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A multimodal approach to the Constructivists' concept of 'new art' in Estonia and in Slovenia

The aim of my paper is to explore the artistic activities of two relatively small groups of artists in Estonia and Slovenia during the second half of the 1920ies. The fact that the artists of both countries never met in person and had no direct connections whatsoever offers, in my view, an interesting angle or a basis to look at the various forms and “face(s)” the international Constructivism had during the 1920s, and, hopefully, open up some new perspectives of a ‘circuit of new art’¹ in more broader terms. My intention is to outline some aspects of the importance of the printed materials (catalogue, manifesto, magazine, almanac) the artists of both countries published during the 1920s in order to express and represent the ideas of International Constructivism, which they considered to be the ‘new art’ of their times.

One of the significant roles of the avant-garde magazine and almanacs had for the modern art world of the 1920s was to make the reproductions of works of art accessible to an international audience and to disseminate information and ideas internationally. In this view various printed materials of the avant-garde artists can be viewed as an attempt to create an alternative gallery space for modern art.² Artists who were involved in new movements shared a common aim to encourage international understanding and hoped that abstract geometry, simple sans serif typefaces and photography or photomontage could combine as a universal visual language that would transcend differences of culture and class.³ While the print media rely on photographs and other visual material, as well as text

¹ The ‘circuit of new art’ here refers to Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘circuit of culture’ that he used to signify a process of meaning production where meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices. ‘Circuit of new art’ could be seen as a similar meaning production process taking place between various groups of artists all over the Europe who contributed to the circulation of concepts, key-authors/artists, and also visual images (repeatedly re-printed reproductions).

² As there were no museums or galleries of „living art” or modern art before the The Museum of Modern Art in New York opened its doors in 1929.

³ Jeremy Aynsley. *Pioneers of Modern Graphic Design: A Complete History*. Published by Mitchell Beazley, 2004, p. 40.

and are by its nature multi-modal,⁴ the theoretical frame of my research underscores the importance of multimodal approach to the analysis of artistic practices in the frame of printed media which the artists began to explore more as a medium in its own right than it had been done before.

Producers of multimodal texts are making greater and more deliberate use of a range of representational and communicational modes which co-occur within the one text. Text exists as one representational element in a text which is always multi-modal, and it has to be read in conjunction with all the other semiotic modes of that text.⁵ The various forms of printed materials published by the artists in Tallinn and in Ljubljana represent an attempt to redefine the visual environment in the ethos of the modern times and the desire to challenge the role of contemporary artists. By the strategic use of the elements of printed media (texts, images, and graphic design) artists of both countries aimed at much more multimodal representation of the 'new art' and thus reinforced a specific constructions of the 'new art' discourse more generally.

⁴ Stewart Colin, Marc Lavelle, Adam Kowaltzke (eds.), *Media and Meaning: An Introduction*. BFI Publishing, 2001, p. 390.

⁵ Gunther Kress, Regina Leite-García and Theo van Leeuwen. *Discourse semiotics*. –Teun A. van Dijk (ed.). *Discourse as Structure and Process. Discourse Studies: Multidisciplinary Introduction*. Volume 1. Sage Publications, 1997, lk. 257.