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Estonian *Sots Art*! Reflections of Soviet Modernity in Estonian Art under Late Socialism

The role that the aesthetic sphere played in the ideological governing of the Soviet Union has been subject of countless scholarly studies. However, less has been written about how the artists themselves, experts of the aesthetic sphere, reflected the Soviet aesthetico-political project they were meant to attend. *Sots art* was one of the early art practices that dealt with artistic investigation of Soviet aesthetic legacy already under the auspices of late socialism (1964-1985). According to Boris Groys, the main goal of *sots art* was to analyze the aesthetico-political will to power that the artists acknowledged was present in all artistic projects including the Soviet and their own.

The first wave of *sots art* histories written at the end of 1980s and in the early 1990s focused mainly on the deconstructive side of the movement, showing how *sots art* authors helped to undermine the all-encompassing language of Socialist Realism. However, looking at the movement's legacy today, we see that *sots art* appropriated tropes not only from Socialist Realism, but from Soviet visual culture in its wider meaning, including the Soviet printed matter, street banners and railroad signs, and also the early Russian avant-garde. Hence, equipped with timely distance we can look at *sots art* today as a reflection of Soviet modernity where visuality played an important role.

Another aspect that deserves renewed attention is the geography of *sots art*, implication that playful-subversive appropriation of Soviet visual culture was a phenomenon unique to Moscow, the center of the Soviet universe. As parallelly with Moscow *sots art* that formed around Komar and Melamid in 1972, network of similar political art practices emerged in other Soviet republics and countries of the Socialist Eastern Europe. In the late 1960s, several Estonian artists turned their attention to the Soviet mass products and environment, creating unique examples of the so called Estonian Soviet pop or Union pop. The group SOUP`69 in Tallinn, just like *sots art* artists in Moscow, were unsatisfied with the socially unengaged practices of their nonconformist predecessors and started to accommodate principles of American pop art to the surrounding Soviet reality. For the leading members Andres Tolts (1949-2014) and Leonhard Lapin (1947) this meant widening their interest to

the Soviet aesthetico-political legacy, appropriating reproductions of Socialist Realist paintings and investigating Soviet symbols in their early collages and paintings.

In the early 1980s Estonian artist Raul Rajangu (1960) became systematically interested in the aesthetic legacy of Soviet socialism, appropriating photos from official photo albums, brochures of Soviet home appliances and posters of Politburo members in his early series *Soviet Midnight* (1981-1982) and *Politburo* (1982). Similarly to the second generation of *sots art* artists, Rajangu was drawn to the peculiar and outmoded aesthetics of Soviet visual culture, mixing together the images of Lenin and governmental car Chaika, new year's tree and vacuum cleaner Raketa. However, when Moscow *sots art* remained aggressively destructive towards the Soviet visual legacy, the approach of Estonian *sots art* was more distant, seeing Soviet visual culture as a rich aesthetic reservoir to be exploited. However, in both Russian and Estonian cases the relationship between *sots art* and the Western movements Pop art and postmodernism remains complex.

The aim of my research is to find a way for the comparative postwar art history for Eastern Europe, looking for overlapping phenomena, similar cultural patterns and shared local terms. To balance the Western oriented art histories written in the region in the 1990s, using local terms instead of Anglo-American ones is a conscious choice to appreciate and work with local languages, letting them influence the ways we think of the local cultures. As such, my research offers yet another interpretation to the horizontal art history - term left to the community of East European art historians by the renowned Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowsky.



Andres Toits. School and Symposium. 1967-68. Collage. Art Museum of Estonia



Leonhard Lapin. From the series Signs. Oil on canvas, 1978-79. Zimmerli Art Museum



Raul Rajangu. From the series Politburo. Ready-made| author's technique. 1982.
