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Estonian *Sots Art*! Reflections of Soviet Modernity in East European 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. However, perhaps it's time to reconsider the implications behind the well-known histories of the *sots art* movement that playful-subversive appropriation of Soviet symbols and visual culture was a phenomenon unique to Moscow, the center of the Soviet universe.

Parallely with Moscow *sots art* that formed around Komar and Melamid in 1972, network of similar political art practices started to emerge in other Soviet republics and various countries of the Socialist Eastern Europe. As early as 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, like the *sots art* artists in Moscow, was unsatisfied with the socially unengaged practices of their nonconformist predecessors and started to accommodate principles of American and British Pop Art to the surrounding Soviet reality. Whereas most of the SOUP`69 members were preoccupied with Soviet mass products and environment, Andres Tolts (1949-2014) and Leonhard Lapin (1947) also took interest in the Soviet aesthetico-political legacy, appropriating reproductions of Socialist Realist paintings and investigating Soviet symbols in their early collages and paintings.

And yet, this was only the beginning of what could be called Estonian *sots art*, as in the early 1980s Raul Rajangu (1960) became systematically interested in the aesthetic legacy of Soviet

socialism, appropriating photos from Soviet parade albums and using posters of Politburo members in his early series *Soviet Midnight* (Nõukogude öö)(1981-1982) and *Politburo* (Poliitbüroo)(1982). Like many *sots art* artists from Moscow, Rajangu was drawn to the peculiar and outmoded aesthetics of Soviet visual culture, mixing together the images of Lenin and Volga, new year's tree and vacuum cleaner *Raketa*. However, when Moscow *sots art* has mainly been received by its historians as aggressively destructive towards Soviet discourse, its Estonian counterpart seemed to carry a different sensitivity that was more distant from its object and closer to the gaze of *camp*, seeing Soviet visual culture as a rich and anachronistic visual field to investigate and exploit.

The aim of this dissertation is to argue on the basis of partly newly discovered art historical material, that we can talk about the wider network of Eastern European *sots art*, and via that, a shared comparative art history of Eastern Europe under socialism. In this comparative Eastern European art history, differences between similar art practices in the center and in the periphery of the Soviet state and its sphere of influence become meaningful. A discussion point it offers is whether this could be a way for horizontal art history — a term left to the community of East European art historians by Piotr Piotrowsky (1952-2015) — that would leave old universalist art history behind and bear in mind a regional as well as global reader interested in the history and culture of Eastern Europe and their place in wider geopolitics.