecture. A Collection of Papers, Articles, Reflections, Documents and Translations about the New Architecture*, ed. L. Lapin (manuscript collection; Tallinn, 1979), 13–16, manuscript in Leonhard Lapin's archive.

⁶¹ The work also included eighty color slides that depicted the actual sites in their original condition; the slides showed mainly abstract fragments from the display boards of the project. At the time slides were just beginning to be used in exhibition design. However, Runge's use of slides for abstract images was unprecedented.

⁶² S. Lapin (Runge), “Tallinna kesklinna miljöö kujundamise võimalusi. Explanatory Note for the Diploma Work” (diploma work, Estonian State Art Institute, Department of Industrial Art, 1975), 8. Her aim, Runge wrote, was to convince people that the city is not “a hostile territory stretching from work to home.” Lapin (Runge) 1975, 5.

⁶³ Lapin (Runge) 1975, 8.

⁶⁴ Lapin (Runge) 1975, 16.

⁶⁵ Lapin (Runge) 1975, 17.

⁶⁶ This means taking into account not only individual spaces but also the whole infrastructure of the

city: for example, Jõgeva's kinetic experiments with chaotically pulsating lights and atonal music could help create systems of street lighting and neon signs and would extend the "present one-track functions of lighting and advertisement to a spatial work of art." "Uudislooming," 35. As Lapin mentioned in his speech on objective art, these projects cannot be realized without support from official institutions.

⁶⁷ Analyzing the built environment in the city center of Tallinn, Lapin emphasized the need for a new monumental art practice. He argued that in the daily life of ordinary citizens there is no urgent need for single heroic monuments; rather there is a need for integrated space. L. Lapin, "Tallinna kesklinna (city) arhitektuurne keskkond", *Tallinna Seminar*, ed. I. Fjuk (manuscript collection), ENSV Arhitektide Liit, Tallinn 1980, 20, manuscript in Leonhard Lapin's archive. After his graduation in 1971, Lapin worked at the State Directorate for Restoration. His research there was an important resource for Sirje Runge when she was working toward her diploma.

⁶⁸ The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre argues that a monument organizes collective space and that the search for new monumental forms also offers the potential for a reorganization of social life. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford 1997, 200.

⁶⁹ Lapin (Runge) 1975, 1. One of the sources Runge references in her diploma is Restany's *Livre blanc-objet blanc*. Runge's own designs are related to Constructivist drafts for information and propaganda kiosks.

⁷⁰ Lapin (Runge) 1975, 13.

⁷¹ This was one of the central topics discussed in the magazine *Kunst ja Kodu* (Art and Home), which was edited by Andres Tolts. The magazine introduced William Morris, art nouveau, and De Stijl to an Estonian and Soviet audience.

⁷² I am thinking of the multimedia environments developed by the Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) initiative during the late 1960s and Robert Whitman's theatre pieces combining visual images, sound, film, and slides. In 1987 Lapin criticized the "environ-mental art" that had become the showpiece at the expos, servicing spectacle and business; L. Lapin, "Mängides happening'i", Lapin, *Kaks*, 34, originally published in *Teater.Muusika.Kino* no. 5, 1987.

⁷³ The Architecture Exhibition '78 took place in the foyer of the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Tallinn and presented works by a loosely affiliated group of young architects who were critical of the prevailing architectural practice. Their unusual, playful, and humorous criticism — presented in the forms of project proposals, photo collages, drawings, etc., on standardization, Soviet mass housing, and modern urban planning — attracted a lot of attention.

⁷⁴ L. Lapin, "Albert Trapezž kunstnikuna", Lapin, *Kaks*, 66, originally written in 1977. The work contains more or less direct references to the Estonian Architects' Union; to the union's chairman, Mart Port; as well as to Lapin himself and his colleagues (*Environment*, 268).

⁷⁵ A. Kurg, "Modernism's Endgame, Tallinn 1978", *Environment*, 70. Drawing on Freud's work on the uncanny, Kurg interprets the cemetery in the middle of the new town as the return of modernism's repressed — the specter of finitude that transforms the familiar environment into something strange.

⁷⁶ Even though Lapin was indebted to contemporary design theories, this is what ultimately distinguishes him from a designer.

⁷⁷ Lapin 1971, 17. As opposed to Restany, the (new) art, in Lapin's view, would help people rediscover their real modern nature, but it would not necessarily make them happy. In fact, it might even frighten them. Lapin 1997, 25; L. Lapin, "Kunstiga kunsti vastu," L. Lapin, *Artikleid ja ettekandeid kunstist 1967–1977*, Tallinn 1977, 79–80, manuscript in Leonhard Lapin's archive.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., M. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1976, 139ff.

⁷⁹ Lapin 1997, 24.

⁸⁰ At the time of the Harku exhibition Lapin's former comrades in arms, Keskküla and Tolts, who had started to paint in a hyperrealist manner, experienced a breakthrough. Lapin saw this as a form of compromise with the system. See L. Lapin, *Pimeydestä valoon: Viron taiteen avantgarde neuvostomiehityksen aikana*, Otava, Helsinki 1996, 102.

⁸¹ Lapin 1977, 78.

⁸² Lapin 1977, 77, 79.

⁸³ Lapin 1977, 81.

Mari Laanemets
Institut za istoriju umetnosti, Estonska akademija umetnosti

LET U SUTRAŠNJICU: PREISPITIVANJE UMETNIČKE PRAKSE U ESTONIJI TOKOM SEDAMDESETIH GODINA DVADESETOG VEKA (LEONARD LAPIN)

Sažetak:

Tekst sagledava način na koji su nova shvatanja umetnosti, koja se javljaju krajem šezdesetih godina dvadesetog veka u okviru pop arta, uticala na grupe umetnika koji su ih radikalizovali tokom druge polovine sedamdesetih godina prošlog veka – perioda koji se smatra slabljenjem avangarde. Fokus teksta nalazi se u pisanjima Leonarda Lapina (Leonhard Lapin) koji se zalagao za umetnost kao sredstvo stvaranja novog životnog okruženja. Uzimajući Lapinov tekst kao okvir, autorka analizira intervencije na zvaničnim izložbama monumentalne umetnosti iz 1976. godine.

Ključne reči:

pop art, okruženje, Leonard Lapin,
interdisciplinarnost, umetnost u sovjetskoj Estoniji